Chapter 4
Who “Screens” Security?
Cultures of Surveillance in Film

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ABSTRACT
Films represent our awareness of surveillance and often trigger a deep emotional response from audiences, and for whole genres of film—particularly the political thriller and science fiction/speculative dystopia, along with horror films and some forms of the mystery or crime film—have been built around an individual or group of individuals who are being kept under some form of surveillance, either by the authorities of the state and by other individuals or groups who may have criminal and/or even psychotic motives. For filmmakers and their intended audiences, the surveillance narrative doubles back onto the very art form itself, composed as it is of the camera’s surveillance of the action, along with the viewers’ attentive watching of the film. While such audience attention had also been fundamental to drama for thousands of years, it has only been more recently that audiences began observing the fourth wall conventions of silence and darkness that make their watching of a performance a kind of surveillance.

Security officer, huh, always screening everybody, only who screens you? -- Sgt. J.J. Sefton (William Holden) in Stalag 17 (1953)

INTRODUCTION
It is a cinematic trope so old that perhaps even parodying it long ago became a cliché—the portrait in the old mysterious house has a haunting quality about it, and as the protagonist passes, we see the eyes in the portrait slowly shift because someone in a secret passage behind is watching. Many of my boomer generation saw such images as much in cartoon parodies of B-horror films as in the films themselves, but the very ubiquitousness of them suggests something about the fundamental fear of being watched. Perhaps this fear is hard-wired into the human species from eons past when, as creatures who were both prey for carnivores and omnivorous themselves, we had to become too aware of both the need to watch and the possibility of being watched. We are beings very sensitive and attentive to being observed and overheard.

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Certainly films that represent our awareness of surveillance often trigger a deep emotional response from audiences. Whole genres of film—particularly the political thriller and science fiction/speculative dystopia, along with horror films and some forms of the mystery or crime film—have been built around an individual or group of individuals who are being kept under some form of surveillance, either by the authorities of the state and by other individuals or groups who may have criminal and/or even psychotic motives. Alfred Hitchcock, for one, perfected a style of filmmaking in which a naïve individual is drawn into a plot not of his or her own making and then becomes the object of search and surveillance, but he is only one of the more prominent among many for whom surveillance narratives became an important aspect of their cinematic art.

Of course, for filmmakers and their intended audiences, the surveillance narrative obviously doubles back onto to very art form itself, composed as it is of the camera’s surveillance of the action, along with the viewers’ attentive watching of the film. While such audience attention had also been fundamental to drama for thousands of years, it has only been more recently (in the mid-nineteenth century, just shortly before the advent of film) that audiences began observing the fourth wall conventions of silence and darkness that make their watching of a performance a kind of surveillance. Up to about a century and a half ago, theater audiences had much more likely been highly evident and overtly interactive with the action on stage, and it is only in the theater of an industrial and bureaucratic age that the audience fully recedes into darkness to listen and watch. Thus, the very conventions of film viewing, with all their voyeuristic implications, grew out of the conventions of the modern European and Anglo-American theaters.

The sense of surveillance is heightened in film by the fact that what is being watched is not action itself but action as viewed and recorded through the camera, and as carefully edited by the filmmakers. This mediated nature of viewing film is another aspect that links it both with voyeurism and surveillance. Decades ago, film scholar Laura Mulvey (1975) established a theoretical perspective on film that also interpreted these voyeuristic features in a gendered context with her concept of film’s affording the “male gaze” through which both female characters and females in the culture at large are positioned to be viewed and controlled by men who limit both their freedom of action and their identities, reducing them to objects of both desire and disdain. Much film theory and scholarship has grown from Mulvey’s thesis, which is still quite relevant in a culture where the majority of directors are male. This perspective can also inform useful readings of political thriller films, where the protagonist (whether male or female) is at first seen as naively innocent and within the observant power of a male-gendered authority or individual, making that protagonist into a somewhat “feminized” character no matter the character’s actual sex.

Additionally, even more scholarship has grown from Michel Foucault’s exploration of the nineteenth-century concept of the panopticon (1977)—the prison design that enforced the possibility that any prisoner might be under constant surveillance without knowing it. Foucault is well known for extending this concept into his analysis of the construction of modern culture, where individuals are controlled by a state apparatus that suggests that any one individual must “watch himself” at all times because the “authorities” might be watching (1977). Of course, even though it is unlikely that one can be watched constantly, the fear of exposure to scrutiny leads individuals, and the culture as a whole, to limit behavior within the norms enforced by the state. Surveillance thus becomes not merely passive, neutral observation but also potentially active enforcement by creating a psychology of self-limitation.

Of course, throughout all of human cultural history, norms have been enforced by creating in a society’s members the fear of being shamed or even just embarrassed before other members of the community, but it is only in a modern industrial/bureaucratic society that the observations carried out by the community