

# THE SCREEN THAT SEES ALL: THE VISUAL MOTIF OF THE CONTROL ROOM IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

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## INTRODUCTION

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In a contemporary context characterised by a proliferation and overabundance of images, automatically produced images—using security cameras, traffic control cameras, police car dashboard cameras, drones, and even X-ray machines at airports and train stations—stand as an example of the progressive *industrialization of vision* (Virilio, 1989: 77), giving rise to recognisable visual motifs that form part of a new iconographic tradition. Although in iconographic studies, cinema has usually been studied as a receptacle of visual motifs previously developed in painting (Balló and Bergala, 2016; André, 2007), there are certain motifs whose roots can be found in the articulation of cinematic technology itself, opening up possibilities for reflection on the reproduction of the image. This is the case, for example, of visual motifs associated with automatically produced images, and especially the motif of the control room as a space for the pro-

ject and mediation of all such images. The motif of the control room, which is the focus of this article, thus reflects this new paradigm of automated perception and representation of the world.

This article provides an overview of some of the results of a research project titled MOVEP (Visual Motifs in the Public Sphere: Production and Circulation of Images of Power in Spain, 2011-2017, reference CSO2017-88876-P). The main objective of this project is to analyse the recurrence, production, and circulation of specific motifs related to the representation of power in images appearing in the digital media, film and television in the years from 2011 to 2017. This article seeks to answer the following questions: How is the motif of the control room used in contemporary film and television fiction? What representations of power and the public sphere is it associated with? What are its roots in the iconographic tradition of film history? Is it possible to imagine new narratives based exclusively on automatically produced

images, or what Harun Farocki calls “operational images” or “phantom shots” (Farocki, 2013: 147)?

The control room is directly associated with the imaginaries of surveillance, which have become a key element for our understanding of contemporary societies, and which straddle the line between two distinct *nightmares* of modernity (Haggerty, 2012: 235). The first is the fear of crime and of being a victim of it; the second is the fear of living in a completely controlled society, i.e., the fear of being watched. In the first

case, surveillance is presented as a means of dealing with and solving social problems like crime, terrorism, or border control, lending legitimacy to the discourse of “law and order” (Jermyn, 2004; Fishman and Cavender, 1990) and an “aesthetics of transparency”, “motivated by the desire to turn the world (the body) inside-out such that there would no longer be any secrets or interiors, human or geographical, in which our enemies (or the enemy within) might find refuge” (Hall, 2015: 127). In the second case, surveillance is seen as a threat to a citizenry subjected to a repressive, authoritarian power, underscoring the inequality between the watchers and the watched. In both cases, surveillance is conceptualised as a form of controlling and shaping public behaviour (Foucault, 2012; Brighenti, 2007). Introduced as a theme in the early days of film history by filmmakers like Fritz Lang in *Metropolis* (1927), *Spies* (Spione, 1928) and especially the Dr. Mabuse saga, the motif of the control room as a site of convergence between laboratory, panopticon and projection room today constitutes a central element for any investigation into the forms of representation of power and politics in contemporary film and television series.

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**LA SALA DE CONTROL SE RELACIONA DIRECTAMENTE CON LOS IMAGINARIOS DE LA VIGILANCIA, QUE SE HAN CONVERTIDO EN UN ELEMENTO CLAVE PARA ENTENDER LAS SOCIEDADES CONTEMPORÁNEAS Y SE SITÚAN ENTRE DOS PESADILLAS DE LA MODERNIDAD**

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This article has two main aims: (1) to establish a taxonomy for the wide range of configurations of the control room motif in contemporary film and television, with the aim of understanding the uses made of them in the story; and (2) to identify new iconographies in the representation

of power in the contemporary world. Our approach draws both on studies of political iconography—by Carlo Ginzburg (2013), Horst Bredekamp (2007) and investigations like the *Handbuch der politischen Ikonographie* (2011)—and explora-

tions of the figural dimension of film images—Brenez (1998), Bellour (2013). Based on the premises outlined above, in the following sections we present the categories identified in this research of the visual motif of the control room.

## **THE MILITARY CONTROL ROOM**

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The visual motif of the control room is associated with the adoption and systematisation of certain advances in technology: “virtualization, remote control, simulation, real-time processing, networked computing, graphical user interfaces—across many fields of activity” (Deane, 2015: 2). The close relationship of the motif with technology has made the military context the one where the control room has the strongest presence in the popular imagination. In *Guerre et cinéma I* (1986), Paul Virilio argues that advances in military technology have a direct impact on our “logic of perception” and representation of the world. The transformation of the theatre of war (Clausewitz, 1832) into an audiovisual setting with multiple screens displaying the progress of the conflict reflects the emergence of a new iconography for representing war. This iconography has been

critical to representing the kind of war—without actually being at war—waged daily by contemporary governments.

A key image in this new conception of the control room was taken on 1 May 2011—the first year of our research sample—by the White House journalist Pete Souza. The picture shows President Barack Obama in the Situation Room surrounded by his government team, watching the images of the operation to hunt down Osama Bin Laden, which are outside the frame of the picture. The complexity of the War on Terror launched by the United States is summed up in this image of a group of individuals around a table watching surveillance footage in real time: the war translated into viewing technology that typifies the age of the *paradoxical logic* of the image (Virilio, 1989), where the here and now disappear completely.

This image of *war without war*, which Paul Virilio describes as a deterrence strategy (Virilio, 1989: 86), explains why it was during the period of the Cold War in the 1960s that the first representations of the control room began to appear in fiction films (Deane, 2015), such as *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964) or *Fail Safe* (Sidney Lumet, 1964). When the military entered the era of “generalised simulation” of military missions (on land, at sea, or in the air), artificial sounds and images replaced the reality of war. This shift towards “simulation” partly explains the representation of the control room in the film *War Games* (John Badham, 1983), where it becomes the bedroom of a teenager who takes the world to the brink of a nuclear holocaust on his personal computer while believing he is playing with a mere war simulator. The move from the prototypical Cold War control room to the teenager’s bedroom reflects both the underage target audience of 1980s blockbusters and the rise of depictions of war in its more ludic dimension; the purely graphic translation of a virtual match where the game board is a map of the world displayed on multiple screens, an iconogra-

phy which, from Fritz Lang to the spy sagas (both classical and contemporary), has been used as a MacGuffin to illustrate the arch-villain’s plans for world domination. In this way, popular culture has turned the control room into one of the settings for contemporary evil.

This is why *Twin Peaks* (David Lynch, ABC: 1990-91; Showtime: 2017) offers one of the most significant reinterpretations of the military control room motif. In “Part 8” (#3x08, David Lynch, Showtime: 2017), a connection is established between the atomic testing carried out in New Mexico in 1945 and the birth of an evil that devastates the world in general and the town of Twin Peaks in particular (Pintor, 2018a). David Lynch, a skillful recycler of Hollywood imagery, makes use of the iconography of the control room to set up this key moment for the mythology of *Twin Peaks*. His use of quasi-dreamlike settings where a demiurge weaves together the threads of the world, from the man with the levers in *Eraserhead* (David Lynch, 1979) to the red room where a mysterious man in a wheelchair looks out in *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001), is transformed in this case into an early twentieth-century Parisian *art nouveau* room (fig. 1). In a reworking of the room where a recorded voice on a gramophone issues its orders in *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse, Fritz Lang, 1932), the control room is confused with the theatrical device. A single screen flanked with curtains and with the projected image of planet Earth in the middle, offers a pure, postmodern vision of the control room as a place where time itself is controlled. Evil takes shape in a small projected sphere of light, sent by the Giant and an elegantly dressed woman, to a moment, 1956, and a specific community in the American heartland. In the space between the photograph of Barack Obama’s Situation Room and the control room in *Twin Peaks*, it becomes clear that both the contemporary historiography of the United States and its historical and oneiric revision are inseparable from this seat of power.

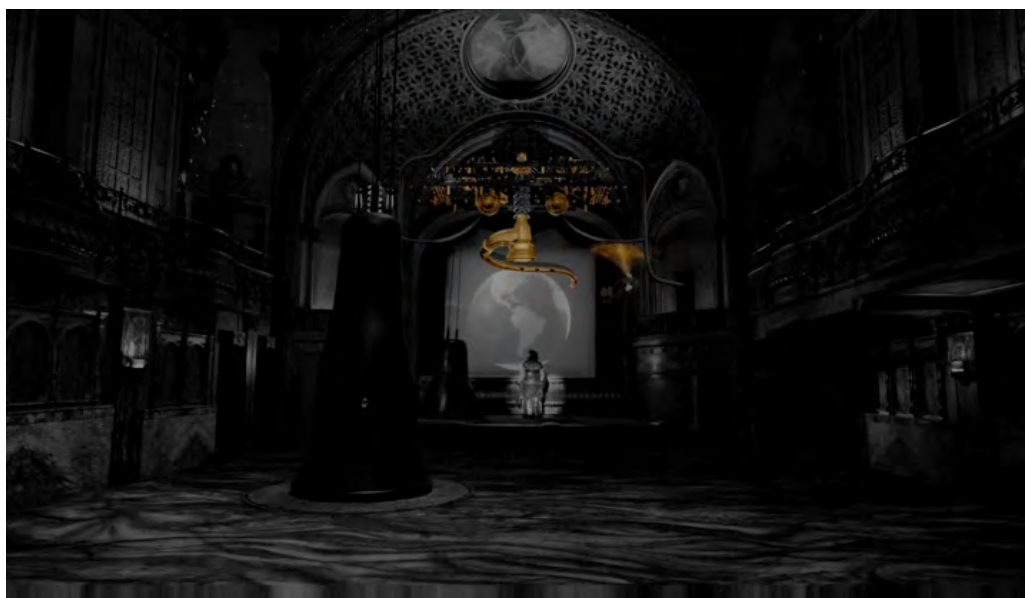


Imagen 1. *Twin Peaks* (David Lynch, ABC: 1990-91; Showtime: 2017).

The control room, which in Lynch's hands is confused with the editing room of reality and with a theatre of history, in a manner similar to that of the final act in *My Case* (Mon Cas, Manoel de Oliveira, 1986), becomes the key site for the management of audiovisual material in a specifically military context; in a war of images everything must be viewed and recorded, and the visual motif of the control room encapsulates this new way of representing power. The "God's eye view" (Steyerl, 2014: 17) is thus a secularised, technological version "that retroactively creates a perspective of overview and surveillance for a distanced, superior spectator safely floating up in the air. [...] This establishes a new visual normality—a new subjectivity safely folded into surveillance technology [...] so that] the former distinction between object and subject is exacerbated and turned into the one-way gaze of superiors onto inferiors, a looking down from high to low" (Steyerl, 2014: 27). It is worth bearing in mind that the CCTV (Closed Circuit Television) system on which all video surveillance technology is based was created by the Siemens company to monitor the launch of the German army's V2 missiles during the Second

World War, and thus the elevated or aerial point of view has always been an implicit element in surveillance systems and the signals they send to the control room.

## **THE ENTERTAINMENT CONTROL ROOM**

Hito Steyerl, quoting Thomas Elsaesser, also highlights the fact that "a hardware environment integrating mili-

tary, surveillance and entertainment applications produces new markets for hardware and software" (Steyerl, 2014: 25). The emergence of the control room as a representation of systematic video surveillance was preceded by the television production control room, which was popularised by reality television, as evidence of a connection between the military context and the world of entertainment. In the 1990s, when formats like *Big Brother* (John de Mol/Veronica, 1999-2006) introduced the narrative of life as simulation, the control room with multiple screens displaying people's lives in real time became something popular and recognisable for the general public. This was an advance not just from the perspective of the *mise-en-scène* in fiction (Martin, 2014: 169), but also on the iconographic level, as the military motif evolved to include a new dimension related to entertainment.

The concept at the creative ludic level involves the design of an audiovisual strategy that allows the domestication of reality: the creation of an artificial world subjected to surveillance from multiple points of view (Kilborn, 2003). The theatrical or film stage in its more traditional sense has now

been replaced with the concept of the *dispositif* (Virilio, 1989) and the stage has been transformed from an empty space (Brook, 1968) into a specular space. The cinematic imaginary has been contaminated by the television imaginary and the stylistic approaches of experimental film aimed at capturing reality (Quintana, 2011) have been

updated based on this process of hybridisation and mixing between television and film worlds. As Adrian Martin explains, “[a]t the dawn of the 21st Century, Reality TV also managed to rudely interrupt and interfere with a particular dream that had long preoccupied many independent and experimental filmmakers [...]. That dream was precisely to serve a raw reality (not the stylised illusion known as “realism”) in as flowing a stream as possible—with no pretension that it was objective or unmediated, and with the proviso that this documenting of the everyday could also be lyrical and poetic, albeit not forced into that straitjacket [...]. Reality TV, over time, became a vast genre absorbing everything from documentary, soap opera and game show to performance art, political activism and state of surveillance” (Martin, 2014: 170-171). In this process of “remediation” (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) described by Martin, the control room has become a space that illustrates new forms of power in the society of the spectacle.

In this sense, the film *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), and more specifically, the control room producing the reality show of which Truman is the unwitting star, offers an allegorical illustration (Žižek, 2005) of how such spaces can operate as contemporary panopticons. The producer of the show plays the role of the demiurge who not only audiovisually tracks Truman’s life from on high right from the day of his birth, but

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**LA EMERGENCIA DE LA SALA DE CONTROL COMO FIGURACIÓN DE LA VIDEOVIGILANCIA SISTEMÁTICA VIENE PRECEDIDA DE LA SALA DE REALIZACIÓN CARACTERÍSTICA DEL MEDIO TELEVISIVO Y POPULARIZADA A PARTIR DEL FORMATO DEL REALITY-SHOW, EVIDENCIANDO EL VÍNCULO ENTRE EL ÁMBITO DE LO MILITAR Y EL DEL ENTRETENIMIENTO**

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also ensures that he cannot escape from his video-monitored world. Life as simulation (Baudrillard, 1978), represented by the cardboard cut-out town of Seahaven, is watched over and cared for by a being who governs the fate of his creature, Truman, from above. The Olympus of Greek mythology where

the gods play with the lives of men is updated to the television control room (fig. 2). The dialogue between “demiurge” and “creature” at the end of the film sums up the virtues and dangers of inhabiting a counterfeit world like Plato’s cave (Žižek, 2005).

*The Truman Show* thus explicitly counteracts the “positive” discourse on surveillance in reality shows like *Big Brother*. As Andrejevic suggests, “reality TV helps to reposition the portrayal of surveillance and highlights its advantages not to the watchers but to the watched” (Andrejevic, 2004: 95). In this way, these programs underscore the therapeutic potential of surveillance, as we are told that participants can get to know

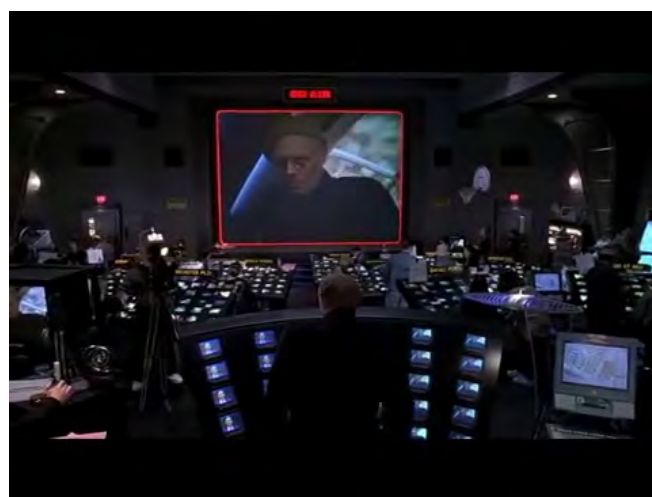


Imagen 2. El show de Truman (*The Truman Show*, Peter Weir, 1998).

themselves better, learn who they really are, and in some cases—for example, reality shows like *Supernanny* (Channel 4, 2004-2008)—improve their behaviour (Ouellette and Hay, 2008; Oliva, 2012). Surveillance is also viewed as a form of validation and a way of acquiring visibility, a form of symbolic capital that can be turned into money. Meanwhile, films like *The Truman Show*, and other fiction films that depict and reflect on the rise of reality television, from *EDtv* (Ron Howard, 1999) to *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012), (re) define video surveillance as an instrument of authoritarian control.

The concept of the control room in simulated worlds has undergone a makeover in the series *Westworld* (HBO: 2016-). In the first two seasons of this television adaptation of Michael Crichton's science fiction film of the same name (1973), where the question of the relationship between “demiurge” and “creature” lies at the very heart of the story, the control room is one of the key settings. The technological and narrative operation of this hyperreal theme park, inspired by the world of Western films, depends on the circular space where a virtual model of the amusement park in the middle of the room has transfigured the multiple screens of the reality show production room. From the cardboard cut-out world of *The Truman Show* to the hyperrealism of *Westworld*, the control room is transformed from a collection of screens showing different camera views to a reduced-scale virtual replica of the theme park.

The dissolving boundary separating human intelligence from artificial intelligence is another of the key tropes in *Westworld*, which itself translates into a new form of surveillance: both the hologram replication of the geography of the theme park and the telemetric data on each “host” (the name used for the androids) that appears on the tablets of the park supervisors. In one of the most distinctive narrative twists in the series, the control strategies employed by the theme park directors are revealed to be a mechanism for collect-

ing data on the guests who visit the park (tastes, behaviours, attitudes, etc.). Like *The Truman Show*, the story in *Westworld* leads towards the protagonists' escape—as an act of individual and collective revolution, respectively—from this simulated space that links the control room to the purest Orwellian imaginary. Escape from the monitored artificial world thus becomes an act of freedom. This is perhaps what makes the change to this imaginary represented by the television fiction series *Dead Set* (Charlie Brooker, BBC: 2008) so significant. Charlie Brooker's series tells the story of a zombie apocalypse during a broadcast of the program *Big Brother*, turning the space of video surveillance into the safest space of all, offering another twist in the representation of the control room associated with the imaginary of entertainment.

## **THE CONTROL ROOM AS CAPITALISM'S ANTECHAMBER**

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The artificial and simulated spaces described in the previous section find their real-life expression in the city of Las Vegas. What could be classified as a theme park for capitalism is revealed to be another of the typical settings in contemporary fiction for exploring the motif of the control room. Of all the places that characterise Las Vegas, the casino is the ultimate expression of the worship and constant circulation of money that it represents. The casino control room is therefore one of the archetypal spaces for the iconographic representation of the city and evidence that hypervisibility is one of the consequences of the omnipresence of money. These considerations, and the idea posited by Marie-José Mondzain (1996) that every relationship between an image and its iconic expression is essentially an economic one, explain why one of the most common contexts for this variation on the control room motif is the genre, or subgenre, of the casino robbery and/or heist film, from *Ocean's Eleven* (Steven Soderbergh, 2001) and its

sequels, to films like *21* (Robert Luketic, 2008). In these films, one of the key themes is the struggle against hypervisibility. Deceiving the neoliberal centres of production, circulation and distribution of money means being invisible to the multiple screens in the control room.

In this type of film, the subterfuge to outsmart the neoliberal powers requires simulation and deceit in front of the cameras, constructing a mathematical choreography often orchestrated from another control room where the mastermind of the operation issues the instructions, like the character of The Professor in the series *Money Heist* (La casa de papel, Álex Pina, Antena 3-Netflix: 2017-) or Luther Stickell in the *Mission Impossible* film saga. This version of the motif plays more consciously with the presence of a human gaze inside the control room; the security guards with their eyes fixed on the monitors are one of the key players in the game of suspense depicted in these films. Consequently, the discourse that emerges is that heroism is defined as becoming invisible to the watchful gaze of neoliberal control. The series *Las Vegas* (Gary Scott Thompson, NBC: 2003-2008) reverses the dynamic, constituting one of the few examples—along with *Casino* (Martin Scorsese, 1995)—where the point of view is positioned inside the control room.

### **THE CONTROL ROOM AS A “LEVIATHANIC” INSTRUMENT**

In his analysis of Christopher Nolan’s Batman saga, Slavoj Žižek shows how Hollywood blockbusters can serve as precise indicators of the ideological predicaments of our societies (Žižek, 2012). In its representation of the control room, *The Dark*

*Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) is influenced by a post-9/11 imaginary. The film establishes a direct correspondence between the irrational and unpredictable methods of the character of the Joker—with no fear whatsoever of immolation—and the terrorist acts carried out by Daesh. The arguments of US national security are reflected in the motif of the control room that appears in the film’s final section as the last desperate attempt to catch the villain. The masked hero establishes a system of wiretapping and geolocation throughout the city, using the mobile devices of its inhabitants. Lucius Fox, Bruce Wayne’s technological assistant and business advisor, is the only one responsible for monitoring the multiple screens installed

at Wayne’s company headquarters, which display the phone conversations being made all over Gotham City at that moment. The hero invades the privacy of the citizens with the objective of catching the Joker and thus preventing further terror-

ist activity.

In the case of *The Dark Knight*, the motif of the control room is presented in its most “leviathanic” dimension. The set of screens displaying the private lives of citizens (fig. 3) ties in with the iconographic tradition that shaped the representation of Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. In his detailed analysis of the book’s cover illustration (Ginzburg, 2013), Carlo Ginzburg emphasises how the body of the sovereign-colossus looming over the horizon above the community is made up of anonymous faces of people looking towards the spectator of the illustration. As Ginzburg points out, the gazes of the faces were no minor matter for Hobbes, who proposed an alternative version for the frontispiece of the book where the people would be looking directly towards the sover-

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### **LAS SALAS DE CONTROL DE LOS CASINOS SON UNO DE LOS ESPACIOS ARQUETÍPICOS EN LA REPRESENTACIÓN ICONOGRÁFICA DE LA CIUDAD Y LA EVIDENCIA QUE LA HIPERVISIBILIDAD ES UNA DE LAS CONSECUENCIAS DE LA OMNIPRESENCIA DE DINERO**

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eign-giant, thereby stressing the idea of the cult of the leader. However, the actual version, with the crowd looking towards the spectator, better reveals the essence of Hobbes' theory (Ginzburg: 2013): the surrender of power by the people to the head of state.

Returning to Batman, and more specifically to the motif of the control room, we find that to deal with the terrorism of the Joker/Daesh, the most neoliberal security measures are imposed with new "leviathanic" conceptions of society. The multiple screens with the voices of Gotham City's citizens on each one, which Lucius Fox, acting as sovereign-colossus, uses to guide the hero in the hunt for terrorist, constitute the audiovisual representation of the frontispiece of *Leviathan*; the freedom of the citizenry placed at the service of Gotham's surveillance authority. This "leviathanic" process depicted in the second instalment of Christopher Nolan's saga culminates with the final lie about the heroic role of the district attorney Harvey Dent, and reinforces the idea that the sovereign is the one who must take responsibility, depriving the people of a truth that they would be incapable of accepting. On this point, Slavoj Žižek observes: "*The Dark Knight* is, in effect, a new version of two John Ford western classics, *Fort Apache* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, which show how, to civilise the Wild West, one has to 'print the legend' and ignore the truth.



Imagen 3. El caballero oscuro (*The Dark Knight*, Christopher Nolan, 2008).

They show, in short, how our civilisation has to be grounded in a lie—one has to break the rules in order to defend the system" (Žižek, 2012).

## **FROM VERTICAL SURVEILLANCE TO HORIZONTAL SURVEILLANCE: DECENTRALISATION OF THE CONTROL ROOM**

While the representations analysed so far refer to imaginaries that could be described as "vertical surveillance", i.e., centralised surveillance involving a select few observing and monitoring the behaviour of many subjects, in recent years various authors have identified a change to the conceptualisation of surveillance, shifting towards forms of "social" surveillance (Marwick, 2012), "lateral" surveillance (Andrejevic, 2005), and "horizontal" surveillance or surveillance "between equals" (Gill, 2017). In other words, a form of decentralised surveillance where we all monitor each other and, especially, ourselves. This change is associated with the emergence of social media (Dubrofsky, 2011; Jones, 2016, MacIsaac et al, 2018), as well as applications and games through which users collect data on themselves (number of kilometres jogged, weight, calories consumed, places visited, etc.) in order to better manage their own behaviour (Millington, 2014; Elias y Gill, 2018; Moore and Robinson, 2016). In this way, "while surveillance is

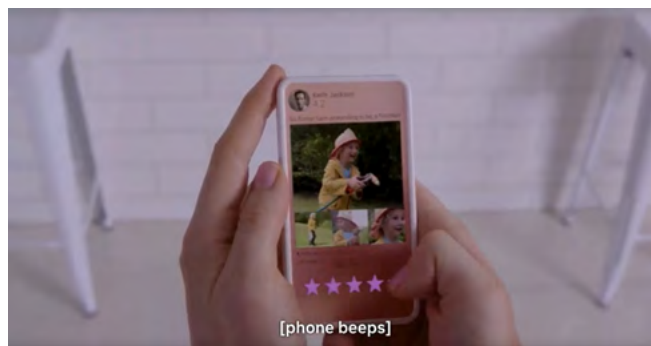
typically undertaken to manage, control, or influence a particular population, social surveillance leads to self-management and direction on the part of social media users" (Marwick, 2012: 381).

In the realm of fiction, *Black Mirror* (Charles Brooker, BBC-Netflix: 2011-), and more specifi-



cally the episode “Nosedive” (#3x01, Joe Wright, Netflix: 2016), explores this new scenario of horizontal surveillance, where the control room is decentralised and individualised: through the mobile phone, which everyone uses to document their own lives and examine and assess the posts of others (figs. 7-8), and through contact lenses that each individual uses to be able to identify others and see their “social rating”. “Nosedive” reveals how lateral surveillance has become a key part of neoliberal governmentality, whereby power is internalised and citizens are expected to self-regulate and become “entrepreneurs of themselves” (Rose, 1998; Pintor, 2018b). These forms of (self-) surveillance are presented as positive and enjoyable, as an activity freely chosen by individuals to pursue happiness and become who they want to be. However, as Byung-Hul Han (2012, 2013) suggests, in reality not only does it constitute a form of subordination to social rules, but it also involves a gruelling form of self-restriction, whereby “the self that is liberated is obliged to live its life tied to the project of its own identity” (Rose, 1998: 258). Thus, in the episode of *Black Mirror*, anyone who is unable to embody the “ideal citizen” is exposed to humiliation.

The documentary *The Cleaners* (Moritz Rieseewieck and Hans Block, 2018) explores another aspect of the imaginary of the control room in the new context of social media. The documentary shows the work of content moderators for platforms like Facebook and Instagram, who have to assess 25,000 images a day and determine wheth-



**Imágenes 4 y 5. *Caída en picado* (#3x01: *Nosedive*, Joe Wright, Netflix: 2016).**

er they meet the guidelines of the platforms in relation to sexual, violent or offensive content, or whether they should be removed. These people sitting behind screens looking at images taken and posted all over the world are employees at outsourced centres located in countries of the South (the documentary presents employees at a work centre located in the Philippines). These employees not only *clean* the content on social media but must also look at images which the companies based in countries in the North believe should not be seen, thereby *protecting* the platform’s users (figs. 4-5).

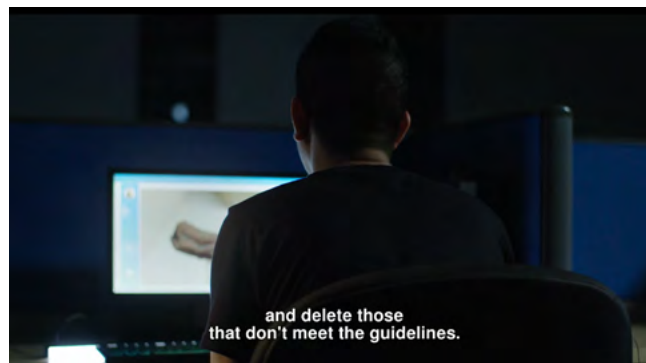
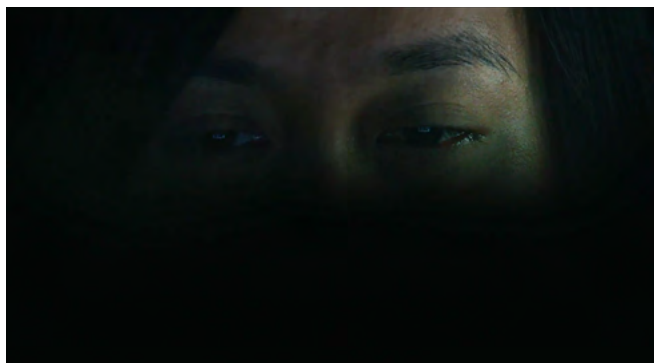
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**CON LA EMERGENCIA DE LAS REDES SOCIALES DIVERSOS AUTORES HAN IDENTIFICADO UN CAMBIO EN LAS FORMAS DE VIGILANCIA, QUE AVANZAN HACIA FORMAS DE VIGILANCIA «HORIZONTAL» O «ENTRE IGUALES», ES DECIR, UNA VIGILANCIA DESCENTRALIZADA EN LA QUE TODOS NOS VIGILAMOS LOS UNOS A LOS OTROS Y, EN ESPECIAL, A NOSOTROS MISMOS**

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## **CONCLUSIONS**

Through an exploration of the use of the visual motif of the control room in contemporary film and television fiction, we have shown how the popularisation of the control room reflects both a



Imágenes 6 y 7. *The Cleaners* (Moritz Rieseewieck y Hans Block, 2018).

process of transfer of scientific and technological advances into contemporary fiction narratives, as a transformation to the logic of perception: from a unitary vision associated with surveillance in the twentieth century towards a diversified, multifaceted vision of surveillance in the twenty-first. We can thus see how, as the philosopher Byung Chul-Han (2012, 2013, 2014: 79; 2014b: 13) has suggested, citing Foucault (2012, 1976) and Deleuze (1990), the society of control and biopolitics has been succeeded by the psychopolitics of transparency, shaped by a horizontal form of constant surveillance, which has moved the monitoring out of the control room and onto the screens of mobile phones and tablets.

Continuing with this idea of the control room as an intersection between the remnants of the scientific-technological imaginary and the contemporary mutation of perceptive logic, and seeking what Carlo Ginzburg (2013) has called the conjuncture, the historical background inscribed in each image, it seems clear that there is no obvious precursor to the image of the control room prior to the emergence of film technology, nor is there any evidence of its pseudomorphosis (Panofsky, 1964: 24-27; Panofsky, Klibansky, Saxl, 1964: 309) through the post-panoptic online surveillance of contemporary societies. In other words, although we can find in Fritz Lang's films, for example, precursors representative of the CCTV (Closed-Circuit Television) system invented by Siemens during the Second World War that served as the origin of the

control room, there are no such precursors in the world of painting. The idea that the cinema invented the control room and established its forms is as true as the fact that filmmakers have integrated the control room within and outside genres where it acquired its full meaning, like military films or casino heist movies. And this elasticity of the motif is what allows filmmakers like David Lynch to establish unexpected visual alliances between the control room, the editing room and theatre.

A second line of conclusions beyond the specific configuration of the motif points to the concept of the public sphere itself: both in the case of representations linked more to vertical surveillance and in the case of horizontal multi-surveillance, the motif of the control room lies at the very heart of the definition of the political sphere, as a relational construction of differences and separations between individuals (Arendt, 1950). Cinema's sensitivity to the political sphere makes the motif both a barometer and a site where technology is made visible, in the *Foucauldian* sense. The answer to the question "who is watching?", which in the classical formulations of the motif was always obvious, being one or more security officers, is now becoming much less clear, as the reality is that many of these images, as suggested in a series like *Person of Interest* (CBS: 2011-2016) created por Jonathan Nolan and J. J. Abrams, are only intended to be viewed by algorithms, not by the human eye. The automatic creation of images that nobody will ever see represents a breakdown of the anthropological logic

behind the very existence of images, whether pictorial or cinematic, constituting the great dilemma that the motif of the control room points to in the contemporary context.

A third set of conclusion takes us from the political to the anthropological sphere, as the positive twist given to surveillance with the rise of reality shows has been deployed through the intersection between biometrics, networks, and big data. The negativised totalitarian imaginary in productions like *Black Mirror* appears with a friendly face, in a logic of autonomous integration of the control room. In its natural evolution, the control room has moved into the pockets of most of the population, contained in the tiny screen of the mobile phone.

In this article we have explored how, on the one hand, the centrality of the control room motif in contemporary fiction has gone far beyond its use in war films that associate it with state power, to emerge as a conspiratorial idea of evil or to represent horizontal surveillance. On the other hand, the motif constitutes a privileged site for analysis of the essential condition under which images—and their relationship with power, sovereignty and contemporary regimes of visibility—appear in an iconographic studies approach. ■

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### EL MOTIVO CONSTITUYE UN ESPACIO DE ANÁLISIS PRIVILEGIADO PARA LA CONDICIÓN ESENCIAL BAJO LA QUE LAS IMÁGENES —SU RELACIÓN CON EL PODER, LA SOBERANÍA Y LOS RÉGIMENES DE VISUALIDAD CONTEMPORÁNEOS— APARECEN BAJO EL ENFOQUE DE LOS ESTUDIOS ICONOGRÁFICOS

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## **LA PANTALLA QUE TODO LO VE: EL MOTIVO VISUAL DE LA SALA DE CONTROL EN LA FICCIÓN CONTEMPORÁNEA**

### **Resumen**

El motivo visual de la sala de vigilancia y control constituye una invención ligada al propio dispositivo cinematográfico. A través de una exploración de las diferentes configuraciones del motivo que se despliegan tanto en el cine como en la ficción televisiva contemporánea, el presente artículo explora la centralidad de este motivo en cualquier tentativa de definición de la imagen contemporánea. Del gabinete de control hasta el desarrollo de una vigilancia horizontal propia de las sociedades post-foucaultianas, la sala de control ha constituido uno de los núcleos centrales del cine bélico, de las visiones críticas con el poder y de las películas de robos a casinos o bancos. El motivo de la sala de control ha sido, asimismo, reinventado por cineastas como David Lynch y sigue constituyendo el vector fundamental en el que se dirime la naturaleza de todas aquellas imágenes no necesariamente captadas por el ojo humano, lo que Harun Farocki denominó imágenes operativas o *phantom shots*.

### **Palabras clave**

Motivo visual; iconografía; sala de control; vigilancia; esfera pública; imágenes operacionales.

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## **THE SCREEN THAT SEES EVERYTHING: THE VISUAL MOTIF OF THE CONTROL ROOM IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION**

### **Abstract**

The visual motif of the security control room is an invention associated with filmmaking technology itself. Through an exploration of the different configurations of the motif in contemporary film and television fiction, this article explores the centrality of this motif in any attempt to define the contemporary image. From the master control panel to the development of the horizontal surveillance that characterises post-Foucauldian societies, the control room constitutes one of the key elements in war films, critiques of power, and bank robbery or casino heist movies. The motif has also been reinvented by filmmakers like David Lynch and continues to be a fundamental vector bearing the nature of all images not necessarily viewed by the human eye, referred to by Harun Farocki as operational images or *phantom shots*.

### **Key words**

Visual motif; Iconography; Control Room; Surveillance; Public Sphere; Operational Images.

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