

Michałowska Marianna

What does the photo show? Between pixels and photo grain

Summary:

The starting point of my paper is Miranda Pennell's film "Man Number 4" (2024). The British visual artist traces the pixel grid of documentary photography in detail to reveal the full frame by gradually moving away from the structure of the image. Between the abstract form and the offline narrative, we study the meaning of the photo. We then learn that the photo, originally published on December 12, 2023, shows the detention of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

I am interested in how creators use the visual structures of photography to comment on the issue of image credibility. In her search, Pennell is both not and original: she is not, because the search for the meaning of photos has a long history in media archeology - from Michelangelo Antonioni's "Blow-Up" to Ridley Scott's "Blade Runner". She is innovative however, because she proposes a perspective opposite to the mentioned creators.

The difference in looks is especially visible when we compare Pennell's film to "Blow-Up". There, the photographer took a photo and enlarged the photographed image to spot the crime. The more he enlarges, the less he sees, because he begins to see only the grain (i.e. the structure of the image), and he is no longer sure whether there are objects that are gradually losing their concreteness. Pennell, on the other hand, starts with structure and works his way towards meaning. These are therefore artistic juxtapositions of two directions of movement - towards a close-up that loses meaning and a distancing of the frame that indicates meaning. In essence, both of these film wholes talk about the same thing - about photography as an uncertain and blurred source: leading astray both to knowledge and to the testimony of events.

Patrick Gamble, while "reading" the film, puts it differently - it is about the credibility of the image. The published photo from Gaza, about whose authorship and context of taking we are not sure (apart from the name of the titular "fourth man", Dr. Khalid Hamoda, and the presumed sender of the image - Nir Dvori), actually takes place not in real, material place, but in a digital reality in which we subject the photographed area to analysis. Therefore, we should also consider the status of a new category of place, this time a digital image repository in which authors publish their messages.

In the analysis of film material, I regard, among others to the concept of Vilém Flusser, who argued that technical images themselves do not have meaning (in the semiotic sense), but point towards meaning. They are therefore insignificant surfaces (sets of points such as photographic grain or screen pixels) through which the meanings given to them by creators reach the audience. Both Pennell and Antonioni exposed the point structure of images, which not only made it easier but also made it more difficult to

recognize the actual objects that were recorded by the camera. But when can we see their “meaning”? In Jacques Rancière's reflection, it is shaped by the relationship between the political and aesthetic nature of the visual message. Gamble points, however, to one more context. About the fate of Dr. Hamoda he writes: "He has since disappeared without a trace. By centering Hamoda's presence within this milieu of cruelty, Pennell forces us to consider the countless lives obscured when images of collective suffering are stripped of their context or ignored entirely." This statement brings me back to Susan Sontag's essay "Regarding the Pain of Others", in which she considered the viewer's responsibility to react to the suffering depicted in paintings. So what is Pennell's movie about? About suffering? Unbelievable? Are there pitfalls in the structure of the technical image itself? In the summary, I return to Flusser's theory and his understanding of maintaining human freedom towards technical media, according to which one of the duties of an artist is to ask questions and question clear answers - not to believe the image thoughtlessly.

Keywords:

Technical images, Miranda Pennell, Vilém Flusser, photo-grain, pixels