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“What does a scanner see?”
Techno-fascination and unreliability in the mind-game film
Laura Schuster

Abstract

In popular cinema, paranoia and conspiracy plots often go hand in hand with questions of technological innovation. For example, *A Scanner Darkly* (Richard Linklater, US 2006) combines issues such as audiovisual surveillance, conspiracy, and manipulation without disambiguating between paranoid delusion and conventional causality. By foregrounding the possibility of all audiovisual media to colour our perceptions, the film emphasises its own functioning as a mediated and synthetic presentation of a story. Moreover, its mode of presentation mimics the themes of delusion, conspiracy, blurred boundaries, and unfixed identities, drawing the spectator fully into its state of confusion.

Films such as *A Scanner Darkly* signal a current shift in narrative cinema, and prompt a kind of spectator-engagement much in line with posthumanist views on subjectivity. Rather than pertaining to traditional notions of illusionism and suspension of disbelief, these “mind-game films” (Thomas Elsaesser) employ unreliability and spectacle for the creation of unstable and synthetic storyworlds. While firmly embedded in the institution of narrative fiction cinema, *A Scanner Darkly* presents novel and significant modes of signification and agency (even if limited or dystopian), both for those ‘trapped’ within its filmic story and for the spectators on its other end.

Key words

cinema, media technologies, posthuman, spectatorship, surveillance

1. Introduction

What if you found yourself in a surveillance monitoring room, forced to inspect recordings of yourself for signs of bad behaviour, and saw yourself in a situation you didn’t remember ever having been part of? Would you trust the surveillance camera, your memory, or your conscience? Luckily, the occurrence of this situation is not all that likely in reality. It would be almost a cliché, however, in nowadays’ cinema, where a wide array of what-if questions prompts an even wider array of scenarios concerning the future of technocratic western society.

A Scanner Darkly (dir. Richard Linklater, US 2006) fully exploits contemporary cinema’s vast range of possible image manipulations through a story of concealed identities, surveillance ‘scanner’ recordings, and large-scale conspiracy. It engages with current preoccupations around the thinning

lines between mediation and manipulation, man and machine, perception and recording. The film's protagonist is an undercover narcotics detective, but his undercover-ness works miraculous ways. In all police contact, he wears a so-called 'scramble suit', a full-body cover projecting a continuous mixture of facial and bodily images to cover his own. His individual appearance, in reverse, serves as undercover identity. Arctor's assignment is to infiltrate a circle of drug users and trace the source of their supplies, a goal pursued through a vast collection of informants, recordings, and interventions. As the group of addicts grow increasingly paranoid (or conscient) of surveillance, Arctor sinks further into addiction and delusion, and his two identities come under extensive interference. The question arises which identity preceded the other; it is suggested that the police or government have lured him into addiction unknowingly, in order to plant not a mole but a near-unconscious robot into their scheme.

A mixture of recorded performances and animation, this film's extravagant appearance allows for the seamless incorporation of different 'sorts' of filmic sequences, most notably surveillance recordings and individuals' hallucinations.¹ Disambiguating between 'actual' and 'imagined', or 'past' and 'current', events becomes a task in itself, and this trouble creates a parallel between characters and spectators, both attempting to make sense of their perceptions. The non-realistic appearance of this film also renders the film's closing sequence rather stunning: it was all true, or at the very least the paranoia was not at all irrational. All along, the truth about their situation was much wilder than the protagonists' imaginations.

Like many recent films, *A Scanner Darkly* is as much concerned with the future of audiovisual media as with their effects on human perceptions. Technological manipulation and psychological delusions have long been a winning team in cinema, and the general nature of cinematic presentation is a probably cause for this. Itself a technology for manipulating time, reality, and observations, cinema has a well-stocked toolkit for playing with our minds and perceptions. In recent years, and quite likely under the influence of digitisation, it has perhaps begun to finally exploit this potential in full. This film is exemplary in how it thematises contemporary cinema's exploration of old, new, and imagined audiovisual technologies. Surveillance and data-gathering are a common concern here, reminiscent of control-society science fiction films such as *Gattaca* (1997) and *Minority Report* (2002). Another clear preoccupation is the manipulability of perceptions and memories, also featured in the *Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2003).

2. Unreliable cinema

Technology dystopia, of which *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Blade Runner* (1982) are classic examples, has always been a strong current in popular cinema fiction. Over the past decade, though, the genre has developed into a structure where ‘technology’ becomes less an externalized antagonist, and more a system of control over human life, developed by humans but also de-humanising. The motivations for these developments are often dubious, as witness the plots of, again, *The Matrix*, *Minority Report*, *Gattaca*, and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

Now these films take a less distinctive stance towards technophobia than their predecessors where computers or nonhumans are often simply ‘the enemy’; they clearly indicate that technological control is not something external to mankind, but an extension of man’s desire to survey, record, control, and where needed, manipulate. Along with this insight, typically flaunted and effaced at the same time, often comes a tight structure of self-reflexivity that foregrounds a film’s own technology display; it presents advanced media technologies as a cause for fear while fetishising the threat, allowing the spectator to admire those cinematic technologies that produced such spectacle. Technology display is often the most heavily advertised attraction of a feature film concerned with the possibly harmful consequences of technological innovations, which elicits a rather ambiguous position on the matter.

It makes sense to interpret these films as ‘symptoms’ of current mutations in narrative cinema. There has been much discussion of cinema’s confrontation with its 100-year anniversary and history, while postmodern pastiche and self-reflexivity practices may suggest that both ‘artistic’ and Hollywood storytelling conventions have long exhausted themselves and the Ouroboros circles of poststructuralist theories collide with the cinephilia of semiotic and aesthetic film analysis. These issues have contributed to a felt collapse of borders and demarcations in cinema, ranging from genre classifications to industrial organisations.

And then, of course, there is the horizon of the digital, which changes our definition of cinema even if it does not announce its end. While some theorists have long proclaimed the ‘death’ of cinema, and others predict a fully transformed cinema of the future, many remain sceptical on whether the digital really announces such a paradigmatic shift.² A common conclusion is that whereas the manipulability, impermanence, and flexibility of digital information allow and force cinema to go just about anywhere, the established principles of narrative cinema are unlikely to be fully abandoned. As Matt Hanson observes,

The digitization of cinema means elements can be fused and altered by the processor, blurring the lines previously dividing

these established schools and their traditions. The 800lb gorilla of moving image, the feature film, is increasingly coming under attack. It needs to shape up, mutate, and evolve if it is to stay relevant in a universe of changing hardware, content, and, ultimately, the thing that matters most: viewer expectations.³

The impact of the digital is also crucial to Laura Mulvey’s notion of a current “technological curiosity”. Diversifying digital film practices and the current proliferation of cinema history through DVD culture, she argues, add to a situation where almost anything can be ‘done’ to pre-existing film images (while, as Hanson points out, almost anything can be created in new ones):

In this dialogue between old and new, past and present the opposition between film and new technologies begins to break down and the new modes of spectatorship illuminate aspects of cinema that, like the still frame, have been hidden from view.⁴

Rather than address their position within the institution of cinema, however, I want to discuss how recent techno-fascinated films, with *A Scanner Darkly* as a representative, incorporate and produce changing notions of spectatorship and subjectivity. Thomas Elsaesser suggests that this type, which fits his notion of “mind-game films”, creates something like a novel “viewing contract” with audiences:

The new contract between spectator and film is no longer based solely on ocular verification, identification, voyeuristic perspectivism and “spectatorship” as such, but on the particular rules that obtain for and, in a sense, are the conditions for spectatorship [...] What makes the mind-game films noteworthy in this respect is the “avant-garde” or “pilot” or “prototype” function they play within the “institution cinema” at this juncture, where they, besides providing “mind-games”, “brain-candy” and often enough, spectacular special effects, set out to train, elaborate, and yes: “test” the textual forms, narrative tropes and story motifs that can serve such a re-negotiation of the rules of the game.⁵

Though hardly new inventions, the current popularity and ubiquity of self-reflexive technology comments in popular cinema affect our sense of perception, cognition, and ultimately, our sense of subjectivity, indeed creating a new kind of spectatorship. One of the new rules is ‘take nothing for granted’: a typical mind-game film will play on viewers’ expectations and

disprove its audience's assumption by showing its own manipulative sleight of hand.

Unreliability is a returning factor in the mind-game film, quite more extensively so than it has been in detective, avant-garde, and art-house films over the past century. In mind-game films, unreliable narration always carries an ontological component, a doubt about the trustworthiness of reality and of perceptions. Audiovisual technologies within the filmic world are often blamed for the loss of reliability: they facilitate the manipulation of characters' perceptions, memories, and/or environments, and sometimes literally pull the ground from under one's feet.

Surveillance recordings in *A Scanner Darkly* colour the filmic presentation, but also interfere with characters' perceptions of their own identities, and with the world around them. The trouble, however, neither ends nor starts here: regardless of the scanners, protagonists' own perceptions and conclusions are hopelessly compromised by drug-induced paranoia and cognitive deterioration. There is no stable or natural ground below the confusions and manipulations. Conspiracy, paranoia, surveillance, and delusion interact in a causal feedback loop, where a narcotics agent is manipulated into a brain-damaging addiction and forced to spy on himself, finding his own perceptions muddled by recordings. Once fully alienated from any self-image or reliable thought, he is planted in a rehabilitation clinic in the hopes that he, unaware, will supply proof of the suspicion that these clinics themselves manufacture the drugs they proclaim to fight.

3. Machine vision

By emphasising issues of perception and memory, mind-game films often hint at the position of the spectator vis-à-vis the film. When considering the way we understand narrative cinema, and the confusing narrative presentations of the mind-game film in particular, it is only a small step from spectators' "illusions" to protagonists' delusions, and this is one example of how mind-game films tie their audience into the game. In their insistence upon the unreliability of information and the fragmented nature of consciousness, these films offer a sense of subjectivity that is characterised by synthetic-ness in both senses of the word: it is as fabricated as it is combinatory.

A peculiar sequence in *A Scanner Darkly* is instructive here. After first dismissing as a dream-like hallucination his disturbing experience of waking up next to a prostitute and for a moment seeing her change into Donna, the girl he actually desires, Robert Arctor is shocked to find his hallucination validated a few days later. When reviewing surveillance footage of himself as part of his incognito narcotics investigation, it turns out that the camera has registered the exact same transformation: it shows Arctor waking up at night and staring in shock as his anonymous bed-mate changes into the image of

Donna, and back. This constitutes a doubling of artificiality-effects: what we spectators see is pure mediation, to be attributed with as much realism as we like, but within the filmic diegesis there exists a concrete battle over the ontology of the filmic image, the tensions between objective registration and the mental projections of the observer. This battle, moreover, is not an auteurist, intellectual observation but exerts a concrete effect upon the lives of the film’s characters.

“When narrative functionalities change”, N. Katherine Hayles remarks on cyborg literature, “a new kind of reader is produced by the text.”⁶ This is exactly what happens with the mind-game film: it dramatically transgresses the traditional positioning of the spectator by Hollywood mainstream pre-1990s cinema. Both more open and more closed to the spectator, offering views from ‘impossible’ or multiple perspectives, deciding not to distinguish between objective and subjective views or representations, jumping between characters and playing constantly with factors of restricted and omniscient narration, its storytelling and style create a high degree of narrative complexity.⁷ Some typical effects and stylistic strategies have quickly established themselves as genre markers: examples are the now-famous *bullet time* and point-of-view shots from the ‘perspective’ of non-organic currents or information flows. Through the constant ambiguations between actual, imagined, and diegetically recorded sequences, *A Scanner Darkly* corresponds exactly to what Elsaesser, in a discussion of the authenticity and archive function of recordings, refers to as a

contest [...] between two kinds of recording-system (the human mind and psyche on the one hand, the camera and sensor on the other), whose data in each case are treated [...] as (raw) material or information, rather than as documents or embodied action.⁸

Whether the film enunciation motivates its information as psychic or actual, both remain the “raw data” of the film itself and function as its real components. To my mind, such a self-reflexive layering of recordings can achieve more than a mere ‘postmodern’ sense of hyperreality or techno-fetish. It suggests a redefinition of human subjectivity, knowledge, and engagement with the technologically mediated world presented by and within a film.

These novel perspectives and effects often point to the interaction and (in)compatibility of mechanical and human perceptions, a continuous preoccupation in cinema from Vertov to Godard. Now, however, it is all over the mainstream multiplex cinemas and our home entertainment systems. From a film-historical, but also from a much wider perspective, this is no coincidence: in western culture today, concrete manifestations of this matter

abound. We find ourselves interacting with - and depending on - machine observations most every day, in ways not altogether dissimilar from the dystopian situations in *A Scanner Darkly* or *Minority Report*. Manifestations and examples range from long-distance communication to artificial intelligence, videogames and training simulations to information warfare, Photoshop to DNA analysis.

There are a number of different ways to argue that the mind-game film is symptomatic of a relatively new conception of subjectivity - one that has emerged over the past 10 years and under the influences of technological restructurations and scientific preoccupations. This notion is usually assembled under the header of 'the posthuman', although it in fact has little to do with not-being-human-anymore. Posthumanist issues such as artificial intelligence and consciousness lead to a conception of the human individual that does not pose a break from humanity, but rather a move away from a historically-developed and culturally distinct sense of humanism which involves individuality, uniqueness, truth, objectivity, embodiment, freedom, will, and agency. Very much in line with the posthuman, Garrett Stewart proposes the term "postsubjective virtuality" for what happens in films akin to those I have mentioned, though for the underdetermination of images, perspectives, and validity that I take as determinants in my corpus, I prefer the term "transsubjective".⁹ This choice is partly in order to avoid confusion with the Lacanian and Lyotardian understanding of intersubjectivity as a social phenomenon of communication and meaning-production,¹⁰ and partly to emphasise the transferable, borderless, and unstable nature of subjectivity amidst the technological and psychological distortions of mind-game films.

Identity is the key arena for all these distortions to be played out: like many mind-game films, *A Scanner Darkly* is riddled with *doppelgänger* motifs, counter-identities, amnesia, and split personalities. Without entering the realm of cyborgs, the questioning, fragmentation, and splitting of identities in *A Scanner Darkly* establishes a similar discussion of human identity, consciousness, and subjectivity. Arctor finds his identity muddled not only by the surveillance of himself he is forced to process, but also by the dwindling of his mental faculties due to the drugs he has himself become addicted to during his undercover narcotics investigation. All these internal and external influences contaminate any clear-cut, coherent sense of self; Arctor perfectly illustrates the posthuman notion, here phrased by Slavoj Žižek, that

At the level of material reality (inclusive of the psychological reality of "inner experience") there is in effect no Self: the Self is not the "inner kernel" of an organism, but a surface-effect. A "true" human Self functions, in a sense, like a computer screen:

what is “behind” it is nothing but a network of “selfless” neuronal machinery.¹¹

In a fitting scene, Arctor delivers a work speech in his scramble suit, but suffers extreme discomfort halfway. His perceptions of the audience are truly caught in the prism of filmic representation: before the blur of his scramble suit, we see the markings “Live” and “HQ” within what is supposedly Arctor’s vision. Arctor’s subjective perceptions appear filtered by the panoptical reign of his employer; our perceptions *of* the film are filtered by its logic of surveillance and mediation.

In this sense, the inhabitants of *A Scanner Darkly*’s world are subject to pre-selected and fragmented information as much as its spectators are – body, mind, and soul, it seems. Arctor’s quasi-philosophical soliloquy (another trademark feature of mind-game films), taken almost verbatim from the film’s literary source, Philip K. Dick’s 1977 novel of the same name, goes as follows:

Whatever it is that's watching, it's not human, unlike little dark eyed Donna. It doesn't ever blink. What does a scanner see? Into the head? Down into the heart? Does it see into me, into us? Clearly or darkly? I hope it sees clearly, because I can't any longer see into myself. I see only murk. I hope for everyone's sake the scanners do better. Because if the scanner sees only darkly, the way I do, then I'm cursed and cursed again. I'll only wind up dead this way, knowing very little, and getting that little fragment wrong too.

The ontological doubt caused by confrontation with alternative, nonhuman hermeneutical systems is a key structure of techno- and futurophobia. It corresponds nicely with what Hayles identifies as a common connection

between the assumptions undergirding the liberal humanist subject and the ethical position that humans, not machines, must be in control. Such an argument assumes a vision of the human in which conscious agency is the essence of human identity. Sacrifice this, and we humans are hopelessly compromised, contaminated with mechanic alienness in the very heart of our humanity.¹²

So are we doomed? Even if we take *A Scanner Darkly* as a pessimist foreboding of future technocracies with our bodies and mind lost in mediation, we need not necessarily ascribe to its dystopia. The film’s trouble with surveillance, manipulation, and identity relates precisely to those ‘old’ values of self-image and humanism that posthuman theorists tend to put under scrutiny. Hayles again:

When the self is envisioned as grounded in presence, identified with originary guarantees and teleological trajectories, associated with solid foundations and logical coherence, the posthuman is likely to be seen as antihuman because it envisions the conscious mind as a small subsystem running its program of self-construction and self-assurance while remaining ignorant of the actual dynamics of complex systems. But the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice.¹³

Whereas this film's characters may be trapped in the doomsday picture of a humanity without self or agency, I suggest that the way we spectators can understand, enjoy, and engage with such disorienting narrative structures and presentations is in itself good news. Over the course of a century, film spectatorship has come a long way. *A Scanner Darkly* is arguably not an outstanding intellectual or artistic film, and did not do particularly well in sales. It shows, however, that narrative cinema does not necessarily rely upon illusionism, photographic indexicality, or on psychological audience-to-protagonist identification.

In the end it is the filmic text that we must believe in, not the (in)accurate perceptions of an 'informant'. In fact, the highly disorienting sequences of pure hallucination within this film suggest that too long a peak into our informants' minds might prove unbearable for the duration of a feature film. The blinking "HQ" indicators, along with many other markers of machine vision, disembody but also render coherent *A Scanner Darkly's* mode of visual communication. The same happens with sound; if music determines the visual pace of scenes, discriminating between 'actual', realistic, imagined, or nondiegetic sounds becomes irrelevant. We have nothing but a film's enunciation as a whole, comprised of fragmented sequences of heterogeneous origins - contaminated by mediation, perhaps, but also rendered presentable by it.

Confusion in itself can be a source of enjoyment; in fact, the puzzle aspect of mind-game films is their most appreciated and discussed feature. This I take as an indication that, indeed, these films serve as our pilots into 'the posthuman', if we are not already there. Mind-game films show that the subject is willing to give up a bit of stable ground and surrender to the unreliable or the hypothetical - as far as cinema is concerned, at least.

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Notes

¹ In this, the film fully corresponds to the ‘return’ to animation and image creativity that, according to a number of media theorists including Sean Cubitt and Lev Manovich, has been brought about by digitisation.

² Within the arena of media-technology debate, theorists predicting a fully transformed future cinema include Mark B.N. Hansen, Friedrich Kittler, David Tafler, Yvonne Spielmann, and Peter Wollen. Perspectives emphasising the continuation of established cinematic principles are forwarded by Sean Cubitt, Anne Friedberg, Daniel Frampton, Matt Hanson, Lev Manovich, and Marie-Laure Ryan, to name but a few. For more on this matter, see Thomas Elsaesser and Kay Hoffmann (eds), *Cinema Futures: Cain, Abel or Cable? The Screen Arts in the Digital Age*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam UP, 1998, or Shilo T. McClean, *Digital Storytelling: The Narrative Power of Visual Effects in Film*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2007.

³ M Hanson, *The End of Celluloid: Film Futures in the Digital Age*, Rotovision SA, Hove (UK), 2004, p. 9.

⁴ L Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, Reaktion, London, 2006, p. 27.

⁵ T Elsaesser, 'The Mind-Game Film', in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, W. Buckland (ed), Blackwell, Oxford, forthcoming.

⁶ N K Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Chicago / London, University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 47.

⁷ The narrative complexity of contemporary popular fiction films has been stressed by many narratologically-inclined film theorists, including David Bordwell, Edward Branigan, Warren Buckland, and Erven Lavik. I am convinced, however, that its identification is not a sufficient end in itself, but rather a means of entry into the complexity of the issues raised through these films' difficult storytelling strategies.

⁸ T Elsaesser, 'The New Film History as Media Archaeology'. *Cinemas*, vol. 14, nr. 2-3, Spring 2005, p. 108.

⁹ G Stewart, *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London, 2007, p. 211: "the technofantastic plots of recent Hollywood films, along with their low-tech supernatural variants, indulge in what we might call a postsubjective virtuality." Though Stewart's interest lies with the temporal distortions brought on by technological and supernatural presences in contemporary cinema, his conclusions apply perfectly to this article's concern with mediation and subjectivity.

¹⁰ For more on this conception of the intersubjective, see for instance Haidar Eid, "Lyotard, Habermas, and the Virtue of the Universal", *Kritikos* online journal, Vol. 4 (May 2007), Intertheory Press, last updated May 2007, viewed May 28th, 2008, <http://intertheory.org/eid.htm>.

¹¹ S Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge (US), MIT Press, 2006: p. 206.

¹² Hayles, p. 288.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 286.