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Post-cinéma.

Pratiques de recherche
et de création

Des images cachées en plein jour

Entretien avec Stefan Kruse

(en anglais)

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En 2018, Stefan Kruse présentait *The Migrating Image*, un film d'une demi-heure dédié aux images produites sur la crise migratoire : surveillance aux frontières, traitement médiatique, publicités des passeurs... Dans cet essai filmique, Stefan Kruse isolait partiellement le sujet de fond - cette crise - pour se focaliser sur la forme : les images, ce qu'elles nous disent, et les affects qu'elles produisent. Focaliser, oui : faire le point sur l'image elle-même, pour mieux comprendre les opérations de surveillance et les dynamiques d'oppression auxquelles elle participe.

Ce projet sur la surveillance a ensuite mené le cinéaste à un autre : il poursuit aujourd'hui sa recherche d'une symptomatique des images techniques avec *A Lack of Clarity*, dans lequel il réfléchit cette fois aux usages des caméras thermiques. Dans ce nouvel essai filmique se mêlent librement poésie et analyse, parole intime et critique.



Stefan Kruse, *The Migrating Image*, 2018

At the end of your film *A Lack of Clarity*, is written: « The images used in this film are gathered from the website of an independent American manufacturer of thermal imaging camera systems ». How did you find out about this website and these images?

I stumbled upon these images while researching for another film project about border surveillance. They immediately spoke to me in some way. Having looked through a lot of material from companies producing these long range thermal cameras, there was something different about these clips.

First of all, the contrast between the military camera and the people engaging with Las Vegas culture

in the frame caught my eye immediately. I felt as if this contrast somehow was revealing something about the times we are living in. Something hidden in plain daylight but revealed through the texture of this all-seeing camera. The thermal camera obviously reveals the temperature of surfaces, which is not visible to the human eye, but I also felt these clips showed somehow a form of bewilderment, loneliness, addictions and so forth. A peephole into the human spirit *anno* 2020.

Thermal cameras could also symbolize the current sanitary crisis. It is an easy way to control the crowd, to see who's got the fever and who hasn't. You were concluding the film when all this began, and you changed some things, at least the end titles in which you refer to March 2020. The film does not mention the coronavirus, yet did the virus directly or indirectly influence it? Does the sanitary crisis influence your way of thinking about images from thermal cameras, or about circulating images nowadays?

Yes, I guess so. In making the film, there was also a desire to talk about the military industrial complex: recognizing the existence of this infrastructure and economy between private contractors, state and military, to at least recognize its existence which is seldomly talked about. At the same time, I also let myself be very intuitive in the process of making the film, including a narrative of my own current experience of the world. In that way, I wanted to include even the process of making this film and looking through material (and my own response to it) into the final narrative.

COVID closed down Europe around the time I was finishing editing the film. A few months later, George Floyd was brutally murdered in the US and sparked massive protests in which one of the demands and chants was 'Defund the police'. All of this definitely affected the final stretch of the film and somehow even the glow of the images. I was already looking into the military (police) industry complex, and so I made it a point in the final credits of the film to give an example of how the current situation also fuels this industry tremendously. I guess my starting point was the rise of surveillance technologies and its connection to the military industrial complex, and for that reason I also don't specifically mention COVID, since it is not why the film was made. Instead, I guess it shaped my view on all the events that happened (and are still happening) afterwards.

I think the sanitary crisis has influenced my way of thinking about images with a certain kind of nostalgia. It is now very easy to tell if an image was produced before or after the emergence of this virus. My nostalgia is somehow related to the massive change of human behavior that this has caused: distance, masks, etc. Somehow, everything prior to this seems far away. I have a similar relation to images shot before and after September 11th, 2001.



Stefan Kruse, *A Lack of Clarity*, 2021

Nostalgia can be one's feeling when one hears the voice over, the sound of the film. *Viva Las Vegas*, the voice sings, a song by Elvis Presley. In the film, is there a nostalgia for the time when Elvis was alive and singing?

Since the film takes place in Las Vegas, Nevada, it began as a sort of joke, that I would be humming the chorus of this song which most people know when they hear it. The song has this fast-paced banjo silliness to its verses and an overall feeling of carelessness. Later, in the making of the film, I had a closer look at the lyrics of the song and I found a peculiar resemblance to both the narrative that I was already working on, and also to the features of the thermal camera that I was pondering about. The song is basically Elvis describing how he is being swallowed by the city. The bright light sets his soul on fire; he sings how he stopped sleeping and how he will *never be the same again*. The song opens with « Bright Light city gonna set my soul, gonna set my soul on fire » and as the first chapter of the film talks about light stimuli as a tool for crowd control, I decided to open the film with the same lyrics. To me « light » in this case becomes a symbol of several things. The film mentions that light became a symbol of prosperity and security at the end of the 17th century and that, in this constant search for illumination, also arose a blindness. To me, the same blindness is also contained in the clips used in the film – the confused man walking aimlessly on the construction site, the surveilled characters of the film in a constant search for entertainment, the ongoing act of looking at phones (light, entertainment, endorphin kicks) and taking selfies, and the sheer act of the military company illegally surveilling these people to create promotion material. Also, the lyrics mention how Las Vegas is *turning day into nighttime, turning night into daytime*, the same dissolvment of night and day happens through the recordings of the thermal camera.

In that sense, I think Las Vegas is an interesting geographical starting point for a discussion about surveillance. The cliché saying goes « what happens in Las Vegas, stays in Las Vegas ». People are attracted to the city and its light because of its promise of untamed behavior. In Las Vegas you can forget about the triviality of life for a brief moment and live like there's no tomorrow, exactly like Elvis Presley in the song. Another reality will tell you that Las Vegas is one of the most surveilled places in the world and that literally your every move will be registered and thus *stay in Las Vegas*. I think this schism is what fascinates me about these images. As a western society, we want to be free as individuals – and, on the surface, everything tells you that we are; but underneath, or in this case above the characters, is a silent recording happening.

I think there is definitely nostalgia for a more untamed time in history. The examples of Elvis Presley or O.J. Simpson stand as a representation of a time long gone. The two of them are also representations of another kind of blindness connected to the entertainment industry. In the case of O.J. Simpson and the car chase scene that I mention in the film, people were out on the street cheering for him despite the overwhelming evidence against him. They loved him for his achievements in sports and through all of the products that he endorsed – they loved him through the television screen. In a sense, his character and his followers at that time somewhat resemble Donald Trump and his all-forgiving supporters. They also got to know and love him through his constant presence on the TV screen.

One can feel loneliness in the images. The voice sounds a bit lost, far away, as if it was all alone in the dark. It talks and sings. Nobody answers. How did you design the sound of the film?

The idea for the voice over is this « note-to-self » recording on a dictaphone. The dictaphone also adds to the feeling of nostalgia, to me it adds a kind dissolvment of time, almost as a bottle mail found on a beach. The idea came through the texture of the grey-scaled thermal images and the movement of the characters. The texture and color remind me of black and white film from the 1950's or 1960's. But then the way people move, the lack of shadows and the fact that these cameras can't penetrate glass give the sense that you are inside a contemporary video game. This contrast definitely inspired the narrative that allows itself to jump in time and space.

Another aspect that inspired this was the fact that these clips reminded me of a recurring dream of mine that I used to have for many years. A claustrophobic, blurry dream in which I am stuck inside my mind not able to communicate with the people around me. This dream is also infiltrated in the narrative, but more than that, the concept of the dream or nightmare inspired many of the narrative decisions. I haven't experienced lucid dreaming, but having talked to people who have, I was also fascinated by their reports. A friend of mine told me of his ability to connect in all these threads (politics, media, historic events, personal, cosmic etc.) and see more clearly how his life had shaped him up until now. Like this huge influx of ideas and inputs that enabled a great comprehension of the contemporary world. Almost impossible to retell with the limits of language and our general understanding of time. This definitely also inspired the narrative of my film, at least on a subconscious level.

For the sound, I used my own voice for the narration. This made most sense to me since many of the passages are personal experiences. The above-mentioned dream, my addiction to the screen before

falling asleep, the fact that my apartment was covered in scaffolding and fluorescent lamps for more than a year, etc. All of the singing in the film is from *Viva Las Vegas* and it became a way to divide the film into kind of chapters. The mumble singing reminds me a bit of lullabies and, as the film also talks a lot about sleep or the lack of it, I found this fitting.

The whole text of the film is a collage of many different sources but, in a sense, it is a testimony from myself. An attempt to describe my experience of life while making this film.

Also, aside from the music and noise, you will occasionally hear the sound of the camera focusing and zooming. This is an attempt to keep reminding the viewer of the presence of this camera in the images. I wanted the sound to surround the viewer and give them a feeling that they could not escape this camera. At the same time, I wanted it to also breathe and dive into these dreamy sequences that hopefully add to the nocturnal/dreamy vibe that I described earlier. The original inspiration for the sound was this CD that a friend of mine had obtained from a rental car in Poland. On this CD, there was this distorted guitar drone song in which you can also occasionally hear the room in which it was recorded. This extra room added an interesting feeling of a person recording and scrambling around in a room, and we decided to do a similar thing with the sound design for the film.

Is it still cinema that you are doing? Would the term « post-cinema » be a relevant way to designate your work - I am thinking about your film *The Migrating Image*, too? What would be « post-cinema » according to you?

I believe that it is cinema I am doing, although I am not too concerned with categorizing it. I can understand why such a term as post-cinema is being discussed and proposed as a term to categorize this fairly new wave of experimental, found footage, post-Internet films. I find the term post-cinema to be a good overall generic term to talk about works like mine. I would be curious to read a description of the term.

But I think the danger of establishing a term like this is that it would have to be all encompassing. I have heard the term « post-Internet film » before, but not « post-cinema ». So I guess to me post-cinema would refer to a bigger description of mixed media. Maybe post-cinema films are less like desktop films and more built upon a mix of early cinema, experimental narrative and the technological possibilities offered in our present times. And perhaps these films are also intended for the cinema screen.