Cover Sheet

ARTICLE TITLE:

Narrative Control and Visual Polysemy: FOX Surveillance Specials and the Limits of Legitimation

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Figure Caption List

Figure 1:

Caption: surveillance aesthetic

Source: Video Justice: Crime Caught on Tape (television program)

Copyright message:

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Clearance update, as of 7/9/99: Fox Broadcasting is going to fax me a license logo form, which I will sign and return, which will give me permission to print the image in question.

Figure 2:

Caption (in quotes): "arrogant and stupid"

Source: World's Scariest Police Chases 2 (television program)

Copyright message:

(to be determined)

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Biographical Statement

Tarleton Gillespie is a doctoral student in candidacy at the Department of Communication at the University of California, San Diego. He is currently working on his dissertation, investigating the use and implications of sampling techniques in contemporary media culture. He also studies cartoons and childhood, television and surveillance, and the implications of interface design in digital technology.

Narrative Control and Visual Polysemy: FOX Surveillance Specials and the Limits of Legitimation*

In theory, the observation of public spaces by powerful forces and the translation of that observation into material consequences is one way social control is maintained and order is enforced. In practice, surveillance is deeply, perhaps fundamentally, problematic. When actually performed, an array of problems and contradictions are set loose that can destabilize the powerful forces that employ it. The most obvious example in recent memory is the videotaping of the Rodney King beating--through which the technology of surveillance was turned against the social order to make visible what conventional surveillance chooses not to see. This breach of control required quite a bit of hasty ideological clean-up to re-stabilize the traditional practices and consequences of the surveillance apparatus. However, surveillance does not work in a cultural vacuum; it receives discursive support from related societal institutions that, though not in conspiratorial alliance, work with "relative autonomy" (White 168) to maintain hegemonic order. Particularly helpful are the popular representations of surveillance that

* Special thanks to Professor Chandra Mukerji, Professor John Caldwell, and Fred Turner for their intellectual stimulation and friendly advice.

authorize it as a legitimate practice and therefore help to naturalize existing institutional patterns of power.

Television in particular is often considered effective at shoring up hegemonic contradictions and legitimating the cultural practices of the powerful.[1] According to this argument, television "trains" the viewing public to observe the world in ways that support dominant interests. It accomplishes this feat by encrusting representations with information that manages their interpretation and embedding problematic images in soothing discourses of pleasurable entertainment and benevolent authority. Doing so constrains the possible subject-positions available, naturalizes commonplace notions of social dynamics, and "fixes" the meanings of troubling events to best encourage dominant perspectives on the world. Thus, television manages thorny cultural practices in the service of powerful interests.

Many scholars have been quick to rail against television for perpetuating dominant values and constraining the kinds of questions that can be asked about our society. It is an important charge, and one implicated in the Gramscian investigation of the

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1 This argument is pursued most vigorously in Todd Gitlin's 1979 essay entitled "Prime Time Ideology: the Hegemonic Process in Television Entertainment," and relies heavily on notions of hegemony developed by Gramsci, Althusser, and Williams. These concerns have reappeared most frequently in discussions of marginalized audiences, for example, Probyn (1988), Gray (1989), and Haralovich (1992). These ideas are extended and developed in Caldwell (1995), discussed later.

workings of hegemony, as applied to television by such scholars as Raymond Williams and Todd Gitlin.[1] But early work often gathered its theoretical momentum by conveniently ignoring some of the complexities of television and how it works. As television scholarship matured, many recognized this complexity and sought ways to make their analysis both more subtle and accommodating to the contradictions of television's discursive address and polyvalent structure. Mimi White's discussion of ideology and television is an excellent example; she discards a singular sense of ideological domination for a more nuanced awareness of the way ideological constraints manage contradiction rather than shut it down.

However, White's lessons have not been embraced by every television scholar; and some of the worst overstatements of television's ideological power have been reserved for "reality television," programs such as America's Most Wanted, Cops, and the specials that I will discuss shortly. Several critics have lambasted these programs for their ideological embrace of a "law-and-order" mentality, and have done so without questioning the limitations of this semantic domination.[2] They point to the ways the programs establish the viewer's identification with the police officers, the way they employ narrative conventions to suggest

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[1] See, for example, Williams (1974) and (1977), and Gitlin (1979) and (1983).

[2] Some examples of this critique can be found in the collection Entertaining Crime (1998), edited by Mark Fishman and Gray Cavender.

closure to the situation represented, the way they play on and reinforce assumptions about race and class, and the way they decontextualize crimes as individualized, violent, and deviant. These dynamics are taken as evidence that the programs have an ideological agenda in line with conservative policies on crime that arose around the same time as these programs, legitimating a particular stance on crime and surveillance and naturalizing a particular conception of law and order.

These arguments overstep themselves when they presume that such ideological qualities necessarily have matching ideological effects. I want to consider several recent "reality television" specials on FOX that turn surveillance images into pleasurable entertainment by surrounding them with a managing narration and aesthetic. These programs present ample evidence of the "ideological" qualities scholars predicted, but they also present ample evidence of the kinds of contradictions that White argues television must manage. These contradictions provide opportunities for readers to construct alternative interpretations of what they see.

There is more than just room for resistance in these texts, however. I will argue that the ideological process of legitimation is by no means straightforward or complete and is often sabotaged by its own techniques. The images these programs rely on, despite extensive narrative and stylistic management, are inherently unstable and ambiguous. They contain an array of viable and fluid subject-positions that may be obscured but cannot be erased.

By pointing out this instability in the case of reality programming, the genre some television scholars have seen as most obviously ideological, I hope to demonstrate that television *in general* is structurally incapable of serving the hegemonic purposes some claim it does. In pursuing narrative resolution, television cannot help but represent the real social tensions that demand resolution. As television has both a financial and conceptual interest in maintaining a certain degree of openness in its representations, in resisting discursive closure and permitting alternative readings, it is rendered a vulnerable and incomplete tool of legitimation.

The four specials I will focus on are *Video Justice: Crime Caught on Tape*, *World's Scariest Police Shootouts*, *Busted on the Job: Caught on Tape*, and *World's Scariest Police Chases 2*. All four were hour-long specials broadcast by the FOX network during the May 1997 sweeps. Each begins with a narrated introduction composed of a montage of "found footage" (images produced outside of the entertainment television apparatus: workplace surveillance footage, police dashboard camera surveillance, hidden camera footage, amateur home video, and raw television news footage), followed by segments comprised of two to four cases, usually thematically linked within each segment, interspersed with on-camera soundbites from police officers, witnesses, victims, and experts. For the sake of this essay, I will refer to the specials as *Justice*, *Shootouts*, *Busted*, and *Chases*. Since their original broadcast, FOX has broadcast several similar programs, including "sequels" to these; their success prompted FOX to create a weekly series called *World's Wildest Police Videos*. Other networks also

have noted FOX's success and have broadcast specials of their own. I will also be considering as a related text the syndicated program Real TV, a half-hour daily program that also collects and narrates found footage of chases, accidents, arrests, and rescues.

Invitation to surveillance

Although these specials are fundamentally about the images they display, I want to begin with the narration that surrounds and frames them. This is not to suggest that the meanings of the images are self-evident; but, since they are not directly produced by the televisual apparatus, their construction has not been managed by the show's producers to the same extent as their narration has. As with the nightly news, the images that must be displayed are inherently ambiguous and therefore potentially problematic; and like the news, these specials go to great lengths to frame those images so as to fix their meaning in an appropriate way. Most of the ideological effort of the program itself is visible in the way the images are framed, edited, narrated, and presented.[1]

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[1] Naturally, consideration of the way media represents real events has focused primarily on the news. Two useful studies dealing with television news conventions and their impact include Gans (1979), discussing the unwritten rules of news gathering and reporting, and Gitlin (1980), discussing the particular role the news media played in the rise and fall of the student movements of the 1960s. More recent analyses that expand this discussion

Unlike the nightly news, the narration that frames these surveillance images is not so much paternalistic and reassuring as it is commanding and forceful. Extra-diegetic narration by actor Peter Coyote (Justice) and (actual) Sheriff John Bunnell (Shootouts and Chases) takes up a position of direct address and narrates in a forceful, even menacing tone. These images, their narration suggests, are of dire importance and imply a threat to the viewer's personal safety. Each special is also preceded by a printed and spoken warning, alerting viewers to the "graphic nature" of the images about to be seen (in the case of Shootouts and Chases, this statement is voiced by Sheriff Bunnell himself, narrating his own narration). This advisory message serves less as a warning than as an enticement, staking out the nature of the experience the program expects viewers to indulge in. You have been warned, and the fierce narration will continue to warn you from the first clip to the last. These images should be treated as important, exciting, dangerous, shocking, and undeniable.

Each of the specials begins with a montage of surveillance images, accompanied by an aggressive, rhythmic soundtrack and an opening statement that, while introducing the show, begins the discursive work that will continue throughout the program. These images need to be settled and fixed quickly lest they get out of hand. The opening statements are insistently about you--a you that is quite flexible in its relationship to the images displayed

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include Reeves and Campbell (1994), discussing the reporting of the "crack epidemic" of the mid-1980s, and Hallin's (1994) work on sound bites.

and described, although the rhetoric clearly prefers one of four subject-positions: (1) vicarious victim, (2) vicarious police, (3) potentially surveilled, and (4) potential surveiller.

(1) The narration in Busted begins:

> Watch out! Something is going on behind your back. These guys are ripping off your luggage. This body shop is smashing your new car. And this guy, he's mistaking the office coffee pot for the men's room. But thanks to hidden cameras, these people have all been busted on the job...

Notice the subject-position made available in this discursive terrain. Crimes are being perpetrated on you, you are oblivious to them, and you are, or will be, grateful that surveillance cameras have been paying attention.[1] This is not abstract crime; it is crime decontextualized (by the surveillance camera) from its original circumstances and recontextualized (by the television narration) as a crime perpetrated upon the viewer, now installed as the vicarious victim.

The narration of Justice is even more urgent and demanding, likely because its surveillance is in the service of police--higher in the hierarchy of authoritative institutions--rather than

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[1] These ideas about the you inscribed in a discursive statement rely on Althusser's notion of "interpellation." He notes that the way in which media hails its viewer is part and parcel of its ideological force.

businesses. Consider the introduction, combined seamlessly with a montage of violent images and a pulsating soundtrack:

> There is a war going on in America: a hidden war, between citizens and criminals, the violent and the vulnerable, the strong and the weak. There is a new weapon in that war: the video camera. It can be a deterrent or an enforcer, in the hands of police or private citizens. What you'll see tonight is graphic, troubling, and real. It is a frightening view of crime seen from police dashboard cameras, hidden surveillance cameras, undercover stings, videos made by those who uphold the law and those who break it. What you'll see is the hidden face of crime and the exhilarating triumph of justice. Technology and law enforcement united to even the score.

The _you_ as victim of crime in _Busted_ has here been reduced to a _you_ watching, but in its place stands a series of constructed dichotomies that clearly indicate which half the viewer is to identify with: citizen, vulnerable, weak. If those last two adjectives strike the viewer as inappropriate, the footage offers eager confirmation--a vicious display of convenience store robberies and bank shootouts.

(2) This narration also offers a solution, however: an alliance with the twin forces of "technology and law enforcement." This is a police-colonized subject-position, as is the rest of the narration. Most of the people who appear in the program, outside of the actual surveillance images, are either police officers or victims of crime. Two of the specials are even narrated by a

police officer as an explanation and legitimation of police work, characterizing the program as a kind of public service. These surveillance images, the narration claims, will show us who to depend on to "even the score."

(3) Along with crime victim, beleaguered citizen, and police ally,[1] another available subject-position constructed in the narration is as the object of surveillance. Busted closes, with a healthy dose of sarcasm, by saying: "Think about it. What have you done lately on the job that you're glad nobody noticed? And

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[1] There is another subject-position made available by these programs, that of the consumer. These texts posit the viewer as a consumer of images, the complications of which I am discussing here. Such positioning fits neatly with the characterization of that viewer as a consumer of products, a position desired by the advertisers. In his discussion of reality programming, Fred Turner (1999) argues that programs like Cops offer the viewer the pleasure of a masculine potency that blurs the lines between physical domination, social stratification, voyeuristic exploration, and sexual penetration. But he also notes that this fantasy of mastery spills neatly over into the adjoining commercials, in which men settling down to their favorite beer pause only to subdue escaping purse-snatchers. Or as Turner puts it, "In real-life crime programming, the sexualized landscape of crime and its containment soon overlaps the commercial landscape of desire and satisfaction, and producers know this" (180). There are complications to the neatness of this fit, which I will discuss later in the essay.

what makes you so sure that you won't be... busted on the job?" We are not entirely free as we watch these images; they instruct us to always consider ourselves watched. Although the surveillance imagery itself may remind us that we could be watched at any time, Lili Berko argues that it is broadcast television, not the surveillance per se, that "has made sure that we all know that each of us is a potential subject of surveillance" (69-70). These specials are only the most obvious evidence for her claim; they go to great lengths to tell us precisely what we should come away with from watching others being observed--that it could just as easily be us caught in the camera's gaze.

(4) Even while we are reminded to see ourselves as potentially surveilled, there is an insistence that the subject-position of surveillers is available to us as well. Not only are we invited to watch as crimes are committed before our very eyes, becoming vicarious surveillers,[1] but each program is careful to include amateur footage as part of its video diegesis, suggesting that under the appropriate circumstances we can even become producers in this culture of surveillance. The program Real TV is the most explicit in this regard, closing with a phone number, an e-mail address, and the comment, "Don't forget to take your camera with you, because you never know when 'real TV' will happen to you." Ignoring for the moment the radical implications of this

[1] These programs invite us to adopt a similar position to the film spectator, as posited by Mulvey, except that as television viewers we are even more self-aware of the scopophilic act we engage in.

Baudrillard-esque transformation of reality into televisual representation, this invitation brings that mobile _you_ back into the equation: a you that things happen to, but who can turn this around for power (and profit?) by training a camera on the world and becoming a surveiller.

In important ways, however, this last subject-position is kept under a number of discursive constraints within these programs. While amateur footage does appear, it is marked as distinct and its amateur status is narratively highlighted. It is held to a rigorous array of demands that serve to further elaborate the "appropriate" use of video technology. Since the advent of video, and especially with its increasing existence as a popular and (relatively) affordable domestic technology, some have suggested that its proliferation will lead to a technological democratization. In the hands of ordinary citizens, video could destabilize powerful institutions such as the police by affording anyone a technological record of wrongdoing. The mere possibility of such a turnaround is a significant unspoken threat haunting these specials. With surveillance discursively aligned with the powers of law enforcement and (more or less) with employers, its amateur use poses a conundrum, and thus demands a great deal of discursive work to reconcile its place in the larger representation of surveillance.

Consider two consecutive sequences in _Justice_. First, a white man being harassed by neighbors about his homosexuality sets up a camera and records himself being brutally attacked. His footage is authorized by the program's narration as a viable use of home video, which reports that the tape helped convict the

attacker (the greatest praise these specials can offer). This footage is juxtaposed with a second segment: a video made by several black youths as they gleefully drive around Los Angeles shooting paintballs at transients and pedestrians. The narration of this clip is adamant that this is deviant use of video technology, and it heaps on its most ironic damnation--that the footage was used as evidence to convict the youths themselves. The segment continues to reveal that one of the paintballers produced a second video, offered as evidence in court, that testified to his subsequent rehabilitation. Both the narrator and the legal experts being interviewed lash out at this use of video technology, calling it "ironic and twisted" and condemning it on the grounds that legal testimony should be "real" evidence rather than constructed argument.

Clearly there are contradictions here. The rest of the program has eagerly highlighted how surveillance video--itself a technologically mediated representation of crime, authorized as real and reliable--is imagined to be the perfect legal evidence. The first amateur video, of the hate crime, is marked as excellent evidence. Yet the other instances of amateur video are considered affronts to the culture of surveillance. Video technology is first appropriated by "criminals," and then is utilized in court in a way that exposes video as a constructed representation of a point of view. In a botched attempt at "balance," this segment unwittingly reveals how amateur video occupies an important but deeply conflicted place in the logic of surveillance.

Realism and style

These specials are peculiar members of a loosely organized televisual genre often referred to as "reality programming." The boundaries of this category are by no means clear; many of the qualities that distinguish members from non-members can be found in other programs not often considered as such. Perhaps it is more useful to say that these specials stake a claim on the kind of televisual experience that they hope to provide by gesturing toward other, similar programs. Most important to all members of this genre is claiming a close connection to (unmediated) reality. It is not enough to merely assert that the footage is real, however, although the narration of these specials never fails to do so. A vérité aesthetic (shaky camerawork, static and technical glitches, time codes, and other aesthetic techniques that suggest that the footage was not studio-produced) is included in the framing and layered onto the footage itself, blended with the surveillance aesthetic in order to certify its own realism.

Why is this claim of realism so insistent? A narrative insistence on the authenticity of its images and the vérité aesthetic of its framing and editing help to distinguish these programs from other visual entertainment--narrative film, fictional television, and even the "realistic" dramas these specials often borrow from stylistically. This is the genuine article, and it must mark itself as such. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin suggest that this "logic of immediacy" is an attempt to erase the mediation involved in transforming the real into representation.

> To fulfill our apparently insatiable desire for immediacy, 'live' point-of-view television programs show viewers what it is like to accompany a police officer on a dangerous raid or to be a skydiver or a race car driver hurtling through space... the logic of immediacy dictates that the medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented (5-6).

With this erasure, the program promises to highlight the presence of the real world within its diegesis--"capturing" the world and conveying it to the viewer intact.

This insistence on realism is not merely aesthetic or expressive; it is also motivated by more political concerns. Reality programming can elide the constraints imposed on other network television by public opinion (at least as interpreted by network executives and advertisers) and by regulations, by situating themselves as "real," that is, by claiming to serve purposes other than mere entertainment. Occasionally those purposes are made explicit; Sheriff Bunnell's narration of "Shootouts" emphasizes both the necessary actions of the heroic police and the way viewers can avoid being caught in similar situations. Informational in only the broadest sense of the term, these programs offer voyeuristic pleasures under the guise of honorific celebration and practical instruction.

If criticisms of excessive violence are leveled at these programs, producers have the option of claiming that their shows merely portray an already violent world. On the other hand, if

criticisms of bias or fabrication are leveled at them, they can counter with the opposite defense: this is only television, nothing more. Because they do not claim to serve the informational function of "hard" news, they can negotiate this slippery position as both entertainment and reality. Reality programming thus indulges both purposes--to entertain and to legitimate.

Most importantly, claiming realism allows these specials to further implicate the viewer in the televised event. It is real, meaning it happened in your world, in places not unlike those you frequent. Whether that implies that you could be like the perpetrator or like the victim (the narration usually suggests the victim, but leaves the option distinctly open), you are implicated. Thus the intensity of the viewing experience is enhanced and the lessons of the narration made more vital and applicable.

Yet this claim of realism is not achieved by stripping the imagery of all mediation to somehow reveal an unadulterated "reality"--an impossible feat. In fact, it tends to require more mediation to assert that these images are real. Stylistic gestures assure the reality of the images themselves. These programs take up the aesthetics encrusted onto surveillance video, such as time codes, graphic frames, and split screens, not only retaining them in the surveillance footage itself but also including them in the televisual graphics and montages that frame the program. The title image of Justice is exemplary but not unique. The program's name is surrounded by a graphic frame often seen on surveillance images (and through camera viewfinders), and

is layered onto a dizzying graphic fizzle of static, camera lenses, ghostly surveillance images, and glittering time codes [see Fig. 1]. Doing so not only marks the program as being about surveillance; it digests the surveillance imagery into a televisual aesthetic, naturalizing and stabilizing it not as particular information that captures and maps people and their actions, but as a kind of surveillance iconography--a visual grammar that will testify to the authenticity of the footage that follows.

(FIGURE 1 HERE)

By engaging in this kind of aesthetic training, these specials attempt to set the terms according to which surveillance images should be interpreted. They also negotiate the implicit divide between surveillance images and the televisual images, which at first are not perfectly correlated. While both the surveillance apparatus and the television apparatus are deeply attentive to the human body, surveillance imagery does not share television's particular attention to expression, character, and dialogue. When these specials overlay dialogue in graphic form or use a close-up on one portion of the surveillance footage, typically on an individual's face, they are helping to fit the surveillance imagery into televisual conventions. These tactics invite viewers to experience the surveillance imagery just as they experience any other television program, naturalizing the relationship between television and surveillance--even to the point of suggesting that the benign surveillance apparatus is

merely a way of endlessly producing more television ("you never know when 'real TV' will happen to you"). This naturalizes surveillance as a legitimate and unproblematic aspect of social interaction--it can even be pleasurable as long as we keep ourselves on the right side of the watchful camera.

The paradox of surveillance

For any surveillance to be successful, the surveilled must know they are being watched; knowing that you are or can be under surveillance urges you to internalize that observation and to act in anticipation of possible repercussions. "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously on himself" (Foucault 202). But as Michel Foucault points out, such self-surveillance only develops if the surveillance is explicit and consequential. In his famous discussion of Bentham's panopticon, he notes that "the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon" (201). Surveillance must perform the presence of the authority that backs it--police, warden, employer, parent--so that the threat of surveillance is accompanied by an awareness of potential punishment. Jimmie Reeves and Richard Campbell call this the "spectacle of surveillance" (49), and point out that television journalism often serves this function. The FOX specials, as legitimating companion texts to the actual surveillance, embed the footage in a discourse that highlights the watchful eye of police or employer, and celebrates the use of

these images in the legal conviction of offenders. This makes viewers aware (as much as they recognize that they are implicated in multiple surveillance mechanisms) that this unblinking eye is not an autonomous or neutral entity, but an eye in the service of social control--powerful forces are doing the watching.

However, announcing and reinforcing the social forces behind the camera may have an unintentional and destabilizing side effect. Doing so highlights the subjectivity of the image, making it a less valuable resource for a legal system, and a culture, that insists on the objectivity of its evidence. A myth propagated by science, journalism, and law enforcement itself, the claim of objectivity carries a great deal of cultural authority, and its absence would significantly diminish the validity of the evidence in question. The discussion that surrounded the paintball attack in Justice demonstrates this insistent need for "objective" information; the video evidence offered by the offender and his attorney was dismissed as "ironic and twisted" because it was used to construct an argument rather than to validate a claim. For surveillance imagery to be taken as reliable, objective, and factual by a legal court and by the court of public opinion, it must convince viewers that it is an unbiased version of the facts. But to maintain its power, it must announce who is doing the observing and why. Like Foucault's guard tower, surveillance cameras only matter if we know that the people watching the monitors have the authority to punish us when we break their rules. But they also draw attention to the subjectivity of that power.

This apparent contradiction is precisely why the discourses that surround and justify these images fetishize the technological apparatus that has done the capturing, playing off of the widespread belief that technologies are somehow free of the subjectivity of people. As the introductory statement of Justice demonstrates, the programs characterize video technology as a participant in this war of and against crime, on ideological par with law enforcement itself. Throughout these specials it is the technology, as much as the incidents, that is the focus of attention. Several of the programs have segments explicitly describing the newest innovations in surveillance technology, which both highlight the technological origins of the surveillance footage and invite the viewer to desire these powerful and empowering gadgets. Even in the language used to introduce the clips, the technology is fetishized. In nearly every introduction in Real TV there is a reference made to the event being "caught on camera," implying that the camera is doing the catching, and that the event would be incomplete without the technology that allowed for its surveillance.

As John Fiske points out, "technology may limit what can or cannot be seen but it does not dictate the way it is watched. Technology may determine what is shown, but society determines what is seen" (221). The power of surveillance is determined by how the images are put into circulation and by whom. It behooves the surveiller to attribute the interpretations they reach to the technology itself. The attention paid in the specials to the technology of surveillance is accompanied by an insistent reassurance of its power, not simply to capture human behavior,

but to do so reliably, accurately, and dispassionately. The camera is the "unblinking eye," the mechanism by which presence is extended, the fearless enforcer. This attention to the technology itself is in certain ways a training exercise, one of the many ways these specials make surveillance images intelligible. Surveillance images are also imagined as the ideal legal evidence. As one interviewee in Busted suggests, "you usually can't argue with video;" another goes so far as to theorize that juries (because, he supposes, they were themselves educated via television) want to see the crime happen "in their presence." Surveillance footage, like the television image, makes it real for them. By making television out of surveillance footage, these specials are working to close the gap between the two.

By explaining how cameras work, where they can be located, and what functions they have at their disposal, the programs contextualize the images in a technological discourse; by explaining who uses them and what the implications are for those captured by them, the programs contextualize the images in a social and moral discourse. And by presenting these claims as televisual entertainment and voyeuristic pleasure, they naturalize the role of surveillance in contemporary society.

This cultural phenomenon permits these specials to sustain a useful contradiction. The camera alone has caught the crime on tape, and thus is objective, but the camera is in the service of police or employers, and thus is consequential. This marriage of the twin claims of subjectivity and objectivity is contradictory, yet ideal for the legitimation of the surveillance imagery. These programs follow suit, embedding the images they display in what

amounts to two aligned discourses: the powerful eye of the heroic and active police and the technological eye of the persistent and observing camera. In celebrating "technology and law enforcement united to even the score" (Justice), these programs are capable of incorporating subjective power and objective reliability within a single image.

Still cleaning up after Rodney King

Clearly, the narration around this surveillance imagery is in part an attempt to authorize those images and organize the appropriate responses to them. Yet, all this discursive containment and insistent legitimation cannot wholly fix the meaning of these images. Fiske remarks that,

> the camera always tells us more than it needs to; a photograph always carries more information than is necessary to make its point. These bits of unnecessary information function to substantiate the "truth injunction" of the photograph, but they also, simultaneously, undercut it: they can remind us that the event being photographed, like any other, can always be put into discourse differently (222).

Despite his enthusiasm for all things postmodern, Fiske tends to privilege the power of "logorationality," or discursive control, over the power of the image--and his emphasis on the power of discourse is important. But the above remark reveals that discursive power can never be total. Images are always unstable,

despite all efforts at discursive stabilization. In the case of surveillance imagery, the interpretation of the image is so crucial to the execution of power that instability is particularly acute.

In one scene from Chases, a man on a motorcycle is speeding away from police through the downtown streets of Los Angeles; the chase is filmed by a helicopter news crew. The fugitive manages to outrun his pursuers until being thwarted by several pedestrians attempting to block his way--what the narrator calls an "amazing display of public cooperation." The motorcyclist veers around them and is off again, until slamming sidelong into a car as he tries to cross a busy intersection. Several of the pedestrians grab and subdue the now staggering motorcyclist, until a group of police officers descend and surround the now crouching figure [see Fig. 2]. In a perfect example of Althusserian overdetermination, the program's narration tag-teams with the original narration from the helicopter reporter. The airborne journalist describes the "swarm maneuver," a tactic in which one officer grabs each limb to render the man immobile. The program then cuts back to a slo-mo clip of the intersection crash, with the narrator commenting, "you don't need to be arrogant and stupid to run from the police, but it sure seems to work out that way."

(FIGURE 2 HERE)

It is difficult to watch this clip without thinking about Rodney King--the image of uniformed police officers forcefully surrounding a motorist downed on the Los Angeles pavement, the

brutal force with which the police immobilize the suspect and even disperse the "cooperative" pedestrians. The images are deeply evocative of a moment in our recent real and televisual past, a moment when a typically stable array of power structures was nearly undermined by shaky footage of a similar "maneuver." When George Halliday's amateur video of King's beating circulated on television news for the first time, the authoritative aura of the police, long haunted by allegations of racially-charged brutality, was visibly disrupted. But in a Simi Valley court, what was once a video that seemed to "speak for itself" was reorganized by the defense attorneys as evidence of a legitimate police strategy. Charles Goodwin argues that defense lawyers were able to "train" the jury to see this situation as police would have. By re-mediating that video with the terms used in police training (translating a twitch of a leg into an "escalation of violence" that, in police mentality, would warrant another blow from a nightstick), the lawyers were able to colonize the perceptual mechanism of the jury and narrate the damning video into submission. What was a deeply troubling and destabilizing piece of video became, to the willing eyes inside the courtroom, another vision of justified police behavior in response to a dangerous criminal in a dangerous city.[1]

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[1] Besides Goodwin's insightful analysis, Robert Gooding-Williams' contribution to his own anthology, Reading Rodney King: Reading Urban Uprising (1993), also discusses how the Halliday video was used in court by the defense team.

Clearly, many in Los Angeles and the rest of the nation were not convinced, and massive rioting followed the announcement of the verdict. The rioters were not privy, nor likely as open, to the re-training of perception that occurred in the courtroom. But television made similar attempts to contain the video's meanings and stabilize its interpretation. As John Caldwell has argued, the televisual apparatus uses aesthetic style to organize the array of possible meanings in a kind of crisis management--an effort at containment pursued even more thoroughly (and, he argues, until nearly imploding) when it tried to cover the riots. The video of the King beating, so visually ambiguous that it becomes a Rorschach test, "a visual schematic ripe for constant and immediate commercial and journalistic redefinition" (Caldwell 305), was shaped and transformed by the televisual apparatus into an icon. In this way, the evocative imagery was given a narrative and visual context that attempted to contain and secure its meanings.

These surveillance specials, despite arriving six years after the King beating, are clearly still engaged in shoring up and reaffirming the authority and legitimacy of the police.[1] Clips

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[1] The intentionality of such affirmation of police authority is not entirely clear in these specials. Much of the video they display are given to the producers gratis by law enforcement agencies, which may account for the positive light the narration bestows on the footage. But a more obvious example, and one particularly saturated with Rodney King-related anxiety, is the program <u>LAPD: Life on the Beat</u>. The program was proposed by the

like the motorcycle chase are selected to represent police power without giving way to images of blatant abuse. This clip is especially useful in this effort of legitimation because of the presence of the pedestrians, whose participation can be narrated as a sign of public support for the LAPD. The clip is soaked in the police-colonized narration of Sheriff Bunnell and the journalistic play-by-play, both performing a similar ritual of containment. Graphics and slo-motion orient our attention to the crash rather than the arrest; when the journalistic narrator does draw our attention to the arrest, it is in a language already characterizing the police behavior as a legitimate and recognizable maneuver required by the situation--clearly reminiscent of the defense strategy in the Simi Valley trial. The clip is closed by turning the blame back on the driver, who is, in this characterization, "arrogant and stupid." The driver in this case is of ambiguous race and even gender, wearing a strikingly white helmet throughout the incident; here the surrogate Rodney King is de-racialized and de-authorized. From a commanding height, we are urged to see this incident as an arrogant and stupid "white" impeded by pedestrians supportive of police efforts, and detained by a team of highly trained police officers using the best method to subdue a dangerous criminal.

This effort to contain and stabilize the meanings of this and other troubling images, and the effort to rehabilitate the

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LAPD, using the <u>COPS</u> model, to portray their force in a more positive light than it had received in the coverage of the King beating and the rioting that followed.

fractured authority of the police in the wake of the King beating, is insistent and overdetermined but by no means entirely successful--nor can it be. Fiske's observation about the polysemic quality of images can be extended here with George Lipsitz's analysis of popular narratives. Lipsitz argues that television, like all popular narratives, depends on social conflict or tension for its narrative fuel. But in order to use social conflict to drive a narrative, impose order, and stabilize cultural tensions, television must first represent those tensions. Lipsitz refers to Jameson when he points out that "the dominant culture can only presume to ease anxieties like disconnection from the past by calling attention to them in the first place, thereby running the risk of re-opening the very ruptures it seeks to close" (17). This structural aspect of popular narratives means that "this 'return of the repressed' within the media creates one of its conditions of possibility" (261).

Lipsitz's revelation is crucial. By showing footage of crime and policing, and this clip in particular, these specials seem eager to contain and legitimate certain powerful structures and to elevate the cultural meanings that support them. When the subject is law enforcement and video, the wound that still demands healing is the Rodney King beating. These images are evocative of that wound in a powerful and uncontainable way; the legitimating power of the sequence is outweighed or at least undermined by the image itself, which is too similar to the King video and therefore too open to the comparison many viewers will make. All of the narration and organization imposed by the police, the journalists, and the televisual apparatus cannot entirely extinguish that

compelling image and the associations it evokes. This is not just Fiske's point about images revealing that they can be read differently; to resolve a problem requires its ritual performance, which gives it life within the narrative.

Incomplete closure

Lipsitz's revelation is important not just for situating this one arguably oblique invocation of Rodney King, but for thinking critically about the specials themselves and the pleasures and tensions available in them. The narrative work, the framed images, and the surveillance aesthetic clearly stake out a number of explicit pleasures made available in the text. This array of explicit pleasures is by no means entirely coherent, either across the different specials or within a single program. The invitation in Justice is that we will enjoy the "exhilarating triumph of justice," a clear sign of the colonization of this narration by a police ideology; the Busted special about on-the-job surveillance suggests that we marvel at the "exquisite weirdness of what people will do," a somewhat different pleasure of voyeurism intertwined with an implied effort at socialization.

However, the specials are at least united in an explicit effort to distinguish criminal and deviant behavior from proper behavior, and they invite us to enjoy the restoration of order to a ruptured situation. This explicitly available narrative pleasure is announced, nearly demanded, by these specials, constructing a multi-faceted subject-position that, if inhabited by viewers, serves particular hegemonic functions in social

discourse. It justifies a particular kind of police presence with a representation of the world as a dangerous place warranting their active and physical intervention. It aligns the willing viewer with that perspective and that effort. It also erases the threat of panoptic surveillance from the explicit discourse by turning the focus of the program to technology and crime, even while it legitimates a network of video surveillance that is increasingly imaging nearly all public urban space for the eyes of the powerful. The justification of video surveillance embedded in the very idea of presenting violent crimes as televisual entertainment hints that this program is not just feeding off of, but is actually an integral part of, a modern panoptic project.

Such legitimation requires a willing viewer, and there are other pleasures available in these texts. Consider another segment from Justice that focuses on criminals using amateur video to film their own crimes. As I have suggested, amateur footage poses a particularly thorny problem in terms of narratively justifying its presence, and its inclusion in these programs makes explicit the contradictions at work throughout. The segment begins with footage of various white suburban teenagers engaged in acts of destruction: smashing mailboxes with baseball bats and setting fire to air conditioner units. The narration explains why vandals and criminals tape their own acts by saying, "For some, the camera acts almost like a drug, enhancing the thrill of their crimes, which they record and play back for repeated pleasure;" the program again relishes the irony that "this living record can be used against them." The segment then shifts to a video produced by a group of white, suburban teenage boys who have

entered a nearly finished home and are indulging in the ritualistic destruction of windows, walls, toilets, and mirrors, what the narration calls a "hundred thousand dollar orgy of destruction." As the teens inflict their destruction on the uninhabited suburban home, the program encrusts it with narration and expert testimony. One expert calls these vandals "particularly pathetic, because their only way of fitting in and belonging is by deviating," but he acknowledges their motive by noting that "obviously there is a certain thrill in the fact that certain people are likely to watch it, so there is that exhibitionistic component to it."

The arduous work of containing and condemning this crime is evident here as elsewhere in these specials; but negotiating the complicated contradictions present in this instance makes visible the frayed edges of this legitimation mechanism. Here, amateur video is put to use in a way that does not support the surveillance mechanism, where the very act of filming crime (precisely what police and employers have done throughout the show) is turned on end as a challenge to the dominant discourse. This subversive use of video must be distinguished from the approved uses, such as amateur surveillance of deviant behavior and the familial commemoration of home movies.

Still, the narration explains their criminal behavior by acknowledging the thrill they get from taping their crime, a thrill dependent on the assumption that the images themselves are thrilling. And by invoking the possibility that these teenagers and their friends will find this footage thrilling, the text cannot help but hint that we as television viewers might also.

Despite the framing and narration (and the techniques used to alter the video, including looping one angry scream four times over and adding a pulsating soundtrack), there is the distinct possibility that some viewers will not be watching in order to enjoy the "exhilarating thrill of justice," but will rather enjoy vicariously the thrill of destruction being acted out by these amateur video producers.

Dick Hebdige argues that there has always been a fundamental relationship between surveillance and youth subcultures:

> for the subcultural milieu has been constructed underneath the authorized discourses, in the face of multiple disciplines of the family, the school and the workplace. Subculture forms up in the space between surveillance and the evasion of surveillance, it translates the fact of being under scrutiny into the pleasure of being watched. It is a hiding in the light (35).

The performance we see displayed here, re-appropriated by the televisual text, is, in Hebdige's terms, both a "refusal of anonymity" and "a confirmation of the fact of powerlessness" (35). These youths accept their existence as objects of surveillance while simultaneously taking surveillance into their own hands. It is no surprise that, in a moment when one boy smashes a mirror with a hammer, the camera operator films his own reflection as it shatters; it is clearly an intentional act, as the vandal waits for his friend to position himself. These youths are aware of their performance and recognize that they are both imagers and

imaged--and that being both simultaneously constitutes and destroys them.[1]

With that recognition, Berko might call them "postmodern performers regaling in the distracted glance of the apparatus of

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[1] This idea, that marginalized groups can formulate cultural resistance using the very mechanisms of oppression in which they are contained, has been pursued fruitfully in terms of black youth and rap music. S. Craig Watkins argues that black youth are not only caught up in social formations, they use an awareness of it to challenge the system:

Black youth are acutely aware of the social world they inhabit and that current structural arrangements produce limited opportunities for their penetration. This particular formation of black youth culture is, then, a strategic attempt to make use of the fissures produced by social, economic, and technological change (74).

Tommy Lott goes farther, discussing how characterizations of black youth become powerful characterizations for black youth to inhabit as a challenge. His discussion focuses on the way the "bad nigga" figure functions in the language of gangsta rap: "By appropriating the term 'nigga' and recoding its social meaning, gangsta rappers have imbued mass media's criminal image of black urban youth with a political ambiguity" (109). Such strategic attempts to turn oppression through representation and stereotype into a form of resistance are similar to the performance of deviance orchestrated by the white suburban vandals.

surveillance;" the video camera gives them the power to produce "the liminal space of ritual" (79). If she is right that "social subjectivity is thus consummated through the act of public performance," then these suburban youths have indeed recognized themselves as liminars. "The liminar finds him/herself subject to a performative aesthetic which demands an audience to witness and in a sense certify the performance (presence)" (87). The adolescents in the video demonstrate an awareness of the "paradoxes of visibility" (19), as described by Joshua Gamson; claiming the right to be publicly visible requires that the claimer negotiate with, even reluctantly embrace, cultural stereotypes. To be seen requires being delinquent amidst a system that does not want to see them in any other light.

It is significant that their performance (or at least what the program shows us) begins with them smashing a wall decorated by a life-sized painting of Barney, the vapid purple dinosaur of children's television. Rather than indiscriminate destruction in the name of deviance, as the narration suggests, viewers may recognize (and enjoy) this as a symbolic attack on everything bland and commercialized in the suburban landscape, as well as a participation in a larger televisual performance by locating themselves on "stage" with another television character. By Lipsitz's logic, we may be drawn to consider precisely what is being closed down by the narration--why this is their "only way" of belonging, what social networks are available to suburban youths, what constraints suburban life imposes and what role commercial media plays in this oppressive environment for these adolescents.

Remember the double offer of pleasure included in the opening to Justice. "What you'll see is the hidden face of crime and the exhilarating triumph of justice." There is clearly another option here, that the narration cannot manage to erase. To show the hidden face of crime (a turn of phrase that already sets up assumptions about whose face that is) can be read as a part of the hegemonic discourse of legitimation at work throughout this text. To evoke the fear and self-righteousness that will legitimate the power of police and the intrusion of surveillance requires the construction of a menacing "other" to embody those fears. But it also demonstrates the weakness of its own construct, for that hidden face need not be a simple menacing other, but may be another available point of identification. Andrew Ross points out that there is a pleasure in watching both transgression and its containment; in Candid Camera, a slightly more benign predecessor to these specials, it was

> the pleasure of watching people being watched, with no apparent risk involved--except, of course, the possible risk of one day being caught in the act. It was also the pleasure of watching people transgress, or on the visible verge of transgressing social codes... but the viewer's pleasure also derived from knowing at the same time that things would never get out of hand, that the transgression would be interrupted and contained by the sudden unveiling of the hidden camera... (Ross 108).

While the crimes in Chases and Justice are more significant in that they have pronounced implications--and the programs are eager to highlight those legal, material, and corporeal consequences--there is still the possibility of enjoying the crime itself. In addition, the social tension being negotiated, be it law enforcement, social control, surveillance, or juvenile delinquency, must necessarily grant representation to the tension being resolved. In doing so, the televisual apparatus opens up the possibility that the contradictions involved in the issue (vandalism as criminal deviance or as symbolic expression within constrained circumstances) can be explored, even against the grain urged by the narrative framing.

Conclusion

The claim that these shows, and reality television in general, help to legitimate a "law-and-order" ideology forgets that, first and foremost, these programs are the products of television. They function according to certain logics that may or may not dovetail with the interests of the police and employers who produce the footage. For instance, the programs solve one of the major problems of weekly television, since they are much cheaper to produce than a dramatic series or two sit-coms. The production costs are minimal, and the footage is often donated free of charge by law enforcement agencies or provided by viewers for small cash awards. These make reality programs about a quarter as costly as series and sitcoms, and half as costly as

tabloid newsmagazines.[1] These programs do not exist, then, to serve the workings of a system of surveillance per se; they exist because that system produces video footage that can be cheaply turned into television that people will watch and advertisers will support.

The fact that the system of surveillance does not produce these programs does not prohibit them from serving their interests. But they also operate according to another televisual logic that helps explain why television can be, at best, only an imperfect mechanism of legitimation. Composed of footage borrowed from police and employers, these programs seem to borrow their hegemonic perspective as well--that the world needs surveillance and particular kinds of powerful interventions into society. The interests of television, however, make it a structurally unfit mechanism for completely enforcing those perspectives and values. The mediated surveillance images tend to exceed their narration, evoking the conceptual opposite of its intended effect. Much of the pleasure that may be derived from these programs is not precisely the "exhilarating triumph of justice," but just as easily a vicarious, voyeuristic thrill of the crime itself: the excess of violence or social display, the transgression of social norms, and the performative significance of subversive cultural practices. Perhaps, as Ross argues, we can enjoy both the transgression and the restoration of order, a complicated

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[1] For estimated costs of some example programs from each category, see Mark Fishman's contribution to his Entertaining Crime (Fishman & Cavender 1998), p. 67.

negotiation of a double or flexible subject-position. Or perhaps, as Lipsitz suggests, the very attempt to bring closure to a social wound demands the invocation of that wound, and doing so can allow viewers to draw from that a counter-narrative that does not simply legitimate and naturalize social power.

There is a doubly ironic comment made by the expert during the suburban vandalism sequence of Justice. He states that "there is the element of exhibitionism with the person who is videotaping him or herself perpetrating crimes. Obviously there is a certain thrill in the fact that certain people are likely to watch it, so there is that exhibitionistic component to it." What he cannot acknowledge is that television, while claiming to celebrate their conviction and the restoration of order, has inadvertently consummated the vandals' greatest desire; now a national television audience has seen, and been thrilled by, their escapades. Their presence has been authorized by the circulation of the liminal performance intended to condemn it; "in a time when many people seem to worry that they are nobody... television has come to serve as a certification of somebody-ness" (Gamson 214). Surveillance helps propagate a sense of anonymity, that we are all the same in the eyes of the camera; the "exhibitionistic component" of video vandalism is a response to that erasure. And there is a similarly exhibitionistic component to television. The very reason these vandals videotape their crime is the same reason television cannot be an efficient mechanism of legitimation. Television's desire, and its financial success, depends on showing what people desire to watch, whatever that desire may be. They

simply cannot afford to close down the potential pleasures of their text.

Certainly there are limits--federal regulation, advertiser and viewer conservatism, even technological limitations--that keep television from being outwardly subversive, anarchistic, patently offensive, or counter-hegemonic. But within those constraints there is a great deal of maneuverability, and television profits by keeping that space relatively open. That even means awkwardly courting the oppositional reader. Despite their fierce narrative control these specials make room for viewers who identify with the police discourse, those who watch that discourse skeptically, and those who watch it for the voyeuristic thrill of seeing transgression and even identifying with the transgressor. Each of these viewers (and of course a single viewer might shift between any or all of these positions) is still potentially present for the advertisements that intervene and will likely return to television again--and therefore functionally serves the needs of the televisual apparatus. Polysemy is a financial asset for television, even when it does not benefit the hegemonic discourses that attempt to employ television as a mechanism of social control.

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