

METAPHORS OF SUBVERSION IN SURVEILLANCE ART PHOTOGRAPHY

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Abstract

The study addresses the way in which visual and discourse metaphors embody subversion in contemporary forms of documentary photography which investigate and illustrate the issue of surveillance. Surveillance art is part of a new configuration of the vigilance phenomena entailed by massive digitalization, in which the classic roles of the observer and the observed have been replaced by complex participatory dynamics.

Combining social and cognitive semiotic approaches from a theoretical point of view, the analysis dwells on a corpus formed of imagery by Hasan Elahi, Tomas van Houtryve, Mishka Henner. The purpose is to detect and discuss a typology of visual metaphors, as well as metaphorizations of situations in curatorial and other discursive practices which accompany the photographic projects.

Grammar of Visual Design by Kress and van Leeuwen will serve as the main theoretical starting point in defining and explaining a series of in-

ternal structures and visual mechanisms which produce a diverse array of subversive effects. The study further aims to discuss metaphors related to discourse practices, since all the art projects belonging to the aesthetics of surveillance are accompanied by an ample series of textual instances. There is also the hybrid manifestation, in which we can speak of interplay between images and texts. The aim is to create counter narrative effects, a phenomenon which can be considered a form of artistic hacktivism.

Finally, we will argue that the resemantization of images and the perceptive implications related to this process are part of a deep social and psychological phenomenon. They represent a powerful indicator of the radical changes in the way in which we define the private and public sphere through the digital lens.

Keywords: surveillance art, subversion, visual metaphors, discourse metaphors, resemantization

1. The Pulverization of Surveillance and its Artistic Metamorphoses

1. 1. The Recent Evolution of the Veillance Phenomena and Terminology

During our recent digital culture development, the concept of *visibility* and the notion of *surveillance* have evolved into a vast array of phenomena, highly amplified and diversified by the rapid proliferation of online tools and platforms. Digitalization brings to the fore new forms of surveillance, leading to a process of decentralization and to the dissolution of the dyad *observer/observed*.

In their analysis of these phenomena, Steve Mann, Jason Nolan and Barry Wellman make reference to the “banalization or popularization of global surveillance.”¹ Furthermore, they identify several veillance manifestations which they describe according to an orientational terminology. *Sousveillance* is defined as the action of *surveilling the surveillers*, that is the possibility of every individual to access panoptic technologies allowing them to revert the relation with authority.

¹ The three researchers are the first ones to have conceived an orientational terminology adapted to the contemporary phenomena of surveillance, that they illustrated through experiments corresponding to each facet of veillance that they identify.

It is a process of mirroring and confronting surveillance in bureaucratic organizations, a phenomenon referred to by Steve Mann as *reflectionism*:

Sousveillance disrupts the power relationship of surveillance when it restores a traditional balance that the institutionalization of Bentham's Panopticon itself disrupted. It is a conceptual model of reflective awareness that seeks to problematize social interactions and factors of contemporary life. It is a model, with its root in previous emancipator movements, with the goal of social engagement and dialogue. (Mann, Nolan and Wellman 2003)

Subveillance is defined as *the recording of the recorders*, by using wearable video recording devices in public spaces, also called *inverse panopticon sousveillance*². Collaborations among citizens are referred to as *coveillance*, a phenomenon that radically transforms the nature of veillance, by shaping it into a collective strategy and banalizing an activity whose characteristic has constantly been secrecy and hierarchical observation.

The multiplication of surveillance tools, as well as their increasingly accessible character, creates a new and rapidly changing configuration of the cultural connotations of the private and public sphere and has as a main effect the dismantling of the institution of surveillance, as well as the dissolution of the idea of a high authority watching. The digital space creates an open configuration of the sphere considered to be private and closed before the Internet era, as well as a gradual transformation through amplification of the idea of self-exposure.

1. 2. Surveillance Art and Subversion

In contemporary art, the pulverization of the veillance phenomena has led to the emergence of an aesthetics of surveillance, in which the visual and linguistic metaphors of subversion play a central part. In his article, *Anxious Architectures. The Aesthetics of Surveillance*, Eric Howeler even advocates the fact that surveillance has become an artistic phenomenon, coagulating into an aesthetics, from fashion and advertising to architecture and design. The aesthetics of surveillance thus becomes a new cultural condition, "saturated with data, fraught with uncertainties, visually and spatially anxious."

Artistic projects self-entitled *surveillance art* or displaying the characteristics of this type of art presuppose, in most cases, subversive mechanisms, a critique of the surveillance performed by authorities and, more

² Most of the analyses of this type of phenomena have as a starting point the Foucauldian process of *panopticism*, through which power is internalized so that it creates patterns of behavior.

often than not, a form of activism. Zhixuan Wang uses the term in order to “categorize artworks that provide critical responses to the growing surveillance activities conducted by various authorities in different forms” (2021: 3). His study is centered on the effects and limits of surveillance art and its impact as a politically critical art.

From political resistance to the critique of certain policies and defense of human rights, surveillance art projects have a powerful dimension of subversion and the purpose of creating a symmetrical power relationship. Moreover, they generate a participatory form of reception, by building awareness and active engagement of the audience. “By reconfiguring and remediating such systems, these works aim to defamiliarize the normalized surveillance culture and awaken us to the problematic and disturbing nature of omnipresent surveillance and potentially bleak future for its use” (Foster 2015: 63).

1. 3. Methodology

Surveillance Art and the Metaphors of Subversion

Our corpus analyses will be structured into three parts which identify different types of visual and linguistic metaphors in surveillance art projects: Tomas van Houtryve’s drone art project *Blue Sky Days*; Hasan Elahi’s self-surveillance project, *Tracking Transience*, with its printed counterpart, *Thousand Little Brothers*; and Mishka Henner’s *Putin’s Prison*, a case of counter-narrative text insertion on images. The theoretical framework mainly dwells on the study of visual metaphors by Kress and van Leeuwen. It also repurposes the notion of *intersemiotic translation* in approaching the relationship between text and image.

In *Reading Images. The Grammar of Visual Design*, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen adopt the framework of social semiotics, in order to elaborate a complex analysis of visual metaphors. Focusing on composition, their study identifies two types of representation structures pertinent to the survey of visual metaphors: “structures which represent aspects of reality in terms of unfolding actions and events, processes of change, transitory spatial arrangements and so on” (2001: 55), called *narrative structures*, and “structures which relate participants in terms of classification, part-whole structure or symbolic attribution” (2001: 55), referred to as *conceptual structures*. We will further discuss these two types of structures related to visual metaphors and their subversive effect in the first and second part of corpus analyses.

Composition relates the representational and interactive meanings of the image to each other through three interrelated systems: *information*

value, framing and salience (ibid.: 181–182). *Information value* refers to the placement of elements which confers upon them particular informational value attached to different zones of the image. *Framing*, the second compositional principle, refers to the use of framing devices that isolate elements from the image. An important notion related to framing is rhythm which becomes a matter of continuity or discontinuity. This makes compositional elements strongly or weakly framed from a visual point of view. Diverse ways of framing have different meaning potentials. Finally, *visual salience* results from the interaction among several elements, such as size, sharpness of focus, tonal contrast, color contrasts, placement in the visual field, perspective.

Analysis of these compositional elements identifies the ways in which visual images are built in order to create metaphors. This is a perspective which can be correlated with the cognitive semiotics approach, placing the interpretation of visual metaphors in cultural and situational contexts.³

Moreover, surveillance art is dependent on curatorial or explanatory discourse practices, as well as on transfers of meanings among diverse semiotic systems. The subversive effect is achieved by means of visual metaphors in a close interdependence with the rhetoric which accompanies the artistic projects and without which the activist dimension would not be possible. The multimodal character of these metaphors can be approached through the discussion of *layering*, understood as a narrative mechanism at the core of the image construction.

2. Combining Metaphor with Documentary in Tomas van Houtryve's *Blue Sky Days*

Drone strike reports are the source of a series of artistic projects for documentary photographers such as Tomas van Houtryve and Trevor Paglen, as well as for hybrid art forms which combine photography with painting, such as Mahwish Chishty's projects. This particular type of drone art has the purpose of raising questions and awareness about drone strikes with innocent victims all over the world.

From a conceptual point of view, Tomas van Houtryve's project, *Blue Sky Days*, combines metaphor with documentary in order to elaborate a sharp critique of situations in which innocent people became victims of

³ A perspective developed by Dezheng Feng and Kay O'Halloran in *The Visual Representation of Metaphor. A Social Semiotic Approach*: "the social semiotic framework is able to provide a comprehensive account of the visual realization of metaphor, and in addition, the study also offers a cognitive explanation of how resources like camera positioning and composition acquire meanings."

drone strikes. Taking as a starting point drone strike reports from over seven countries documented by human rights groups, Tomas van Houtryve has, as a first stage, made a list of situations in which US drones have killed innocent people. The *Blue Sky Days* project has as a basic narrative layer the death of a 67-year-old woman in Northeast Pakistan. She was killed during a drone strike while picking okra outside her house: “I no longer love blue skies. In fact, now I prefer grey skies. The drones do not fly when the skies are grey”⁴, declared the woman’s 13-year-old grandson, Zubair Rehman, at a briefing held in 2013 in Washington DC.

Tomas van Houtryve uses visual metaphors for the purpose of echoing this type of situation. Realized with a camera attached to a small drone, his project encompasses captures from across America. They cover the same sorts of gatherings which have become usual targets for foreign strikes, that is weddings, funerals, groups of people praying or exercising, as well as settings in which drones are used to less lethal effect, such as prisons, oil fields, and the Us-Mexico border. The artist’s statement makes explicit the surveillance and subversive dimension of the project: *The images captured from the drone perspective engage with the changing nature of surveillance, personal privacy and war*⁵.

The effect of subversion is achieved through two components of the visual metaphors: on the one hand, the mirroring - central to the narrative structure subjacent to the metaphor; while on the other hand, the transformative dynamics achieved through a poeticization of the referent. It contains in its turn other multiple layers: *Even when I’m looking at a sinister subject based on very difficult research talking about people being killed, and I am looking at it in a new way, there’s inside me an urge to make beautiful compositions to find poetry to find moments that I want to respond to in the same way that a painter has his canvass and his palette*⁶.

Redefining perspective leads to a resemantization of spaces and situations, a transformative phenomenon entirely dependent on the transmutation⁷ of images into explanatory discourse. Among the components of

⁴ The artist’s statements and the narrative accompanying the images can be consulted at: <https://tomasvh.com/works/blue-sky-days/>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ News and Art Meet Through the Eyes of a Drone. <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/news-and-art-meet-through-eyes-drone>.

⁷ In his famous text, *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation*, Roman Jakobson distinguishes three categories of translation: 1. *Intralingual translation* or *rewording* – an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language. 2. *Interlingual translation* or *translation*

composition discussed by Kress and van Leeuwen, *salience* is achieved in this situation by means of an interplay between shadows and lines. This presupposes waiting for the moments during the day when people's shadows are exactly the same length as them. The central idea is that, owing to this equal length, everything you do is written on the ground. This metaphor of the inscription perduring even in an ephemeral environment creates a narrative layer of a poetic memory that makes the message extremely powerful. This *never forget* implicit content entails a reflection on the responsibility and the long-term effects of our gestures.

The metaphorical layer of the inscription also has an important intertextual dimension. This refers to the function of art to transform and to preserve historical scenes which are to be kept in memory in order not to be repeated. This compositional aspect transcends the historical fact, sending to other similar compositional schemes used in art history. Tomas van Houtryve compares the technique he uses to painting. Such a comparison emphasizes, once again, the importance of light and perspective and the placing in a lineage of influence in which the symbolic value of light plays an important part in the interpretation of the image.

The interplay between shadows and lines also becomes a way to materialize time and to give a concrete grasp of a moment that could be just before death: a construction that becomes possible through the geometry created by light. Reference to current situations of drone strikes is clear through the artist's discourse. However, the geometry of shadows depersonalizes human beings, rendering the message of activism and defense of human rights a general and atemporal one, encompassing layers of time and with a reference potential to several tenses.

3. The Metaphorization of the Private Space and the Semantic Horizon: Hassan Elahi's *Tracking Transience*

This part brings to the fore a case of subversion built through self-surveillance and through the metaphorization of the private space in which technologies are mediators of experience. In 2002, Professor Hassan Elahi from the University of Maryland was wrongly identified as a potential terrorist by the FBI, a fact that led to a six-month investigation. In this context, he began *Tracking Transience*, a long-term project, documenting his daily activities, with the declared purpose of rendering FBI's monitor activity

proper - an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language. 3. *Intersemiotic translation* or *transmutation* - an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems.

easier. This transfiguration of a habitual vertical coercive act of surveillance into a voluntary one is actually a declared satire of the erosion of civil rights in the United States. The printed version became the object of an exhibition: *Thousand Little Brothers* contains almost 32 000 photographs from the *Tracking Transience* project, printed on seven canvas banners. Together they measure almost twenty-eight feet tall and fifteen feet wide.

Elahi's project, which started as an alibi surveillance, actually dwells on a conceptual metaphor of the private space and is based on a saturation effect. The accumulation of images constituting sequences of his daily life results in a visual narrative structure with the nature of a list. The multiplication of images representing empty beds, toilets, rooms, shelves with products from different shops, dishes results in a flooding technique:

By opening up every aspect of my life and every little detail, I actually maintain a very private and anonymous life. All of us make data. Our phones are tracking every piece of information about us. So when you don't have enough information out in public, that's actually sometimes more of a red flag than having too much information⁸.

The endless enumeration of banal details entails a no boundary impression by the incessant and overabundant exposure of private frames. This is what Umberto Eco calls *a visual list* (2009: 37–47). The intensive and extensive multiplication of instances of the same empty place can create a disturbing effect, as well as a paralysis due to the overwhelming quantity of information. Elahi builds a detailed metaphor of his daily routine in which images allude to his presence in his own self-surveilled life. These complex memory edifices are stored in minute and clearly defined lists. The lists are potentially infinite due to the fact that there is no hierarchical organization of information and there are actually no limits defined through frames of this online project. An important element of composition is rhythm which organizes the digital sequences in continuous visual flows.

On the other hand, rhythm shapes in a different manner the printed version of the project, organizing it mostly in the form of collections. Rhythm is closely interconnected in this case with framing. Whereas in the online environment there are no boundaries of the visual enumeration and the platformization of the experience practically allows the insertion of an infinity of elements, physical framing delimits micro-collections of spaces or objects from different contexts. These are collections of ordinary, banal

⁸ Hasan Elahi. <https://buffaloakg.org/person/hasan-elahi>.

instances. The accumulation of these instances not only leads to saturation, but also to deindividualization and defamiliarization.

Factoriality⁹, the part-whole relationship which may be conceived as the body being a part of the whole series of spaces, also presupposes a flow of perceptual perspectives and continuities interrupted by a border. Elahi's enumerative technique shapes a personal imagery with predictable series of sequences, a patterning of daily experiences in which his absence becomes like the absence of the camel in the Koran evoked by Borges¹⁰.

Self-exposure can also be discussed as indicative of a paradigm shift which Elahi himself highlights twenty years after having had the idea of *Tracking Transience*:

Nearly 20 years ago, people were looking at me like: Why in the world would you like to share all this information? And now people look at me like – I don't get it. What's the big deal? This looks like my Instagram feed.¹¹

The statement is highly suggestive of the discrepancy between the perspective we used to have about privacy before the explosion of the Internet and the one we are currently having, as a consequence of the rapid transformation of the way we see things due to technologies. The notion of *semantic horizon* and the changes that it entails is extremely useful in explaining the articulation of a new perspective on the private sphere:

The semantic horizon is the set of cultural and fundamental knowledge that a person or a group of people has. This semantic universe can be implicitly or explicitly used by innovators, primarily through metaphor, to help give meaning to technologies, ultimately easing the integration of the new products into the user's understanding of the world. The result is that new technologies that do this successfully are far more likely to be useful because they are far more likely to be used¹².

⁹ Göran Sonesson differentiates between two kinds of indexical relationships, that is *factoriality*, referring to the relation from part to whole, or the inverse, and that of *contiguity*.

¹⁰ In his essay, *The Argentine Writer and Tradition* (1951), Jorge Luis Borges advocates that the total absence of camels in the Koran shows the authenticity of the text; although from the horizon of Occidental culture, the camel seems characteristic of the Arabic world, the Arab simply takes it for granted, and so does not bother to mention it. This image is linked by Göran Sonesson to the a priori perspective that cultures assume when picturing nature.

¹¹ Hasan Elahi. <https://buffaloakg.org/person/hasan-elahi>.

¹² Inspired from Hans-Georg Gadamer's famous hermeneutical notion of "fusion of horizons", the concept of *semantic horizon* is developed by Eric Chown and Fernando

The semantic universe of the private sphere has undergone a complex and continuous transformation throughout time. Technologies have gradually introduced elements associated to the private sphere into the online environment. While analyzing this phenomenon, Elahi formulates the idea that there is no need to delete information anymore and makes a very suggestive comparison between information and commodities: the reason information has any value at all is the fact that no one has access to it. By giving massive access to information, this currency becomes automatically devalued. Whereas at an individual level the fact is symbolic, when it becomes a collective reality, the whole intelligence system needs to be reshaped in its most minute details. This new paradigm of self-exposure enhances the importance of interpretation in the treatment of information.

The multiplication of images in the online environment creates new forms of babelization and new challenges in selecting and interpreting overwhelming amounts of culturally connoted data. Images have massively replaced texts on online platforms, thus becoming a favorite communication tool. They can lead to conflicts of interpretation due to a vast array of implicit meanings that can be vehiculated by means of visual media. The concepts of personal archive and personal branding bring identity construction in a realm of visibility to a much greater extent than would have been possible in a non-digital environment.

4. Image and Text Interplay in Mishka Henner's *Putin's Prison*

Mishka Henner's *Putin's Prison* is a recent project which has resulted in a printed booklet with screen captures from unsecured surveillance cameras across Russia between the 3rd and the 4th of April 2022. The images display corridors, barriers, fences, entrances, shop interiors, parks, in which hackers replaced the usual data with anti-Putin messages and pro-Ukrainian slogans. The whole project is a metaphor of the vulnerable spots in the surveillance system. By introducing counter-narrative texts, the message is that of subverting the camera's ability to impose State control over citizens.

Mishka Henner is well known for this type of project resulting sometimes in print-on-demand books. His work is controversial, since he often appropriates and modifies images which do not belong to him. Starting from freely available imagery from satellites, such as Google Earth, then applying appropriation and erasure to famous photographs, such as the highly controversial *Less Americans* project, in which he modified 83 images from Robert Frank's classic book *The Americans*.

Nascimento in their book *Meaningful Technologies. How Digital Metaphors Change the Way We Think and Live*.

Putin's Prison is based on a form of hacktivism¹³. The text insertions reconstruct the image, by creating a metaphoric mapping of its vulnerabilities. Through compromising the system coherence in accurately rendering what was happening in the surveilled spaces, the counter-narrative produces a disruptive and activist effect. The text resemantizes the images, endowing them with a new meaning, that of criticizing the war in Ukraine.

The narrative layering in this situation has at its core the manipulation of emotions central to state surveillance systems. A main idea in the study of security mechanisms is that they feed on anxiety and fear, on an entire emotional content, in order to exert control and belief in the existence of an inescapable reality. Propagandistic discourse relies on the same type of emotional construction. It amplifies the image of a vulnerable system, achieved through different types of media. The rhetoric and visual articulation of power dwells on triggering conceptual metaphors of fear and creating *regime-like media*: “The regime is, in other words, a forum for the circulation of power, and entails the possibility of management of emotions and subjectivity through the definition of what counts as threat and vulnerability” (Rose & Miller 1992: 281). The name of the project, *Putin's Prison*, is per se a visual metaphor for regime subversion. The captures are selected in such a way that they produce a panopticon effect through an architectural vertical dynamics, in which the vantage point belongs to the camera, to the observer.

The counter-narrative text insertions from *Putin's Prison* have a destructuring and subversive function. The technique consists in counter-mirroring the model of the propaganda structure in strata of discourse, dependent on one another in order to act as a whole and have the expected effect. The hacking dimension introduces a layer that destabilizes the whole organization and possible effects of the other strata of meaning converging into a semantics of power. The image reconstruction as an artistic procedure is part of a long history of appropriation. Playing is an extremely important part of appropriation and of the hacker ethics¹⁴, which allows reinventing the rules of the game and inserting new layers of interpretation.

¹³ According to Sofa Alexopoulou and Antonia Pavli, hacktivism is a term combining two actions, hacking and activism, and a concept that can also be linked to political activism. The purpose of hacktivism is to combine hacking tactics within the context of a political agenda; hacktivism also makes reference to any use of digital technologies for political reasons. (2019: 240)

¹⁴ Pekka Himanen explains, in *The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the Information Age*, that the artist as a hacker inherits his mainspring from the figure of the pirate, who, even before being a copyright thief, is by his etymological nature an explorer, the one who attempts, assaults, and, above all, navigates (2001: 85–111).

The participatory dimension of the reception is of paramount importance. Thus, the public reshapes the emotional content based on fear into active paths which entail the subversion of the system. The project having a printed version can also be circulated as a booklet, another symbolic form of subversion. Printed forms obviate the minute control exerted through digital tools and media. The function of objects that escape digital monitoring may be essential in an informational war in which most of the propaganda rhetoric is shaped and amplified in the online environment.

Conclusion

Documentary surveillance photography is part of a deep social phenomenon of circulating and negotiating power. The subversion effect characteristic to this type of aesthetics derives from layered constructions and complex metaphorizations of situations and spaces, in order to generate new meanings filled with activist contents. Discourse practices are of paramount importance in conveying and constructing activist messages. They thus entail participatory experiences at the level of reception. The examples analyzed reveal different types of system subversion: from poeticizing dramatic situations to enlisting experiences of self-exposure and emphasizing vulnerable spots.

The elements of construction presented by Kress and van Leeuwen in *The Grammar of Visual Design* are central to corpus analyses. They are also well complemented by a theoretical framework mainly dwelling on Umberto Eco, Göran Sonesson and Roman Jakobson, as well as on a multitude of contemporary research papers on surveillance phenomena in general and surveillance art in particular. The artistic projects selected reshape the temporal and spatial dimensions of events through metaphoric layers in such a way so as to determine at the level of reception attitudes against oppressive and abusive endeavors. Subversion thus becomes an active phenomenon in the playground of reception.

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