

Letters to the Editors: Responses to Jon Rich's "The Blood of the Victim"

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Shortly after *e-flux journal* published Jon Rich's essay "The Blood of the Victim" last June, Jessica Kornheisl and Natasha Llorens wrote in with responses to the piece. To offer your own response to texts published in *e-flux journal*, write to journal@e-flux.com.

Natasha Llorens

In "The Blood of the Victim," a text published in issue 26 of this journal, Jon Rich begins with a classic formulation of photojournalism's ethical quandary, that images of human starvation taken in order to feed the world's desire to *know*, and which the world *buys* in order to satisfy that desire, are monstrous. Because the photographer's identity is enmeshed with the systems of circulation for which he produces images – neocolonialist systems – he cannot avoid the ethical responsibility for producing death as an object, a thing observed. The image produced is intolerable to the spectator, even as we desire it, because it shows us our own unwillingness (attachment to morning coffee, for example) to make death stop.

Rich then offers us a counter-example: photographs of the Syrian revolution taken by its own victims/producers that collapse the structure of the traditional photojournalistic image, thereby enacting the image's decolonization. The photographers reveal their own mortality instead of being revealed as mortal by a spectral photographer, breaking apart the victim/hero binary. The world, however, does not want these images-as-events produced by Syrian protesters, what the world desires (and what CNN provides) are pictures about events constructed by a third party – a "branded" view of injustice and a structure the dominant paradigm depends on in order to control the histories of revolution and of victimhood respectively.

Rich argues that images taken by protesters turn the protest into an autonomous event and therefore "safeguard" the images' meaning; yet he also seems to argue that images taken in the heat of the moment by people who have a stake in the events they are portraying are more authentic, that we can trust them to hold consistent meaning better than images produced more explicitly for consumption, by the West for the West. I do not dispute that the structure of the documentary image is changing, but I wonder whether simply dissolving the boundary between the photographic subject and its object really addresses the complexity of the image's movement today. Ariella Azoullay – among others – has argued convincingly that the photograph's meaning is produced by its viewer as much if not more than it is produced by its "author," the

photojournalist.¹ The division between who is photographing whom and from what distance is of less importance, according to Azoullay, than who is looking at what image, and in which frame of signification that image circulates.

An example to clarify this point: Situ Studio collaborated with the Foresenic Architecture research group to produce an extensive report and a video triptych on the April 17, 2009 death of 25-year old Palestinian Bassem Ibrahim Abu Rahma.² Rahma and others were peacefully demonstrating the Israeli army's construction of the Separation Wall around the village of Bil'in, west of Ramallah, when he was hit in the chest by a high velocity gas canister.³ Situ Studio exhaustively analyzed the footage from three hand-held cameras taken from the protester's perspective, along with other circumstantial data, in order to disprove the army's claim that soldiers had been shooting into the air and not directly at the protesters.

This project both confirms and complicates Rich's claim that the object of Syrians' photojournalism is also, and simultaneously, its subject. In one sense, the footage of Rahma's murder enacts precisely the shift in power Rich describes by placing the production of images directly in the hands of the persecuted in the moment of their persecution. What is unclear, however, is where exactly the production of the image of Rahma's death – or really any image – ends.

The autonomous event capable of forcing the army to reconsider its original statement was, in this case, achieved only after considerable post-production. The footage of Mr. Rahma's death was taken up by two institutions in London and in New York and its visual information was intensely processed before being re-articulated as a highly designed argument. Diagrams charting the perspective and ballistic reports, still images, slowed images, and carefully synced moving images are all marshaled to make a single point: the soldiers had to be firing directly at protesters, therefore the army's explanation of the events is impossible. Any straightforward understanding of who produced the final visual argument, however, and from what position (geographically, ideologically, temporally) is equally impossible.

I do not suggest that, because images are produced anew by each system of circulation they enter, we should abandon any hope of finding meaning in them. or that they should not be used as evidence. I do argue that focusing exclusively on the conditions of an image's production does not provide enough analytical flexibility to account for the eventual – and inevitable – migration of an image from one context to another.

Jessica Kornheist

I really enjoyed Jon Rich's article, "The Blood of the Victim," published in the June issue of *e-flux journal*. We certainly are "far from equaling the Syrians in their stature or courage"; they are amazing people with the most incredible bravery and hope. But Rich contends that, because Syrians themselves are both the victims and the image-makers, the ability of the viewer to relate, as an outsider, becomes problematic, and that this is the cause for the delay in international attention to the fight. I argue, however, that it is not the role of the image-maker as victim that has caused the slow spread of information, but rather the untraditional form of publishing these images that has created this lag. These images, if anything, DO make us all Syrian.

In the last century or so, war has evolved from being fought on specific battlegrounds by career soldiers to become something that takes place anywhere, waged by any civilian conscripted into the military. In art, particularly after World War I, imagery in which the soldier, victim, or situational bystander as witness began to appear. I immediately thought of the photographs of Mendel Grossman, who secretly photographed his fellow concentration camp prisoners, and the writings of Siegfried Sassoon. Like the image-makers of the Syrian Revolution, these works of art were often late in reaching mass public attention, but their power and shocking relatability as experiences of human suffering cannot be discounted. I think we can all remember the chill that ran up our spines when we first read *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* and imagined ourselves in pursued hiding. We were all Jewish at that moment.

With the videos and photographs taken by Syrian protestors, we are transported to the Middle East. We, like the image-makers, face tanks, bullets, and frightful soldiers. And, like the artists themselves, we are entirely unarmed; all we have before us is a piece of nonviolent technology. This situation, as Rich points out very nicely, can be "too much to bear," I know I myself am party to that sentiment. However, I think this overwhelming sensation does not deter viewers from relating but encourages and emphasizes this point. This could be us at any moment, and, in a parallel situation, most of us, like our Syrian counterparts, would never dream of acting violently. We generally do not possess heavy weaponry, nor the savagery to kill another person. We are all Syrian, because we are all creatures of this earth who desire freedom and prefer to avoid forceful confrontation.

Typically, we turn to a newspaper (in hand or online), radio, or television for our daily news. But

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it is the nontraditional form of image-dissemination that has created the lag in seeing pictures from the Syrian Revolution. The imagery proliferated on Facebook from the start, with no screening or censoring. Anyone involved in or aware of the fight could find pictures and videos. Many of these images also made it to signs at international protests in support of the Syrian people for any passerby to easily see the brutality of Al-Assad. But, as mentioned above, this is not the usual way for the average person to find his or her news. Looking back on emails, it was actually three to four weeks after the first Syrian protests on March 15 before US supporters of the revolution began a push to contact the media. Therefore, traditional sources simply did not know about it at first. Once the word began to spread, it can generally be assumed that it is the business of most media to take their own pictures. This, however, was met with difficulties, as there was a ban on allowing foreign news agents into the country. Thus, the work of Syrian protestors became all the more valuable and necessary, and we can now view their images daily via our usual news sources. They are no less shocking than they were in the beginning; if anything, the regime has become even more violent. And we, as outside viewers, are in no more or less of a psychological predicament than if we had seen the images earlier, via Facebook or protest posters.

The revolution is undoubtedly being led by Syrians – visual documentation included. But this does not make us any less able to share the emotive power of what is seen. It is their ability to place us in the same role, to share the lens through which they are witnessing their lives, that we are all Syrians too. We cannot shy away from taking part, and it is up to international viewers to lead international action. Facebook continues to be the best source for news in this battle, with information on how we viewers can act. Write to your President or Prime Minister, boycott businesses supporting the regime; in short, use the simple technology you have in your hands, just as our Syrian brothers and sisters with their smartphones, to participate in the fight. Peaceful means are, as we can see from the regime's extreme reactions, far more frightening and powerful than any gun or bomb.

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1
Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, Zone Books, 2008).

2
Situ Studio is a design firm based in Brooklyn NY that combines textual research with material investigation. <http://www.situstudio.com/design/index.html>. Forensic Architecture is a research group at Goldsmith's University in London headed by Eyal Weizman that examines architecture's potential role as evidence in human rights violations. <http://cms.gold.ac.uk/forensic-architecture/> The full report from Situ Studio is available online here, <http://www.situstudio.com/blog/2010/07/21/bil-in-report/>, and their video tryptich here, <http://www.situstudio.com/bil-in/>.

3
See <http://www.palestinemonitor.org/spip/spip.php?article910>