

When a picture is worth a thousand debates, give or take

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There is a civil contract implied by photographs. An Israeli writer, Ariella Azoulay, published a book making that point. Henri Cartier-Bresson made it too. He described shooting pictures of people as a "sort of violation," adding, "if sensitivity is lacking, there can be something barbaric about it." There can be, of course, and not just when the subject doesn't like the image.



Marc Garanger

"Portrait de Cherid Barkaoun," one of Marc Garanger's pictures of Algerian women, taken during in the early 1960s.

We, viewing the pictures, are complicit. As consumers of images we bear witness through them. Or we're voyeurs. In either case we complete a transaction that we instigated, in that a photograph is made hoping someone will look at it. It's a message tossed into the ocean of time, and how we read that message, whether indifferently or with compassion, can have moral dimensions.

All this is the familiarly messy, philosophical heart of photography, and it's also the subject of a show that just closed here, itself a mess. "Controversies: A Legal and Ethical History of Photography" was organized by Christian Pirker and Daniel Girardin, a lawyer and a curator from Switzerland, where the exhibition originated. Louvre-length, two-hour lines daily snaked out the door of the Bibliothèque Nationale here until the end of last month. (The show moves on to South America.) Inside, scrums of visitors clustered before 80 or so pictures, more or less famous troublemakers, spanning the era of the daguerreotype through Abu Ghraib.

Like everywhere else, sex and violence sell in Paris. "Controversies" ended with a David LaChapelle photograph of a white stallion nibbling on Angelina Jolie's bare breast, the ostensible excuse for which was some legal squabble about depicting sex with animals.

There were also wall texts about copyright and fair use laws, about public decency debates, hoaxes and shifting social standards to accompany pictures like Annelies Strba's photograph of a 12-year-old girl named Sonja in her bubble bath, Secundo Pia's picture of the Shroud of Turin, Todd Maisel's dismembered hand from 9/11 and Paul Watson's image of the corpse of an American Marine dragged through the streets of Mogadishu by an angry mob.

Near Kevin Carter's unbearable view of a starving, huddled Sudanese child stalked by a vulture, an advertisement by Oliviero Toscani for Benetton posed two glamorous models as nun and priest, kissing.



Oliviero Toscani/Benetton Group

Oliviero Toscani's "Kissing Nun," taken for Benetton, shown in the "Controversies" exhibition.

A mess, as I said. But willy-nilly, some big questions arose. The biggest, as Mr. Girardin ventured by telephone the other day, was, "What is possible to show in a photograph?" He elaborated: "What does society accept or refuse? Why are some pictures shown over and over, and then they suddenly become unacceptable?"

In that case he was alluding to a portrait by Boris Lipnitzki from 1946, not a remarkable photograph but a curious case. Jean-Paul Sartre leans over the footlights at the Théâtre Antoine, pinching the remains of a smoldering cigarette between his fingers. This is the picture that in 2005 the Bibliothèque Nationale doctored for the cover of a catalog for a Sartre exhibition. The library expunged the cigarette. Nearly a decade earlier French postal authorities, as part of a national anti-smoking campaign, issued a stamp based on a famous snapshot by Gisèle Freund of André Malraux, tousled, perennial cigarette between lips. Authorities guillotined the cigarette.

That rightly burned French critics who decried — this was the French equivalent of freedom fries, you might say — what they called American-style political correctness, notwithstanding that the history of photography is rife with subterfuges concocted in the name of some greater social good, American and otherwise. It happens that "Controversies" included one of those tinkered Soviet photographs of Stalin from which Nikolai Yezhov, bloodthirsty head of the secret police, himself executed when he fell out of favor, has been purged like Malraux's Gauloise.

One regime's moral authority is another's tyranny.

Which gets back to the original question about civic contracts. By virtue of its economy and proliferation, photography has been one of the most convenient weapons of the powerless even while it serves the powers that be. During the early 1960s, when French authorities required Algerians to have identity cards, a conscript in the French Army, Marc Garanger, was ordered to shoot their portraits. He photographed some 2,000 Algerian women, many of whom had been, until they uncovered themselves for his camera, veiled throughout their adult lives.

This was a profound violation for these women. Making the pictures turned Mr. Garanger entirely against French rule. He registered his opposition in these official portraits, through the humanity of his subjects, whose anger, which the pictures make perfectly obvious, conveyed both their oppression and resistance.

"For 24 months I never stopped, sure that one day I would be able to testify with these images," Mr. Garanger recalled two decades later. "All of this I did with more force than the dominant military ideology of the era that surrounded me with hatred and violence."

With more enduring effect anyway. A particularly beautiful portrait of a woman named Cherid Barkaoun, mournful but proud, large eyes kohl-rimmed, hair braided, absently clutching a scarf to her chest as if to keep hold of some sliver of privacy, reaches across half a century.

Compelling our attendance in a very different respect are the blurry, clandestine photographs shot at Auschwitz-Birkenau in August 1944, by a Sonderkommando, one of the prisoners forced to assist in the exterminations, a Greek Jew known as Alex. He perished like the rest. The only photographic remains of the mass killing in process, these pictures include a view taken through a doorway from inside one of the gas chambers. (The black of the door frame serves as an obvious metaphor.)

Bodies are being cremated in a pit outside. Apparently too many victims overwhelmed the Nazi crematoriums. So under a bright sun, several figures, other Sonderkommandos, one of them walking as if on a tightrope among the corpses, stand before plumes of rising smoke and mounds of the dead in the open field, waiting to throw more remains on the pyre.

I stress this gruesome photograph because a few years ago a debate transpired in France over whether these pictures should be seen at all. Claude Lanzmann, the director of "Shoah," and two others, Gérard Wajcman and Elisabeth Pagnoux, insisted they shouldn't, that what happened at the camps can't be adequately represented in archival snapshots, which provide only some fraction of the truth. "Archival images are images without imagination," Mr. Lanzmann explained at the time, having avoided them in his film by relying on testimonials, which by implication presented the Holocaust as an enduring calamity.

Against Mr. Lanzmann's injunction, Georges Didi-Huberman, a French art historian, wrote a book defending the value of looking at the Birkenau pictures. It seems absurd now, a debate from Planet Academe. The pictures need to be seen, to bear witness to what happened, because knowing is better than not knowing, and also to complete the transaction with Alex and a dozen others who sneaked the camera into the camp and smuggled the negatives out in a tube of toothpaste.

But tortured though it was, at heart that French debate revolved around a deep truth. Years ago Susan Sontag recalled her first sight, at 12, of the pictures taken by British soldiers arriving at Bergen-Belsen. "When I looked at those photographs, something broke," she wrote in "On Photography." "Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror. I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying. To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them."

To see something, in other words, is to face the prospect of becoming inured to it, even if only slightly. Photographs reveal horrors to which they also accustom viewers. That was the ultimate problem with "Controversies." The show squandered our mercy for a rambling survey.

It violated the civil contract. Even that image of the starving Sudanese child becomes a little easier to bear. Not much easier, maybe, but just enough to recall Cartier-Bresson's word, barbaric. He was talking about portraits and street scenes, not pictures of incomprehensible suffering. But the same emotional transactions apply.

It's not just the perpetrators' barbarism but ours that photographs like these expose.

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