

The Photographs and their Agents

Why You Should Care before You Share

On the 9th of March 2012, CNN led with the headline “*Joseph Kony: Brutal warlord who shocked world*”. Kony regularly made world news with his Lord’s Resistance Army, and reporting on the rebel movement was, indeed, not always nuanced: headlines using words such as “brutal warlord” tend to generate more clicks than layered stories that deal with a myriad of people and factors. Just like sensationalist headlines, ever since its inception photography has been fundamental to how the public perceives a conflict. Photographs have been instrumental in the mediatisation of certain war criminals and of poison gas and bomb attacks: images can romanticise, dramatize and disguise events, playing with our emotions. They dictate our perception – but how much can they really tell us?

No single image can encompass the complexity of a conflict. A photograph is never simply a carrier of meaning or information: it is a visual “thing” in and of itself. If there is any meaning behind a photograph, this meaning is in a continual state of flux. Photographs are fluid and this is due to the different players that make it what it is: the maker or photographer, the photographed subject and the viewer. Ariella Azoulay names these three actors in her *Civil Contract of Photography* and emphasises the fact that none of them can be responsible on their own for the unique significance of a photograph.¹

The photographs in *Rebel Lives* are anything but what we expect from conflict zone images, and far removed from traditional war photography. The characteristic aesthetic codes of the genre - the bold contrasts, dominance of black-and-white, focus on atrocities and their aftermath - invariably position the human subjects within a particular narrative frame. There is little room for nuance: a storyline must be as unambiguous as can be, and terms like good and evil are never far from people’s lips. The visual language of the photographs in *Rebel Lives* is at odds with this: they are in colour and in the familiar 10x15 cm pocket-sized format. Unintended printing errors, bad focusing, double exposures and poor framing only contribute to the intimate, recognisable nature of the material. This is all down to the identity of the makers: these images were not made by observers but by the people involved in the conflict themselves. It was the rebels, the criminals, who operated the camera. But these photographs challenge all our preconceptions. Are these perpetrators or in fact victims? Many of the people shown, and the ones wielding the cameras, were abducted by Kony’s rebel army when they were children. They found themselves in an extremely traumatic setting, and slowly but surely were indoctrinated as extremists, murderers and war criminals. But where you would expect to see a photograph of a brutal fighter or a violent scene, instead you are confronted with a playing child, or a young couple. What you see are photographs of human beings taken by the very same human beings. The filter of the observer is not present here.

The photographer and his/her subject occasionally overlap, although the camera is also an instrument of power: according to former rebels, it was usually higher-ranking members of the group that operated the camera and decided who would be in the picture. The subjects are often looking straight into the camera: this makes it seem as though they are directly addressing the person looking at the photograph. Azoulay attaches great importance to this dynamic: it is the moment when the viewer comes into play and gives the photograph new meaning. The subject forces the viewer to relate to what – and especially whom – they see. During the research for this

¹ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Zone Books 2012.

book, Kristof Titeca presented these images to the people portrayed in them in order to confront them with their own gaze from the past. This encounter between the subjects (albeit in a different time) and the viewers calls the latter into account. The responses they gave in the course of interviews were diverse, at times contradictory and at others confusing. But they certainly provide the photographs with a new potential for meaning.

As part of the interview process, photographer George Senga created new portraits of the subjects. For some, there was a gap of twenty years between the portraits. Senga asked them how they would prefer to be depicted. His signature photographic style is clearly discernable in these images: Senga usually places his subject centrally in the picture; he photographs in colour; and he is particularly attentive to the interiors and living conditions of his subjects. Once again, the photographer drives the narrative: we gain an insight into the daily lives of the ex-rebels – as we did when they were fighters – without focusing on the dramatic or grotesque aspects of their time with the LRA. Their gaze into the lens invites us to reflect on their current situation, on the lives they have built after the LRA.

But what does the future hold for the archive images in *Rebel Lives*? At the time the pictures were taken, social media did not exist and the absence of an efficient avenue of distribution meant that few people beyond those who developed them, and the rebels themselves, ever saw them. Their inherent power could not be channelled. Today, it is highly likely that the interest generated by the project has exceeded the makers' expectations.

The decision to release this collection of photographs was not taken lightly. The form in which the pictures are displayed determines how they will be interpreted. There are special considerations for each medium: should the images be placed side-by-side in a book or isolated? How do you make a selection from an archive of over 1,000 photographs? Should text and image be combined? What is the most appropriate format?

So the material's distributor has a major ethical responsibility. It is relatively easy to control the content of a book or an exhibition: in both cases, the decision was to provide as much context for the archive as possible through giving space to multiple voices and nuanced perspectives, and to try to avoid any "misunderstandings". But even though *Rebel Lives* closely involved the protagonists in the process and has gone to great lengths to avoid platitudes, ethical issues remain. For example, what about the press images that accompany a publication? The internet enables the unsupervised dissemination of information and the use of these photographs is, therefore, unpredictable. They may be taken completely out of context. A fourth player is thus added to Azoulay's photographic game: the distributor must also be called to account.

What can we conclude from all these reflections? The entire creative process that led to *Rebel Lives* was driven by ethical considerations: they dictated the final result. For example, press images have been released to the world but with a disclaimer whereby the user is made aware of the sensitivity of the material and provided with guidelines, such as that the images may not be shown without an accompanying text or caption that explains their context. The blurred boundary between perpetrator and victim in this case needs to be indicated. Finally, the current status of the ex-rebels must be taken into account as, following a period of rehabilitation, they have been reintegrated into society and may therefore be exposed to the images.

Rebel Lives aims to make a contribution to the current debate about visual representations of children and adults in armed conflicts. We weighed this contribution against any

misunderstandings that may be generated as a result and made the decision to take our chances. The reason is simple: to not show these pictures would also have entailed a heavy responsibility.