

Eva Schwarz

# **VISUAL PARANOIA**

*in Rear Window, Blow-Up and The Truman Show*

*ibidem*-Verlag  
Stuttgart

## **Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek**

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

## **Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Lektorat: Michael Gromm

Coverfoto: gagel

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Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem, säurefreiem Papier  
Printed on acid-free paper

ISBN-13: 978-3-89821-812-2

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Stuttgart 2011

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Printed in Germany

Gratefully dedicated to those  
who graciously helped and supported me  
in manifold ways



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## PREFACE

With the present study, Eva Schwarz offers an exciting investigation of what has advanced in recent decades to an almost paradigmatic genre: films picturing and problematizing the growing society of surveillance. Her readings of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966) and Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998) are highly entertaining and accessible and, at the same time, a theoretically profound analysis of three milestones in cinematic history. This makes her book interesting for cineastes, academic audiences and paranoia aficionados, alike.

Starting with an in-depth discussion of recent cultural theories of postmodernism, she develops her concept of "visual paranoia". Paranoia, here understood in a non-clinical way, seems to be born out of an overall crisis of visual culture in postmodern society. The dominant regimen of images we encounter today in everyday life has far-reaching consequences for our general perception of reality: with the proliferation and ambiguity of images and signs in today's mass medial culture and a growing unreliability of images and their surfaces, scepticism, uncertainty and confusion have taken over.

In her first chapter, Schwarz outlines the generic development of the paranoia film by focussing her observations on the concept of the gaze and masterfully embedding them into a detailed interpretation of the three selected films. Taking her cue from the general theoretical framework of cultural paranoia, she explores three distinct ways of seeing, which exceed and outgrow mere cinematographic curiosity: scopophilic (Hitchcock), common photographic (Antonioni) and scopophobic paranoia (Weir).

In the chapter on *Rear Window*, Eva Schwarz discusses frames of self-reference and self-reflexivity and diagnoses movements within the film, which bear witness to an existential scepticism towards the act of seeing itself. The gaze as a substitute for (physical) movement seems to open up a space for a specific desire for knowledge, for a truth that is assumed to be lying behind the surface of phenomena. The protagonist's desire to accumulate information via visual perception entices him to suspect murder behind the scenes he observes and, finally, to doubt the reliability of the visible itself. Thus, Eva Schwarz argues, *Rear Window* seems to anticipate the postmodern crisis of the society of the spectacle.

In Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, visual scepticism seems to grow into a no-longer tangible complexity, openness and indefiniteness of all phenomena. According to what Schwarz calls "photographic paranoia", boundaries between reality and imagination in *Blow-Up* progressively blur in such a way that perception (the visible), representation (the image) and interpretation (assumption of murder) continuously seem to fold into one another. Here,

paradoxically, the photograph serves as the medium that lends itself easily to an authentic mapping of reality and, at the same time, exposes the nature of powerful submission inherent in photography (Sontag).

Following in the same vein as *Rear Window*, *Blow-Up* tells the story of a crime, which is investigated thoroughly by the protagonist through the use of photographic methods. In this context, Eva Schwarz sketches another essential paradox characterising visual culture: with the magnification of the pictures, the signs relevant to the crime investigation become less visible and tenable. Visibility becomes a trap; the darkroom turns into a theatre where visual memory is relentlessly deconstructed. Schwarz's study elaborates in a detailed and knowledgeable way the profound transformation of images and their significance in this film: images become the only visual evidence of a murder, which - given the deep disbelief in visual culture - is doomed to remain ultimately unverifiable. The protagonist as a "postmodern voyeur" (Denzin) turns into a cipher, symbolizing the crisis of visual representation; a sign within a text narrating the mystery of the image.

The final chapter of Schwarz's book focuses on previous observations and enlarges upon the concept of "scopophobic paranoia", as depicted in *The Truman Show*. Here, the emphasis is less on the unreliability of images and texts, but rather on the production of meaning controlled and determined by an omnipresent media culture in postmodern society: hyper-realities and panopticism (Foucault), the disorientation felt by the protagonist (who ultimately personifies the percipient human subject in the media age) and hence his perambulations in an ambiguous parallel reality characterized by conspiracy and confusion. "Scopophobic paranoia" as a visual questioning of all that which is visible, eventually, gives rise to an unmasking of the simulacrum.

Eva Schwarz's study is impressing in its scope and depth of argumentation. It makes us aware of the panoptic regimen deeply inscribed in the postmodern society of the spectacle; a culture marked by the ubiquity of mass media and the visual. The author's thorough analysis raises fundamental questions about the control and power exerted by images and the regimen of the visual; questions that in the end leave the readers interrogating their own perception of reality.

*Dr. Sabine Fries*

Paraphrased and translated from German by Leyla Ercan

# INTRODUCTION

“Allowing us to know the way we see and have seen ourselves has been one of the greatest contributions of films to culture [...] one of the greatest achievements of film is its ability to open itself to cultural influences so directly.”

Leo Braudy, *The World in A Frame*, 180

Fredric Jameson describes films as cultural texts and socially symbolic acts that reflect the ‘political unconscious’ of a society. In this sense film expresses and influences the social and cultural trends of a respective period.<sup>1</sup>

In postmodern times this trend finds expression in a variety of paranoia films. Although films with paranoid plots already existed before, paranoia in film has gained increased proliferation throughout the last decades. The popularity of contemporary paranoia films reflects the emergence of ‘cultural paranoia’ as a condition of postmodern times.

Rooted in the ‘paranoid style’ of American politics and inspired by several events in the recent history of the United States, paranoia flourished and with it the number of conspiracy theories. Following the traumatic event of the Kennedy assassination in the 1960s, the rhetoric of conspiracy has been increasingly incorporated into common usage. Paranoia has become a widespread phenomenon that circulates through high and popular contemporary culture.

The culture of paranoia coincides with a culture that is dominated by the visual on the one hand and the ‘postmodern condition’, which is characterized by a loss of the real, on the other. Thus, paranoia not only expresses a general suspicion towards both authority and alleged truths, but also towards visual appearances. From this field of tension between seeing as believing and general scepticism towards the genuine nature of visual signs emerges visual paranoia. It reflects the assumption that appearances cannot be trusted. With a scrutinizing gaze, visual paranoia tries to discover the truth beyond the surface of reality.

In this study, I intend to investigate this kind of visual paranoia as it is represented in three relatively contemporary films: Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear*

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Kellner suggests a relationship between film and society in which “films take the raw material of social history and of social discourses and process them into products which are themselves historical events and social forces” as quoted in Ray Pratt, *Projecting Paranoia. Conspiratorial Visions in American Film* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 2001), 44

*Window* (1954), Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966) and a more recent film by Peter Weir, *The Truman Show* (1998).

I begin the first chapter of my book with a short survey of paranoia in film and the paranoia film. I will then demonstrate the significance of paranoia in postmodern culture by sketching the development from politically inspired paranoia towards cultural paranoia as all-pervasive phenomenon that permeates contemporary life. The chapter concludes with a description of how the strong implication of visuality in a postmodern context brings forth visual paranoia.

In the following three chapters I investigate different kinds of visual paranoia with reference to the three selected films. A discussion will follow the chronological order of the films' release.

In the chapter on *Rear Window*, visual paranoia appears in a scopophilic form. As the protagonist gathers visual evidence in the course of his voyeuristic observation of the neighbourhood he detects the hidden truth of a murder.

In the following chapter on *Blow-Up*, visual paranoia emerges as photographic paranoia, which also lures the protagonist into the investigation of a murder mystery. Since his photographic images turn out to be unreliable proof, however, the crime remains unsolved.

In the final chapter dealing with *The Truman Show*, visual paranoia finally takes the form of scopophobic paranoia. The protagonist gradually discovers that his entire existence has been manipulated. He finally manages to break the spell of the fake world he has been living in and escape.

Each chapter will be rounded off by a selection of stills from the films representatively reflecting the paranoid plot. With the assistance of the commenting captions the images aim at concatenating the bits and pieces and thus tracking the threads of the narratives of the respective film.

My conclusion contains a summary of the results of my analysis and a short demonstration of the development that can be traced through the chronology of the films' release.