

The Complicit Lens: An Archaeology of the Perpetrator's Gaze

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Review of: Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, *The Death in Their Eyes: What Perpetrator Images Perpetrate*, trans. by Martin Boyd (Berghahn Books, 2024), pp. 280 (hardback). GBP: 104.00. ISBN: 9781805396413

A researcher investigating violence knows that images are not neutral documents, but endless potential narratives that mutate and acquire meaning when questioned. In his book *The Death in Their Eyes: What Perpetrator Images Perpetrate*, Spanish academic Vicente Sánchez-Biosca scrutinises these 'elementary particles' of collective memory: multidimensional images, whose countless layers collapse on the ethical-aesthetic plane. That is the plane the author inhabits and explores.

Sánchez-Biosca's work on the afterlife of perpetrator images is driven by the urgency to delve deeper into political violence and its representations. Sánchez-Biosca is one of the leading members of the research group REPERCRI (Representations of Perpetrators of Mass Violence: Concepts, Narratives and Images), based at the University of Valencia. In and beyond this role, he has spent years advancing Perpetrator Studies in the Spanish and international research landscapes, in scholarship that interrogates the archive, and reinforces the necessary concepts and ideas used to access the visual dimension of episodes of barbarity. These concepts have become tools for confronting these images and penetrating the gazes of those who exercise violence, without becoming trapped by it.

The Death in Their Eyes is the culmination of an investigative and personal process which started many years ago and which has taken Sánchez-Biosca around the globe. Various works and projects have borne witness to this trajectory, such as the compendium of essays co-edited with the philosopher Anacleto Ferrer, titled *El infierno de los perpetradores: imágenes, relatos y conceptos* (*The Hell of the Perpetrators: Images, Narratives and Concepts*). In his text 'In Praise of the Smile' ('El elogio de la sonrisa'), Sánchez-Biosca already posed the question that would later become the subtitle of the work here reviewed: 'What do

perpetrator images perpetrate?’¹ A couple of years later and just before the publication of the *The Death in Their Eyes* in Spanish, in September 2021, a fascinating conversation took place between Sánchez-Biosca and Brazilian filmmaker Anita Leandro. During the discussion of Leandro’s *Retratos de identificação* (2014), Sánchez-Biosca told the filmmaker about her work: ‘As you said, you face the perpetrators, you don’t represent them. But you do use their gaze, which is the same one that produced the documents’.² In a similar way, the academic uses the perpetrator’s gaze as a springboard into the dark waters of political and religious brutality, to understand the complex reasons behind the murderous hatred, but also to vindicate and dignify the life of the person on the other side of the camera.

Sánchez-Biosca’s work comes to light at a time when Perpetrator Studies – and, particularly, its branch focused on images and visuality – are generating an increasing number of tools that allow for a deeper and more nuanced comprehension of acts of barbarity. Also, the need to ‘turn to the perpetrator’³ that Susanne Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg pointed out, along with the understanding of perpetration as a process – with its ‘different layers of authority, different motives of involvement, different intentionality, and most importantly, the changes in these factors over time’⁴ – have enabled academics to add complexity to their analysis and theoretical constructions of the figure of the perpetrator. In ‘the age of the perpetrator image’,⁵ the visual subfield of Perpetrator Studies precisely explores ‘what perpetrators do when they speak’⁶ through the images that they produce.

1 *El infierno de los perpetradores: Imágenes, relatos y conceptos*, ed. by Vicente Sánchez-Biosca and Anacleto Ferrer (Edicions Bellaterra, 2019), p. 303. All translations are the author’s.

2 Vicente Sánchez-Biosca and Anita Leandro, ‘Archivo visual de la represión y montaje. Conversación Vicente Sánchez-Biosca y Anita Leandro’, *laFuga*, 2022 <<http://2016.lafuga.cl/archivo-visual-de-la-represion-y-montaje-conversacion-vicente-sanchez-biosca-y-anita-leandro/1121>> [accessed 30 September 2025].

3 *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (Routledge, 2020), p. 1.

4 Uğur Ümit Üngör and Kjell Anderson, ‘From Perpetrators to Perpetration: Definitions, Typologies and Processes’, in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (Routledge, 2020), p. 7.

5 Susie Linfield, ‘Perpetrators’, in *Visual Global Politics*, ed. by Roland Bleiker (Taylor & Francis, 2018), p. 224.

6 Claudia Feld and Valentina Salvi, ‘¿Qué hacen los perpetradores cuando hablan?: Aportes metodológicos a partir de una investigación sobre declaraciones públicas de represores (Argentina, 1976–2018)’, *Cuaderns de Filologia. Estudis Literaris: Contrafiguras de la violencia: imàgenes, relatos y arquetipos de la perpetración de los crímenes del franquismo*, 26 (2023), p. 181.

Thus, the book begins from the firm premise that visual transparency does not exist – least of all when we deal with artifacts that materialise the relationship between the perpetrator's gaze and the victim. Thus, it is not so much the violent effects that may derive from the consumption of images that are of interest, but rather the violence that the image itself exerts. Sánchez-Biosca continues to frame the image as a Warburgian palimpsest, deciphering its layers and studying its movements: starting from the instant of its recording, he questions the original intention, the context, the staging. Shifting, then, to subsequent uses of the image, he dwells on how it is reinterpreted, for example, in the realm of propaganda. Finally, in doing this, Sánchez-Biosca never dismisses the present gaze, the analysis that today's viewer can deploy thanks to acquired historical knowledge. It is this hermeneutic decoding on three levels that allow him, and us, to grasp the semantic core of the perpetrator's images.

The volume is divided into four parts that are in close dialogue. In the first, Sánchez-Biosca introduces a complex theoretical and methodological framework based on various case studies that have permeated the collective psyche over the last few decades: from the mugshots of Brazilian guerrillas detained during the Castelo Branco dictatorship to the carefully staged murders filmed by the Islamic State, and the gruesome images of the Abu Ghraib prison that flooded the international media at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Sánchez-Biosca guides the reader through his theoretical proposal, which aims to define the relationship between the producer of the image and the violent act it records. Thanks to his insights, we are able to *recognise* these documents of barbarism, to transcend the mere image and extract the historicity embedded within it. In this way, historical knowledge, combined with a meticulous study of the technique underlying the recording or photograph, gradually brings the recorded then-present moment into sharper focus, while also enabling a reflection that speaks of both past and future times.

Sánchez-Biosca 'awakens' the images through his analytical framework with a sense of freedom rarely found in academic research. Indeed, as Schiller wrote, 'the transition from the passive state of sensation to the active state of thought and will can only take place through an intermediate state of aesthetic freedom'⁷ This conviction also accompanied German filmmaker Harun Farocki throughout his career and perme-

⁷ Friedrich Schiller, *Cartas sobre la educación estética del hombre* (Universidad Nacional de Cuyo, 2019), p. 135.

ated each of his films, installations, and artistic projects. It was precisely from this aesthetic freedom that he created *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (*Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, 1989) and *Aufschub* (*Respite*, 2007), works which, furthermore, only achieve their full meaning through the action of time and through meticulous research devoted to them. Sánchez-Biosca operates along the same latitude: he pierces the image freely, devising an exhaustive methodology that allows for interpretation from countless angles until he discovers a new kind of *punctum* that becomes a stab, a flash that portends destruction. The intentionality of death is revealed, first, in the meticulous preparation for the intervention by the photographic device, at the scene. By providing data, stories, and at times overwhelming historical-technical knowledge, Sánchez-Biosca guides the reader's gaze. It is then, thanks to his analysis, that the recording of a glance at the camera, of a space through a tracking shot, or of a close-up metamorphosis into evidence of barbarism. For, as he points out (p. 68), the space represented portrays the effect of an action that largely occurs behind the camera. These images, imbued with the intentionality and rational process that leads to the making of the photographic or videographic record, are dissected through various questions that function as surgical incisions. What was the degree of the camera's proximity to the scene shown and its protagonists? What elements compose the frame and how are they arranged? And, above all: how does the recording device influence the moment recorded?

Confronted with the blatant existence of a 'complicit camera' in the act of perpetration, we begin, with Sánchez-Biosca's guidance, to delve into these forensic images that reveal collusions and tacit agreements through three dark moments in recent history. The first episodes studied by Sánchez-Biosca occurred in the context of the Spanish Civil War and revolve around a way of understanding the act of perpetration as intrinsically linked to the prevailing climate in the country during war-time. The academic sheds light on two sequences that he first groups together, from the very title of the chapter, under the category of 'martyrdom of things'. This refers to the fervent anti-clericalism present in large sectors of the Republican side in the summer of 1936, immediately after the coup d'état that sparked the war. The first sequence records the desecration of the tombs housed in the Salesas convent in Barcelona and the public display of the mummies of nuns and priests at the entrance to the building. The second captures the symbolic 'execution' of the Sacred Heart of Christ monument at the Hill of Angels in Madrid, in July 1936. Sánchez-Biosca articulates his analysis by drawing on texts from

the period and audiovisual reports from national and international media, in an exercise of inferring the journalistic, socio-cultural, and propagandistic biases used by the different parties to endow images, through headlines, voiceovers, and re-edits.

The visual-archaeological work undertaken by Sánchez-Biosca in assigning the status of perpetrator images to these sequences is courageous and ethical in a way that cannot be underestimated. As Sánchez-Biosca explains, the shooting of the Sacred Heart was an act of iconoclasm that is to be included in the corpus of perpetrator images mainly because the presence of the recording apparatus is a constitutive element of the event itself, not a mere accessory. Thus, the camera transforms, choreographs, and endows the event with a performative meaning. In this scene, which unfolds simultaneously on physical and, above all, psychological levels, the militiamen 'execute' a representation of the divinity; before the lens, that action becomes a ritual act of collective self-affirmation, of camaraderie, of warning. The shooting is for and because of the camera.

The second chapter deals with a sequence that shows the streets and surroundings of the Warsaw ghetto in the spring of 1942. It is part of an unfinished film called *Ghetto or Asien in Mitteleuropa* (USHMM, 1942), which sought to unveil the idiosyncrasies and customs of Jewish residents in Eastern Europe. The intent was to present this people as cunning beings capable of masking their otherness and their condition as irreverent beasts who practiced strange traditions; the Nazis, following Goebbels' orders, filmed to insert the images into a visceral anti-Semitic magma that had been bubbling for years in Western countries. Sánchez-Biosca unearths numerous references to 'the filmmakers' in the testimonies by people like Adam Czerniakov, leader of the Warsaw Judenrat, and Wladyslaw Szpilman, the pianist whose overwhelming life was brought to the big screen by Roman Polanski. These were the 'filmmakers' who forced the resident-prisoners of the Warsaw ghetto to perform and enact weddings, funerals, rituals, and leisure activities for the camera, invading and upsetting spaces, believing themselves to be invisible behind the filming apparatus.

It is no coincidence that, in relation to these images, Farocki has written: 'one sees the intentionality of the representation in the photographers' framings, their purpose of contempt for the people enclosed in the ghetto, and how their shots do not align with their interests'.⁸ Like a researcher adjusting the contrast to reveal a face hidden in the fog, Sánchez-Biosca demonstrates the existence of an 'imaginary script'

8 Harun Farocki, *Desconfiar de las imágenes* (Caja Negra, 2015), p. 145.

which emerges from conscious observation and historical and technical knowledge, and which undermines the images' verisimilitude. Once again, as Farocki noted, the details bring to the surface the intentionality of perpetration that underlies the image. However, we now encounter a paradox which the filmmaker and Sánchez-Biosca problematise, and which the reader processes almost as a joke in poor taste: many of these images were never used, as the Nazis feared that they would have the opposite effect and generate compassion among Germans. Goebbels could control the message and polish the script to perfection, but he could not dictate how the images would be processed and interpreted.

These perpetrator images have a 'life of their own' that can't be understood without paying attention to the migration of their semantics, which travel through time and are re-signified through subsequent material interventions. Sánchez-Biosca reflects on the nature of this manipulation and warns us that such interventions can sometimes erase the particularities that reveal the implicit violence of the image. To this end, he mainly uses two films: *Mein Kampf: Den blodiga Tiden* by Erwin Leiser (*My Struggle: The Bloody Times*, 1959) and *Temps du ghetto* by Frédéric Rossif (*The Witness*, 1961). Regarding Leiser, Sánchez-Biosca writes that he 'demonstrated an insightful intuition with his recognition of the value of preserving the image produced by criminals of their victims for the purpose of understanding their crime' (p. 163). Preserving the moral bias that Nazi cameramen had imprinted on the sequences, by respecting the raw material, became imperative when contrasted with films such as Rossif's, which ultimately patronised and sanded down the valuable and terrible topography of the original layer.

Sánchez-Biosca points to the elements that betray the constructed nature of the images, in an intellectual exercise reminiscent of that undertaken by the Spanish playwright Juan Mayorga in his play *Himmelweg*. The thought of these artificial settings – where the living wander about, cued by the cameras, while the camps remained out of focus – leads us to the same mental space inhabited by Mayorga's characters. In the play, a Nazi officer and the Jewish 'mayor' of Theresienstadt, Gershom Gottfried, present the supposed virtues of a Potemkin-village camp to a visiting Red Cross official:

I took many photos. Every so often, Gottfried reminds me that I can take photos. I photograph the streets, paved and clean. The bandstand where the orchestra plays, in the centre of the square. The park, full of animal-shaped swings. The colourful balloons. [...] 'What did you

expect?' the officer asks me. 'Skinny men in striped pyjamas? I've heard those fantasies too. You've heard them too, haven't you, Gottfried?'.⁹

Between the seams of the staging, the imaginary script gradually emerges, exposing the deception and making it even more painful when seen from today's perspective. Like Mayorga in his *Himmelweg*, Sánchez-Biosca casts a critical gaze upon the visual recording apparatus, unmasking its perverse potential, its use for propagandistic ends and, ultimately, its capacity to deepen the suffering of the victims within fundamentally brutal scenarios devised by the perpetrators.

In fact, the last place *The Death in their Eyes* takes us to one of these scenarios, a building called Tuol Sleng, where everything was designed to cause as much damage as possible. Rithy Panh explains this in his book *The Elimination*:

The language of slaughter is in the word kamtech, to reduce to dust. Let nothing remain, no trace of life, no trace of death. Let the death itself be erased. [...] Thus Bophana's clothes and other belongings were given away to all comers as soon as she was transferred to S-21. Bophana disappeared; everything pertaining to Bophana disappeared. And such an erasure is an ungraspable death.¹⁰

The photograph of Bophana, a twenty-five-year-old woman persecuted by the Khmer Rouge, holds a sadly privileged place in the work by both Panh and Sánchez-Biosca. Once again, Sánchez-Biosca's gaze transcends the image, going beyond Bophana's defiant eyes to tell her story of death by reclaiming that of her life. In an exercise similar to that developed by Rithy Panh in *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy* (1996), Sánchez-Biosca traces the key moments of the young woman's life that ultimately led her into S21 and placed her in front of that lens – itself one of the torture devices (p. 182).

In addition to his reflection on the perverse action unfolding off-screen at the moment the photograph was taken in 1977, Sánchez-Biosca also considers the real and present off-screen space, inhabited by the spectators of these images who, in the rooms of museums and galleries, gaze into the eyes of Bophana and the thousands of other murdered individuals whose portraits were seized.

9 Juan Mayorga, *Himmelweg* (La Uña Rota Ediciones, 2022), pp. 5-6.

10 Rithy Panh, *The Elimination* (The Clerkenwell Press, 2013), pp. 103-04.

Sánchez-Biosca contrasts two contexts in which the mugshots are displayed in order to analyse their ethical and political implications and invoke related questions from the previous chapters. In the same way that he questions whether it is appropriate to adulterate the images of the Warsaw ghetto through editing – given the risk of erasing the ‘invisible script’ – he similarly doubts the suitability of exhibiting the images of Tuol Sleng in the MoMA, ‘sterilized and stripped of their status as objects anchored in a space’ (p. 195). Thus, through his archaeological work, Sánchez-Biosca’s commitment to the victim’s memory takes two forms. First, he revives the perpetrator images and brings out their specificities, going beyond the surface to restore and honour the stolen biographies of their subjects. Second, he advocates for contexts that allow these images to exist within a respectful interpretive space—one that rejects trivialisation and ensures that their legacy serves as a safeguard against the repetition of such brutality. In this sense, Rithy Panh writes that

The work of research is a struggle against elimination. Of course such work doesn't raise the dead. It doesn't seek out bad ground or ashes. And of course this work doesn't bring us rest. Doesn't mellow us. But it gives us back our humanity, our intelligence, our history. Sometimes it even ennobles us. It makes us feel alive.¹¹

The Death in Their Eyes stands out as a powerful piece of scholarship that transcends conventional analysis to propose a genuine archaeology of the visibility of horror, based on three pillars: first, Sánchez-Biosca delves into the image, drawing on a meticulous knowledge of history and film apparatuses, excavating the layers of intentionality, technique, and context that constitute its essence. Second, he traces the semantic migration of these images, tracking the transformation, perversion, or re-signification of their meanings across time, space, and various propagandistic uses. Finally, he critically examines the contexts of reproduction and distribution, questioning the ethical and aesthetic implications of exhibiting these images in the present. He provides an answer to the tacit question: how, where, and with what intent are they displayed?

Upon these three foundations, Sánchez-Biosca deploys an approach to sequences and photographs that respects their specificities while rejecting a rigid methodological framework. He refuses a standardized model, understanding that these images present themselves as unique

¹¹ Panh, p. 162.

universes. Through adaptability, attention to detail and the creative and academic freedom that has long guided his research, he forges a binding ethical commitment to the victims while simultaneously reinforcing the potency of his analysis.

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