

POLITICAL SURVEILLANCE PHOTOGRAPHY AND GENERATIONAL MEMORY IN PUERTO RICO

Images of a Vanished World?

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Abstract

During the Twentieth Century, pro-independence and leftist movements in Puerto Rico, a colony of the USA, endured an intense surveillance and persecution, the memory of which has transformed the political militancy of subsequent generations. This article contrasts images produced by political surveillance with images that seek to exalt it. On the one hand, it examines an instance of representation of police work in *National Geographic Magazine*; on the other, photographs made of student militants at the University of Puerto Rico. Making reference to Walter Benjamin, it analyzes this visual documentation as fragments for a revolutionary tradition inherited from a period of social conflict that would seem to have evaporated, rather than as evidence. It studies the complexities of looking at these images while considering them as snapshots of an unfinished and contentious story that demand an alternate set of captions under the photographs of past and present.

Keywords

Political surveillance; photographs; Puerto Rico; *carpetas*; pro-independence movement; Walter Benjamin.

The contingency of photographs confirms that everything is perishable; the arbitrariness of photographic evidence indicates that reality is fundamentally unclassifiable.
Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

1. Vestiges of a Vanished World

In Eduardo Lalo's (2015) novel *Simone*, an unnamed writer recounts a run-in that exemplifies how a world of political militancy in Puerto Rico (PR) seems to have all but been lost to the past. Walking around the college town of Río Piedras, the writer encounters a man wearing a T-shirt with a date printed on it: September 23, 1977.¹ "I recalled an anecdote I once

heard Diego tell. He knew a member of the Socialist Party who, after an event where few people had shown up, took a box of T-shirts that they wouldn't be selling again home with him. He used them for years with complete indifference, with demented frugality" (30). Upon realizing he had just met the character from that anecdote, he reflects: "I had just met that man, who was no longer young, who had probably been walking around the city's streets for years bearing on his chest the vestiges of a vanished world" (p. 30).

Those days of struggle and ensuing persecution seem to have disintegrated, reduced to mere remembrances for their participants, now old. As in many other parts of the world, in the 1980s the Left in PR saw a process of progressive atomization: the pro-independence parties lost support; clandestine organizations were dismantled by federal police; and that *Partido Socialista Puertorriqueño*, of which the veteran militant Lalo's protagonist had been a member, was disintegrating. However, in 1987 what had been an open secret was revealed publicly: the PR police kept extensive files in which it carefully documented the political activities of thousands of nationalist and left-wing activists. By the mid-1990s, those documents — colloquially called "*las carpetas*" — were made public, handed to the subjects persecuted in their pages. The image of those dossiers has subsequently become an important marker in the way in which the collective memory of that period of anti-colonial struggle is constructed. Thus, PR arrived at a paradoxical turning-point in its awareness about repression and surveillance perpetrated by the state upon anti-establishment movements: How was it possible that such a world of activism could disappear at the same time as the undeniable evidence of its contentious character was finally at hand?

This essay considers the visual memory of those times and their generational transmission. After a discussion of visual culture and surveillance in the colonial context, I proceed to question the reduction of images produced by political surveillance to mere evidence of repression. Here I explore an alternative perspective, based upon two groups of hard to classify images in which that surveillance activity appears from a different angle: on the one hand, the glorification of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) surveillance in two photographs from *National Geographic Magazine* (NG); on the other, surveillance photographs of the student movement at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) published in its Archive ("*Archivo Histórico*"). Perusing these archives, I ask generationally how it is possible for that world to actually have disappeared. The answer is mediated by personal anecdote: part of the knowledge reproduced here is not derived only from accessing photographic archives, but from having experienced in my own family the inheritance and memory of that repression. Having seen since a young age the role played by those memories in my father and his generation's political identity, this autobiographical intervention situates

itself in the study of what Marianne Hirsh has called the “postmemory” of traumatic events as “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before —to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (2012, p. 5).

The question is pertinent as that world, receding into the past as it may be, persists, retaining a great affective charge. In it was formed a generation that still inhabits Puerto Rico’s public life and whose perspectives have been crucial in the formation of the islands’ contemporary political culture. The transmission of that generation’s experiences constitutes the basis for a warning call to future ones: know that to engage in activism is to live repression, to have the vigilant eye of the state fixated upon one at each step. I propose to show that beyond this warning, the images of that epoch dialectically depict a contentious mesh of possibilities: in studying them we can find suggestions for how to navigate a world in which surveillance is evermore a daily fact and where it is crucial to establish a relation to the memory of political, anti-colonial and anti-capitalist, struggle that goes beyond the character of precious object for the antiques collection of nostalgia.

2. Puerto Rico: Persistence of Colonialism

Puerto Rico, which along with Cuba was the last Spanish colony in America until the North American invasion in 1898, obtained a degree of local autonomy starting in 1952 with the creation of the “*Estado Libre Asociado*” (ELA). This political status, also called Commonwealth, retains colonial subjection, as the United States keeps its prerogatives over PR especially internationally, but allows for certain internal democratic advances. This colonially conditioned democracy —in the words of Benjamín Torres Gotay (2019), this “simulacrum of democracy”— ordered Puerto Rican political life since then until 2016, when the PROMESA Act in the federal Congress eliminated all appearances of fiscal autonomy, imposing an Oversight Board named from Washington with the mission of controlling all of the state’s budgets and guaranteeing the repayment of the exorbitant public debt. The persistence of colonialism, hidden for six decades, is today plain to see.

Since its founding, ELA has been marked by political violence and repression. Before its proclamation, the leadership that created it attempted to purge the island of communist and pro-independence influences, using both local and USA laws —including the infamous Gag Law of 1948. Based upon a federal anti-communist law (the Smith Act), it facilitated the repression of events such as the nationalist insurrection of 1950, when over a thousand pro-independence militants and leftists were arrested (Ayala &

Bernabe 2011). During the Commonwealth's apogee in the 1950s, there was a concerted attempt from the state at reconstructing the country's historical memory in order to eliminate the perception that there ever was an alternative; an attempt that, nevertheless, failed by the 1960s thanks to the emergence of the so-called "new struggle" for independence and the intellectual settling of accounts of the first generation to have grown up under ELA (Díaz Quiñones 1993).

In time, the response to that resurgence of political resistance was once again repression. The 1970s in PR saw both an increase in the criminalization of the independence movement and an intensification in "colonial state terrorism" that included the proliferation of political murders committed by the government and paramilitary organizations (Atilés Osoria 2016, pp. 216-127). In that context, UPR, as a microcosm of its surroundings, has been identified in memory as a space of political conflict in which both specific student struggles and national struggles are fought over.² The most recent of these —a student strike in 2017— has been perhaps the most politicized one because its demands concentrated upon the questioning of the legitimacy of the public debt and opposition to neoliberal austerity.

That student movement, which still takes to the streets or occupies buildings, does not exist independently of its history. In its daily practice it inserts itself, consciously or not, in an organized memory. The result is a collective practice situated in the present but informed by historical knowledges that are no longer of mere academic interest. In that movement one can see a reiterated appropriation of memory, not without contradictions, as archive and repertoire for social struggles (Fortuño Bernier 2017). Nevertheless, it remains necessary to continue reflecting on the mode of engagement, or lack thereof, with these contradictions. The images of that past of struggle and repression demand a critical reconsideration.

3. Empire and Surveillance: Techniques for the Disciplining of Collective Memory

It is impossible to speak of colonies and colonialism without mentioning the power that constitutes them and makes them endure: that of empires. Historically, these have necessitated the development of evermore complex techniques in order to retain control over their vast territories across the planet. According to Sa'di, imperial complexity required scientific methodologies and two-dimensional symbolic representations, such as maps and photographs, to take account of their diversity. But this project always represented a contradiction: on the one hand, there was an attempt

at fixing populations and making them manageable; while, on the other hand, colonialism advanced in the forceful transformation of those populations and their context —colonialism is at once hierarchical rigidity and changing boundaries (2012, pp. 152, 157). In this context, surveillance appears as a crucial strategy that emulates the nature of imperial power itself, as “it implies a viewer with an elevated vantage point, it suggests the power to process and understand that which is seen, and it objectifies and interpolates the colonized subject in a way that fixes its identity in relation to the surveyor” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007, p. 207). In other words, the relation of surveillance reproduces the vision of social hierarchy convenient to the imperial system: on one side the colonizer stands overbearing and on the other the colonized is objectified in inferiority.

At the broadest level, surveillance has been defined as the practice of giving “attention” to individuals in a “focused, systematic, and routine” form (Lyon 2007, p. 14). Beyond this somewhat descriptive definition, nevertheless, one has to underline the political character of all surveillance. Monahan points out this element in arguing that if “control over people” is not included in the definition, then any information technology would imply a “relation of surveillance” (2010, p. 8). In general, surveillance calls to mind a visual practice, although in fact it entails a number of practices —some of which are invisible, such as intercepting telephone conversations or monitoring social media. In the colonial context, invisibilization itself emerges as a fundamental aspect of surveillance. As Smith argues, the colonial gaze not only pays attention to the colonized “dysfunctional” behavior in order to determine what they are doing, but also does it with the objective of hiding the fact that it is the colonial state itself that creates dysfunction in the colony (Smith 2015, pp. 25-26).

In other words, the goal of surveillance in a colonial context is to support and reproduce colonialism. To that end, keeping track of the behavior of those who oppose the colonial system is key. But also, according to Sorek, is the use of surveillance itself as a disciplining technique that even affects collective memory: “the visibility of the surveillance apparatus and the constant reminder of the existence of the gaze are as important as the visibility of the subject and the focused collection of individual data” (2011, pp. 113-114). Such disciplining of memory begins with the mere knowledge of being under surveillance: in knowing oneself to be under the gaze of power, one learns through fear what is acceptable to remember. Ensuring that those who are surveilled are conscious of it, as we will see, has generational and political repercussions as important as the act of surveillance itself.

4. The Visuality of the Imperial Panorama

At the end of his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," Walter Benjamin attacks anesthetization taken to its ultimate consequences as a technique through which fascism made humanity consume its alienation with gusto. With this conclusion, Benjamin underlined the fundamental element of his aesthetic theorization: the necessity of paying attention above all to the political and conflictual character of perceptions. "In what follows, the concepts which are introduced into the theory of art differ from those now current in that they are completely useless for the purposes of fascism" ([1939] 2003, p. 252). This consciousness of the political contentiousness of concepts, of necessary partisanship in confronting an object of study, must be a basic starting point of any contemporary attempt at approaching images critically.

As Mitchell has established, the study of what we have come to call visual culture cannot be reduced to the study of purely visual media, as it entails the rejection of vision as a given sense or of the visual as a pure and unmediated aesthetic process, which would not require a critical approach. Consequently, the photographs studied below cannot be considered only in their visual aspect, but as objects charged with affects and histories, with generational and political relations. I explore, thus, how it is possible to approach these photographs keeping in mind their capacity for a "refusal to testify" (Hirsh & Spitzer 2012, p. 56).

In this case, the testimony that would be compelled from these images is an alibi for the prefabricated memory of imperial continuity or for the account of what "actually happened" in nostalgic key. In the worst case, it is the attempt to recruit them as pieces in visuality's representation, devoid of any conflictive interruption. For Mirzoeff, visuality is not a reference to the "social practice of vision," but an imperial and colonial technique "by which power visualizes History to itself. In so doing, it claims authority above and beyond its ability to impose its will" (2013, p. xxx). Visuality as a colonial technique implies the insertion of the perceived world in imperial history: an attempt at constructing a chronological landscape or panorama of the possessions under its power. It can be understood as an attempt at producing the appearance of supreme unity in the empire's image. The sovereign's image, Buck-Morss (2007) has remarked, is of importance given its capacity for constructing a miraculous suture: in seeing the unity of his person it would be possible to represent the unity of his empire, otherwise based on the necessary dispersion of sovereignty as representative of a collectivity. In what follows, I use the metaphor of a "visual empire," but differently from Buck-Morss, for with it I try to describe the extension, both geographical and temporal, of a visual imagery constituted from the

imperial gaze, but nominally hidden in the clandestine character of surveillance.

5. Puerto Rico in the Imperial Gaze: the Aestheticization of Colonial Surveillance in *National Geographic*

The June 1961 issue of *National Geographic* includes a feature on the Federal Bureau of Investigation by Jacob Hay, with photographs by Robert Sisson titled: "The FBI: Public Friend Number One."³ Geographically as well as thematically wide-ranging, it is an exaltation of the FBI's role throughout USA and its territories. By taking the reader from the shooting ranges of the Bureau to the unavoidable anti-Soviet counter-espionage episode, it paints a landscape of American dominions from visuality. In its particular conjunction of text and photography, the article echoes the colonial travel and exploration writing at the height of European colonialism, a genre marked by surveillance:

Surveillance of colonial space is a regular feature of exploration and travel writing. The emergence of 'landscape' and the concomitant desire for a commanding view that could provide a sweeping visual mastery of the scene was an important feature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetry and fiction. It became a significant method by which European explorers and travellers could obtain a position of panoramic observation, itself a representation of knowledge and power over colonial space. (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007, p. 208)

In this grand tour, Puerto Rico is but a stop along the way: the island is referenced, in passing, as a site for lottery scams. It glosses over the political character of the FBI's operations on the island. Behind its representation of the magnitude of the colonial space, it hides the particularity of its criminality.

Nevertheless, even though it does not discuss the FBI's operations in PR at length, two pictures from its activities in Puerto Rico are included (Images 1–3). Given the article's hagiographic tone, it is not too risky to think that these are staged photographs, not spontaneous. In the bottom one (Image 2), a furtive FBI agent sits at a checker-patterned restaurant table. On one hand, he holds a menu; on the other, a miniature camera. He points it at a group of three men cowering around a table set against the wall, above which one can see various posters advertising Broadway shows. The photograph's caption makes plain the scene's nature: "Whispers of conspirators may escape the ear of the San Juan G-man in Puerto Rico, but a Minox camera can record their faces." Of the three men being surveilled, the one in the middle contorts his body away from the camera and towards his co-conspirators, lending the scene an impromptu character. The image

of the government agent, with the latest technology in his hand, is meant to inspire a sense of being adventurous and cool.



Image 1. Sisson, R. Dos imágenes en la página 878. [Fotografía]. *National Geographic Magazine*, Junio 1961. Tomada de Sisson, Robert F., and Jacob Hay. "The FBI: Public Friend Number One." *National Geographic Magazine*, June 1961, p. 860+. *National Geographic Virtual Library*, <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/A33j25>.

Image 2. Sisson, R. "Pretending to read a menu, an FBI agent slyly photographs diners." [Fotografía]. Tomada de <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/pretending-to-read-a-menu-an-fbi-agent-slyly-photographs-news-photo/81956320>.

Image 3. Sisson, R. "A FBI agent meets with an informant under an archway at night." [Fotografía]. Tomada de <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/agent-meets-with-an-informant-under-an-archway-at-night-san-news-photo/81956317>.

The top photograph gives an even clearer impression of being staged to look like a scene from a spy film. It shows two men meeting at night under a streetlamp on a street corner in Old San Juan (Image 3). One man in a dark suit is looking at a sheet of paper; the other one, in more tropical garb, has his back turned away from the camera. The photograph has been taken from inside a chapel that has stood here —on the corner where Calle del Cristo ends— since the 18th century. The caption informs us that "Under cover of night an FBI agent (left) in San Juan, Puerto Rico, meets a trusted informant." In the figure of the informant, who does not show his face, is the only positive depiction of a Puerto Rican in this issue of *NG*: in the other photograph they appear as criminals targeted for surveillance.

These two images present themselves initially as trivial Caribbean snapshots in the grand tour of FBI surveillance. However, behind their carefully curated style, they hide the political role of the USA's security apparatus in Puerto Rico. For decades, the FBI and the PR police had

collaborated in much more than monitoring conmen. In fact, in November 1960, J. Edgar Hoover had authorized the extension of the infamous COINTELPRO program to Puerto Rico, in order to combat the pro-independence and leftist movements (Blanco-Rivera 2005).

During this period, surveillance was not only effective in repressing dissident movements. It also was productive: it generated an immense archive. These police agencies worked together in the creation of a massive and secret database. This information system is known in PR as the "*carpetas*" (folders), referring to their physical character: the typed papers of each file were collated between sepia-colored folders, today yellowed. Due to their prominent position in the contemporary political imagery, these documents have come to exemplify the key visual representation and documentary evidence of the generalized practice of what LeBrón calls "politicized police surveillance and targeted harassment" (20017, p. 148).

These files are icons of representation in themselves. Their physical existence goes hand in hand with their symbolic existence: they are both visual representatives and physical relics that evidence repression. In their pages, there is not only detailed information of relationships, movements, and actions of its subjects, but also a visual archive of their political lives. Each one contains at least one photograph of its target. In that context, the *NG* images present an attempt at a glamorization and beautification of that surveillance work, presenting it in an attractive, pleasing, and even exciting way. They are photographs with which an enticing aesthetic depiction of a visual regime of power that remained otherwise hidden for decades is attempted. That other world, a veritable visual empire, can only be glimpsed in them through the fascistic screen of visibility.

Even though these two images were produced to adulate the FBI, their particular form of propaganda is now obsolete. As is the Cold War context in which they were produced.⁴ However, in depicting that world in a way that today inspires so little sympathy, these photographs point to a contemporary problem. It is precisely the obsolescence of that matrix of meanings what lays the grounds for approaching the more contradictory aspects of the images produced by surveillance and repression as material documents and problematic objects of collective memory, which are thus potentially detached from the trap of the intentionality of their producers.

6. Visual Objects of Surveillance as More than Relic and Information

Observing documents such as the *carpetas* and reducing them to images whose importance is re-stricted to their character as evidence is a risky political game. To approach these images as a mere evidentiary supplement

is to engage them in an acritical way, denying them the richness of their contradictions and imperfections:

In memoir and testimony, and in historical accounts and scholarly discussions, as within new artistic texts, archival images function as supplements, both confirming and unsettling the stories that are explored and transmitted. On the one hand, they are imperfect documents, [...], already deeply problematic when they are taken; on the other hand, as points of memory, they embody an alternate discourse, create an opening in the present to something in the past that goes beyond their indexicality or the information they record. (Hirsch & Spitzer 73-74)

In treating them as tactile indexes and non-redacted evidence of victimization —that is, in ignoring that they may be points of departure for memory— one can end up reducing a document such as the *carpetas* to a limited existence, as a receptacle for “information” deposited in them by the intentionality of its creators, the police spies. By taking them as evidence, one presumes they contain a certain explanatory power: that in studying them one will discover what actually happened.

Politically, the hopes that the act of making visible the abuses of imperial power will be enough can be easily disappointed, as Mirzoeff warns happened in the case of the photographs of torture in the jails of Abu Ghraib in Iraq:

Perhaps the very expectation that the photographs would reveal the inner truth to the war was at fault. It betrays a modernist sensibility that the documentary or straight photograph could capture and express what Henri Cartier-Bresson famously called the “decisive moment” as indexical truth. (Mirzoeff 2006, p. 22)

As proof of the fact that torture happened, the photographs from Abu Ghraib were irrefutable. However, especially inside the USA, these were rapidly made invisible —their grotesque representation of imperial infamy ignored even by some political opponents. The failure of the image-evidence in such a clear case puts in question the evidentiary scheme based on which the understanding of the political character of image is usually attempted. As index and information, the value of visual objects produced by surveillance is passing and instrumental. Thus, as will be seen, they will never actually represent the experience of that generation whose victimization would be evidenced.

In his essay on narrative, “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin remarks how a glance at a newspaper demonstrates the fall in value of experience. This devaluation of experience is not just an economic process, but also a measure of an historical change. In his essay, Benjamin observes how that

change is announced by the First World War, continuing through the century. What he identifies is a crisis exemplified by the growing primacy of information; a process in which the loss for narrative capacity reveals how contemporary experience has silenced “communicable experience.”

Information, according to Benjamin, differs from storytelling in two main ways. First, because it is “shot through with explanation.” Second, because it is completely enmeshed in the immediate. This presentism is made evident in the shift in journalistic function from anecdotal intelligence from afar towards the recent and close-by event:

“Villemessant, the founder of *Le Figaro*, characterized the nature of information in a famous formulation. ‘To my readers,’ he used to say, ‘an attic fire in the Latin Quarter is more important than a revolution in Madrid.’ This makes strikingly clear that what gets the readiest hearing is no longer intelligence coming from afar, but the information which supplies a handle for what is nearest. Intelligence that came from afar —whether over spatial distance (from foreign countries) or temporal (from tradition)— possessed an authority which gave it validity, even when it was not subject to verification. Information, however, lays claim to prompt verifiability. The prime requirement is that it appear ‘understandable in itself’” ([1936] 2002, p. 147).

Both in terms of time and space, the close event is presented as if it were at hand; it garners more attention because it can be presented as something already understandable. This does not mean that major events are ignored, but that now they are rendered in the same way as one would speak of the mundane and the quotidian. In recording the events of the world as a matters-of-fact, the newspaper makes them digestible. Thus, the verisimilitude with which each event is reported is characteristic of a regime which prioritizes the verifiable, always marked by an accelerated temporality that guarantees *a priori* verification.

In an analogue way, the approach to the yellowed pages of the dossier or the black-and-white photographs of the police spies can also fall prey to this informative immediateness.

Thus, their authenticity is readily verifiable in the mark of the police stamp which adorns each page; in the strokes of ink that identify, with numbers, each surveilled individual in a photo. And once their own authenticity is established, these images become machines of verifiability —granting verisimilitude and conferring veracity to the conjecture of surveillance as victimization. “In the fairy tale of photography,” states Sontag, “the magic box insures veracity and banishes error, compensates for inexperience and rewards innocence” (1978, p. 53). Trapped by the enchantment they produce as supposedly true evidence, these images would appear as

documents revealed “perfectly understandable” (Benjamin). Their meaning is thus restricted to a closed narrative circle where the conclusions about their political value are predetermined.

As such, however, the *carpeta* or the photograph is stripped of the anecdotal nature that it would otherwise share with a veteran’s tale. For in contrast to the self-explanatory nature of evidence, the narratives from a previous generation of activism —memories incomplete and contradictory, but always fascinating— have an utterly different character than the documents that supposedly hold the factual record of these events.

There is a gulf between reading surveillance reports and listening to its target describe the experience which the documents claim to contain. Not the least of the effects is that the retold anecdote often destroys the mythical aura held by the police record. The tale may be able to give a version —which will admittedly not be absolutely true, for it is partial and militant— that at least may dismantle the alibi of police fascination: the necessary ritualistic veil shared by both diligent state paranoia and our melancholic remembrance of its acts. Provided we do not take it as established historical truth, but as a narration allowing us a different relation to that past, the anecdote can be politically productive.

Thus, one reads in a surveillance report about a man arriving at a Socialist Party leader’s house with a suspicious box; and then listens to that man laugh when he recounts that it was nothing more than pastries. One reads that a man picked up a boy here and dropped him there and then one hears him remember between laughs that the police agents, in their attempt at detailing his daily movements, were not even able to determine that it was a girl, his daughter. Or perhaps one smiles after hearing the reaction of the participant of a meeting who has read in his file that an informant reported an important revelation: crucial to identify “comrade Stalin” whose ideas were discussed for hours.

These anecdotes, even though they have their counterpart in the “evidence,” do not provide an immediate explanation of what occurred. Listening to them allows for a more relaxed relation to be established between the listener and that past. Of course, there is also the possibility of the anecdote being taken as evidentiary testimony or of the storyteller using it to convey his own authority. The persecuted also inscribe their memories in melancholic, depoliticized narratives. However, at least in the previous examples, the interpretative distance is achieved rapidly due to the humorous character of the anecdote. Here also Benjamin found the value for narration over the transmitting of information. Whoever narrates does not force whoever listens to adopt an explanation. On the contrary, good narration establishes a free, loose relation between text and meaning:

“The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks” ([1936] 2002, 148).

Storytelling, therefore, is not seen as less accurate than information. But it is less saturated with meaning. It requires a certain labor in order to find some trace of truth. The promise of ready understandability, deposited in the image of the documents-evidence of surveillance, contrasts with the possibility of another tradition based upon the narration of the memories of the persecuted. The allure of documentary evidence is also the staleness of a cognitive rupture, not an artifact of a world that recedes into the past, but what blows it beyond the grasp of the present. Yet the problem with the telling of the anecdote as a defense against the mythology of nostalgia is that the storytellers are not available to all: what of the immense majority who will never have access to a quiet evening speaking at length with an old veteran of the struggle? And, moreover, how will these memories be retrievable after their lives end?

7. The Visual Documentation of Surveillance at the University of Puerto Rico: between information and Anecdote

The *carpetas*, as important and contradictory as they are, do not constitute the only documents of their epoch. Within them one finds pictures. Often, they were the same as the target’s driver’s license; however some of them were taken directly at political events —not all by the police. For instance, in the Archive of the UPR, one finds dozens of pictures categorized as “documentary photography” that deal with political events. Somehow, some of these found their way to the files, as documents used for the identification of their targets. I know this because precisely with one of these begins my father’s file (Image 4). The purpose of these photos is clear: identification. They include lists of names as a caption. Thus, for example, one can see the use of a blue pen with which someone drew, next to each target, a circled number (Image 5).



Image 4. "Piquete-Librería" (1975, 15 de agosto) [Fotografía documental]. Archivo Universitario (PR AH-UPRRP 553-46-842-AU887-2014). Universidad de Puerto Rico- Recinto de Río Piedras.



Image 5. "No identificado" (1976, 9 de septiembre) [Fotografía documental]. Archivo Universitario (PR AH-UPRRP 553-46-948-AU887-2014). Universidad de Puerto Rico- Recinto de Río Piedras.

That image of my father, the first document within his *carpeta*, was taken by someone at the UPR. In it he appears at twenty years of age, a microphone in hand. The photograph in the *carpeta* is based on the one in the Archive, because it is a cropped version in which the two men who flank him disappear. In the context of the file, this image is an informative weapon: here is the face of the target identified in this document. With this photograph, he can be identified. In the Archive, the informative attack is arrested. Questions arise: who are these others? What was said into that microphone? Why were they there? Why does he seem to laugh? One does not encounter the record of an era, but rather a mere snapshot. Seeing these photographs recalls Sontag's argument about the "posthumous irony" of the moments captured by the camera: "Photographs show people being so irrefutable *there* and at a specific age in their lives; group together people and things which a moment later have already disbanded, changed, continued along their independent destinies" (1978, p. 70. Emphasis in original). Thus, these archival pictures depict a passing instance in the daily comings-and-goings of what could be termed the Puerto Rican detachment of the "Last Generation of October."⁵

If the *NG* photographs appear to be easy to comprehend as advertisement for the coolness of police activity and the *carpetas*, as icon, acquire an explanatory meaning as evidence, these Archive images are harder to look at. They possess neither the glossiness of *NG*, nor the creases of the *carpetas*. They appear decontextualized, untitled. They barely carry dates. At the most, blue numbers to collate names in a caption on the back. What does the more fragmentary nature of these pictures entail for the consideration of that world of political life which seems to have evaporated?

In his polemic against the movement known as New Objectivity, Benjamin calls for the use of captions in the course of elaborating the notion of a constructive principle in artistic production —analogue to the one presented in "On the Concept of History" as the organizing element of the constellations produced by materialist historiography against the aggregate of data that historicism orders in "homogeneous empty time" (see thesis XVII; Benjamin [1940] 2003, p. 396). "What we require," he writes in "The Author as Producer," "of the photographer is the ability to give his picture a caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it a revolutionary use value" ([1934] 1999, p. 775). Writing a caption is presented as a political act. Through it, a text-image relation is established that can depict a social relation beyond aesthetic value as object of beauty. In his essay "Little History of Photography," he had already expanded upon the constructive element necessary for political photography, for it unmasks "the posture of a photography that can endow any soup with cosmic significance but cannot grasp a single one of the human connections in which it exists" ([1931] 1999, p. 526).

The problem is that the “documentary” images we find at the Archive were taken precisely as a register of social relations. In them, men and women are often marked with numbers and their names are written in order to not only establish their singular identity, but also with whom they relate. If one photo sees only one man identified (Image 6), in another we see a proliferation of numbers (Image 5). To identify is not to isolate individuals: above all, the surveyor attempts to establish relations among them.

Take for instance the two photographs of a rally (Images 6 and 7). The first would seem right in a newspaper or magazine. Its subject is Juan Mari Brás, leader of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, giving a speech. In front of him, and occupying three quarters of the shot, a group of youths can be seen, whose blurred figures serve as background. The image documents an event: this man spoke here, those present listened. In this one it is irrelevant (and impossible) to identify the public, it constitutes an unnamed mass. And, nevertheless, in the other photo, taken on the same day and location, one can see clearly that documenting this political leader’s speech was not the sole purpose of this photograph. Mari Brás is shown sitting down. On his left, two men, one smoking, do not pay attention to anything in particular. They are not identified. But on the other side, a man kneels next to him, his face close to Mari Brás’, as if he was telling him something in secret. The natural question is “what were they discussing?” This one is identified: on his chest a “1” is drawn inside a circle. In the Archive, his name appears: Jaime Córdoba.



Image 6. “No identificado” (1975, 26 de noviembre) [Fotografía documental]. Archivo Universitario (PR AH-UPRRP 553-46-918-AU887-2014). Universidad de Puerto Rico- Recinto de Río Piedras.



Image 7. "No identificado" (1975, 26 de noviembre) [Fotografía documental]. Archivo Universitario (PR AH-UPRRP 553-46-916-AU887-2014). Universidad de Puerto Rico- Recinto de Río Piedras.

In calling for the use of captions, Benjamin attempts to warn that the seeming semiotic independence of the photograph, its supposed capacity for reproducing reality with evident obviousness, actually hides the contentious character of social relations. In fact, the miniaturized camera and the surveillance photo seem to be the technical conclusion of the purified photographic aestheticization Benjamin critiques:

"The camera is getting smaller and smaller, ever readier to capture fleeting and secret images whose shock effect paralyzes the associative mechanisms in the beholder. This is where inscription must come into play, which includes the photography of the literarization of the conditions of life, and without which all photographic construction must remain arrested in the approximate. It is no accident that Atget's photographs have been likened to those of a crime scene. But isn't every square inch of our cities a crime scene? Every passer-by a culprit? Isn't it the task of the photographer — descendant of the augurs and haruspices— to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures?" ([1931] 1999, p. 527).

Benjamin observes here an inherent tendency in photographic technology that makes it a potential instrument for widespread political surveillance. But photography is not reducible to this technical possibility. Here it is also clear that the perverse social function of the caption/name-list of the photographs found in the Archive is not the same thing as the "literarization" that Benjamin demands. The furtive photographers clearly attempted to adjudicate guilt. If this juridical language is here appropriate, it is because the system of social persecution they were a part of could only function on the premise that the surveilled were already guilty of something. Through the lens of these photographers, everyday political life

is presented as a crime scene, but one different from what Benjamin had in mind. For in calling for an unmasking of social relations through the application of a photo-caption written based upon a constructive principle, he made a call for something more than the ascertaining of an identity or a social relation. He demanded the indictment of those social relations. In other words, the crime scene appearing here is not Benjamin's. One could even say that through those surveying lenses the streets and plazas of PR do not appear as crime scenes, but rather as a battlefield.

What we see in these archival "documentary" pictures is, therefore, a snippet of a social and political struggle as it occurred. This makes them alluring in a way altogether different from those in *NG*. It also makes it harder to take account of these pictures, because we lack their full explanation: as objects produced by one side in a conflict, they are impossibly impartial. But at the same time, they provide a broad and different window into a past generation's life. They require one to approach them constructively, as elements to reconstruct the distribution of positions before combat. We receive them in the same way as we inherit memories from another time: as fragments, snapshots.

8. Conclusion: Towards a New Caption

Through the images of surveilled and *surveillant*, understood as captures of a contentious moment, one can see some indications of how the visual culture of an empire operates across history. Visuality should not be understood as a static project, but as a historical process. Additionally, inasmuch as the visual objects survive through history, these acquire a generational aspect. No matter how much a photograph attempts to capture a moment, once it falls into the hands of those who did not live it, they acquire an unexpected meaning.⁶

Despite the ruptures in memory, continuities impose themselves also. Political surveillance in PR has never actually ended. Tracing a line between surveillance in the past and the present is not difficult. LeBrón has detailed the effects of past repression on present generations, studying the contemporary activist milieu at UPR:

"For the young activists at the University of Puerto Rico, the so-called subversive archive created generations earlier by local and federal law enforcement agencies became an *archive of subversion*— evidence that what they were experiencing at the hands of police and private security forces was far from unprecedented and had to do with the long entanglement of colonial and capitalist exploitation on the island" (LeBrón, 153).

Accessing that past as an archive of subversion, LeBrón argues, would have allowed current activists to preempt and react to surveillance tactics. But it has also, I argue, made today's activists anxious, if not paranoid, when confronted with the ever-present possibility of surveillance and state persecution. In fact, in more recent times, the depoliticization of the practice of surveillance, together with the criminalization of protest, has allowed it to happen more in the open (Atiles-Osoria and Whyte, 2011). Surveillance during more recent student protests has made an effort, to a great extent, to underline its own visibility. As documented by LeBrón, this caused an increase in the sense of suspicion among the activists, not always in a productive way. Those who are still under surveillance, moreover, live today in a world in which the making of audiovisual recordings is ubiquitous, contributing to its depoliticization.⁷

The continuity between practices of surveillance past and present establishes a perverse link between generations. Is this link enough, however, to claim that the past world is not as lost as it would seem? Given the limits of the images of surveillance as information, how to look at these images of repression in the present in a way that indicts the social relations that made them possible?

One option is to take them literally for what they were: weapons. This perspective brings out their tendentious quality. Positioning them within the coordinates of a political struggle, they can be used as materials for a contemporary political practice that, insofar as it establishes a tradition, does not do it based upon the testimony of the victim as evidence. Thus, by taking these images as objects dyed by a necessary contentiousness, they can be positioned as something more than a document of what actually happened. None of these images is precise in the historicist sense, which Benjamin taught us to doubt. If they are recruited to fulfill that evidentiary function, they lose as much as if they are enshrined as objects of an inaccessible past, to which nostalgia nevertheless holds on. The question has been if the allure of the visual world of surveillance is an index of its actuality or a melancholic barrier to its overcoming. In other words, how such worlds can disappear. Or how they can be made to disappear. To take these images as material is to deny them completeness, embrace them as necessarily fragmented, and reject the nostalgic affectation of their ritualistic existence. We are then forced to accept that there is nothing in that past that we have not already inherited: do we wish to have a *carpeta* made of us? The camera still has us in its sights. Is it too much to hope that it is again recording snapshots of a world that will soon vanish?

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Notes

¹ September 23 commemorates the Lares Revolution ("*Grito de Lares*") of 1868, a suppressed attempted pro-independence revolution against Spanish colonialism during which a Republic of Puerto Rico was proclaimed.

² For an extensive genealogy of the student movement at UPR see Laguarda (2016), especially Chapter 2.

³ According to Crespo Armáiz (2014), PR's representation in NG has gone through three periods: initially, it is framed in the catalogue of new possessions, then it focuses in the island's geopolitical role, and eventually, it gives priority to uncertainty and political indefiniteness as framing. These images are part of the middle period during which PR appears as the alternative the USA proposals for Latin America in order to confront the advance of socialism exemplified by the Cuban Revolution. In other words, these images exist completely within the frame of the Cold War.

⁴ For an extensive study of the transformations introduced by the end of the Cold War in the fundamental conceptions of politics at a global level, see Buck-Morss (2000).

⁵ Traverso (2016) appropriates this term to name the last generation who experienced political militancy in a way primarily marked by the revolutionary imperative of historical necessity inaugurated by the Russian Revolution's October.

⁶ "A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading (or matching to other photographs)", Sontag (1978, 71).

⁷ This agrees with general observations about the contradictory reactions to the increase in the use of surveillance techniques. Their increasing omnipresence has been a paradox for those that study it, as the response, sometimes even playful, to its presence does not always correspond to an expected resistance and defense of privacy (Lyon, Haggerty, & Ball 2012, p. 4).