
Special issue
Visual motifs

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Pandemic/Screen. The visual motif of police violence in public spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic

Abstract

In the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, various forms of digital surveillance have been globally established. Despite many of these forms of surveillance already existed, now, they have increased their range and have been legitimized and imposed daily. The logic of surveillance has allowed the universalization of surveillance, denunciation between citizens, and protests through mobile phone screens and social networks. In this state of exception, crossed by the rise of vigilantism, we propose to analyze the visual motif of police brutality in public spaces during the confinement. We will base the analysis on three categories of subjective enunciation: a witness-gaze, where the observer remains silent, recording the image; a protest-gaze, in which the observer reproaches the police for their violent action; and a lynching-gaze, where, on the contrary, the observer encourages police brutality and denounces the subject who transgresses confinement and goes for a walk on public roads. These types of gaze will allow us to demonstrate a settlement in the popular imagination of trust in the use of digital technologies and media to empower citizens in political and social praxis, and citizen journalism.

Keywords

Visual motif, gaze typology, surveillance capitalism, vigilantism, audiovisual surveillance and counter-surveillance, pandemic.

1. Introduction

Since its origins, humankind has tried to capture what happens in the surroundings to express, to understand, to remember, or even to exorcise and deny it. It has tried to capture the surrounding world, and, *for this*, it has framed, cut, and packaged it in narrow frames that mutilate and couple it to their sensitive, cognitive, aesthetic, moral, and political capacity. A framework that humans apply to themselves and their peers, with whom they are observed, studied, and controlled. When their peers become oppressive, humans transgress and modify themselves.

Screens offer the current control model of social reality: rectangles with which we visually cut reality, devices of paradoxical subjectivation where objectivity becomes Big Brother's eye. The triumphal framing is neither circular, oval, nor pentagonal. Practicality may be adduced, but there is no escape from the rectangular frame. Whatever is outside the camera does not exist: more than ever, reality is cut out and controlled by hegemonic vision

mechanisms (Buck-Morss, 2009; Mitchell, 2003). On a global scale, collective memory is built from these rectangles that enclose us: television, computer, mobile, phone, etc. Analogous to modern western logic –which frames our thinking within the framework of Cartesian-Kantian subjectivity–, the visibility regime is constrained to the frame of the camera of our mobile device. As Mirzoeff points out: “modern life unfolds in the screen” (2016, p. 11). It could almost be argued that our life has become a screen.

This screen-evolution of life is linked to the multiple networks of power that build our contemporaneity. Currently, we must expose and exhibit ourselves, and turn ourselves and others into objects of surveillance, control, and criticism. Foucault (2000) pointed out that one of the operational modes of power consisted in implementing disciplining techniques through vigilance and control of conducts, behaviors, and skills. These disciplinary forms of surveillance and self-surveillance are constant thanks to mobile communication devices and the installation of social networks in our daily lives. This model of corporate-biopolitical control through technologies, as we will see, acquires its maximum expression during the confinement induced by the great global crisis of COVID-19.

It is a fact that the state of world exceptionality caused by the pandemic has increased the proliferation of forms of technological relationships, which, on occasions, lead to high intensity audiovisual surveillance and video-control practices. Applying the concept of the “shock doctrine” –referring to Klein’s (2007) criticism of North American business classes, which took advantage of the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina as a business opportunity– to our contemporary pandemic and digital world, various social groups of University professors and researchers from different disciplines have signed the manifesto *Against the Doctrine of Digital Shock* (2020). In this text, light is shed on the perverse links between the new forms of confinement inaugurated during the pandemic and the totalitarian and mercantile uses of the new technologies, which, although previously existing, are intensifying and becoming more and more evident. The virus, therefore, does not suppose a new reality, but “acts in our image and likeness, it does nothing more than replicate, materialize, intensify and extend to the entire population, the dominant forms of biopolitical and necropolitical management that were already working in the national territory and its limits” (Preciado, 2020, p. 168).

Both states and companies have designed a disembodied world where technologies total reality and where computing becomes the univocal and all-powerful connective link, “a new social regime without human contact, or with the least possible number of contacts and regulated by bureaucracy” (*Against the Doctrine of Digital Shock*, 2020, p. 2). Undoubtedly, telemedicine, teleteaching and digital commerce represent a business opportunity for states and companies since less investment is required to produce the services and goods they offer. This business opportunity is also an opportunity to universalize an online life managed by a particular totalitarianism of screens allowed by our relationships: either in bureaucratic procedures of public services or in telework of private companies. Paul Virilio has already pointed the dangers of this virtual life, he assumes that: “in our time speed is absolute: real time. The essential feature of absolute speed is absolute power. They are divine attributes: ubiquity, instantaneity, immediacy. Total vision. This is more of a tyranny than a democracy” (1997, p. 18).

In this way, it is possible to build a provisional typology on the uses of screens as forms of control at the state, business, and citizen levels during our daily pandemic:

- a) The use of the screen as state control. Although the techno-surveillance practices of Asian governments –through mobile geolocation and facial recognition techniques– certainly go beyond the limits of democratic logic –since screens become a totalitarian tool in the current apotheosis of the doctrine of digital shock– it should be noted that in the pandemic they have been extremely useful. In Asia, an authoritarian mentality converges with an attitude of citizen obedience, which has allowed a digital surveillance system that invalidates all data protection (Han, 2020, p. 103). For this reason, this Big

Data surveillance system is efficient in the fight against the pandemic and, in fact, the work of computer scientists is as important as that of virologists and epidemiologists. The observation of all social action by cameras equipped with artificial intelligence makes it possible to control the epidemic.

- b) The use of screens as business control. For their part, companies have used remote work platforms that implement forms of surveillance that are beginning to erode workers' rights. The screen, in this case, is allied to forms of capitalist control. Remote work has been the perfect excuse for companies to introduce new forms of control through images in the context of digital capitalism (Wajcman, 2017). While admittedly platforms such as ZOOM allow the connection between several people and is extremely useful for interactive communication and exchange, it must also be borne in mind that these technologies allow greater control by entrepreneurs: "increasingly to a greater extent and with greater incidence, the employer has at his disposal multiple (more or less invasive) control and surveillance instruments in need of limitation and transparency" (Álvarez Cuesta, 2019, p. 110).
- c) The use of screens as citizen control. Finally, the screens of mobile phones have allowed a delirious audiovisual control among citizens, especially in those cases where a citizen broke the confinement. Sztajnszrajber (2020) considers that the forms of surveillance during the pandemic are forms of social discipline that can be dangerous: "I am concerned that this situation of public control has spread as an identity form of the bonds with others, and that this police state may become a way of thinking and practices and rituals of life on the part of civil society."

While it is true that these technological devices can empower (Sierra, 2018; Montero & Sierra, 2017; Lievrouw, 2011; Atton, 2006; Bustos, 2006) or subdue (Tejero 2020; Bouhaben, 2019; Tqqun, 2015; Marwick, 2015; Virilio, 1997) –and in fact in their ambivalence they simultaneously fulfill these two functions–, it is still notorious that whoever knows, manufactures, and dominates the system has priority to define the way of use and the purpose of their tools. Although, their inevitable flaws and loopholes may be used by citizens in a resistant and subversive way, as it has been shown in various actions by groups, such as Anonymous. From this resistant and subversive line, the legitimacy of the "citizen counter-surveillance" is defended. *Sousveillance* (Krona, 2015) reverses the model in which a few people watch over many and where any citizen can control power by recording, broadcasting, and distributing information from their personal mobile devices as postulated by the theories of "citizen journalism" (Penney & Dadas, 2014), of "an alternative journalism" (Poell & Borra, 2011), or of "smartphone journalism" (Newell, 2014). In other words, an inversion of power is postulated, which is based on the formula "if they watch us, we can watch them." Now, who is Us and who is Them? The biopower of capitalism blurs the identity of the agents who exercise power, since it is "everywhere" (Foucault, 1999, p. 111), but it also disarticulates the unity of the oppressed groups, increasingly confronted among themselves.

In addition, the individualism and hedonism that characterize the post-capitalist subject is irretrievably accentuated in the isolation of quarantine, and it leads more easily to turn other citizens into potential dangers. The quarantine turns us into appendices inscribed in the great virtual machine, immersed in the screen that shows us the world cut out and in which we participate equally cut out. As Sztajnszrajber (2000) says again: "The quarantine occurred from social structures that were already predisposed for that. We were already confined in our relationship with the other, with the commodification of existence. Isolation has to do with a priority of one's own over something else that already existed." In the situation of isolation and the loss of physical public space, the power of the virtual image, of the recording, and of the virtual spaces of social networks takes on a leading role. That is where personal relationships, political actions, demands, and protests take place. Even battles

and discussions, without the possibility of making use of public space, are staged more than ever on an omnipresent screen.

2. Objective and Method

Bearing in mind the context described above, we propose to analyze a set of audiovisual images that belong to the third use of control through screens, namely, citizen control. During the COVID-19 pandemic, within the Spanish State, many images have proliferated through social networks that have three elements in common: actions of police violence in public spaces, citizens who suffer such violence for skipping the confinement, which in the set of videos that we have consulted are mostly racialized people and/or citizens of working class neighborhoods, and the observers who, from a distance, record the scenes with their mobile devices. These images of police violence in public spaces form a visual motif (Balló & Bergala, 2016; Balló, 2000) that has been repeated in countless videos shared on social networks.

However, this visual motif adopts different modalities that have to do with the observer of the scene. After viewing more than thirty videos of this visual motif, we contemplate three categories of subjective enunciation of the observer: a witness-gaze, where the observer is silently recording the image; a protest-gaze, where the observer recriminates the police for their violent action; and a lynching-gaze, where, on the contrary, the observer encourages police violence and denounces the subject who skips confinement and decides to go out into the street.

The method carried out to determine this categorization follows the incoming stages:

- a) Compilation of videos from social networks that share the same visual motif: citizens who were in public spaces and were attacked by the police during the confinement of the first pandemic wave in the Spanish State. This compilation makes up our sample: 31 videos taken from YouTube channels of mass media such as EITB, Telemadrid, *El Mundo*, RTVE, *La Vanguardia*, and from channels such as “we are free, not slaves” (“somos libres, no esclavos”). The viewing of this sample revealed that the people attacked by the police mostly belong to vulnerable groups –racialized people, citizens of working-class neighborhoods, and women– and, therefore, we assume that the sample is qualitatively representative.
- b) Determination of the different types of gaze on the visual motif: witness-gaze, protest-gaze, and lynching-gaze
- c) Analysis of each type of gaze of the visual motif.

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework used has an unequivocal interdisciplinary character. In the first place, for the development of our analysis, we have taken some concepts from biopolitical studies, specifically, on the critique of forms of control and surveillance (Foucault, 2000; Foucault, 1999; Foucault, 2000). Likewise, we have approached a dialogue with theories on surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2020), on the surveillance state (Foessel, 2011), and on the origins of citizen vigilantism and popular lynching (Dorlin, 2015). Theories on criticism of the cyberworld (Virilio, 1997), cybernetics (Tquun, 2015), digital capitalism (Wajcman, 2017), cybersecurity (Álvarez-Cuesta, 2019), and the totalitarian regime of the doctrine of digital shock (Klein, 2007; VV.AA., 2020). Likewise, we have had in mind some readings on the forms of social empowerment of new technologies (Sierra, 2018; Montero & Sierra, 2017; Lievrouw, 2011; Atton, 2006; Bustos, 2006), as well as on their possibilities of submission (Tejero 2020; Bouhaben, 2019; Tquun, 2015; Marwick, 2015; Virilio, 1997).

Secondly, we used concepts from various visual theories; fundamentally, from theories about visual motifs (Balló & Bergala, 2016; Balló, 2016), theories of the gaze (Lacan, 1986; González Requena, 1989), theories of cinema (Nichols, 1991; Deleuze, 1987; Lopate, 2007), visual semiotics (Barthes, 1986; April, 2012), image sociology (Bourdieu, 1996), visual studies

(Mitchell, 2003; Buck-Morss, 2009; Mirzoeff, 2016), and citizen audiovisual journalism (Krona, 2015; Penney & Dadas, 2014; Newell, 2014; Poell & Borra, 2011).

In the third place, we have collected ideas from *Wuhan Soup* and other texts that emerged during the state of exceptionality caused by COVID-19. These are: on forms of surveillance (Han, 2020), on forms of denunciation (Sztajnszrajber, 2020), and on dominant forms of biopolitical and necropolitical management (Preciado, 2020) developed during the pandemic.

4. Types of gaze of the visual motif on the police violence in public spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic

Recordings of the motif of police violence in public spaces during the first confinement in the Spanish State, circulated insistently through social networks. Among these videos are numerous cases of racialized and socially vulnerable people surrounded, rebuked, and forcibly reduced by police officers. This motive has been a recurring theme in guerrilla and protest cinema, but it also appears in television programs that exalt and justify police violence. For example, the controversial documentary series *COPS* (1989–2020) in the the USA or its Spanish version *Police in Action* (2013–2016). During the Spanish lockdown between the months of March and June 2020, recordings from mobile devices increased in the two versions: as a complaint by some citizens over others and a praise for all kinds of police action, and as a denunciation of the vulnerability and repression of citizens, in many cases, by the police forces. Videos like these go viral on the internet and maintain popular attention, until, after days of being massively uploaded to social networks, shared, discussed, interpreted, and covered, they end up arousing the interest of the official media.

In this visual motif, in some cases, what has been called “the balcony police” is visible. This completes a circuit of biopolitics fostered by the devices of “Surveillance Capitalism” (Zuboff, 2020), of the “State of surveillance” (Foessel, 2011), and cybernetics as “police thought of the Empire” (Tquun, 2015). They follow the vigilantism patterns of the XIX and XX that develop their understanding of popular lynching (Dorlin, 2015). A policy based on suspicion and fear towards all the people (*pandemos*-phobia) and where anyone is a potential terrorist (an “irresponsible person”). This means that anyone can organize, monitor, point out, and condemn others –conceived as threats– through the “mobile-screen” or even symbolically lynch, by showing videos on networks, shouting reprimands, or placing threatening posters on the doors of houses.

In contrast, thanks to this ambivalence of mobile devices, it is possible that this citizen surveillance turns into counter-vigilance activism (Krona, 2015). In other words, it allows the transmission of resistance, and denounces the violence perpetrated with impunity by the forces of order, or of these “spontaneous watchers,” as well as other types of violence that can also be documented and criticized by networks. In addition, it allows discussions in networks, such as the one that questions the contrast, in the context of confinement, between violent and peaceful police interventions. The latter recorded, for example, in mobilizations against confinement and disseminated through hashtags such as #cayeborroka or #cayetanos. The actors of these protests, as the newspaper *20 Minutes* points out, are presumed to be upper class because they belong to affluent neighborhoods in Madrid.

In this context of universalization of surveillance, we are going to analyze the visual motif of police violence in public spaces from two dimensions: a political-thematic one, which refers to a registered object, that is, police violence on citizens in public spaces, and an aesthetic-formal one, which alludes to the point of view of the witness who observes reality from his window. These two dimensions have been repeated many times, both in mainstream and militant cinema.

Regarding the political-thematic dimension, there is a recurring element in the typology of the gaze that we are building. In almost all the images, police violence against racialized citizens and/or middle/low-class citizens appears explicitly as an expression of the power of

the state in the public sphere. In the chosen examples, police officers assault immigrant citizens, working class citizens, and women. While it is true that these images of repression of vulnerable groups in the context of the coronavirus crisis are recurrent, this is not a novelty since they appear in countless visual records. For example, in documentaries on the struggles for civil rights, such as African American movements during the decade of the 60s in the USA. In *Now* (1965) by Cuban filmmaker Santiago Álvarez –who lived those years of his youth in New York and, therefore, he closely experienced those struggles– a whole catalog of archive images is shown, which points to the political-thematic dimension of this visual motif. In Álvarez's film, as in the images that we are going to analyze below, archive images are used to show several police officers throwing and attacking black people: sometimes grabbing their heads from behind, other times beating in their faces or stepping on their necks (Fig. 1). This last image is the one that is closest to our example and the one that is most sadly reminiscent of the reckless homicide of George Floyd.

Figure 1: *Now* (Santiago Álvarez, 1965).



Source: Own screenshot.

Thanks to the current confidence in the individual capacity to intervene politically in social networks from social counter-surveillance and citizen journalism (Krona, 2015; Penney & Dadas, 2014), there are numerous reports and amateur documentaries that try to denounce violence and confrontations between police officers and racialized people, from videos of spontaneous spectators. This type of gaze-protest characterizes anti-racist militant movements such as Black Lives Matter, so active today. For example, the documentary *Whose Streets* (Davis & Folleyan, 2017) recounts the reactions of rejection and outrage to the murder of the young African American Michael Brown, shot in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, by Darren Wilson, a white police officer. The popular mobilizations led President Obama to express his condolences in a press conference. However, a few days later a state of emergency and a curfew were declared in the state, which exacerbated violence in the streets and mobilized international public opinion leading to the arrival of Amnesty International observers. This documentary gives an account of this process that started in the streets. It collected numerous images of police violence towards racialized people recorded by citizens who simultaneously protest the police actions and demand explanations about their actions.

Regarding the aesthetic-formal dimension, there is a definitive relationship between the structure of the gaze of the three examples that we are going to analyze and the structure of the gaze of the character played by James Stewart in the film *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954) (Figure 2). In our examples, the scene we contemplate is configured by a subjectivity that sometimes looks and is silent (witness-gaze), and at other times looks and speaks (protest-gaze and lynching-gaze), but they are always images where a subject looks from a window and reframes the reality of the public space from the privacy of their home. As in Hitchcock's film, the window, more than a system of openings, turns out to be a dimensioning and reframing system.

The window shown in the film, far from acting as an opening, limits it, closes it, limits the vision: not only in the narrative plane, but also literally: in *Rear Window*, everything that excites the gaze is triple reframed: inside the framing of the screen itself, the reframing of the window from which the protagonist looks and then, within it, the window of the apartment being viewed (González Requena, 1989, p. 150).

In Hitchcock's film, the act of looking takes center stage thanks to those swings of the image that describe the emotionality of the subject of enunciation and construct a look inside the film universe.

Figure 2: *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954).



Source: Own screenshot.

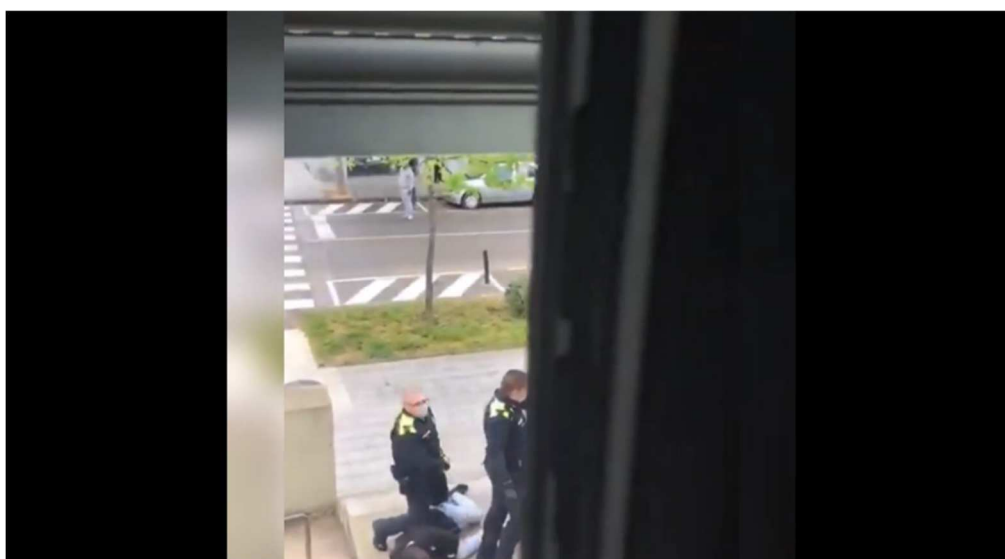
Once the context, the objective, and the method of our investigation have been traced, we are able to analyze the visual motif of police violence in public spaces during the first confinement of COVID-19 in the Spanish State. In order to do this, we will start from the analysis of three different types of glances on this motif: the witness-gaze, the protest-gaze, and the lynching gaze.

4.1. *The witness-gaze*

In the first place, to account for the visual motif of police violence on vulnerable subjects, we are going to build the concept of witness-gaze from the analysis of one of the many images of police aggressions that proliferate on the internet and on social networks. In this case, the aggression is carried out by two policemen wearing masks who push a racialized young man and his mother, who tries in vain to defend him. One of the policemen hits the young man with extreme violence and throws him to the ground. As he restrains him by violently placing one knee on his back, the other agent draws his service weapon and threatens his mother.

When observing this image, we can see how the camera does not stop moving. The subject holding it sometimes hides behind the blind and the curtain, and then re-centers the lens in the scene, unable to avoid some oscillations, dynamism, blurring, and shaking in the image. This movement of the camera allows us, to see almost nothing at times, while at other times we only contemplate the scene cut out and reframed by the blind, the curtain, and the window frame (Figure 3). We can also see how the camera is located very close to the action and how the observer records from a low-angle perspective from a ground floor or a first floor. Both the closeness between the enunciating subject and the filmed subjects, as well as the silence of the watching subject leads us to think that he is afraid of being discovered and of being attacked or detained. Otherwise, he would speak. This silence is not usual in recorded images where there is a greater distance, and where citizens who observe these normalized actions of abuse of power either criticize the violence or encourage lynching.

Figure 3: The witness-gaze.



Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhef6wtyoVk&has_verified=1.

The formal characteristic that interests us about the witness-gaze is precisely its silent essence. The form of the enunciation of the image is constructed by a silent observer. We witness astonished the vision of an image of police violence where the subject holding the gaze does not issue any judgment on what he records. But this does not mean that the subject is impartial. He says nothing, but his work implies a standing, a performative act, the act of filming the reality shown before his eyes. A reality that must be recorded because it is ethically condemned from every perspective. The image is not only “what we see” but also “what we do not see but do.” It is social praxis. Undoubtedly, this silent and testimonial praxis of the image bears similarities with the observational modality of Nichols (1991), where the observer remains passive and does not intervene. Only focusing on reality, in silence, without commenting on what he sees, without accompanying with words the things that are manifested in front of his gaze. Like a fly on the wall. We can even link this witness-gaze with Gilles Deleuze’s (1987) concept of solid-image. An image that functions as a subjective consciousness-camera, which explores space from his point of view, sometimes accompanying and others abandoning the characters. A consciousness-camera that is free to listen to reality, which is dynamic and moving.

We can read about this lack of comments on images in Foucault (1986), who points out that knowledge is built thanks to the intersection between words and things. Knowledge is the second discourse of the comment about things and, therefore, “the nature of knowledge

is neither seeing nor demonstrating but interpreting” (p. 48). In this image there is no comment, that is true, but there is a hidden knowledge. A knowledge that is certainly not linguistic, but bodily and visceral. The oscillations and tremors of the images are the oscillations and tremors of the gaze that are derived from the oscillations and tremors of the body. From the body to the gaze, from the gaze to the image. The fear of being discovered causes the movements of the body, which are transferred to the image. This transfer has nothing to do with the linguistic comment, but we can affirm that it is a kind of comment of the body. The body is holding, feeling, knowing, and thinking what is contained in that image. The body narrates, the body transmits information. The body knows and relates its fear through the gaze. In this sense, the act of looking without saying anything, the witness-gaze as an enunciation that trembles and makes the image tremble, replaces all those possible comments and statements about the image.

In conclusion, the witness-gaze is the result of the cancellation of the comment and the trembling of the body transferred to the image. As we have pointed out, both the body and the gaze –which is an expression of the body– are in the image, and they are a constitutive part of what we see. They are not installed in an exteriority, but they cross the image, “the gaze, far from being entirely exterior to the visual text, it is already to some extent, that is, for certain purposes of meaning, contained in it” (April, 2012, p. 26). Not only the gaze of the subject of the enunciation, but also our gaze. The image looks at us and assigns us the place of spectators. For this reason, this oscillating image does nothing but return to us the fear of the body of the subject of the enunciation and, therefore, our own fear. Lacan affirms that the painter or the photographer when they register an image, they choose the way of looking, which implies a choice of “their morality, their inquiry” (Lacan, 1986, p. 108). In our example, we can see how the subject of the enunciation of the image cannot choose his way of looking: he is fatally doomed to it. He cannot look otherwise, but his desire to look and to know something, which we suppose is immoral, through his body flooded with fear, supposes an ethical and epistemic act.

4.2. *The protest-gaze*

This video shows the attacks committed by a group of armed forces against a young immigrant and his mother –all of them wearing masks– in Bilbao neighborhood, San Francisco, in full confinement. The gaze here displays an act of counter-vigilant activism (Krona, 2015) through the interpretation of the events that took place in the street with protest, condemnation, and verbal intervention of the enunciation (Figure 4).

Figure 4: The protest-gaze.



Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3TPaZMi2aPE&has_verified=1.

Although it shares the motif with the witness-gaze, it differs from the previous one because the polysemy inherent in every image is anchored in a fixed sense thanks to the word, which has a denominative, descriptive, and emotional function (Barthes, 1986). In this case, the words belong to the narrator, who, at the same time, records. In this way, the receiver shares the perspective of the enunciation. This coincides with the voice and gaze of the narrator, but is separated from it thanks to the comments made by him and his companion. Thus, preventing the receiver from completely merging with the gaze, as in the witness-gaze. The visual motif takes form here thanks to verbal language. Without it, no full meaning is reached, since the world of the image is dominated by words (Bourdieu, 1996). The voice contextualizes the scene by reporting on what happened previously and explaining the causes of the scene captured by the camera of the mobile phone.

The documentary eagerness that is explicit in the use of language in the image, is related in certain aspects to a film-essay and to a performative documentary. The filmmaker does not limit himself to “being an eye with a cinematographic record,” but incorporates speech and listening, simultaneously with the course of events. In other words, he incorporates his response to what happens. According to Philip Lopate (2007), a film-essay incorporates a subjective voice that thinks about the occurring image and questions it. However, unlike a film-essay, the discourse is not the result of a posteriori reflection in the montage, but rather, it is produced at the same moment in which it is filmed, facing the protagonists of the event.

Likewise, we can link these images with the practices of a performative documentary, those where the intrusive presence of the filmmaker articulates the images (Nichols, 1991). This filiation with a performative documentary can be observed in the displacements of the image that is enlarged by means of the zoom, signaling the interest that the scene arouses by means of a hand that makes an effort to show what the enunciator sees and feels. Accompanying the voice, the movement of the device, which opens up different spaces, fulfills a deictic function that imitates a real conversation with the viewer and reinforces the oral narrative. The body that records reacts spontaneously and acts performatively, at the same time, as a result of impotence. While the receiver receives a visual chaos that he must reorganize from that narrative voice, which also intervenes and appeals to the scene, crossing the fourth wall and making the agents look back at him. This is verified when the mother, after being attacked, lies motionless on the ground, apparently unconscious, and the narrator and her partner demand that the police call an ambulance. The drama of the situation is intensified through sudden movements of the camera, blurring, and out of the frame.

Throughout the recording, a chopped frame from the balcony is maintained, which provides a wide field and, therefore, greater intelligibility than the focus of a passerby. From the perspective of the protest-gaze, the enunciation does not reflect the fear of being discovered. On the contrary, it is filmed openly without hiding the mobile device. The street, however, is perceived as a place of danger and vulnerability, while the home is understood as a safe place. It is a frame that is reminiscent of the surveillance cameras placed on the streets of many neighborhoods where the residents themselves have requested the increase of these devices to protect them from street crime.

In fact, the confidence that transpires in this video is something typical of the imaginary of panoptism (Foucault, 2005), of the surveillance state (Foessel, 2011), and of cybernetic society (Tquun, 2015). In describing “panoptism,” Foucault points out that the disciplinary social order faces chaos and “appeals to multiple separations, individualizing distributions, an in-depth organization of surveillance and controls, an intensification and a ramification of power.” (2005, p. 202). Here, faith in control is displayed as a form of social justice. The filmmaker feels safe and confronts the police, protesting and threatening to denounce by recording them. She acts from an imaginary where she considers that the Ertzaintza fails to fulfill their duty towards the people they should protect. She herself makes this explicit,

arguing that both she and the beaten woman pay the agents' salaries with their taxes. In other words, the forces of order would be attacking those they should protect. This perspective gives the filmmaker courage to face what she considers an injustice, confusing the place of her enunciation with the place of power. She considers her protest legitimate, since she views the events that she is recording as racist harassment –in the arrest of the young man– and as male chauvinism –in the violence exerted on his mother. She thus forges the myth that through surveillance, direct social justice is exercised. The consolidation of this myth, which is very widespread in contemporary society, is based on a misinterpretation of the statement “knowledge is power.” The narrator believes that the recording of an abuse has, logically, punitive consequences. She considers that the recording of what she evidences as an injustice, supposes an unappealable and objective proof of felony, crime, and abuse in a court.

The video offers an interpretation of the visual motif of the violent detention as proof of injustice. In it, the enunciator's confidence in the democratic power of the image that it counter-watches is deduced. For her, every image –despite its possible readings and interpretations– contains the power of truth and proof. She fully trusts the image captured by the device and its ability to distribute it over the networks, as well as the impunity for possible police reprisals, an immunity that the enunciator assumes comes from her possession of the truth. However, the capacity of the images is not limited to their veracity, insofar as in the current legal framework, the recording and dissemination of a video by a civilian is not subject to the same rights and freedoms as that carried out by a law enforcement officer. Surveillance is neither objective nor subjective. It is embedded in a construction of truth and verisimilitude within the hegemonic discourse that operates within a legal and juridical framework. Therefore, the same visual motif means opposite things. The person who watches over, who frames reality, and who interprets it, is not indifferent. This mirage supposes believing that the surveillance society is democratic and that the ability to control and disseminate knowledge is in the hands of anyone freely and democratically. However, the surveillance society supported by control and knowledge establishes two types of power: “digital totalitarianism” and “behavioral instrumentation” (Zuboff, 2020). This society, by combining both forms of power –which hold the monopoly of the meaning of both truth and violence– reduces the unpredictability of protest movements, anticipating, mitigating, and neutralizing them. The notion of justice, associated with interpretations of violence and truth, will ultimately be determined by power. Weeks later, as published by www.eitb.eus, the Ertzaintza denounced the woman who recorded the images, despite the protests and the public rejection of police violence (SOS Racismo Bizkaia).

This issue can also be addressed in the sequence of the documentary *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore, 2002). Moore goes to a Walmart headquarters with two young victims of the Columbine shooting in order to demand the company to stop the sale of ammunition, which almost ended their lives. They face different representatives of the commercial chain without success, but everything changes when the next day he contacts a great number of official mass media outlets, obtaining the desired result immediately. In the same way, our sequence shows that the diffusion of an image does not have power by itself. Its power depends greatly from where the gaze is constructed. This shows the ineffectiveness of recording and of the isolated and individual protest. Although it is understood as a legitimate act of democratic protest and exercise of freedom of expression, it reveals a situation of asymmetry when the recording is judicially turned against the director.

4.3. *The Lynching-gaze*

This video captures the violent arrest of a runner. It shows a violent situation in progress, where the detainee resists and asks for help, while the woman filming, together with another person, encourages the violence of the agents, justifying it, threatening, and verbally attacking the citizen. The gaze is accompanied again by the verbalization and gesture of the body

transmitted to the camera, which brings us closer to the film-essay and the performative documentary (Nichols, 1991). As in the previous case, the visual motif of the police reducing and surrounding a suspect lying on the asphalt is explained and reduced in its potential polysemy in the immediate occurrence of the events from the point of view of the enunciation. In this video, the voice encourages and reinforces the violence of the events, also sharing the role of spontaneous and direct observation through the attempt to capture reality in its immediacy. The gaze executes an action, where monitoring and punishing are articulated in the same movement. In this way, an action is formed that goes beyond interpreting facts and positioning about them. In addition, the enunciation acts, attacks, and reinforces the action. It not only intervenes verbally, but also performs the punishment and social rejection by recording, condemning the detained person, legitimizing direct violence, and even threatening: “As I come down, you can enter at once!” (Figure 5).

Figure 5: The lynching-gaze.



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCjSYk3C0i4>.

We use the term “lynching-gaze” here because the explicit violence that is generated from the enunciation towards the attacked people is linked to the so-called “culture of vigilantism.” Dorlin (2019) explains its origin in the United States, as a reaction to the first revolts that announced the Civil War. The first vigilant groups were organized groups of “self-proclaimed vigilante citizens” (2019, p. 180). Wealthy and anti-abolitionist whites (most of them men) legitimized armed violence as “defensive,” independent of judges and lawyers, and broke with the classical conception of justice. Vigilant vigilantes seek to defend society against its enemies from a logic that denies “equity and the presumption of innocence, a logic of war and social purge of a police type rather than judicial” (2019, pp. 183–185). This warlike logic mobilizes the hatred and violence of the crowd surrounding the executed person. During the confinement, the idea of vigilant vigilantes has multiplied the number of videos of violent content in which the use of police force is celebrated, or people who walk on the street are threatened and rebuked, recording them and exposing them to media lynching. This fulfills the same functions that Foucault (2000) observes in the execution or public punishment. In other words, to show the “dissymmetry” between power and the individual: the vulnerability of the citizen before the law and the manifestation of its force. It also reflects the ideal of the plagued city, and therefore guarded, hierarchical, classified, as “the utopia of the perfectly governed city” (2000, p. 202). The confinement of COVID-19, the digital age, and the empire of the screen is added to the previous.

The visual motif of police violence in public spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic

Another characteristic of the lynch-gaze is that, often and not coincidentally, the people “lynched” belong to vulnerable groups –a fact denounced by organizations such as SOS Racismo or Amnesty International– where hatred is rooted in prejudice and racial, class, and gender discrimination. This is observed in the following example (Fig. 6) of a conflict between the neighbors who watch from their balconies and a passer-by before the police arrive. It is based on the confrontation among the “Spaniards” who reprimand her for the threat that she represents as an Ecuadorian immigrant, betraying the conception of “a dangerous world” that promotes “the presumption of guilt” of otherness, the basis of the security logic of the “State of surveillance” (Foessel, 2011, p. 59). The woman is rebuked by the shouts and insults of “bitch” or “slut” and is incited by the agents to enter her house. The narrator of the video, the subject of the lynch-gaze, makes a comment that highlights the thought of a patriarchal vigilante: “we would have already slapped our women twice.”

Figure 6: The lynching-gaze over an immigrant.



Source:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=ktkILzilihQ&feature=emb_logo.

This way of thinking about transgression as a possible attack on the civilian body through contagion, turns anyone who circulates on the streets –especially immigrants and the most vulnerable groups– into a potential criminal: a sick person, a terrorist against public health, a danger to society. Any passer-by is suspicious and liable to be guilty, whether it is obviously so, or the reasons why you are on the street are unknown; whether you leave for an emergency, a medical prescription or because you suffer a mental disorder:

That is the paradox of biopolitics: every act of protection implies an immune definition of the community according to which it will give itself the authority to sacrifice other lives, for the benefit of an idea of its own sovereignty. The state of exception is the normalization of this unbearable paradox (Preciado, 2020, p. 166).

The idea of civil self-defence empowers a vigilant society and legitimizes lynching. In this way, a warlike imaginary of fighting the virus is expressed where the responsible people fight the virus while the irresponsible ones encourage the advance of the enemy. From this logic, it is justified that police officers take justice into their own hands or go overreach in their actions. In this imaginary of war, “naturalized and universalized” fear (Foessel, 2011, p. 123) is transformed into hatred and triumphant euphoria of a combat that, simulating unity, has intensified hostility and confrontation among neighbors, culminating in social lynching. The

sadistic interest and popular excitement that the public executions aroused –which Galdós and Baroja already denounced in their chronicles and articles– is linked to the vigilantism present day, although in a sweetened version. However, since the confinement it multiplies its attacks and increases in virulence. The visual motif of lynching is linked to a multitude of scenes present in the collective imaginary, of crowd executions. In a humorous way, we can evoke the emotion that the public execution aroused in some disguised women in *Life of Brian* (Jones, 1979) eager to participate in a group stoning as entertainment and as a form of relief or catharsis.

As a result of the evident rise of vigilant surveillance from windows and balconies, those who performed this type of practice –including the sticking of threatening posters on neighbors' houses– have been popularly baptized as “balcony police.” This derogatory qualifier has also reached the media, nourished by images created by the population, in a feedback process, where everyone watches everyone. The division and social controversy produced by these practices can be synthetically illustrated by means of the viral version – during the confinement– of a song by Lendakaris Muertos, entitled “Gestapo vecinal,” that satirizes these practices.

5. Conclusions

As we have verified from the analysis of the visual motif of police violence in public spaces, the same motif allows multiple interpretations and perspectives. Therefore, a motif may build different stories, varying its function depending on the type of operative gaze. The types of gaze depend on various factors: the use or elision of the voice of the person recording, the spontaneous movement or not of the camera, and the intention of the recording. From the witness-gaze, the aim is to give testimony without intervening in the facts, but without being an impersonal record, since the trembling and spontaneous movements of the image reflect the emotions and tensions of the body that records. The protest-gaze incorporates, in addition to the unplanned tremors, the narrative voice simultaneous to the events, as well as direct intervention on the scene censoring the police violence. Finally, the lynching-gaze differs from the protest-gaze, because in its intervention, instead of rejecting, it reinforces the violent action. This turns the recording itself into a means of virtual lynching of the person reduced by force, when published on channels like YouTube.

On the other hand, these types of gaze exemplified in the recordings made by confined amateurs from their mobile phones or from their screens, demonstrate a settlement in the popular imagination of the trust in the use of digital communication technologies and media, as enablers of the citizen agency for political, social, and journalistic praxis. The crisis caused by the pandemic highlights the crystallization of the state or capitalism of surveillance (Foessel 2011; Zuboff, 2020) of a police policy where security comes from social control, which incurs in the increase of mutual distrust and social psychosis. This belief is evident both in vigilantism (lynching-gaze) that stands on the side of the oppressor, and in counter-vigilance (witness-gaze and protest-gaze), which denounces power abuse. The risk here is that the importance of the place of the enunciation regarding power is confused. In other words, the relevant difference between surveillance from above, which supposes the control exercised by a few over many, vigilance from below, of many over a few, and the mutual vigilance of all overall, is obviated. The impact of the role played by the social and political position from which an event is denounced, condemned, or celebrated seems to be diluted in a kind of myth of the virtual world, where its democratizing potential is misinterpreted, making access to technological media and social networks equivalent to the ability to affect and influence society and politics. The lynching-gaze, by positioning itself next to the official account, although it takes sides in an aggression, is justified from the warmongering thought, where anything goes against the enemy. This logic encourages the increase in social confrontations based on prejudice and discrimination of class, race, and gender, harming mainly the most

disadvantaged sectors. It is on them on whom the vigilantist social screen falls upon with special rigor since the idea of privileging control jeopardizes the rights and freedom of anyone on whom suspicion is built. The subjects that can become suspects more easily are those who are easier to monitor, that is, people without resources –immigrants, homeless, mentally ill, etc.– and/or people indicated (pointed out) by prejudice of class, race, gender, or sexual orientation, therefore, with less ability to counter-monitor and be heard.

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Filmography

Fiction

- Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954)
- Life of Brian* (Terry Jones, 1979)
- Now* (Santiago Álvarez, 1965)

Documentaries

- Bowling for Columbine* (Michael Moore, 2002)
- Whose Streets* (Davis & Folayan, 2017)

Series

COPS (1989–2020)

Policías en acción (2013–2016)