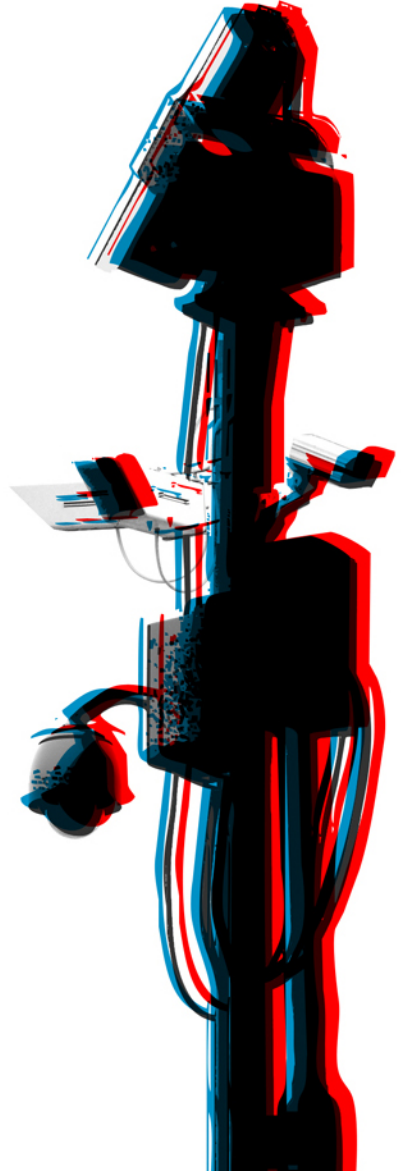


UN PROYECTO DE FUNDACIÓN RODRÍGUEZ + ZEMOS98

PANEL DE CONTROL

INTERRUPTORES CRÍTICOS

PARA UNA SOCIEDAD VIGILADA



ZEM
OS
98

COLECTIVO

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VIDEO SURVEILLANCE AS GENRE

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Fundación Rodríguez has operated as a collective since 1994. In that time, they have organised and co-ordinated a number contemporary culture and new media projects, always considering these activities to be an extension of their artistic work. The group always endeavours to adapt a project's conception to its execution, based on theoretical reflection that puts forward new curatorial formulas and new modes of production, diffusion and distribution of the current artistic reality. Over time, our work is becoming rooted in ideas like the dissolution of formats and transmitting free knowledge.

Abstract

Video surveillance cameras are an increasingly common presence in the city landscape – in street furniture and traffic monitoring towers and integrated into the architectural fabric. The images provided by these cameras can form subjective perceptions and “fictionalising digressions”, as they gradually increase their weight in the media universe and the social imaginary. Video surveillance thus becomes a narrative genre with subgenres that range from suspense to horror.

Keywords

Vision, invisible, gaze, narration, fictionalising, subjectivity, frame, film, editing, criminalisation, spectacle, Orwell, Huxley, disturb, distort.

Originally published in 2001 as part of *Videoscopia* (organised by Jordi Martorell and Lidia Porcar), this text is a revision of some of the keys to the project we presented at that event, and now becomes an essay for *Panel de Control*. The full project and all the additional documentation is available through the web site www.fundacionrdz.com

1.

The gradual introduction of surveillance cameras in public and private spaces, workplaces, and leisure and shopping areas is already such as to “invisibilise” these vision machines, which are ready to learn all about our habits, our “tics”, our desires and our intentions. This “wanting to know” turns the person observed into a “character” through the effects of the “fictionalising” gaze. We do it ourselves when we look at a screen and watch someone who doesn't know he's being observed. We exercise our power over him by imagining his life for a moment, where he comes from. We think with characteristic curiosity because we're curious by nature, by definition. But as we think we also desire outcomes, and this more complex and intricate feeling is one we have learnt.

That's the power of the narration mechanisms on which visual communication is based, working closely with our capacity for digression.

When evocative and narrative factors come together, our gaze becomes an interrogation, and this makes us find ourselves facing a “situation” or portrayal. This system of relationships, sometimes unconnected and others obvious, makes us think of video surveillance images as a fiction genre (which is sometimes internalised as desire, but other times can be taken to a parallel reality).

At the start of his essay *Candid Camera*, Paul Virilio wrote: “At the Second International Video Festival in Montbeliard in 1984, the Grand Prix went to a German film by Michael Klier called *Der Riese* (The Giant). This was a simple montage of images recorded by automatic surveillance cameras in major German cities (airports, roads, supermarkets...). Klier asserts that the surveillance video represents ‘the end and recapitulation’ of his art. Whereas in the news report the photographer (cameraman) remained the sole witness implicated in the business of documentation, here no one at all is implicated and the only danger from now on is that the eye of the camera may get smashed by the odd thug or terrorist.”

Virilio then talks about the evaporation of visual subjectivity into a kind of “permanent pancinema” that turns our ordinary acts into movie actions, as though we had come to terms with the fact that we are observed and this knowledge had become embedded into our daily life, and then goes on to develop the importance of visual and photographic devices in war

politics and the war industry. The idea of “perception” and “objectivity/subjectivity” are obviously involved when we speak about these kinds of automatic devices, always-open eyes that are there to record everything, in contrast to human perception.

Talking about the instinctive human glance in *The Vision Machine*, Virilio also says: “(...) The space of sight is accordingly not Newton’s space, absolute space, but Minkovskian event-space, a relative space. As Rudolf Arnheim understood, sight comes from a long way off. It is a kind of dolly in, a perceptual activity that starts in the past in order to illuminate the present, to focus on the object of our immediate perception.”

But while it may be true that “direction has disappeared” (in the audiovisual production sense), at least some kind of mediating action still exists in the selection of where the surveilling technological eye will be placed, what its range will be and it’s ability to focus on the object of its surveillance, as well as other factors that will irremissibly influence the specific function of that eye.

There may also be a subsequent use for this material, which could potentially be manipulated as required - an idea so similar to the editing process that it almost denies the apparent objectivity of the device. Dziga Vertov’s film *Man with a Movie Camera*, and the “kino-eye” status it gives the camera, leaves us with a gaze that tries to avoid influence or predetermination in an attempt to show “the truth” on screen”, but, through the effects of a radically modern use, still manages to offer us some of the most brilliant moments in cinema history, even while avoiding (or at least trying to avoid) mediation throughout the whole process.

In any case, the attempts to “take life by surprise” end up consisting of choosing the best of the moments produced by placing the viewfinder in one place or another, and deciding between one framing or the next. Later, “cinema verité” as system of observation would also try and remain outside of the constructing gaze.

At the opposite extreme – film-montage (Kuleshov) – we’d find the true subjective device, that which forms an expression of reality. In the case that concerns us here, a continuous series of control images could also be ordered or reordered, deleted or distorted, in order to portray, show or conceal actions. And we’d find that the need for these kinds of surveillance devices doesn’t just include a desire to use (and therefore subjectivize) the resulting footage, but also to have a degree of access to creating situations in which they have the desired value of impact.

This shows that video surveillance is not simply limited to the control system’s practical capacity. It extends to what could be a violent usurpation of the subject’s reality, with the subsequent loss of control over the

consequences of his own actions, or even the purpose behind them.

We’ve often seen how decontextualised images can take on meanings other than what they really meant in their original context. The slightest mediation disrupts the discourse, distorts the message, alters communication. And by altering the context for the purpose of promoting a particular characteristic of these images, it is possible to construct a fiction.

It’s like the effects that any old soft drink bottle can take on if it’s presented as part of one of the still lives displayed by police after confiscating subversive material. A cola bottle placed side by side with weapons, ammunition and money is a potential Molotov cocktail and thus takes on the form of a dangerous object. And by this rule, anything we put on that table, fine-tuning the presentation and set design, could be seen differently and understood in a different way through a set of more or less elaborate connotations applied to the gaze.

Making a thing’s “potential” into a reason for suspicion, criminalising anything that may be deemed fit rather than just things with objectively criminal purposes, and subjective recontextualisation in order to see further than what has really occurred are some of the implementations based on the gaze and projected as subtleties or hypothesis without any real grounds. In a context where subversive material is seized a video camera becomes a dangerous object, it’s technological aura and the extreme likelihood of incorrect use put it on the level as a weapon.

2.

Surveillance camera images gradually become recognisable over time for their visual qualities, definition and texture. On the other hand, cameras are increasingly common in the cityscape, in street furniture, in traffic monitoring towers and integrated into the architectural fabric... Likewise, the general public’s ability to identify these images as originating from surveillance devices is has been educating a gaze that may be distrustful at times, but is also capable of constructing fictions without too much of an effort. In this sense, the use of video footage as evidence in court proceedings is a complex issue.

The use of these kinds of images in news bulletins accompanied by the presenter explicitly advising viewers to pay “special attention”, in cases where the footage has helped locate criminals, identify extortionists or catch people “red-handed”, colours the gaze with a certain sense of exceptionality on discovering something secret, something unveiled by the power of technology and its omnipotent ability to detect the forbidden. It’s a technological achievement that makes us feel part of our civilisation’s conquests and breakthroughs that keep us in a safe place where somebody is always watching over us, looking after

our safety (“an efficient system”, “a rule of law”, “an advanced democracy”...; expressions of self-complacency and... control). Things change when we realise that we’re also the object of that gaze, when the impassive eye has entered our house or harasses us at work, when we can fall prey to a film editing technique that can cast us in one role or another, the role of terrorist or criminal, the role of victim even if we don’t feel it, the role of scapegoat, of violent person... These are roles we can be allocated without having the chance to influence the script or the overall filming and without the right to explain or qualify our behaviour. Because the invisible director who pushes the buttons could be, for example, about to achieve a prime time ratings success or perversely interfering in other kinds of public or private activities.

3.

In the spread of home video cameras and surveillance devices, the “spectacle” – as the contemporary context and the natural status of the commonplace – has found an inexhaustible mine of situations that can be shared with the mainstream (a real market for furtive voyeurism). Making the private public through sleight of hand, artifice or court order, produces high-intensity – and therefore highly profitable – media moments. There has been a proliferation of hidden camera or “impact” programs on television, which has also resulting in the debunking of another myth, the idea of “broadcast quality”. Reality has shown that the quality of the footage is of little importance if the document has sufficient shocking, pornographic or incriminating qualities.

Miguel Ibáñez’s overview in *Pop Control* (1) of the comparison between utopias in Orwell’s *1984* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* is enlightening: “... Orwell warned that an externally imposed oppression would defeat us. Meanwhile, Huxley had predicted – fifteen years before Orwell – that we don’t need Bigbrothers or Bigsisters to snatch away our autonomy, maturity and history: people will end up adoring their oppression, suitably disguised in all these technologies and methods that lead us to override our abilities to think and distract us in the worst sense...”.

He goes on to describe the clash of these two concepts with thoughts like “Orwell feared that the truth would be hidden from us, Huxley saw the truth drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture, Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, concerned with drive!”.

Be that as it may, different forms of control are always imagined as the elaborate technology of an “external”, imposed power. But it’s a good idea to reflect on the ease with which we accept these forms, on our consent of their presence and the way we internalise their message.

The narcotic of visual culture, its unceasing flow and prevalence in the everyday, prevents us from having the necessary, healthy interval that could trigger a questioning attitude. And so its volume of stimulation and its speed attract minds like a magnet. While our ability to process information through multiple devices and options increases, it can also make/make us users more vulnerable to surveillance and manipulation.

The utopia of the early “guerrilla television” video makers, who imagined that new, portable equipment and the opportunity for collectives and activist groups to access it would lead to the democratisation of information, has been domesticated as “naïve” home video camera use, the innocuous standardisation of amateurs video makers, and the adaptation of the technology to the sphere of the anecdotal, insignificant or the family album, now on video, DVD, etc... (2)

But if an amateur video maker happens in the area when news happens, he immediately becomes a journalist, the images circulate around the world and the footage takes on a new dimension, not least of which is its economic value... It’s still possible to reveal the way things are to an extent, or to give account of certain situations of social injustice and the abuse of power. But now the true crux of the matter is how much control we’re prepared to accept over our own will and the strategic determination of our actions.

“The perfect form of social control is to make us think that this control is omnipotent and all-powerful. This is the most serious mistake we can make, to think that everything is irreversibly under control, to internalise and believe that the current state of things is immovable and impossible to change. If our head adopts this stance, we will be the most effective method for controlling our own thoughts and actions, turning each of us into an unbeatable self-controlling device. This would be the biggest favour we could do to the system, the cheapest, most transparent and efficient form of social control. (There is nothing tidier than a cemetery)”. (3)

Notes

(1) IBÁÑEZ, MIGUEL *Pop Control. Crónicas post industriales*

(2) The text, written in 2001, doesn't go into what we could refer as the establishment of a new online communication space, in which political and cultural divergence uses video as a tool for denunciation.

(3) Malatxa "*Euskal Herriaren desmilitarizazioa Helburu duen Kolektiboa (Kontrol Sozialaren auto-babeserako guida liburu praktikoa)*".