

The gaze in the surveillance of political groups by the DIPBA. Some problems for researchers

María Ledesma

Background

This is one of a series of articles that explore the visual records of the so-called 'archives of repression' once maintained by the Directorate of Intelligence of the Police of the Province of Buenos Aires (DIPBA) in Argentina. Starting from the assumption that images are significant practices, the article sets out to reconstruct the values of those who produced, manipulated and consumed them. Further assumptions and hypotheses are derived from current approaches to visual culture and discourse. These raise questions not only about what the archive contains but about what it denies, hides or avoids.

The videotaped material in the archive consists of recordings made by the DIPBA itself, contemporary television broadcasts recorded by DIPBA members and material produced by the persons or groups under surveillance. The latter was stolen, confiscated or obtained from undercover operations together with photographs, magazines and posters. The DIPBA used all the surveillance technologies at its disposal and every possible device and mode of representation, from drawings and videos to maps and figurative representations. Most of these visual archives were classified as 'evidence'. Their importance and everyday use are shown by numerous references in the DIPBA's operational guidelines and constant allusions to 'photographic' staff, mapmaking and storage of information in various 'formats' (see Folder Miscellaneous, 1980s, box 2702, File 89, page 7). These 'formats' were probably produced by the DIPBA's department of artists and photographers (see Folder Miscellaneous 25, 1957, p. 4).

So far, however, very few images have been found in the files. Most files contain several dozen pages of writing in the most diverse genres (reports, chronicles, communiqués)¹ suddenly interrupted by two or three photographs (occasionally as many as six) of the same event or a set of explanatory diagrams, which appear unexpectedly like a vein of pure gold in a dark mine. Afterwards, the writing continues.

What makes these photographs, images and diagrams appear as if from nowhere? What were the criteria for inclusion and exclusion, apart from the moment of production? The file gives no indications to shed light on this question. On the contrary, everything seems to indicate that they are part of a much larger collection of records. Photography acquired an important role in police records in the second half of the nineteenth century and this continued throughout the twentieth century². Moreover, there is reliable

¹ Elsa Bettendorff calls this diversity 'documentary heterogeneity'. See María Elsa Bettendorff, "La palabra capturada. Acerca de la polifonía y la heterogeneidad enunciativa en los legajos de inteligencia de la DIPBA", en María Alejandra Vitale (ed.), *Vigilar la sociedad. Estudios discursivos sobre inteligencia policial bonaerense*, Buenos Aires, Biblos, pp. 83-105.

² Since the late nineteenth century, police photography has been used in Argentina as a forensic tool and a tool for state control, particularly photographs of subjects wanted by the police and the judiciary. Criminal profiling provided not only the courts but also the government with a surveillance technology, what Foucault calls "the eye of power". See Natalia Magrin, "Imágenes de veridicción. Acerca de las fotografías tomadas a hombres y mujeres en el centro clandestino de detención del Departamento de Informaciones de la Policía de la provincia de Córdoba (D2)", *Aletheia*, 2 (4), 2012.

evidence, albeit indirect, as to the number of images that should be present in a file of this sort, which tends to be almost saturated with photos of a single event or object. Precise and detailed series of photographs of a window, a group of people, a street or a building taken from different angles strongly suggest that there must have been hundreds and even thousands of images, perhaps combined with verbal language.

There are then two hypotheses: either they have been lost or destroyed, or they have been filed elsewhere using a cataloguing, classification and data storage system that we have not yet accessed.

I start from the assumption that those who organized the archive from its creation in 1955 until its closure in 1998 constituted a discourse community that believed in the objective value of visual images as evidence in the general sense of proof or knowledge³. I will begin by describing the social agreement, the contract that led the group of watchers to create ways of recording, displaying and circulating –or restricting the circulation of– images in the archive. At the same time, I will show the performative nature these images acquired. If an individual appeared in a DIPBA file, even as a suspect, this had a clear meaning for the DIPBA discourse community: it ‘proved’ that person was dangerous and/or subversive and/or a terrorist⁴.

Since the archive also contains material seized from those under surveillance, these records are the product of both communities (watchers and watched). However, the visual perspective or ‘visuality’ of those who designed and organised the archive is defined by the images produced, how these are organised, and how they differ from the banned images confiscated in police operations.

Now, both communities resort to similar metaphorical and diagrammatic modes of representation in their frequent use of insignias, maps, plans and diagrams. There are diagrams showing how the DIPBA operates and also how a guerrilla group operates; there are maps produced by the DIPBA to pinpoint a particular place and similar maps produced by targeted groups. The most notable difference is that there are no photographs of the watchers. This is perhaps to be expected, but it is highly significant. Members of targeted groups appear in photographs taken by the DIPBA community itself, photographs taken from the media of the time and photographs of holidays, outings and family meetings seized during police raids. Once they were included in the archive, pictures of this type immediately lost their emotional quality and became objects to be observed, analysed and investigated with rational methods⁵. The ways in which the records were displayed (grouped by factors and in tables) objectified them still further and greatly increased their performativity.

Stolen images

As we have already seen, images could enter the file in three different ways: through direct surveillance, through media recordings or from sources produced by the targeted groups. I will now analyse a direct surveillance file dealing with the

³ Here ‘discourse community’ refers to the structuring of the groups that manage different discourses. See Dominique Maingueneau, *Análisis de textos de comunicación*, Buenos Aires, Nueva Visión, 2009.

⁴ The exact terms varied over the four and a half decades the archive was in use. Perhaps the common notion was that these people were a ‘danger to society’.

⁵ Any photograph included in a police file is likely to be viewed as data or evidence. Once a photograph enters the file, it loses any meaning previously been conferred upon it. However, as Julia Kratje argues, demystifying the archive allows new readings of its materials. See Julia Kratje, “Shot, countershot, off-screen space...” in this same volume.

repercussions of the so-called Trelew massacre in the Province of Buenos Aires. On 15 August, 1972, during the de facto government of General Lanusse, 110 prisoners belonging to armed Peronist and left-wing groups attempted to escape from Rawson Penitentiary in the southern province of Chubut. Six escapees managed to flee to Chile in a plane hijacked by supporters at Trelew airport. A second group of nineteen fugitives reached the airport just in time to see the plane take off. Surrounded by soldiers and police, they surrendered to the authorities, who transferred them to the Almirante Zar Air Base near the city of Trelew. The Chilean government refused to extradite the fugitive guerrillas and gave them safe-conducts to travel to Cuba. On 22 August, the nineteen recaptured prisoners were machine-gunned in retaliation at the Military Base where they were being held. Sixteen were killed and the other three survived. The 'Trelew massacre' caused a commotion throughout the country not only because of the spectacular nature of the escape and the violence that ensued but also because of countless reactions from militants and activists in all sectors of society. For this reason, although the massacre did not occur within the jurisdiction of the Province of Buenos Aires, it kept the DIPBA extremely busy.

The Trelew case as it appears in Table D (s), Folder Miscellaneous, File 383. Volume I covers three topics: 'Detainees' flight to Chile' / 'Attempt to escape and death of extremists at the Naval Base of Admiral Zar' and 'Attacks committed by extremist organizations in retaliation for the death of extremists in Trelew' (cover page, page 1). The file has a total of 619 pages arranged in a chronological order; almost all the documents are independent of each other and are often repeated, the only change being the name of the employee responsible for reception and transmission. The file starts with a communiqué from the Secretariat of Intelligence of the Police of the Province of Buenos Aires (SIPBA) dated 29 June, 1972, giving news about movements of people in the Patagonian region and alerting the DIPBA to a possible escape plan by inmates of Rawson prison. This is followed by a description of the escape, requests for reports, extensions of the reports, descriptions of searches for possible accomplices and finally the machine-gunning of the prisoners⁶. From 24 August onwards, attention focuses on the arrival of the coffins of the victims to be buried in the province of Buenos Aires. Although the file does not say how many burials took place or where, two of those executed, María Angélica Sabelli and Pedro Rubén Bonnet, came from the province and were presumably buried there. Note 402/5 to the Chief of Police on the subject of the burial to be held in Boulogne gives information about the presence of specialist photographers along with other members of the police, to 'check on those attending' the funeral (page 181) because, as it says on the cover of the file itself, attacks are expected in reprisal for the deaths of the guerrillas⁷. The reports show that demonstrations have been expected at the funerals for several days; in fact, in Buenos Aires City, Tucumán and Córdoba, uprisings and attacks were the order of the day (pages 140, 142, 146, 158). Photographers were expected to be kept busy during this time and the DIPBA was eager to get its hands on photographs that might reveal new suspects.

However, despite expectations of trouble and explicit references to the photographers who would cover any incidents, the file contains only two pages with photos. The file has a few more images (photographs, drawings, diagrams) from mass

⁶ As an aside, it is worth mentioning that the DIPBA seems to have learned of the shootings through the media rather than through its own information channels, judging by the tone of various complaints and requests for clarification.

⁷ The person buried in Boulogne may have been María Angélica Sabelli.

circulation newspapers or publications by the People's Revolutionary Army (Spanish: *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo*, or ERP), one of the political groups to which the prisoners belonged, but this analysis will focus on a single series of four photographs documenting the 'dispersal of the crowd after the burial of XXXX'⁸, taken by DIPBA staff (p 276 and p 277), 'specialized in checking on those attending'.

There are just four photographs, which can be grouped thematically into two series: people and cars. The first photograph is of a group of men and women mostly with their backs turned to the camera; the second, a side shot of a car with people inside; the third, a car moving forward with four occupants; and the fourth, another group photo in which people are seen heading towards parked cars. While the images are in focus and framed, it is clear that all have been taken covertly. The standing groups and the car sides point to a photographer -or photographers- whose identity as such is hidden.

⁸ Possibly it is the burial of Rubén Pedro Bonnet in the town of Pergamino.



CPM – FONDO DIPPBA, División Central de Documentación, Registro y Archivo.



CEMENTERIO: Desconcentración del público después de la inhumación de los restos de [REDACTED]



CPM – FONDO DIPPBA, División Central de Documentación, Registro y Archivo.

The photographs of the groups attending the funeral have been taken in broad daylight by a spy who, as such, is invisible. Although this is a common feature of photos taken without the subjects' awareness –what Susan Sontag calls 'stolen images'– it is remarkable that these photos portray the groups from behind, without showing their faces, as if the scene captured by the camera is of no interest to the watcher.

The photographs that make up police archives revel in detail, value close-ups and portraits as much as they despise crowds, which nearly always appear out of focus in the background. They tend to split up groups into individuals who can be identified, registered and isolated. Since photos are taken without the consent of those who are under surveillance, they are not usually posed (except when they have been taken at a prison or detention centre) but it is possible to observe a composition principle typical of photo-journalism: show something that deserves to be shown. In terms of discursive memory, photographing crowds or groups of people involves one of the formulas for recording a public street event as an interdiscourse: capturing the individual in the group⁹.

In this case, however, the photographs do nothing of the kind. They are analogical photographs, they have not been tampered with, and they could not therefore have been produced without a photographer being physically present. The order in which they were taken is easy to reconstruct: after the burial, the onlookers dispersed. According to different reports included in the file, there was a small group of 25 to 40 people. The photographer stayed behind and documented them melting away without focusing on any individuals. He obviously found them uninteresting; he only wanted to show –with the colourful/miscellaneous/more compact group (figure 1) or the more scattered group (figure 2)– that 'nothing happened here'. Clearly, he did not consider the scene important – or at least, not in the sense he expected. Perhaps the parents wanted a private ceremony with only family and friends. Whatever the reason, there was nothing about the funeral to suggest the demonstrations or uprisings and attacks of which the report speaks. The events developed very differently to what was expected. This is captured by the photographer, who zooms in on an unidentifiable group or a ragged collection of people.

There is no doubt that the photos are still 'constative' in that they show that an action has occurred. But they contradict the logic of archive photography because they do not incriminate. They confirm that there was 'nothing doing' at a particular place and time and that those portrayed there 'had done nothing'. By appealing to a different interdiscourse –the casual snapshot of a social situation– the photographer interprets, catalogues and bestows a value on the act he is photographing. The instance of enunciation turns the enunciator's body into a space of confirmation and confers a character and a tone that legitimize the inconsequential nature of what is shown. The *ethical* world is rooted in a set of stereotyping attitudes that correspond to the behaviours photographed. The series of automobiles (also formed by two photographs) differs in almost all aspects from the treatment of groups of people. These images are also 'stolen' but more care has gone into stealing them. The cars are enormous as if the photographer is anxious to rob them of their identity; just as he disregards the identity of the people, so he is carried away by the identity of the cars. Nothing about these photographs suggests the record of a social situation; the camera's attention to detail matches its usual function of producing incriminating records: the number plates are there to be registered; the faces

⁹ See Michel Pêcheux, *L'inquiétude du discours*, Paris, Editions des Cendres, 1990.

behind the car windows are there to be revealed. The ethical world is no longer socially banal but is rooted in police stereotypes.

The file offers no explanation for this different approach. Nothing links the texts with the images: the photographs have no captions or comments and it is difficult to tell that they are records of the burial in question. Therefore, we can only ask questions that in turn raise more questions. Were there two photographers? This would explain the different intentions and also the different physical locations of the two sets of photos. Or was there just one photographer who was closer to the cars when they were leaving? And does the photographer pay attention to the car's registration number simply because this is easy to trace?

Faced with the problem of identifying the discursive process underlying the complete series, we find two types of collective representations, one that approaches the social register, the other that clearly belongs to the police record. However, the guarantor of these enunciative processes could -in either case- have chosen one or the other. The documents (verbal and visual) that make up the different files follow not an archival plan but a surveillance plan. Therefore, it is clear that it is the 'surveillance operations' genre that triggered stereotypes in a community where behaviours were highly institutionalised.

Beyond two very different approaches visible in the photographs, this preliminary analysis shows that the DIPBA community's 'scopic regime' - its prescribed mode of seeing and object visibility - is characterized by the removal of subjective elements, at least in these images¹⁰. This constructs what Foucault calls an 'empirical gaze'. The DIPBA community conceived of visual language as a neutral, transparent medium that informs about scenarios, people or locations through diagrams and/ or photographs¹¹. This is also clearly a gaze in the sense that Jay uses the term, based on Foucault's analyses: the vigilant gaze, the power held in the gaze¹². The object of surveillance is constructed frame by frame until it has been described, detailed and quantified.

However, watchers and spies were also required to record what the people they watched or spied on were doing. And revolutionaries who were being watched always sought to exercise power through visible shows of strength in the form of performative demonstrations of a political and aesthetic nature. The Argentine guerrilla groups carried out this sort of spectacularisation by holding parades, wearing uniforms and carrying banners at demonstrations, among other things.

The watchers knew this and were ready with their cameras to register it all. As mentioned earlier, photographers were sent to potential trouble spots to identify who was present. The burial ceremonies for those shot at Trelew and other public events connected with the massacre lent themselves to this type of spectacularisation. So, I expected the file to contain both verbal and visual references to those events when I began analysing the

¹⁰ Jay takes the term 'scopic regime' from Metz to refer to a certain way of seeing at each period in history. It is defined by a set of historical, cultural and epistemic elements. See Martin Jay, "Scopic regimes of modernity", in Foster, Hal (ed.), *Vision and visibility*, Seattle, Bay Press, pp. 3-23.

¹¹ See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth- Century French Thought*, Berkeley, University of California Press, pp. 467-468.

¹² In *Downcast eyes* Jay contrasts the empirical gaze (gaze) to the public manifestation of power as a spectacle; he recalls Foucault's account of the torture and execution of the failed regicide Damiens in 1765 as "a theatrical representation of pain" where "the power of the monarch was literally inscribed in the visible flesh of the executed". This spectacle of power that swelled our imaginary with the executions of the French Revolution has been repeated on innumerable occasions: military parades, the display of uniforms and even the dances performed by teams like the All Blacks before the start of a game. See Martin Jay, *ibid.*, p. 409.

archive on the repercussions of the massacre in the Province of Buenos Aires. Verbal references abound, especially warnings and forecasts: surveillance teams had to be sent to funerals and other events. But the visual record, as we have seen, is reduced to four photographs. Since these photographs are like a visual quotation from the performative enunciation of the watched group as it staged its power, I have sought to highlight two competing visual regimes in the political scenario recorded by the DIPBA during the 1970s. In Foucault and Jay's terms, these regimes are the 'invisible eye of the vigilance' carried out by members of the DIPBA, and the display of power as spectacle included as a 'quotation' in the set of documents.

Whether we are considering the watchers or the watched, performativity is a powerful concept to describe the *effects* of the action of looking in relation to the events the DIPBA was concerned with. For the watchers, 'looking at someone' in the file was part of assigning an identity to them -as subversive, dangerous, suspicious; for militants 'being looked at' on the political stage was a way of affirming their identity (as politically strong, seizing power). Photographers alternated between these two positions as they covered this scene in their role as spies, striving to assemble the best range of evidence that might point to possible lawbreakers in the political arena.

Although they are not in the file studied, the absence of other photographic records does not mean that they were never there. We simply do not know what the file looked like when it was operational. As we have already said, numerous documents report on the massive demonstrations held during that period, either before or after they took place.

Final words

The four photographs analysed in connection with the 'Trelew massacre' may indicate a way of understanding the social agreement or contract that led the group of watchers to create ways of recording, displaying and circulating -or restricting the circulation of- the images in the archive.

This study has outlined the difficulty of interpreting a small number of images in a mainly written file from which many others must have disappeared. Those few that have survived are included on a separate page in chronological order and subdivided by themes. The only indications suggesting how the file should be read refer to its location in the archive; inside the file there are communiqués, requests for reports, pages from newspapers, and telegraphic transmissions from different sources. Among them are these photographs although as Indices, 'which represent their objects independently of any resemblance to them, only by virtue of real connections with them'.¹³ They do not manage to explain their subject matter because they remain isolated and separate from the body of the text. The lack of integration of these photographic images and the absence of any others is no minor matter. We need to know what power the DIPBA discourse community conferred on these images. They must have been powerful as they are still hidden from researchers even though the file that contained them is no longer secret. We also need to know what restrictions (if any) existed on circulating these images and - above all: how much we can reconstruct from these fragments.

¹³ See Charles S. Peirce, "A Sketch of Logical Critics". In: *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings* Volume 2 (1893-1913), edited by the Peirce Edition Project, p. 461.

This poses a major methodological problem since it is not only the individual records that are of interest, but also the ways in which the file is organised and the information is put together. Archives are not a collection of documents frozen in time but living textual sets. As such, they undergo transformations. There was a moment when the documents we are analysing today were produced, circulated and read by a closed discourse community. Opening the archive has transformed its character. The documents not only circulate among and are known to a different discourse community. The community that accesses them today gives new meanings to those documents.

As a researcher I aim to discover the rules for producing, conserving and concealing photographic images during the period in question and thereby achieve a more nuanced description of the DIPBA discourse community. Hopefully, this will be possible before long.

~ Facultad de Arquitectura, Diseño y Urbanismo, University of Buenos Aires ~