Zooming in on the panopticon: CCTV operator practices at Schiphol Airport

Pieter Wagenaar and Kees Boersma (f.p.wagenaar@vu.nl), VU University Amsterdam

On traveling to this conference we’ve experienced it again: airports are ‘heterotopias’. They are places:

“that are in relation with all other sites, but in such a way to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (Foucault 1986: 24). The airport connects the national and the international (also the national to itself), the domestic and the foreign, in a way that problematizes those connections’ (Salter 2007).

Unsurprisingly, then, a heteropia like Schiphol airport is heavily surveilled. Not only are we questioned before boarding, are our identities checked, our clothes frisked, our belongings searched, and our bodies scanned, we are constantly watched as well: through CCTV. An airport is not only a heterotopia, but, to borrow yet another term from Foucault, also a ‘panopticon’.

Behind the screens of the CCTV monitors ‘social sorting’ takes place. The state is watching us to decide whether we are fit to use the airport or not. Or isn’t it? As it happens, it is CCTV operators who do the actual sorting. They can be officers of the Dutch military police, but also employees of various private security companies. And, as always, they form communities of practice, that have their own rules for sorting - which might differ enormously from each other - and might have difficulties cooperating (Norris 1999).

Which symbols, stories, and narratives do the Schiphol Airport control room operators construct to do their sorting? How are these transmitted between control rooms? Which consequences does this have for the ‘all-seeing eyes’ of the state? In this paper we present our first findings.