You never know what you’re recording

Fernando Baños Fidalgo / Yayo Aznar Almazán
University Complutense de Madrid UCM / Universidad de Educación a Distancia UNED

Guidelines for a correct (and reader-friendly) appreciation of the text: this text was not written with consensus of opinion. It is an exchange of ideas through dialogue between an art historian and the creator of a video-essay based on specific images of the war in Bosnia. This ‘textual collage’ was presented as a paper during the seminar “Art thinks; thinking with images” in June 2010 and formed part of the R&D project Images of art and the rewriting of narratives in global visual culture. The reader should note that the text in italics identifies comments of the art historian (Yayo Aznar Almazán) whereas normal text is that of the artist (Fernando Baños Fidalgo).

“There was a South Korean team at the Helsinki Olympics whose cook had been the man who Leni Riefenstahl had shot, or let’s say filmed, as being the winner of the Olympic Marathon in Berlin, 1936. Only that back then, he was Japanese. You see, you never know what you are recording. Leni Riefenstahl thought that she was filming a Japanese athlete, however he turned out to be Korean. In 1952, I thought I was filming a champion show-jumper of the Chilean team. I was actually filming someone involved in a Coup. It turned out that Mendoza was a Lieutenant, and later as General Mendoza, would be member of the Pinochet Junta. You never know what you’re filming”. [1]

Position
The question of what we see and the creation of narratives which digress from historical and media discussion still poses a challenge for the visual artist. What images should be taken into account? Why are some images ‘superior’ to others? This is the position I take: to question the value of the image, place it in the system of active thought and turn it into an analytical tool in order to create ‘other’ narratives of the world.

Here art is imposed on the given image to create (a new narrative), that is to say, ‘to think with the image’. We could even state that art exploits its own ineffectiveness at questioning and has been able to become, as Nietzsche says, an art which protects us from falling to the bottom of the truth, that is, no matter how much trauma it produces, it can never match the reality as to so create belief in the given truth; this constructed iconic narrative by means of proliferating images first appeared in constant succession in an unprecedented whirlwind at the turn of the century; how well Kracauer knew it!

I will start from the logical and orthodox construction of a media discourse, in order to then move away from it and position myself on the boundary between reality and fiction, adopting a strategy of representation which, to paraphrase Ernst van Alphen, “supplements (completes) a documentary (mode) which is no longer possible”. Rather than protect us from falling to the bottom of the truth, it will attempt to drag us to the bottom of what is possible. “An intense discussion is going on, as eyewitnesses become rarer and fiction is one of the few remaining options for keeping the memory of the events alive. Visual artists as Christian Boltanski and Armando struggle to come up with strategies of representation that supplement the documentary mode that is no longer possible.” [2]
The problem is how; not what art can do, but how it can do it. Adopting a representational strategy which, in the words of van Alphen, will complete a documentary mode which is already no longer possible... or indeed impossible, I would say, as the media sees it today. Because, perhaps, fiction is not the only option possible. To imagine (as Didi-Huberman would have it) is to not fantasise. Nevertheless, we should not write off the documentary image so quickly, nor should we leave it as a mere documentary image; let’s imagine with them.

Srebrenica: a pretext to build ‘another’ narrative of the war
Bosnia-Herzegovina War. July 1995. In the days leading up to the seizure of Srebrenica security enclave [3], the Spanish public television (TVE) news accompanied its reports with archive footage because no images existed of what was taking place at the time. On July 11, Bosnian Serb troops, under the command of General Ratko Mladic, took Srebrenica. The aim was to deal a blow to the Bosnian Muslim militia for breaching the demilitarisation agreements between Bosnian and Serbs of April 18 and May 8, 1993, which forced the disarmament of Muslim troops in the said enclavei [4]. The entry of the Bosnian Serb army into Srebrenica resulted in the displacement of some 40,000 Bosnian Muslims to the town of Potocari where Dutch troops of the UNPROFOR (United Nations Protection Force) had the responsibility of protecting the security enclave. During the critical days of this conflict, between 11 and 15 July, TVE broadcasted only a few news agency images despite the fact that there were Serbian journalists recording the actions of Mladic’s troops in Srebrenica. These images were filtered out in Belgrade before being distributed to news agencies and it is, therefore, little wonder that TV news had to ‘pull out’ archive footage for its broadcasts.

On 12 July, Bosnian Serb troops arrived at Potocari and, in images that were seen around the world, General Mladic appeared before the cameras greeting and reassuring Bosnian refugees.
“The same general Mladic, military leader of the secessionist Serbs, close friend of Serbia’s Slobodan Milosevic, appeared yesterday in true Nazi style, handing out chocolates to his victims, to children whose brothers and sisters, parents or grandparents are presently being interrogated at the Bratunac football ground, which is of course off-limits to international organisations.” [5]

What occurred over the following days is officially regarded as the greatest act of genocide in Europe since WWII [6]. Allegedly, more than 8,000 unarmed male Bosnian Muslims were murdered. [7]

The Bosnian war ended with the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, known as the Dayton Accords or the Paris Protocol, signed 14 December 1995. It was only from that moment on that some of the atrocities committed during the war began to come to light; with particular attention being paid to Srebrenica. In addition to numerous newspaper articles and books [8] on the subject. I wish to highlight some of the documentaries that have been broadcasted since then by different media which allow an assessment of existing images:

- 1999: BBC4 – A Cry from the Grave
- 2003: Journeyman Pictures – Bosnia: Lost Images
- 2005: BBC4 – Srebrenica: Never Again
- 2008: Journeyman Pictures – Srebrenica: Autopsy of a Massacre
- 2008: Journeyman Pictures – Srebrenica: The Trauma of the Blue Berets.

In addition, we cannot ignore the countless video documentation posted on Youtube, of particular note being: Srebrenica 11.07.1995 - Genocide in Europe, an audio-visual documentary in 20 parts (approx. 180 minutes) by the PLBIH, the Bosnia-Herzegovina patriotic league [9]. Although it is a document made by an interested party, the Bosnians, the video has a very interesting format, the story develops without sound and restricts itself to a fairly aseptic form which creates a video-diary of the events in Srebrenica and uses as source material all images filmed during the conflict, including footage from: Television Serbia; a Bosnian Srebrenica video amateur and that of an officer with Dutch troops in Potocari.

Black gaps

On July 12, 1995, just a day after Bosnian Serb troops took the Srebrenica enclave, Zoran Petrovic, a journalist for Belgrade’s independent television, joined the Serbian troops and filmed what happened at the front over two days. Of this adventure journalism there only remains a one-hour tape with some of its parts in black (‘black gaps’) which provide evidence of it being erased post-recording.

In 2006, the British film distributor Journeyman Pictures made the documentary Lost Images [10] in which Petrovic is interviewed. In the documentary, the Serbian journalist argues that the black gaps would actually correspond to images of the front that had been subjected to censorship deletion by the Bosnian Serb soldiers themselves, who reviewed everything that he had filmed. Nevertheless, Journeyman contend that the images were deleted some time later. The
importance of the black gaps lies in the fact that they could be decisive proof of the killings of Bosnian Muslim civilians. So, Journeyman gets “a copy of a copy of a copy” [11] in which you can see something that could prove the said facts, but at the same time is a tape was subject to deletion.

I wish to highlight two significant considerations arising from this story:

1. The black gaps reveal the predatory attitude of the media towards images. That is, THERE ARE NEVER ENOUGH PICTURES. Now we know that not all images available are released, so therefore WE NEVER SEE ALL THE PICTURES THAT EXIST. Because despite the disproportionate appropriation of images, the usefulness of the vast majority of them will be to merely serve as archive documents. Only the fortunate minority will be the lucky ones, that is, the ones that will have the chance to be turned into icons. Thus, postures Didi-Huberman:

“television information is adept at exploiting both of these techniques: the ‘nothing’ or the ‘too much’ either on the one hand, by blinding us better through censorship and destruction, or on the other, by choking us with proliferation [...] if the information offers us too many images, we are predisposed to believe ‘nothing’ of what we see and, ultimately, we do not wish to look at what has been placed before our eyes.” [12]; and Rancière: “It is not true that those who rule the world are deceiving or blinding us by showing us too many images; their power is actually exerted by discarding them [...] and it is precisely this that the big wheels of information do. We accuse them of drowning us in a sea of images; but what they do is the exact opposite. Not being content with merely reducing the number of images made available; they also sort them before putting them on the scene.” [13]

2. Did Zoran Petrović actually know what he was filming Srebrenica between 12 and 14 July 1995?

- “Your eyes were not closed. So you know, you are the only one almost [sic.], what was happening there.” –states the Journeyman interviewer.
- “No. It happened what I have on film...” -retorts Petrović.

And this is true. Petrović’s hand directed the camera and the tape recorded things that he did not see. The truth is he didn’t know what he was filming, not because of ignorance nor because a closer look would reveal something else, but because he had no idea what others would see in the tape. And this is what is given away in the recording, the chance that someone else will look at it through a prism of other images which accompany it. Therefore, the question has a clear answer: Zoran Petrović didn’t know what he was filming [14], because nobody knows what is being recorded until one sees what has been filmed (whoever the viewer may be).

We shouldn’t talk about missing images, or lost images, or images that do not exist, or misappropriated images, or stolen images. We ought to talk about images that have not had sufficient attention paid to them and are imploiting us to look at them; images in a ‘latent state’.

But this doesn’t mean that he doesn’t know what he’s filming; it merely implies that he is recording more than what is being filmed; and it is this which demands a closer look afterwards. Alfredo Jaar touches on this when he speaks of letting images cool; for it is in this cooling of the images of Auschwitz, as Didi-Huberman would have it [15] that we can fly over what we already know in order to imagine the urgency. The urgency as a value of the image, and one which is, of course, latent.
The place where images live (think)

“The archive has the function of sheltering that which makes no sense memorising […]. The archive was born out of the need to externalise our memory which we deposit in a foreign place that is not, of course, a place of our own intimate experience. It is a place which is out there where the facts are when we need to look for them”. [16]

As I mentioned before, the images broadcasted in the news reports on Spanish public television especially during the month of July 1995, the key month in Bosnian War, were on the whole archive footage; some of them were even older than two years. But in reality there were more images. There are more images. They are images that have been discarded and archived. Images which in the place where they now reside have never ceased to think.

Both television news and the majority of documentaries are assembled as to produce an unconscious link [17] in the observer between the sound -which relates- and the image-which illustrates the story. It’s all about creating a montage aimed at the senses.

Its characteristic form is documentary and/or narrative. There is no possibility of a ‘disruption’ in our way of thinking because what we see and what we hear are in perfect harmony. It is a kind of primary function of our perception, whereby what we perceive is assimilated without question. Hence, the key aspect in creating the montage is to choose the correct image to the exclusion of the rest.

But returning to the images, all, both the ones chosen and the ones not chosen, form a part of this great audio-visual archive which documents everything that has happened in the world and is so characteristic of what has come to be called visual culture. “In itself, this duplication and storage of the visual world, its conversion into visual memory […] produces a reconsideration of what is real.” [18]

It is necessary to take advantage of this proliferation of archives (analogue, digital and virtual) of these places where images inhabit, in order to reconsider reality through the creation of parallel accounts on the discussion of consensus; and this is the way in which the essay form, both in video and cinema, manifests itself. The essay form as a means of rewriting the narratives in global visual culture. “But above this senseless chat performed by the mass media using images of the world, lies the sensible chat of the film-essay which converts the recorded material that has been either directly or indirectly archived, into contemplative or thoughtful conversation in a visual form” [19]

Going against the grain: slow movement as a strategy and the essay form as a consequence.

“Well, we all know, a picture is worth a thousand words. But suppose it were otherwise. Or rather, let’s suppose that the power of the image were a problem. That a ‘downgrade’ would be necessary in order to use it, in order to analyse it, or to convert it into an analytical tool. […] To avoid this medusa-effect, at the mercy of an image that bewitches us […], one has to establish a certain distance from it. Only then can we start to think about the image itself, think with the image, or even create a thinking image: different ways of summing it up as an essay project.” [20]

To distance oneself from the image, to distance it from its original role, to 'isolate it' as document, is not about losing sight of the referent, but circumventing the image; its role as 'representative' of reality, and allow it to -perhaps- take on an
By stepping back, we can take a different view of the images, a view which acts as if it were a slow motion camera: a slowed down gaze. This strategy had been employed by various authors in their own work:

- Roland Barthes, in the S/Z essay on the short story by Balzac, Sarrasine, in which he talks about searching for the plural in the text: “substitute for the simple representative model another model, whose very gradualness would guarantee what may be productive in the classic text; for the step-by-step method, through its very slowness and dispersion, avoids penetrating, reversing the tutor text, giving an internal image of it: it is never anything but the decomposition (in the cinematographic sense) of the work of reading: a slow motion, so to speak, neither wholly image nor wholly analysis” [21].

- Jesús Rodríguez Cortezo in his Diary (apocryphal) of a turn of a century: 1989-1991 [22], vindicates the slow motion camera as an observational method for relating to and coping with the events of the past which, due to the devilish pace of the present day, we are unable to see.

- The protagonist of Austerlitz, the acclaimed novel by Sebald, plays a video of a documentary showing Nazi propaganda slowly in an attempt to ‘see the hidden’ and discover any trace of an image of his mother.

- Chris Marker, and his concept of the superliminal message in the Staring Back exhibition. “If subliminal refers to the object the eye doesn’t catch, yet the brain does. Superliminal is THE REVENGE OF THE EYE... that on slow-motion catches one image among others apparently identical as being THE image” [23]

It is, therefore, a methodological and experimental model which allows us to view the image differently: to think with the image in order to enable the creation of new narratives; and this is where the essay-form comes to the fore: as we are talking about visual images intended to be released on video, one of the most appropriate forms for this rewrite is through an essay-project: the video-essay and the film-essay. And it is no coincidence that the necessary condition required to produce an essay for both video and film is: “(to) return to ‘looking at the image’, distort its original role (narrative, observational) and view it as far as representation, not read only what it represents […] a way to subordinate the image to a ‘subsequent’ discussion: the image used in this way reverts to an ‘earlier stage’, thus creating the necessary distance from its original meaning and function.” [24]

The aim of the audio-visual essay would be, as Christa Blümlinger says, “to avoid an unconscious welding of image and sound by means of dynamic confrontations and a winding progression”, [25] to provoke the observer. But now it’s not about a montage for the eye, not even about a new montage which would go from ear to eye as André Bazin states [26] (which would subordinate the image to sound), but a new autonomous device capable of thought and decision.

Returning to the two reflections on the black gaps made earlier, the audio-visual essay allows us to rescue these archive images which have not been scrutinised and which besides being images that do not know why they are, they also don’t know why they were filmed; we therefore rescue them in order to create a new tale, a form that thinks. The essay-form can carry out the idea of Rancière to see “what is taken into account”, what images are taken into account. To paraphrase the same Rancière, it’s not about criticising the televised message, it’s about creating another spatial-temporal device through which words are not spoken by a voice, but arranged as a poem on screen, where there may be less information,
but one which holds our attention for much longer. [27]

The Contemplation (of the war) [28]: ‘another’ video about Srebrenica

Images then, apparently without the slightest urgency. A fixed camera recording a burning house for just over four minutes, a house that could be any home, which could be in many places. So there it is, the image, but it does not appear as a stand-alone image. The voiceover helps, of course, but it is also the ability to look through the prism of other images that accompany them.

Images, seen a thousand times, which have many houses in flames, as a backdrop, or just something in the background. But now the burning house is brought to the fore, in detail in form and time. And I quote Fernando literally [29]: “Details are those indivisible elements which provide the basic information for a reassembly, that is, a new assembly of what was previously disassembled.”

So why film the same event for so long? From so many different angles and with so many long shots? Knowing full well that it would not be broadcasted? Is this the direct result of a contemplative gaze? A gaze which is fascinated by the effect of the fire on the memory causing a ‘revolution’ in thoughts? What ever it may be, the result is that this recorded new material is pure visual rhetoric for the medium of television: an image which has already been seen, repeated, and of no documentary interest; archive fodder. All these images lie latent in the archives, in a sort of ‘stand-by’ mode, waiting for someone to give them a closer look. They are images that also tell us about the war; they are also images of war.

It’s a polemic word, ‘contemplation’, charged with an inheritance that is not easy to recuperate. But of course, Fernando is not talking about ‘disinterested contemplation’; he talks only of ‘contemplation’ because he is interested in distancing himself in the same way as the ‘distracted gaze’.

That is, calling for attention. But does Fernando call for attention or understanding? Is contemplating the war only
paying attention to the war? Because to see more in what one sees is not merely a problem of attention. It is not merely
attention, we ought not to be ‘disposed towards’ an ideology or a well closed discussion, rather, we ought to understand,
that is, to be ‘disposed to be within’. Between ‘be inclined towards’(ally ourselves to a group) and ‘be inclined to be within’
what happened, the difference is key to these ‘memories under siege’ of which van Alphen speaks when he refers to
Peter Forgacs’ production. Perhaps in the end it is indeed true that he didn’t know what he was filming as he was filming;
in the words of Didi-Huberman, images always retain problematic indeterminate and latent elements. All images, both
selected and not selected by the media, film who films them.

Seen through the eyes of Fernando, through Fernando’s work which establishes itself as an ‘agent of power’; an agent of
power which instead of turning all it sees into stone, it reworks it and imbues it with another narrative framework, which
clashes with the images we already have of that war.

Because this house could be in any war (or even none), but we know that Fernando will let us know that it is from this
war. The image always exerts pressure on ideology. The eyes are always “agents of power”, but for art, maybe these
are not always agents of power as a noun, rather power used as a verb. Power establishes these images as a point of
reference for the memory, because these images are also a statement and Fernando doesn’t cease to play around with
the said statement in this medium of audio-visual essay which avoids this unconscious welding that closes the discussion
leaving it open, un-welded; and he does this with some very specific tools:

Addressing the evocative role of the image: we can not stop looking at the fire, contemplating the fire. Why couldn’t
modern man stop looking at the sea?, I asked myself, and once again, found myself having problems contemplating. I
don’t have all the information, and in the end, I get distracted. But you need to think with the image as it so deserves.
The critique of Benjamin of contemplative reception is totally justified, but this does not mean (and with this I am in
total agreement with Peter Burger [30]) that we have to accept and offer no resistance to such a distracted bourgeois
reception as if it were inevitable, because to do so would condemn us to deny contemplating (which is a real experience)
in an abstract fashion. However, distancing ourselves with a distracted gaze does not mean an almost melancholic,
contemplation of the fire. Thanks to the voices in off we can not forget what we have in front of us is a detail of the war
elevated to the category of document. Looking at that fire, with no person visible, so many times and seen from afar, as
a simple background, we stop looking and we start to remember, accompany this fire with other images that we have
already gathered in our collective memory. The image is thus dialectical; “corresponding to a past made memory” [31].

Slowing images down also pushes them to an aesthetic limit. Stopping the images to ‘see more’. Contemplation of the
fire is impossible in a simple photograph (although, now that’s it’s been reinterpreted, I won’t push the issue anymore).
Playing around with the ‘sublime’. Barthes was interested in still photography, Silverman and van Alphen prefer to explore
the moving image, but there is also a manipulation of time in the film, an interest in its slowing down, and moreover, an
interest in an image that is practically still, in which the only thing moving in fact is the fire.) In the end, what is actually
alive in this image is the destruction that now anticipates the thought process and starts to weave a discussion in which
echoes the word ‘vengeance’ (remaining fixed there, still, like an echo), curiously enough only mentioned by a western
and ‘official’ voice which is trying to be denied by ‘the other’.

Este es un artículo de acceso abierto distribuido bajo los términos de la licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento – NoComercial – SinObraDerivada (by-nc-nd) Spain 3.0.
References:


Footnotes


[3] Srebrenica is a town in eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina, in the Srpska Republic, whose capital has the same name. Although today it is a Serbian majority, until 1991 seven out of ten people were Bosnian Muslims. In April 1993, during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the UN declared a total of six security zones around the country: Bihac, Gorazde, Srebrenica, Sarajevo, Tuzla and Zepa.

[4] Source: Report of the UN Secretary General in accordance with the resolution 53/35 of the UN General Assembly: The fall of Srebrenica.


[6] According to the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY). For more information visit official website of the ICTY: http://www.icty.org/ In one of its pages you can read: “It has been proven beyond reasonable doubt that the mass murder at Srebrenica was indeed genocide”. (http://www.icty.org/sections/AbouttheICTY).
Despite the recognition and condemnation of the Srebrenica massacre, the Serbian Parliament recently passed the motion, by slight majority (127 MPs out of 250), to never mention the word genocide (source: LOBO, R. “Forgiveness for Srebrenica reopens wounds in Serbia “, El Pais newspaper, April 1, 2010), the vast majority of Serbian people do not explicitly recognise these events: in the first place, they believe that the number of victims is exaggerated and demand that the UN perform a post-war census of Bosnia-Herzegovina; secondly they argue that similar crimes were committed against Serbian civilians by Muslim militias. However, all attempts to incriminate Bosnian Muslims have fallen on deaf ears probably for lack of evidence. Even the International Criminal Tribunal for the former crimes Yugoslavia began an investigation against Alija Izetbegovic, the president of Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war, but it was interrupted by his death in 2003.


These videos can be viewed on the PLBIH Youtube channel: http://www.youtube.com/user/PLBIH

The documentary can be viewed on-line at http://www.journeyman.tv/?lid=9456

Taken from the transcript of the documentary: “Via contacts, we spoke to someone who had a copy of a copy of a copy of a tape showing the Studio B program in question.”, 15’27”. Source: http://www.journeyman.tv/?lid=9456&tmpl=transcript


Paraphrasing Chris Marker in his video, Le Fond du l’air est Rouge (A Grin without a Cat)(1977) and furthermore, a quote which I share conceptually and one which serves as the fundamental basis of these ‘other’ narratives to which I refer throughout the text. This is not only evident in Marker but also in Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges (Pictures of the World and Enrolment in the War) by Harun Farocki (1988). At the point when they show an aerial photograph of Auschwitz taken in April 1944, the narrator says “the experts discovered a power plant, a carbide factory under construction, and a factory for hydrogenating petrol. It wasn’t their mission to look for the Auschwitz camp, and consequently they didn’t find it."


(Translation mine) Morey, M., “The place of all places: considerations on the archive”. In Registros imposibles: el Mal
[17] Christa Blümlinger paraphrase. The quote can be read below.


[19] Ibid., p. 102.


[26] André Bazin writes in his text “Lettre de Siberie” on 30 March 1958, regarding the work of the name of Chris Marker, that the author invents a new type of montage that is no longer from eye to ear, rather from ear to eye, and is called horizontal montage. Christa Blumlinger explains this new form of montage (Translation mine) “regarding this new audio-visual entity: the image doesn’t refer (necessarily) to what precedes or follows it, rather it acts in a certain lateral mode, referring to what is said (in the comment). Blüminger, C. “Read between the images”, Op. cit., p. 53. However, it seems correct in its assessment of Josep M. Catalá to the respect: (Translation mine) “It should be made absolutely clear, however, that the oral-graphic language does not refer to the voice: which would repeat the same error as Bazin, of considering that the film-essay invents a new type of montage which runs from ear to eye”. Op. cit. pp. 104 & 105.


[28] We recommend the reader to view the video at www.ferbanos.com
