Article

Seeing Police: Cinematic Training and the Scripting of Police Vision

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Abstract

While contemporary ethnographies on policing describe the use of televisual and cinematic images as ancillary police training materials (Manning 2003; Moskos 2008), few studies have examined how these visual texts shape the practice of patrol work. One of my primary aims as an ethnographer is to find different ways of understanding everyday policing by bringing the materials that construct officers' visual worlds under ethnographic analysis. These materials include cinematic images used in police academies to teach police recruits how to *see* like police officers. Attending to cinema's mobility in training facilities where trainees learn how to *screen* situations, bodies, and encounters in the field can offer new insights into understanding police vision. I proceed with the knowledge that Antoine Fuqua's 2001 film *Training Day* has been screened in San Diego's police academy. While *Training Day* reproduces the kinds of visual practices that are part and parcel of policing praxis, I argue that an *ethnographic* reading of the film offers critical insight into what happens when an idealized police vision "meets the ground" in practice. I explore the productive tension between cinematic models like *Training Day* and everyday patrol work through an analysis of the "precarious cinema" of policing, a concept I use to understand how police officers' engagements with *Training Day* reflect and reveal a mode of police vision that is often blind to the experiences of the policed, and the performance of ethnography as a visual profiling practice that offers new conceptual frames for approaching how these blinds spots manifest in the visual worlds of patrol officers. In a time when police violence and police brutality are invariably subject to the camera's scrutiny and a scrutinizing public, the political stakes for an increasingly visible police vision include contending with, accounting for, and being *answerable* to its own visibility.

Introduction

"*This is the heart of it, right here.*" Coolly inflected, the detective's metaphor is a disaffected indictment performed for the trainee, a junior officer warily observing the street activity through the car's windows from the passenger seat. This dark manifesto lingers in the chassis of the unmarked police vehicle as it rolls down the street, trailing sun-scorched asphalt in its wake. It is "here"—flanked by two rows of cracked sidewalk pavement and iron-barred apartment windows—that the "heart" manifests: hooded figures and hooded eyes gaze into the car's windshield and open windows. Despite efforts to comport himself in the senior officer's presence, the rookie's nervous blinking betrays his uncertainty and fear. Tension builds as the officers and watchful neighborhood members exchange guarded looks that border on the unpredictable, but this dramatic reading belies the practiced social choreographies of both groups. For the rookie, this ride-along is unlike anything he has seen before. For the senior officer and the residents under his "watch," this ride is darkly familiar. What unfolds "here" is not only cinematic; it is ethnographic.

— Scene 1

“This is the heart of it, right here.” One sunbaked arm rests against the driver’s side door of the police vehicle as the officer lifts his index finger. A micro-gesture manifests the object of his gaze. This hand meets this “heart:” a park peppered with sun-scorched figures rifling through personal belongings, passing tobacco rolling papers, and sidled against public trash receptacles, slumbering. Keen, discerning, the officer flits his gaze out of the window and tracks it across these individuals—identified as “vagrants” by the officer—seeking respite from the afternoon sun beneath a canopy of poorly-pruned trees. He locks eyes with a man draped in a nylon sleeping bag as passersby peer through the parked car’s windshield from the sidewalk, squinting mirages that wane and shimmer in the San Diego heat. Aware of these peering eyes, a dark decorum settles into the car’s interior as the officer fixes a pair of black aviator sunglasses to his face: a panoptic screen through which figures beyond the windshield remain visible while maintaining the integrity of the officer’s illegible stare. It is “here,” in the mobile cinema of the police cruiser, that the officer observes the daily performances of the park’s inhabitants, screening bodies for choreographies of criminality. Scenes of daily life, framed by the viewing bay of the police vehicle windshield, unfold as visual dramas for interpretation by both this one-man audience, and the wary ethnographer along for the ride. What unfolds “here” is not only ethnographic; it is cinematic.

— Scene 2

As ambiguous scenes of encounter between police officers and fragmented others, the vignettes above render the complex visual worlds police move through. The work of seeing and the conditions for *being seen* from both the parked and mobile police vehicle draw critical attention to how everyday policing is enacted in a field of precarious vision. This precarity is not only marked by what police officers cannot see, but by the *reversibility* of police vision that enables the policed and the surveilled to look back and watch the watchers. The screening techniques deployed by these officers—practices oriented toward keeping officers “safe” by profiling subjects at a distance—expose them to the distorted, illegible glances, gazes, and stares of those surveyed and surveilled by this mobile vision.

From casual, curious stares to more concerted sousveillance tactics used by citizens filming police encounters with video-capable cell phones (Brucato 2015; Mann, Nolan, and Wellman 2003; Mann and Ferenok 2011), everyday patrol work coexists with methods of being “watched from below.” The two opening scenes underscore this relationship and reveal the permeability of boundaries that seem to separate the visual worlds of on-duty officers from the policed: The first is a description of a scene from Antoine Fuqua’s 2001 Hollywood film *Training Day*, in which dilettante Los Angeles Police Department Officer Jake Hoyt (played by American actor Ethan Hawke) struggles to adapt to the pressures of a 24-hour ride-along with veteran narcotics detective Alonzo Harris (played by American actor Denzel Washington). The second details a moment from my fieldwork while participating in a ride-along with a novice patrol officer from the El Cajon Police Department in San Diego, California. Reconstructing a scene from *Training Day* (2001) alongside an ethnographic encounter in an active-duty patrol car is an attempt to trouble the distinction between the visual worlds of police officers and the policed, on the one hand, and the symbolic work of cinema and the “reality” of policing by approaching the interactions between them, on the other. I would come to experience this cinematic juxtaposition for myself while engaged in ethnographic research at the San Diego Regional Public Safety Training Institute (SDRPSTI), San Diego’s regional police academy, and while on citizen ride-alongs with police officers from the El Cajon and San Diego Police Departments.

In conversation with academy recruits, I learned that scenes from *Training Day* are screened at San Diego’s regional police academy as an unofficial part of the police training curriculum. While the scope of my awareness of this phenomenon is limited—any mention of this film cannot be found in the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) handbook provided to all academy recruits—this anecdote has been shared and re-performed between officers who finished their training as part of San

Diego's 98th Regional Academy graduating class.¹ Nonetheless, the revelation that *Training Day* had a place in San Diego's regional police academy bridged the visual worlds of the police academy and patrol fieldwork: From behind their desks, police academy recruits interpret cinematic representations of policing mediated by the space of the academy classroom. From behind the dashboard of police vehicles, police officers practice interpretive strategies for making sense of an unfolding visual world mediated by their relationship to the patrol car, and to each other. This pedagogical mirroring suggests that lived encounters of policing (the "ethnographic") and encounters on screen (the "cinematic") are simultaneously structured by and *structuring* the practices of police officers in the field. I took this as an opportunity to explore, through participant observation and unstructured interviews,² training officers' and academy recruits' engagements with *Training Day* as a paradigmatic police training film.

In this article I argue that, while *Training Day* reproduces the kinds of social arrangements and visual practices that are part and parcel of policing praxis, a closer *ethnographic* reading of the film offers critical insight into what happens when an idealized, universalizing police vision "meets the ground." As a pedagogical tool, Fuqua's film visualizes a multitude of gazes, subverting assumptions about the scope and power of police vision as impermeable, impenetrable, and unaffected by the gaze of the policed. Therefore, a critical exploration of *Training Day*'s scenes suggests that policing's relationship with these ambivalent cinematic models of patrol work requires a new orientation to imagining police vision differently, including being empathically responsive to the experiences of the policed and the surveilled. I explore the productive tension between cinematic models like *Training Day* and everyday patrol work through an analysis of the "precarious cinema" of policing, a concept I use to understand how police officers' engagements with *Training Day* reflect and reveal a mode of police vision that is alienated from and often blind to the experiences of the policed, and the performance of ethnography as a visual profiling practice that offers new conceptual frames for approaching how these blind spots manifest in the visual worlds of patrol officers. In a time when police violence and police brutality are invariably subject to the camera's scrutiny, and a scrutinizing public, the material stakes of an increasingly visible police vision include contending with, accounting for, and being *answerable* to its own visibility.

The first part of this analysis uses scholarship on visibility to examine the screening practices of patrol work that are socially activated by the material arrangement of bodies in the mobile police cruiser. As described by feminist film theorists and science and technology studies (STS) scholars, visibility is deployed here as an analytical register that can attend to the social, iterative processes that shape how police see. Pairing an analysis of cinema with the empirical worlds of patrol officers, the second part of this analysis positions scenes from *Training Day* alongside ethnographic vignettes written from my experiences as a ride-along participant with police officers. Based on two years of fieldwork, in which I logged more than thirty hours on police ride-alongs from behind the windshield screens of on-duty police vehicles and uncounted hours with police officers at banquets, bars, and backyard barbecues, this article weaves ethnography and film analysis to illustrate how a cinematic framework structures both police vision and the interpretive work of ethnography. My writing method is a meditation on anthropologist Kathleen Stewart's (2007: 68) claim that, "Scenes of impact...have an afterlife." I take up Stewart's engagement with the scenic to investigate ethnography's cinematic qualities and to argue for the utility of ethnography for studying policing's visual practices. To explore the intersection between ethnography and policing, however, requires addressing issues of complicity that pervade these interpretive fields; a cinematic police vision in *Training Day* implies

¹ Despite the limitations of my knowledge regarding how far-reaching the *Training Day* phenomenon may be, recent law enforcement scandals suggest otherwise. Consider the story of Dean Zipes, a former Florida sheriff's deputy filmed on police vehicle dashboard camera re-enacting a scene from *Training Day* in front of a trainee on February 16, 2017. The filmed incident shows Zipes reciting lines from Denzel Washington's Alonzo character while stroking himself with both his service pistol and taser gun. He was subsequently fired two months later in April (Ruiter 2017). According to his public LinkedIn profile, Zipes currently attends the University of Florida's Levin School of Law as a Juris Doctor Candidate while volunteering his time teaching gun safety to children, the latter being of most concern considering the circumstances of his terminated employment.

² All research participants have been given pseudonyms.

that audiences are complicit in viewing officers as heroes (Karpiak 2010), and the position of the “insider” or “embedded” ethnographer as complicit in the invasive, profiling practices of her research subjects emerges here as major issues of concern.³

As this article demonstrates, research concerning the everyday work of urban policing provides critical insights into how the role of the ethnographer—as observer, interlocutor, and producer of texts—becomes complicit in the project of policing itself, especially for those in the field with police while on patrol, and thus distinctly visible to the policed as well. In *Writing the World of Policing: The Difference Ethnography Makes* (2017), Didier Fassin and fellow contributors to the edited volume reflect on this often fraught and entangled relationship, each suggesting how ethnographic praxis may continue to offer critical insights into a world where police power is an uncertain object that both the police and the ethnographer are after in their respective (and sometimes overlapping) interpretive realms. By blending ethnographic methods and film analysis, this discussion is an experimental approach to answering the following questions posed by Fassin (2017: 3): “What difference does it [ethnography] make for the study of the police? What difference does it [policing] make for the practice of ethnography?” By exploring how police vision emerges between the screens of Hollywood cinema and the screening practices of patrol officers, I argue that ethnography’s attunement to the visually fleeting, the unnamed, and the unknown can offer contemporary police praxis a lens through which to look back and reflect on its own visual practices in the field. When both ethnography and policing are conceived as cinematic, new conceptual frames for understanding police vision become available. Likewise, ethnography’s limits and possibilities also emerge in this analysis and enable this discussion to turn the reflective lens back on the work that ethnography performs in making the visual worlds of research subjects legible, intelligible, and knowable to the vast knowledge projects of academia. Like the disciplinary conditions of ethnography, this article demonstrates what is at stake in the claim that policing shapes its objects of inquiry.

The Cinematic Field in Policing and Ethnography

Policing is cinematic. This proposal is not merely an invocation of dramaturgical theory leveraged in sociological studies of policing (Manning 1997, 2003; Manning and Van Maanen 1978; O’Neill 2015; Rafaeli and Pratt 1993) nor a spectacular metaphor evocative of the spectacular modes of violence⁴ scholarly and activist debates have historically situated as a precondition for modern policing (Beydoun and Ocen 2015; James 1996; Rodriguez 2006; Shakur 2001; Vargas and Alves 2010). Inciting the cinematic is a turn toward a theoretical and methodological engagement with policing in a time of ever-increasing speculation and critique concerning such spectacles of police violence as they are played out on screens of every kind: citizen-produced recordings of police interactions on the street (Brucato 2015; Jackson 2016; Sandhu 2016; Sandhu and Haggerty 2017), closed-circuit television and surveillance system technologies (Gates 2011; Manovich 2001; Thompson 2005), dashboard-mounted police vehicle cameras (Taylor and Gill 2014), body-worn cameras (Ariel, Farrar, and Sutherland 2015; Taylor 2016), and, of specific interest to this discussion, in the fictional dramas of Hollywood cinema (Doyle 2003; Huey 2010; Lovell 2003; Maurantonio 2012).

³ My approach to profiling here builds from a basic understanding of the practices by which patrol officers “use subjective impressions of civilians to classify them as ‘suspects’” (Brucato 2015: 469). While I do not locate “racial profiling” as the object of my analysis, the dark underbelly of profiling has always been the visually arresting work of making black and brown bodies visible. For a discussion on the contemporary profiling mechanisms historically tied to the surveillance of racial blackness, see Simone Browne’s work in *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (2015).

⁴ For many critical theorists and historians, police violence is inextricably linked to the *longue durée* of state-sanctioned rituals of antiblack violence in the United States. Antiblackness scholars have long argued that the subjugated position of the enslaved and incarcerated black subject—of blackness itself—is historically foundational to American civil society. As a racist legacy of antebellum slave patrolling, modern policing of the black body is fundamental to the continued maintenance of an American police institution. For more on historical inscriptions of policing and carceral violence, see works by Dennis Childs (2015), Saidiya Hartman (2010), Dylan Rodríguez (2006), and Cristina Mejia Vesperas (2019).

My rhetorical insistence that “policing is cinematic” brings together what Afro-Pessimist scholar Jared Sexton calls the “cinema of policing” (2009, 2017) with the “real police work” described by anthropologists and sociologists in the 1970s (Van Maanen 1973, 1978).⁵ Eschewing distinctions between the “fake” and the “real,” the “staged” of cinematic performance and what is relegated to the “back stage” of “serious” police research (Perlmutter 2000), this claim is a methodological imperative to examine the cinematic worlds of officers and the potentiality of using ethnography’s cinematic qualities to research and write about the visual world of policing. While the epistemic lineages of the term vary across disciplines, “policing” is situated here as a set of practices deployed and constituted by police officers at the patrol level whose work encompasses a nuanced range of routinized activities and tacit conventions.⁶ In the vein of feminist science and technology studies scholars who examine and historicize vision and visualizing technologies (Cartwright 1995, 2008, 2011; Haraway 1988, 1997; Rose 2010), I foreground the cinematic to approach how tacit policing conventions, including “ways of seeing” (Berger 1977) in the field, are socially and historically situated.

As an ethnographic analysis of the relationship between policing and cinema, I look toward sites where officers are engaged in collective practices of looking beyond the brick-and-mortar classrooms of the police academy, following the ambivalent construction of this vision to the “mobile classroom” of the police vehicle. Taken here as an extension of the police academy, the on-duty mobile police vehicle becomes a place to consider the nuanced ways in which officers put these cinematic lessons into practice. In *Training Day*, fictional officers Jake and Alonzo share such interpretive modes while seated together in what sociologist Peter Manning (2003: 130) analogizes as the “mobile office” of the squad car. In the following section, I work to understand how *Training Day*’s cinematic patrol lessons are mobilized by film historian Anne Friedberg’s (2002) writing on “automotive visuality,” an exploration of how the vision of the automobile driver is literally framed by the windshield and imbricated in the social experience of driving. I bring her analysis of the visuality of driving to bear upon one of the most conspicuous tools of police work: the police vehicle through which officers learn how to screen.

Screening and Visuality

Screening is situated here as a social practice through which patrol officers learn to categorize actions, bodies, and events while on patrol. As a practice of making objects visible, identifiable, and knowable, the term “screening” is inextricably linked to the history of screening the body in medical scientific practice. In her book on medicine and visual culture, Lisa Cartwright (1995: 3) traces the origins of modern medical screening technology to precedent techniques and experiments associated with cinematic apparatuses during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, suggesting that “the long history of bodily analysis and surveillance in medicine and science is critically tied to the history of the development of the cinema as a popular cultural institution and a technological apparatus.” The interplay between science and cinema offers important insights into how police vision is co-constituted with visualizing technologies and surveillance practices. In her research on law enforcement use of biometrics, Kelly Gates (2011: 64) attends to the social forces that shape how faces are screened for signs of criminality with facial recognition software, exploring this specific practice alongside “important questions about . . . the amount and form of police power that video technology has enabled, and about struggles over the legitimacy of that power.” In bringing the screening practices of police officers under the critical optics of such visual epistemologies, my argument

⁵ This article is indebted to the Afro-Pessimist scholarship of Jared Sexton (University of California, Irvine). His 2009 article “The Ruse of Engagement: Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing” offers a much more complex, rich analysis of the racialized and racist tropes of black masculinity in *Training Day* than I attempt here.

⁶ I bring this definition to the forefront of this paper in response to anthropological debates that emerged at the 2015 meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in Denver, Colorado. During the conference’s yearly panel on policing, entitled “The Anthropology of Police: Challenges and Opportunities,” presenters (which, for the first time in the AAA’s history, included a police officer from the Denver Police Department) discussed the different symbolic valences of the term “policing,” highlighting its transformation alongside epistemic shifts in anthropology, sociology, and surveillance studies.

suggests that the *power to see* as a patrol officer is not only co-constituted by larger architectures of surveillance, but is shaped by the very co-presence of *being with* other bodies who share the space of seeing together in the field of patrol work: fellow police officers, community members, activists, and ethnographic researchers who are along for the ride. It is here that questions of the social come into view and provide this analysis with ways to consider how technologies of seeing, such as the automobile, frame the social space of patrol work.

Proceeding from the premise that seeing in the field of policing is contingent on the social conditions through which it is practiced, the work of feminist film historian Anne Friedberg gestures toward the sociality of vision in her discussion on automotive visuality. This term approaches ways of seeing structured by the mobility of the automobile. As a conceptual framework, automotive visuality emerges from “the intersection between urban mobility and automotive visuality (i.e. its materiality and mobility) by examining the screen—its format, its architectural context, its *implied spectator*” (Friedberg 2002: 186, emphasis mine). This mobile vision, she argues, is mediated through practices of cinematic spectatorship that materialize alongside the architectural design of both proscenium theaters and automobiles in the twentieth century: two interrelated developments that presuppose the social conditions of watching performances with others in a shared space of looking and *seeing together*. “The automobile *is* a viewing machine,” asserts Friedberg, arguing that mobility transforms the more static vision of the pedestrian on foot as immortalized by the modern figure of the *flâneur* (Benjamin 2002). Framing the automobile as a kind of “vision machine” is significant considering the historical foot patrols that defined early police work at the turn of the century, a practice that was transformed by the proliferated use of the automobile by American police departments nationwide in the 1940s, instantiating a new mode of mobile patrol (Bowers and Hirsch 1987). In this way, contemporary police vision can be understood as co-constituted by the material conditions of driving, turning officers into mobile *flâneurs* that observe people, groups, and gatherings at a distance using the framing device of the police vehicle. This mode of observation brings new insight into Benjamin’s articulation of the *flâneur* as outsider and “above all, someone who does not feel comfortable in his own company. That is why he seeks out the crowd” (1999: 48). If the mobile cruiser is an epistemological machine for producing visual knowledge, then its windshield is a screen through which officers experience a visual desire to know the unknowable figures of the anonymous “crowd” before ever committing to closer contact.

In the next section, I consider the automotive visuality of policing in *Training Day* by turning toward one of the primary locations in which the film is set—the unmarked police car, the mobile classroom in which senior police Detective Alonzo Harris (Washington) trains rookie Officer Jake Hoyt (Hawke) to adopt a new way of seeing and seeking criminality while on patrol. Their fraught ride-along through the Jungle is of analytical value here considering the academic canon of police research. For many anthropologists and ethnographers, the police vehicle is also the “front row seat” proximal to the unfolding action of police work and the privileged seat of distance from which academics have produced knowledge about policing (Linnemann 2016; Meehan 1992, 1998; Nunn 1993). The structure of the remaining pages here articulates this disciplinary history by inserting ethnographic vignettes between scenes from *Training Day*. I bring these scenes into conversation through a series of cinematic smash cuts not simply as representations of policing, but as a stylistic choice that illustrates the methodological entanglements of my fieldwork and writing practice.

Employing these cuts illustrates my often-disorienting experience watching police officers both in and outside of the cop car and becomes a kind of interpretive mirror that gestures toward the difficulties and uncertainties of the officers’ own attempts to see, categorize, and make sensible the many gestures, bodies, and figures that enter their visual fields. Therefore, I follow emergent scenes of encounter across the cinematic fields police move through as a means of both exploring the sociality of police vision and to bring my own interpretive voice under investigation in the performance of this research. As descriptions of film scenes give way to the scenic, ethnographic worlds of the police ride-along, the impulse to constitute these subjects and bring them under a stable narrative control is challenged by the ways in which objects shift, move out of focus, or beyond the frame of my vision. Kim Fortun (2009: 182) addresses the complexity of

the ethnographer's task when she writes, "Critical ethnography requires intense attunement to what is being considered in the frame and what is not, to subtle slides between figure and ground, and to the many forces that shape what a particular study comes to be about." Foregrounded here as a condition shared by both the work of policing and ethnography as research method, visual contingencies of the unknown and unseen illuminate problems of vision across these scenes: figures, gazes, and gestures recede and advance as unsteady objects of both the officers' attention and of the ethnographer's interpretive reading practice.

Training Day as Training Film

"Unlearn that bullshit they teach you at the Academy. Don't bring none of that shit in here. That shit'll get you killed out here."—Alonzo Harris, *Training Day*

With these words, Detective Sergeant Alonzo Harris, Denzel Washington's unscrupulous L.A.P.D. narcotics detective in Antoine Fuqua's *Training Day*, summons the ironic into full force for his rookie trainee Jake Hoyt (Ethan Hawke). Eager to transition from patrol officer to detective, Jake accompanies Alonzo on a 24-hour ride-along replete with violence, corruption, and police brutality unencumbered by any moral impetus to do things "by the book." Alonzo makes no attempt to hide his unbidden contempt for officers who participate in the bureaucracy of policing from behind a "pussy desk job," and suggests Jake ought to waive his dream of making detective if he cannot embrace the hands-on tactics that narcotics work demands. Alonzo's rapid-fire instruction to abandon the trappings of the academy is Jake's—and the film's audiences'—introduction to Alonzo's police pedagogy that privileges the "real world" experiences of patrol work on the streets. "Roll your window down," Alonzo instructs Jake upon inviting him to step into the mobile office of his pristine, black-lacquered 1979 Chevy Monte Carlo. Eager to impress, Jake complies and Alonzo opines further, "See? You gotta hear the street. You gotta smell it, you know? You gotta taste that shit, *feel* it." In his insistence that Jake abandon his academy training to phenomenologically embrace the full sensorium of policing on the ground, Alonzo—and Fuqua—bring a familiar narrative to bear upon the figuration of the police academy: impractical, useless, "bullshit." The irony of Alonzo's appraisal is unknown to the film's characters: Nearly two decades since its release, *Training Day* is part of a world of interpretation where training officers teach and academy recruits learn the strategies—and the stakes—for *seeing* like police officers.

In the following paragraphs, I argue that the "precarious cinema" of *Training Day*'s "Jungle" sequence models and reinforces a police vision that academy recruits implicitly learn to inscribe into their daily practices in the field of patrol work. I foreground a few shots from a sequence where Alonzo introduces Jake to the "Jungle," a moniker for the real-life Baldwin Village neighborhood of South Central, Los Angeles where the detective lives alongside its denizens as their de facto resident bully. In the opening shot of this sequence, Alonzo pulls his unmarked 1979 Chevy Monte Carlo around a corner, crossing an imperceptible boundary into the Jungle neighborhood. A passerby dressed in black steps from the sidewalk into the street. Jake is seen in the passenger seat, looking out into the street beyond his open window. For a moment, Jake—a heteronormative white man—and this unnamed black man meet each other's gaze, and what appears coincidental is a part of a larger argument about the power to see and surveil that is fundamental to policing praxis: the officer's vision moves at the speed of the car, and this mobility enables policing to keep its distance from those subjects and objects that may threaten an officer if one were to approach on foot. It is no accident that this passing glance is captured by the cinematic lens from behind blurred, black bars: these officers are entering a space of enclosure. Jake shifts uncomfortably in the passenger seat as he asks, "What are we doing going in here, man? We'll get killed coming in here." While Alonzo's car bears little resemblance to Ford Motor Company's iconic V8-powered workhorse the Crown Victoria Police Interceptor (colloquially known as the "Crown Vic" in many police circles), a two-tone vehicular beast emblematic of law enforcement in America's cultural imaginary, it nonetheless marks their precarious visibility.

San Diego Police Officer Fuentes turns the wheel hard, and beneath her slim yet strong fingers the power steering mechanisms of the Ford Crown Victoria Interceptor Vehicle seem to resist the force of her action, promising to send our vehicle into a line of neon construction cones. The note pad poised precariously on my lap threatens to slide off into some long-forgotten, crumb-filled corner of this decades-old cruiser. “Sorry,” she mutters more to herself than to me, pulling the car back into the middle of the lane and away from the tiny rubber pylons. She continues, “I’m always stuck with the shitty car for my shift.” In the wake of her apology, she punches the throttle with a steel-toed boot, and we are cruising at speed again. This is our third encounter in the mobile office of her on-duty vehicle, but it is the first time that she is called to a “B and E” (breaking and entering) in what she refers to as a “questionable neighborhood.” As we cruise slowly around the vicinity of the address, Officer Fuentes peers through the windshield warily. I track her gaze through the viewing bay of the windshield, and see tiny faces looking out from a second-story window in the apartment building in front of us. A chirp over the radio informs us that other police units are investigating the scene, but it is this staring contest between Officer Fuentes and a growing number of peering faces that emerge from cracks in doorways and between window blinds that captures my attention. Our arrival is met by these silent stares, and something in the officer’s demeanor has shifted: where once she sat at ease, she now appears tense. After a moment, she announces on the radio that she is going to take another call and reverses away from the scene. From within Officer Fuentes’ Crown Vic, I become complicit in a mode of police vision manifested by the physical presence of the police vehicle itself. As revealed in the next scene, this complicity is a structural part of the sociality of policing.

Jake’s fear is palpable, and Alonzo’s reply is marked by a barefaced pride, “Ah, you know about this place, huh?” Buckling under the pressure of what *this* place signifies, Jake’s response is tentative, but not naïve: “It’s the Jungle, right? They say don’t come in here with anything less than a platoon.” Within the first few moments of this sequence, the Jungle neighborhood is narrativized as a war zone.⁷ Alonzo’s reply is absent any jest, “Don’t ever come up here without me. I’m serious. For your safety.” At this point in the film, a discernible spectator might question the sincerity of Alonzo’s concern, but this command is instructive nonetheless, for both Jake and the many police trainees beyond the world of the film: masculine pomp and pageantry aside, policing praxis commands of its officers a vigilant attention to an unfolding visual world that poses all manner of threat.

The movement and positioning of the camera in this sequence highlights the sense of precarious visibility that academy recruits are taught to *feel* while both viewing the film and during their time on patrol. Jake’s furtive glances out of Alonzo’s unmarked car betray his discomfort at being visible to the unfamiliar figures that gaze back at him. Jake hazards a look over his shoulder as he takes in the scenes of daily life in this predominately African-American and multi-generationally poor neighborhood: a woman combing another woman’s hair, young men talking together, and a group of children playing. Throughout this sequence, the cinematic lens stands in for Jake’s point-of-view, imitating his gaze as it tracks across different bodies, struggling to keep them in view before these figures move beyond the mobile frame of the car’s passenger window. Throughout this sequence, Jake’s expression is guarded, a seemingly unremarkable feat of careful, “distanced” observation that is an essential skill recruits are taught to practice in the police academy (Manning 1997, 2003; Manning and Van Maanen 1978; O’Neill 2015). What is significant in this sequence is not only that Jake is a veritable avatar for officers-in-training, but that the model of policing represented is necessarily collaborative: Jake and Alonzo share modes of interpretation and description that are built into the structure of the police as an organizational culture (Fry and Berkes 1983). If “effective” policing requires dialogical interaction, then sociality itself is central to an officer’s arsenal of strategies for policing in a visual world.

⁷ This narrow trajectory through the streets of the Jungle is reminiscent of antecedent work in film, and the following comparison illustrates the visual continuum of the depiction of urban streets as foreign warzones. This comparison is most striking when considering Francis Ford Coppola’s film *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which Fuqua cites as an inspiration for his own filmmaking practices (Truitt 2013).

In an early interview with El Cajon Police Officer Leitzig, he explained that a clip from *Training Day* had been screened as part of a learning module on officer safety. When asked how the film was framed for recruits, Officer Leitzig, an academy recruit at the time, replied, “We discussed the types of neighborhoods we will have to police in the field, places where we may not be welcome.” Seemingly innocuous, the phrase “we will” not only illustrates the important symbolic and imaginative work that *Training Day* performs for police recruits, but also summons the conditions of sociality within the academy classroom that shape how this cinematic intervention is collectively read and discussed. In considering the academy’s role in framing this film as representative of patrol work, it becomes clear that practices of interpretation, negotiation, and dialogical communication are foundational to the sociality of policing.

A few months later, I found myself deeply embedded in this sociality while seated next to Officer Leitzig in an active-duty patrol car during our first citizen ride-along encounter. “This is the heart of it, right here,” he intoned, referring to a nearby park that was the alleged “hotbed” of drug-related activity for his assigned patrol sector (also known as a “beat”) in the city of El Cajon, California. The irony of his seemingly unconscious quotation of Denzel Washington’s line from Fuqua’s film was not lost on me: much like Alonzo’s description that introduces Jake to the Jungle and its inhabitants, Officer Leitzig was making intelligible forms and bodies outside of the vehicle by virtue of our social interactions inside the patrol car. Gesturing through the frame of the open driver’s side window, he drew imaginary lines in the air between seated figures in the park, miming and narrating what he perceived within the scope of his visual field. “I’ve been watching him for a few weeks,” he said, drawing a circle in midair over the figure of a man with shorn salt-and-pepper hair. “We’re pretty sure he’s either dealing or an affiliate of a gang. Look at how he’s fidgeting with something in his pocket. You see? Watch his hands.” It was then that I first considered (and would come to co-witness⁸ on many ride-alongs thereafter) that the work of identifying potentially criminal activity is not solely bound up in an individual officer’s optic faculties, but in the capacity for officers to share—through a nuanced repertoire of visual description, interpretation, and embodied action—modes of seeing. In other words, police vision and the visibility of patrol work emerge from the sociality of policing itself.

For officers, the imperative of daily police work requires making sense of objects that seem “out of place” in their patrol sectors, including patterns of behavior, unrecognizable paraphernalia, and, of course, people. This is a social enterprise upon which the organizational ideology of policing functions: officers must collaborate to make sense of an unfolding visual world that can threaten an officer’s safety, if not threaten the entire social order upon which the institution of policing depends (Freiberg 2001; Manning 1997, 2003). If police pedagogy is predicated upon both implicitly and explicitly teaching officers-in-training how to see themselves in relationship to each other, it is no wonder that scenes from the “cinema of policing” (Sexton 2009) would be screened for police recruits en masse in training academy classrooms. To consider cinema as a component of police training is to importantly engage with the social space of both the academy—where recruits watch and analyze films together—and in the police vehicle where officers are often partnered up during their work shifts. However, the function of cinema in the academy is not merely an innocuous supplement to other training activities, such as physical combat or firearms training, nor is it a form of rote “edutainment” for a generation of screen-obsessed “digital natives” (Palfrey and Gasser 2008). Rather, it is a mode that trains recruits how to read and interpret representations of policing as a practice of collective attunement with direct consequences for their collaborative patrol duties in the field.

El Cajon Police Officer Medina flicks a button on the center console and jerks the cruiser hard, pulling us into a tight U-turn. As far as departmental colloquialisms go, we are “lights and sirens,” barreling across black tar in pursuit of a sedan whose driver matches the description of a burglary suspect. A few minutes later, our car is sidled up against a curb and the rear of the sedan-in-question sits center-frame in our car’s windshield screen. Another police vehicle arrives at the scene and Officer Medina instructs me to wait in

⁸ For more on the methodology of co-witnessing in ethnography, see D. Soyini Madison (2006).

the car for a moment while the two converse. I comply and watch from the passenger seat as Officer Medina and fellow El Cajon Police Officer Lorne stand “a safe distance” behind the sedan. Through the sliver of the open passenger’s side window, I listen to them discuss the physical condition of the pulled-over car. Rather than approach the vehicle, these two officers spend more than five minutes collectively describing and interpreting what appears in their visual field, sometimes arguing and contradicting each other. Officer Medina is beginning to note that the car’s registration is expired, but Officer Lorne interrupts him, “Ignore that for right now. Do you see the way he’s shifting in his seat? Look at him moving around in there. What would we need for probable cause to search him?” From behind the glass of the passenger window, this scene unfolds as precarious cinema: this buddy-cop duo struggles to see the same thing—pointing at the car, pointing at each other—searching for categories of criminality based on visual information, seemingly oblivious to the pair of eyes gazing back at them in the sedan’s rearview mirror.

As a visualizing machine, Alonzo’s car in *Training Day* frames the vision of both officers as they move through the Jungle: bodies and gestures of the policed are momentarily captured by the viewing bays of the car’s windshield and windows. Police recruits watching this sequence are offered a simulated vision of policing that must adapt to a fleeting visual world. Fuqua’s directorial vision here offers the viewer a pointed representation of the speed of police vision: it is fast, discerning, and cursory. It does not flinch. It does not slow down to ask questions. It attempts to make knowledge about a visual field based on rote observation, but one must wonder how it is possible at all for Jake to identify anything about the Jungle’s neighborhood residents, let alone their intentions, desires, or whether they are participating in criminal activity and are therefore deserving of his prying gaze. However, to imagine the camera work in this sequence as visualizing the inhabitants of the Jungle as passive, visually arrested objects would be a gross simplification. If police vision is necessarily social because it emerges in a space of shared interaction, then one must include the participation of the policed in this encounter.

What is so compelling about the camerawork in the Jungle sequence is how the camera’s movement visualizes the ways in which a police vision makes possible the reversibility of that vision: the police vehicle allows the officers to see as readily as it allows them to be seen. The police cruiser may enable visual mobility, but it is a mobility that is confined and enclosed within the material chassis of the car. Cynthia Baron and Sharon Marie Carnicke (2008: 191) acknowledge the importance of cinematic framing in creating a sense of enclosure in *Training Day*, arguing that “the film’s most searing dramatic conflicts are played out, not in the open or when the characters are on the move, but when Washington and Hawke are confined by the interior of Alonzo’s black Monte Carlo automobile.” Here, the mobile cruiser is no panoptic machine from which officers observe visually arrested subjects, no central tower where the observers can see but not be seen. Caged within the car’s chassis, officers in this scene experience the totality of French philosopher Michel Foucault’s (2012: 200) maxim on surveillance power in reverse: “Visibility is a trap.”

These conditions allow the gaze of the policed to look back into the frames of the car’s open windows and windshield, and therefore, back into the frame of the cinematic lens. These curious, cautious, and wary stares meet Jake’s—and the audiences’—eyes. As an avatar for the audience’s subjectivity, Jake is interpellated (see Fanon 2008) by the vision of the residents who gaze back at him and Alonzo. In Figure 5, this stoic vision is center-frame: a shirtless black man with tightly-woven braids looks at the camera defiantly, or, in the narrative descriptions of training officers in the police academy, “menacingly.” The interpretation of this stare is itself a part of the practice of seeing like a police officer in the academy. While interviewing another police officer from the San Diego Police Department, it became clear that training officers’ descriptions in the academy shape recruits’ interpretations. In my conversation with Officer Phelan, he said the officer leading the discussion on *Training Day* gestured with one hand to the projected image of Jake and Alonzo on the screen and to the audience of recruits with the other. “This is what *will* happen to you,” Officer Phelan said with a hint of mockery in his voice, re-performing the words of the training officer in question, “You are going to be outsiders in some very dangerous places.”

As Officer Phelan's re-performance illustrates, the precarious cinema of policing crudely divides officers from the world "outside" the on-duty police vehicle, yet this film sequence suggests this orientation to the field is problematic. While the beginning of the Jungle sequence prioritizes shots of Alonzo and Jake's interactions inside of the car, subsequent shots reveal how neighborhood residents maintain their own practices of looking back at the officers. The camerawork demonstrates this shift, shooting from behind the bodies of residents standing on the sidewalk as Alonzo's car passes in front of them. In this way, the film's viewer does not sit comfortably next to these officers on this virtual ride-along. Rather, the camera places a "we"—however fractured and precarious—among the many vigilant eyes watching from beyond the "viewing machine" of the detective's vehicle.

"انت سريانية," the man tells me, poking his head through the open sliver of his apartment door, but the barely perceptible inflection in his speech suggests it might be a question. Unable to understand, I smile awkwardly, but the way his tongue extends the vowels indicates he is speaking Assyrian, a neo-Aramaic language with deep roots in the Assyrian Empire.⁹ He appears to be Chaldean, El Cajon's fastest growing ethnic and refugee population from Iraq and Syria. As instructed by my ride-along officer, I am leaning against a stucco wall a few paces behind the three officers knocking on an apartment door. They have a warrant for the occupant's arrest. The pounding fists send shockwaves of affect throughout the apartment corridor, inviting others to open their own doors to hazard a glance at this intrusion of uniformed men. Looking up, I realize they have turned their collective attention away from the officers, and toward me. I shift under the weight of these many eyes, and across these Chaldean faces I think I see the hint of recognition of my own racial markers: dark circles under my dark eyes, and the unmistakable and commanding curve of my nose—my father's Iraqi-Assyrian nose. In their stares, an imagined question, "لماذا هي مع البوليس؟"

The disciplinary mandate of participant observation asks the ethnographic researcher to commit to a shared space of sustained social interaction with her research subjects. However, as many anthropologists and feminist ethnographers have noted (Visweswaran 1994; Tallbear 2014), this orientation to fieldwork is not apolitical, nor innocent. Indictments of anthropology's complicity with projects of empire and the epistemic violence produced by ethnography's mission to "write culture" based on categories of otherness continue to resonate for research that includes such powerful interlocutors as the police. Julia Hornberger (2017: 52) writes about the historical entanglements of complicity that ground her research among South African police officers, noting that "during late apartheid, ethnography and its related methods of participant observation were seen as the ultimate form of colonial complicity." Hornberger foregrounds for us the historical complicity of the ethnographer in systems of structural violence. However, while the vignette above illustrates one moment in which the ethnographer is positioned in a surveillance apparatus beyond her control, it also draws attention to the intersubjective relationship of fieldwork that always includes the unspoken and unknown desires of others. Kim Fortun's (2001: 23) discussion on recursivity and the ethnographer's reflexive positioning is striking here when read alongside the imagined words—and worlds—of others in the previous scene: "Reflexivity asks what constitutes the ethnographer as a speaking subject. Recursivity asks what interrupts her and demands a reply."

⁹ I arrived at the transliterated Arabic script here through multiple conversations with fluent Assyrian and Arabic speakers. These included a discussion with my father, a native Assyrian speaker from Baghdad, Iraq, whom I called after this ride-along encounter. I relayed what I *believed* I heard the man say to me, and my father suggested it sounded like he said, "You look Assyrian." Due to limitations in Microsoft Word and as a testament to the resourcefulness and adaptability of Assyrians in the diaspora (like my father) who were exiled from their indigenous homelands and endured all forms of violence as a direct consequence of the Armenian and Assyrian genocides, I have translated spoken Assyrian using Arabic script, as many Assyrians also speak and write in Arabic.

Complicity calls us to be answerable to the material and affective impacts of our work without losing sight of the larger intractable conflicts in which we are always embedded with others. Elana Zilberg's (2011) ethnographic research among former and current members of La Mara Salvatrucha (MS or MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang illustrates the complexities of finding oneself caught within the same systems of power as her interlocutors. Zilberg's recent writing on the "double binds" of complicity—the tensions between the ethnographer's ethical and research commitments—offers a sobering reminder for those seeking research collaborations with police, and asks such scholars to reflect on "the politics and ethics of ethnographic research conducted in deeply charged contexts where the stakes for the people with whom we engage are very high—be those stakes incarceration, detention, deportation, injury, or death" (Zilberg 2016: 720). Seeking ethnographic complicity with the powerful demands of the researcher an attunement to the ways in which power shapes our own vision in the performance of research, a kind of profiling practice that makes us answerable to a set of political commitments that can allow us to share these insights with our interlocutors. This is no small contribution considering the embodied stakes of everyday policing for overly policed and economically depressed neighborhoods across San Diego County, which include harassment, racial profiling, arrest, and routine, tragic, and often *preventable* deaths of community members at the hands of the police.¹⁰

Future Directions for Ethnographers and Patrol Officers

As this article demonstrates, *Training Day* offers cinematic frames through which we see a more vexed profile of police vision at odds with its proliferation as a model for police recruits. Given the practices of collective spectatorship that officers practice both in the academy and in the field when policing together as shift partners, I want to suggest that the social conditions of policing praxis and training pedagogy direct officers and officers-in-training toward ways of seeing that are problematically totalizing. If policing has a "vision problem," then it is a problem of standardized training that equips officers with prescriptive ways of seeing that meet resistance in daily patrol interactions far more nuanced and complex than such academy training can possibly account for. In service of this point, I have argued that Fuqua's film does more than reflect or dramatize police work as a kind of distorted mirror of policing when employed as a pedagogical tool; it visualizes the blind spots that suggest that ethnography's work here can reveal the nuances of the visual worlds that police and everyday citizens inhabit. The consideration of ethnography as a related field of interpretation adjacent to the work of patrol officers suggests policing might benefit from a different relationship to modes of interrogation and interpretation that can, in the words of Stewart (2007: 4), "slow the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique long enough to find ways of approaching the complex and uncertain objects that fascinate because they literally hit us or exert a pull on us."

The imperative to slow down the pace of ethnographic analysis offers contemporary police praxis a more nuanced approach to patrol work and suggests that the everyday performance of police vision demands critical appraisal by officers, police departments, scholars, and community members. What Stewart proposes here is an approach to fieldwork that can account for, without knowing completely, those "uncertain objects" that emerge in the complexity of fieldwork: glances and gestures that elude easy categorization, stuttered and interrupted speech, and an array of interpretive gaps in meaning that arise when different cultural interlocutors—police, the policed, and the police ethnographer—struggle to share both physical and ideological space. However, "uncertain objects" are as much a part of the police officer's world as they are of interest to the ethnographer. This discussion is a clarion call to police researchers, police officers, and disillusioned ethnographers everywhere: Rather than falling into a nihilistic trap over the uncertain, the unknowable, the invisible, or the unintelligible, how might we instead envision modes of looking, sensing,

¹⁰ As an intervention in making knowable the scale of deaths committed by on-duty police officers, I situate a project here known as "The Counted." Created by *The Guardian*, this online database has been tracking the number of people killed by police in the United States since 2015. Drawing on both original reporting and crowdsourced information, this project underscores the important work activists have been engaged in to make visible and accessible information about those slain by law enforcement. See <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/jun/01/the-counted-police-killings-us-database>

and categorizing that leave space for others to look back and make us answerable for our own interpretive practices?

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