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Archive Crisis
Shaking Up the
Shelves of History

A visual essay on media archives from the recent political past of Greece

JAPSAM
BOOKS

SHOW AND TELL

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In this text, I address the responsibility of the image-maker in both the journalism and art environment. It is actually no small feat; therefore, it is paramount to understand first how images work. I will try to make this clear through three separate considerations. Firstly, that information and instructions about how to read the world around us lie at the basis of our being in it. Secondly, that these forms of instruction are visually organized and made available in specific and often subtle ways. Lastly, that to take responsibility for our being in the world and for the way we mediate it visually, we have to reconsider the conception of visual information formats.

Zero to One

'Information,' said Claude Shannon, the mathematician-engineer who first coined the term 'information theory', 'although related to the everyday meaning of the world, should not be confused with it.'[1]

Up to the nineteenth century, what we now understand as 'the media' - then limited to newspapers and other press outputs - reported almost exclusively on social investigations, tribunal decisions and ballot results, often making use of interviews and statistics. In the United States, for instance, through the various media enterprises of Joseph Pulitzer, an embryo of media journalism advanced and embraced the idea of a public service, with a certain duty to improve society. From then on, and throughout the modern age, information journalism has come to be considered a kind of transnational institution, a body guarantor of public assets through image and text. What it also, and prominently, does, is to make a point rather than test hypotheses. In editorial circles, the point to be made decides in advance the selection of people to interview and the nature of the questions these people are asked. In short, information journalism has assumed a transversal form of storytelling, embedded into a structure (the TV format, the magazine, the newspaper, the video or slideshow on the Internet) that is familiar to the viewer, recognizable as information narrative and therefore trustable as a filter to explain the world.

The interaction of aesthetics and information is therefore the fabric and the stepping-stone upon which we build our opinions and form our ideas of the society we live in. The process can be identified in our gathering of signs from the environment (primary signs like shelter, food etc. or secondary signs like social bonds) and our interpretation - that is, translation - of these signs into information, which becomes a sort of pre-processed knowledge. The key element to finalize this knowledge and turn it into opinions and ideas is the acquisition of the skill to ask the right question about those signs, and thus ultimately transform the original information received. The impulse

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1   Pindar, Ian, 'It from Bit', review of James Gleick's book *The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood* in *The Guardian*, Review section (30 April 2011: 7).

to ever expand knowledge and grasp more meaning out of information, especially visual one, is derived from our very development as humans, which in time has generated an all-encompassing aesthetic approach to life.

Since language prefigures our coming into the world, so do visual forms of it, allowing us to interpret signs through their visual translation. In modern age, a catalogue of pre-loaded imagery from information journalism provides us with the possibilities, but also with the limitations, to understand the world semantically. This is what Kaja Silverman calls the 'cultural screen';[2] the repertoire of images that are given to us in a certain historical moment and culture. Silverman's main concept is that we can only experience our reality as a specific version of it. Constituted by practices and relations; this particular side of the world is made up, for the greater part, by the screen. The way we look at the world and the way we are seen by others is constantly structured and mediated by images. Imagery establishes a close relationship between what we see and what we know: they form, in other words, the condition for us to see.[3]

Within this context, it is vital to allow other tools such as imagination, doubt and open-endedness into the questioning

that leads to visual translation. By changing the collection of images that we can refer to, and introducing new material and new ways to gauge the existing imagery, we can change the way we assess other people, stories and circumstances. This implies that we may be able to disrupt the sort of visual 'fiction' in which we live, i.e. the predominant ways of seeing and evaluating images. A case in point is the 'optically correct'[4] language that journalism imagery uses as a standard form of information exchange, that is, the politically correct imagery used as a standard form of communication by respected broadcasters and newspapers - in print, broadcast and online. Taking the newspaper as an example, the standard is not to show images of people staring directly at the reader on the front page. The 'objectivity' of the information is guaranteed through subtle visual mechanisms as such, to which exceptions only confirm the norm. The direct gaze is reserved for features inside the paper. Far from rendering the representation more transparent, the entire visual process is disguised as objectivity; the individual or organizational agenda behind it remains undeclared. This *modus operandi* by media outlets actually allows swapping an actual episode for its symbolic reading, presenting only a specific way to tell a story. This way of telling a story becomes the basis for further reporting and accumulating news, ever distancing the origins and sources of the facts from the subsequent interpolations

2   Silverman, Kaja, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, New York and London: Routledge (1996).
3   Becker, Karin (2004): 'Where is visual culture in contemporary theories of media and communication?', in Carlsson, Ulla, ed., *Nordicom Review 1-2/2004*, Special Issue: *The 16th Nordic Conference on Media and Communication Research*, pp. 149-157, http://www.nordicom.gu.se/eng.php?portal=publ&main=info_publ2.php?&ex=157&me=2. Accessed 2 February 2014. Becker acknowledges Bal, Mieke, 'Visual essentialism and the object of visual culture', in *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 2 (1) (2003: 5-32).

4   Virilio, Paul, *L'arte dell'accecamento*, Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore (2007). First edition in French as *L'art à perte de vue*, Editions Galilée, 2005.

and mediations. It is quite unusual these days to witness the verification, disclaiming of or apologizing for mistaken or even misleading news given the day, week or month before. When it happens, it is often tucked away in a corner of hidden between the spoken lines. Information journalism finds itself flanked on one side by its original social mission, and on the other by its power position. In between lies the rather uncharted territory (from the receiver's point of view) of the visual organization of the information. It comes down to who is arranging the sequence of knowledge, how and when this is visualized, for what intentions and through which formats it is presented.

In a bizarre twist, part of the world lives in a media-saturated age in which information overload and information poverty are never far apart. We rely increasingly on 'meta-journalism' in order to filter and make sense of the various contradictory positions and narratives we are presented on a daily basis. This kind of explanatory industry is made up by media watchers, field experts, political, social or technological commentators; it often uses images based on the interpretation of other images in an endless referring game.

One to Two

We have seen how forms of instruction about how to 'read' the world around us are at the basis of the relationship between us humans and the environment we inhabit. Our preoccupation with the information overload is the starting point for the future we prepare to

encounter. This overload requires us to act on a second level upon the information we receive - not just to absorb the information itself, but also to filter, search and make sense of the sources of information. My argument is that it is not a matter of creating new categories of knowledge but rather of sharpening the existing ways of production and circulation of knowledge. We can think of both information journalism and art as visual regimes; the first is a coded system that *stands for* reality; the second, a set of activities that is supposed to question itself at every step and *create* a form of reality. The interesting feature about art is that it often implies a degree of self-critique about how images are produced and what they are saying - something which within journalism is kept in check, often in favor of passing certain points. I believe that there is space for reciprocal fertilization though. Both systems can define what is 'out there' by not only producing what is visible, but also what can be imaginable, and thus representable.

That is why it is useful to establish a precise relationship between information and aesthetics and use it as a built-in critical instrument. Being aware that whatever information we are absorbing, we are doing it through our senses, and that these senses are constantly subject to aesthetic manipulation, can make the difference to how we translate this information into knowledge. The very point of the responsibility toward truth implies a question about what kind of truth we feel most responsible for. In theory, we would need to methodically assess what could be important or superficial in relation to what

we see has happened, what might have happened, what could happen and what is represented by the image. In practice, this is wishful thinking. But what we can do is to constantly ask ourselves not only what the meaning is of the information we have in front of us, but also, and equally important, what the possible intention of the author of that information is, and what the possible other meaning of it is. We can assess our position in relation to that.

And so it takes place in terms of cross-contamination. From the producer's point of view, it is crucial to be able to source, report and present stories through the combination of data analysis, alternative mapping, interactive graphics, and ultimately the visualization and presentation of data. This is part of the core activity of keeping things in perspective, helping people out to understand where and how things fit, or do not fit together, and how this affects our lives. This approach pertains to art and journalism alike, as well as citizens' platforms, in the interest of disclosing links between different datasets or specific information contained in them.

When I introduce to an audience the idea of 'aesthetic journalism',[5] being produced by journalists, artists, or a 'hybrid' between the two, the first reaction is contradictory and even of an improbable pairing. What do I mean by the aesthetics of journalism? Surely journalism is something to think about in terms of ethics, rather than aesthetics? It is a fair point, given its original

social mission as we have seen above. Information journalism though, and with that the imagery that we absorb regularly, is characterized by a certain organization of the material found or available, usually put together by professionally trained people. In turn, it shapes a certain vision of reality and organizes a certain 'structure' of what is out there, that allows the viewer to perceive it and accept it as a form of reality (the 'cultural screen' mentioned earlier, through front-page visual standards and other formats). The recipient may agree or disagree with the content, but the form is rarely called into question. The mediation of information and its structuring according to specific aesthetic formats is equally manifest on tablet screens as in magazine spreads.

These visual formats are the result of an aesthetic choice, not their cause. They have been so embedded and ingrained in our visual life for such a long time, that we tend to take them for neutral and standard - the size and definition of the images, the length of the captions, and so forth. Even the at times extraordinary coverages of natural disasters or terrorist attacks that disrupts the usual visual organization are the exceptions confirming the rule; after a few days, everything becomes 'visually normal' again. But what happens to the visual information that cannot be contained in the standard aesthetic format of, say, the newspaper commentary article, the online photo film, or the sequencing of the journalistic reportage? There are two possibilities: either it is re-worked until it fits into

the aesthetics of journalism, or it is left out. The only fixed rule is that the format cannot change.

Two to Three

However, there is indeed a third way to produce and present what is visible, imaginable, and representable. Everything that does not fit into the mass-media imagery becomes potential material and argument for art practices. Obviously, the way we perceive a journalist is light years away from the way we think of an artist. For the latter, the type of artistic practice needs to be taken into account, and the economic conditions of its realization (who is paying for it; with what money; for whom is the work intended) need to be rendered visible. Nevertheless, I argue that the figure of the journalist and that of the artist are not so distant from each other. Firstly, because the economic conditions of production and distribution are crucial to both, even with the clear imbalance between journalistic and artistic budgets. And secondly, as outlined above, because they both organize information in a certain way through adopting specific canons and strategies of aesthetics, either accepted or open to re-interpretation. Art and information journalism are neither separate forms of communication nor two clear-cut disciplines, but two sides of the same coin - the production and distribution of information. How we organize the information in order to create meaningful knowledge is a matter of the context in which we live and the tools we have at our disposal. These tools are all the

more relevant if the authors of the information narrative have embedded in it some mechanisms to open up different possibilities of interpretation.

We mistakenly believe that visual perception is the most accurate of our senses, and we tend to forget that we have been taught to see - as we have been taught to read and write: "We do not know what we are seeing until we have learned what it is we are seeing."[6] If press, broadcast and online news are the main arenas in which our concept of reality takes form, visual art, on the other hand, is probably the realm in which to present the communication of urgencies in a more multifaceted way. Conversely, art itself is moving out from the private realm of the art object, the author and the spectator, and the meaning carried through the object, to enter a more public sphere in which the issues at stake, the process undertaken by the author, and the distribution of the resulting knowledge are prevalent. To some extent, the concept of reality and truth (which is part of it, but does not necessarily coincide with it) seems to be shifting from the sphere of information journalism to the territory of art. In the last two decades, we can witness this shift through the ubiquity of art biennials, film forums, art-activism symposia and the embracing of 'political art' in many academic environments, which totally reverses the common understanding and expectation of the two fields.

5   Cramerotti, Alfredo, *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform without Informing*, Bristol and Wilmington, NC: Intellect (2009).

6   Natharius, David, 'The more we know, the more we see: The role of visuality in media literacy', in *American Behavioral Scientist*, 48 (2), (2004: 238-247), London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004. Online at http://abs.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/48/2/238. Accessed 2 February 2014.

Ultimately, what we can learn from all this is that today we have a multitude of perspectives rather than a universal concept of reality and truth. The question 'could this be true?' is better rephrased as 'under what conditions can this be true?'[7] It is as if the ability to read reality and its close features goes hand in hand with the possibility to construct it.

The responsibility of the image-maker with which I have opened this text is therefore of central importance in understanding how images, and ultimately our mode of being and relating to each other, work. To assess an image, a more appropriate standard than 'truth-telling' would be to accept its exactness and transparency, take the side of a story, and declare it. This means embracing the concept of *parrhésia*, picked up, among others, by Michel Foucault,[8] who in his late work wondered what could be the genuine connotation for this ancient Greek term, which means telling the truth. In antique times, the truth-teller he who can speak the truth, occupied this position at his peril. To speak on behalf of the people against injustices and the powers that be regardless of the consequences for oneself, required courage and self-sacrifice. Many modern commentators have pointed out this quasi-heroic aspect of parrhésia. But for Foucault the situation was conflicting. In order to have the possibility to speak the truth to those in power, the

speaker (and it was usually a he) had to have a position somehow connected to the power itself, a position of authority. So parrhésia does not simply mean to speak the truth to those in power, but also - and equally important - the ability to speak the truth about oneself.

This sense of responsibility thus implies revealing the position from which one is speaking, divulging the means and methods with which the argument is constructed, and exposing the subject and the object in equal measure. In this light, I find it pertinent and all the more urgent to reflect the journalistic in the aesthetics, and the aesthetic in the journalistic.[9]

I believe in creating relations of mutual influence with other systems that govern, structure and mediate our lives, be it art, science, politics, law, government datasets, or economics regulations. It means to constantly relate the perception of a visual meaning outside the environment that has generated it - a parallel to what Albert Einstein expressed when he reportedly stated that we cannot solve our problems at the same level of thinking that has generated them. Thinking again about the conception of visual information formats allowing, for instance, imagination, doubt and open-endedness, I might end up perceiving things in ways I was unaware of. In this sense, while information journalism reports and fiction reveals, an approach close to what I define as aesthetic journalism does both.

This information exchange across seemingly disparate activities would open up a kind of suspicious and even spiteful terrain compared with the certainties of mass media journalism and the self-referential aspects of the art world. The very difficulty of embracing a non-definitive approach, an unstable way of assessing information narrative and knowledge can only improve both fields.

7   Žižek, Slavoj. 'The prospects of radical politics today', in Enwezor, Okwui; Basualdo, Carlos; Maharaj, Sarat et. al., eds., *Documenta 11_ Platform 1, Democracy Unrealized*, pp. 67-85. Stuttgart: Hatje Kantz Verlag (2002).
8   Foucault, Michel, *The Courage of Truth, Lectures at the Collége de France 1983 -1984*, Houndsville and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (2011).
9   Cramerotti, Alfredo and Sheikh, Simon, in Carruthers, Jill and Cramerotti, Alfredo (eds.), *All That Fits: The Aesthetics of Journalism* exhibition *catalogue*, Derby: QUAD Publishing (2011).