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Something smart going on: the apocalyptic aesthetics of surveillance

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Abstract

This paper analyses surveillance as an integral element in contemporary discourses of the apocalyptic. It outlines a model of the apocalyptic that has its roots in the western religious tradition particularly the last book of the Christian bible: The Book of Revelation. It explores the intersecting narratives of surveillance, the apocalyptic and the forensic as a way of contextualising contemporary political, pop cultural and technological events. Each of these narratives play themselves out through a dialectical logic: surveillance is seen as bringing both intrusion and protection; the apocalypse is harbinger of both destruction and a new world; while the forensic revels in both discovery and horror. Each of these narratives is related to a search for meaning and authenticity and each is expressed through a broad range of multimodal contemporary mythic structures in news, film, television and politics.

Keywords: Apocalypitics, surveillance, forensic aesthetics, myth,

1 Introduction

Walking down the street, getting money from a bank ATM, entering a building, countless times every day we are warned by signs: “You may be photographed while...”. The intensity of this visual surveillance is matched by the voice heard every time we que for a telephone service: “This call may be monitored for...” The technological eye and ear have become ubiquitous parts of our everyday.

A recent study calculates that if you live in London – the most surveilled of modern cities – you will appear on camera some 300 times a day just going about your normal business. (Van Melik et al 2007:26). The London CCTV system – one camera per 15 inhabitants – played a starring role in the media stories of the capture of those associated with the so-called July 2007 “Doctors Plot” which saw failed bombings in London and Glasgow. A *Time* magazine report on the bombings referred to “London's wondrous surveillance system” and quoted U.S. Senator Joe Lieberman’s praise of that system:

“The Brits have got something smart going. They have cameras all over London... I think it's just common sense to do that here much more widely.” (Ripley 2007)

What once would have been tagged “Orwellian” is now called “wondrous” and lauded as “common sense”. In fact in an age where “Big Brother” has become a global brand quite different to the one George Orwell predicted in his totalitarian allegory *1984*, it is hard to know exactly what Orwellian is anymore. This is indicative of an increasingly complex, shifting cultural landscape that can only be understood by looking at a range of intersecting cultural narratives.

This paper explores the intersecting narratives of surveillance, the apocalyptic and the forensic as a way of contextualising contemporary political, pop cultural and technological events. Each of these narratives play themselves out through a dialectical logic: surveillance is seen as bringing both intrusion and protection; the apocalypse is harbinger of both destruction and a new world; while the forensic revels in both discovery and horror. Each of these narratives is related to a search for meaning and authenticity and each is expressed through a broad range of multimodal contemporary mythic structures in news, film, television and politics.

I will argue that understanding the contemporary aesthetics of surveillance is essential to understanding the cultural work of surveillance technologies. Firstly I will situate surveillance within the myth of the apocalyptic. Secondly I will look at how these ideas are played out in contemporary television and film through what Ralph Rugoff (1997) has called “forensic aesthetics”. I will conclude with some brief reflections on how these ideas relate to the current news context and national security.

2 The Apocalyptic

Apocalypse – Greek for revelation – is the name given to the final book of the Christian bible¹, a

¹ The last book of the bible is also known as *Revelation* or *The Revelation of John*. It is thought to have been composed at the end of the first century CE. It’s author is identified as John – “your brother who shares with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance...on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Rev 1:9). Traditionally this “John” has been associated with the apostle John also the reputed author of the fourth Gospel. Although the exact authorship of these Johannine texts is disputed by contemporary scholars, the book is thought by some to have emerged out of a “Johannine” school within the early church, while others point to affinities with the Pauline and Synoptic traditions. (Schussler-Fiorenza 1998: 85-113)

highly symbolic end-time narrative of “blood-drenched scenes of nature gone deadly, war, and famine” (Quinby 1999:283). Images from this book – such as the four horseman of the apocalypse who bring famine and plague and Armageddon, the site of final conflict between the forces of good and evil – are familiar motifs of popular culture. But the apocalyptic story is not just catastrophic it is also freighted with utopic millenarian promise rooted in the prophecy of the thousand-year kingdom of the saints (Rev 20:1-7) and the restoration of the holy city of Jerusalem. It is a story of redemption and transformation butted up against condemnation and destruction. It dramatises the dialectic between hope and fatalism, the end and the beginning, annihilation and transformation.

Scholars have long argued about what defines apocalypses as a genre (Webb 1999) but the generic definition of these ancient texts is relatively simple when compared with broader issues such as defining “apocalyptic ideology” or “apocalyptic movements”. What is undisputed however is the reach, the influence and the ongoing power of the ideas, beliefs and rhetorical devices that trace their lineage to this biblical book and its genre.

The apocalyptic is a theme that has been studied widely across a range of disciplines including: history (Cohn 1970;) sociology (Robbins and Palmer 1997) literature (Ahearn 1996; Kermode 2000) rhetorical studies (O’Leary 1994) cinema studies (Sharrett 1993; Dixon 2003) visual art (Cunningham and Grell 2000) and postmodern philosophy (Dellamora 1994)².

In both subtle and not so subtle ways the apocalyptic retains much poetic, religious and political power and is an influential individual and collective ordering force. The most obvious dimension of this influence can be seen in connections between the many current discourses of crisis – the war on terror, environmental collapse, threatening epidemics such as SARS and HIV – and the common understanding of the apocalyptic as cataclysm. Although the Christian apocalyptic forms the main context for this study it is important to note that the biblical story is not an isolated work it belongs to a genre of ancient middle eastern texts that deal with similar issues and share similar literary forms (Hultgard 1998). It could in fact be argued that the clash of competing Jewish, Christian and Islamic apocalyptic narratives is fundamental to understanding contemporary international relations and national security. (Gorenberg 2000; Juergensmeyer 2001; New 2002).

In this context I have previously argued (O’Donnell 2005) that the rhetoric of George W. Bush in his construction of the war on terror and homeland security is firmly rooted in the apocalyptic religious world-view. In a radio address to the nation on September 15 2001 Bush began to establish a pattern in his war on terror rhetoric. Comforting and challenging a nation in shock from the attacks on the twin towers he quickly established that moment as an ongoing conflict and reiterated that it would be “a different kind of conflict against a different kind of enemy”.

This is a conflict without battlefields or beachheads, a conflict with opponents who believe they are invisible. Yet, they are mistaken. They will be exposed, and they will discover what others in the past have learned: those who make war against the United States have chosen their own destruction.

Underlying this implied promise of victory was this presidential caveat: “We have much to do and much to ask of the American people. You will be asked for your patience, for the conflict will not be short. You will be asked for resolve, for the conflict will not be easy. You will be asked for your strength, because the course to victory may be long.” This rhetoric of test and endurance is strikingly similar to the calls at the beginning of the *Book of Revelation* in the seven letters to the seven churches to whom the book is addressed:

I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers...I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. (Rev 2:2-3)

² This is obviously only a brief noting of select key works

To the “saints” who endure is promised a crown, a white cloak and a new name written in the book of life. The specific echoes of the language of *Revelation* and its promises would have been heard by many of Bush’s Christian base and the generic language of national mission familiar from American frontierism (West & Carey 2006) meant that its power was not lost on others.

David Domke (2004) in an analysis of Bush’s speeches for the eighteen months following September 11 notes a concentration on “moment and mission”. He argues that this crisis discourse contributes to what he calls the Bush administration’s “political fundamentalism”. Calls for *imminent action* and *enduring commitment* create a strategically powerful discourse. He writes:

When combined these time focused emphases become politically potent: They allowed the administration to push for immediate action on specific policy goals [Patriot Act; establishment of Homeland Security Department; doctrine of pre-emption] with others’ questions dismissed, and to justify these desires as unchallengeable steps in a God-ordained, long term process. (2004:64)

In the next part of this paper I want to explore three other less obvious but not unrelated aspects of the rhetoric of the apocalyptic that also have telling implications for current discourses of national security and surveillance. Firstly I will look at a set of ideas that cluster around, sight, secrets and surveillance in the context of what Lee Quinby (1994) has called the techno-apocalypse. Secondly I will look at the visceral embodiment of these ideas in what Tina Pippin and other scholars (Pippin 1999; Gomel 2000) have called “the apocalyptic body”. Thirdly, both these ideas are related to one of the central images of the apocalyptic literature: the Beast and his mark.

3 Strange things

From the opening verse of the *Book of Revelation* we know that this text is about secrets: a “revelation” of strange things that “must soon take place” made known by a message from an angel. (Rev 1:1) As the visionary journey unfolds the extent of access is also revealed:

After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. (Rev 4:1-3)

Readers of this text are invited into a secret world – through a door into heaven – they are given access to esoteric knowledge but they are also shown how deeply forces conspire in the unfolding of the cosmic drama. Gerard Von Rad argues that one of the messages of Jewish apocalyptic writing is that “the last things” can be known and exactly calculated but that this knowledge is only open to the initiated, this is why the key textual device of this genre is the esoteric cipher. The gnosticism of these texts goes to the heart of the apocalyptic world view: “He who understands the secrets understands what holds the world together in its inmost being” (Von Rad 1975:302).

The other side of this access to mysteries and esoteric knowledge is the knowledge that you too are known, fully known. The one who grants access to this new knowledge is “the one who searches minds and hearts, and...will give to each of you as your works deserve” (Rev 2:23). The story of revelation is one of both secrets and surveillance.

The seven letters to the seven churches to whom *Revelation* is addressed all follow a set formula. The refrain of these letters is: “I know.” The Son of Man whose eyes are like a flame of fire sees all, knows all and judges all: “I know your works...I know your patient endurance...but

I also have this against you....For those who conquer I promise...” Surveillance, endurance and promise form the rhetorical rhythm of the *Book of Revelation*. As Henry Maeir puts it:

As the readers travel with John to the heavenly throne room, where he unveils to them a vision of a slain lamb with seven horns and seven eyes, "which are the seven spirits sent out into all the earth," the audience, already revealed to itself in the seven letters, knows that it has entered a world of perfect universal surveillance. It responds to John's unfolding visions as an observed audience. This depiction of an all-seeing God is a commonplace in both Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic literature. The omniobservant eye of God serves as a hortatory device to guarantee obedience in the face of coming or threatened judgment against evildoers. In apocalyptic plots of the end of the world, God plays a character who sees, records, and rewards or punishes all human actions. (1997:141)

This “omniobservant God” is at the heart of what Quinby calls the “twin millennial pillars of dread and desire” (1999: 284): the desire to know and embrace the great cosmological secret and the simultaneous dread of being completely known and thus perhaps judged unworthy to share in the promise of that secret world. These dual apocalyptic impulses are deeply entrenched in western culture, and play out across three different modes of contemporary apocalyptic thinking: the divine apocalypse, the technological apocalypse and the ironic apocalypse (Quinby 1994: xv-xvi). The divine mode includes both fundamentalists from the American right as well as Latin American proponents of liberation theology. The ironic mode reflects the nihilistic and absurdist tendencies of post modern philosophy. The technological mode includes both narratives of technological devastation (from nuclear to environmental) and technological salvation (from life saving technologies to visions of a utopic world order).

4 Techno-apocalypse and the Beast

Although Quinby's three apocalyptic modes are a useful typology, she herself notes that expressions of the apocalyptic often cluster across modes with surprising effects. One of the reasons why the apocalyptic is such a buoyant form – expressing itself in movements as diverse as dissenting religious movements in the European middle ages (Cohn 1970) the Puritan settlement of America (Boyer 1992) and the Russian revolution (Rowley 1999) – is the almost viral way it combines and recombines across these various modes of expression.

The techno and divine modes have converged in recent years in a variety of significant ways. This was particularly notable in the countdown to the year 2000. A number of scholars have noted (McMinn 2001; Tapia 2002; Schaefer 2004) the convergence of techno and divine apocalyptic in discourses surrounding “Y2K” computer systems meltdown. These studies throw some light on apocalyptic attitudes to both earthly and heavenly technologies of surveillance.

Many respondents in Tapia's study of the “millennialist” Christian response to Y2K, saw technology as an “evil” force that fragmented society. They argued that it was an “idol” that turned people away from God. (278). Schaefer points out that although many “evangelicals evidently feared that society's increased dependency on technology....might usher in worldwide domination by the Antichrist... their stance toward globalism and technology is both paradoxical and ambiguous. Committed to spreading their message by every (legitimate) means possible, evangelicals do not hesitate to employ technological advancements in production, mass communications, and travel to help them reach their goal.” (Schaefer 2004:98)

This ambiguous relationship between millennial evangelicals and technology can be also seen in one of the most popular contemporary mass communications of the apocalyptic: the best selling *Left Behind* series of “prophecy novels” from evangelical leader Tim LaHaye and novelist Barry Jenkins. The twelve part series fictionalises the events of the *Book of Revelation* narrating

the last days after God's chosen are "raptured"³ up to heaven and non-believers and not-quite-right Christians alike are left behind to endure the "tribulation" or the reign of the Antichrist.

The series is something of a publishing phenomenon. The first novel was published in 1995 and several novels in the series have topped the bestseller lists. According to *Newsweek* (Gates 2004) the events of September 11 boosted the sales of the 2001 instalment, *Desecration*, which became the best selling novel of that year. Presales of the final instalment published in 2004 reached 2 million and all up the series has sold some 62 million copies.

At the heart of the series is the work of the Tribulation Force who spearhead an underground resistance movement that battles the Antichrist and his "council of ten". In his analysis of the novels Glenn Shuck (2005) points out that surveillance technologies are integral to both the work of the Antichrist and the Tribulation Force. He contrasts LaHaye and Jenkin's "beast system" with the "network culture" of social theorist Manuel Castells and shows how both the Antichrist and the Tribulation Force display implicit understanding of the interaction between, new technologies and new decentralized flows of global capital.

The success of the Tribulation Force depends on its ability to clone vital components of the network culture – the Beast system it seeks to resist. Operatives require flexibility, the latest technologies, ultra modern weapons, mobility and a decentralized organizational logic. They even understand image and the possible benefits of deception in a world characterized by confusion and uncertainty. (Shuck 2005:110)

The image of the Beast that both Shuck and the authors of *Left Behind* rightly take as a metaphor for the totalizing power of the anti-God forces of apocalyptic times is a key symbol in the *Book of Revelation*. There are two Beasts referred to in chapter 13, the first Beast rising from the sea and the second Beast rising from the land. The first Beast has ten horns and seven heads and immediately assumes an irresistible position of power in the complex mythological system of *Revelation*:

One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. They worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?" ...Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered (13:3-8)

This introduction of the Beast couples him with the Dragon previously identified with Satan (12:9) and places his power over all the earth in the context of an earlier battle between the forces of God and the forces of Evil staged in the previous chapter. The second Beast has "two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon" and it acts as the lieutenant of the first Beast forcing all to worship this master. It is this second Beast that inaugurates the "Beast system": the mark of the beast that attributes all economic and social status to those who are marked as followers.

It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all; and by the signs that it is allowed to perform on behalf of the beast, it deceives the inhabitants of earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived; and it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast could even speak and cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed. Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on

³ The idea of the rapture proposed by some Christians does not come from the Book of Revelation like most other key elements of apocalypticism but is based on a literal interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18: "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words."

the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six. (13:13-18)

For the original audience of *Revelation* the Beast had a clear lineage that linked to both similar figures in Jewish mythology and the imperial cult of the Roman emperor. Thus they understood the Beast in both cosmological and localized political terms (Schussler Fiorenza 1991:82-87). In the Middle Ages the Beast was linked to the Antichrist figure who became a vital part of the apocalyptic legend (Rusconi 1998). Both the figure of the Beast and the Antichrist still function today as a lightning rod for cosmological and political conspiracy. Google searches will identify numerous current candidates for the Antichrist including the Pope, Barak Obama, George Bush and Vladimir Putin. This game of spot the Antichrist has a long tradition from the writings of Joachim de Fiore and Nostradamus to contemporary conspiracy websites and feeds the rhetoric of secrets and signs that I have argued is essential to an understanding of the apocalyptic. This vision of the Beast and the Beast System also clearly mirrors the you-are-with-us-or-you-are-with-the-terrorists language of the war on terror. In the mythological system envisaged in this chapter of *Revelation* those remaining in the end times belong to one of two groups, those marked by the Beast and those whose names are written in the book of the Lamb. These positions are irrevocable and these marks of identity are indelible.

The *Left Behind* authors re-envisage this web of power and the mark of the Beast in quite a specific form which clearly links to both contemporary Christian and broader fears about technological intrusion and domination. They describe the mark not as the traditional number of the beast but as a tiny microchip inserted under the skin. Shuck (2004) summarises the functions of this Beast chip:

First, it permits believers to participate in Antichrist's economy, using their implanted chips as debit cards which eliminate fraud and speed transactions. Second, the mark gives its bearer a sense of place, specifying one of ten regional kingdoms as the bearer's homeland. Third, it conveys a permanent identity which cannot be effaced. It instantly identifies one to authorities, and suggests where one belongs, allowing Antichrist's forces to track citizens and make his kingdom more secure. Fourth, every mark bears the name of Antichrist. Finally, Antichrist displays a remarkable knowledge of consumer preferences, making provision for those who want a customized, vanity design. (54-55)

However in spite of the impressive reach of the "beast system" Shuck shows that the active resistance of the Tribulation Force introduces a new kind of post rapture activism not seen in earlier prophecy novels. He points out the "naïve" faith the authors place in the skills of the heroes to outwit the vast technological resources available to the "one world government" controlled by the novels' designated Antichrist figure Nicolae Carpathia. This is largely achieved through several well-placed moles within the Beast system. The authors' "focus on individuals acting against powerful structures may serve them textually – to a limited extent...but its wisdom appears dubious outside the realm of prophecy fiction"(107). This post rapture activism sits oddly with traditional apocalyptic ideas of fated destiny but sits well with the contemporary emergence of the politicized evangelical religious right and is cognizant with a view of apocalypticism as a mobile mythic cluster that can be successfully reconfigured by believers to bouy-up their current needs and concerns. In her reader ethnography of the *Left Behind* series Amy Frykholm (2004) notes the way the novels' framing of technologies is affecting evangelical reader's fears of technology and like Shuck she notes a developing commitment to activist millennialism: "many readers identify with the Tribulation Force as a group...a community that will overcome the isolation, competition and fearful complexity of the modern world...Jason [a reader] imagines himself not as an individual hero but instead as 'part of a secretive organization'." (129)

These narratives, however naïve, allow readers to project themselves into an increasingly

complex world as actors. In both the early Christian narratives of the apocalypse and in their contemporary manifestations, secrets, signs and surveillance are essential rhetorical motifs as well as essential technologies in the divine economy of the end. These secret ciphers are embodied in particular marks of the Beast and the Lamb. The hortatory function of an omniobservant God is clear, and such a theology brings with it a particular apocalyptic subjectivity of faithful endurance – and increasingly it would seem of active engagement – which parallels more contemporary paradigms of authenticity. For millennialist Christians, those who live well under the all knowing gaze of God are seen to be living authentically: in sync with the deepest secrets that will be revealed to all at the end times. This authenticity, can now be conceptualised as a participatory event within the domain of complex networked culture rather than as merely passive resistance under the surveillance of God.

5 The new authenticity and the surveilled self

This active connection between the surveilled self and the revelation of an authentic lifestyle or real self can be seen at play in a variety of both religious and secular discourses.

Mark Andrejevic (2002; 2003) has argued that the current bonanza in reality TV programming has helped “to define a particular form of subjectivity consonant with an emerging online economy: one which equates submission to comprehensive surveillance with self-expression and self-knowledge” (2002:253) rather than corporate or governmental control. Reality TV programs have also become in some senses “training” documentaries for what Andrejevic calls lateral surveillance: the call for good citizens to watch one another. In the new televisual economy that Andrejevic describes this willingness to subject oneself to surveillance serves as a demonstration of the strength of one’s self-image.

Being ‘real’ is a proof of honesty, and the persistent gaze of the camera provides one way of guaranteeing that ‘realness’. Further, in a teeming society wherein one’s actions often go unnoticed by others, the reality of those actions can be validated if they are recorded and broadcasted – they become more real to oneself to the extent they become real for others. Submission to comprehensive surveillance is a kind of institutionally ratified individuation: it provides the guarantee of the authenticity of one’s individuality. (266)

The sense of not having anything to hide is both reified and problematised by these programs. If everything is in view then both the realness and the manipulative construction of character become evident, as do the prevailing models of normative characterisation.

Surveillance data and a variety of video and audio evidence, are not just used in reality programming they are now essential plot devices in popular crime shows. Here the forensic power of surveillance data is shone on characterisations of the deviant and the criminal. Hardly an episode goes by in series like the *CSI* franchise without someone pouring over hours of CCTV footage from a crime scene. Such work is often represented as mundane but fruitful, as one amongst many forms of looking at/through evidence. Often however it comes to the forefront of the plot and takes on a more integral element linking the voyeuristic game of viewers and characters. The connections between forensic logic, the apocalyptic and visual surveillance are also evident. Like prophecy believers, television’s forensic scientists are looking for the signs of the times, for portents that will help them understand reality and in each of these episodes “reality” or “evidence” is mediated through a series of visual signs.

Recently broadcast episodes⁴ of two popular crime dramas, *CSI* and *Criminal Minds*, bear

⁴ The episodes of *CSI* and *Criminal Minds* were broadcast in Australia on 29 and 30 July. As Nick Groombridge (2002) points out in his survey of CCTV imagery on popular television this method of looking to episodes “at hand” may seem random but is indicative of the widespread references in popular culture because almost any night or week’s viewing can be chosen and will yield interesting “results” for

this out. In an episode of *CSI*⁵, CCTV footage is used to reconstruct a complex multi-gunman supermarket shoot out. In the following episode of *CSI Miami*⁶ it is not CCTV footage but the video extras from a pornstar victim's most recent film that provides the video evidence. In recent episodes of *Criminal Minds* surveillance footage is even more central. One storyline⁷ is constructed around a paedophile's online video auction of a child through a live web cam feed time-stamped to indicate the minutes and hours left before the child goes to the highest bidder. The next episode⁸ features videos of a sadistic duo who send DVDs to their victims' mothers. In each of these instances the video evidence is read by the protagonists and the viewers as a potential revelation of something real or authentic about the victims or their unknown attackers. The DVDs from the sadists for example, are read closely by the show's behavioural scientists to reveal the presence of the unseen accomplice. In a pop-psychological interpretation – a staple of this show – it is also read as an “intrinsic” element of the two criminals' “perversion.” We are told that the accomplices “need” the video evidence as an artefact to share and a way of reliving their sadistic crimes.

The connections between the surveillance data and the apocalyptic moment are particularly acute in the paedophile auction episode of *Criminal Minds*. The “ticking” clock code at the bottom of the live feed, which allows paedophile voyeurs into the world of the child, is a literal marker of the countdown to the apocalyptic fate that awaits the boy when the auction is over. It is also a marker for the work of the criminalists of the FBI, who have a limited time span to decipher the images before them. It thus represents both a fated end and a hoped for salvation.

The time codes of surveillance footage marks it as a mediation of both “real” bodies and of “real” time and in shows like *CSI* and *Criminal Minds* it is the ability to read the complex evidence of space and time together that is often most revealing. This work is imaginative and psychological, it involves the players getting “inside” the heads of the criminals or reconstructing the crime after the event. It is often through staring at these surveillance images that insight occurs – in a pseudo-visionary experience – allowing a connection to be made between the after image and the real bodies of the crime.

6 The forensic and the apocalyptic body

Novelist J. G. Ballard has written of his own fascination with the *CSI* series and asks the question: “Why is it so riveting?”. He finds his answer in an existential apocalypticism: the finality of the autopsy room, which he describes as the “inner sanctum” of the series:

Here the victims surrender all that is left of their unique identities, revealing the wounds and medical anomalies that led to their demise. Once they have been dissected - their ribcages opened like suitcases, brains lifted from their craniums, tissues analysed into their basic components - they have nothing left, not even the faintest claim on existence. I suspect that the cadavers waiting their turn on the tables are surrogates for ourselves, the viewers. The real crime the C.S.I. team is investigating, weighing every tear, every drop of blood, every smear of semen, is the crime of being alive. I fear that we watch, entranced, because we feel an almost holy pity for ourselves and the oblivion patiently waiting for us. (Ballard 2005)

But Andres Vaccari (2005) accuses Ballard of missing the point: yes the body on the table is

analysis. While the episodes discussed here were broadcast over two days recently in Australia they include repeats that had first aired in the United States in 2004. They thus represent a narrative of surveillance that has remained “current” over the last three years.

⁵ “Paper or Plastic” Episode 83/Season 4 first broadcast 12/02/2004

⁶ “Innocent” Episode 48/Season 2 first broadcast 24/05/2004

⁷ “P911” Episode 24/Season 2 first broadcast 27/09/2006

⁸ “The Perfect Storm” Episode 25/Season 2 first broadcast 04/10/2006

key but the fantasy of *CSI* is not just psychological, there is also “a right-wing edge to *CSI*, a morally conservative paranoia”:

CSI is, in fact, a parable about the War on Terror. It is full of paranoid warnings, admonitions, explorations of fear. The space the forensic investigators tread on every day is a landscape of death and remains, of accidents and rotten intentions. This is the modern traumascape, an unsafe and paranoid place, a netherworld of catastrophe and loss. No, there’s no heaven; just decomposing bodies, flesh cracked open on the stainless-steel table, organic fluids and chunks of tissue under the microscope. *CSI* portrays a world in which we have come to accept these things as necessary and inevitable.

Investigating this televisual traumascape requires what Rugoff (1997) has dubbed “forensic aesthetics.” He notes (1997:91) that “any good investigator...must have a nose...for smelling out the significance not only of seemingly trivial clues but of non-events and missing details as well.” It is the overall “gestalt” of the “crime scene” that matters because “clues do not betray their secrets when directly examined; their story emerges only if they are approached obliquely.” This forensic aesthetic finds surprising resonance in the Christian apocalyptic. Rugoff’s “gestalt” echoes VonRad’s (1975) apocalyptic “cipher” described earlier. For prophecy believers the world is in fact a “crime scene,” an “after image” that follows on from the original sin of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3). And both the Christian apocalyptic and Rugoff’s forensic aesthetic are corporeal narratives that depend on the trace of the body for their impact and intrigue. The aftermath of the expulsion from Eden is always a bodily experience, more specifically of the body under surveillance. Expelled from the garden Adam’s first thought is of his body, a new instinct, a sensation of being watched, compels him to cover his nakedness, and quickly following this experience of bodily shame comes the realisation of bodily exertion: he will have to labour to feed and clothe the body.

As Ballard notes, in the inner sanctum of forensic dramas is the autopsy table, on the autopsy table the contemporary body is naked but not in a pre-edenic sense, here the apocalyptic signs of pain, exertion and violence are examined. The *Book of Revelation* might be read as a bizarre autopsy report of “the lamb that was slain” (Rev 5:6; 13:8) so crucial is the wounded body in this narrative. Christian commentators like to point out that it is “the lamb that was slain” who is triumphant in *Revelation*. (cf Barr 1984). Many argue that this is a remarkable image of a reverse theology of power: the weak will come to rule over the brutalising and the strong. However what is perhaps more notable is that the lamb is not the only figure in *Revelation* who is slain. The book is awash with ruptured bodies. As Elana Gomel (2000) has pointed out, *Revelation’s* “baroque scenarios are shaped by the eroticism of disaster” and these erotics are double edged:

On the one hand, its ultimate object is some version of the crystalline New Jerusalem, an image of purity so absolute that it denies the organic messiness of life. On the other hand, apocalyptic fictions typically linger on pain and suffering. The end result of apocalyptic purification often seems of less importance than the narrative pleasure derived from the bizarre and opulent tribulations of the bodies being burnt by fire and brimstone, tormented by scorpion stings, trodden like grapes in the winepress. In this interplay between the incorporeal purity of the ends and the violent corporeality of the means the apocalyptic body is born. (Gomel 2000:405)

In the current environment the image of the devastated apocalyptic body – the bodies still falling from the towers of September 11, the bodies of Abu Ghraib, the bodies of starvation in Darfur – seem to elide any millennial hope. The forensic analysis of such images refuses to give up its meaning and leaves us hankering for a conjuring trick that will transform the vulnerability they do reveal.

These connections between apocalyptic bodies and the contemporary security state become acute in the world of nanotechnologies. These evolving technologies produce the mechanisms whereby human bodies become controllable nodes in an information network of somantic surveillance. “Smart-warriors” become fully mission-controlled through an array of wearable and

implantable technologies that see, sense and report. It is here that the discourse of future bodies oversteps the messiness of today's realities. Monahan and Wall (2007) point out that these technologies are caught between current realities and a discourse about their future potential. They note that this discursive "history of the future," also creates the necessary parameters for generous funding and development opportunities.

Discourses about the revolutionary potential of nanotech should also be read as cultural tools for conjuring those worlds into existence, while simultaneously foreclosing alternative pathways for technoscientific development.... By stressing the "new" groundbreaking features of nanoscience and nanotechnology... proponents of nanotech biomedical monitoring seek to construct a "break in time"... or a point at which the future lifts off from the present, transporting us away from current problems and concerns. In this framing, any resistance to such bold futures is seen as increasing national vulnerability to terrorists who might not be as ethically constrained or responsible as the US. (Monihan & Wall 2007:159)

While these "bold futures" are being explored for very real military and corporate ends, in a fascinating feedback loop this discourse of the future has also found its way back into contemporary reimaginings of traditional apocalyptic bodies such as the Beast micro-chip of the *Left Behind* novels.

7 The image rhetorics of surveillance and national security

Films, television drama and popular cultural artefacts like *Left Behind* are critical players in the contemporary "image rhetorics" of securitisation (Muller 2004). We live in an environment where security – national, homeland, personal – must be configured in response to what Liotta (2005) calls "creeping vulnerabilities" as well as specific "threats". And as Barkun notes it is also an environment in which "war" and "disaster" are conflated with very real policy consequences:

It implies that all forms of emergency response must be linked, whether civilian or military, national or local. This potential breaching of boundaries between types of response mirrors the breaching of conventional boundaries among types of threats. Thus there are no longer clear distinctions between war and peace, war and crime, war and disaster. Rather myriad forms of "low intensity" conflict inhabit a transnational zone of ambiguous events (Barkun 2002:31)

This "transnational zone of ambiguous events" is not just apparent in the news and the rhetoric of politicians. As we have seen the "traumascape" of popular crime shows and the apocalyptic scenarios of prophecy novels all contribute to this ongoing sense of low intensity conflict and creeping vulnerabilities. Popular culture is not just used by viewers to try to make individual psychological sense of this contemporary situation it is also a potent tool available to advocates and policy makers. Popular image rhetorics are an essential part of conjuring the history of the future. Benjamin Muller argues, for example that "by exposing the painful procedures necessary for cheating biometrics, films like *Minority Report* only strengthen the resolve to introduce such technologies into the contemporary politics of discriminating friend from foe." He continues:

Minority Report, *Mission Impossible*, and other films, become the space in which the merits, dilemmas, and even considerations of political agency are evaluated. In this sense, it would seem that industry representatives and policy advocates consistently evoke Hollywood representations of biometric technologies in order to justify the introduction of such measures and even extol their virtues. (Muller 2004:286)

Michael Shapiro gives quite a different reading of this same situation. In his formulation, the hero's painful eye surgery to avoid retinal identification is a decisive movement that marks John Anderton (the Tom Cruise character) as a "subversive body".

He manifests a counter energy and goes so far as to modify his body to subvert the surveillance

system...Anderton is therefore a Deleuzian fugitive; "Everybody runs," he says when the police first try to apprehend him, and thereafter his running requires him to move in ways that allow him to escape from the coding apparatuses and exemplify the Deleuzian suggestion that there are always forms of flow that elude the capturing, binary organizations. (2005:30)

Significantly, as Shapiro points out, this is a critical movement from the opening scenes of the film where Anderton's body is choreographed as an integrated part of the surveillance machinery of the state.

Minority Report can and will be read both ways by audiences, critics and policy makers. And certainly overall the discourse of "the history of the future" is inherently unstable and competing fragments will ensure that is not reduced to either unadorned paranoia or easy optimism. However there is no doubt that since September 11 there does seem to have been a shift in the way that surveillance futures are conceptualized and represented. As the *Time* magazine article quoted at the beginning of this paper and much of the press coverage of the July 2007 London bombings indicates, the balance between surveillance as protection and surveillance as intrusion has tilted dramatically. As one commentator put it recently: "I think the genie is out of the bottle." Paul Levinson, chairman of communication and media studies at Fordham University told the *Washington Post* that people now have different expectations about their right to privacy. And the genie that has escaped?

"The genie is the lowest level of privacy that human beings have had in their history," Levinson says. "We just have to get used to it. It's a question of redefining what our public and private lives are." (Duke 2007)

One recent media survey (Lirtzman 2007) indicates that 70% of Americans support the increased use of surveillance cameras in public places and another shows 62% support continued wiretapping to fight terrorism (Duke 2007). *Post* writer Lynne Duke identifies Jason Bourne and Jack Bauer⁹ as part of a culture that promotes a new "swashbuckling and romantic" view of surveillance.

In these types of adrenaline-pumping portrayals of electronic eavesdropping, reality must step aside so that Bourne (when he's not crashing a car) or "24's" Jack Bauer (when he's not torturing someone) can eavesdrop in real time, real fast. And it's always for the good, you see, because Bourne's gotta find out what sinister spook programmed him to be a stone-cold killer and Bauer's gotta save the world. The ends justify the means. No time for questions. (Duke 2007)

Certainly cries of "I'm repositioning the satellite now" or "Send the feed to my PDA" are part of the familiar patter that pretends to make shows like *24* "realistic" encounters with contemporary technologies of spying. Nicola Rafter has detected a similar "swashbuckling" attitude in another recent surveillance film: Tony Scott's *DejaVu*. Although it has the structural earmarks of classic surveillance films it bears little of the social critique. It uses a futuristic surveillance device as a principle visual element but does not use it as a plot device to critique technology or to explore the character's identity. (Rafter 2007)

But not all recent surveillance films take this approach. *The Lives of Others* has enjoyed both critical acclaim – an Oscar for Best Foreign picture – and unusually long playing seasons at Melbourne and Sydney arthouse cinemas. At its heart is a devastating critique of the East German surveillance state under the Stasi. Although the brutality of the state is represented through the ubiquity of its surveillance, the intensity of its interrogation techniques and the corruption of friend against friend that this inculcated, the film also presents a story of resistance and

⁹ Jason Bourne is the lead character played by Matt Damon of three highly successful movies (*The Bourne Identity*; *The Bourne Supremacy*; *The Bourne Ultimatum*) about a rouge CIA assassin. Counter terrorism agent Jack Bauer, played by Kiefer Sutherland is the hero of six seasons of the high-rating television drama *24*.

transformation. This attempt to produce a transformational story has been criticised by those who believe it fails to come to terms with the severity of the East German security state (Ash 2007; Funder 2007).

What is unique about Florian Henckel Von Donnersmarck's debut feature and what troubles his critics from the point of view of history, is the portrayal of a genuine "encounter" through the mechanics of surveillance. Stasi agent Gerd Wiesler is gradually transformed through his day-to-day encounter with playwright Georg Dreyman and his circle of friends who have been placed under surveillance. Wiesler gradually becomes addicted to their lives as he sits in the attic of Dreyman's apartment building listening to the clumsy old reel-to-reel wire taps. His existential encounter with the lives of others leads to his taking unusual risks to protect them. Whether such risk taking would have been historically possible given the multiple levels of lateral surveillance in place during the Stasi era is not my concern here. What I find interesting is the way this narrative, this reimagining of the past, links in with contemporary narratives of surveillance as a site of authenticity. While, as we have seen, the culture of reality TV "equates submission to comprehensive surveillance with self-expression and self-knowledge," (Andrejevic 2002:253) Von Donnersmarck's film explores this relationship from the other side. Surveillance becomes not an objectifying method of control – of "othering" – but a site of existential encounter *with* the other. Both self and other are reimagined in this encounter.

8 Conclusion

The trope of surveillance is ubiquitous in contemporary culture and the reach of surveillance technology in contemporary urban spaces is constantly expanding through both technical advances and policy creep. Two metaphors have commonly been adopted to mediate reflections on cultures of surveillance. At a popular level the Orwellian figure of Big Brother has been the focal point for fears of technological encroachment on private lives. At a policy or academic level the Foucaultian Panopticon¹⁰ (Foucault 1977) has often been employed to conceptualise the modern disciplinary power of the surveillance state.

I have argued in this paper that the discourse of the apocalyptic and the forensic are deeply embroiled in contemporary cultural mediations of surveillance. These narratives allow for both a critique of surveillance cultures as well as an interrogation of unexpected resistances, opportunities, fears and new cultural spaces of the surveilled subject.

Neither of these narratives allow us to abandon the totalitarian metaphors of Big Brother and the Panopticon. As Maier (1997) notes the apocalyptic omniobservant God is a model of Foucault's panoptic watcher. But the twin impulses of the apocalyptic and the forensic: transformation and catastrophe; discovery and horror; enable us to conceptualise the cultural work of surveillance in a range of ways. One of the surprising insights that emerges at the intersection of these narratives is a story of authenticity and self discovery that shadows the wider story of state intervention that subjects identity to interrogation in quite different ways.

As media academic Paul Levinson said to the *Washington Post*: "the genie is out of the bottle." He might have added: be careful what you wish for.

¹⁰ This model prison has been widely described, with its unseen watcher in the middle and its prisoners constantly on view around the perimeter. The *possibility* of surveillance at any point becomes the disciplining factor leading to extremely effective internalised self-surveillance.

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