

On Photography as Inflationary Art

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Susan Sontag was a brilliant gadfly, and even if she fell short in the area of sustained systematic thinking, we turn again and again to her work for marvelous flashes of significant human insight. Some of her best work was on photography. It has been said that photography was the first truly democratic art form, because virtually everyone could engage in the creation of photographs (others might distinguish between anyone who can take photographs and photographers as those who have specific ideological and creative agendas). But it is Sontag who speaks of the trivialization photography permits, of the endless duplication of similar themes, circumstances, poses, petty ironies, and painful demonstrations of appalling cuteness (these are some of my categories, not hers). Photography has no productive bounds, and anyone who has engaged in the professional work of photography—either as a photographer (Vivian Maier, for example) or as a scholar of photography—knows well that the shoemaker’s elves were never more necessary than in the management of the relevant archives.

To be sure, the materiality of the Internet exceeds that of photography in dizzyingly exponential ways. An NPR commentator recently said, with regard to the proliferation of material on the Internet, that he felt like he had already read about a million pages of the world’s worst book. Today the Internet may be our Book of the Universe, but, with the exception of the Internet as the vehicle for creative writing—as opposed to the Internet as creative writing (albeit it is a treasure trove of conflicting explanations that, were one to want to bother to do so, can only resolve themselves under the *sememe* [LIE])—one might be hard-pressed to find someone defending the Internet as creative writing. By contrast, photography—even photojournalism—is prized as an art form, and scholarly analyses have been devoted to the family album phenomenon in a way they have not to the collected oeuvre of someone’s

Facebook posts or tweets (perhaps Donald Trump's 2015–2016 election cycle tweets might be a contender for similar recognition here). That is, we cling to photography as somehow fulfilling a millenary (that is, obviously, far before the mid-nineteenth-century invention of photography) imperative to provide interpretations of lived human experience and, moreover, because of its visual imposition and urgency, to overwhelm us with its affective potential. Photography is supposed to bowl us over in a way that we used to think poetry might do so, or music in concert with the harmony of the heavens. The result is that anything goes in the attempt to fulfill this imperative, with the concomitant consequence (again Sontag may be heard in the background here) that photography is the consummate artistic hucksterism.

I have no reason to engage in any argument with Sontag here. Indeed, I would concede that the photographs of her dying body assembled by her lover Annie Leibowitz, often reputed to be one of the greatest portrait photographers of all time, might well constitute Exhibit A in defense of her propositions. What I do want to do, however, is to attempt to understand what all this means for a significant subgenre of Latin American photography: images relating to the hegemony of military tyranny and concomitant human rights abuse, particularly with reference to two societies, Argentina and Chile, in the context of neo-fascist regimes in both during the years, respectively, 1976–1983 and 1973–1990.

But first, it is important to emphasize how photographic codes changed sometime in the middle of the twentieth century, not much removed from the second inflationary surge in human media production. For approximately one hundred years after the invention of photography in the 1840s, there were three distinct modalities when viewed from the point of view of what photography was intended or thought to be able to do. All were very much dependent on technological advances in equipment and processing. The first and clearly most utilitarian conception of photography was its archival possibilities: photography produced a record that organized and stored information. Thus, photography became important for scientific and technological enterprises, including as a form of note taking, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss's father's use of photography as a preliminary sketch for his paintings or the nascent anthropologist's use of photography to supplement his field notebooks. In the latter's case, his photography for this purpose has been published as *Saudades do Brasil* and *Saudades de São Paulo* and duly studied as integral texts even when Lévi-Strauss himself did not much like photography and never "intended" them to function as integral texts, much less as dossiers for academic study. The emergence of photojournalism or journalistic photography is an extension of the view of photography as an impersonal record, although photojournalism ends up very much affected by the changes in photographic codes in the middle of the twentieth century. Domestic photography, of the family album variety, is a subgenre of the archival impulse.

The second modality is the Henri Cartier-Bresson matrix in which photography is still viewed as capturing an unmediated slice of human life, with the photographer strictly forbidden to “intervene” compositionally or rhetorically in image production. Yet clearly the photographer is a subjective presence in that the image is determined not by a framing archival motive, but by the decision of what to photograph. Nevertheless, the photographic document is to be as spontaneous and immediate as possible to guarantee its authenticity as a slice of life. The main artistic impulse of the photographer is in knowing what to look for and to be ready to snap the photograph as some vaguely precise instant of revelation. In this sense, photography is still continuous with one of its oldest modalities: the photograph as a piece of art, but yet the photographer is not the artist who might devote hours to one brushstroke or to one color hue. Indeed, the Cartier-Bresson matrix is fundamentally a project in black-and-white: this is the real world, but the photograph is not the real world, which is what color often implies.

The third modality, as old as photography itself, is the photograph as a work of art, meant to rival traditional painting, with the explicit pursuit of all of the subtleties of complex painterly representation. This is the photography of Alfred Stieglitz, in which each photograph is a study in artistic technique. Certainly, there continues to be a vigorous tradition of the production of a photograph as equivalent to the production of a painting. In my corner of the world, Ansel Adams and Georgia O’Keeffe, photographer and painter, are bound more by their view of the representation of the artistic beauty of the American Southwest than they are divided by the different artistic genres in which they worked (see, by the way, Stieglitz’s photograph of O’Keeffe as artist). One can see the continuation of the concept of the photographer as a canvas artist in the work of the contemporary Spanish photographer David Trullo, although he concomitantly partakes of the sea change in photographic codes that I have been alluding to.

This sea change is when photographers begin to adopt complex interlocking ironic poses as regards their medium of creativity. It is when the artist clearly doubts the possibility of archival representation (i.e., the release from the principal of objectivity or neutrality: the adscription to the so-called observer effect in some forms of physics), and as photography teachers are wont to say, yes, there are a million pictures of the Brooklyn bridge, but your picture is *your* interpretation of the Brooklyn Bridge. It is when the photographer introduces strategies of irony in the production of photographs, in occasion, content, point of view, and the manipulation of light. It is when the photographer in the first place sets up the image, as though staging a scene from a play, and then goes on to manipulate the resulting image in the laboratory, with all of the infinite possibilities of digital languages. It is, à la John Cage, a totally white image or a totally black image. Of particular note is what happens with

documentary photography, which previously was a “straight” archival record. Now it is a project, in which an overarching writerly inflection (to borrow from Roland Barthes) impels the individual and collective images (that is, the body of images in a specific photographic project) toward a particular interpretation. The classic example here is Robert Frank’s disturbing *The Americans*, produced by an alien eye at a time in which Americans were living a heightened version of the imaginary of American exceptionalism abetted by the American salvation of the known civilized world through the triumph against the forces of evil in World War II.

What does all this mean for Latin American documentary photography in the context of authoritarian and neo-fascist regimes? Certainly, it means, first of all, a continuing commitment, despite everything else, to the possibility of archiving specific sociohistorical realities, and the record of photographic production relating in some direct ways and in many indirect ways to military tyranny is extensive. We can refer to specific, highly exceptional projects, such as the dossier *Chile from Within* (1991), organized by Susan Meiselas, with work by fifteen different photographers (with accompanying verbal texts by the likes of Ariel Dorfman) executed at the time of the Pinochet coup d’état in 1993; it is only recently that the Spanish translation, *Chile desde adentro* (2015), has been published, and the almost quarter-century hiatus between the two editions (the translation, so to speak, and its belated original) bespeaks a collateral story about the censorship or repression of inconvenient artistic material. Another singular model is Marcelo Brodsky’s *Buena memoria* (1997), a complex, multilayered project devoted to the students at the Argentine Colegio Nacional who were persecuted by the dictatorship (among them, Brodsky’s brother Fernando, who was disappeared by the machine); it in turn has provoked complex multilayered cultural projects, all within the proposition that photography is one cultural platform of particular eloquence in stimulating and preserving memory of a past that cannot be allowed to repeat itself.

Yet, as much as these projects (and others to which one could refer) enjoy a critical privilege for their originality and eloquence, the simple fact is that, like print media and very much more than print media, they represent an ever-expanding inflationary inventory of cultural production. One might admire the many ingenious ways in which different photographers have established intriguing interpretive agendas with regard to the so-called *años de plomo* (years of lead), but one cannot escape the impression that the interest in so much production derives less from the way in which each project is a fragment of a whole as yet to be fully known as it is a question of a Derridian supplement to a supplement to a supplement to a supplement. Or one might evoke Eco-ian infinite displacement here by virtue of the critical irony perceivable in the scholar’s very name.

What is particularly striking about the recourse to documentary photography for the analysis of military dictatorships in general and neo-fascist tyrannies in particular is what, in the end, cannot and can never be represented, no matter how much we proliferate the photographic undertaking. Now, this does not mean we do not have access to proliferating images of torture and execution, judicial or otherwise. If we leave aside the possibility of staged photography, either through *mise-en-scène* or collage (e.g., a variety of pornography or snuff-film stills), there is certainly an ample archive of photographs that document executions. The U.S. archive relating to the practice of public lynching is particularly gruesome in this regard, as numerous studies have shown—of particular interest to Hispanic studies is the work of Ken Gonzales-Day on the record of the lynching of Mexicans and associated groups in California. Consequently, the photographic representation of torture abounds, which is part of what Susan Sontag has referred to as the complicity of photography in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. A significant subset of this genre is photography that focuses on torture at the hands of “barbarians”—that is, the Orientalized other who provides the self-congratulating yet nevertheless self-satisfied civilized viewer with the *frisson* (shudder) of repugnance in the face of the uncivilized essence of others. A primary point of reference here is the inclusion by Salvador Elizondo, in his 1965 novel *Farabeuf, o la crónica de un instante* (*Farabeuf: the Chronicle of an Instant*), of the Chinese judicial practice of the “death by a thousand cuts,” a presumably anthropological piece of evidence from the 1920s that Julio Cortázar also used (chapter 14, *Rayuela*) (see fig. 1.). Narrative film, to be sure, may endlessly recreate scenes of physical abuse, mayhem, torture, killing, and execution, whether under an aesthetic or semi- or quasi-aesthetic impulse or as docunarrative (the many films on the history of the official use of torture in Argentina, for example), along with documentaries that may not, however, have actual access to any real-time filming of torture sessions. This, certainly, depends on the definition of torture, since we do have filmed sequences of electroshock therapy, and the U.S. fight against terrorism has produced clandestine footage of harsh interrogation methods that surface in places like YouTube. Perhaps it is the illusion of “real life in action” that makes film a more reasonable place to look for the proliferation of clips regarding abuse and death at the hands of someone who is, through multiple mechanisms, accorded the power over victims.

In the case of photography, however, and specifically in the case of the record of Latin American repression, whether we take the long view going back to the first uses of photography in Latin America or the more limited scope of authoritarian and neo-fascist regimes in the latter quarter of the twentieth century, a similar archive is lacking. We have now at our disposal close to one hundred photobooks relating to the military dictatorships of the period, including the subsequent effects (e.g., the broken ex-combatants of the Guerra



Fig. 1. Photograph of unknown origin, included as a tipped-in plate in Salvador Elizondo, *Farabeuf*, 140–141.

de las Malvinas [1982], the outrageous and disastrous attempt of the Argentine military to shore up its crumbling power as the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (Process of National Reorganization) came to its appallingly dreary conclusion). The photobooks may contain seemingly endless images of the bullying street presence of military elements (such as the iconic image of Juan Domingo Marinello, featured on the cover of Gonzalo Leiva Quejada's *Punto ciego*) (see fig. 2), the cycling scenarios of conflict between them and protesting citizens, the transformation of social space with the overlay of a police state, or the reorganization of national rituals of self-identity in conformance with dictatorial messages. Subsequently, the return to constitutional democracy, with its institutional restructurings of national life, will bring a photography that focuses on redemocratization. Such photography often comes with an emphasis on the direct or implied juxtaposition of the visual texture of collective and individual life within the context of tyranny and the context of liberties guaranteed by law. An example might be the *Siluetazos* (Big Silhouette) project for which, even before the official return to democracy, Eduardo Gil photographed life-sized silhouettes of victims of the repression posted in public places, under the apparent protection of several policemen (see fig. 3). One could turn to an elaborate survey of these various projects from one country to another, emphasizing certain locally determined details, but always with the same message: the *then* of the period of repression and the *now* of the return to democracy, with the latter allowing for the recovery of images of the consequences of abuse during the former (image "Dentro de la Vicaría" from *Chile from Within*) (see fig. 4). Yet this return is not unfettered by historical circumstance, and a necessary inflection for the various national projects would be the failures, setbacks, and discontinuities of the return to democracy and evidence of abiding authoritarian/neo-fascist tyranny that demonstrates either how deeply the structures of repression are



Fig. 2. Cover photo from *Punto Ciego*.

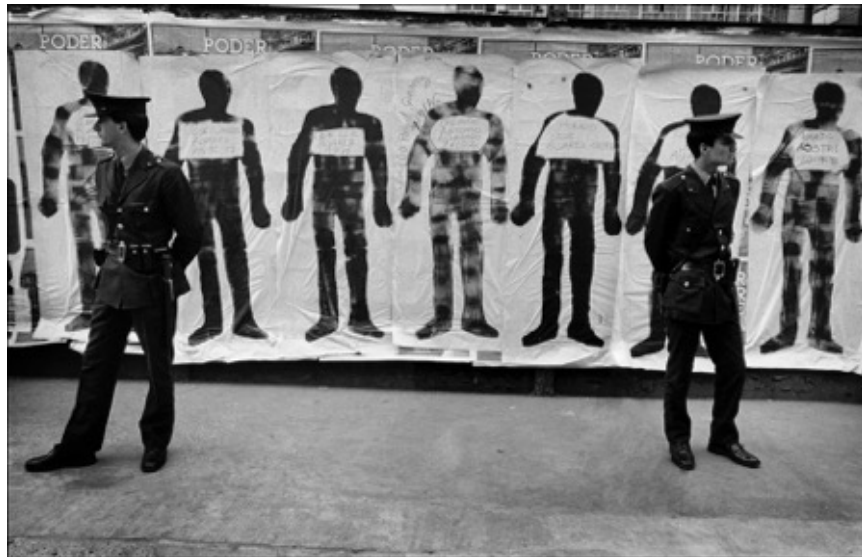


Fig. 3. Image by Eduard Gil, 40–41.

rooted in the structures of national life and/or how precarious the transition to full democracy really is.

Yet what is missing in all of this, what is the absent center, the absent signifier, is the crucial detail of the mechanism of torture, disappearance, and death. If there are actual authenticated photographs of the machine for the destruction of actual social subjects, we do not have any of them available, to the best of my knowledge. We have fictional, narrative refigurations in the form of personal memoirs, narrative films, and artistic representations, such as



Fig. 4. Marcelo Montecino, “Dentro de la Vicaría,” *Chile from Within*, 26.

Carlos Distéfano’s sculpture of a body broken by clandestine torture (included in Ramírez, *Cantos paralelos*). But not only do we not possess a photographic archive snapped in the torture chambers or from within the bellies of the military transport planes used in the “vuelos de la muerte” (death flights) (although we do have Helen Zout’s image of a decommissioned plane of this ilk) (see fig. 5), those photographers who engage in complex photocompositions, like Argentina’s Marcos López (another example would be Mexico’s Pedro Meyer), have not seen fit to attempt a pseudo-documentary recreation of the operational events that motivate all of the expanding inventory of subsequent photography.¹ One might cite also Marcelo Brodsky, whose complex photographic projects can never actually access the crucial events motivating those projects. The closest he can get are the mug shots taken as part of the intake process in the detention centers and subsequently smuggled out, such as the anchoring image of much of his work, the head and upper-torso shot of his brother Fernando, disappeared in 1977; the photograph shows obvious signs of gross physical abuse, but there is no trace of the image production of that abuse, only the reflex of it in the ensuing mug shot. There are documents in the 2005 volume of materials organized by Brodsky, *Memoria en construcción: el debate sobre la ESMA*, regarding the issue of the reconstruction of the centers and operations of the detention, torture, and elimination. The *ESMA* (originally the *La Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada* [The Argentine Advanced

School for Naval Engineering], now *El Espacio para la Memoria Argentina* [The Space for Argentine Memory]) is an ideologically drenched project that has now been used by different governments for different interpretations of the so-called *Guerra Sucia* (Dirty War). But the agreement forged by the *Colegio de Arquitectos* (Argentine Architectural Association) that its members would not engage in any project of the physical reconstruction of the material signs of repression has held constant, and the visitor to the various key spaces of the ESMA is immediately struck at how they are empty, devoid of any trace of what their function was between 1976–1983 (this bare-bones approach is also true of the São Paulo *Memorial da Resistência* [Memorial of the Resistance]).² This is in stark contrast to details of the Chilean *Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos* (Museum of Memory and Human Rights) in Santiago, Chile or the U.S. Museum of the Holocaust in Washington, D.C., both of which contain “realistic” architectural recreations of the spaces of repression. In the case of the Chilean *Museo*, there is a recreated torture chamber, complete with a genuine *picana eléctrica* (electric pick), the basic go-to instrument for the torture of political prisoners, so much so that we can safely say that all detainees, as a matter of course, became acquainted with the *picana* within a brief period of time after their arrest. The Argentine artists Ignacio Colombres and Hugo Pereyra recreate a version of the *picana* (reproduced in *Arte y política* [Art and Politics]), whose invention is falsely attributed to Polo Lugones, the father of the great Argentine poet Leopoldo Lugones and the chief of police of Buenos Aires who perfected its use; what is not false is that it was used on his own daughter, Piri, by the agents of repression after her arrest in 1977. The Internet, by the way, has a couple of artistic and photographic images of the use of cattle prods under the heading of *picana eléctrica* and a lot of images of variants of the Taser, which for some native speakers should be translated as *picana eléctrica*, although *táser* is more reasonable, since the design and function of the two are completely different. Otherwise, one looks in vain for a photographic image of the reglamentation *picana eléctrica* in question, such as featured in Mario Bechis’s 1999 narrative film *Garage Olimpo* or in the Chilean *Museo*. Bechis shows its use, but filtered through a mediating poor-quality TV monitor, while Eduardo Pavlovsky does so directly in his 1973 *El señor Galíndez*, a brilliant theatrical exercise in the education of the professional torturer.

In conclusion, photography dramatically exemplifies the inflation of visual images in the second phase of media explosion, and if it brings with it the tedium of an archive that is virtually impossible to manage, especially in the way in which photographs are reproduced *ad infinitum* on the Internet and monumentalized in the, at times, nearly impossible-to-heft photobook, photography, especially putatively documentary photography, also deals in the ethical issues of the vicarious experience of the most acute sufferings of oth-

ers. Yet we are given sobering pause by the way in which documentary photography, at least in the context of authoritarian and neo-fascist repression in Latin America, cannot deliver on the crucial money shot of that photography: the actual verifiable and unmediated representation of torture, disappearance, and death by state-sponsored terrorism.

Notes

1. A somewhat different take on the relationship between photography and authoritarian/neo-fascist dictatorship is provided by Gabriela Nouzeilles, working from Roland Barthes's maxim in *Camera Lucida* to the effect that "The photograph is violent" and Jean Franco's remarkably subtle study on the violence of modernity, which Nouzeilles claims demonstrates how "Franco's anxiety echoes recent debates about the limitations of photograph witnessing and the intolerable image" (713). It is, of course, the proposition of the intolerable image that leads me here to remark on the way in which (the act of) photography cannot go into the torture chamber, into the death ward, or into the mass grave.
2. It is here where we can make explicit reference to Castillo's and Egginton's account of U.S. public monuments, such as the 9/11 memorial, where the operating architectural principle—and, therefore, the dynamic of emotional engagement—is grounded in semiotic excess:

In mourning we fill with words, with meaning, a hole in the real. Yet the 9/11 Memorial inverts this formula. In the most literal sense it fills words, the names of the dead in this case, with voids—turning the litany of inscriptions so canonized by Maya Lin's Wall into hollow stencils, themselves echoing the roaring holes in the real that they silently border. Everything is inside out: instead of fixity paying tribute to a sacred list of names, fixed names frame and open out onto incessant loss, movement, churning. (198)

If the *Casino de Oficiales* (Officers Canteen), which served as the principal installation of abuse at the *ESMA*, is nothing but a bare shell, a hull of emptiness that the visitor may be able to populate, through acts of memory (if only received secondhand accounts from the general public historical discourse in Argentine society) with respect to the multiplicity of actions that took place there. The grounds are equally spare, characterized by the minimalist landscaping that was likely the natural setting of the property when it was first ceded to the Argentine Navy by a wealthy landowner at the beginning of the twentieth century. Aside from such institutional details as sidewalks and location boards, nothing has been done at this—the most important—memorial site in Argentina to enhance the property as the sort of over-determined and highly problematic statement that Castillo and Egginton identify for the 9/11 Memorial.

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