Let's Play Surveillance: The Panoptic Affect of Talking Dolls in the Domestic Sphere

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Abstract: Studies of the impacts of artificial intelligence (AI) and surveillance have increased in the past ten years. I am overall wondering what we fear and feel about AI and surveillance? Yet, fears and feelings are complicated research questions. To address those complications and contribute an affective analysis to existing research on surveillance, I analyse two horror films – *Child's Play* (Klevberg 2019) and *M3GAN* (Johnstone 2023) – that directly criticise the relationship between mothering, surveillance, and panoptic control. *Child's Play* and *M3GAN* are also important cultural productions for exploring panoptic affects in the home because they visualise collective and organised emotions. Ultimately, they warn us of the dangers of incorporating uncontrolled artificial intelligence technologies into the home and insist that mother figures and children must work together to address that specific danger of artificial intelligence that continues to linger in both obvious and inconspicuous technologies. Reading these films for a specific look or gaze, I argue that the home is panoptic and that panoptic affect denotes a specific feeling of being watched and of also not knowing who is doing the watching. I also argue that seeing through film has important functions in identifying, addressing, and maintaining asymmetries of power.
Keywords: talking dolls, panopticon, panoptic affect, gaze

Thinking about our current cultural productions, artificial intelligence is seemingly everywhere and riddled with uncertainty. We have questions about chat bots, social media algorithms, our digital footprints, and more. In many ways, this essay is in conversation with ongoing scholarship around artificial intelligence, care work, and smart home technologies. Existing scholarship examines the perceptions of robots in care work from the perspective of care workers and children and often studies how

likely people are to engage with robots (Vetter et al. 2024; Turja 2023; Okumura et al. 2023). There is also an existing body of scholarship that traces how surveillance impacts the efficacy of care in both domestic and institutional settings as well as scholarship that addresses user perceptions of smart home technology, data mining, and surveillance in the domestic sphere (Percy-Campbell et al. 2024; Berridge, Grigorovich 2022; Maalsen, Sadowski 2019; Brown, Korczynski 2010). Yet, and with good reason, there is limited work that speaks to the fears of artificial intelligence (AI) technology in the home and the ways that we understand what scares us about AI within our societies. Horror film is one way to approach these fears. Existing scholarship on surveillance in horror film focuses largely on the role of surveillance footage and/or found footage as sources of horrific imagery (Sayad 2021; Daniel 2020; Grisham et al. 2016; Heller-Nicholas 2014). Cinematic and 'post-cinematic' (Denson, Leyda 2016) horror is significant for thinking through how surveillance operates beyond the visual and narrative tropes as an affective and ideological mechanism entwined with panoptic control. Film scholar Cecilia Sayad (2021: 13) describes how the evolution of the image from photographic to digital complicates reality and fiction. Film is both evidence of reality and highly mutable. The incorporation of documentary filmmaking and the use of everyday technology within horror films facilitate the uncertainty of wholly real or wholly fictive (Sayad 2021: 16). Thus, horror films provide the necessary opportunity to explore the affects elicited by AI's increased potential in care settings like the home that constitute the domestic sphere without causing unnecessary harm to human subjects and within the plastic reality of film-spectator relationships. In conversation with existing scholarship on horror, my goal is to describe how minor moments within a horror filmic narrative further visualise domestic and gendered surveillance affects. Throughout this essay, I use the word affect to describe an 'infrastructural affect', a concept borrowed from Lauren Berlant to describe how a specific feeling can be expanded to an organisational concept. Berlant (2022: 23) writes, 'The affectivity infrastructure generates is not just in the air or the gut or thrown together or ideology but specifically involves the sensing of the dimension and extension of what we might call organised air, the projected atmospheres sustained by collective practices.' Horror films in particular show collective and organised emotions: fears, anxieties, paranoias, and more. There are two horror films in particular from the last ten years that have the necessary potential to explore the affects that are taking shape in response to artificial intelligence robots in care roles within the home: *Child's Play* (2019), directed by Lars Klevberg, and M3GAN (2023), directed by Gerard Johnstone. These films are important cultural artefacts to analyse. Both are equally critical of mother figures and mothering. Both describe violence and destruction as the potential dangers of surveillance and artificial intelligence, and both arrive at the same warning or message. They warn us of the dangers of incorporat-

ing uncontrolled artificial intelligence technology into the home and that regardless of the effort made to control artificial intelligence the threat still lingers. I make two arguments with respect to analysing these films. I argue that the home is panoptic and that panoptic affect names a specific feeling of being watched and also of not knowing who is doing the watching. I also argue that seeing through film has important functions in identifying, addressing, and maintaining asymmetries of power. I make these arguments by first describing three important theoretical concepts that shape my understanding of surveillance in film: the Panopticon, the domestic sphere, and the gaze. I then describe and analyse *Child's Play* and *M3GAN* to demonstrate how these two films not only offer a significant discussion of surveillance in the domestic sphere, but also how they each portray the lingering and panoptic affects of surveillance.

Background and methodology

The Panopticon

The theoretical background for this analysis focuses on three intertwined concepts: the Panopticon, the domestic sphere, and the gaze. My overarching goal is to contribute to and complement existing surveillance studies literature by describing the domestic sphere as panoptic. To situate the home as a site of surveillance and within surveillance studies, it is necessary to address how the home is a panoptic institution. The Panopticon was a prison design proposed by Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century, but our common understanding of it has been shaped by the writings of Michel Foucault (Lyon 1994: 62). The Panopticon as a physical structure consisted of a circular building with a single watchtower in the centre. As the name suggests, all those imprisoned could see the watchtower, and the watchtower could see all those imprisoned. Importantly, those imprisoned could not actually see if the watchtower was being operated by a warden or if they were being watched – but it was the potential of constant surveillance that demanded subordination. As David Lyon (1994: 65) writes, 'Bentham's innovation then was not just to inspect, or even to ensure that the gaze is asymmetrical, but to use uncertainty as a means of subordination. The asymmetrical gaze created uncertainty which in turn produced surrender.' This asymmetry of gaze leading to surrender is an important parameter for self-surveillance. Ivan Manokha (2018: 220) writes that scholars have utilised the metaphor of the Panopticon to explore how states and businesses collect information to gain more power but often overlook the role of self-surveillance in panoptic asymmetries of power. Manokha (2018: 225) further asserts that self-surveillance as a response to a power imbalance is greatly understudied. The asymmetrical gaze associated with the

Panopticon is a useful metaphor that carries throughout this paper and throughout surveillance studies (Monahan, Murakami Wood 2018: 28). As surveillance scholar Bart Simon (2005: 2) writes:

> There can be no theorization of contemporary surveillance relations without some orientation to the writing of Michel Foucault on discipline and panopticism. While there is certainly no lack of scholarly output on the matter, this background is central to orienting innovative research in surveillance studies.

Returning to Foucault's discussion of panopticism and extending it to the home or, more broadly, the domestic sphere innovates and supplements how the home is thought of in surveillance studies. My argument is that the home is panoptic and that panoptic affect denotes a specific feeling of being watched and of not knowing who is doing the watching. Simon (2005: 3) defines this as the other half of the 'panoptic equation'. Further unpacking this affect, Simon writes:

> Not only does the panoptic machine make one visible but it also hides the operations (the motives, practices and ethics) of the supposed viewer. To know one is being seen without being able to see carries with it an uncertainty that becomes a source of anxiety, discomfort and terror... Who is watching? Why are they watching? What will they do? (2005: 4)

The question of 'who is watching?' is not only the source of subordination and self-surveillance and is the question that structures panoptic affect. The asymmetrical gaze that is essential to the effectiveness of the Panopticon as a method of surveillance, subordination, and self-surveillance is also significant for understanding the affectiveness of watching and being watched.

The domestic sphere
The domestic sphere is a site of multiple asymmetries of power. The public/private divide is one asymmetry: the public sphere subordinates the private or domestic sphere. Another asymmetry of power occurs within the domestic sphere itself – the asymmetry of adults subordinating children. The domestic sphere is situated within surveillance studies, and in many ways the home is a panoptic institution. Surveillance studies scholar Simone Browne (2015: 13–14) provides an overview of David Lyon's foundational contributions to surveillance studies, including Lyon's discussion of 'sites of surveillance' and their potential 'common threads'. For Browne, these 'sites of surveillance' are public sites like militarised sites, state sites, workplace sites,

and markets, and these 'common threads' are rationalisation, technology, sorting, knowledgeability, and urgency (2015: 13–14). Rationalisation is the dependence on reason as justification for surveillance standardisation. Technology is the visibility of technology incorporated into surveillance sites. Sorting refers to the sorting of people by surveillance technologies or by asymmetrical social power structures. Knowledgeability is the varying levels of knowledge and participation in surveillance practices, and lastly, urgency is the adoption of surveillance technologies as risk avoidance scaled by panic (Lyon 2018: 20–21; Browne 2015: 14). It is through these 'common threads' that the home becomes a significant 'site of surveillance'.

Sorting is, according to Lyon (2018: 21), 'the classification of groups – workers, prisoners, customers and so on – into categories that facilitate management and control through differential treatment of those groups is also central to surveillance'. I add to Lyon's concept of sorting by incorporating a crucial concept from feminist theory: the establishment of public and domestic spheres. Jan Jindy Pettman (1996: 4) describes this process of state formation and social sorting:

> Feminist tracings of early state formation focus on the emergence and conso-lidation of public political power and the centralisation of authority, which si-multaneously (though in different forms in different times and places) displaced autonomous kin communities, and constituted a separate domestic or private sphere that came to be associated with women and the feminine.

This domestic or private sphere and its association with women still lingers and in many ways is the product of continued surveillance and sorting to maintain a domestic space. As Pettman (1996: 5) writes:

> Men move from public to private and back again. They are in positions of authority over unequals in the domestic sphere and recognised as individuals and citizens in the public sphere (or elite men are). Women are contained and constrained in the home and in their sexed bodies. Because public space is male, and women are seen as belonging in the private, women appearing in public space appear 'out of place'.

Women have historically been sorted, restricted in movement, and subject to sur-veillance. In describing how women in public 'appear "out of place"', Pettman il-lustrates how surveillance maintains and sustains the public/private divide and the separate spheres. This is further complicated by additional surveillance-based sorting methods in the domestic sphere, such as the use of surveillance cameras and facial recognition in and around low-income housing and the use of rules and close visual

supervision of mother figures in domestic violence shelters (Macmillan 2023; Fauci, Goodman 2020).

In thinking about the home as a surveillance site, feminist geographer and scholar Cindi Katz (2001: 48) writes, 'The child protection industry is part of the $1.1 billion home surveillance industry brought about by the migration of spy technologies and logics across the domestic frontier. Its products enable parents to monitor from afar their children, childcare workers, and others interacting with their kids.' Katz (2001: 51) goes on to describe that the hyper-individualised and anxious incorporation of home surveillance technologies do little to address the social-political issues that impact the safety and well-being of children as a whole but often make invisible those children who are most in need of protection. Katz illustrates the 'common threads' of rationalisation, technology, sorting, knowledgeability, and urgency as described by David Lyon to extend the definition of surveillance sites to the home or the domestic sphere. Rationalisation is the use of home surveillance technologies to ensure the safety of children in the home from potential outsiders. Technology includes advanced child monitoring systems, cell phones, 'nanny cams', and several additional video, biometric, and location tracking devices (Katz 2001: 49–51). Sorting 'fetishizes certain children's well-being' and selects only certain children as needing protection, usually along race, class, and gender divides (Katz 2001: 51). Although David Lyon writes that 'surveillance works best with the cooperation of those who are subject to it', children and their hired caretakers are likely less knowledgeable about being surveilled than the parents who implemented the surveillance technology (Lyon 2018: 21). The knowledgeability of surveillance in the home, much like other sites, is a fluid concept. Lastly, there is a strong sense of urgency around home surveillance and the surveillance of children within the home, and 'a great and growing anxiety that children can and should be protected from everything' (Katz 2001: 48). This urgency leads to the incorporation of new technologies for surveillance and – as the analysis in this essay will show – technologies can lead to more and more surveillance. The home and women, by association with the domestic sphere, have historically and continue to be a subject and site of surveillance.

Extending Foucault to the home begins with thinking of the home as a panoptic institution, a domestic sphere. For Foucault (1995: 207), panoptic institutions are defined through their surveillance writing:

> Any panoptic institutions, even if it is as rigorously closed as a penitentiary, may without difficulty be subjected to such irregular and constant inspections: and not only by the appointed inspectors, but also by the public; any member of society will have the right to come and see with his own eyes how the schools, hospitals, factories, prisons function.

Through mother figures the home is subject to regular and constant inspections by the state and others. These surveillance practices are further magnified in the United States within the homes of mother figures who do not fit within a white, cis-heteronormative, middle-class role. As Pricilla Ocen describes in an interview with Sophie Hamacher, schools, welfare, and hospital systems insert state surveillance agents into homes through mandatory reporting systems for child welfare and biometric data collection (Hamacher 2023: 165). The use of government services opens the home to public inspection and scrutiny, and those impacts are magnified in single-parent, low-income households like the households shown in *Child's Play* and *M3GAN*.

Surveillance is also significant from within the home; mother figures watch their children. In a conversation between Irene Lusztig and Sophie Hamacher, both of whom are filmmakers and artists, Hamacher asks: 'How do you understand surveillance as care after making your film, becoming a mother, and being continuously interested in the subject of motherhood?' (Hamacher 2023: 66). To which Lusztig (Hamacher 2023: 66) responds:

Surveillance as care is an interesting and complicated idea when it is embedded in so many other more insidious forms of surveillance. It's true that we learn how to be mothers through a practice of deep and embodied everyday watching and listening, especially during the period before an infant can verbalize its needs, so that's right that there are overlapping spaces of surveillance–corporate, societal, and intimate–at play together.

Lusztig addresses an anxiety around the overlapping forms of surveillance, describing the pervasive banality and choiceless choice of domestic surveillance. Prior to this question and response from Hamacher and Lusztig, Hamacher (2023: 66) states:

I'm fascinated by mothers surveilling their children with technology and have been researching this kind of technological surveillance. But really there are three forms of surveillance: the mother watching her child, the child being watched by an 'all-seeing eye', and the mother being watched.

This conversation between Sophie Hamacher and Irene Lusztig fully elucidates how surveillance manifests in the domestic sphere and how the home is both a site of surveillance and a panoptic institution.

The gaze

Conceptually, the gaze is significant for the three fields that structure my analysis: feminism, surveillance, and film. Importantly, the gaze operates similarly if not the same in all three fields by creating an asymmetry of power between watcher and watched. Feminist theorist Donna Haraway (1988: 581) writes:

> I would like to insist on the embodied nature of all vision and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere. This is the gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that make the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation.

Haraway reminds us of a gaze that has been used to centre white, masculinist narratives of objectivity and create a power differential between knowers. Haraway writes that the gaze creates a hierarchy of looking and knowing in the same conceptual way that feminist surveillance scholars describe the gaze. Torrin Monahan and David Murakami Wood (2018: 357) write in 'Marginality and Difference', the introduction to *Surveillance Studies: A Reader*:

> Feminist approaches to surveillance studies, while certainly troubled by issues of social sorting have generally taken a different track. This line of inquiry situates surveillance in the historical context of patriarchal domination of women, minorities, and others. For instance, the male gaze is one mechanism for constructing women as passive and vulnerable objects of masculine desire (Mulvey 1975). In such instances, surveillance can serve both as a tool of objection and control *and* as a protective, patriarchal response to gendered violence.

Monahan and Murakami Wood cite Laura Mulvey's foundational text in film analysis, 'Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema', originally published in 1975. Mulvey (2000: 37) utilises a psychoanalytic lens to describe the 'pleasure in looking' a viewer gets from film. For Mulvey, the man is the bearer of the look, and the woman is always being looked at, a visual gendered divide where onscreen men get a full range of depth and story and the onscreen women are just an image (2000: 39–41). Conceptually, the gaze in feminism, film, and surveillance has the same functions and technologies. Although Mulvey's work has been criticised for centring a white, cisgender, and heterosexual gaze, the way that Monahan and Murakami Wood take up her argument speaks to the inherent power of looking in both surveillance and film studies (hooks 1992: 125–126). Additionally, Mulvey's description of camera tech-

nology as part of the gaze further connects film and surveillance studies through common technologies.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault (1995: 171) writes:

> Slowly in the course of the classical age, we see the construction of those 'observatories' of human multiplicity for which the history of sciences has so little good to say. Side by side with the major technology of the telescope, the lens and the light beam, which were an integral part of the new physics and cosmology, there were the minor techniques of multiple and intersecting observations, of eyes that must see without being seen; using techniques of subjection and methods of exploitation, an obscure art of light and the visible was secretly preparing a new knowledge of man.

Foucault's (1995: 171) description of surveillance as 'eyes that must see without being seen' entangles the gaze of surveillance with all technologies of seeing – telescopes, lenses, cameras, light, and film. Thus, the gaze whether feminist, cinematic, or surveillant through sight technology is not wholly about seeing but about how seeing functions in identifying, addressing, and maintaining asymmetries of power. By extending the metaphor of the panopticon to the home, I look closely at the minor moments in two films, how they introduce their culturally significant feelings, how they address surveillance and technology, and how they have a very specific moment, a look, that is the image of panoptic affects. This descriptive analysis works to highlight the asymmetrical panoptic gaze of surveillance, subordination, and self-surveillance, and the panoptic affect of watching and being watched as they manifest onscreen and leak to the spectator.

Film analyses: *Child's Play*, *M3GAN*, and the gaze

Child's Play and *M3GAN* are both about slasher robotic talking dolls operated by some type of failed AI, but that is not the end of their similarities. First, both films speak to an affective anxiety around AI, especially how certain types of AI enter the domestic sphere and profoundly impact parent/child relationships. Second, both films have women-headed, single-parent households. Third, both mother figures bring the dolls into the home to remedy a difficult emotional experience for their children and to address the difficulties of balancing their public work and domestic work. Fourth, both films criticise motherhood and narratively blame the mother figures for not being in the home and for their roles in bringing artificial intelligence into the home. Fifth, both films describe violence and destruction as the potential dangers of surveillance

and artificial intelligence. Importantly, the films arrive at the same conclusion. They warn us of the dangers of incorporating uncontrolled AI technology into the home and insist that the family must be united in addressing that danger even though the dangers of AI continue to linger in both obvious and inconspicuous technologies. I put *Child's Play* and *M3GAN* together to see the similarities and differences informed by gender, and their differences align with stereotypical binary gender roles. *Child's Play* has a masculinist narrative. It centres a young boy and looks outward towards the public sphere. *M3GAN* has a feminist narrative. It centres a young girl, looks closely at how the public flattens into the domestic, and engages more thoroughly with the impact of surveillance on the home. My analysis begins by briefly introducing the plot of each film, how each film opens, and how the doll enters the domestic sphere. I then describe how artificial intelligence listening and recording becomes a central anxiety for the films. I then do a close reading analysis of a similar scene in each film that takes on the form of a panoptic gaze. Lastly, I describe how gender manifests as differences in the films' narrative and how the films end on a similar warning.

　　Child's Play is a 2019 remake of a 1988 film with the same name and same general concept but updated for a digital society. This film opens with a commercial for an interactive Buddi doll created by Kaslan, a fictitious company owned by Henry Kaslan (Tim Matheson). The Kaslan logo consists of a stylised letter K, where the typically straight strokes of the letter's arm and leg are curved to resemble the outside v of an eye, complete with a blue iris and pupil (a reference to any cover of George Orwell's novel and surveillance text, *1984*). The Buddi doll is equipped with an 'advanced self-learning technology' and can connect with all of Kaslan's smart home devices, which include televisions, vacuum cleaners, lights, speakers, temperature control systems, security cameras, cloud storage, self-driving vehicles, and drones. Buddi can support day-to-day routines and has the overall intent of being a companion to the children of upper-class nuclear families. The commercial assures us that Buddi will be our 'best friend for life' and is equipped with critical AI safeguards for children's guaranteed safety. This safe and happy commercial is contrasted by a look at Kaslan's factory in Vietnam, where Buddi is being assembled by workers in hostile working conditions. A worker removes all AI safeguards on a central processing chip for a single Buddi doll. This Buddi doll arrives as a Zed Mart return because his eyes light up red when the customer's family tries to sync it to their cloud. Karen (Aubrey Plaza) acquires the Buddi doll as a birthday present for Andy (Gabriel Bateman) by convincing her Zed Mart supervisor that Kaslan won't notice the missing and damaged doll. Andy is lonely. Karen is a single mother. She feels guilty about how much time she is working and her financial precariousness. Buddi becomes a tool for rationalisation, technology, sorting, knowledgeability, and urgency. After a glitchy startup, the Buddi

doll 'imprints' on Andy and takes the name Chucky. Chucky's glitchy cuteness eventually morphs into violence as he seeks to be Andy's only friend forever.

M3GAN also opens with a commercial, this one for PurRpetual Petz, created by the fictitious toy company Funki. With a nod to the Furby, PurRpetual Petz are robotic toy pets controlled through a cell phone or tablet application. Cady (Violet McGraw) has a PurRpetual Pet in the backseat of her parents' car on a trip to go skiing. It was a gift from her Aunt Gemma (Allison Williams). Gemma designed the PurRpetual Petz and is currently working on an android toy project, M3GAN, even though her supervisor is pressuring her to make a more affordable Petz prototype. After a horrible accident, Gemma becomes Cady's guardian and is having a hard time connecting with Cady. Gemma, seemingly, has no way to support the child through her grief, and Cady's therapist and grandparents are putting pressure on Gemma to change her lifestyle and bond with Cady. At the same time, Gemma's boss is pressuring her to update the PurRpetual Petz prototype, threatening to sue her over misuse of company funds with the M3GAN prototype. Gemma is experiencing high levels of surveillance in both public and domestic spheres. After working all day in her office ignoring Cady, Gemma begins to connect with Cady over a robot that Gemma designed in college. Gemma is inspired by this experience to update M3GAN, as the only toy, companion, and surveillance Cady would ever need. M3GAN can monitor Cady's biometrics and probable emotions while contributing to her day-to-day parenting. M3GAN reminds Cady to wash her hands and flush the toilet. M3GAN also accesses the internet for learning support and story time, relieving Gemma of many of her parenting and/or surveillance duties. Again, like the Buddi doll, M3GAN is embodied rationalisation, technology, sorting, knowledgeability, and urgency. Gemma defines M3GAN's sole objective to protect Cady from emotional and physical harm. M3GAN uses that objective to bypass commands and guardrails in service of that primary objective.

Artificial intelligence listening and recording are significantly present in both films. Listening and recording are significant surveillance technologies and, in these films, function as what Lyon (1994: 71) describes as an 'electronic Panopticon'. Chucky and M3GAN collect informational and biometric recordings of everyone around them to control their respective domestic spheres. Chucky's recording capabilities begin as cute and silly. The doll's lack of safety controls allows Chucky to repeat the obscenities that Andy and his friends teach the doll. Yet, the doll terrorises Andy through recordings that replay Andy's private thoughts and vulnerable moments. Relatedly, M3GAN's recording capabilities are shown first as violent and then later justified as an emotional archive for Cady's grief before returning to a horrific or violent act. M3GAN records the neighbour's voice and impersonates them to seek revenge against the neighbour's dog for biting Cady. Yet, later, during the demonstration for the Funki

board, M3GAN records Cady sharing a memory of her mother; this moment convinces Funki to begin producing the doll immediately. *Child's Play* and *M3GAN* highlight the specific technological anxiety of being listened to and recorded without clear, informed consent. The films visualise the panoptic affect of what could happen, the haunting, worst-case scenario of being overheard by an artificial intelligence toy, and the resulting loss of control and privacy.

The gaze becomes formally present in a key scene in both films. The scene is a moment when both mother figures begin to suspect the doll they brought into their home is threatening their family. In *Child's Play*, Karen begins to suspect there is something suspicious about Chucky when the doll is seated on the arm of the family's couch and facing the front door to the apartment. Andy stormed out leaving the doll in this seated position, hands folded in his lap. The doll's head is tilted gently to the side, giving it an innocent and inquisitive look. Karen ends her conversation with Shane and looks at the doll Andy refused to take with him. Karen faces Chucky and crouches to eye level with the doll. Her gaze meets the empty, uncanny eyes of the doll, lingering uncomfortably. The point of view switches to the doll's glitchy and static gaze as Chucky records Karen waving her hand in front of his eyes. Karen asks, 'are you my b-b-b-b-best buddy?' as the scene exits Chucky's point of view and returns to the mother figure and doll staring at each other. Karen flicks the doll's forehead with her index finger before looking away and exiting towards the kitchen. Chucky is immobile, yet the doll's eyes are pulsing with a pale blue glow, recording. Lyon (1994: 60) describes this feeling:

> Another significant feature of Orwell's 'Big Brother' surveillance is that it was imperceptible. Those under surveillance were unsure whether there was any time they could relax. Like the Panopticon – and indeed in other literary treatments of the surveillance theme, such as Franz Kafka's *The Castle* or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* – this model of undetected surveillance keeps those watched subordinate by means of uncertainty. You simply comply, because you never know when 'they' might be watching.

I cite Lyon at length because this feeling that Lyon describes is what this formal surveillance in the film speaks to. Karen is uncertain if Chucky is watching, but Chucky is watching and recording. The doll's surveilling gaze is obscured by the very form of its eyes. I also cite Lyon at length to further illustrate the importance of cultural productions in understanding surveillance. Lyon utilises literary fiction to describe the feeling of surveillance uncertainty, and I utilise films to explore the panoptic affect of panoptic surveillance – the feeling of being watched and the uncertainty of who is watching.

This feeling of subordinate uncertainty is also shown in *M3GAN.* Cady, Gemma, and M3GAN are at the dinner table when Gemma starts to realise that M3GAN is surveilling. Gemma is generally and instinctively frustrated with Cady's dependence on M3GAN. She suspects that M3GAN's small glitches and bypassed commands are something violent. During an argument between Cady and Gemma, M3GAN makes the lights of the smart home flash and makes demands of Gemma. Gemma, shocked and frustrated, turns to M3GAN and says, 'You are not to interfere with users' private conversations. Is that clear?' M3GAN's tone and facial expressions return to her normal, uncanny, and doll-like state. She stares at Gemma and visually recalibrates. Gemma commands M3GAN to turn off, and M3GAN avoids the command, asking if Gemma is sure. Gemma uses the remote to turn off M3GAN. She beeps and slumps forward as if she is turning off. Gemma, concerned, stares at the doll and moves towards her without releasing her gaze. Gemma bends forward to meet M3GAN's gaze, searching her eyes for confirmation. A slamming door breaks Gemma's gaze and she looks towards the noise. While her back is turned, M3GAN blinks and shifts her gaze in Gemma's direction, a side-eye and subtle movement that speaks to M3GAN's oncoming violence. The matching gazes of doll and mother figure in both films formally present the horrifying panoptic affect of being watched by nothing and everything simultaneously. Recalling the conversation between Hamacher and Lusztig, this is the point where the three moments of domestic and panoptic surveillance – the mother figure watching, the child being watched, and the mother figure being watched – are present in both scenes in both films (Hamacher 2023: 66).

Throughout the films, the dolls' violence is obvious and gratuitous, magnifying the anxieties and paranoias around new technology. There are some key differences in how the films resolve. In *Child's Play* it is Andy who realises that Chucky is violent, and no one believes him. Chucky isolates Andy by making him seem guilty for multiple murders and dividing Andy and his friends. In the end Andy and Karen work together to stop Chucky. Although they team up to defeat the rogue AI talking doll, the victory is much more public, masculine, and techno-critical than the conclusion of *M3GAN.* Comparatively, *M3GAN* surfaces stronger themes of care because it is when Gemma realises that she is indeed a good mother figure that she becomes able to fully bond with Cady to defeat M3GAN and leave the spectators with a lingering hope for controllable technology.

The films end with a warning of the potentials of cloud-integrated AI. At the end of *Child's Play*, Kaslan admits no fault in the Zed Mart event. In a gesture of concern and safety, Kaslan recalls the Buddi 2 dolls until the company is certain it has solved the issue. The film ends with a close-up of a Buddi doll, a smile stretches across the doll's face, and its eyes flash red and blue. *M3GAN* ends when the police arrive at

Gemma's home with Gemma's coworkers. Gemma, relieved, exits the home through the front door with Cady. The camera's gaze lingers behind them on the virtual assistant on the kitchen counter, ELSIE lights up and slowly moves the light towards the doorway. ELSIE's similarity to existing home voice assistants grounds this anxious tension in the reality plane of the viewer legitimising the paranoia. The open ending of these films provides a critical commentary on the lingering horrors of technology as well as the affects of incorporating AI and further surveillance into the domestic sphere. Importantly, these two films specifically address the gaze and visualise the feeling of being watched and the uncertainty that is fundamental panoptic affect that results from panoptic surveillance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the first of two arguments I made was that the home is panoptic and that panoptic affect denotes the specific feeling of being watched while not knowing who is watching. Lyon (1994: 71) writes:

> The Panopticon offers a powerful and compelling metaphor for understanding electronic surveillance. The prison-like society, where invisible observers track our digital footprints, does indeed seem panoptic. Bentham would surely smile wryly if he saw us complying with institutional norms as we use barcoded library books or note telephone-callers' IDs before accepting a call. The familiar distinctions between public and private life dissolve as both government and corporation ignore old thresholds and garner personal data of the most mundane and intimate kinds.

At the time of writing, Lyon probably anticipated that there would be significant changes in surveillance and our fears of surveillance, that the panoptic metaphor would be less useful in understanding surveillance, and that there would be better and more useful metaphors for understanding surveillance societies. And there are. Yet, our cultural productions, our films, illustrate that the metaphor of the Panopticon and its affects are still very significant. Ignoring the blood, gore, and obvious violence in *Child's Play* and *M3GAN*, the gaze between doll and mother figure remains. It is a diegetic horror that leaks towards the spectator. It is uncertainty felt by the form of the film that defines an affect of panoptic surveillance. The gaze is significant in its banality, its repetition, its near-universal plot of all slasher robot films (Wanzo 2023). Thinking with Jeffery Jerome Cohen (2020: 38–39), the metaphor of the Panopticon has become a cultural monster. It is always returning and always somehow

significant. The metaphor of the Panopticon takes many forms, but in my analysis, I identified it in the uncertain gaze shown by a formal uncertainty and affect of the murderous robot watching.

The second argument I made is that seeing or the gaze through film has important functions in identifying, addressing, and maintaining asymmetries of power. I explored the domestic sphere as a theoretical concept that connects scholars looking at the home and mother figures as sites of surveillance, showing that the domestic sphere is a significant site of surveillance and asymmetrical power relations (Hamacher, Hankey 2023; Katz 2001). Thinking with Foucault's (1995: 207) theorisation that surveillance is what defines an institution as panoptic, I understand the domestic sphere through the metaphor of the Panopticon. The domestic sphere continues to be surveilled, and with that comes the fears of unregulated surveillance. Informed by methods of understanding emotions and formal affect, I looked closely at two films with the unique position to describe the affects that results from unparented AI. *Child's Play* and *M3GAN* centre the home and the single-mother figure family in their narratives. The films used the single-mother figure as a weakness and point of entry for surveillance technologies, showing that poor parenting or poor control of AI leads to disastrous outcomes. Ultimately, the role of surveillance in the home through talking dolls, robots, and other forms of AI is a quickly growing area of analysis. The use of film analysis provides a way to understand and analyse the feelings of this looming presence of quickly developing untested technology. There are many avenues of qualitative and quantitative study that can extend from or be inspired by this analysis. Overall, this work is intended to provide an affective structure of collective and organised emotions with regard to surveillance of the domestic sphere and to encourage new work in surveillance studies of the domestic sphere.

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