



The Road to Southend Pier  
by Ross Clark

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## The Talking Lamp-Post

The blurb on the back of this book, as it happens, uses a bit of artistic licence: there is nothing accidental about my encounter with a talking lamp-post. I had been wanting to converse with a talking Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) system for months – ever since the then Home Secretary, John Reid, announced in April 2007 a £500,000 scheme to install the devices in 20 towns and cities across England in a bid to cut anti-social behaviour. The cameras, he said, would be watching out for anti-social behaviour which, when spotted, would be countered with a blast over a loudspeaker along the lines: “Hey, you, put down that traffic cone/pick up that burger carton/zip up your flies NOW.” “We want to remind people about what is and what is not, respectful behaviour,” warned Louise Casey, co-ordinator of the government’s ‘Respect’ agenda, “Act anti-socially and face the shame of being publicly embarrassed.”

Intrigued, I wanted to see the cameras for myself and speak to the people operating them. So, naturally, I contacted Middlesbrough Council, which had been running a pilot scheme for several months. It claimed, somewhat improbably, that the trial had achieved “100 per cent success” in persuading people not to drop litter after having a dressing-down from one of the lamp-posts. Yet in spite of this apparent success, a council spokeswoman seemed loathe to let me come and have a look, complaining that “we seem to have everyone wanting to look at our cameras”.

The fact that Britain’s talking CCTV cameras have become an eighth wonder of the world made me even more determined to seek them out. So I tried Northampton instead. The Midlands

town had just put out a press release advertising its new talking CCTV cameras which, it proclaimed, would address miscreants with admonishments delivered by the voice of two local disc-jockeys, Jagger and Woody. The DJs, it said, had been persuaded to join the fight against crime after being attacked in Northampton town centre, a resolute Jagger adding: “You get all these do-gooders saying it’s like big brother being watched but if you do nothing wrong then you have got nothing to worry about have you.”

Misbehaving in Northampton certainly sounds a scary business. The town’s ‘cutting edge’ security system has 495 CCTV cameras, according to the council. The bumf goes on:

“The CCTV system is staffed 24 hours a day, 365 days a year by operators who are trained and licensed by the Security Industry Authority for public space surveillance. All images are transmitted back to the Northampton control room by fibre optic cables, recorded and held for a maximum of 31 days. The CCTV cameras are controlled by a touch view system which enables a dedicated team of CCTV operators to control the entire network of cameras by switching from one location to another or to zoom in on any area.”

You’d think, then, that Northampton Council would be keen to show off its cameras. Yet like Middlesbrough it seemed strangely cool towards my attempts to invite myself into the control room to watch Jagger and Woody at work, shaming Northampton’s jobs. Twice I requested some more information on Northampton’s talking CCTV system. Twice I was told somebody would get back to me, but nobody did.

There seemed only one thing for it: if Northampton City Council’s CCTV operators weren’t going to entertain me, I would

have to don a hoody, head to the town and pee in a litter bin to try to elicit some sort of response from them. So, would I get caught? Would, the moment I undid my zipper, the voices of Jagger and Woody ring out in my ears – “Hey, don’t you dare piss on our town” – followed by a swoop by Northampton’s finest cops and, for me, a night in the cells? Would I end up like the teenage girls who, to round off a day out in Worthing in August 2007, decided to expose their breasts to the town’s CCTV cameras and were threatened with prosecution as a result?

My doubts were raised when I learned that besides Jagger and Woody, I might find myself admonished by a five year old. The towns chosen by the government to have the talking cameras installed were trying to recruit primary school children for the task of shaming the nation’s drunks and louts. Competitions were being organised to find children with the finest – or perhaps most nannying – voices. The winners, in the manner of Stalin’s Russia, would then be recruited to keep wayward grown-ups on the straight and narrow.

Or would they? Was the Home Office really planning to staff CCTV control rooms with five year olds who would be expected to sit up until after midnight surveying banks of screens of vomiting, urinating louts, and shrilly berating them? I thought it unlikely – and I was right. Of course, what the children were being recruited to do was to make a series of pre-recorded messages. The more I delved, the less it came to sound like the cutting edge of crime-fighting.

I arrive in Northampton’s largely deserted Market Square at 10pm on a Tuesday evening with a full bladder – and much apprehension. Where are these cameras, and what are they going to say to me? “Excuse me, Sir, that’s a litter bin, not a lavatory”? “Oi, you! Do up your f\*\*\*ing zipper, you f\*\*\*ing f\*\*\*!”? And if I don’t comply, how long will it take the cops to get to me? I find

a lamp-post, affixed with a loudspeaker and a prominent notice warning “CCTV radio watch area”. Nervously, I unzip. Then, after half a minute hosing away, up I zip again. And off I go.

Still I half-expect Robocop to arrive, but he never does. Let’s just get this straight: I have walked into the heart of one of Britain’s – and the world’s – most surveilled-upon towns. I have peed into a litter bin – and I have damn well got away with it. Is this just beginner’s luck?

I turn left into Abington Street, straight into another ‘CCTV radio watch area’. Two shifty youths are loitering there. One of them approaches me, and I brace myself for a mugging. Will I lose my wallet, or will the youth run off after a blast from one of the talking lamp-posts? It turns out, thankfully, that he is a mugger of modest ambition. “Oi, you got 10 pence on you?” he asks. “No, sorry, I haven’t,” I say. “You f\*\*\*ing pr\*\*k!” he shouts as I hurry away. And still nothing from Jagger and Woody – or even a ticking-off from a five year old schoolchild.

Further up the street, a gang of louts is hanging around, drunk. Two of them take a fancy to a potted tree, which has been planted to add a little *rus in urbe*. They grab it and haul it over, so that its broken trunk ends up at a 45 degree angle, with soil spilled over the pavement. Come on Jagger, come on Woody, I want to scream: say something for Christ’s sake! But they don’t. Next, I walk up to Sheep Street. There, underneath a sign reading “Still under surveillance – illegal dumping costs you” stands, er, a pile of discarded rubbish bags.

And so it went on: just a typical night out in an English town centre. By the time I made my way through the labyrinth of soulless underpasses by the bus station and safely back to my car I have spent two hours wandering around Northampton’s town centre, and not once do I hear so much as a recorded message from Jagger and Woody. But more to the point, neither, save for a

couple who briefly turn up to deal with a minor traffic accident, do I see a single police officer. This is one of Britain's 'surveillance towns' – kitted-out, so I'm told, with a remote-control policing system – but it has virtually none of the real thing.

Northampton's CCTV system might catch you peeing in a litter bin, but more likely it won't. It is designed to give you the impression that everything you do in the town is under the gaze of some watchful law-enforcement officer – when the reality is that most of the screens spend most of their time unwatched. Northampton is a latterday *Panopticon*: a prison designed by the nineteenth century lawyer Jeremy Bentham to fool inmates into thinking that they were being constantly watched. The prison consisted of a central tower, whose windows, fitted with blinds, gave onto hundreds of cells, each one containing a prisoner. A guard in the tower could easily see each prisoner, the cells being backlit by the windows, but the prisoners could not see the guard. Intended result: prisoners had to behave all the time, thanks to what Bentham described as a 'sentiment of invisible omnipresence'. "Allow me to construct a prison on this model," he added. "I will be the gaoler. You will see by the memoire, this gaoler will have no salary, will cost nothing to the nation."

In 1811, the British government almost let Bentham have his way. It commissioned a panopticon to be built, only to cancel the project the following year. Its successors, on the other hand, have not been so shy. Modern Britain is one big panopticon. From our town centres to our schools, our roads to our airport lounges, the sentiment of invisible omnipresence rules. Even in a bed and breakfast in rural Wales I was happily pouring out the Corn Flakes, only to catch sight of a webcam peering out from behind the cereal boxes. Where once we fancied that God could see all that we did – and judge us accordingly, come the time – now we have an army of uniformed CCTV operators.

Does it matter? And, equally to the point, does it actually work? Has life in Britain's panopticon made us better people, worse people, or don't we even realise, or care, what is going on? Or rather, have we just got wise to the panopticon, and realised that Big Brother probably isn't really watching us at all?

Northampton has given me some kind of answer, but I want to find out more. I want to turn my own gaze upon the CCTV cameras and ask just what is going on in Britain's panopticon?