Between Affect and Authenticity: Disobedient Photographs

Ewa Stańczyk

I would like to begin this essay by thanking Peter Pastor for his careful reading of my article "Heroes, Victims, Role Models: Representing the Child Soldiers of the Warsaw Uprising" which looked at the cultural portrayals of the anti-Nazi revolt and focused, particularly, on contemporary narratives surrounding the underage soldier. By spotting my misreading of the Budapest images, he opened up an important discussion on the afterlife of archival photographs, their (mis)uses, re- and misinterpretations, and crucially, their longevity and continued relevance. I believe it is a timely debate and, as the other essays in this forum show, a debate that is relevant to artists, writers, historians and cultural studies scholars, among others.[1]

My own position is that of a cultural studies scholar. In my discipline, as in history, the origin and the wider context in which a photograph was taken is profoundly important and this essay constitutes, in many ways, a postscript to my earlier article. It is an attempt to provide another angle from which to examine Jacek Frąś's excellent comic, "Kaczka" (The Duck), and to reflect on wider issues relating to war photographs, their distribution, recycling, consumption and reception. I also take on some of the points raised by Peter Pastor, including the differences in which artists and writers, on one hand, and historians, on the other, treat such images. I believe Peter Pastor's intervention is a necessary and valuable one. It is a reminder of the mischievousness and fickleness of photographs, their unceasing potential to surprise us, to humble us and to question what we think we know, irrespective of the perspective from which we look at them. Above all, it is a reminder that archival images are not fixed documents but are malleable and open-ended sources that are subject to the same processes of interpretation and rereading as literature is.

As I write this essay, I am looking at another World War II image. Most of us know the photograph of the boy from the Warsaw Ghetto—it is probably one of the most commonly reproduced images from that period. The boy is part of a larger group of Jews being forced out of their hideouts during the suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in May 1943. Prior to the moment when the picture was taken, the inhabitants had fought the liquidation of the ghetto for weeks, while the uprising itself came to be considered the most important act of Jewish resistance in World War II. And yet, despite the original context of armed struggle with which the photograph is inextricably tied, the image quickly became an iconic representation of Jewish victimization. In a similar vein, the Warsaw Ghetto boy turned into an archetype of an innocent

1. I wrote this essay during my time as the Leibniz Summer Fellow at the Center for Contemporary History Potsdam (ZZF). I would like to thank the ZZF for hosting me between May and June 2016, and providing me with an ideal working environment during that period. I owe my special gratitude to Annette Vowinckel who commented on an early draft of this paper and to John Paul Newman for talking through key ideas with me.

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Figure 1. Jews captured by SS and SD troops during the suppression of the Warsaw ghetto uprising are forced to leave their shelter and march to the Umschlagplatz for deportation. Photo from Public Domain. Photo credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

child caught up in armed conflict and his cropped out and decontextualized figure began to be widely reproduced in scholarly and popular publications, documentary films, art installations, paintings and at memorial days.[2] As a result, the original context of the image is slowly being forgotten and new meanings are imposed on it.

The same seems to have happened to the boy from the picture. In fact, over the years, there have been numerous attempts to identify him by both archivists and private persons. Several people claimed to have been him, including a man called Tsvi Nussbaum, or claimed to have recognized their own child in the image, such as Abraham Zejlinwarger, who was certain the image was of his son, Lewi, exterminated in Treblinka. Despite all these efforts to give him a name, the child remains elusive, his real identity hidden behind a series of names that have been assigned to him.

But it is not only the image itself that has captured the popular imagination in the post-Holocaust period. Also the child's raised arms, a gesture of helplessness and defeat, became a widely recognizable cultural reference point, emphasizing the immense ability of certain representations to resonate with broader audiences. In December 2011, during a public protest against

2. Interestingly, the cropped out picture of the boy has often been digitally manipulated to include the yellow star on his coat, as visible in Figure 2 from the poster advertising the Holocaust Remembrance Day in Ireland.

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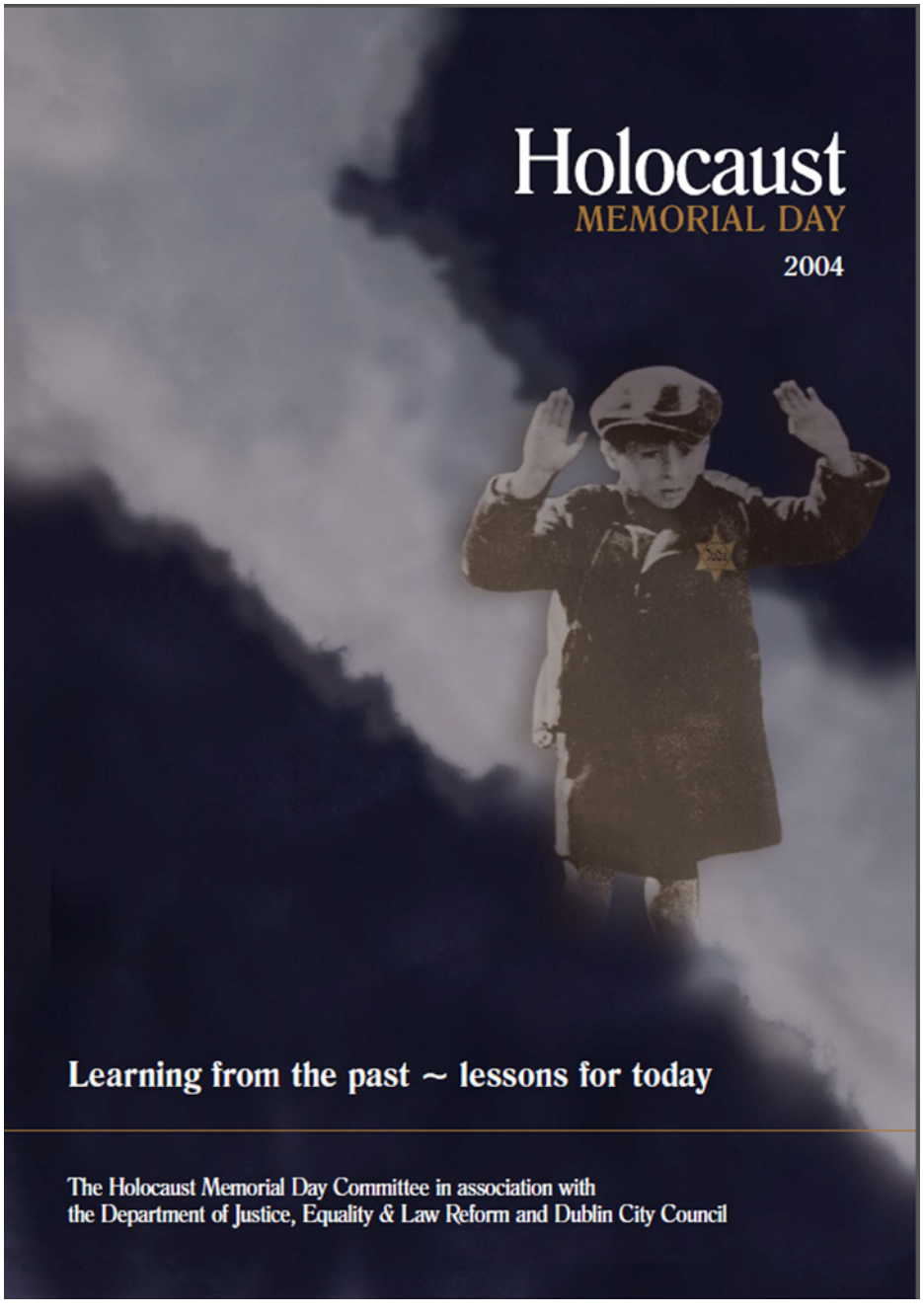


Figure 2. A poster advertising the Holocaust Memorial Day in Ireland in 2004 Courtesy of Holocaust Education Trust Ireland.

the purported persecution of ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel, a Haredi boy was photographed with the yellow star sewn onto his coat and arms raised in surrender, enacting the scene from the Warsaw Ghetto and, simultaneously,

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allowing for a recontextualization of the original picture by those who photographed him.[3] In yet another striking case, images of Palestinian children covered with pointed guns by Israeli soldiers have been circulating the web side by side with the World War II photograph, acting as a forceful expression of protest against the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Feeding off the immense referential power of the original image and exuding compelling associations with the Shoah, such repositioned and reinterpreted photographs constitute unique platforms for voicing new (and profoundly politicized) narratives of past and present. The practices surrounding the reusing of certain archival images thus speak to their intense persuasive quality. After all, photographs such as these are often seen as commanding high moral authority and they are "used more for their symbolic or affective than for their evidentiary or informational power."[4]

Not only has this been a common strategy employed by artists, writers, graphic novelists, and human rights activists, but also a practice perpetuated by the general public in less formal contexts, most notably on social media. Well-known and highly poignant photographs have been used as expressions of resistance, dissent, dissatisfaction, protest, and outrage. Most recently, montages, alterations, creative retouching and re-enactments of the image of the Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, whose body was washed out on the beach near Bodrum in Turkey in September 2015, showed an immense power of visual recontextualization in raising awareness about the refugee crisis.[5] The image and its numerous reinterpretations mobilized the public and led to a surge in donations to NGOs dealing with the migrants. At the same time, the photograph and its afterlife have often been seen as a symptom of calculating tokenism, while the rise in humanitarian sentiment it triggered, an expression of a seemingly interventionist, and in reality detached, western gaze.[6] Opinions such as this perpetuate the idea of photography as exploitative and present the "consumers" of such images as voyeurs who find morbid pleasure in looking at the suffering of others.[7]

There is no doubt that photographs of war and humanitarian crises are there to elicit an emotional response, to question our preconceptions about

3. The protests took place in Jerusalem where Haredi Jews claimed they were being persecuted by the Israeli state for demanding gender separation in ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods and other public spaces.

4. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York, 2012), 133.

5. A striking example of recreating the original image is a 2016 picture by the Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei, who photographed himself lying face down on a pebbled beach on the Greek island of Lesbos, assuming the same pose in which Aylan Kurdi's body was found. The image was part of a series of projects in which the artist participated on Lesbos, aiming to highlight the plight of refugees.

6. Brendan O'Neill, "Sharing a Photo of a Dead Syrian Child Isn't Compassionate, It's Narcissistic," *The Spectator* (September 3, 2015).

7. Despite this widespread criticism of war photography, there is an emerging trend in photography studies which emphasizes the moral obligation of contemporary viewers to continue to *look* at such images and to see people in them, irrespective of the emotions the act of looking inspires. See, for example, Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago, 2010).

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important social and political issues, and, at times, to prompt collective soul searching. The power of such photographs is self-evident, but the practices surrounding their recycling and narrativization are more complex. Literature, fiction in particular, is one of the myriad ways in which such photographs can be redeployed, getting a new lease on life. When used in literary works, they cease to be solely pictorial sources, they become tropes too. Subsequently, in such contexts the intersections of authenticity, historical accuracy and fiction become particularly pronounced.

These issues are implicit to Jacek Frąś's award-winning comic "Kaczka." Frąś's graphic novella draws on the events of the Warsaw Uprising, an anti-Nazi revolt which took place between August and October 1944. As I argued earlier, Frąś's work offers a nuanced exploration of child soldiery, a phenomenon inextricably linked with this particular revolt.[8] The comic shows us that what has been traditionally considered selfless sacrifice by patriotic young people could also be seen as a reckless and desperate act which brought hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties and almost total destruction of the city. "Kaczka" makes use of several archival images to illustrate these points. Two photos, in particular, offer a harrowing visual commentary to the events of 1944 and it is these two images that are at the center of our discussion here. As Peter Pastor has shown, these are not images of Warsaw but of war-ravaged Budapest taken by a Jewish-Soviet photographer, Evgenii Khaldei, during the liberation of the city by Red Army.

Despite constituting authentic sources that are often used (and equally often misused) in scholarly publications, here the recontextualized pictures are far from furnishing "model" historical evidence. In fact, as Frąś argues in his essay, historical accuracy was not his objective. "Kaczka" uses the images as pictorial metonymies or visual "citations," as Olga Shevchenko has put it. As a metonymic representation of a destroyed European city the images emphasize the devastation brought about by war, irrespective of the location or the political allegiances of the country. In addition, the reused photos highlight the historicity of the comic, and simultaneously, unsettle our faith in its factual accuracy by introducing the discord between the setting of the story and the actual location of the images.

It is this tension between fact and fiction, and between the literary and the historical narrative, that underpins "Kaczka's" treatment of archival photographs. This tension comes to light also in the image of children behind a barbed-wired fence with which the comic ends. The original, and by now iconic, photograph, was taken in July 1944, one month before the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising, and relates to a whole different event—the SS "Heuaktion" (Hay Action).

It presents a group of eastern European children in Auschwitz as they await transfer to the Reich where they are to work as forced laborers, but in the context of the graphic novella the image takes on a whole new meaning and evokes wider cultural and historical associations. It points to the involvement of children in World War II and alludes to their victimization. This includes

8. Ewa Stańczyk, "Heroes, Victims, Role Models: Representing the Child Soldiers of the Warsaw Uprising," *Slavic Review* 74, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 738–59.

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Figure 3. Children taken from eastern Europe during the SS "Heuaktion" (Hay Action), and temporarily imprisoned in Auschwitz awaiting their transfer to Germany, look out from behind the barbed wire fence. Photo from Public Domain. Photo credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Belarusian State Archive of Documentary Film and Photography.

Warsaw's child soldiers who, following the surrender, endured the same fate as the adult participants of the uprising, including internment in POW camps.

Despite being taken out of the original context, the images fit here seamlessly. This is a mark of Frąś's visual virtuosity and, at the same time, an important commentary on the susceptibility of archival images to a creative reinvention. "Kaczka" shows that "a photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading (or matching to other photographs)."[9] This is particularly true for literature but, as the various interpretations of the image of two dead women discussed by Peter Pastor in his essay show, increasingly also for historians, who become seduced (or corrupted) by the interpretative potential of such pictures.

Interestingly, Frąś does not reproduce the original images "literally." He crops the pictures and superimposes the drawings of his characters on the photographs, further deepening the rift between fact and fiction. The comic shows that such a recontextualization of archival documents is not meant simply to reproduce evidence but rather to offer an alternative approach to a traditional linear historical narrative. This strategy allows for an empirical take on the uprising, which is meant to enable the reader a greater emotional engagement with the events. Of course, while doing so, Frąś brings into focus a contradiction between the status of these images as war photographs and their role as contestants of the very same photographic genre. He intentionally undermines our trust in these documents, shows they are far from being transparent evidence, and, as such, encourages the reader/viewer to challenge the stereotypical ideas of historical accuracy. In the process, Frąś

9. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London, 1979), 71.

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Figure 4. Jacek Frąś, 'Kaczka.' Courtesy of Jacek Frąś.

shows us the impossibility of writing history "objectively" and suggests that the use of photographic sources might further complicate the way we understand the past.

As we have seen, war photographs and their literary reconfigurations are not there to provide a cogent explanation for historical events. Thus, literature's tendency to reinvent and narrativize the past might be difficult to reconcile with the need for historical accuracy. The deceptive similarity of representations of bombed-out Warsaw and Budapest, and the interchangeability of such images are, of course, poignant reminders of the repetitiveness of the horrors of war, but they tell us very little about the specific conditions under which these images were taken. Nonetheless, as we look at pictures employed by Frąś, we intuitively understand why writers and artists would turn to such photographs—it is for their ability to affect the viewer and to speak to their deepest emotions. Critical distance notwithstanding, this is how in the first instance we, the spectators and readers of literature, respond to such images. As Susie Linfield put it:

> People don't look at photographs to understand the inner contradictions of global capitalism, or the reasons for the genocide in Rwanda, or the solution to the conflicts in the Middle East. They—we—turn to photographs for other things: for a glimpse of what cruelty, or strangeness, or beauty, or agony, or love, or disease, or natural wonder, or artistic creation, or depraved violence, looks like. And we turn to photographs to discover what our intuitive reactions to such otherness—and to such others—might be. There is no doubt that we approach photographs, first and foremost, through emotions.[10]

This affective dimension of war photographs was recognized and skillfully used by politicians and the media in the aftermath of World War II. The most horrid images of Nazi atrocities were omnipresent in magazines, newspapers and cinemas. Exhibitions were organized to make the public aware of what had happened, and in the case of the German nation, to educate, punish and shake the conscience through *seeing*. As Olga Shevchenko shows in her essay, the print media also strove to affect their readers through the skillful caption-

10. Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance*, 22.

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ing of war photographs. Some of these images were used as evidence in war trials and, later on, incorporated in the forging of new communist national identities. Elsewhere, they were also used in the construction of the memory of the Holocaust. And yet, despite their intrinsic affective quality, these images were all the more influential because they were informed by the specific political context of post-war Europe in general, and the full knowledge of the Nazi war crimes in particular. By then, post-war spectators were acutely aware of what they were looking at.

Photography studies scholars, particularly those building on the work of Susan Sontag, have over the years reiterated the idea that in order to have a deeper ethical impact on the viewer, atrocity photographs should be accompanied by a distinct "political consciousness." Otherwise, as Sontag herself famously stated, they "will most likely be experienced as, simply, unreal or as a demoralizing emotional blow."[11] Following this line of reasoning, some scholars argued that the public can be affected by such images only "if they are informed by and express a morally relevant politics."[12] Others warned that if catastrophic events are "presented . . . without a context (a politics) to explain it, the effect is simply emotionally crippling."[13]

Some historians take this approach a step further. In his admirably crafted intervention, Peter Pastor emphasizes the importance of researching a full historical background to the documents at hand. What matters to historians he says is, first and foremost, the "authenticity" of the photograph and this is, essentially, where artists and historians part company. This means that in order to be useful to historians, the origin of images as material objects must be known and their content verified, including the date when it was taken, the location and the identity of the subjects and photographers. There is a number of ways to ensure the "authenticity" of images. For example, results from several archives might be compared; photographs may be verified against scholarly works, eye-witness and survivor testimonies, as well as publications from the period and other written sources. Additional evidence include captions, written information on the photographs (backs and fronts), and the examination of other images from the same collection that share similar characteristics. Needless to say, I embrace Peter Pastor's statement that "the historian's imagination should be kept in bounds by authentic evidence through which he/she describes and analyzes the past." This is also true for other scholarly disciplines, including literary and cultural studies, and there is no doubt that my own initial interpretation of Frąś's work would have been enriched by cross-checking and discussing the origin of the photographs.

Having said that, I approach the idea of "authenticity" of photographs with some hesitation. After all, the discussion surrounding the perpetrators behind the murder of the two women in Khaldei's picture shows that the "authenticity" itself is a construct, while the "truth" behind such images is often

11. Sontag, *On Photography*, 19.

12. John Taylor, *Body Horror: Photojournalism, Catastrophe and War* (New York, 1998), 18.

13. Jennifer Good, *Photography and September 11th: Spectacle, Memory, Trauma* (London, 2015), 65.

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an educated guess, an interpretation at best, based on written sources that are, in themselves, highly subjective. Thus, no matter how well researched, pictures do often elude attempts at verification, and prove to be disobedient in their interactions with the spectator. This includes Dmitri Baltermants's *Grief*, which is discussed by David Shneer, who spent more than a decade exploring the historical context in which the picture was taken. The same can be said about the photograph from the Warsaw Ghetto with which my discussion began. It is true that had we known the identity of the boy, our understanding of the scene would be much deeper. And yet, even without that knowledge, we are still able to respond to the image at a profound emotional level, without misgivings, with an open heart. Such images might understandably frustrate us, making us feel inadequate and voyeuristic, but they also inspire passion that goes beyond bathos or sentimentality. It is such images that make us think about the perseverance and dignity of those caught up in the horrors of war, whether they fight for survival, walk to their death or lay quietly amidst the ruined city.

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