

Forensic Architecture: *The whole truth?*

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When I visited Forensic Architecture's first major exhibition in the UK, *Counter Investigations* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (London 2018), I left with mixed feelings. It was the first time I saw their work in the context of contemporary art. Both their idea of 'counter-forensics'—which was explained and mapped out spectacularly on the walls of the gallery— and the technology they had access to for their investigations seemed fascinating and intriguing. Nevertheless, I detected something that disturbed me about the ways in which their videos were constructed. It took me a while—hours of viewing their work online, days of reflection and several heated debates with fellow artists, scholars and activists—to articulate what that exactly was. On the one hand, the videos seem to provide scientific knowledge based on material conditions, for example forensic evidence of a murder or human right violations. On the other hand, they appealed to my emotions in a manipulative way that one is familiar with from mainstream cinema. There are a number of elements in the narrative and aesthetic structures of these video investigations that are significantly cinematic in terms of editing, camera movements and angles, linear arrangement of shots, and the narration. For example, the seamless transitions between the documentary video footage and the 3D modelled animations recall continuity editing; the bird's eye view shots of cities and buildings combined with satellite images and naming the time and the place recall establishing shots that locate the viewer in a filmic event; utilising shot-reverse-shot shots and point of view shots providing perspective; narrative construction that conveys a clear beginning, middle and an end of the event. In what follows, I want to have a closer look at *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* (2019) to raise some questions about the representation of real, violent events through computer-generated simulations that utilize cinematic codes and conventions, problematic spectatorship of such, and issues relating to Eyal Weizman's assertion that there is a "necessity for the truth to be produced and staged" (2017:74).

The Killing of Tahir Elçi is a video that presents Forensic Architecture's investigation of the assassination of Tahir Elçi, a well-known Kurdish lawyer and human rights activist. Elçi was shot dead in Diyarbakir, Turkey, in 2015 while giving a press conference in front of a historic minaret that had been damaged a few nights earlier by armed clashes between PKK militants and the police. At the time, the Turkish officials blamed PKK for the killing, but Forensic Architecture suggests otherwise, trying to prove that the lethal shot was most likely fired

from the weapon of a member of the Turkish security forces at the scene. As of 2020, three police officers were indeed treated as suspects in the on-going case, partly thanks to Forensic Architecture's investigation. This should be celebrated as a success, but shouldn't distract us from critically engaging with the video's aesthetic construction and from thinking through how the work functions in the realm of aesthetics.

The video opens with TV footage of Elçi speaking to the press just before the incident takes place, with a narrator introducing Elçi and describing the time and the place akin to an establishing sequence in filmic conventions, which provides the viewer with context. The placards Elçi and the people behind him hold present several slogans that attempt to give voice to the ancient four-legged minaret, whose legs were badly damaged by the armed clashes. Tragically, the one Elçi was carrying says "I am a heritage of humanity, look after me" (my translation). This footage from the actual press conference is followed by a single video clip, which covers the 20-second period during which Elçi was shot, off-screen, just after his speech. In this sequence we see Elçi and another man worryingly looking behind the camera that was recording them. The camera follows their gaze, turns and records two armed men running towards them while being shot at by police officers in front. The narrator then reports that these two young PKK militants shot two police officers (who later died) in an adjacent street, and ran towards the narrow street where the press conference was. During this narration the incident is being located on a map, zooming in on a satellite image. As we get to street level the satellite map gracefully becomes a sophisticated 3D model of the two adjacent streets reminiscent of video game aesthetics. A couple of minutes into the video the surveillance footage is superimposed on the 3D model of the street, where the militants shoot the police officers and run towards the street where Elçi is. Since there was no camera recording the street from that direction, the footage dissolves into a complete 3D simulation to follow the militants until the virtual camera positions itself with a real camera recording from the other direction showing the militants running towards it. This is also the first time we see Elçi as an avatar, marked by the colour red amongst other grey avatars. The transition between the video image of Elçi and the red avatar is often conducted with a dissolve, and sometimes one image combining the two.

The transitions and movement of the virtual camera merging with the real one is exceptionally precise and seamless, demonstrating significant finesse. Forensic Architecture (FA) often utilize this kind of simulation in their investigations to 'see' incidents from a

perspective for which there was no camera present or where the video footage is insufficient. Weizman defines this construction as “architectural image complex.” He writes: “what we refer to as the architectural image complex is a method of assembling image evidence in a spatial environment. The architectural image complex can function as an optical device that allows the viewer to see the scene of the crime as a set of relations between images in time and space” (2017:100). This “optical device” also allows FA to have more control over the moving image as they can place the camera anywhere in the virtual reality they create, for example to get closer to a scene or object, or to zoom out and have a wider view of the field. However, through the same method they also can and do manipulate the scene. For example, cars or other objects magically disappear to make certain things visible. It also allows them to create a particular effect, as in the poignant scene at the end of *The Killing of Tahir Elçi*, when the virtual camera zooms out, leaving Elçi (in avatar form) lying alone, dead on the ground. Not only is this scene highly emotive, it also alludes to the aesthetics of film noir. In these computer-generated simulations, FA uses cinematic techniques such as shot-reverse-shots, superimposition, dissolves, and continuity editing to achieve the desired effect. I find the ways in which they merge the video documentation of a real crime and computer-generated simulation problematic at times, especially when the effect blurs the line in between the real violent event and a fictionalized one.

But, this is part of FA’s project as a whole and is theorized as “forensic aesthetics” by Weizman (2011, 2017). When challenged by an unnamed British Barrister on this matter of incorporating “aesthetics” and “the legal conception of truth,” Weizman’s answer is not satisfactory when he writes: “All forensic practitioners are keenly aware of that paradox: we know how essential aesthetics and the imagination are to the investigative and interpretative labor necessary to ascertain the most simple of facts, as well as to the production and presentation of a truth claim, but likewise, how important it is to refer to the truth as something much more obvious, something that is simply there” (2017:75). Not only am I doubtful of “the truth” being “simply there” in the visible world, I am also critical of the ways in which this “truth” is “produced and staged” (Weizman, 2017:74) in these videos. Peter Wollen, in his influential essay “Godard and Counter- Cinema: *Vent d’Est*” (1972), asserts the opposite: “the truth is not out there in the real world, waiting to be photographed” (1982:91). With regard to Elçi’s assassination, I have to agree with Wollen. In this case, the truth is much more complex than immediately available architectural or videographic data isolated to the time and place of the incident. On their website, FA admits that “such cases

can be complex, and understanding what has taken place can be challenging,” but also claims that “Architectural analysis and digital modelling techniques enable us to unravel that complexity, and to present information in a convincing, precise, and accessible manner—qualities which are crucial for the pursuit of accountability.” So I ask myself: Do they “unravel the complexity” in Elçi’s murder? I don’t think so. Going into complexities and intricacies of Kurdish struggle in Turkey is beyond the remit of this article, but what perhaps suffices to say is that pointing at the hand that triggered the lethal shot is far from unraveling the complexity of the real event. I thus find Weizman’s theorisation of “producing and staging the truth,” which apparently is “simply there” as “forensic aesthetics,” very concerning as it projects a false sense of knowing.

Hal Foster claims that Weizman (along with Hito Steyerl and Trevor Paglen) “point to the urgent necessity of a science of agnotology, or the analysis of how it is we do not know or, better, how we are prevented from knowing” (2020:123). I am not convinced that this applies to FA’s video investigations. To me, many of these videos focus more on the analysis of how it is that *they know* (the investigators) and that I (the viewer) should believe in their account. The videos presuppose that the viewer does not know but should know, whereas the videos’ makers do know and have the authority to convey this knowledge in detail. This construction constitutes a hierarchical relationship with the viewer and consequently affirms existing power relations, which ironically resemble those of the Establishment structures frequently critiqued in the videos. Additionally, the construction simply does not apply to people who do know more than FA assumes, or whose knowledge falls outside of epistemological frameworks that FA can anticipate. So, what position are we offered here as viewers in the art gallery? Who are we? If we are Turkish or Kurdish, or both (like I am), at least we know who could be possible suspects of Elçi’s murder. If we are Palestinian, then we don’t really need FA to point out to us that members of Israeli Army kill Palestinian civilians “unlawfully.” And this is perhaps the same for many Western viewers who pay attention to what’s happening in the world of human rights violations. So if you are a viewer who knows one or two things about state violence, human rights, and so on, then you will likely be left with a fascination for the technology employed, and an assured sense of ‘knowing’ conferred on you by the video. If you are a viewer who has no idea about any of the conflicts underlying any of these events, murders, or crimes, then you may be more than inclined to believe FA’s proposition, since their framing does not leave room for contradictions and there is no questioning of the perspective offered. These videos are rhetorical, designed, and constructed

to convince the viewer of their truth, rather than equipping them to question the ways in which this truth is constructed and presented. For example, in *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* and in other video investigations, instead of acknowledging the possible deficiencies of video recordings, these deficiencies or insufficiencies are counter-balanced by the computer-generated simulations described earlier.

Another problem I have with these simulations is that they erase the identity of a real person. One could argue that the aesthetic strategy creates a distancing effect, as the image becomes non-personal. Integrating virtually-designed avatars with videographic representations could be conceived of as a materialist practice in which the content is divorced from the personal to facilitate an objective look at what happened. As a method of investigation, this could well be true and justified for the sake of providing evidence of the murders in court, for the eyes of the judge or the experts whose job requires them to put their emotions aside. But when I watch Elçi's dead body lying on the ground in this video, what I see is his agency taken away from him in reality by a bullet, and then again in representation in the video footage, and even further by the computer-generated image. I particularly find this difficult as Elçi was not an ordinary civilian; he was a fighter, an activist: part of a massive struggle that has been going on for half a century, cost many lives, and displaced millions. In this construction, not only are the deceased represented to us without agency, but we, as viewers, are also positioned as helpless onlookers. According to Henrik Gustafsson, a representation of a crime scene "solicits a specific form of attention. It is a look after the deed, in the wake of the event. It interpellates the spectator not as a disinterested or complacent viewer, but as a witness or bystander" (2019: 3). But how can we "look after the deed," considering that our witnessing as such is symbolic? In an art gallery, we are put in the strange position of witnessing a crime but not really, because we were not really there. We did not really witness the crime, so we would have absolutely no say in the ensuing court case and hence we are absolutely powerless in intervening in the case we are presented with.

As I mentioned earlier, *The Killing of Tahir Elçi* ends with quite an emotive image: a 3-D simulated bird-eye view on Elçi's red body avatar in a predominantly grey model, isolated from others (as they are erased in the modelling) lying on the ground by the ancient minaret. The camera zooms out away from him until he disappears in between buildings, then the image dissolves into the satellite image of the city. Through this sequence, we are invited to move away from the crime scene, leave Elçi on the ground and look at the city, to watch a

time-lapse sequence demonstrating its destruction in the following months during the clashes between PKK and Turkish military forces. While we watch the minuscule changes on the city's landscape speeded up, one of the most tragic events in the history of the Kurdish struggle was happening in reality, in which hundreds of people were killed and thousands of people were displaced. This distant perspective makes us look down at this city or what remains of it, just like how we watch it in a gallery in London or Basel. Is this the perspective of Walter Benjamin's "angel of history?" Are we also put in the position of the helpless angel, looking down at the ruins, the catastrophe, "which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet" (2007:257)? Because like this angel of history, we are also unable to reconstruct the debris, awaken the dead. We can only watch the pile of debris growing in front of us while being propelled into the future. But since Benjamin's time, the speed of this propelling has increased so much that there is no time for contemplation.

I am normally and predominantly interested in experimental film and video practices that question the politics of representation and reveal the issues of their own domain in the arts, rather than using filmmaking tools as a medium to make a statement about politics. But Forensic Architecture's works have occupied my mind for many years now. While I share the humanitarian incentive and intention behind these videos, I find myself extremely critical of them, because I cannot ignore the problematic ways in which these videos are constructed and exhibited in the context of contemporary art. This is not to suggest that they should not be exhibiting their work in a gallery setting, but that they should reconsider their aesthetic strategies when they are constructing these videos for public art exhibition. One could argue that FA doesn't claim to make art, or that these video investigations are not meant to be art. But if one puts an object on a plinth in a gallery, the meaning of that object changes, the viewer's relation to that object changes, the way in which the object is perceived changes.

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