Shifting perceptions – Who shapes the image in the photojournalistic apparatus?

A case study of the winning 2006 World Press Photo of the Year "Affluent Lebanese drive down the street to look at a destroyed neighbourhood 15 August 2006 in southern Beirut, Lebanon."

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1. Introduction

Much has been written and discussed on a case of common irritations regarding a news picture depicting a scene from South Beirut in the context of the Israel-Hezbollah war striking over particular areas of Lebanon in 2006. Much has been said about it already and time has been passing since then. So why again look at it and think about it 14 years later?

Initially attracted by the subject through the fact that I've been intervalically working in Lebanon over a period of five years myself, during my research I became more an more interested by the circumstances and multiple layers of the case itself as well as by the possibility of subsequently tracking down the context of the photographed event to an extent that is unusual within press coverage from war or – let's say – conflict zones.

Specific subsequent research by three dedicated journalists[1] offer fact-based and verifiable knowledge about what was actually going on in the depicted scene. Fact-based in so far as the depicted persons themselves are given a voice in personal interview statements on the 'reality' of the situation and the background of their appearance on site in the given moment of the shutter's release; Verifiable in so far as the depicted persons – in this specific case of explicit journalistic re-coverage – would have had objected if statements were selected or edited with biases, or citations were proven false.

2. Deconstructing the interpretativ layers of the photograph (expectations and perceptions)

2.1 Essential facts on date and place of the depicted scene (background)

The 2006 Israel–Hezbollah War was a 34-day military conflict taking place in South Lebanon and South Beirut, both areas mostly inhabited by Shia populations and controlled by Hezbollah. The conflict is believed to have killed between 1,191 and 1,300 Lebanese people, and 159 Israelis.[2] It severely damaged Lebanese civil infrastructure, and displaced approximately one

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[1] see page 6 of this essay for details

[2] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5257128.stm

million Lebanese[3] and 300,000–500,000 Israelis. It practically ended when an United Nations-brokered ceasefire went into effect on 14 August 2006.

The following day thousands of Lebanese began to return to their homes while an American photographer – assigned by the American Getty Images photo agency – covered the situation in the southern suburbs of Beirut. The specific neighbourhood of Haret Hreik, part of the larger Dahiye area has a majority of Shia Muslime populations and is known as a stronghold of Hezbollah.

2.2 What the photographer believes to see (production)

New York based photojournalist Spencer Platt (born 1970) who had documented conflicts for Getty Images in Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and Latin America[4] was guided by a local female fixer into the destroyed neighbourhood when suddenly he became attracted by an approaching car:

> "And, you know, I was walking on this road and I saw a kind of - a corner on my eye, maybe a lurid color - a loud color, and I literally turned. I had very little time to focus, to frame the photo. I banged off five frames and someone walked in front of me and ruined four of them. So there's actually only one really usable frame of this situation."[5]

Within the researchable sources there is no precise information given by the photographer himself on what kind of impulse he intentionally might have reacted to when pressing the shutter in the given situation. We can now only reconstruct it by looking at the picture and notably at the caption that he evidentially delivered it with, to his agency's picturedesk in the first instance:

The background shows a completely demolished building and a few pedestrians in the street, in the foreground we see four women and one man in a stylish red convertible Mini Cooper. The young and attractive women appear with a considerable amount of naked skin, one of them, blonde, with her body in a specific twisting that makes us remind representations of the female body that aim to eroticise and please the male gaze. The whole setting with a male driver and

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[3] https://web.archive.org/web/20071227165718/http://www.lebanonundersiege.gov.lb/english/F/Main/index.asp

[4] https://www.reportagebygettyimages.com/spencer-platt/lebanon/#biography

[5] https://www.npr.org/transcripts/7684938?storyId=7684938?storyId=7684938

four female passengers in a convertible perfectly corresponds to visual and social life related tropes within western (and by the way: also middle eastern) projections and imaginations of masculinity. Intuitively Spencer Platt photographed the 'perfect' everything-in-it picture, depicting what in his view might have been the essence of a (preconceived) convention and perspective on what Lebanon was supposed to be: a battlefield between glamour and destruction.

The original caption reads:

"*Affluent* Lebanese drive down the street to look at a destroyed neighbourhood August 15, 2006 in southern Beirut, Lebanon"[6]

and obviously reflects the photographer's understanding of what he coincidentally depicted.

2.3 What the commissioning agency uses the image to 'communicate' (distribution)

As a stock photo in the Getty archive Platt's picture was then commercially circulated and published internationally in the context of the war that, despite of the cease-fire, formally ended no earlier than on 8 September 2006 when Israel lifted its naval blockade of Lebanon.

It was only six years before (2000) that Getty Images started supporting (and selling) photojournalism. The agency's (then and now) CEO Jonathan Klein, "eager to build rapport with the audience of industry professionals, some of whom were still skeptical of Getty" (Gürsel 2016, p.278) was saying at a later occasion:

"I am very fortunate to work with many photographers who will live through just about anything to capture the essence of a story in a perfect shot. […] You continue to show us all the world in ways most of us would never experience. We all know in this group that throughout history, imagery has proven to be a universal language that transcends political and social boundaries to communicate the shared human condition. […] Everytime people see powerful, polished images they react. Why? Perhaps it is because imagery reveals truth and today people don't run from what they see – they don't trust what they read, but they trust what they see" (Gürsel 2016, p.278 ff.)

In this (what Klein calls) 'universal language', according to Klein, 'truth' is thus reported through Spencer Platt's 'perfect shot' from Beirut that the people can trust in as they *see* it,

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[6] https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/photos/71643850sp013_beirut_resi

contrastively not trusting (according to his diagnosis) in what they *read*. We will see how the latter ironically became advisable in the context of our case study.

2.4 What the World Press Photo contest jury judges to see (awarding)

A couple of months later, on February 9, 2007, after having been submitted by the photographer, his image from Beirut was awarded "World Press Photo of the Year 2006" in the prestigious Amsterdam based contest where 78,000 photos taken by 4,400 photographers from 124 countries had been entered.[7] World Press Photo's then jury chairwoman Michele McNally described the image this way:

> "It's a picture you can keep looking at. It has the complexity and contradiction of real life, amidst chaos. This photograph makes you look beyond the obvious."[8]

Even though Ms McNally's assessment must have been certainly based on a broad experience as the New York Times' director of photography and assistant managing editor, the jury's selection caused far-reaching controversy.

After the winner announcement and driven by the attention that the picture gained through the World Press Photo organisation's reputation and marketing tools its circulation was boosted on a worldwide scale. And it continued to be both acclaimed and criticised for various reasons and from various sides. One thread of criticism did not refer to any evaluations of the 'quality' of the image itself but to the alleged behaviour of its protagonists.

2.5 What the (seemingly) accidentally mislead viewer is accusing the depicted persons to disrespect (ethical projections)

Already before its awarding, reportedly in September 2006 in the French magazine Paris Match, the image was published with captions that assumed it was showing rich Lebanese

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[7] https://www.aljadid.com/content/controversial-image-lebanon-war-wins-photo-prize

[8] https://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/03/09/war-tourists-or-refugees

Christians doing war tourism in the ravaged suburbs of Beirut.[9] Many foreign commentators

> "were incensed by the skimpy T-shirts worn by the girls, arguing such apparel was out of place in the conservative neighbourhood. They commented on the disgusted expressions on the faces of those in the car, saying those expressions only showed the rich have no sympathy for ordinary people."[10]

Interestingly, all these interpretations and judgements did rely on the caption originally given by the photographer and adopted by the commissioning agency.

Driven by their investigative senses three reputable journalists decided independently to more profoundly research the depicted persons' identities and went to see them in Beirut: Belgian freelancer *Gert Van Langendonck*[11], working for the Belgian newspaper *De Morgen*, *Ulrike Putz*, then Middle East correspondent of the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*[12] and notably *Kim Ghattas*, a Dutch-Lebanese journalist for the *BBC*.

What they found out did not match with the photographer's interpretation of what he had believed to see and then selected as an image to be delivered to his agency. Neither did it fuel the accusations the depicted persons had to face internationally but also locally by some Lebanese citizens themselves who unknowingly adopted the suggested interpretations.

The four young woman and the young man were not "affluent", not belonging to the Christian bourgeoisie, and they were not just voyeuristic outsiders disrespecting other people's losses.

At least the World Press Photo wording was changed subsequently into:

> "*Young* Lebanese drive down a street in Haret Shreik, a southern suburb of Beirut, to check on their homes after bombardments by Israel."[13]

Inexplicably (or should we say significantly), the caption in the publicly accessible Getty archive wasn't readjusted, perpetuating the fallacy up to the present day.

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9 https://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/03/09/war-tourists-or-refugees/

10 https://www.spiegel.de/international/catering-to-a-lebanese-cliche-world-press-photo-mix-up-a-469070.html

11 His original text is available in a translated version in German language in an archived article of Die Zeit: https://www.zeit.de/2007/10/Beirut/komplettansicht

12 cf. fn 11

13 https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/2007/31012/1/2007-spencer-platt-wy

2.6 What the audience expects to see (reception)

When it comes to viewing patterns, a large majority within the recipients of photojournalistic work have preconceived ideas of what, for example, a victim would look like or, to mention another example from a different semantic field, what photographic representations of Lebanon would look like, notably the ones connected to former imaginations of Lebanon as the 'Switzerland of the Middle East', its capital Beirut as the 'Paris of the Middle East', the latter invoking a sense of cosmopolitanism, modernity and glamour. And, of course, photojournalists might aim to correspond to these expectations, which they often might have internalised themselves, also to serve a global picture-market that seeks to attract customers and finally consumers.

Stephen Mayes, a former secretary of the World Press Photo competition was "more broadly critical in a talk he gave upon resigning his post in 2009 […] stating that 90 per cent of the pictures submitted were about 10 per cent of the world" (Ritchin 2013, p.21), and according to a report by Paul Lowe on Foto8[14], Meyers then went on to question:

> "why most photojournalism investigates a very limited series of tropes in a very limited series of visual approaches, becoming a self-replicating machine that churns off copies of itself in perpetual motion" […], [pointing out] "that the industry is in essence reactionary and unrealistic in its understanding of the changes in global media and society."[15]

Spencer Platt's image perfectly operates within an apparatus that follows basic demands such as 'sex sells' by conforming to expectable clichés of glamorous young Middle Eastern women in a dense visual combination with signs and traces of devastation and war. What appears problematic is not necessarily the sheer representation (which, as any clichés, might have some aspects of truth) but the lack of contextualisation!

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[14] http://www.foto8.com/live/world-press-photo-09-by-paul-lowe/

[15] ibid

2.7 What other involved war photographers wish to see in this type of imagery (competitors)

According to Der Spiegel,

> "Lebanese photographer and [former World Press; note from the author] jury member Samer Mohad vehemently opposed giving the award to Platt and spoke of an 'insult' to all press photographers who had 'risked their lives' reporting on the war in Lebanon."[16]

From this perspective we encounter expectations on what a war photo should look like, what the photographer should go through when making (or, in this case 'taking') a picture that would contain more depth and have more relevance to the audience and to other contributing members of the industry. The question remains if the inherently suggested war-picture-ideal was then free of other visual and ideological stereotypes.

2.8 What actually happened (contextualisation)

Eventually, it will be much more interesting to honestly look at the factual circumstances of what was depicted in our case and to take into consideration as much of a contextualisation as possible. Fortunately, BBC's Kim Ghattas gave us the opportunity to read unfiltered statements of four of the persons in the car as well as the owner of the car. Thus we can study the contrast of sometimes misleading photographic representations (as well as viewers' misperceptions) versus a dedicated documentary practice that would basically involve photographed subjects to talk back:

> "The fact that photographs can be evaluated not only by the photographers, editors or readers but also by their subjects changes the power balance enormously. Now it is not only the professional outsiders depicting the insiders, but the insiders responding with their own points of view, which may amplify or contest images and captions that previously had considerable immunity from such criticism." (Ritchin 2009, p.153 ff.)

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[16] https://www.spiegel.de/international/catering-to-a-lebanese-cliche-world-press-photo-mix-up-a-469070.html

Depicted in the image are: Jad Maroun (22, the driver of the car), his sisters Bissan Maroun (29, with cell phone) and Tamara Maroun (26, front seat), all Christians, and Nour Nasser (21) who is a Shia Muslim; These four persons (at that time) were residents of the neighbourhood, and had to flee during the shelling. After the cease-fire it was the first time they returned to the suburbs to check on their apartment and their belongings.

The fifth person is Liliane Nacouzi (22, Christian, tissue to her face), she had not been to this specific area before but lived near by. Though, all of them were displaced by the war and were put up by their employers in the same hotel in the centre of Beirut, where they became friends. All consider themselves part of the working middle class.[17]

The car itself belongs to the driver's girlfriend, Lana Khalil (not in the scene), a Shia Muslime. On the dashboard, there's a sticker for Samidoun[18], a grassroots relief organisation for Palestinian prisoners, to which Lana belongs. The car was used throughout the war to help deliver medication to refugees who had taken shelter in schools in central Beirut. In the BBC interview Bissan says:

> "During the war, we gave shelter to nine families, around 40 people, in our home. We are not rich kids, we are really middle class, so the impression the picture gives is wrong."[19]

Nour explains:

> "I understand why the picture won. It's about the contrast between destruction and glamour. But it's the wrong image of the war and it sanitises it."[20]

Summarising, a different 'picture' with insightful details can be seen through dedicated contextualisation and by somehow including the photographed subjects in the process instead of just 'using' them.

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[17] In its entirety the personal data of the depicted persons were collected, collated and verified by the author from different but conforming sources

[18] https://samidoun.net

[19] See all original statements as recorded by BBC journalist Kim Ghattas who is of Lebanese origin herself and speaks Arabic, here: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6385969.stm

[20] ibid

3. Conclusion

As we could see in the preceding deconstructing of the interpretativ layers that Spencer Platt's photograph is exposed to (and created within) in the photojournalistic apparatus, a set of structural and individual factors will eventually shape the image and its assumed meaning. Shifting perceptions, prevailing misconceptions and a socio-economically determined agenda[21] will influence both representations and interpretations of a construction that was formerly known as 'the truth'.[22]

On the level of actual photographic practice, the presented case study shows that complexity cannot be reduced to stereotypes wrapped in a photographic spectacle of loud (and sometimes misleading) obviousness. Certainly,

"the misuse of photographs by mass media to create spectacle without explaining the underlying systems at work […] [has] also severely degraded photographic credibility. […] One response is to produce seriously contextualised, transparently authored photographs that appeal to the readers intelligence, not simply to a sense of spectacle" (Fred Ritchin in: Fromm et al. 2018, p.501 ff.)

Accordingly, photography in general and documentary and photojournalism in particular are rather recognised as

"an environment in which the image is understood to represent a mode of address that requires attentiveness and connection to the subject" (Good and Lowe, 2017, p.156)

To get in touch touch with people, to at least try to hear them and straightforwardly report (verbally or visually) in whatsoever photographic or artistic approach is what literally gives

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[21] Referring to a speaker's "bombastic version of praise for photojournalism" and his "insistence on [its] universality and truthfulness" (Gürsel 2016, p.279) at the occasion of World Press Photo's fiftieth anniversary event, Zeynep Devrim Gürsel summarises her thoughts at the end of her chapter on the World Press Photo Awards: "Inadvertently perhaps, he was also drawing attention to precisely that wich the insistance on universality obscures: the significant power asymmetries inherent in international journalism, photography included. Photographs still accrue political value by circulating among certain specific, mostly western news centers. Moreover, as we have seen throughout this chapter, the ability of foreign photographers to circulate, to leave once they have taken certain images, and not face the repercussions of beeing local is precisely why the structures that create the inequalities and conflicts that photographers so heroically document also structure world press photography." (Gürsel 2016, p.280)

[22] see also Jonathan Klein's relating proposition cited under 2.3 of this essay

victims – and photographed subjects in general – a voice, so much more than what a specific kind of world press photography with a large heroic pathos formula so often hypocritically pretends to do: give 'them' a voice! Spencer Platt didn't even speak to one of them…

Appendix / Plate

Fig.1 Spencer Platt, *Affluent Lebanese drive down the street to look at a destroyed neighbourhood 15 August 2006 in southern Beirut, Lebanon.* Getty Images

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