

Philosophy of Photography

Volume 1 Number 1

© 2010 Intellect Ltd Symposium. English language. doi: 10.1386/pop.1.1.9/7

ARIELLA AZOULAY

Bar Ilan University

What is a photograph? What is photography?

I. What is a photograph?

Most political philosophers, historians and sociologists, do not acknowledge photographs as documents. Their unequivocal answer is revealed in the pages of their books: they do not regard photographs as a source for political, philosophical or historical research. Until recently, the question was not even raised by people dealing with political thought. A photograph is considered partial, false, incidental, biased (only a few of the attributes ascribed to photographs, and taken as grounds not to view them). In the press, and in archives in general, photographs are shown or stored as reference to an event, and are thenceforth brought out and replicated time and again in the simple and problematic signifying relations attested to by the language of captions common in archives like ‘refugees’, ‘expulsion’ or ‘torture’.

In simple signifying relations, when the photograph is perceived as the signifier of the event attributed to it by the caption, it is easy to dismiss the photograph as partial, false, incidental and biased or to ‘look at’ the reference represented by this type of caption. But these signifying relations accompanying one’s gaze at the photograph are but one use of it, which cannot answer questions about what photography or a photograph are. At the most, they might instruct what the specific form

of use in question is. To illustrate this form of use, I shall liken it to a paperclip – the simple accessory with which one attaches the referent to the photograph, creating (out of this temporary attachment) a mask that facilitates its sorting and categorization, differentiating it from other objects. This tagging mask is perceived as a would-be factual description or a broad common denominator of what different people might see in the photograph. But anyone who has ever searched for a photograph in an archive – all the more so nowadays, as such searches are objectified by search engines – knows the difficulties that await her in the attempt to locate a photograph she anticipates might be found under X or Y, while the archivist – expert in her job and operating within its conventions – could not but place it under A or B.

This use of the photograph assumes that the photographer, and later the archivist and spectator, are outside of that which is seen in the photograph, observing an event which the photograph has sealed.¹ In this sense, I, as a spectator, and all of my predecessors, stand parallel to the photograph, facing it as a closed image, which is externalized and vertical. This view affords a limited understanding of the photograph. However, it cannot be entirely dismissed since it accompanies most of the encounters with photographs in which we do not relinquish this view and are helped by it. We are all in the habit of sorting, for our photo albums, pictures of Grandma Selena or Aunt Bertha, or trying to preserve in our memory photographs from this or that event of interest to us. I find, therefore, no point in going totally against such uses of photographs. Rather, one should relocate them within a spectrum of possible uses that are not necessarily subjugated to the existence of a photograph. Something about the limitation of this kind of use is exposed in every renewed viewing of photographs, revealing that which our use of the photograph did not let us see when we first viewed it: that by following the classifying ‘clip’ our gaze dismissed the three men actually standing beside the photographed woman. Or that, from the very beginning, in the pile of rubble there lay a dead body, which was only discovered when we looked again.

What appears in one viewing and vanishes in another is not the result of that attitude. I have heard expressed time and again, ‘it is all in the eyes of the beholder’, as if when it comes to photographs, ‘anything goes’. Such platitudes, turning the photograph into an unreliable source that is given to manipulation, are disappointed with it or find fault in its failure to fulfill the fantasy of a sovereign source. It is exactly this failure that turns photography into a civil medium and a priceless source. What is written in it is always excessive with regard to any sovereign representation that one side or another – be it the photographer, the photographed person or the person in charge of the ‘arena’ in which the photograph was taken – wishes to impose on it. The appearance and disappearance of objects of the gaze in photography do not attest to the essential unreliability of the photograph. They attest, rather, and first and foremost, to the fact that a photograph does not possess a single sovereign, stable point of view, and that what is visible in it – its actual referent – must be grounded no less than its interpretation. This insight requires us to ask anew:

1. The photographer, the archivist and the spectator face the photograph, as it were, in the kind of relation that Aim Deüelle Lüschi – in his writings on photography – has named ‘a vertical view’.

what is a photograph? What does it enable, and what does it not enable one to see? In the book *The Civil Contract of Photography* and in two archive-exhibitions, I formulated theoretically and provided practically the minimal basis for an answer to these questions: a photograph is the product of an encounter of several protagonists, mainly photographer and photographed, camera and spectator (Azoulay 2008). Understanding the photograph as a product of such an encounter extricated me from dead-end discussions of the photograph in terms of the ‘inside and outside’ organized and embodied by the camera – those standing in front of the camera and behind it at the moment the photograph is taken, and inside and outside the frame at the moment the photograph is viewed. These inside/outside relations have generated the conditions for a long tradition of viewing the disasters that befall others as if the disasters that struck ‘them’ were a (political) trait of theirs, as though they had not been governed alongside the viewers of their photographic images. In other words, these inside/outside relations enabled one not to see the photographed persons as ‘governed’, not to conceptualize our own ‘being-governed’ as spectators through the regime disaster that befell them, but rather enabled one to perceive them according to absurd categories such as ‘displaced persons’, ‘dispossessed’ or ‘refugees’ (categories which serve external appendages of the democratic regimes under which we live) (Azoulay 2010).

The ontological framework commonly held for discussing photography, that wishes to ask what it is, is limited by the photograph – the frame – and linked to whoever held the camera. Such ontological discussions assume, as their point of departure, that the photograph is a product of one stable point of view – that of the photographer. Critical discourse aims to expose the fact that the photographer’s field of vision – and hence also that which is visible within the photograph – is usually determined by the arms of army and state. But such critical claims do not transcend the usual ontological framework. They continue to see the photograph as a product of a single and stable point of view, which differs only in being attributed to a body other than that of the photographer. Criticism grows sharper, then it judges the stabilized point of view of the photograph and/or of whoever is responsible for producing it as something ‘independent’, ‘critical’ or ‘mobilized’, as if these were fixed traits that the spectator – perceived as external – could only judge.

Most, if not all, of those who wish to examine the ontology of photography – generally, from the point of view of art or photographic discourse – are not aware of the fact that what they draw as the object of discussion results from the specific field of discourse of which they are a part, and which perceives the photograph strictly in its own terms. From its onset, the practice of photography was regarded in productive terms. Available categories serving other traditions of the production of images, such as art or literature, were adopted as being effective tools for the discussion of the *product* of photography: an image created by a skilled agent on an easily transportable foundation. Such discussion reduces the practice of photography to that which it produces, emphasizing the producer of the image as a free agent who is responsible for his final product.

In order to inquire what the photographic entity is, one should suspend the priority attributed to the photograph and the agent, who aims for sovereignty over the field of vision from which the photograph is produced. This suspension enables one to look at whatever is inscribed in the frame as not being a consequence, application or implementation of the photographer's point of view but, rather, as resulting from an encounter between several protagonists that might take on various forms. Even if one of these protagonists – usually the photographer – enjoys a privileged position and is the one responsible for setting the boundaries of the photograph, s/he alone does not determine what will be inscribed in the frame and what might be reconstructed from it regarding the situation photographed.

The photographed image produced out of an encounter invariably contains both *more* and *less* than that which someone wished to inscribe in it. The photograph is always more and less than what one of the parties to the encounter managed to frame at the moment of photography. The photograph is always in excess of, and always bears a lack in relation to, each of its protagonists. This excess and this lack are, of course, not shared by all those who took part in the encounter: it is impossible to subject all of them to the point of view of any single one.

II. Photography

Discursively framing photography according to the (in)accessibility of the photograph obliterates the discussion of photography even before it begins. Against this tendency, I argue that photography is an event that is not conditioned by the eventual production of a photograph. Considered in relation to the camera or the photographed persons, this sounds obvious. Everyone knows that the arrival of a camera on the scene creates a hubbub – it might serve as a magnet for one event or distance and disrupt another.² The photographed persons will not necessarily view the photographs taken at the photographic event of which they were a part, but this does not obliterate the fact that it took place. When, in the interrogation room, an interrogator tells a detainee that he has a photograph of the detainee, but does not actually show it, the interrogator conducts himself as one who continues this earlier photographic event, when in fact he is producing it for the detainee in order to exert pressure upon him (Azoulay 2008). Not all of those who take part in the photographic event do so in the same way. Not all are even aware that this event is taking place, certainly not at the time of its occurrence; nor can all those involved view the product of this event and those who do view it are not necessarily permitted to use the product in the same way.

I would go further than this to claim that, presently – at a time in which nearly everyone possesses photographic tools – photography has become a potential event even when there is no camera visible. The absence of a camera in the field of vision does not refute its potential existence. I think of the photographic event as an effect of the potential penetration of a camera, accompanied by the

2. Usually it divides those present into different positions: those who congregate around it and react to its presence, and those who go on minding their own business; those who wish to present it with something; others who address the photographer directly; and those who disperse as a response to its invasion or attempt to block its field of vision.

possibility that a photograph will be produced within its field of vision. The event of photography – not the photographed event – might take place as the encounter with a camera, with a photograph or with the mere knowledge that a photograph has been (or might have been) produced. This possibility might be troubling, pleasing, threatening, damaging, soothing and even reassuring. Obviously, the feelings of all those partaking in the event are not aroused by this possibility. Photography is an event that always takes place among people. Out of this event a photograph might possibly be produced. The photograph produced, or not produced, at this event is a rich document that might prove helpful in attempts to reconstruct something of the encounter for all of those who took part in it. It is unique in that no one can claim a sovereign position from which to rule what, of this encounter, will be inscribed in the photograph. When such a photograph is inaccessible, other sources can be used that bear witness to the photography-event. One can use one's civil imagination to complete the multiple points of view that the photograph might have recorded, had it been produced.

A reformulation of the ontology of photography as a political ontology constitutes a basis for civil, post-sovereign thinking.

Translation: Tal Haran.

References

Azoulay, A. (2008), *The Civil Contract of Photography*, London: Zone Books.

Azoulay, A. (2009), *Act of State 1967–2007*, : .

Azoulay, A. (2009), Etgar: *Atto di Stato 1967–2007*, Bruno Mondadori.

Etgar: *Atto di Stato 1967–2007*, Bruno Mondadori *Constituent Violence 1947–1950*, Resling.

Azoulay, A. (2010), *Civil Imagination: Political Ontology of Photography*, Tel Aviv: Resling.

Suggested citation

Azoulay, A. (2010), 'What is a photograph? What is photography?', *Philosophy of Photography* 1: 1, pp. 9–13, doi: 10.1386/pop.1.1.9/7

Contributor details

Ariella Azoulay teaches Visual Culture and Contemporary Philosophy at the Programme for Culture and Hermeneutics, Bar Ilan University. She is a curator and a documentary film-maker. She is the author of *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Zone Books, 2008).

E-mail: rellyaz@netvision.net.il