Dialogue | The Visuality of Professionalised Sousveillance

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Abstract

This contribution addresses the visuality deployed in the practice of professionalised sousveillance. I draw on research undertaken with sousveillance activists in Brazilian favelas. By recognising vision as a site of power and identifying the particular visuality central to the policing of favelas, I draw an uncomfortable link between professionalised sousveillance and this police visuality. In acknowledging this relationship, it can be argued that professionalised sousveillance practice unintentionally works to preserve the perceptual foundations of the favela's social order. I conclude that we should also seek forms of sousveillance practice that engage alternative visualities.

Whilst Mann and his collaborators draw attention to the equalising power visual recording devices can have, particularly when their visual data are networked through social media platforms, little attention is given to the visual practices deployed and the resulting visual data. By recognising vision as foundational to questions of power and social order, we open up an alternative perspective through which to assess sousveillance. I argue that the professionalised forms of sousveillance taking place in Brazil's favelas partake in the same visual practices as the state that they seek to denounce. From this perspective, it may indeed be argued that sousveillance has "serve[d] the ends of the existing dominant power structure" (Mann, Nolan, and Wellman, 2003: 347).

I draw on research conducted with sousveillance activists working in Brazil's favelas. These activists use visual technologies to record and disseminate police and military (henceforth, police) interventions in their communities, recording misconduct and violence committed against favela residents—most forcefully against black and poor residents (Santiago 2017). Their sousveillance draws attention to the abuses perpetrated by the police, performs a check on officers' daily behaviour, and has recently been incorporated into legal proceedings against individual officers (WITNESS 2017).

Activists themselves, the international organisations that support them, and previous academic publications have described these activities with the term sousveillance (de Guzman 2016; Prouse 2018; Ribeiro 2016). As also noted by Glencora Borradaile and Joshua Reeves and Bärbel Harju in this issue's Dialogue section, it is easy to sympathise with the goals that motivate this kind of sousveillance and anti-racist activism. However, this should not discourage us from investigating the wider repercussions of these sousveillance practices.

What is professionalised sousveillance? Over the last few years there has been a profusion of written field guides, video manuals, and training courses that seek to refine sousveillance. Alongside warnings, advice on keeping safe in protests, and guidance on how to store and share the resulting visual data, these materials give detailed guidance on how to actually capture moments of state abuse. This perceptual instruction even

offers novices to visual production definitions of different camera shots and when to use them. Direction in framing is accompanied by guidance on shot lengths and vantage points from which to record from. Camera movements such as pans, zooms, and tilts also receive consideration; they should be “slow, smooth and deliberate” (Matheson 2016: 97).

There is a growing field of international NGOs producing these training materials who seek to orientate sousveillance towards the production of video evidence. Evidence—data permissible in juridical contexts—can eventually lead to formal sanctions against perpetrators of abuse. For the activists I spoke with, distrust in national and international legal systems and a sense of exclusion from these formal legal spaces did not deter them from maintaining legal victories as a primary objective of their work. Juridical audiences are understood to be the primary arenas through which actors can push for change. These have distinct barriers to entry that obstruct the circulation of any and all data. Regardless of how graphic or emotive the contents of a video, a video needs to prove its provenance and veracity before entry. Organisations well-versed in these legal struggles dedicate resources to training activists on how to produce videos with a higher chance of meeting these conditions of entry.

In my conversations with experienced activists, they acknowledged that this training was central to their practice, and many actively disseminate these training materials to newer activists. Of course, situations arise when the rules have to be broken—maybe in the dense favela environment it is not possible to begin a recording with a landmark shot that captures the position of the sun, as some training advises. But activists recounted that it was reassuring to carry with them a mental check-list of instructions to follow when encountering these scenes. Considering the risk activists are taking to enter these situations, it makes sense to adopt this visibility. Unlike the sousveillance trope of a concerned citizen wearing a body-mounted camera in a shop fitted with CCTV—a seemingly low-risk activity—these activists are harmed, both collaterally and purposefully, by police forces. Such a risk is only worth taking if some tangible outcome may derive from the data captured.

The professionalisation of video activism has not proceeded without its critics. Most notably, Sandra Ristovska (2016) critiques this emerging form of “strategic witnessing” for disrupting longstanding modes of activism, now placing the expectations of institutionalised legal audiences at the centre of this practice. Yet the influence of international organisations that promote this approach, such as Amnesty International and WITNESS, is discernible in the resulting data.

My research focused on the visual practices and data produced by Coletivo Papo Reto, a collective working in the favelas of the north zone of Rio de Janeiro. Digging through their vast video archive capturing confrontations between police and favela residents, it was possible to detect the patterns of camera handling and shot selection advocated in the field guides. Slow rotations around scenes lead into precisely manoeuvred zooms back and forth. Shots rest carefully on identification plates and uniform insignias. Stillness becomes a noticeable feature despite the chaos recorded. The repetition of these practices produces distinctive visual data. Graphic content is captured through these formulaic practices, organising the visual field into something unexpectedly composed.

This focus on a correct form of capture and, by extension, the correct subject commanding the camera, speaks to a wider politics of perception that requires our attention. Critical thinking on vision has sought to unpick the ways that visibility is rendered as the sovereign sense. Whilst reflection on one’s own sensory experience quickly reveals its interconnection with the other senses, the representation of vision as the sovereign sense has a long history tied to the development of scientific rationalism, imperialism, and capitalism (Crary 1988). Importantly, its positioning as the dominant sense has played a key role in the making of the rational subject. Through the prioritisation of vision, a sense that allows for a fictitious distancing between subjects and objects, subjects become controllers of a coherent visual field, able to manage and rationalise the messy outside world.

Professionalised sousveillance is contingent on this visuality. This process facilitates activists' capacity to construct and manage the production of their videos. The focus on *how* to see and record such encounters, so prevalent in the training materials, encapsulates this understanding of vision as a sense that can be divorced from experience, disassociated from stimulus in a way that the other senses cannot. By deploying these sousveillance practices, the activist is able to make visual order out of disorder. The adoption of this optic is useful not only for the international organizations they network with, but also for the activists themselves. Whereas once they may have been overwhelmed by a particular incident they encounter, emphasis on the production of visual evidence allows them to disengage from the immediate chaos. First-hand interaction with these gross scenes of abuse is a lot to handle. Activists on the ground have little access to emotional and psychological support beyond their immediate community, and so activists did inform me that the possibility of entering into a traumatic space and actively switching into this strategic visuality provides some comfort to them.

However, the consequences of this visuality are something we need to interrogate further. Not only is the visual reified as sovereign among the senses, it is also uniquely implicated in the production of social order in Brazil's favelas. As Jens Andermann (2007: 2) has noted in the context of nineteenth-century Brazil and Argentina, the state is "just as much a cultural form as a particular organization of the political. It is a specific correlation between politics and aesthetics, or rules of perception, in which the latter sustains the former as its own cause and end." Addressing the perceptual configurations that sustain violent state interactions with favela residents draws an uncomfortable link between this visuality and that of professionalised sousveillance. This is despite the end goal of this activism being the interruption of the violent and racist social order maintained by actors such as the police.

As explored in James Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1998), the mid-twentieth century saw the Brazilian state's vision becomes a driving force in the "high modernist" evolution of Brasília (Brazil's capital). State interventions to implant order and legibility in the visual field have also persisted in contemporary dynamics, particularly in relation to the policing of favelas. A raft of federal and state-level initiatives aim to physically carve up favela spaces, attacking their density and remodelling the terrain to enable a state of hypervisibility, where spaces and populations can be easily monitored. New (although not alternative) approaches to policing the favelas have focused on the forceful construction of watchtowers and vantage points within communities from which officers survey the terrain below. This constant monitoring is accompanied by helicopter flyovers and an increasing number of drones positioned in the airspace above favelas, allowing these fixed architectural positions to be accompanied by technologically enhanced mobile vistas that expand police capacity to scan the favela topography. During the presidential decree of 2018 that put the military in charge of security in Rio de Janeiro, favela communities in this city also endured the erection of checkpoints at key sites and transport points in favelas. Part of this intervention involved military personnel demanding identification from residents, making it easier to identify and target individual favela residents amongst these dense populations.

Through quilting together these visual interventions, the Brazilian state seeks to produce a master-view that renders these populations and territories comprehensible, thus producing the conditions for their direct control. Whilst this objective is also pushed via accompanying strategies, such as through welfare policies that collect information on favela residents, visual dominance over the favela is central to the state's strategy of domination of these populations.

Furthermore, there is a particular visuality work in these interventions: occupying watch towers, surveying favela residents through drone imagery, isolating the favela resident in the cross-hairs of a gun scope. For the police officer performing these visual manoeuvres, vision becomes manageable and the favela below becomes an organised visual field. This disentanglement of subject (security agent) and object (favela resident) suggests that through occupying these positions and adopting these techniques, officers can maintain a (supposedly) objective, rational visuality. The favela becomes a distanced, neat space through which these objects are easily controlled.

By drawing this activist practice into a juridical framework, professionalised sousveillance reiterates the same set of visual signs and structures that dominate police interactions with favela communities. If we engage the scholarship of Jacques Rancière (2004, 2010), we can recognise how this visual redeployment works to maintain the existing system of violent repression at work in favelas. In the transferal of this visibility from police officer to the favela activist, we can recognise the continuation of a particular perceptual arrangement. Crucially for Rancière (2004, 2010), it is through perception, experience, and representation that social orders are preserved. Who or what can be recognised within what role in society are fundamentally questions of vision (alongside the other senses). Thus, participation in the police's visibility also works to maintain the social order that police themselves are active in constructing. From this perspective, whilst adopting this professionalised vision makes such visual data legible to institutionalised audiences, it also preserves the perceptual foundations of the favela's contemporary distribution of bodies, roles, and expectations. As Jamie Amparo Alves (2018) demonstrates, the existing social order has brutal consequences, primarily for the favela's black populations.

This visual synergy inhibits the vital task of challenging the perceptual foundation of the existing social order in Brazil's favelas. Yet, visual interventions also have the potential to rupture this order because the deployment of a visibility is never complete. Denise Ferreira Silva (2009) has poignantly demonstrated how the Brazilian police officer's gun-sight, contrary to being a neutral optic, is a site of racial violence. These activists' digital archive also holds traces of alternative visibilities, particularly when their work is not directed towards the production of evidence. These moments require further investigation and their affects explored as the potential basis for a future sousveillance practice that seeks to interrupt and remake, rather than reiterate, the visual field and its attendant power dynamics.

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