Film Review

Ondi Timoner (2009) *We Live in Public*.

Interloper Films. 90 min. \$22.49 (US) ASIN: B00337U904

Nathan Jurgenson

University of Maryland, USA. nathanjurgenson@gmail.com

We find ourselves in a bunker below New York City literally on the eve of the 21st century. Here, individuals are living their lives completely exposed; every move is documented by dozens of cameras. The toilets are out in the open and the showers are transparent. Living always in full view, individuals retire to their sleeping pods, equipped with both a television screen and a video camera which allows all the pods to be connected together. This makes the individual at once voyeur and exhibitionist: both in possession of and subject to the gaze of everyone else. This part art and part social experiment is one of the escapades created by Josh Harris that is documented by Ondi Timoner (who also produced the award-winning *DiG!*) in her documentary *We Live in Public*.

While much of the film is shot prior to the rise of social network sites like MySpace and Facebook, it is the explosive popularity of these sites that provide context for this film and makes it important in dealing with identity, sociality, privacy, publicity, surveillance, capitalism and much else in the age of online social networking. In fact, Timoner claims that she could not have made the movie before Facebook came along.¹

However, before going into these broader theoretical implications, we should note that this is primarily a film that tells the story of one person: Josh Harris. The bunker described above is just one of his surveillance-based exploits. Josh Harris arrived in New York City in the 1980s as a “common researcher” and would later become a dot-com millionaire. He created a company called Jupiter Communications that provided web-statistics and another that dealt with web-chat, which he sold to Prodigy. Harris’ wealth shot up to \$80 million when Jupiter went public.

An eccentric personality with cash to burn, Harris proceeds to throw infamous parties filled with New York City scenesters, supermodels, and computer nerds. And it is at one of these events where Timoner, our filmmaker, meets him. He has her film him at his new project, an internet-television network called Pseudo. Harris goes on to tell *60 Minutes* that he intends to take network television down. From there he builds the bunker described above, a project he calls *Quiet: We Live in Public*. The total-surveillance free-for-all was an attempt to know what the world might be like when the Internet “took over”; when we supposedly are all connected to the web, our every movement and thought monitored. Individuals were drawn to the bunker with the promise of unlimited free food and drink. There were performances and even a shooting range. The only price of admission was permission to be fully exposed and documented. As Harris states, “Everything is free, except the video we capture of you. That we own.” The experiment grew increasingly out of control, documented in the film’s most powerful scene, and was shut down by the police on January 1st, 2000.

¹ <http://www.villagevoice.com/2009-03-25/film/nd-nf-ondi-timoner-is-inside-josh-harris-s-web/>

Harris teams up with a girlfriend to move on to the next project. This involves living together in an apartment jam-packed with cameras and microphones, even in the refrigerator and toilet. Motion-detection-equipped, the cameras follow the couple's every move – all of which broadcasts real time to the web via weliveinpublic.com. They attract considerable media attention and a large web-audience who interact with them and each other via a live text-chat interface built into the site. However, much like the Quiet bunker, this experiment in surveillance also implodes. Harris loses his girlfriend and, in the meantime, the dot-com bubble bursts. Pseudo, his internet-television company, goes bankrupt along with thousands of other internet companies. Harris has lost his fortune. Without money or a relationship, Harris suffers a mini-breakdown, all while still “living in public,” always filmed and broadcasted in his surveillance-equipped home. Harris runs off to a secluded apple farm in an attempt to purge himself of all the media he has ingested, reminding the viewer of our hyper-consumption of images in this media-saturated age.

Here, Harris' childhood becomes important to understand these unusual events. Harris grew up in a large family with little privacy. With a mother increasingly distant, Harris came to be raised by television. States Harris, “The most important friend to me growing up was in fact television.” His brother says that all Harris did was watch TV. Harris saw television, especially the show *Gilligan's Island*, as his family. Tellingly, the movie begins with a video-tape he sends to his mother on her deathbed instead of visiting her. The message does not even arrive before she passes away.

Timoner concludes the movie by conceptually linking Harris' escapades with the subsequent rise of social network sites. Like those living in the Quiet bunker, so many of us are putting ourselves on display online. Part mass exhibitionism and part mass voyeurism, people are uploading billions of photos and videos. They are using Twitter to document various thoughts and activities. Some are documenting themselves in more unique ways, such as tracing where they are geographically by “checking in” on Foursquare, which places their exact location on a map for their “friends” to see. The paradigmatic example today is Facebook: 500 million people are uploading billions of status messages, photos, chats and emails, all in order to live in public in ways most could never have predicted. Except for, of course, Josh Harris.

Timoner informs the viewer that everything we do on sites like Facebook is tracked and documented in order to serve us targeted advertisements. While Timoner acknowledges that using these sites can be fun, she states that what we do is recorded and is no longer ours to make private again. Remember, as Harris states, “the video, that we keep.”

What *We Live in Public* gets absolutely right is that, indeed, we increasingly are living in public. If this film is about one thing, it is about the future of privacy and publicity. How much should be shared and how much should be kept private given this new reality? *We Live in Public* provides a cautionary take on publicity by comparing Facebook and the rest of social media to Harris' sometimes creepy and sometimes fascistic surveillance-based experiments. Ultimately, this film treats publicity with great scepticism.

Part of why living in public is treated with such scepticism is that Harris comes to realize very intimately the power of being watched; that is, the power of the gaze. One “surveillance artist” in the film makes the point that it is hard to get people to conform without a camera, but if you promise to record, you can more easily manipulate people into doing what you please. Harris exploits this idea in the Quiet bunker by controlling others, and comes to be exploited himself by this power when he lives in the home rigged with cameras. It is there that he comes to learn that having so many eyes judging his every action allows the power of the gaze to burrow deep down into his conscious, even into his fantasies, similar to what Foucault calls “capillary power” when talking about sexuality.

Beyond the abstract power of the gaze in this Foucauldian sense, the film also highlights the more concrete problematic of just who possesses the gaze. Remember that Harris said the Quiet bunker would be free, fun, but he owned all the video. The Quiet bunker is described at one point in the movie as being like a beehive filled with worker bees. Mass amounts of potentially valuable video footage were being

drawn from the individual worker-bee participants by the cameras. Harris saw the individuals as producing a valuable product, while those participating (or “working”) thought of themselves as simply having fun on someone else’s dime.

There is clear parallel between the bunker and some aspects of the internet. Facebook, for example, provides an environment that is fun and free to use. Meanwhile, depending on how much you use the service, the site is poised to record nearly anything you do; your ‘likes’, photos, connections, the events to which you plan on going, and now, potentially, even your geographic location (with Facebook Places). In the eyes of Facebook, we are all worker bees busily producing value for the site (they use this information to target advertisements). Facebook may seem free to use, but we pay by losing control of our intimate information. (This also picks up on the idea that play and labour, work and leisure, have become increasingly blurred into what some have called “playbor” or “weisure.”)

Josh Harris himself is also sceptical about humans increasingly living in public. He states that we will enjoy it at first, but as time goes by we will find ourselves constrained in virtual boxes. With our every action counted, we will eventually become servants to the game of surveillance. Humans will become like lions: once king of the jungle, they have now found themselves confined, controlled, and on display in zoos. “I suspect we’re on the same track”, Harris concludes. His point is that putting ourselves on display will eventually come to enslave us.

The movie spends less time looking at why people may *want to* live in public. Neither Harris’ experiments nor social media force people to be exposed. Instead of 1984-style intrusions into privacy, we see today a sort of mass exhibitionism. Why? One clue comes from someone constructing the Quiet bunker who says, “Everybody will feel like celebrities here.” However, it seems that living in public on, say, Facebook is not about being a celebrity as much as it is about joining the ranks of one’s peers. As the *Village Voice* points out in its review of this film, the movie is also about being terrified of being alone, invisible and without a voice. People live publicly in order to exist, to be real, to be seen by peers. If almost all of your peers are on Facebook – and this is the case for many – then it could be very costly to not live in public. One might miss out on social events, inside jokes, networking possibilities for work, and much else.

Ultimately, living in public under the eye of companies, governments as well as peers can be both constraining and empowering. While this movie quite brilliantly allows us to ask in what ways one is freer or more constrained when being watched, it simultaneously paints a far-too grim picture of living in public. Timoner makes the same mistake that Harris does: the latter often makes conclusions about all people based on his own biases, and the former replicates this mistake by extrapolating about living in public in general from the specific outcomes of Harris’ experiences.

Interestingly, this mistake of concluding about social media in general based on a specific individual is replicated in perhaps the only other film about social networking: *The Social Network* (2010). This box-office smash is a fictional description of the contradiction that the most popular social network site (Facebook) was created by a socially-awkward individual (Mark Zuckerberg). This film also paints a negative picture of social media because its main character is unpleasant.

Yes, Harris substituted connecting intimately with others in his quest for publicity, and Zuckerberg had few friends of his own, but this is no reason to repeat the familiar social-media scare-tactic that we are trading in real relationships for false Facebook “friends.” In fact, some research has shown, quite to the contrary, that using social media tools to live in public can actually bolster off-line social connections.

Beyond the questions about whether Facebook-style publicity is a good or bad thing, *We Live in Public* also gives us an opportunity to think about how surveillance operates on social network sites. Harris keys in on the main difference between Big Brother-style surveillance and much of what takes place on Facebook. No longer is the gaze in the complete possession of the few in order to watch the many; instead now, increasingly, technology is allowing the many to watch the many. While Bentham discussed

panoptic surveillance of the many (prisoners) by the few (guards in the tower), the “pods” in which Quiet residents slept in could tap into and be tapped into by anyone else via cameras and televisions. There, the many watched the many; a model of social observation Jurgenson and Ritzer call the “omnipticon,” a democratization of the gaze that has come into reality with the rise of social network sites. In the omnipticon, individuals are not just passive consumers, but also producers of both the content and the gaze. That is, we have become “prosumers” on social network sites, just as was portrayed by those pods in the Quiet bunker. The social web is founded on prosumption, where the consumers of content also produce this content. The model of consumer society surveillance is what Mathiesen calls the “synopticon,” the many watching the few, exemplified by the image of people blankly staring at and consuming television images. Alternatively, omnioptic surveillance, as portrayed in this film and that occurs on social network sites, describes surveillance beyond the age of consumption and into the realm of prosumption; an age where the many watch the many.

Harris seems to be on the edge of coming to this realization while living in his camera-packed house when he states that Big Brother is not a person or a government, but the “collective conscious.” Throughout the movie he waffles back and forth between the gaze being enacted by the few or the many, which makes sense because that is the world we are increasingly living in. On Facebook, for example, we are subject to both the gaze of the many – our peers eying our profiles – as well as the few, i.e. the Facebook company extracting data from our every action.

We Live in Public makes these important conceptual connections regarding publicity in our highly networked age, but there are also some conceptualizations that could be improved. For instance, the film creates too strong a dualism of the physical and digital worlds. This bias in seeing these as separate domains is, in part, what fuels some of the negativity applied to digitality. The web is described as “taking over” and that “virtual” connectedness is coming to replace the more real and traditional sense of connection. This is a fear that goes back to the beginning of thought about the internet.

However, the world of atoms and the world of bits have increasingly come to be meshed together, creating what might be called an *augmented reality*. Typically, the term “augmented reality” is reserved for new technologies that overlay digital information onto a view of the physical world using an electronic screen of some sort (for instance, on a smart phone). Instead, we can also think of reality in general as becoming increasingly augmented. In this way, the term can refer to any meshing of digitality and materiality. Take, for example, social network profiles. In the early days of the web people often discussed going online as anyone you wanted to be, detached from one’s physicality. However, today, digital profiles are augmented by materiality as those we connect with on Facebook are often those we see offline as well. The digital profile is more anchored in the reality of the physical world (and *vice versa*); especially with the recent rise of new location-based services that allow users to share their precise geographical location with others (this has come to be known as geo-tagging). Thus, the lesson is not that the digital world will come to “take over,” but *that digital and material realities dialectically co-construct each other*. No longer can we think of a “real” world made of atoms opposed to a “virtual” world of bits. Instead, we need to think with a paradigm that centres on the implosion of the worlds of bits and atoms into the augmented reality that has seemingly become ascendant. While the Quiet bunker was all about removing people into a separate sphere of surveillance, social media today is enmeshed with everyday life. Living in public does not mean abandoning the “real” physical world; rather it refers to its augmentation. Perhaps the best film representation of this point is David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* (1983), which describes a merging of the physical and media into a “new flesh” that conceptually resembles the increasingly blurred realities of the physical world with social media.

Another conceptualization made in the film that might be improved is Harris’ tendency towards thinking that the web is increasingly about complete exposure. He claims that as time goes by we are going to increasingly have our lives exposed, “and we’re gonna want that to happen.” This grand narrative of increasing exposure, what has been called “pure transparency” by Foucault or “obscenity” by Baudrillard, misses the idea that digital self-presentation is less about pure exposure as it is about an *interplay* of

revealing and concealing – what Baudrillard called “seduction.” Recent research has shown that those most involved with living in public online are also those most involved with the privacy settings of any particular site. What Harris misses is the point that those engaged with our new project of living in public will be engaged with both revealing and concealing, privacy and publicity. Given that others are watching us – our peers, authority figures, and so on – we want to create a successful self-presentation. Sometimes that involves revealing, and sometimes that involves concealing. Privacy and publicity should not be thought to be on some continuum, one on which Harris thinks we are moving increasingly in one direction; rather instead, privacy and publicity always imply each other. In fact, they can both be enacted simultaneously, for example in how danah boyd describes “social stenography,” where users post messages online that have simultaneously different meanings for the different audiences that consume them. This is an act that can be both private and public at the same time, which is ultimately true of all messages, on or offline.

In any case, the film provides fantastic opportunities to think through the issues surrounding an emerging reality, this new project of self-display, and the possibilities it creates as well as the problems it entails. The movie is wonderfully shot, brilliantly edited, visually striking, and provides an entertaining story about an engaging individual. Beyond that, it deals explicitly with issues surrounding the rise of new media, and, as such, should be required viewing for those working in this area.