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Film Review: *All Light, Everywhere*

Anthony Theo (dir.) (2021) *All Light, Everywhere*. New York, New York, United States: Sandbox Films

All Light, Everywhere (2021) directed and written by filmmaker Theo Anthony, is a documentary film that focuses on –or perhaps more accurately, revolves around– the blind spots of vision. More specifically, the film asks if imaging technologies, for instance police body-worn video cameras (BWCs), can ever provide an *objective* viewpoint. The film's essayistic format comprises a number of strands. These include: a tour of Axon Incorporated's headquarters, (Axon are the leading producer of BWCs and manufacturer Taser 'non-lethal' weapons), a BWC training session held for police officers in Baltimore, a community meeting, also in Baltimore, hosted by CEO of Persistent Surveillance Systems Ross McNutt, and a history of imaging technologies and their connection to astronomy, the military, and notably policing. Set against composer Dan Deacon's somewhat earie synth soundtrack, these strands are interspersed with more artistic shots of a crowd of people at what appears to be a solar eclipse, Anthony's own retina, people taking part in an experiment for brain scanning technology, and footage shot using a camera mounted to a pigeon.

One of the central themes of the film is man's (and it does seem to be predominantly men) faith in technology as the solution to societal problems. From the Gatling gun, one of the first machine guns designed in 1861 by Richard Gatling who hoped that it would *reduce* the bloodshed of the civil war, to Steve Tuttle and Ross McNutt, spokespeople from Axon and Persistent Surveillance Systems respectively, who develop and pitch technologies which, they argue, deter and prevent crime. The film gives numerous other examples of how technology, and automation are promised as ways of ways of making societies safer and more equitable. The connection between firearms and moving image is made explicitly in the film, as Anthony's disembodied narrator points out 'a cartridge of film is loaded, the shutter is triggered the flash fires, the camera shoots, an image is captured, a common language endures'. Such connections have been drawn before, notably by Donna Haraway (1988) who Anthony refences. Haraway talks of the 'God trick of seeing everything from nowhere' (1988, p. 581), and says that in putting this 'myth' into practice techno-monsters are born. She insists that vision is always embodied and therefore always particular and, crucially, partial. As Anthony reminds us 'every image has a frame'.

Axon make both weapons (supposedly non-lethal ones) and cameras. The company is in many ways emblematic of the enduring connection between cameras and weaponry. Anthony uses it, and its flagship body camera the Axon Body-2 as the glue that binds the film together. Steve Tuttle gives the viewer a tour of the Axon headquarters. Viewers familiar with Axons corporate media –some of which features in *All Light, Everywhere*– will be familiar with the tone and style of Tuttle's delivery. Anthony, occasionally appearing in the shot as he helps Tuttle is evidently keen to draw attention to this in his film. The headquarters building plays a central role. The open 'catwalk' walkways, styled we are told on sci-fi films like Star Trek mean, according to Tuttle, that 'there are no secrets' at Axon. The walk ways reflect that it is a 'transparent company', or depending on your point of view, one obsessed with surveillance and appearances. The company's slogans: 'Win Right', 'Own It', 'Be Obsessed', 'Aim Far', 'Join Forces', and 'Expect Candour' are printed in bold type adorning the factory floor. Taken at face value, the slogans are merely meaningless corporate jargon that Tuttle attempts to decipherer for us. Collectively, however, they reflect

the deterministic ideology at the core of Axon; that human behaviour can be shaped and controlled by design. One of the building's most striking features is the 'Black Box', a cube shaped office in the top of the building occupied by the companies research and development team. Constructed out of two-way glass, the Black Box, Tuttle rather excitedly informs us, 'allows those inside to see out, but hides what they're working on inside; we can't see them but they can see us'. Much like the central guard tower in Jeremy Bentham's panopticon design (Bentham, 1995), the Black Box is a reminder (like the tour itself) that to control who sees what, and from where, is to have power.

The lens on Axon BWCs is designed to mimic the human eye. Ambiguity is a design feature, 'we don't want the infrared to show that it was a gun or wasn't a gun, because the officer doesn't see in infrared'. This, Tuttle tells us, is one of the unique selling points of Axon cameras compared to competitors. The importance of the officer's point-of-view in the design of Axons cameras is noted by Ben Brucato who argues that the officer's embodied perspective has 'special social and legal significance' (2015, p. 456). This, along with 'multiple levels of gate-keeping' (2015, p. 466) mean that footage recorded on BWC privileges the police viewpoint, and can be used to nullify other video evidence, for instance that recorded by citizens using smartphones. Anthony also explores the idea of privilege in relation to the footage that BWCs produce. His narrator frames the ability of officers to use BWCs as a 'memory aid' when writing statements about use-of-force as an opportunity. The BWC, and the footage it produces doesn't record reality, but makes new ones.

But with BWCs police bodies become another blind spot. Bodies, vital to how the cameras work, are invisible in the footage. A voice narrates, the camera moves, but the officer who wears the camera is disembodied; they become part of the camera, Anthony's narrator tells us. This is one way of looking at it. The other is that cameras become part of the officer. Gates describes mounting a camera to one's body as an 'intimate act' (2016, p. 417), noting privacy issues around wearing a camera as you work. She also speculates that wearers might grow fond of their BWCs, highlighting points made by police chiefs at a 'TASER Tech Summit' about officers who, although initially resistant to BWCs, end up 'becoming ardent supporters' who are 'very much attached to their camera attachments' (2016, p. 418). Literally cyborgs (Haraway, 1991) officers learn from the outset how to see like the camera. It becomes impossible to know where one ends and the other begins. But as Anthony points out, there is a gap. The camera attached to the officer's body, provides a slightly different perspective to that of their own vision. Watching BWC footage we enter the void between the two.

Perhaps the most successful part of the film is of the discussion that takes place during a community meeting held by McNutt, CEO of Persistent Surveillance Systems, an aerial surveillance company. McNutt's plane was grounded after it emerged that the company conducted covert surveillance over Baltimore on behalf of the city's police department following the murder of Freddie Gray by the same police department (Laughland and Swaine, 2015). In an attempt to get both his plane and his company off the ground, McNutt, with the help of hired community liaisons, was seeking the consent of those surveilled. The responses from the group are some of the most powerful and astute points in the film. Maybe unsurprisingly to viewers, although seemingly to McNutt, the vast majority of the group are against the use of an imaging technology which originated, as did to the Gatling gun before it, on the battlefield, in this case Iraq and Afghanistan. One man, a Haitian immigrant to the United States, questions how

such a pervasive technology owned by a private entity could ever be used to solve crime and help the community. He succinctly and powerfully makes the case against movements towards so called 'platform policing' models (Gates, 2019; Wilson, 2019). Others question the notion that more surveillance will deter crime. Recalling rioting in the wake of Gray's death, one man says: 'it ain't cameras that gonna deter anything, its mentality'. Another member of the group points out how the places where crimes take place are *already* highly surveilled. Similar points have been made about BWCs by researchers. In a study conducted in Washington DC BWCs were found to have negligible impact on crime, one hypothesis being that the high saturation of existing surveillance infrastructure (not to mention citizens with smartphones) meant that behaviour was already being modified (Yokum, Ravishankar and Coppock, 2019).

The community meeting contrasts starkly with scenes of the officer BWC training session. Also filmed in Baltimore, and consequently involving the same police department that was involved in the murder of Freddie Gray, the session introduces officers to the Axon Body-2 camera, its features, and their implications. 'Thirty seconds is a long time' says the sergeant conducting the session as he starts a timer on his smartphone. As the seconds tick by, Anthony's cameras zoom uncomfortably close to the officer's faces. We watch the watchers think about what the cameras mean, 'a lot can happen', says one of the officers as the thirty seconds is up. Officers learn of the rationale for the cameras, broken down into four bullet points; professionalism, transparency, evidence collection, and accountability. These, like Axon's corporate jargon, are equally vague, politically agile terms. Their exposition by the sergeant reveals little of how a BWC will practically achieve these stated aims. Ultimately, actions speak louder than words. As the sergeant discusses professionalism, he has to pause to ask two of the officers to stop chatting. Even with the volume of cameras in the room 'professionalism' isn't insured.

All Light, Everywhere presents a number of opposing perspectives. Although Anthony draws no explicit conclusions, the film shows that the search for any true objectivity in video imagery is doomed to fail. This, as the film reminds us has always been true, but in a world with so many cameras, perspectives and views it is more important than ever to bear in mind Haraway's warnings, after all, 'infinite vision is an illusion, a god trick' (1988, p. 582). The film also highlights an inherent violence of capturing images (Sontag, 2008). Who has the power to shoot, and or capture are questions that loom large in the film. Video cameras are not only connected to weapons in a mechanical sense, but also because of how they have been used as tools of subjugation, often against people of colour. Various strands or frames of the film frequently crystallise into moments of clarity, though this is not a view shared by all (Seitz, 2021). Viewers will make their own minds up about what they are shown. Whether you think that technology can create a more equitable society will depend on where you are stood, and perhaps who you're employed by a company or organisation with a vested interest in surveillance technologies. What's needed, as one of the people in the community meeting says, 'is the truth about this neighbourhood'. The question is, whose truth do we see?

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