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Does the journalistic photograph need a context? Rethinking contextual interpretation

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Abstract

In times when photojournalists experiment with various forms of visual production and journalistic photographs are disseminated not only in the press, but at the photography festivals and in museums, the question about the role of context in photography interpretation should be revisited. Thus, this study provides critical review of the contextual interpretation of journalistic images, focusing on the production, medium and page context. The context of production is discussed here by referring to the quantitative content analysis and iconological context analysis. The context of medium determines the perception of photographs and provides a particular page context, usually limited to the caption. The critical evaluation of contextual studies of journalistic images leads to the conclusion that “picture plus text” is not the only option for the photography interpretation. The proposed solution is to use intertextuality as an approach, especially useful for visual education. Intertextuality is based on the claim that each text and photograph is a quotation from other texts. Hence, the viewer interprets journalistic photographs from the angle of their own cultural background, visual competence, and experience. This kind of interpretation may, however, lead to unpredictable and surprising results, and thus, not please traditional way of thinking about journalistic images.

Keywords: caption; context; interpretation; intertextuality; journalistic photograph; page context; visual education

Introduction

Photojournalists experiment with new forms of news images (see, for instance, Wolf's project with Google Street View: Wolf, 2010), or provide evidence not only in stills, but also with complementary videos (Zelizer, 2010, p. 4). They collect visual material, which will fit into a variety of information frames, or will have strong emotional influence on viewers (Brennen, 2010). Photographs travel easily between different media (Müller, Kappas & Olk, 2012), appearing simultaneously in various contexts, in a traditional newspaper, or its online edition, or at a photography festival or competition. And although it is not easy to define the context of journalistic photograph, researching images in journalism studies still relies too heavily on words that surround images (Zelizer, 2010, p. 3).

The results of studies on the reception of journalistic photographs suggest that providing a particular context to the viewer, either the page or the medium context, could manipulate (Müller, Kappas & Olk, 2012), or at least affect (Westman & Laine-Hernandez, 2008), the way

how an image is interpreted. However, the contextual analysis of journalistic images is continuously applied in visual methodologies (see, for example, Bock, Isermann & Knieper, 2011; Müller, 2011), while other possibilities are mostly overlooked.

Polysemic character of journalistic photographs can provide at least two types of interpretation: (i) focused, more narrowed one, in which context plays crucial role, and (ii) more open, free interpretation that mainly relies on viewer's experience of a picture, with minor attention to context. The aim of each of these two ways of interpretation is different and they also use a journalistic photograph differently. The former interpretation perceives journalistic photograph as a *news item* that has a particular meaning, intended by the news provider (photographer, photo editor or image broker), while the latter uses journalistic photograph as an image *per se*. The latter type of interpretation is also more suitable for pedagogical purposes of teaching visual literacy, because it is more open for the negotiation of meaning.

My aim in this study is to challenge traditional way of thinking about journalistic images by questioning the role, and need, of context in the interpretation process of journalistic photographs. It is important to revisit this issue now, when we are experiencing a constant flow of images and visual information.

Firstly, I critically review a few methods of visual analysis, which employ the concept of context from the following perspectives: the context of production, the context of medium and the page context. Furthermore, I propose intertextuality as an approach to photography interpretation that primarily focuses on viewer's experience of visual artefact. The concept of intertextuality derives from the French *intertextualité*, introduced and popularized by Julia Kristeva, who combined elements of linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure with Mikhail Bakhtin's theories (Allen, 2000; Roudiez, 1980). Since then, the concept has been traveling across disciplines, sometimes misunderstood, or redefined according to the needs of the discipline. In visual studies, intertextuality is applied by Burgin (1982) in the field of photography, Rose (2012) in the method of discourse analysis of visual material, and Barrett (2010) in the principles for interpreting photographs. Intertextuality is discussed further in the last section of this article. Considering the predominantly theoretical character of this study, I also refer briefly to an educational experiment that applied an intertextual way of thinking to the interpretation of journalistic photographs.

In this study I call to rethink the role of context in photography interpretation, with an attempt to answer the following questions: (i) What is meant by the context of journalistic photograph? (ii) Does the journalistic photograph (always) need a context for interpretation? (iii) How else can a journalistic photograph be interpreted? In the light of these questions, and taking the argument of Azoulay (2008) who claims that journalistic photographs should be *watched* rather than *looked at*, this study considers journalistic photographs as images for interpretation, instead of focusing on their purely informative/news character.

The term *journalistic photograph* is understood here as a photograph that was taken for journalistic purposes (to inform about events, or to illustrate events, or to provide portraits of certain people), and thus, it has

information/news values. Nowadays, the term journalistic photograph may also include amateur photographs (that is, photographs taken by non-journalists), or even stock images used by the press to illustrate journalistic texts (for more on stock photography, see Frosh, 2001).

Journalistic photographs are usually displayed in the traditional press, that is, newspapers and magazines, and the Internet, that is, online press, information portals and vortals. Due to their aesthetic values some journalistic photographs may be perceived as art and displayed in museums, books, screenings, or become the subject of specialized photography festivals and contests, for instance, the World Press Photo Contest and Awards Days, and the International Festival of Photojournalism *Visa pour l'Image*. Both these events display journalistic images with just a caption, with the addition of background music, or a short oral commentary.¹ Thus, they remove photographs from their textual/visual surrounding in the press by limiting the context either to the caption (or label), or by removing it entirely. Often, even the caption is not the initial version, having been changed (sometimes significantly), depending on who is doing the composing. In a similar way to photography festivals, online news portals and some of the illustrated magazines run a section dedicated to the pictures of the week, for instance the BBC.com, the Polish site *onet.pl*, or the pictures of the day in the *National Geographic*. The presentation, in these cases, is also limited to photographs and captions, which forces viewers to perceive and interpret images with little access to the full page context in which a photograph might have initially appeared. Does it mean that a caption provides sufficient information to understand what the image shows? In an attempt to answer this question, I suggest distinguishing two *types* of photographs: those that stand alone, or with a caption only, and those that require context for interpretation. The former might be referred to as an *iconic* picture, while the latter is just an ordinary journalistic photograph. The concept of iconic photograph (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007;

¹ World Press Photo presents photographs through exhibitions and meetings with photographers during the Awards Days and the Awards Ceremony. *Visa pour l'Image*, likewise displays photographs at the exhibitions, and meetings with photographers and evening screenings during the Professional Week. In both cases photographs are submitted only with captions, by professional photojournalists. However, the requirement for the World Press Photo is that pictures should appear beforehand in the press.

Lucaites & Hariman, 2001; Zelizer, 2005) is briefly reviewed below.

Iconic photographs

Zelizer (2005, p. 172) defines iconic photographs by their ability to provide symbolic meaning of particular events, as well as by their repeated use by media outlets. While Zelizer (2005) emphasizes the symbolism of iconic photographs, Lucaites and Hariman (2001) focus on the public recognition and cultural significance of these types of images. They explain that:

Iconic photographs are photographic images produced in print, electronic, or digital media that are (1) recognized by everyone within a public culture, (2) understood to be representations of historically significant events, (3) objects of strong emotional identification or response, and (4) regularly reproduced or copied across a range of media, genres, and topics (Lucaites & Hariman, 2001, p. 37).

Interestingly, neither Zelizer (2005) nor Lucaites and Hariman (2001) discuss the role of context. Instead, they indicate that iconic photographs can appear in many different types of media and are recognized through their visual content that shows particular events and emotionally engages viewers.

In the same vein, Zarzycka and Kleppe (2013, p. 979) write about a picture, which is independent from any specific time, space and context, as having its own identity. This kind of image contains photographic tropes. The authors explain that not all pictures, which rely on a visual trope, gain the status of iconicity, but many iconic photographs represent a certain trope. "By tropes, we [Zarzycka and Kleppe] mean conventions, such as a mourning woman, a young non-western girl, or a civilian facing soldiers, that remain solid and unaltered, despite their travels across geopolitical contexts." (Bal, 2002, cited in Zarzycka & Kleppe, 2013, p. 978). In addition, Hariman and Lucaites (2007), with a provocative title *No Caption Needed*, suggest that iconic photographs do not require any additional description to be readable within a particular culture and time. This kind of characteristic may indicate that iconic photographs are decontextualized, or even more, they become non-contextual – providing a universal code that can be easily

recognized across cultures. Initially, as journalistic photographs, they had appeared in a particular media context, and then, due to the cultural significance, they became iconic, and finally they appeared beside their press context. Thus, iconic photograph is an example of a journalistic photograph that is less likely to be misinterpreted even when removed from context.

Contextual analyses of journalistic photographs

Numerous studies have attempted to describe certain aspects of photographic context. The most commonly studied is page context, the relationship between a photograph and text (Marsh & White, 2003; Westman & Laine-Hernandez, 2008). Some researchers concentrate, in particular, on the practice and purpose of captioning (for a social scientist's perspective, see Chaplin, 2006) or the influence of a caption on the image reception process (Müller, Kappas & Olk, 2012). Closely related to page context is the context of the medium in which a particular photograph is displayed (Barrett, 1985). Other studies identify the context of the production of an image (Adelman, 1998), or relate it to the context of reception (Bock, Isermann & Knieper, 2011; Müller, 2011; Templin, 1982).

Context of production

Research on photography production is a separate wide research area, which includes the empirical evaluation of the image-taking process as well as the complex decision-making and editing procedures in a newsroom (see, for instance, Mäenpää & Seppänen, 2010; Gürsel, 2010, 2012). Each step in the production process has some influence on the image reception. However, my interest is not in the production process as such, but in how the production context subsequently influences the reception of journalistic images. Thus, I discuss the context of production as used in quantitative visual content analysis (Bock, Isermann & Knieper, 2011) and in iconological context analysis (Müller, 2011).

Iconological context analysis is used for mass-mediated images to discover their meanings and contexts (Müller, 2011, p. 294). Müller (2011) identifies three levels of visual context: (i) the form, motif, or "gestalt" of the visual, for instance, photography or film; (ii) the

production context; and (iii) the reception context. Iconological context analysis can be applied to a range of visual artefacts, not only to journalistic photographs. The journalistic context is mentioned as one (out of six) production contexts, which Müller points out, and is characterized by a high degree of labour division, as all of the people engaged in the press and media industry play a role in the selection and production process of visual material. Journalistic routines, expertise and ethics also influence the journalistic production context. However, the central goal is to sell the image (Müller, 2011, p. 293). In addition, in the production context, Gürsel (2012, p. 72) emphasizes the role of image brokers, who commission, evaluate, approve, edit, negotiate and, finally, sell the image. Image brokers are not necessarily producers of images, instead, they move pictures or restrict their movement.

While describing each level of visual context included in iconological context analysis, Müller finally fails to fully explain how to analyse the production context. In this case, her guidelines are limited to the following advice: “Read and write about the visual production context, its structure and function, as well as potential changes. How does the production context influence the form and the intended meanings of the studied visuals?” (Müller, 2011, p. 294). These kinds of guidelines might fail from the beginning if there is no access to the production process of the visuals studied. Consequently, it is impossible to describe the influence of the production context on the analysed material, unless the description is based on the viewer’s assumptions.

While Müller only focuses on three levels of context (visual form, production and reception), Bock, Isermann and Knieper (2011) suggest integrating a complex and multilevel process of image communication into a quantitative content analysis, with six types of higher-level contexts: context of design, incidence, production, media context, context of reception and cognition. However, there is no need to analyse images in each of these contexts, unless the research questions of a particular study requires it. Nevertheless, it is important to underline Bock, Isermann and Knieper’s (2011, p. 272) strong belief in contextual analysis. They argue that the media-generated visual material, appropriate for content analysis, always has to be contextualized. They also claim that both the context of production and the context of

reception should be considered when conducting visual content analysis.

In the process of image communication (Bock, Isermann & Knieper, 2011, pp. 265-282), the context of production is related to the actual production of an image, that is, to the process of taking a picture by a photographer (see also Barrett, 1985). At this stage, there is no editing in a newsroom. The photographer, named as “the originator of the picture” (Bock, Isermann & Knieper, 2011, pp. 265-282), decides on the context of production by their choice of frame type, light source, exposition, technical parameters, and so on. These decisions are influenced by the photographer’s individual preferences (Brennen, 2010) and technical skills, as well as by the media socialization, formed by certain established visual standards and forms of viewing, both related to the meaning and the possibility of selling the image (Bock, Isermann & Knieper, 2011, p. 278). The contextualizing and editing of the photograph by the media outlet occurs at the next step of the image communication process – in the media context, additionally characterized by Bock, Isermann and Knieper as a place of publication of a photograph with audio or textual elements, within a specific layout. In their study, the term *media context* covers three types of photographic context, separated for the purpose of this article as follows: (i) context of production, (ii) context of a medium and (iii) page context.

Context of a medium

Journalistic photographs appear to the viewer through particular media, which can be traditional and online editions of newspapers and magazines, information portals and vortals, and, sometimes, television. Photographs can be also displayed in a museum, a book collection of photographs, at a photography festival, or a contest. Each of these media and places provide different, socially and culturally determined contexts for the perception of photographs. What is more, Becker (1995) claims that the perception of a picture has a contextual nature, and that the context is always available, because even “if we think that there is no context, that only means that the maker of the work has cleverly taken advantage of our willingness to provide the context for ourselves” (Becker, 1995, p. 88). By this claim, Becker refers to an artwork in a museum, but emphasizes that a similar

practice concerns photographs that museums now frequently display. However, when interpreting journalistic photographs, viewers concentrate on the content of an image, rather than on trying to provide an appropriate context, if no context is available. The results of Westman and Laine-Hernandez's (2008) study on image categorization show that participants were more eager to describe objects, people and events framed in photographs, when the context was removed from the studied visuals.

The fact that reception of an image is usually determined by a medium can be illustrated by the example of Robert Doisneau's 1958 photograph *At the Café* (referred by Barrett, 1985). The photograph shows a young woman and a middle-aged man drinking wine in a café. This image was initially published in *Le Point* as a part of an essay on Paris cafés, and later appeared in a brochure concerning alcohol abuse. The third medium was a French scandal sheet, which published the photograph with the caption *Prostitution in the Champs-Élysées*. Sometime later, Doisneau's photograph hung in the photography galleries of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and was published in one of the Museum's photo albums. Doisneau's photograph was interpreted according to the context of a medium through which viewers received it, or to be more accurate: the medium in which Doisneau's photograph appeared to viewers, determined the page context, which in consequence, provided a particular reading. Hence, the type (magazine, newspaper) and title (opinion/afternoon paper, its political and sociocultural orientation, etc.) of a medium does not form a context for journalistic photograph. Instead, the medium type and title determine the textual and visual surrounding of a photograph, that is, the page context.

Barthes ([1967] 1977, p. 15) uses the term "channel of transmission", by which he means both the medium and the page context. He describes the channel of transmission as the newspaper, its type, title and layout (the medium context), and the photograph with its textual surrounding, such as a caption, title, headline or article (the page context). However, Barthes ([1967] 1977) further concentrates mainly on the page context, which I refer to below.

Page context

According to Barthes ([1967] 1977) the photograph is a structure, not isolated, but in

communication with another structure – text, that is, a title, a caption or an article, which accompanies an image. Barthes ([1967] 1977) argues that each journalistic photograph should be interpreted within its context. However, he suggests first analysing each structure separately, the photograph and the text, and then identifying the relationships between them. Barthes' structural approach is too linguistically oriented, as he only concentrates on the textual context, and entirely ignores the visual context of a journalistic photograph, that is other images (which are equally important for the contextual interpretation of images). In contrast, Zelizer (2005) points out not only the textual, but also the visual context of journalistic photographs. First of all, she emphasizes the importance of the selection and presentation of photographs in the press. She argues that the ways in which photographs appear on a page, determine their relationship to news stories and other texts and pictures adjacent to them. Zelizer (2005) does not explicitly define the context of a journalistic photograph, instead, she identifies a variety of ways in which photographs appear in the press: either as a cover photo, or inside the newspaper or magazine; displayed individually, or contextualized by news-texts, or grouped as a part of a larger photographic display on a similar subject. Zelizer (2005) further explains that some photographs communicate the news mainly through their content, whereas there are others that need much more text (a caption, title or article) to explicitly pass visual information.

Caption

Although Berger (1971, p. ii) reminds us about the belief that a good photograph does not require a caption, Seppänen (2006, pp. 20-21) observes that the contemporary press almost never publishes a photograph without one, while Garncarek (2005) points out that captions control our perception of images. Nevertheless, it is very rare that a photograph is completely explicit visually. For some journalistic images it might not be possible to determine the visual message if the viewers are not already familiar with the information captured in the picture. Even iconic photographs, reproduced repeatedly in different media, initially had to appear in some context. Sontag ([1978] 2008, pp. 105-107) claims that each photograph is just a piece of reality and thus requires a context for interpretation. However, she points out that some museum curators

remove captions in order to transform journalistic pictures into art. Becker (1995) stresses that photographs are cultural objects, similar to paintings and sculptures, and thus, they need a context to obtain any meaning. Paintings and sculptures receive their meaning from the museum's labels as well as from the social context, that is, discussions about them and the subject that they show. Similarly, photographs are interpreted within the context of the presentation in a museum, a book or a newspaper.

In the case study about images in W. G. Sebald's work, Chaplin (2006) discusses the role of the caption from a broader social science perspective. Her perspective can also be applied to journalistic photographs. Chaplin refers, for instance, to studies on captioning by Roland Barthes (in the early 1960s) and Stuart Hall (in 1973) who used the instance of a photograph in a newspaper article. She points out that the convention of captioning is a cultural instrument, and members of a particular culture can decide whether to use it or not. Chaplin (2006) also claims that images are polysemic and the caption provides just one possible meaning of the visual content. Furthermore she explains that "the purpose of captioning is to direct viewer's attention to specific parts of the photographic image and to specific interpretations, while playing down the polysemic character of the image" (Chaplin, 2006, p. 50). In other words, captions as a part of a photographic context help in reading photographs, but also in limiting the possibility of multilevel visual interpretation. Hence, even if photojournalists send in captions, they are often edited by image brokers (this kind of practice is described by Gürsel, 2012) or photo editors (Freeman, 2011).

Furthermore, captions have a strong influence on the reception process of journalistic images, as the findings of one of the pilot studies, conducted by Müller, Kappas and Olk (2012), indicate. In this pilot study, journalistic photographs were paired with captions suggesting a particular reading of a photograph, or left without any caption. The result was that the captions can change the meaning of the basic emotions represented visually in journalistic photographs, for instance, from happiness to sadness. Similarly, a study on magazine image categorization, by Westman and Laine-Hernandez (2008), showed that the inclusion or exclusion of the page context

affected the interpretation of photographs, and, consequently, the process of attributing categories to particular images. However, it is important to mention that, in Westman and Laine-Hernandez's (2008) study, not all of the study participants used the context fully. Some of them read only parts of the articles or captions, or looked at other photographs on the page. There were also participants who claimed that without the context they would not have been able to interpret the images. The main reason for looking at the page context was to collect more information about the subject framed, and about the motivation for taking the photograph and displaying it in the press.

Content instead of context: the intertextual approach

In this study, I do not claim that context is unimportant in the reception process of journalistic images. On the contrary, I admit that context guides the reception, and thus, the interpretation of journalistic photographs. However, I also suggest removing journalistic photographs from their contexts and interpreting them without any textual and visual surrounding, with an exception of a caption. As an approach to such interpretation, I propose intertextuality that may add new semantic layers to photography interpretation process. Intertextuality, introduced below, is mainly intended as a tool for visual education and as an option for other than traditional contextual interpretation of journalistic images.

Many scholars who insist on the contextual interpretation of journalistic photographs may be concerned about the unpredictable and undirected outcomes of other methods of interpretation. They may even wonder if the results of such decontextualized interpretations would be credible and whether it is possible to interpret journalistic photographs independently of their context. In this study, I neither deny the role of context in journalistic photography reception, nor claim that a decontextualized interpretation will provide more valuable results. However, I do contend that a method of interpretation which removes journalistic photographs from their context and relies on viewer's experience of an image is likely to offer more interesting and surprising outcomes. I suggest that decontextualized interpretation of journalistic photographs can be especially valuable in teaching visual literacy,

because it opens up various possibilities for interacting with images in the interpretation process.

Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2004) believe that the interpretation of images does not require any reference to either the spoken word or written text. Moreover, they claim that some photographs are “self-sufficient,” created to fit into various contexts, as in the case of “classic photojournalism” (they refer to Cartier-Bresson’s photography, but iconic photographs can be also included here). In a similar vein, Broomberg and Chanarin (2008) point out that “in the tradition of the World Press Photo awards, a photograph that relies on its caption to create meaning is impotent.” However, they also argue that some photographs need at least a caption or other images (if they are a part of a photo story²) to communicate meaning. Scott (as cited in Garncarek, 1999) provides an extended typology, in which he indicates that the photographic caption may function as (i) a destination, which explains and synthesizes the image, (ii) a point of departure, which only gives a hint for the viewer’s perception, and (iii) a parallel but displaced commentary, which does not often have much in common with the photograph itself. From the point of the intertextual interpretation of photographs, the most desirable is the second type, but this type appears more frequently with art photographs than with journalistic images.

Henri Cartier-Bresson, one of the most influential photographers of his generation, claims that the only caption which the good photograph needs is information about *where* and *when* the image was taken; that the questions *who?*, *what?*, and *why?* should already be included in the picture’s theme, and that the question *how?* is completely unnecessary for the caption of a good photograph (Freeman, 2011). Indeed, a well-written caption ought to contain only information which is impossible to present visually, leaving the rest to the viewers’ visual competence and imagination. In a similar vein, Garncarek (1999) argues that captions often conceal what has really happened in a picture and that they try to dissuade the viewer from

any doubts, and from further consideration of meaning.

Chaplin (2006) goes even further by arguing that a photograph with a caption loses its visual ambiguity as a result of written clarity. Readers perceive captioned images as a convention, so they interpret pictures with the help of textual statements. Chaplin’s claims on the convention of captioning in literature and social sciences can be applied to journalistic photographs to certain extent. The caption provides readers with only one possible meaning whereas many journalistic photographs are visually polysemic, and can be as well interpreted without a context, especially for the purpose of visual education. Chaplin observes that captions create certain relationships between the photograph, text and layout. Hence, she argues that the consequences of dropping captions are enormous, influencing the interpretation and the reader’s engagement with the text. This means that omitting the caption, or even the entire context, requires much more effort from the reader to assign meaning to an image. The question is whether or not readers are capable of overcoming this kind of challenge. The answer is that not all of them are, because reading images without a context is difficult and requires visual literacy, or at least some experience in the craft. This claim can be illustrated by one of the results of an experiment conducted with university undergraduate students (n=40) of the course *Media Analysis and Criticism*. Students, without much previous experience in visual analysis, were asked to interpret a journalistic photograph (see Figure 1), using a guideline sheet provided. The guideline comprised of a photo caption and eight questions, including the following one: “Does the photograph remind you of some other images, art, film, other cultural artefacts, religion believes, or your own experiences?” Interestingly, 15 students (37,5%) were not able to point out any references, even though they answered to other questions in the guideline sheet without difficulties.

A photograph, like any other cultural object, is a palette of intertextual connotations to previous texts (Burgin, 1982, p. 144), and thus its meaning depends on the viewer’s ability to recognize certain allusions and conventions (Allen, 2004). Sontag ([1978] 2008, p. 106) points out that many photographs refer us to other images, and to life, as they are images themselves. Thus, the concept of intertextuality

² The term *photo story* is used here in the way that Broomberg and Chanarin (2008) refer to the World Press Photo competition, which divides each of the thematic categories into single photographs and stories (WPP, 2016). However, there are other terms applied in the literature to name a series of photographs, such as a photo reportage (Kazimierz Wolny-Zmorzyński, 2011; Kędra, 2016), photo essay (Freeman, 2011), or feature (Newton, 2001).

is understood here as “the accumulation and generation of meaning across texts where all meanings depend on other meanings generated and/or deployed in alternative contexts” (Barker, 2004, p. 101). Rose (2012), while describing the method of visual discourse analysis, indicates that intertextuality is important to understand discourse, due to the diversity of forms through which the discourse could be articulated. For instance, if *art* is a discourse, it could be articulated through visual and verbal images, as well as through particular practices. The main feature of intertextuality is that the meaning of each picture depends not only on this picture, but also on the pallet of references to other visual and textual representations (Rose, 2012, p. 191). Zarzycka and Kleppe (2013) mention intertextuality when describing recognisability, one of the four features of photographic tropes, which they later use in the analysis of images of war and disaster awarded in the World Press Photo contest in the years 2009-11. They claim that photographs gain recognition and thus become widely circulated due to the intertextual connections with the western visual and verbal culture of photographic tropes that they contain (Zarzycka & Kleppe, 2013, p. 981). Due to this tendency, iconic photographs undergo intertextual interpretation more easily than ordinary journalistic photographs.



Figure 1: At the Dandora Dump, April 3, 2012, Nairobi, Kenya: “A woman sits on bags of waste she has salvaged, at the Dandora municipal dump, outside Nairobi, Kenya. She said that she enjoys looking at books, even industrial catalogues, as a break from picking up garbage”³

³ (World Press Photo, “At the Dandora Dump,” accessed October 5, 2015, <http://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/2013/contemporary-issues/micah-albert>). World Press Photo 2012: 1st prize singles, Contemporary Issues. Copyright 2012 by Micah Albert. Reprinted with permission.

Intertextual interpretation is a never-ending, constant learning process, which lacks any methodological guidelines. This means that the viewer should train their visual perception in order to advance their visual literacy skills, and they should be able to provide some explanation of their choice of proposed connections, instead of only enumerating them. The only suggestion about the intertextual interpretation of journalistic photographs can be the main rule of the intertextual approach, which reads: “No text has meaning alone. All texts have meaning in relation to other texts” (Allen, 2004, from the cover), and then this: “Reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts” (Allen, 2004, p. 1). All these apply equally to journalistic images if we agree to consider journalistic photographs not only as *news items*, but as images that demand interpretation.

Conclusion

In this article I evaluated the concept of context and its role in the interpretation of journalistic images. I proposed to interpret journalistic photographs without context, but I do not claim that they can exist without it. Some photographs can lose their meaning, that is, information they depict, when context is entirely removed. However, marginalizing context in the interpretation of journalistic photographs should not be perceived as a violation towards tradition of photojournalism. Likewise, many scholars have argued that context is necessary to distinguish journalistic photographs from other images, but it may not necessarily play a central role in the interpretation process (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2004). Even though some photographs appear without any page context, or the page context is limited only to the caption, they are still perceived as journalistic photographs, and even become iconic photographs. Journalistic images, displayed at festivals or in museums, and often completely removed from their previous context, still aim to convey visual information (Newton, 2001). What is more, they continue to be perceived as journalistic photographs. However, it might be the case that the information they convey differs from the initial information conveyed, as, for instance, in the case of Robert Doisneau’s photograph.

The literature has concentrated on the photographic context, trying to prove that the interpretation of journalistic photographs is

impossible without considering the context (Becker, 1995; Bock, Isermann & Knieper, 2011; Westman & Laine-Hernandez, 2008). On the other hand, Müller, Kappas and Olk (2012, p. 322) point out that while pictures move easily between various media, their meaning does not always follow the same path. Instead, the initial meaning interrelates with the viewer's individual ability to create meaning in various cultural and reception contexts. Hence, the interpretation of journalistic photographs should not only draw on the photographic context (that is, the context of production, the medium or page context), since reading photographs without it, offers the viewer freedom to attribute various meanings to images, and thus provide deeper understanding of the visual. As Azoulay (2008) claims, photographs are the attestation of the event. Hence, in order to reconstruct the event, they require more than just the identification of the subject framed. The viewer is asked to *watch* the photograph instead of *looking at* it (Azoulay,

2008, p. 14). Watching a photograph is not an easy task, as it requires a method or at least some guidelines. This article has suggested intertextuality as an approach to photography interpretation. However, intertextual interpretation demands visual literacy, and thus, further studies should explore how to educate visually literate viewers.

The critical view of the concept of the photographic context will probably not please many scholars in visual methodologies and journalism studies. However, even Rose (2012), a follower of contextual analysis, argues that images should not be completely reduced to their context as they have their own effects (Rose, 2012, pp. 16-17). Hence, without intending to remove journalistic photographs from the press, this study will, hopefully, initiate a discussion about new or alternative approaches to journalistic photography interpretation (for example, intertextuality) in the times of constant flow of images.

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