

Beyond the Frame of Our Lives: *All Light, Everywhere*, Surveillance, and the Illusion of Objectivity

Andrew E. Lawrence
Tufts University

May 5th, 2024

Addendum:

This essay was published in The Lantern No. 2 Spring 2024 issue. The Lantern is a student-led organization at Tufts University exploring the intersections of science, technology, and society.

The magazine can be found on our website, <https://tuftslantern.org>.

Introduction

All Light, Everywhere is a 2021 documentary that explores the objectivity of reality. The film primarily follows the evolution of the camera as an instrument of surveillance by interviewing the organizations and communities that develop and interact with surveillance technologies. In this documentary analysis, I examine how the technologies presented—namely police body cameras and monitoring software—define and distort realities, then argue against their widespread application.

“Every image has a frame”

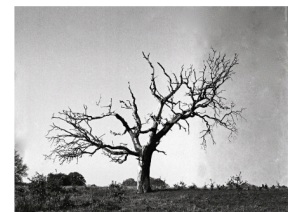
To many, a photograph represents a fact—what you see in the image is, undeniably, what was in front of the camera when the photo was taken. However, this is not always the case. Rather, the image is both a product of the tool used to capture it and the frame of reference developed by the observer. In *All Light, Everywhere* this equation is best explained through the experiments conducted by the 19th-century French scientist and photographer, Étienne-Jules Marey. Marey attempted to transform natural motions in our world into

a series of photographs and then data points. However, the “natural” basis of his experiments never existed where the photos were shot; he manufactured the studio conditions, floor, and specific movements (Anthony). Consequently, Marey’s actions demonstrate that the author of each image plays an important role in determining the outcome of the image. To further highlight this, I look towards British photographer Ben Smart who captured the same tree from similar perspectives with three different types of film (Smart). Each image posits a certain

objectivity—the tree exists at that location and the conditions surrounding it at that time did occur. Yet, changes to the composition of the photo, like the position of the camera or the film used, dramatically alter how one views the tree and its surroundings. Is the



Bronica ETRS, Fuji Superia 400



Bronica ETRS, Lomography Black and White film 100 ISO



Pentax ME Super, Kodak Ektarcolor 100

black-and-white photo not spookier than the others? These alterations transform its casual objectivity. Through Marey and Smart's series of images, we can see that there is no true objectivity in observation, rather what we see is a reflection of the choices made leading up to the act of observing.

"More than what the officer can see"

Like the images above, the footage taken from a body-worn camera (BWC) is seemingly objective: it records police-civilian interactions that are automatically uploaded to a tamper-evident secure database. Yet, designed and implemented within these cameras are a series of practices that reproduce bias and stray far from objectivity. Although BWCs differ in functionality between models, Axon Enterprises, formerly TASER International, controlled roughly 70% of the market in 2021 (Goldsmith). By zooming in on Axon as the dominant force in the industry, we can analyze how the majority of Americans interact with BWCs. In *All Light, Everywhere*, director Theo Anthony interviews Steve Tuttle, the Principal and Former VP of Strategic Communications at Axon, about their BWC. In the film, Tuttle presents the design choices and policies that went into developing the camera. After introducing the BWC, Tuttle immediately presents one of its most problematic aspects: the cameras are deliberately engineered so that they only capture the officer's tailored point of view (Anthony). Tuttle defends this choice by highlighting how in "court cases, the officer's view is key" and so you don't want to "jade the jury" by giving them

"more than what the officer can see" (Anthony). Initially, this seems to make sense. Yet, after reflection, the underlying implication of this statement becomes clear: Axon controls what the jury sees. With its technology, Axon defines our reality. Thus, the power of interpretation is removed from our justice system and placed into the care of a private corporation. What remains is still plagued with misrepresentation. While Tuttle ensures the camera's portrayal accurately parallels what the human eye could have seen, among other issues, the corporation's BWCs have been shown to distort movement, making actions seem more erratic and intense (Anthony). This intervention ultimately benefits the officer wearing the camera as it suggests those that they were interacting with can be perceived as erratic. Consequently, a seemingly objective video becomes the culmination of alterations to the actual event. Axon's tagline for their Axon Body is "See truth in the moment"—but what truth exists in constructed images?

"God's eye view"

Even if certain design choices did not skew an officer's body-worn camera to favor the wearer, their use, and that of surveillance technology in general, is ultimately unethical. Looking beyond BWCs and toward mass surveillance systems can highlight this. In *All Light, Everywhere*, the documentary introduces Ross McNutt, CEO & Founder of Persistent Surveillance Systems (PSS). PSS is a private security firm that specializes in constant mass surveillance via a plane equipped with 12 cameras that take a photo every second of

every day of entire cities (Anthony). This “God’s eye view,” as coined by McNutt, enables the organization contracting PSS to monitor every aspect of the public lives of the civilians beneath the plane (Anthony). In the case presented during the documentary, the Baltimore Police Department (BPD) used the plane to gather footage of the city without the knowledge or consent of the Baltimore Mayor or any civilians. While this obviously represents a serious violation of privacy, even if the BPD informed citizens, the use of the plane would still be unethical. *All Light, Everywhere* has shown us that any form of observation contains some bias and some frame that distorts the reality presented to us. This axiom prevails no matter the system and context of observation. In simple contexts—such as snapping a photo of our friend or our dinner—it matters little. However, when the prosecution of entire populations hinges on it, the consequences are incredibly problematic. Persistent

Surveillance Systems imposed limitations of observation onto their tools. Thus, the BPD cannot claim that their footage is objective evidence. No matter the organization, however, surveillance systems ultimately reproduce the biases and frames of observation of their creators and thus are not reliable sources of information. Consequently, their continued use is unethical.

Conclusion

From quantum physics to the tree at our local park, the objectivity of what we observe through tools of our creation has always been in question. Yet, when the goals of observation go beyond simple exploration of our reality, the limitations of objectivity are severely damaging. Extinguishing the power of a nuanced perspective, the mass surveillance of cities and civilians mistakes objectivity as a simple truth that guarantees justice.

Bibliography

- Anthony, Theo, director. *All Light, Everywhere*. Sandbox Films (II), 2021.
<https://www.kanopy.com/en/tufts/video/12333392>.
- Goldsmith, Eloise. "Profiting from Police Reform: Can the Feds Break up Axon's Body Camera Monopoly?" *WhoWhatWhy*, 26 Aug. 2021,
whowhatwhy.org/justice/criminal-justice/profitting-on-police-reform-can-the-feds-break-up-axons-body-camera-monopoly/. Accessed November 22, 2023
- Smart, Ben. "Lomography - the Same Three: Shooting the Same Scene with Different Cameras." *The Same Three: Shooting the Same Scene with Different Cameras*, Lomography, 10 May 2012,
www.lomography.com/magazine/175997-the-same-three-shooting-the-same-scene-with-different-cameras. Accessed November 22, 2023.
- Stanley, Jay, and Peter Bibring. "Should Officers Be Permitted to View Body Camera Footage Before Writing Their Reports?" *American Civil Liberties Union*, 13 Jan. 2015,
www.aclu.org/news/national-security/should-officers-be-permitted-view-body-camera-footage-writing-their-reports. Accessed November 22, 2023.