Photographs and Their Many Lives

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"How does meaning get into the image? Where does it end?" asked Roland Barthes in his now-classic essay "Rhetoric of the image."[1] At first glance, Barthes's questions might appear nonsensical, but as this discussion around the various uses and misuses of Evgenii Khaldei's photographs of war-time Budapest demonstrates, the question of meaning and truth in photography is anything but simple. This is because the meaning of a photograph is shaped by a multitude of factors, both internal and external to the image itself, and because the photographic medium, more so than other visual practices, lends itself to expectations of verisimilitude that obscure the complex relationship that photographs have to reality that they purportedly record.

As far as the expectations of verisimilitude are concerned, they derive in large part from the mechanical nature of the photographic process: the light rays hit the film (or a light-sensitive plate), and an image of the objects or bodies in front of the lens is recorded by the camera.[2] This is indeed the most striking feature of photographic technology when viewed in the context of other 19th century visual media; it is what earned it "the pencil of nature" moniker from one of its early adopters and proselytizers, William Henry Fox Talbot.[3]

My reading of Peter Pastor's essay suggests that Pastor is close to Talbot's vision of photography as an inherently privileged technology as far as unmediated access to reality is concerned. While Pastor appreciates the possibility that photographs could be arranged or staged, and that shots could also be altered post-production (and wisely insists on the importance of source criticism in approaching images as data), he also preserves the possibility of an "authentic" photo, a "genuine camera shot, which in a Rankean sense, documents an event as it happened."

In my view, this word choice brings in assumptions about photography that obscure more than they clarify. This is not to say that engaging in source criticism or inquiring into the date, place and subject attribution are worthless pursuits. Indeed, Pastor's meticulous research into the history of Khaldei's photographs and their uses is a highly valuable addition to our body of knowledge on the history of Soviet photography and the politics of memory of WWII in eastern Europe today. Due to his essay, we doubtlessly know more than we did before. However, I take issue with the assumption that all subsequent uses of Khaldei's images by authors as diverse as Cornelius, Pető, Frąs, and Stańczyk are equally problematic insofar as they fail to explicitly connect the photographs to the specific circumstances in which they were taken. Such conclusion seems to glide over important disciplinary and interpretative

1. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image-Music-Text* (New York, 1977), 32.

2. Ibid., 44. Barthes calls this message *denotational*: it refers to the viewer's awareness of something "having-been-there" in front of the lens at some past moment. Barthes posits that denotational message co-exists with, and naturalizes the *connotational*, or symbolic, message that every photograph also contains.

3. William H.F. Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (London, 1844–46).

Slavic Review 76, no. 1 (Spring 2017)

doi: 10.1017/slr.2017.12

differences in how these authors deploy the relevant photographs, and in the kinds of work these images are mobilized to perform in each particular case. The relevant issue, I suggest, is not to separate the wheat from the chaff, the "distorted" images from the "undistorted" ones, but to learn how to recognize and assess the constructedness and connotations of any photographic image, and, further, to use this recognition as a source of insight into the distinctive fields in which photographs are so differently deployed.

It is worth mentioning from the outset that, as various adopters experimented with the range of uses of photographic technology, photography's claim to realism was not the only, and not even the main reason for its appeal, as evidenced by the prominence of pictorialist photography in the 19th and early 20th century. The legacy of pictorialism is relevant in art photography up until today, but this should not distract us from recognizing that photographs that circulate as news or documentary images are also shaped by a myriad of creative decisions that complicate the seemingly self-evident dichotomy between "altered" and "unaltered."[4] For example, news and documentary photographers routinely crop images, turn away from some subjects and towards others, pre-set white balance, color effects and many other parameters on digital cameras, and, if given the opportunity, provide their shots with captions, all of which doubtlessly frame their take on reality in specific patterned ways.

And the standards for what is considered acceptable practice for news photography change dramatically. While today's news photographers may be fired for combining negatives taken within split seconds of one another for compositional balance (Brian Walski from the *The Los Angeles Times*) or for adding plumes of smoke to a bombing scene (Adnan Hajj in a photograph sold to Reuters), Soviet war correspondents routinely did just that and more, as David Shneer documented in his pioneering study of Soviet Jewish war photographers.[5] This was not because they were somehow less professional than the photo correspondents of today, or had less exacting standards. Rather, they functioned under a different set of expectations, and indeed a different understanding of the role of the media as part and parcel of the Soviet war effort. In other words, rather than assuming that Khaldei's photographs are documentations of events in the Rankean sense, it seems more historically accurate to recognize that Khaldei's gaze, too, is pre-mediated, in this case, by a clear understanding of what comprises "news from the front" (certainly, photographs of the civilian victims of rape by Soviet troops would not), and by Khaldei's understanding of his own camera being "as much a tool of revenge as of documentation."[6]

4. No one is more dismissive of the "myth of photographic truth" than practicing photographers who know better than anyone that any event could be photographed in a myriad different ways. For a fairly impatient re-statement that all images are, in one way or another, fictions, see Barry M. Goldstein, "All Photos Lie: Images as Data," in Gregory C. Stanczak, ed., *Visual Research Methods: Image, Society and Representation* (London, 2007), 61–81.

5. David Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2010).

6. Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes*, 148.

What we need, then, is a general reorientation of perspective, from one that treats photographs as original "unaltered" windows into history that subsequently get corrupted by misattribution, and towards an alternative one, that sees all visual evidence as lodged in, and shaped by, its institutional and historical contexts. In this understanding, I am influenced by John Tagg's argument that "photography as such has no identity. Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work."[7] In Tagg's view, the very status of a photograph as evidence—something that seems largely uncontroversial in the 20th century—is a legacy of its deployment as part and parcel of the apparatus of state power and surveillance: the uses photographs received in the hands of police, in penal and mental institutions, as well as in institutions of social reform.

The subtitle of Tagg's book ("Essays on photographies and histories") uses the plural advisedly: if photography is "a flickering across a field of institutional spaces," then indeed, there are as many photographies as there are institutions, and the same image may function quite differently in different institutional arenas.[8] In other words, to answer Barthes's question about the meaning of an image, one needs to attend not only to the elements within the image itself (Barthes differentiates linguistic, denotative, and connotative elements), and not even to the image plus the historical circumstances of its production (though both are important), but also to how images come to mean different things within different institutional configurations.

What are the institutional arenas on which the Budapest ghetto photograph circulated?[9] While the discussion questions from *Slavic Review* identify two (art and the discipline of history), I can count at least five: in addition to art and academic history, there is also the institution of Soviet news/war propaganda, modern-day public history fora, such as popular history websites, museums and discussion blogs, and the field of cultural studies, which, although it shares many of its foundational texts with history, is more interested in politics of representation and memory than in reconstructing the circumstances of the past *sensu stricto*. Each of them puts Khaldei's photographs to use in order to achieve quite different aims and in the process, invites assessment on their own terms.

When viewed in the academic history context, to which both Peter Pastor's critique and Deborah Cornelius's book belong, Khaldei's photographs could be seen as sources that invite scrutiny for what they represent about the identity of their producer or the culture of Soviet visual journalism at the time (this task is brilliantly executed by Shneer's monograph cited above). They could also offer a glimpse into elements of urban material culture of the period, and suggest the extent to which ant-Semitic violence and sight of death

7. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis, 1993), 63.

8. Ibid., 63.

9. In the interests of space, here and onward I concentrate on the Budapest ghetto photograph, with the understanding that Khaldei's second photograph that Pastor discusses could be subjected to a similar analysis.

had become routinized in the Hungarian capital by early 1945.[10] Such uses, however, require that: (1) the photographs are treated as sources in and of themselves, rather than illustrations to arguments that have already been established, and (2) the provenance of the photographs is established correctly.

From what I can tell, neither Pastor nor Cornelius is particularly interested in the visual content of Khaldei's photograph for its own sake. In this, they validate Burke's observation that "[i]n cases in which the images are discussed in the [historical] text, this evidence is often used to illustrate conclusions that the author has already reached by other means, rather than to give new answers or to ask new questions."[11] As for the attribution of the photograph, is it hard not to agree with Pastor that this is a task at which the Hungarian translation of Cornelius's book fails. By accompanying the image with a caption that mangles the identities of both perpetrators and victims of the violence, the book's Hungarian edition frames the photograph in a way that not only rules out any further historical insights, but also implies that Hungarian women were victimized by Soviet soldiers with brutality and casualness that left their bodies scattered on the street (this may or may not be true, but we cannot know from the photograph). Indeed, Pastor suggests that Cornelius and Rácz either willfully directed attention of the reader away from the roving Arrow Cross gang members who are most likely responsible for the deaths of the two women in the frame, or, in the very least, had a cavalier enough attitude to evidence as to overlook such misattribution. Either possibility inspires serious doubts as to the credibility of the book's arguments, considering that they revolve around questions of Hungary's own historical responsibility for just the kinds of crimes that Khaldei's images depict in this case.

"All images are polysemous," observed Barthes, "they imply, underlying their signifiers, a 'floating chain' of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore others [. . .] Hence in every society various techniques are developed intended to *fix* the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs."[12] One such technique is the captioning of text that works to anchor the image's meaning and guide further interpretation. In a way, Peter Pastor's entire essay could be construed as a very extended anchoring caption to Khaldei's image. The Hungarian edition of Cornelius's book provides a concise (but incorrect) caption ("Rape victims of the Soviet military at the beginning of 1945").[13] In both cases, the captions reflect the expectation that, in an arena of academic history, a photograph analyzed by a professional historian would be mined for evidence as a visual trace of a specific historical moment, and that its connection to that moment would have been vetted and confirmed by the historian. The rhetorical power of a photograph in a historical account derives from the authority of the historical discipline itself; to support this authority, much effort and energy is spent within

10. These are the kinds of uses that Peter Burke mentions in *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, 2001).

11. Ibid., 10.

12. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image-Music-Text* (New York, 1977), 38–39 (italics in the original).

13. Deborah S. Cornelius, *Kutyaszorítóban. Magyarország és a II. világháború* [In a Quagmire: Hungary and World War II] (Budapest, 2015), 421.

the discipline on peer reviewing and evaluation. A caption like one published in the Hungarian translation of Cornelius's book not only misdirects Barthean signifiers in the photograph so that they begin to signify the wrong thing, but also hurts the authority of history as a discipline.[14]

The misattribution of the cause and nature of the women's deaths in Khaldei's photograph is also made, albeit less explicitly, in the article published on the Hungarian popular history journal *Mandiner* by Andrea Pető. Unlike Cornelius's translated monograph, the article offers no caption. The discussion itself serves to delimit the meaning of photographs it includes, however, and I agree with Pastor that the text also assumes, albeit perhaps less authoritatively, that the bodies of the two women are likely Hungarian rape victims of Soviet soldiers.

But where the damage of misattribution may be lessened by a more evasive nature of the commentary (and Pető's subsequent voicing of her doubts), it is magnified hundred-fold by the electronic medium in which this discussion appeared. Indeed, a cursory search in Google Images shows that, as of June 2016, this image has found an eventful digital afterlife, popping up on numerous discussion forums and websites. It is notable that the photograph is typically identified in this context as an image of *German* women raped by Allied soldiers in Berlin in 1945.[15] In other words, the symbolic, or connotative message of the photograph completely overtook in the digital ether the original denotative connection to the time and place of the incident that is identified by Pastor. Now the prostrated women's bodies still wearing their nightgowns are taken to signify, not just victims of rape but, in many of these websites, Germany's war-time innocence (it is no accident that many of the websites appear apologetic of the Nazi cause). We need not embrace this meaning as legitimate (knowing, as we do, the circumstances of the image's creation) to agree that this signifying potential of the photograph likely accounts for the image's appeal to anyone invested into the cause of claiming national victimhood in the context of WWII. While Árpád Rácz and Andrea Pető appear to be the first to be swayed by this symbolic potential of Khaldei's photograph, they are not the last, and neither do they have much control over the subsequent iterations of the image's attribution on-line. There, the photograph begins to circulate as a potent but misconstrued symbol, and the facility of sharing and reposting the image, often anonymously, contributes to its rapid dissemination.

In the "ecosystem of connective media" online, images validate pre-existing claims and circulate as symbols.[16] These symbols trigger emotions in

14. It is worth noting that the same error was not made in the English version of Cornelius's book, suggesting that the mechanism of verification and assessment of the manuscript may have functioned quite differently in the Hungarian context.

15. For some examples, see www.cloudmind.info/violence-against-women-the-high-cost-of-war-paid-by-women/ (last accessed November 15, 2016); www.exulanten.com/humanloot.html (last accessed November 15, 2016); https://rodoh.info/forum/viewtopic.php?t=1346 (last accessed November 15, 2016).

16. José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford, 2013), 154.

a context that does not lend itself to easy verification or falsification.[17] Yet it would be a mistake to assume that all previous actors in the story of this photograph's circulation through institutional arenas have been uninterested in the emotive or symbolic, connotative power of photographs. Arguably, it is this connotative power that, in combination with the photographs' presumed truth value, gives all news photographs their appeal. In the words of anthropologist Zeynep Gürsel: "The particular form of authenticity in news images is due to a specific characteristic of photography: each body in a photograph is highly singular and indexed to a particular individual, and yet many of the bodies in news images—almost all except images of celebrities—circulate as stand-ins for large numbers of bodies sharing the same condition, bodies that are metonyms for social bodies."[18] The specific parameters of the social bodies that the viewers are invited to see in a photograph are often clear from the images' captions. Khaldei's original caption ("Ghetto in Budapest") in this context set the stage for framing the depicted scene as representative of the fate of other inhabitants of the Budapest ghetto, and the Yiddish-language newspaper that published the image in 1945 did further interpretative work of connecting this fate to the "fascists," or "Hitlerites" who, reportedly, murdered them before retreating from the city.

As was typical for journalism at the time, the makers of news photographs and the writers of captions were usually not the same people. This gave rise to frequent factual errors, although admittedly less egregious than the ones that are committed by hasty re-posters of the photograph today. Pastor documents one: the attribution of crimes most likely committed by the members of Hungarian Arrow Cross to German occupiers. Barbie Zelizer, in her work on Holocaust photography in American and British news, uncovers other, at times, equally serious mix-ups, such as when an image taken in one concentration camp is attributed to another.[19] While it may be tempting to chuck these errors to imperfections in communication, or to insufficiently rigorous professional standards, it is worth noting that the gap between photographers, image agencies, editors and word journalists persists in news photography today, as Gürsel documents in her ethnographic study of the international photojournalism industry.

This is hardly an accident. The logic of captioning decisions made by newspapers demonstrates precisely the importance of the emotional appeal and of the connotative, symbolic message. Thus, in case of post-liberation Holocaust photography, captions indicate that "images were used more to mark general discourse—about atrocity and war—and less as providers of definitive

17. Note that arousal of emotions is one function in which images are supremely effective even as they may falter as channels of communication or expression. See Ernst Gombrich, "The visual image: Its place in communication," in Richard Woodfield, ed., *The Essential Gombrich* (New York, 1996), and for a more up-to-date discussion of the emotional appeal and symbolic potential of news images, see Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* (New York, 2010).

18. Zeynep Devrim Gürsel, *Image Brokers: Visualizing World News in the Age of Digital Circulation* (Berkeley, 2016), 18.

19. See Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago, 1998).

information about certain actions, camps, or victims" (or perpetrators, as seems to be the case with the Budapest ghetto photograph).[20] The viewers were being invited to see the bodies on the photographs as "stand-ins" for other Jewish victims across recently liberated Europe, and captions directed them to "choose *the correct level of perception*" rather than viewing the photographed scenes as idiosyncratic and unique.[21]

The appearance of Soviet Holocaust photographs in exhibitions in the 1960s and onward further broadened the range of the images' symbolic message, as the photographs taken to document specifically Jewish victimhood were transformed into universal symbols of grief, mourning, and human resilience.[22] Both the post-war Soviet political climate, in which Jewish suffering was consistently downplayed in favor of tales of "Soviet" suffering and heroism, and the institutional conventions of art photography as a genre that had the license to speak about existential conditions and universal truths, contributed to this transformation.

This brings us to the last two contexts in which Khaldei's ghetto photograph is discussed by Pastor—the graphic novel *Kaczka* by Jacek Frąś and Ewa Stańczyk's discussion of this novel in the recent *Slavic Review* article.

As we have seen, historical research places high priority on the denotative, or referential content of the photograph in order to use photographs as data. Photographs that function as art tend to deploy complex signification on the symbolic, or connotative level (although in neither case is the other aspect of meaning entirely irrelevant: as Barthes insists, the power of connotative message always rests on the viewer's faith in the denotative one, and denotative message itself has connotations of factuality, veracity, and validity). This has implication for how Khaldei's photographs function in the context of Jacek Frąś's work. The "correct level of perception" within this institutional domain is hinted here not by captions, but by the very nature of the artistic medium of the graphic novel, which promises not a reportage on reality but a creation of an imaginary world (any temptation to mine the novel for referential content would presumably stop dead in its tracks at the first encounter with a duplicitous golden duck). While Frąś uses various devices to reference the material reality of war-time existence (such as the stamp and the photographic backdrops), they are deployed in a citational way, in which no claims are made regarding their authenticity (they may stand in as *mediated signs* of material reality, but not the reality itself). That said, a citational manner does seem to require a citation; until, that is, we consider the centrality of citational recycling, typically unreferenced whatsoever, in the surrealist tradition with which Frąś's work seems to have affinity.

Cited or not, the cropped and photocopied images of Khaldei's photographs used as backdrops for several *Kaczka* frames gain their meaning from the context in which they are placed, the visible traces of multiple reproductions

20. Ibid., 118.

21. Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 39. Italics in the original.

22. For a detailed discussion of such transformations of Khaldei's and Dmitri Baltermants's photographs after the war, see David Shneer, "Picturing Grief: Soviet Holocaust Photography at the Intersection of History and Memory," *The American Historical Review* 115, no. 1 (Feb. 2010).

and tampering that they underwent, their relationship to one another and to the other frames of the novel, their interaction with the drawn characters that inhabit them and, finally, from the genre conventions themselves. As such, they reference the horrors of wartime destruction, and in this, share much in common with the use that Khaldei's and Dmitri Baltermants's photographs received in the context of 1960s war commemoration, as described by Shneer.

It is in this capacity that the photographs attracted the attention of Ewa Stańczyk, who investigated *Kaczka*, alongside several other cultural objects, in her study of the representation of child soldiers of the Warsaw uprising in Polish popular culture. With this, it would appear, our discussion has come full circle, from one academic discipline (history) to another (cultural studies). But there is an important distinction that informs my understanding of the work done by Khaldei's photograph in the two contexts. While Deborah Cornelius's Hungarian monograph deploys Khaldei's photographs in the process of making erroneous claims about the war (and, as Pastor shows, omits the available evidence about the photograph that would directly contradict those claims), Stańczyk's article, in line with the spirit of memory and cultural studies more broadly, aims to detail the contemporary politics of representing the war. While Stańczyk would have surely benefitted from knowing the provenance of Khaldei's photograph while writing her article, there is no evidence that her discussion would have arrived at substantively different conclusions, had that provenance been known. The meaning of Khaldei's photograph, for Stańczyk's purposes, has to be connected to the meaning it holds for Frąś and his readers, and that meaning, as I have suggested, has little to do with the specific location in which the image was taken.

"The first step in deciding whether pictures tell the truth . . . is to decide what truth they assert by seeing what answers we can extract from them to questions either we or they have suggested," sociologist Howard Becker proposed in his work on photography as a form of evidence.[23] The many lives of Khaldei's photograph offer a fascinating case study that shows how photographs can answer multiple questions, and thus hold multiple meanings depending on the arenas in which they circulate. Attending to how these meanings come about does not make all of these meanings equally legitimate, but neither does it mean that regardless of the context, only one interpretation of that photograph is correct. Attending to how photographs are made to signify requires that we remain attuned to the multiple circuits through which they move, and to the multiple ways in which they are able, for better or worse, to move us.

23. Howard Becker, "Do Photographs Tell the Truth?," in *Doing Things Together* (Evanston, 1986), 279.