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**THE FUTURE(S) OF RISK:
BARTHES AND BAUDRILLARD GO TO HOLLYWOOD**

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THE FUTURE(S) OF RISK:

BARTHES AND BAUDRILLARD GO TO HOLLYWOOD

ABSTRACT

Hollywood cinema is rarely acknowledged as an important counterpublic sphere which not only works to stimulate a critical and inclusive dialogue on the nature of risk technologies, but which also facilitates a deliberative engagement with the politics and ethics of risk-management. And yet, it is commonplace for the futuristic films of the science fiction genre to take seriously the implications to 'justice' of intensified surveillance in liberal democratic societies faced with different kinds of risk. Filmic representations of 'imagined' technologies for responding to crime, especially those based on identificatory and predictive capacity, are typified in box office successes, such as *Minority Report* (2002), *Paycheck* (2003) and *A Scanner Darkly* (2006). These films may (simply) be entertaining as 'action-packed' science fiction thrillers, but they also create a Baudrillardian hyperreality which allows us to glimpse alternative frameworks of risk-management which, ambiguously, reflect both the horror and the hope for systems of 'justice', law enforcement and punishment in a 'risk society'. Through an analysis of these films, and drawing on Barthes's notions of *jouissance* and the *enigmatic*, this paper explores the critical, subversive and disruptive possibilities of the simulated worlds of 'Hollywood risk-management' paying particular attention to how they work to destabilise and scrutinise the conceptual scope and empirical instantiation of 'risk' as well as challenge its ethico-political meaning in contemporary life.

KEYWORDS: risk; science fiction; hyperreality; *jouissance*; the enigmatic

FROM RISK TO RESISTANCE

In the academic and policy literature, the concept of risk organises and informs our perspectives on contemporary life, and is used not only as a mobile signifier of the quality of everyday experience in the present, but also as a means of contemplating and planning for the dynamics of the future. There is now a large body of theoretical scholarship and scientific research which provides a wide range of sophisticated, complex and generally persuasive analyses of the different hazards we face, and the potentialities of a future blighted by environmental, political, economic and social insecurities (Giddens, 1990, 1991; Beck, 1992; Bauman, 1997). Indeed, Giddens's (1984) overworked notion of 'ontological insecurity' is frequently used as shorthand to describe the uncertainties of life in late modernity. While there is much to support this gloomy outlook, the rhetoric of a runaway world and its accompanying narratives of precariousness, risk, threat and fear sustains an affective register of concern, and a receptivity to strategies and technologies which can be fashioned and developed in the name of risk management. Such a context provides fertile ground for popularising and giving credence to certain narrowly conceived approaches to the containment and management of risk, most especially in relation to the surveillance and regulation of predatory, dangerous and prolific forms of criminality.

Across Western liberal democratic societies, risk analysis, both as a process of inquiry and an apparatus of quantitative, actuarial reasoning has become the dominant procedure used to predict behaviour and situate individuals according to the level of risk they pose (Feeley and Simon, 1992; Kelmshall, 2003). Indeed, since the publication of Feeley's and Simon's (1992) seminal article on the 'new penology', criminological scholarship has been swift to comment on how modes of calculation

and control associated with risk-oriented technologies and actuarial practices have infiltrated and become *de rigeur* within criminal justice and penal administration. At times made meaningful within wider perspectives on neo-liberalism (O'Malley, 2004a; Stenson, 2000), and at other times investigated in relation to specific areas of policy and practice – see, for example, Stenson and Sullivan (2001) - there now exists a substantial critical literature documenting not only the power effects of 'risk discourse', but also how thorny questions of governance, legitimacy, human rights, punishment, law enforcement, justice and community safety are increasingly settled by reference to the notion of 'risk'

This kind of critical work provides an important counterpoint to (atheoretical) evaluation studies which focus almost exclusively on the administrative utility and instrumental value of different 'risk technologies'. Widely condemned as 'positivist correctionalism and managerialism' (Pratt, 1997: 4), the majority of these contributions have been concerned with developing and perfecting different technologies and apparatuses for identifying, managing, measuring, calculating and predicting risk (Hoge, 2002; Webster, MacDonald and Simpson, 2006). At best, they provide negative, rather than critical assessments of the effectiveness, efficiency and/or predictive utility of risk technologies; at worst, they leave in place how 'risk' should be thought, analysed, managed and communicated in any given politico-economic context. However, and of concern here is how critical scholarship *and* administrative work alike make a number of unqualified assumptions about the popular (public) appetite and support for risk-oriented modes of governance. In his outline of the resonance of fear of crime to the contemporary politics of risk, Jackson posits:

Anxieties about crime make themselves felt through public demands on the police to manage crime and its concomitant causes and effects. Clamor for more police, increasing calls for the government to tackle antisocial behaviour, the seeming refusal of many people to believe that crime rates are not rising – all these evidence the influence of public perceptions of risk. And governments respond: witness popular punitive law and order sloganeering (and) police strategies of reassurance..... In some instances, public perceptions of risk even encourage the police to focus on reassurance at the expense of actual risk reduction (2006: 253).

The idea of a compliant public which is not only receptive to the introduction of authoritarian risk-reduction strategies, but which also welcomes the widespread use of pseudo-scientific instruments and tools of risk-management, runs through much of the academic commentary on ‘risk’. There is a tacit assumption that the public is not merely convinced of the utility of risk technologies, but actively clamours for more of the same – see, for example, Ashenden’s (2002) eloquent and insightful article on ‘policing perversion’, in which she examines the ‘normalising models of risk’ which inform popular acceptance of the perceived threat posed by child sex offenders. What is missing from such accounts is any acknowledgement of the circulation of a ‘risk discourse’ which is resistant to or, at least, which problematises, challenges and/or subverts hegemonic ideas about the systems and apparatuses of risk control and their anticipated effects. I want to suggest three key and interrelated reasons for this omission. First, the literature tends to hold a rather limited (and limiting), one-dimensional view of the nature of public opinion and the orientation of public deliberation; second, there is very little imagination about the range of media through which ‘risk discourse’ circulates, or what counts as the public sphere; and third,

academic scholarship, despite its critical credentials, is rather conservative about what it regards as, and where it locates relations and practices of resistance.

Elsewhere, I have raised concern about criminology's tendency to characterise (or even caricature) public opinion as reactionary and punitive (Campbell, 2008). According to Lyons and Scheingold (2000), understanding community engagements with questions of crime and punishment through the lens of 'punitive populism' (Bottoms, 1995) has become something of a cumulative enterprise within academic criminology. Getting to analytical grips with the (re-)emergence of populism and its presumed support for the reintroduction of harsh measures premised on retribution, deterrence and incapacitation, has produced some very innovative accounts of the resurgence of a more conservative, authoritarian penalty which is open to the proliferating (and often unregulated) use of risk-centred surveillance and control systems such as CCTV, biometric identification methods, psychometric testing, screening and scanning devices, offender profiling, drugs and alcohol testing procedures and sex offender registers (Lyon, 2006; Thomas, 2005; McCartney, 2006). At the same time, the term 'punitiveness normally carries connotations of excess' (Matthews, 2005: 179) in the penal realm, and when articulated in conjunction with 'populism' the effect is to discredit the value of public deliberations about risk and its management. Indeed, it is not uncommon for public dialogue to be summarily dismissed as rhetorical, hyperbolic, unreasonable, irrational, paranoid, hysterical and atavistic (Anderson, 1995). However, there is a growing chorus of voices which question whether the expression 'the new punitiveness', or the notion of 'punitive populism' adequately describes the public mood and tolerance for intrusive, panoptic forms of risk-management (O'Malley, 1999; Matthews, 2005). Indeed, Hutton (2005)

questions the notion of a monolithic public disposition and presents empirical data to demonstrate that punitive attitudes co-exist with less visceral and more ‘rational’, reflective attitudes to the politics of risk - see also Roberts, Stalans, Indermaur and Hough (2003); while Sparks calls for a highly contextualised and situationally-specific appreciation of popular views:

... the reception by people of media stories about crime and punishment is best grasped ethnographically and *in situ*, in which case many public responses that are commonly deprecated by criminologists and others as ‘irrational’ or ‘hysterical’ tend to become substantially more intelligible (2001: 197).

Sparks’s reference to the mediated nature of public discourse on ‘risk’ also prompts us to question what we come to regard as ‘media’ in this context. It is commonplace, for example, to cite newspaper coverage as the source media of public consciousness about the risks posed by crime, most especially the sensationalist reports of the tabloid press. Even those accounts which explicitly examine ‘media representations’ of risk, disproportionately trawl the newspapers for data (Ashenden, 2002; Meyer, 2007) rather than any other medium. It is not that this is ‘wrong’ so much that it ultimately skews and narrows our understanding of ‘media’ and, more importantly, it limits our sense of what counts as the public sphere of ‘risk discourse’. Recent developments in public sphere theory call into question Habermasian notions of the nature of public deliberation and mediated dialogue. Habermas’s insistence on the nature of public discussion – as a rule-based, ideal speech situation; as informed by communicative rationality; and as achieving consensus based on universal norms and principles – expose him to the charge of failing to recognise the exclusivity of his particular version of discourse ethics (Benhabib, 1986; Calhoun, 1992; Outhwaite, 1994;

Crossley and Roberts, 2004). Discursive media and practices which do not conform to the formalism of Habermasian criteria are either rendered irrelevant to deliberative forms of political engagement; or, are excluded and silenced as instances of public dialogue. Such discursive spaces have been theorised as counterpublic spheres (Asen, 2000; Asen and Brouwer, 2001; Warner, 2002) and this is a concept which allows an understanding of public deliberation (of risk in this context) as mobilised discursively within and through a heterogeneity of cultural media. Consequently, stand-up comedy, Hollywood film, television talk shows, video-gaming and cartoons, for example, are as crucial for deliberative and participatory engagement with the politics of risk as are government publications, documentary broadcasts, citizens juries, town hall meetings, local surveys and consensus conferences. Such media function as discursive spaces of ‘critical publicity’ (Asen and Brouwer, 2001: 6), a notion which denotes the reflexive interaction of resistance and power as a discursive and cultural accomplishment.

These kinds of insights also allow us to be a little more imaginative about the nature of resistance, and where relations and practices of resistance might be located. With the exception of cultural criminological scholarship (Hayward, 2004; Ferrell, Hayward and Young, 2008), ‘conventional criminologies of risk’ tend to recognise resistance only if it comes in the form of direct action which has the effect of scuppering or problematising the exercise of governmental power. So long as resistance is equated with direct forms of action which have a demonstrable, political impact on how risk is communicated and governed, it will obscure the more subtle ways in which contemporary modes of risk-management come to be questioned, reflected upon and challenged as part of an everyday, ongoing and revisable

consciousness of 'risk'. In other words, relations of resistance inhere in what Connolly talks of as a 'movement of becoming' (1999: 57-62), a point at which we might engage with forms of critical publicity and counterdiscourses of 'risk' in a way which incites an 'ethos of critical responsiveness' (*op cit*: 62; see also, Campbell, 2009 *in press*). Such an ethos is experienced as a dynamic process of sensibility-formation which involves a disruptive reflexivity about our own and others' beliefs about 'risk' and how it is currently managed. This kind of subjective and intersubjective resistance may not be visually dramatic (or even materially effective) but it unsettles and contests the terms and conditions of the received wisdom of 'risk', exposing its ambiguities and uncertainties, and leaving it vulnerable to change.

Kemshall is right to suggest that '(t)he identification, assessment, prevention and management of risk have become *big business* in crime policy, practice and research' (2003: 1: *my emphasis*). However, the hegemony of a 'risk-based' approach to criminal justice matters does not also mean that such strategies are popularly supported, or actively demanded from below. Yet, the existence of a 'mass risk consciousness' (O'Malley, 2004b: 185) is continually asserted as though it were the mainspring of the strategic direction of contemporary crime control. It is certainly common for politicians to present legislative or policy change in terms of being responsive to public concern about risk - and this is especially evident in relation to the management of serious sexual and violent offenders (Kemshall and Maguire, 2001; Ashenden, 2002). If we agree with Ryan (2005) that the rise of the public voice(s) within the national and local politics of risk *democratizes* the policy-making process, then it is clearly important to ensure that such voices are heard in their

complexity and diversity, rather than assumed to be all singing from the same hymn sheet.

HYPERREALITIES OF 'RISK'

Hollywood cinema is rarely acknowledged as an important counterpublic sphere which works firstly, to stimulate a critical and inclusive dialogue on the nature of risk of/from crime; and secondly, to facilitate a deliberative engagement with the politics and ethics of 'risk-management'. There is, of course, an extensive criminological literature which critically examines the cultural politics of Hollywood film and how it might be read/viewed as an important site of resistance, contestation and confrontation (Rafter, 2000; Mason, 2003; Valverde, 2006). As O'Brien *et al* note:

Rather than understanding Hollywood movies simply as vehicles for disseminating conventional mores, we suggest that they can furnish critical (and complex) points of view on law and crime (2005a: 17).

However, this critical scholarship tends to privilege the kinds of representational approaches to power, communication and resistance associated with the Birmingham School (Hall, 1997); or the ideological criticism exemplified by structuralist approaches to literary and cultural studies – see, especially Carrabine (2008,); or schematic models of cultural analysis exemplified in Valverde's (2006) use of social semiotics. To be sure, this literature offers valuable insights into the cultural meanings of Hollywood film (O'Brien *et al*, 2005b), and suggests that 'crime films' provide a useful social and political commentary on contemporary events (McLaughlin, 2005). However, while much of this work acknowledges the vicarious pleasures and fascinations of viewing, it invariably positions such analyses within a

frame of reference concerned with 'effects' rather than 'existential experience'. In short, there is an organising epistemological commitment to structuralism where the relationship between viewer, film and socio-cultural context can appear too mechanistic, periodised and reductionist to capture the instabilities and uncertainties of cinematic meaning-making. What is proposed here, then, is an approach to Hollywood cinema which contributes to criminological work on film in three key ways.

First, and following Valverde (2006: 11), I want to cast off the sub-discipline of 'crime and the media' from its criminological moorings, without losing sight of the discipline's core philosophical interests in the nature of justice, rights, legitimacy and social order. I do this by suggesting that we should be relatively open to what counts as a 'crime film' and not artificially restrict this to '*films that focus primarily on crime and its consequences*' (Rafter, 2000: 5 *Original emphasis*). Secondly, I want to bring to the analysis a greater sense of the 'disturbing pleasures' of viewing. For example, in summary of Rafter's *Shots in the Mirror*, an anonymous reviewer writes that 'crime films provide a *safe space* for fantasies of rebellion, punishment and the restoration of order' (2000: back cover: *my emphasis*). Rather than safety, I propose a viewing position which is altogether more unsettling and ontologically disruptive. Thirdly, I want to read Hollywood film with a poststructuralist inflection which moves beyond questions of representation, ideology and effects and foregrounds the worlds of simulation, affect and experience.

In recent years, particularly through the work of poststructuralist and/or feminist theorists, the genre of science fiction film (and also that of horror) has been described

as the paradigmatic form of reflexive and destabilising cultural experiences (Creed, 1993; McGuigan, 1999: 80-85; Dimitrakaki and Tsiantis, 2002; O’Riordan, 2008). Such a status is designated by its subject matter, most especially the recurring references to a dystopian future, alien life forms, apocalyptic scenarios and temporal dislocations. But whereas most authors regard science fiction as speculative fantasy, often incorporating imaginative elements which have no existence in our present reality, Baudrillard complains that the distinction between film and reality is no longer apparent - ‘life is cinema’, he proclaims in *America* (1986/1988:101). From this standpoint, the task of science fiction is not a phantasmagorical one, but is:

.... to put decentred situations, models of simulation in place and to contrive to give them the feeling of the real, of the banal, of lived experience, to reinvent the real as fiction, precisely because it has disappeared from our own life. Hallucination of the real, of lived experience, of the quotidian, but reconstituted, sometimes down to disquietingly strange details Brought to life with a transparent precision, but without substance, derealized in advance, hyperrealised (Baudrillard, 1981/1994: 124).

There is no need to take Baudrillard literally, or to accept his theory of the ‘precession of simulacra’ (Baudrillard, 1981/1994: 1-42) in its entirety to appreciate the point he is making here. That is, if all life is a fiction, we can accept the proposition that the difference between how we narrate our everyday experiences of living in a ‘risk society’, and how such experiences are narrated through Hollywood film, is a question of form rather than content. Indeed, the potential of the cinematographic form of a blockbuster science fiction movie lies not only in its capacity to produce perfect (and spectacular) simulations of extant, everyday ‘realities’ of risk and crime,

but also to render those ‘realities’ as troubling and strange. There is no guarantee here of a ‘safe encounter’ with the cinematic spectacle so much as an experience of realisation that all limits no longer apply and have already been exceeded. As Baudrillard might put it, the catastrophe has already happened. It is in the fleeting moment of realisation, that a ‘critical responsiveness’ to other possibilities for thinking about our present condition, is initiated.

Baudrillard proposes a theoretical framework for conceptualising science fiction film as a hyperrealised simulacrum of our everyday life in the ‘risk society’. However, as Merrin (2005: 151) notes, Baudrillard has no dialogue with alternative theories of media, and he does not reference models of communication and, in particular, theories of the active reception of media products. In short, he cannot account for the continuing popularity of the genre given its propensity to disrupt our sense of ontological security. Baudrillard’s lack of analytical interest in media receptivity is all the more surprising given his debt to Barthesian semiology. This is not the place to elaborate either the influence of Barthes on Baudrillard’s work, or Barthes’s cultural theories as a generic whole – see, for example, Merrin (2005) and Culler (2001) respectively. However, Barthes’s concepts of *jouissance* and the *enigmatic* are relevant here. In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973/1990), Barthes sets out what Howard describes as an ‘erotics of reading’ (1973/1990: xviii); it is a thesis which talks of the *pleasure* and *jouissance* (bliss) of our textual encounters. The text of *pleasure* brings comfort and contentment to the reader/viewer by virtue of its stable perspective and conventional narrative form; in Barthes’s words, ‘(it is) the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, (it) is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading’ (1973/1990: 14: *Original emphasis*). In terms of science fiction film, such pleasure

might come from ‘feel-good’ sci-fi such as *ET: The Extra Terrestrial* (1982), *Bicentennial Man* (1999) or *Artificial Intelligence: AI* (2001); or ‘happy-ever-after’ sci-fi disaster movies such as *Independence Day* (1996), *Armageddon* (1998), and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004). However, for the most part, the genre is defined by its apocalyptic and sinister narratives which not only pose questions about humanity’s place in the scheme of things, but which also create a dystopic view of the world which always-already appears grim, threatening, unnerving and dangerous – such as *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984) or *Twelve Monkeys* (1995). For Telotte, the stuff of science fiction film ‘... typically focuses our attention on borders: the borders of our knowledge, those of our experience, those that separate us from “nature”’ (2001: 197). Such films are more likely, then, to induce *jouissance* amongst their viewers. For Barthes these are ‘texts of bliss’:

... the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts ... unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his (*sic*) relation with language’ (1973/1990: 14).

In an earlier work, *S/Z* ([1970/1975]), Barthes outlines a framework for understanding narrative conventions, how these structure reading practices and sustain the dialectical relationship between text and reader – a process which Howard describes as the ‘poetics of reading’ (1970/1975: vii). Introduced in this work, and of relevance to this discussion, is Barthes’s notion of the *enigmatic*. Barthes posits the presence, in any given narrative, of a hermeneutic code, a sequence of enigmas, paradoxes and puzzles which not only pose and formulate questions, but which also function to retard, equivocate on, evade and denounce answers. From this vantage point, it is easy to recognise how science fiction narratives – as might be argued of all narratives - are

characteristically punctuated by multiple enigmas which continually postpone the moment of closure, certainty and narrative resolution. Put another way, the ‘enigmatic’ is that aspect of narrative which induces *jouissance* and prompts a disruptive reflexivity about the ways things are.

In the light of these methodological insights, I want to suggest that our consumption of science fiction films is an experience of *jouissance* involving a series of encounters with the *enigmatic*. In the next section I explore this proposition through the lens of three contemporary science fiction films – *Minority Report* (2002), *Paycheck* (2003) and *A Scanner Darkly* (2006). These films are adaptations of Philip K Dick’s short stories (*Paycheck* [1953]; *Minority Report* [1956]; and auto-biographical novel (*A Scanner Darkly* [1977])). These are not ‘crime texts’ in any conventional sense, but are narratives woven around themes of *inter alia* authoritarianism, parallel universes, alternative histories, transcendental experience, monopoly capital and trust in government. Moreover, there is a degree of artistic licence in the transformation of Dick’s stories and their cinematic re-articulation as contemporaneous myths which may have no correspondence with Dick’s own political and philosophical concerns. Furthermore, there will always be something lost in an analysis which reads these texts through a single thematic, in this instance as narratives of risk, its management and associated technologies. With these caveats, the paper goes on to explore the critical, subversive and disruptive possibilities of the simulated worlds of ‘Hollywood risk-management’ paying particular attention to how they work to destabilise and scrutinise the conceptual scope and empirical instantiation of ‘risk’ as well as challenge its ethico-political meaning in contemporary life.

THE FUTURE PRESENT

The adjective most commonly used to describe science fiction as a film (or literary) genre, is that it is ‘futuristic’. While I do not dispute this description, it can obscure more than it illuminates about the temporal horizons of sci-fi narratives. Films invariably open with a reference to the temporal context in which the action is taking place, and this ranges from specific dates – such as ‘2054’ (*Minority Report*, 2002) and ‘1995’ (*A Clockwork Orange*, 1971) – to something more vague and open – such as ‘seven years from now’ (*A Scanner Darkly*, 2006), and ‘in the near future’ (*V for Vendetta*, 2005). In these cinematic futures, we are introduced to a wide range of ‘fanciful’ technologies which have different capabilities in terms of managing, reducing or eliminating risk. In *Paycheck* (2003), for example, we encounter not only a laser-enhanced lens which allows the user to see around the curvature of the earth, and thus, into the future, but also digital and biological procedures for erasing memory. *Minority Report* (2002) features an elaborate system of intelligence-led policing based on the harnessed powers of human pre-cognition; while *A Scanner Darkly* (2006) opens with a press conference which explains the value to intensive, undercover surveillance of a high-tech scramble-suit which disguises every aspect of the wearer’s appearance. These technologies certainly appeal to our imagination and fantasies of future ‘realities’, or at least, ‘potentialities’ in the field of ‘risk-management’, but they are also grounded in present day technological capabilities. In his review of sci-fi films since the 1960s, Larson (2008) finds that depictions of computer technologies tend to mirror real-world developments and trends. He draws inspiration from Edmund Burke’s (1759/1992) observation that ‘... the power of the imagination is incapable of producing anything absolutely new; it can only vary the disposition of those ideas which it has received from the senses’ (Burke, 1759/1992:

301 cited in Larson, 2008: 294). But whereas Larson uses this insight as an hypothesis to be tested, Burke's reference to the *relationship* between imagination and disposition is more instructive here. That is, alongside the more 'fanciful' technologies – the most elaborate of which facilitate time travel (*Timecop*, 1994; *Total Recall*, 1990) - sci-fi films are resplendent with actually-existing gadgetry and computer-assisted security practices. The use of smartcards, retinal/iris scanning, biometric identification systems, voice authorisation devices, palm print activation locks, miniature camcorder surveillance, holograms/holographics and LCD monitors invite the viewer to experience a veritable 'gauntlet of cybersecurity' (Nellis, 2005: 71) which, though instantly recognisable, may appear to be disturbingly strange. In other words, it is not our imagination about risk technologies which is being stimulated, but our disposition to the potential scope and impact of their uses. Consider some of the promotional taglines:

What would you do if you were accused of a murder you had not committed yet?
The future can be seen. Murder can be prevented. The guilty punished before the crime is committed. The system is perfect. It's never wrong until it comes after you
(*Minority Report*, 2002).

Big Brother is watching you (*Nineteen Eighty Four*, 1984).

What does a scanner see? Everything is not going to be OK (*A Scanner Darkly*, 2006).

Through their taglines, trailers and publicity material, Hollywood sci-fi not only entices viewers with a series of enigmas about the nature of ‘justice’ in the ‘risk society’, but also poses questions about the language, ethics, politics and boundaries of hi-tech security systems and the technologies upon which they rely. Science fiction cinema permits viewers to *glance* at a strange yet familiar ‘risk landscape’ of future possibilities which are always-already embedded in present realities. Ott (2007) reminds us that the ‘glance’, unlike the ‘gaze’, engages viewers on an emotionally-embodied level rather than on a rational, cognitive basis. As Romanyshyn puts it, the cinematic glance is ‘an emotional vision, a vision that is moved at a bodily level’ (1993: 341). To watch sci-fi films, then, is to experience *jouissance* as a destabilising realisation that all is not quite what it seems.

THE LANGUAGE AND RHETORIC OF SCIENTISM

The notion of risk ‘has deep roots in the history of science’ (Horlick-Jones, 1998: 84 cited in Kemshall, 2003: 49-50), and is ‘embedded in empiricism, scientific canons of proof, probabilistic thinking, and a realist epistemology’ (Kemshall, 2003: 50). Consequently, the language of risk is infused with pseudo-scientific concepts such that the utility and value of different risk technologies and procedures comes to be seen in abstract, almost technical terms. Whether in the form of a risk assessment tool, a surveillance device or an identificatory technique, the impact and effectiveness of ‘risk technologies’ is often read off from the reliability, systematicity, predictive capacity and/or accuracy of the ‘hardware’. This is the kind of commentary which accompanies our introduction to the ground-breaking technology of Washington, DC’s Pre-Crime Unit featured in *Minority Report* (2002). The film opens with a series of sequences which showcase the predictive capabilities of the ‘pre-cogs’. A

series of black and white images of a murder in progress are flashed across the screen, and we witness the gory and horrific event as though it takes place in a dream. This is no dream, but the view of the future as seen through the ‘mind’s eye’ of the ‘pre-cog’, Agatha, one of three psychic ‘humanoids’ who are kept floating in a translucent, nutrient substance in a security-protected chamber. Her ‘pre-cognition’ is translated and made readable through a ball and shuttle system which delivers the names of the victims and killer, and marks the start of an intelligence-led and highly efficient police investigation which apprehends the murderer before he has had chance to kill. What is significant here, is how far the operational environment of the ‘pre-cogs’ technology is explicitly represented as pristine and sterile with all of the accoutrements and trappings of a hi-tech facility complete with robotics, pulsating lights, electronic probes, steel, glass, remote controls and LCD displays. This is further buttressed by the presence of a white-coated technician who is tasked with the continual monitoring and checking of the ‘pre-cogs’ to ensure not only their maximum efficiency but also that there is no contamination or interference with their functioning in the service of ‘justice’. As Chief Anderton (Tom Cruise) is quick to point out, ‘it’s better if you don’t think of them as human pre-cogs are pattern recognition filters, that’s all’. These signifiers reinforce the scientificity of the ‘pre-cog’ technology and invite viewers to accept its ideological credentials as a neutral, dispassionate and infallible system of risk management which, importantly, is not susceptible to the frailties and contingencies of the human condition.

However, *Minority Report* centres on a narrative which foregrounds the *jouissance* of the imperfection of perfection (the innocence of the guilty, the humanity of the dehumanised, and the mistrust of the trustworthy). Indeed, the title of the film refers

to the production of a report which documents those occasions when the ‘pre-cogs’ disagree about the predicted future. In an exchange between Anderton and Dr Iris Hineman (Lois Smith), the scientist responsible for the development of ‘pre-cog’ technology, they ruminate the implications to ‘justice’ of a flawed system:

Dr Hineman: These minority reports are destroyed the instant they occur Obviously for pre-crime to function there can’t be any suggestion of fallibility. After all, who wants a justice system that instils doubt.

However, it is the character, Danny Whitwer (Colin Farrell), sent by the US Attorney-General to assess the work of the Pre-Crime Unit, who recognises that technology is never devoid of human involvement. In a very instructive sequence where he is given a tour of the security chamber, he questions the trust placed in the infallibility of the ‘pre-cog’ system, is sceptical of the hegemony of scientism, and is critical of what he regards as the deification of risk technologies:

Science has stolen most of our miracles..... In a way they (the ‘pre-cogs’) give us hope. Hope of the existence of the divine. I find it interesting that some people have begun to deify the pre-cogs..... You call this room the ‘temple’ The oracle isn’t where the power is anyway. The power has always been with the priests If there’s a flaw, it’s human, it always is.

This interjection prompts the realisation that the promise of predictive crime prevention delivered through a reliable, value-neutral and abstract risk technology may be merely a powerful rhetoric which masks its human-made flaws and inherent fallibilities, as well as the politics of its use. As O’Malley has argued very

persuasively, risk is never technically neutral and, '(i)n particular, (it) is always shaped and given effect by specific social and political rationales and environments' (2008: 453).

'RISK' AS A POLITICO-ETHICAL RELATIONSHIP

Cinema-goers, as any other section of the population, are familiar with contemporary initiatives in crime reduction and public protection, even if they do not appreciate some of the more nuanced aspects of their development. There is a common-sense acceptability of managing the risk posed by dangerous, anti-social and persistent offenders but, as Kemshall and Maguire suggest, even when such management raises serious ethical questions about human rights, the rule of law or accountability, '(t)he process is self-justificatory and difficult to challenge without appearing to "side with" a highly unpopular group of people' (2001: 258). However, the narrative economies of science fiction films permit viewers to glimpse and ponder the politico-ethical dilemmas of risk management practices in ways which seem to be absent from everyday discourse.

A Scanner Darkly (2006), for example, is set within the context of a 'war on drugs'. At a time, 'seven years from now', 20% of the population are hooked on the highly addictive and debilitating, illegal drug, Substance D, made from a small blue flower. In response to this 'culture of addiction', the government develops an invasive, high-tech surveillance system which relies on a network of informants and undercover agents. Several sequences in the film which represent this surveillance at work, raise questions about the ethics of such practices in terms of civil liberties, social justice and individual rights. As Lyon (2002) has argued, most people assume (wrongly) that

the ‘respectable, law-abiding majority’ have a ‘right’ to their privacy, and also that ‘the innocent’ have nothing to fear from a surveillance-based society. To be sure, critical scholarship has been swift to document the politico-ethical implications of the unrestrained and unregulated spread of surveillance technology – see, for example, Lyon, 2003 – but McCartney contends that ‘normative constraints are not yet proving sufficient to restrain policy which prioritises risk aversion above human rights and justice for all members of society’ (2006: 129). As the story unfolds, viewers of *A Scanner Darkly* are invited to reflect on the ethicality of risk management, and to balance the need for security *and* freedom through the lens of the protagonist’s story; as the DVD plot summary puts it, ‘(t)he story: a twisted funny tale of people hooked on Substance D. And of a government that cheerfully destroys its citizens – their rights, their relationships – in order to save them’.

Bob Arctor (Keanu Reeves) is the undercover agent assigned to immerse himself in the drug underworld and infiltrate the drug supply chain. We follow Arctor’s undercover journey as an experience of increasing paranoia and confusion concerning his identity, as he becomes addicted to Substance D and no longer able to function effectively. However, the viewer is free to ponder whether it is Substance D, or whether it is the nature of an intensive ‘surveillance society’ which induces these destabilising effects. For example, Arctor’s housemates, though heavy drug-users, are convinced (and justifiably so) that the police have bugged their home and are watching their every move. Moreover, Arctor’s roommate, Barris (Robert Downey Jr), suspects that Arctor (and his girlfriend) are part of a terrorist organisation, and he secretly reports them to the police. Through a variety of sub-plots, some of which provide the most memorable comedic interludes, a sense of the pervasiveness of

surveillance and the compulsion to spy even on one's friends and neighbours, is played out throughout the film. As Linklater commented: 'The meaning of the film is embedded right here. Authority itself is omnipresent' (DVD [2006] : Special Features).

However, it is the twist in the tale which provokes our ethical curiosity. Our concern for Arctor's addiction and his decline into paranoia, deflects our attention away from the 'bigger picture' which is revealed toward the end of the film. That is, Arctor's descent into a drug-fuelled insanity had been intended; it was a carefully conceived police operation to enable them to infiltrate New Path, a global corporation which not only held the monopoly of drug rehabilitative work but which also sponsored a wide range of risk-management and policing programmes relating to drug-use reduction. Thus, selected without his knowledge or consent, Arctor was sacrificed so that he could enter New Path unnoticed as a genuine addict. Some film critics have complained that *A Scanner Darkly* suffers from an 'inability to draw in the viewer', is 'not involving on an emotional level' and is 'well-trodden' (Berardinelli, 2006). Yet others have suggested that 'the brilliance of the film is how it suggests, without bombast or fanfare, the ways in which the real world has come to resemble the dark world of comic books' (Chocano, 2006). It is not my aim here to pronounce on the filmic merits (or otherwise) of *A Scanner Darkly*, but I would agree with *both* of these film reviews. On the one hand, the narrative twist which reveals the mass deception of an 'authority of trust' (whether in the form of a corporation, a government, an institution or a body of experts) is a conventional plot device used to conclude the story and explain its mysteries – for example, *Planet of the Apes* (1968); *Soylent Green* (1973). In this sense, Berardinelli is right to complain of the use of the

‘narrative twist’ in *A Scanner Darkly* as being ‘well-trodden’. However, such twists in the tale vary from film to film and therefore rupture quite different myths about the ethics of risk management, the politics of authority and the nature of trust. We can, therefore, also agree with Chocano and recognise that it is in the particular context of a ‘war on drugs’ (rather than any other sort of risk-producing context), that *A Scanner Darkly* identifies a number of key and specific ethical and political dilemmas. First, it prompts viewers to question the ethicality of certain kinds of risk governance, most especially to problematise the means-ends justifications for the use of covert techniques and approaches. Second, it asks us to reconsider how surveillance functions not only to alter relations between citizens, but also to reconfigure the relationship between citizens and state. Third, through the narrative device of the ‘twist’ comes the abrupt realisation of the possibility of institutional complicity in generating the very risk it is tasked to manage.

BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES

Another way of talking about the dispersal and reversal of authority over risk-management, as discussed above, is to suggest that simplistic dichotomies concerning the guilty/innocent, offender/victim, public/private, risk/protection can be reconfigured in a science fiction narrative. As Keanu Reeves commented about *A Scanner Darkly*, ‘the lines between criminals and police are blurred’ (DVD [2006]: Special Features). For example, in *Minority Report*, we enjoy a cinematic shopping experience where shoppers’ movement through a mall initiates personalised greetings and purchasing hints, all activated through the omnipresent technology of iris scanning. Chief Anderton, now being pursued by his own officers, and having had his eyes surgically replaced by a backstreet ophthalmist, has entered a retail complex to

purchase clothes for the abducted ‘pre-cog’, Agatha. As he runs through the mall, we hear an accompanying commentary: ‘Hello Mr Yakomoto. Welcome back to the Gap. How did the assorted tank tops work out for you?’ - to which Anderton mutters, ‘Mr Yakomoto?’. While this sequence provides a little light relief to a very tense drama, it nonetheless makes two key points. The first is that the technologies of biometric identification can be circumvented. While there is clearly a degree of *unalterability* of the body parts or tissues which form the basis for unique identification – such as fingerprints, DNA, iris and retinal patterning - there remains the possibility of their *transferability* to another party. Secondly, the sequence makes the important point that databases are fluid, shareable entities and cannot be fixed in space and time according to logic of ownership and accountability (Castells, 2000, 2001). In this example, the database which supports iris scanning for risk management/security purposes on the underground metro system, is transportable and communicated to other contexts to meet other ends – in this instance, re-usable as a biometrically-activated personal shopping service.

While the example of the personalised shopping service is relatively benign, other instances concerning the collection, storage, retrieval and/or access to different kinds of data blur the boundaries of public/private concerns and responsibilities. For example, in *A Scanner Darkly* personalised and biometric data is shareable and interactively used across both statutory and corporate sectors. Given the narrative twist (discussed above), this turns out to be a rather sinister development.

Academics, ‘paranoid survivalists’, right-wing libertarians and liberals alike, warn of the dangers of database expansion by the state sector. Repeated references to cross-

sectoral access to personalised intelligence, across different films, reminds viewers of the fragility of ‘protective controls’ and the improbability of (totally) ‘secure data systems’. For example, in *Paycheck*, we discover that a disaffected government physicist working on a classified project in the weapons division, sold the design to the private corporation, Allcom. He is subsequently killed for his efforts, and the services of Michael Jennings (Ben Affleck), a reverse engineer, are called upon to reconfigure the technology so that it functions even more efficiently – in this case, to see into the future. ‘Risk technology’ in this film is represented as a commodity which can be bought and sold, deconstructed and reconstructed, sabotaged and stolen. While the plot centres on the power struggle over the creation and destruction of an awesome, risk-predictive laser technology, along the way Jennings sidesteps and overcomes a range of high-tech security controls. For example, he uses a dollar bill to jam a security panel; he plants a bug in the computer system to disable it; and he gains entry to a high-security lab by stealing an electronic keycard. Moreover, all of this takes place in full view of a government which is left rather helpless in the face of a powerful corporation and a skilful engineer. In the sequence where Jennings is interrogated by the FBI, the US Attorney-General has reminded the agents that ‘Michael Jennings’s cooperation is a matter of national security’, implying that the future of an entire nation boils down to the technological knowledge and expertise of just one individual. Indeed, Jennings, as a character, blurs our understanding of guilt and innocence, offender and victim, villain and hero, making it difficult to determine whether the possession of ‘risk expertise’ is something which should evoke horror or hope concerning our protection.

The ability to sabotage, disable or circumvent different kinds of risk technologies is a pervasive feature of all of the films examined. *Minority Report*, for example, not only includes the entrepreneurial character of a back street eye surgeon (discussed above), but the reliability of pre-cognition, it appears, can be circumvented from the ‘inside’. When Anderton eventually discovers that it is Lamar Burgess who has used his insider-knowledge of the ‘pre-cogs’ system to commit the ‘perfect’ murder, he confronts Burgess, and very publicly exposes the human fallibility of the scientifically infallible. While this may be viewed as just another commonplace narrative technique, there is something especially disturbing and unsettling when the ‘trusted insider’ turns out to be the source of the greatest danger and deceit. It is an especially powerful trope which confuses our sense of where risk is located, and who or what we invest with our protection. This kind of storyline, as it appears in a science fiction narrative – rather than, say, within the murder mystery – alerts viewers to the problematic claims of ‘risk knowledges’ which operationalise ‘risk’ in dichotomous ways, and which imagine its management as a zero-sum game between identifiable heroes and villains, and recognisable spaces of safety and danger (O’Malley, 2008).

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to accomplish several inter-related things in an attempt to rethink the nature of public opinion about ‘risk’, its management and the technologies which claim to achieve this. I challenged assumptions about a ‘mass risk consciousness’ which presupposes a largely compliant and passive public who are not only receptive to the introduction of new strategies of risk-management, but who also actively campaign for and demand them. However, there is very little work undertaken which starts from the premise of a public discourse which may be resistant to, or critical of,

or which at least has some reservations about the effectiveness of systems and apparatuses of risk control. It seems to me that as a point of departure, the idea of a *critical publicity* about ‘risk’ is a necessary component of functioning liberal democratic societies where the introduction and use of different models of risk-management may raise a number of ethical and political questions about their implications to rights, justice, accountability and legitimacy. Even so, deliberative democratic participation relies on more than town hall meetings and e-petitions; that is, we should be prepared to be relatively catholic in what we accept as ‘media of publicity’, and also what we regard as resistive practice. Hitherto, such media have not included popular cultural forms, especially those which may be regarded as carnivalesque, even frivolous, such as comedy sketches, cartoons and blockbuster Hollywood cinema – *even though* mass marketed entertainment may have a much wider audience than any other form of ‘risk-engagement’ activity. At the same time, relations of resistance need not be demonstrative or have a material impact to be effective. Connolly’s (1999) notion of a ‘movement of becoming’ and an ‘ethos of responsiveness’ perfectly captures this sense of subjective and intersubjective resistance which is experienced as an existentially disturbing moment which unsettles our beliefs about ‘risk’ and its management, and incites a disruptive reflexivity about the received wisdoms of the ‘risk society’.

Given its reputation as a medium of reflexive and destabilising cultural experiences, science fiction film constitutes an important counterpublic sphere through which risk discourse is re-presented and narrated. Baudrillard’s notions of *hyperreality*, and Barthes’s concepts of *jouissance* and the *enigmatic* have been used here to inform a viewing/reading of science fiction cinema as a practice of critical publicity which

provokes a 'movement of becoming'. However, whereas formal, public discussion may centre on matters of impact, cost-benefits, levels and kinds of harm-minimization, methodologies and technical inventions, film-going promotes a more open dialogue, even a conversation, in which our sensibilities to the 'risk economy' and 'risk-reduction' are being formed and reformed in the light of different possibilities and fictionalised imaginings.

Science fiction film is invariably described as 'futuristic', and in the sense that stories are set at some future point in time, this is a reasonable characterisation. However, it obscures the way that filmic futures are always-already embedded in the present. Sci-fi may appear to invoke a universe of fantastical forms, but on closer reading/viewing the genre centres on a range of suppositional narratives which raise questions about the scope and potentialities of actually existing risk technologies. In this paper, I have argued that to view *Minority Report*, *A Scanner Darkly* and *Paycheck* is to experience a critical reflection on the language of science and its associated significations of risk technologies as infallible, reliable and objective, such that it is recognised as a powerful rhetoric which deflects attention away from the flaws, dangers and inherent weaknesses of different models and techniques of risk management – most especially the implications of the (inevitable) human involvement in abstract systems and apparatuses. Through these films, viewers come to interrogate the politico-ethical relations of the 'risk society' in ways which may escape conventional deliberations. Questions of the means-ends justifications for the use of covert techniques; the nature of our relationship to each other in conditions of intensive surveillance; and our relationship to power and governmental authorities all feature as problematic aspects of human societies in which the management of risk has become the organising mode

of experience. Moreover, ontological assumptions about what is or who are 'risky' are shaken at their core and in film, if not in life, categories and hierarchies of 'risk-producing', 'risk-free' or 'risk-prone' environments and practices collapse, just as the boundaries between public and private and between state and civil society become blurred. These kinds of existential 'movements of becoming' do not engender forms of resistance as material practice, but they do foster an 'ethos of critical responsiveness' which is not only ready, but is obliged to denaturalise the mythologies of the 'risk society'.

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