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New York Diary

## Take that, Big Brother: The cameras have turned

SIMON HOUPT

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Should we call this the age of the citizenrazzi?

A week ago last Friday, during the monthly Critical Mass bike ride around the city, a rider zipping down Seventh Avenue through Times Square was arrested and charged with several offences, including attempted assault, resisting arrest and disorderly conduct. The arresting officer, a rookie cop named Patrick Pogan, reported that Christopher Long had ridden his bicycle directly into him, causing Pogan to fall to the ground and suffer lacerations on both arms. Long was held for 26 hours before being released without bail.

Late that Sunday night, however, a fellow rider posted a video of the alleged assault on YouTube that suggested the officer was living in upside-down world. The video appears to show it was in fact Pogan who had assaulted Long, slamming the rider off his bike with a horrific body check that left the cop entirely unscathed.

Hours after its posting, Pogan was stripped of his badge and gun, and placed on desk duty pending an investigation.

Meanwhile, the 1:10-minute clip quickly went viral, reaching the top five of all videos watched in the United States on YouTube last week. Millions saw it there and on other sites, including Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who suggested that the officer's action was, "totally over the top and inappropriate."

Maybe NYPD station houses should start subscribing to US Weekly. For years now, the magazine has featured paparazzi snaps of celebrities caught on the street engaged in everything from quaffing mochaccinos to flaunting their Brazilian waxes. Surely the cops recognize by now that everyone's filming everything all the time.

Underscoring the point, this week marks the 20th anniversary of the Tompkins Square Park police riot, which began at around 1 a.m. on Aug. 7, 1988, when the NYPD tried to uproot a sprawling, unsanitary tent city of homeless people from the 10.5-acre green space. But rather than merely clearing the East Village park, officers swarmed the whole area, supported by horses and helicopters, brutally attacking innocent people who had gathered on nearby streets.

While many newspapers and TV stations covered the event, only one man captured the full scope of the infamy and helped make it a turning point in the city's recent history. Across four hours of tape shot with his early generation camcorder, Clayton Patterson, a local artist and street photographer, documented dozens of instances of police brutality. After a protracted legal battle in which Patterson was threatened with 90 days in jail for refusing to hand over the original tape to the D.A., the NYPD admitted its sins (some of them, anyway) and shook up its ranks. Numerous cops were released from the force. Patterson visited Oprah Winfrey's

couch to spread the news that, "little brother is watching Big Brother."

Tomorrow night, Patterson will appear at Webster Hall for a screening of *Captured*, a new film about his life. The documentary traces his history back to Calgary, where he and his common-law wife, Elsa Rensaa, were art-school misfits who left town in 1979 for New York, settling on the Lower East Side. Patterson, a gentle bear of a man who could pass for a member of a motorcycle gang, set out to document his adopted neighbourhood: the heroin users and hardcore bands, the drag queens and crack addicts, the immigrants and AIDS victims living in the shadows. To date, he estimates he has about one million photographs.

Patterson never had much trouble gaining access to the sort of people who might normally be suspicious of a camera in their midst - drug dealers and users, gang members, others on the margins of society - in part because he shoots without judgment. But *Captured* shows that newcomers to the neighbourhood - like developers putting up \$3-million condos on the Bowery - are suspicious of his camera. Ever since that fateful night in 1988 when Patterson became one of the earliest citizen journalists, he has been in the NYPD's sights. Arrests are a regular part of his life.

Two weeks ago, he was arrested again while taking pictures of the FDNY responding to a small fire alarm on Ludlow Street. (There was no fire, just smoke.) "There was no police line," he said. "People were allowed to walk through. Kids were hanging out." And yet he ended up in cuffs. "The cops have this serious need to stop anyone from taking photos," he said. "It would be a little ridiculous and funny if it was not so sinister."

This comes at a time when police forces around the world are wiring their cities with cameras in public spaces. Last week, New York announced the city's 911 emergency phone centre would soon begin accepting video and still picture transmissions to help track crimes.

The fear among civil libertarians is that a city swarming in video cameras will lead to their misuse by the authorities, and that in any case legal behaviour should not be tracked. But with last week's YouTube revelation, which is only the latest incident in which people charged by the NYPD have used eyewitness video to turn the tables on the force, it seems the cameras may in fact be the most effective weapon against abuse by authorities.

Besides, in the end, the antagonists do have to learn to live together. There's a lovely moment toward the end of *Captured* when Patterson invites a retired NYPD narcotics officer, Scott Dillin, back to his gallery on Essex Street, and they share a chuckle over when they were on opposite sides of the Lower East Side fight. "I was always like, that scumbag's taking our picture," Dillin tells the camera. Flipping through some of Patterson's old photos, he sees a picture of himself and a couple of buddies, and laughs at the memories it conjures. "Want me to make copies of those?" asks Patterson. "Yeah," says Dillin. "That'd be great."