



Nicholas Mirzoeff observes in *The Right to Look* that one of the very first steps in the French declaration of a state of emergency in Algeria in April 1955 was the assertion of powers to ‘take all measures to ensure control of the press and of publications of all kinds, as well as radio transmissions, showings of films and theatrical performances.’¹ State censorship of representations of events in Algeria and events connected with

¹ Nicolas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC, 2011) 244.

Algeria continued over the course of the war. Perhaps most famously, *L'Humanité's* front page story on March 7, 1961, "Deux Algériens témoignent" ("Two Algerians bear witness"), complete with graphic photographs documenting the torture of Algerians in Paris, was censored. The newspaper decided to lead with the same headline on the front page and a small double-column in the top left corner explaining the censorship, leaving most of the front page blank, punctuated by the word "CENSURÉ".

Like most of the images that survive from the Algerian War, the photograph I examine here was taken by a European press photographer working for a large agency, in this case Agence France Presse (AFP). Yet there is little information available about the circulation of the photograph. Benjamin Stora includes it within a chapter entitled "France: images vues, perdues, retrouvées" in a collection of photo-essays he co-edited with Laurent Gervereau – *Photographier La Guerre d'Algérie*.² However, he provides no commentary on it. As is common with many press photographs, we don't know who took it. The caption beneath the image simply reads, 'Anonymous. A group of Algerian independence fighters, liberated from a detention camp near Sétif, display portraits of General de Gaulle. 25 May, 1961. (AFP).³ Although we know the rough location and the timing of the photograph, we know nothing about these particular men beyond the general fact that they were 'independence fighters'. It remains unclear as to whether these men were simply political members, metaphorical "fighters" of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), or members of the organization's guerilla fighting groups – the Armée de Libération Nationale (ALN). Either way, the men are presented in the image not as armed combatants but as civilians. In this respect, the photograph differs

² Laurent Gervereau and Benjamin Stora (eds.) *Photographier La Guerre d'Algérie* (Marval, 2004).

³ *Ibid*, 94.

markedly from the majority of surviving photographs of Algerian independence fighters from the period. The men carry no weapons or combat gear. Many are wearing smart blazers. At least three of them are bearing official presidential portraits of General De Gaulle, though only two are properly visible within the photograph.

Indeed, it is precisely the absence of weapons that invites us to look closer at these men, and not simply ascribe identity – “*these are independence fighters*” – and move on. Most obviously, our attention is drawn to the identical presidential portraits and what they might signify in this context. The photograph of Charles De Gaulle is the official presidential portrait, taken by Jean-Marie Marcel in February, 1959. Marcel had in fact retired and closed down his photographic studio in Paris several years earlier, so just as the photograph marks De Gaulle’s coming out of retirement to do his civic duty for the republic, it also indexes Marcel’s answering the unexpected call of patriotic duty. Marcel set up two poses in the library of the Elysée palace – one in which De Gaulle was dressed in military uniform, and the other with him in ceremonial, presidential dress.⁴ It is significant, therefore, that De Gaulle and Marcel actively chose the latter. The image of De Gaulle as statesman, regaled with medals, presidential sash and the “grand collier” of the Order of the Legion of Honor, marks the transition of the iconography of De Gaulle in French culture from military hero to political bearer of a new constitution ushering in the fifth republic. Moreover, as Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle points out in his reading of the image, the red, green and gold of De Gaulle’s adornments form an aesthetic link with the red, green and gold of the book-bindings, which in effect legitimizes De Gaulle’s statesmanship through scholarly precedent.⁵ De Gaulle’s

⁴ « Petites histoires de la photo présidentielle, » *Le Figaro* (May 23, 1977).

⁵ Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, *Les images prises au mot* (Paris 1989) 149.

presidential portrait was the first French presidential portrait to be released in color.⁶ Although the photograph we have here is black and white, it is likely that the presidential portraits that the men are holding would have been in color. The use of color in the presidential portrait of De Gaulle inaugurated a new chapter in the aesthetics of French governmentality, even as that new chapter's heritage was grounded in the enlightenment imagery of the bibliothèque. The image reflected the political mood of the late 1950s, in which De Gaulle was presented as a savior of the French republic, the key to a national resurgence. France had lost its way; it had to go "back to the future."

It is difficult to underestimate the prevalence of the presidential portrait in French public life. Marcel's photograph of De Gaulle would have been seen in schools, train stations, hospitals and official government buildings throughout France and the empire. The presidential portrait is the exhibition of "visuality" par excellence.⁷ But the official portrait of De Gaulle takes on a special significance at this moment in Algeria in 1961, just days after the beginning of peace talks between the French government and the FLN at Evian. De Gaulle's right hand touches the books on the table, forging a link between his presidential person and the wisdom of office. His left hand, however, clutches a cane, which acts as a memento of his military past. De Gaulle had been badly wounded in the leg at the Battle of Verdun in 1916. The presence of the cane marks him out as someone who knows the cost of war. This part of the image is particularly significant in the context of Algeria in 1961 because at that time De Gaulle was leading efforts to begin negotiations with the FLN at the risk of compromising the interests of

⁶ Ibid, 147.

⁷ I am borrowing the formulation of "visuality" from Nicholas Mirzoeff in *The Right to Look*. Mirzoeff, following Rancière, defines visuality as that 'division of the sensible whereby domination imposes the sensible evidence of its legitimacy' (3).

the French army and indeed at the risk of his safety. A dissident paramilitary wing of the French army, the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (OAS), was formed in January of that year precisely as a response to De Gaulle's "softness" on the question of Algerian self-determination. Moreover, the Generals' Putsch had taken place just one month earlier, in April 1961, when a group of four commanding officers of the French army in Algeria attempted to overthrow De Gaulle because they were opposed to the government's negotiations with the FLN. As a result, this photograph dramatizes the visual rhetoric of the official presidential portrait at the moment in which the person of the president and the system of governance he embodied were most under threat. His self-evident legitimation called into question, the "meaning" of De Gaulle was in suspension.

The two framed pictures of De Gaulle within the photograph of the Algerian fighters direct De Gaulle's gaze differently. In the official picture itself, De Gaulle faces the camera but looks away to his left. His chin raised, gazing into the middle distance, De Gaulle does not address the camera or the implied spectator directly. This creates a sense of distance between the stately figure of De Gaulle and the public to whom the image is directed. The semiotics of the image, therefore, emphasize the fact that the president does not engage the public spectator on equal terms. De Gaulle is literally in touch with the Elysée library, his hand resting upon the gilded books lying on the table. The proximity with stately tradition in the library created by Napoleon III fashions an image of a president looking out from within the intimate environment of power, towards a public that is always elsewhere, always abstractly engaged.

With the arrangement of the larger of the two visible official portraits within the photograph, this sense of distance is reaffirmed. The line of sight of the camera touches

on the portrait at an angle; De Gaulle's gaze is deflected further to the right of the camera. However, the way in which the man in the far left of the photograph holds the smaller portrait of De Gaulle turns the picture towards the viewer, so that De Gaulle's line of sight meets the lens. How can we read these positionings within the photograph as a whole? Do these distinct positionings stage visibility differently? In order to begin to approach these questions, it is important to recognize, following Ariella Azoulay, that the event of photography is much broader and more open than the photographic event per se. As Azoulay makes clear in *Civil Imagination*, the event of photography is never over.⁸ The photograph always opens out towards other contexts, other histories, and other spectators. It is never ontologically complete.⁹ It is precisely for this reason, she suggests, that no one is the sole signatory to the event of photography. In the open photographic encounter, none of the participants enjoys sovereign status.¹⁰ This photograph of the Algerian combatants with the official portraits of De Gaulle itself stages the openness of the event of photography. The fixed image of the president, designed and circulated precisely in order to present sovereign status, is here doubled, presented from different viewing angles, and detached from the walls of official buildings as a transferable material object open to recontextualization. In effect, therefore, the unfixing of the official portrait of the president unfixes the semiotics of state power.

One particularly important event that the event of this photograph seems to be in dialogue with is the famous speech given by De Gaulle three years earlier in Algiers on June 4th, 1958. At that time, De Gaulle had just taken over the leadership of the

⁸ Arielle Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (New York, 2012) 25.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 17.

government as a result of the May crisis, and the speech that he gave from the balcony of the government building in the Forum d'Alger was intended to mark both the return of his own political power and the direction of French governmental policy in the Algerian conflict. The opening of De Gaulle's speech has been widely commented upon. In a deliberately ambiguous expression of inclusion, De Gaulle declared: 'Je vous ai compris!' Many in the 500,000 strong crowd took this to imply a renewed effort to protect the interests of the *pieds-noirs*, the established French settlers in Algeria. But De Gaulle's words were also taken to imply that he understood the actions of the previous four years of conflict, and that an independent Algeria, whatever particular form it took, would be the basic condition of future decision-making. Importantly for our purposes here, the exclamation, 'Je vous ai compris!', also constituted an attempt to bridge the presidential distance later instantiated by the official portrait. 'Je vous ai compris!' was immediately mythologized as a symbol of De Gaulle's popularism, a direct address designed to speak across political divisions.

The combatants' furnishing of the official portrait formulates an ambiguous set of responses to De Gaulle's 'Je vous ai compris!' that can be interpreted in multiple ways. On the one hand, the fact that they both carry his official image in the wake of the liberation of the camp in which they were held suggests a validation of that mutual understanding. The man on the far left of the picture with the smaller framed image of the president offers the official portrait back to the viewer, returning the viewer's gaze with that of his own and that of De Gaulle. This reciprocal act of looking seems to offer an equivalency, a rhetorical mirroring of the understanding posited by 'Je vous ai compris!' But we could also read the reciprocity of looking as a counter-claim to the state regime of visibility. In this sense, holding the official portrait of the president

returns the scopic regime of visibility of which it is an archetype to the implied viewer. By returning the image that every French citizen knows and understands, the independence fighter draws attention to the inscrutability of his own image. The image of the president is instantly recognizable – we know what this image is, and who the subject of the image is. The photograph which contains the presidential portrait, however, is less knowable. Unlike the other men in the photograph, the one holding the larger portrait averts his gaze from the camera, refusing, like De Gaulle, to meet the spectator's eye. In this way, returning the image of the president is also a means of returning the rhetoric of understanding – can any participant to this event of photography really say to this Algerian fighter, 'Je vous ai compris'?

This leads us to a consideration of the photograph in light of the second sentence of De Gaulle's June, 1958 speech, which has been much less frequently attended to. Directly after the famous phrase, 'Je vous ai compris!', De Gaulle exclaimed, 'Je sais ce qui s'est passé ici' ('I know what happened here'). Part of what De Gaulle comes to represent in the Algerian context, therefore, is a sovereign claim to historical knowledge. Perhaps the bearing of the portraits here validates this claim to historical knowledge, reflecting a desire to display mutual understanding of "what happened" as the basis for the new peace negotiations. But the bearing of the portraits also appears to signify something altogether different. What is certain is that these men are self-consciousness participants in the manipulation of photography. They are involved in the recontextualization of the fixed presidential image, which is not only a re-staging of the state regime of visibility, but a construction of their own representation. By presenting themselves in conjunction with the official portrait of the president, they draw attention to the role of photography in fashioning, rather than indexing the real.

In this sense, therefore, just as the bearing of the official portraits returns the rhetoric of understanding enacted through 'Je vous ai compris!', it also returns the performative utterance of historical understanding embodied in 'Je sais ce qui s'est passé ici'. The photograph has replaced the gun of the independence fighter; it refutes the bearer's cooption into the epistemological claims of imperial visuality. Bouncing back the visual rhetoric of the official presidential portrait is at one and the same time bouncing back the language of political and historiographical power, as if to say: you cannot possibly have understood me, you cannot possibly know what happened here. Most strikingly, perhaps, this visual refutation cunningly engages the politics of censorship, employing the quintessential example of visuality as a vehicle for a countervisual challenge to authority.

If the two men bearing the official portraits of De Gaulle seem to create a dissensus within the regime of imperial visuality, then what of the other men in the photograph who do not bear and refashion this presidential image? These men are lined up in rows, their hands by their sides, looking intently into the camera. They bear no weapons. They exhibit neither the pose of defeat, nor of victory. They do not gesture, or display political slogans. They simply stand, and look, in an act of quiet solidarity. There are no objects of obvious significance like the portraits, apart from a single pen resting in the pocket of the man in the middle of the front row in the foreground. This pen emblemizes another historical trajectory of French colonialism in Algeria that counterposes the narrative of Republican learning embodied by the Elysée library in the presidential portraits. In Algeria, the literacy rate had more than

halved by the 1950s since colonization in 1830, from 40% to less than 15%.¹¹

Intentionally or not, the presence of the pen references this counterhistory to the ideology of the *mission civilatrice*. Yet it also points towards unofficial documents, words that have not been bound in books, and indeed towards words that have not yet been written. It does not make the epistemological claim to the past of the library. With simplicity rather than gilded ornament, it dramatizes epistemological and historiographical potential.

The simplicity, or rather the intense, deliberate simplicity of this scene, seems to me to be an instance of what Mirzoeff calls the ‘right to look’. The determined solidarity of the men in the photograph stakes a claim for a basic autonomy that is simultaneously antagonistic to the regime of visibility with its too-easy nominations and classifications, and suggestive of a form of subjectivity that at the clicking of the shutter does not yet exist. These men do not look from behind the regime of visibility like the other two who carry the official presidential portrait, they look past it. In fact, they bypass official visibility to engage the viewer directly, looking the spectator in the eye and demanding recognition.¹² ¹² It is important to understand that this claim to the right to look is more fundamental than a claim to recognition as members of the FLN or ALN, or another political group. The photograph itself offers no political detail of this sort. Instead, it unveils a performative claim to the common – the assertion of “bare rights”. The collective demand for the right to look itself looks past the claims and counter-claims of “Algérie française” and “Algérie algérienne.”

¹¹ Mahfoud Bennoune, *The Making of Contemporary Algeria, 1830-1987*, 67-8.

¹² Two key elements of the ‘right to look’, according to Mirzoeff, are that it is a performative claim to a subjectivity that does not yet exist, and that it is never individual, but rather comes into being through mutual recognition with an other (*The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visibility*, p. 25-6).

The photograph does not only ask us to interpret a shift from military to civilian representation, from uniform to suits. It also demands that we recognize a claim to transpolitical citizenry, one which is not bestowed, but which comes into being precisely at the moment of visual address. Understanding this performative claim means resisting the ontological enforcement of visibility. Following Ariella Azoulay, we should not think of this claim as existing for the means of representation. To do so is to risk submerging the “*this was there*” under a different claim – “*this is X.*”¹³ The photograph records a moment of potential, of becoming, which we restrict arbitrarily by fixing the subjects’ identity in saying – *they are independence fighters.*¹⁴ We would do better, therefore, not to think about the event of photography as a form of “capture”. The subject of this photograph is a historical moment of liberation from a detention camp; it is also a moment of self-conscious exposure. Within the frame itself, there is no topographical marker. The photograph is situational only insofar as the men are arranged in relation to each other. Unlike the figure of De Gaulle, contained within the space of the library, the Algerian men are framed by open ground and open sky. The camera has not “captured” them. Rather, it has engaged their exposure to one another, to spectators, and to the regime of visibility.

In emphasizing the potential of this photograph, its ontological incompleteness, I do not wish to suggest that this form of exposure with its attendant claim to the common is somehow the final truth to which all other aspects of the photograph tend. As Ariella Azoulay makes clear, we need to understand not ‘that truth is sedimented in the photograph, ready to be revealed, but rather that truth is what is at stake between

¹³ Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (New York, 2012) 223.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 226.

those who share the space of the photographed image and the world within which such an image has been made possible.’¹⁵ What I have attempted to tease out here as the performative claim of the right to look does not supplant other responses to visuality that are dramatized in the photograph. It is important, as I have outlined, that the photograph seems to stage claims to mutual recognition both through the official presidential portrait and in spite of the official presidential portrait. Indeed, the subject of the photograph is much more than a group of liberated independence fighters; it is a moment of historical becoming in which the roles of these men, of De Gaulle, and of visual rhetoric are not fixed. The truth is not “there”, but at stake. Coming to terms with this photograph enjoins us to understand the ontological incompleteness of the photograph, and the epistemological uncertainty of a live, historical moment of exposure. It forces us to acknowledge: *je ne vous ai pas compris. Je ne sais pas ce qui s’est passé ici*. This acknowledgement is the decolonizing rhetoric of photography, and the visual rhetoric of decolonization.