

# Multiple Screen Aesthetics, ‘Neurothrills’ and Affects of Surveillance



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Cartographies of Sensation – Between Emotion, Feeling and Affect in Art, Philosophy and Science

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**From *Evidence Locker* by Jill Magid (letter 4):**

Dear Observer,

I met you today. I came to your office. You had been informed of my arrival. (...)

You marked a path on my map. I followed it. I got tea at Café Nero and wrote a postcard. You watched me, from two angles, when I did this.

You followed me through the center of town, on the streets without cars. I walked circles around your feet and your neck got stuck. It was funny to see you following me. You constantly moved to meet me.

(...)

# Multiple Screen Aesthetics



*Evidence Locker* - Jill Magid (2004)  
<http://www.evidencelocker.net/story.php>



*Red Road* (Andrea Arnold, 2007)  
[http://nl.youtube.com/watch?v=oawa85d\\_bJY](http://nl.youtube.com/watch?v=oawa85d_bJY)

## Multiple Screen Aesthetics

This letter and these surveillance images are part of an art project, *Evidence Locker* by Jill Magid. As the Project website indicates, in 2004 she spent 31 days in Liverpool, where she developed a close relationship with 'City Watch', the surveillance office of the Liverpool Police and City Council. The idea was to use the 242 public surveillance cameras of the city as her film crew. Wearing a bright red trench coat she would call the officer on duty with details of where she was and ask them to film her in particular poses and at some point even guide her through the city with her eyes closed. The CCTV images are selected, manipulated and edited by Magid herself. For access to this footage she had to submit 31 Subject Access Request Forms, which she composed as though they were letters to a lover (addressed as 'You', indicating both the surveillance camera and the officer on duty). The letters give an intimate portrait of the relationship between herself, the police and the city. As a 'third party witness', visitors of the Project can receive these letters one by one through their private e-mail address, together with a daily clip of surveillance footage.

What struck me in this project, which I too received in my mail, are the personal, aesthetic and affective dimensions of the 'surveillance apparatus' that is usually seen as a much more impersonal and controlling power. In a similar way the film *Red Road* by Andrea Arnold (2007), about a surveillance officer for Glasgow's 'City Eye control room', provides a different take on the surveillance gaze and on the affective dimensions of what could be called contemporary 'multiple screen aesthetics'.

Without going into details about this type of aesthetics, I here define it here simply as a type of film or art installation that involves explicitly multiple screens, such as surveillance monitors, satellite tracking grids, mobile phone displays, video images, webcams or large city screens. I will focus here on the multiple screens of CCTV images in *Red Road* and the various affects it puts in motion. The emphasis on the effects of the surveillance camera is one particular salient feature of contemporary media culture, but as a preliminary note I should say that the affective approach that I'm going to propose by relating image culture to Deleuzian philosophy and neuroscience is not limited to these type of images. What I will present is rather tentative and part of a larger project on Deleuze, neuroscience and cinema, entitled *Machines of the Invisible: The Neuro-Image*.

# Dominant affect of surveillance: paranoia – fight/flight



*Enemy of the State* (Tony Scott, 1998)



*Bourne trilogy* (2002-2007)



## Dominant Affects of Surveillance

Since the early 1970s, and especially after the Watergate scandal, surveillance, conspiracy and paranoia are themes that run frequently through Hollywood cinema (think of *The Parallax View*, *All the Presidents Men* and *The Anderson Tapes*). According to Deleuze these themes are even characteristic for the new type of Hollywood cinema that he announces at the end of *The Movement-Image* (210). Surveillance as a concept is usually (and with good reason) related to Foucault's analysis of Bentham's panopticum and its disciplinary and self-disciplinary effects. Orwell's *1984* filmed by Michael Redford is of course a case in point. In Hollywood cinema the panoptic gaze is frequently displayed. *Fortress* (Stuart Gordon, 1993), for instance, presents quite literally a futuristic panoptic prison. In the nineties the surveillance camera, as panoptic instrument of surveillance par excellence, gets increasingly assistance from networked computers, satellite tracking systems and all kind of biometric identification technologies. Think of *The Net* (Irwin Winkler, 1995), *Gattaca* (Andrew Niccol, 1997), *Enemy of the State* (Tony Scott, 1998), and more recently Richard Linklater's *A Scanner Darkly* (2007) the Bourne-trilogy and the television-series *24* and BBC's *The Last Enemy*.

All these films relate to Deleuze's elaboration of Foucault's disciplinary society into a control society, where individuals are no longer confined to particular spaces that discipline them (prisons, schools, hospitals), but can move freely and are nevertheless constantly watched and controlled. All that an individual, caught in the controlling powers of the panoptic or networked gaze, can do is move and think faster: run and outsmart the system, which protagonists in many surveillance films do, more or less successfully. These multiple screen films are full of highly adrenalined affects: fear, paranoia and a desire to fight and flight run through them.

However, as the scope of surveillance increases and develops into a whole 'apparatus' (perhaps comparable to the cinematographic apparatus), its effects and affects can be investigated in a bigger variety as well. One of these investigating strategies is to establish a more intimate relationship to the surveillance apparatus of power, as Jill Magid and Andrea Arnold propose. In this way 'power' becomes a multilayered concept, as explained by Elena del Rio. In her book *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance* she points to the difference between two kinds of power: a controlling power ('pouvoir', usually associated with the paranoid affects of surveillance) and a more molecular power ('puissance', that I want to investigate here). When talking about surveillance, both these powers have to be taken into account as the relationship between 'surveiller' and 'surveilled' becomes more complex and also engages in more varied affective forces. To study these affects it is useful to look into recent developments in neuroscience and establish a fruitful encounter between 'brains' and 'screens'.

# Surveilling the Brain



## ‘Surveilling the Brain’

Let me first make a few preliminary remarks about this interdisciplinary move. As a film scholar my interest in neuroscience was initiated by Deleuze’s main idea about cinema that ‘the brain is the screen’ and his remarks in several interviews that film scholars might want to talk to neurobiologists. Furthermore, with all the new developments in contemporary neuroscience and the pervasiveness of visualization technologies in all aspects of science and society, it seems that both the brain and the screen are important places for any interdisciplinary encounter. Not only is the brain the point where the three domains of thinking (philosophy, science, art) come together, as Deleuze and Guattari have argued in *What is Philosophy?* But increasingly the brain is visualized and screened itself, and it seems that in an indirect way this affects cinema production and spectatorship as well. But this is going too fast and will have to wait for further development on another occasion, although I will briefly return to this point at the end. For now, let’s first recall from *What is Philosophy?* how disciplines differ from each other:

What defines thought in its three great forms – art, science and philosophy – is always confronting chaos, laying out a plane, throwing a plane over chaos. But *philosophy* wants to *save the infinite* by giving it consistency: it lays out a plane of immanence that, through the action of conceptual personae, takes events or consistent concepts to infinity. *Science* on the other hand, relinquishes the infinite in order to gain *reference*: it lays out a plane of simply undefined coordinates that each time, through the action of partial observers, defines *states of affairs*, functions, or referential propositions. *Art* wants to *create the finite that restores the infinite*: it lays out a plane of compositions that, in turn, through the action of aesthetic figures, bears monument of composite sensations. (197)

As philosophers Deleuze and Guattari have often referred to both art and science. And while the references to art have been widely appreciated and understood, the references to science have more often been problematized in recent academic discussions. Mark Hansen, for instance, has put forward an important critique on Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘biophilosophy’ (Hansen, 2000). While appreciating Deleuze’s ecological model of an ‘ethology of assemblages’ which recognizes the fundamental and complex relationships between body, brain and world that resonates with different branches of modern cognitive and biological science (3), Hansen objects to Deleuze’s insistence on and preference for a ‘molecular cosmic expressionism’ that conflicts with the insistence on the actuality of specific organisms in modern science.

## Multiple Affects

When establishing connections between Deleuze and neurosciences, similar objections of conflicting aims and scopes can be made. However, taking into account Deleuze and Guattari's definitions of interdisciplinarity in *What is Philosophy?*, it is first of all important to note that the infinity of molecular expressionism and the virtuality that Deleuze and Guattari emphasize time and again, is in line with philosophy's task of saving the infinite in concepts and conceptual personae, while the insistence on finite organic actuality is precisely the typical scientific domain of finite reference and partial observers. I'd like to argue that these two approaches do not, as Hanson argues, conflict with each other but, as Deleuze and Guattari insist, they need each other (218). Perhaps the missing link in Hanson's argument is the third domain of thinking, art, where the finite and infinite can meet. Art is able to mobilize both levels (finite and infinite, actual and virtual) in its own specific way, namely through the creation of percepts and affects, presenting aesthetic figures as their embodiment.

Therefore I'd like to insist that the seemingly raw and distant surveillance images both in *Evidence Locker* and in *Red Road* are manipulated and transformed into artistic images. Because of their diffused and blurry quality these images are affection-images. They have, as paradoxical as it may seem for surveillance technology, mostly haptic or tactile qualities, described for a totally different set of films (experimental minority videos) by Laura Marks in her book *The Skin of Film*.

In respect to the affective dimension of these images, we should distinguish between two different layers that they address: one material and actual (that can be well explained by the matter of factness of science – neuroscience-), the other immaterial and virtual full of intensity and more infinite or perhaps essential expressionistic (as Spinozian inspired Deleuzian philosophy would like to describe them). Brian Massumi has argued that the relationship between these two levels is not one of exact conformity or complete correspondence but “rather of resonance or interference, amplification or dampening.” (25) A relationship that can lead to paradoxical effects/affects. Let's see how in *Red Road* affective levels resonate and intertwine to a point that it becomes hard to separate art, science and philosophy.



## Multiple Affects in *Red Road*

The first images of *Red Road* emphasize the haptic qualities of surveillance images. We see several blurred CCTV images on tv monitors in close-up (accompanied by an equally blurry soundtrack), then a medium shot that reveals the multiple screens from a distance. In front of these screens very prominently we see a pair of rubbing hands. Then we get a close-up of a pair of eyes looking at the screens. Before we see the main character Jackie (played by Kate Dickie), we see her hands, rubbing, touching a display and handling a joystick to zoom in on particular images. This multiple screens-hand-eye assemblage gets company of a smile when on one of the screens Jackie sees a man taking his old dog for a walk and on another screen a cleaning lady who dances on her I-pod music. Except for its emphasize on the hands and the haptic quality of the images, the opening scene reminds us of *Rear Window's* voyeurism. We understand that this is habitual recognition, a daily routine of a police officer observing the city to protect its people. Jackie's smile indicates that she feels somehow connected to these people on the screens, a friendly engagement that already indicates an affective dimension in the surveillance apparatus.

A little later we see how this routine gets broken by something she sees on one of her screens. The scene takes place at the beginning of the film after we have seen Jackie going to a wedding and meeting her family-in-law that apparently she has not seen for a long time. Especially the confrontation with her father in law seems painful and based on an unresolved conflict. She leaves the party early and goes back to work, passing through the street she normally sees on her screens, meeting the man with the old sick dog, starting a conversation with him as if they know each other. Of course for him she is just a passer-by and he moves on quickly. At work she reports a lonely girl in the streets that might need protection. On another screen she then sees a women running away, chased by a man. She makes another phone call but just when she wants to report the incident she realizes that she was falsely alarmed: it was just a play, the man and woman have sex against a wall. At this point Jackie's body language starts to speak. As she leans backwards in her chair, her left hand is tensely stretched on her desk, her right hand caress the joystick of her cameras (as if a double emotion of tension and arousal is already announcing itself). When the man throws his head backwards at his climactic moment, she sees a glimpse of his face. Jackie's eyes dilate, her body freezes. She zooms in on the face. Completely upset she leaves her station, asks one of her colleagues for a fag ('I thought you'd quit', he says in surprise) and runs outside to smoke.



From this moment onward the film presents us an extremely rich array of affects that range from the most basic emotions to the most complex and ethical ones. Jackie's habitual work of tracking the screens and taking action when necessary is broken. This man on one of her screens overwhelms her with emotions, sexually charged at first but apparently mixed with other feelings, possibly a traumatic memory. Here a first cycle of resonance and feedback starts operating. As Jackie is affected by the content of these images on her screens, the film becomes affectively intense. And as Massumi has argued about affect: "Intensity is incipience, incipient action and expression. (...) It is also the beginning of selection." (30). Jackie starts a search for this man. First through her camera's and screens, selecting images relating to him (at the neglect of others), zooming in, following him, finding out what he does, where he lives. In her own apartment she looks for an old newspaper article that identifies the man as a murderer, Clyde Henderson, and she soon finds out he was released from prison earlier for good behavior. Then she leaves her safe position in the control room to follow him in his neighborhood and visit him in his flat on Red Road.

## Affective neuroscience

As indicated Jackie's personal emotions are intensified by the tactile qualities of the images (both the unsharp CCTV images and the quality of Arnold's cinematography and mise-en-scene are haptic, like the blurred red lightning in the scene where she first meets Clyde face to face at a party in his shabby flat.) Let's see how neuroscience can relate to what is happening in these images. Neurological research of emotions has developed into an important subfield of (cognitive) neuroscience as 'affective neuroscience'. Affective neuroscientists study not only which regions of the brain are involved in emotional experiences (such as the prefrontal cortex and amygdale, or the difference between left or right hemisphere activity) but they study also the relations between emotions and learning, memory, social responses, vigilance, decision making, emotional communication (prosody) and affective styles.

Affective neuroscientists usually make a distinction between *emotion* (which takes place in the materiality of body and brain) and *feeling* (which is a mental operation). Emotion and feeling are fundamentally connected and resonate much like material content and immaterial expression in art mentioned before (so material scientific questions are immediately related to questions of immateriality and infinity; this is what neuroscientists call 'the hard question' – but actually calls for interdisciplinary collaboration). Several neurological experiments have demonstrated that emotion comes before feeling. For instance Antonio Damasio, together with Joseph Ledoux one of the most known affective neuroscientist, has demonstrated that emotional body skin responses and corresponding brain activity of experimental subjects is registered before subjects are conscious of them.

In this scene too it is remarkable how Jackie's body seems to know before she is conscious of the powerful affects she is about to experience (again it's the hands that are most telling in this respect). Very remarkable too is the ambiguity there seems to be between sexual arousal and mixed feelings, possibly fear. In later scenes in the film this ambiguity of paradoxical resonating levels between body and mind will be repeated in the scene where she visits Clyde Henderson in his shabby apartment where they meet and towards the end of the film when he takes her to his bedroom after she has looked him up in a bar. At the level of the content of the image, in the material body and brain activity, there is an incredible sexual tension between her and this man that at the same time obviously inspires her with fear, disgust and anger. This tension of ambiguous emotions and mixed feelings is spread over the images without yet making sense. Sexual arousal, fear, disgust, and anger, the emotions that we can feel running through Jackie's body, are what neuroscientist call *basic emotions* that are related to our basic (and universal) biological "striving to persist" (and yes, Spinoza's conatus is not by accident resonating here as well, but I'll return to that). What makes this film so very powerful is that it plays constantly on the parallel but in this case paradoxically resonating levels of affects, between body and mind, between emotion and feeling, between actual and virtual, material and immaterial. This creates an enormous amount of suspense that makes the film what I'd like to call an 'affective neurothriller'.

# Affective Neurothriller



## Affective Neurothriller

Suspense in an affective neurothriller does not so much play out on a narrative level where the audience knows more than the character do or where narrative time is suspended, as Hitchcock played with the knowledge of the audience (which then leads to emotions/feelings of suspense). It operates literally on the neural basis of our affects: playing with the tensions between body/brain and mind, ultimately playing with our 'striving to persist'. The intensity that we are experiencing here is a tension related to a fight between life and death that we grasp at its incipience in the embodiment of Jackie's reactions to the screen. Compared to the dominant images of surveillance, Jackie's reaction is not to fight and flight from the surveilling screens, but to delve in, to step in front of the screens.

When the narrative develops, we find out that Jackie has lost her child and husband, and that this man, Clyde Henderson, must have been the murderer. So at that point in the film suspense is indeed partly related to the narrative fact that Jackie is following a murderer – she could endanger herself. But that does not explain the paradoxically mixed affects (emotion/feeling mixtures) of sexuality, fear, disgust and anger that run through the film. The fact that preventing crimes is Jackie's job does not make it very likely that she is naïve or masochistic and an easy prey for a murderer. So we need to look elsewhere.

Affective neuroscientists Bartels and Zeki (2004) have done some interesting research that could give some matter-of-factness explanation for Jackie's paradoxical behavior. From experiments they conducted, Bartels and Zeki concluded that maternal love and romantic love/sexual desire share not only "a common and crucial evolutionary purpose, namely the maintenance and perpetuation of the species, (...) they also share a core of common neural mechanisms." As the narrative of *Red Road* unfolds it could be argued that Jackie's sexual arousal, as a force of life, seems to be an unconscious bodily response, precisely towards the man that took away her offspring. This could be explained as ultimate perverse behavior, but it is also possible that her maternal and sexual neurons unconsciously start firing together and become intertwined. And considering the memories of what happened in the past, obviously they get mixed up with feelings of fear, disgust and anger, bringing to the film a confusing suspense in its intense affective dimensions.

The film does not stop at this level of basic emotions, although these are the emotions that lead to her moment of revenge (she makes sure Clyde gets arrested for raping her). In the final part of the film, Jackie finds redemption going through a whole range of more complex emotions and feelings. But it is clear that when emotions become (complex) feelings, an encounter between disciplines becomes necessary. As already indicated Spinoza shares the biological dimension of the body's conatus, which is at the basis of his philosophy of basic and complex emotions in *The Ethics*. In his book *Looking for Spinoza, Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain* Damasio acknowledges this common ground and pleads for an integrated field of study on emotion (the other obvious reference for neuroscientist is cognitive philosophy, but that is a different topic that I will not address here). An ethics of affects has at its basis the transformation of passive sad affects into active joyful affects. In final analysis also *Red Road* presents us an ethics of affect, though that analysis I cannot develop here.

Another point that remains to be developed in affective neurological and philosophical terms is position of the spectator in terms of mirror-neurons and affective-becoming. Mirror neurons are neurons that fire both when we perform an action or experience an emotion ourselves *and* when we observe someone else (in real life or on a screen) performing or having an emotion. Mirror neurons appear to play an important role in empathic imaginations and social and ethical behavior (research into autism is taking this branch of affective neuroscience further). To cut it short, it might be possible to draw a model of spectatorship in terms of Deleuzian becomings, related to research on mirror neurons ('We become –mostly imperceptibly– what we see'). In any case it is now possible (by 'surveilling the brain') to understand how the brain changes when we watch a movie, to understand how images directly do something to the brain and how this influences directly our emotions, feelings and understanding. Again there is no time to develop this here further. For now I'd like to conclude by returning to the affective aesthetics of the 'apparatus of surveillance'.



### **Both sides of the camera**

As already indicated both *Evidence Locker* and *Red Road* emphasize the power ('puissance') of tactile qualities of surveillance images that go against the grain of the all seeing omnipotent 'pouvoir' ascribed to contemporary surveillance screens. In general they present affection-images rather than paranoid panoptic images. Furthermore it is important to note that what makes these experiments in surveillance aesthetics different is the fact that the police in the operating rooms are not abstract entities of power, but human beings with emotions and feelings. Jackie leaves her place behind the camera and enters in front of it, where the affective qualities of Arnold's camera take over. Jill Magid on her turn sometimes leaves the streets and visits the policemen on duty in their office, looks at the images from their perspective, and addresses them intimately in her letters. So occupying both sides of the camera, changing positions between observing and being observed, seems to be a final important characteristic of the complex and confusing affects of surveillance.

In one of her last letters, Jill Magid confesses her affective relation to City Watch to one of her observers.

**From *Evidence Locker* by Jill Magid (Letter 30)**

Dear Observer,

Then you – the most powerful you – surprised me: *So about this artwork of yours...* I thought you had not remembered. I realized then, that before I had arrived, you simply had approved me. You let me come here blankly, with an ambiguous identity, and I got to make one myself.

And You, You with capital Y. You who walks for me. You who I trust completely...

Things come out to you slowly, not all at once, and still not everything.

About the red coat, about the letters, about the spaces I am in when you are not around.

You wanted to ask a million things.

You are nervous, scared for those above you. This city is unique and you want it protected.

(...) And I tell you, hurting the city's reputation is not my intention. Neither is it to judge what you do. Let other's do that. I tell you: I did not critique your system; I made love to it.

You blushed.

# Aesthetic figures 'Sensing Alices'



**Making the surveillance camera blush** by admitting our affective relationship to it is what Jill and Jackie, as new aesthetic figures are doing. They are no longer purely voyeuristic 'Peeping Toms' related to the panoptic power of the gaze. Occupying both sides of the camera, embodying and expressing the ambiguous neurothrills and affective powers of surveillance, and on their way to encounter interesting scientific partial observers and philosophical conceptual personae, we better call them 'sensing Alices' that can guide us through the surveillance adventures of contemporary multiple screen culture.