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Nina Sosna

*Russian Academy of Science*

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# THE GHOST OF THE UNIVERSAL SPECTATOR

Nina Sosna

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*The Civil Contract of Photography*  
by Ariella Azoulay. New York:  
Zone Books, (2008) 2012. Pp. 585;  
8 color, 100 black-and-white  
photographs. \$36.95 cloth, \$22.95  
paper.

This book is not really about photography as a certain type of visual image. Rather, it proposes to consider photography politically, with both words stressed, *consider* and *politically* (although the move towards the political sometimes takes the form of poetic expression). This does not mean, however, that Ariella Azoulay sees the political in the *content* of the photograph or that the political (in the photograph) can be analyzed from a visual perspective: the black-and-white photographs collected in the book are quite restrained and even visually modest while still containing something ambiguous and troublesome. For example, in one photo a woman is led by the hand—whether she is being helped and supported or compelled to move is unclear (301). In another, a dozen men sit on the ground with their eyes bandaged (360). What do they expect to happen? Are these photos taken in a war zone? No, these photographs do not illustrate the “state of exception.” The problem that arises in relation to these photos concerns what happens when the armies have gone, together with the nongovernmental peacemaking organizations, the situation in which *subjects* (persons living in the governed territories in general and women in particular) are left to make their own decisions, when there is nobody to help and almost no resources available to improve their situation.

Women (in general—African servants, photographed by owners of the grounds; Eadweard Muybridge's wife; a white American; Vietnamese women photographed by American soldiers; average women in “developing” countries who have been exposed to violence) and residents of occupied territories: these are the two groups, which, for Azoulay, show how photographs can restore violated rights. In Azoulay's view, if these photographs are displayed in a proper setting (a newspaper or gallery) and presented along with discursive evidence of the misery of a given situation, the claims that they make can effectively be transformed from a cry for help into an enunciation—a call to action that cannot be ignored.

The women and noncitizens of occupied territories do not have rights as human beings or as citizens, in general: even if women have gained ground in the realm of civil rights, this doesn't seem to be as true about the field of representation: “It doesn't matter what she does, what work she's employed in, where she lives, where she goes, what she wears, or what she says—ultimately, her presence there is *for* man” (265). Azoulay asks whether the “bare life” they are left with is worth living. The question is how to exist on the edge, in a constant state of anxiety and precariousness, when formally nothing is happening in the occupied territories, but

every moment an act of violence might take place—any woman can be forced to do things she hasn't agreed upon, any inhabitant of the occupied territory can be injured—by a mistake or in the name of “prevention.” In this situation, horror is not a horrible Horror, but silent, unseen, almost unrepresentable, almost omnipresent.

The book has an accusatory tone. Azoulay accuses us, passive readers and spectators, who sometimes say we have seen enough photographs from war zones and know what they look like and do not want to see more and, thus, do not want to help others in their desperate situations. Giorgio Agamben, too, is called to account for ignoring the extent to which citizenship is not something taken for granted—that it is dynamic because it has to be regained again and again through action. (This is to say nothing about Agamben's blindness to the fact that women are excepted in a double manner—from the community of human beings and from the community of citizens.) Susan Sontag, too, is accused for regarding the pain of others and claiming together with Donald Rumsfeld that torture is more serious than what is clearly sexual abuse (271). Roland Barthes is criticized for his insensitivity to the photographs that he deemed journalistic.

Rarely examining photographic material itself, Azoulay's book is mainly engaged in debates and

discussions with the theories of figures such as Etienne Balibar, Roland Barthes, Judith Butler, Jacques Lacan, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, and Michel Foucault. Azoulay claims that a set of new conditions came into being with the advent of photography, but she is not always clear just what technical, theological, magical, messianic, or medium changes characterize these new conditions, and what, precisely, is new about them. It also remains unclear why photography is given priority as the best means for the restoration of political representation, and what exactly the mechanism of political change would be. What about other structures of representation through which power flows?<sup>1</sup> And in her polemics against Barthes, who is of course a necessary reference point for any book on photography, the crucial point for Azoulay seems to be his will to remain alone, his being asocial. She writes that he wanted to be a citizen in the citizenry of photography, but that he did not have the passport (168). Is it Azoulay herself who deprives him of this citizenship?

Azoulay's main objection to Barthes's position as it is formulated in *Camera Lucida* (1980) concerns his defense of the viewer's ability to judge. In Azoulay's interpretation, photography must respect Barthes's physical and spiritual autonomy and let him feel himself the master of his own judgment of the

photo. This leaves no room for the viewer to be the real addressee of photography, instead becoming a scholar of its visual effects (130–70). But Barthes, one might point out in his defense, was trying to unravel the mechanisms of photographic affectivity and proposed his own experience as the basis for more general observations. In so doing, he was thereby speaking about his pain with others. We can see both Barthes's and Azoulay's arguments as focused on a mechanism *activated* by photography.

Azoulay's other objection concerns Barthes's famous statement that photography shows something as it really existed in front of the lens of the camera. Quite often, the photograph is only a part of what really was or even the starting point of what really was. That is why the situation in which a photograph was made should always be reconstructed: photography demands that other testimonies be added, visual as well as discursive. The contract, which is interwoven with photography as technology, comes into play, preventing technology from remaining only technology.

Here we see the concept that gives the book its title: the "civil contract of photography." Developing Walter Benjamin's ideas in her own way, Azoulay suggests that when we study the history of photography there is no real point at which we can say, "He is the inventor of photography." Neither

Nicephore Niepps, William Henry Fox Talbot, Louis Daguerre, nor Andre-Adolphe-Eugene Disderi could reasonably apply to play this role. Photography has no author (90–93). It cannot be someone’s property; it can only be “deposited” (as Azoulay puts it) for some period of time (103). A professional community stands as its source. The civil contract of photography was not a rational one; it was not made with a particular photographer but served as an expression of agreement upon certain rules between the users of photography and the relation of these users to a camera (157).

This contract was the mission of those who happened to be users of photography (137). From that time on, the photographing person gathers testimonies, but the photographic print should not be considered as the end result: photography is to be situated in an ongoing present, because the photographer can never know what really enters the photo and how it will later be seen. Having shown her injured legs to the lens of the camera, Mrs. Abu-Zohir lowers her skirt—but the photograph is not yet complete because “nothing has concluded, though the hour of photography has passed” (150). Only the viewers (or citizens of the citizenry of photography) can construct the meaning of this photo, having accepted her address with all respectful responsibility. The

fact that photography is “ready” only when it is being looked at is a sort of guarantee that the commitment before the photographed person is to be fulfilled. The photographic image is irreversible. But even more important are the acts of others caused by this photo, and these acts are unpredictable. Azoulay underscores how the gesture of identification (this is Jerome—the brother of Napoleon) homogenizes the plurality of which photography is made and unites it into a stable invention, producing an illusion that we are dealing with a closed unit of visual information. As long as cameras exist, photographs will be taken by different people from different perspectives—and photos will be distributed, and this is the basis for a community (of citizens of the citizenry of photography).

Azoulay’s attempt here to describe the relations that exist around photography seems like an allusion to Jean-Luc Nancy’s *communism litteraire*. As Nancy writes, “Community is given to us—or we are given and abandoned to the community: a gift to be renewed and communicated, it is not a work to be done or produced. But it is a task”<sup>22</sup>—a task of articulation, of communication through writing. But it appears that the citizenry that concerns Azoulay, who dedicates many pages to the literary analysis of declarations of civil rights, finally turns out to be virtual: “Against the political order of the nation-state,

photography—together with other media that created the conditions for globalization—paved the way for a universal citizenship: not a state, but a citizenry, a virtual citizenry, in potential, with the civil contract of photography as its organizing framework” (134). In a sense, it does not exist at all: “As a matter of principle, and in the strictest sense of the term, under a regime in which hordes of noncitizens live beside citizens, there are no citizens at all” (78). The argumentation itself leads us to the conclusion that a future ideal would be the total representation of each and every person by her image, which might actually mean that human beings are not so necessary alongside their images. And these representations would be even further multiplied by the exchange of photographs.

In order to consider this idea about the virtualization of communication, it is useful to examine some of the other concepts, in addition to that of civil contract of photography, that Azoulay develops in her book. Although the civil rights pathos of the book seems quite accessible, its argument is sometimes obscured because its concepts are not defined or developed clearly. For example, there is a complicated problem of how the political and economic enter the field of the image or become connected to it. Actually, Azoulay refers to different economies as though they were

all the same. The first we might link to the community theme, when an individual refuses her right to her image for the sake of being connected to others, of being opened to their gaze. This *economy of images* (also referred to as *economy of looks*) concerns giving up one’s ability to defend one’s autonomic visual field from external forces (113). In understanding the “impossibility of maintaining a direct gaze between the spectator and the photograph and between the photographer and the photographed person” (376), we also see the moment when photography cannot show and the spectator cannot see. Photography is not a piece of paper but a space of relations.

But there is a second economy, which accounts for the spread of capital into the sphere of media. Azoulay is compelled to say that an equal relationship between the positions in the addressee-addressant-referent-meaning structure is hardly possible. The person photographed gets nothing in exchange except for being turned into an image (to be kept in some kind of archive). Moreover, permission is often not asked of the photographed person, and she is photographed from a position that is not included in the frame, that is the privileged position of the viewer with a camera in his hands. That is the moment when the violence takes place; a “photorape” occurs (355). It is not a noncitizen

in front of us on the photo, the one who can be arrested at any time, the one who cries out for help by the very act of photography, but an abstract figure, a sign (Azoulay writes “icon”): a typical Palestinian without any private story, whose image can be used by a newspaper to illustrate its commentary. Having written many slogans,<sup>3</sup> having reconstructed cases of resistance through the means of photography (167–86), having repeatedly insisted on the supporting (though indirect) role of photography for those who have no voice to express their needs, Azoulay is nonetheless obliged to conclude that in most cases photographed persons are ghosts for the sake of which photos are being made and distributed; and a photographer, willingly or not, is made a part of the power that turns the photographed into ghosts. These photos, as usual, are channeled into the economy (and this is the second economy, the economy of capital, and not of the exchange of looks) of “the hit parade of images of horror” (306).

The unequal exchange continues. Not only is the photographed person being instrumentalized in media practices, but so too is the photographer himself. Photographers, mostly foreigners but sometimes also Palestinians, just hand their photographs over to international agencies, such as Reuters, and the “real distribution” of these photographs, if it takes place

at all, leaves us with ghostly traces of the photographed and of the photographers.

What, then, is the effect of these two economies? If both the photographer and the photographed are victimized? If the encounter between the photographer and the photographed occurs in order to address someone else, who is not at the encounter (390)? If this final addressee, “hovering above the encounter between the photographer and the photographed person at the time the photograph is taken, is an effect of the act of photography” (391)—that is, does not exist in the traditional sense of the term?

We see here the difficult act of admitting the virtuality of *this* world. Let us consider Azoulay’s preferred modes of working with or through this problem. Her modes are *retrospective* looks on the events that do not exist anymore because they are out of media coverage, *reconstruction* (of the situation in which the photo was made), *rehabilitation* (thinking, for instance, about how to rehabilitate the citizenship of a specific body of governed [47]), another *rehabilitation* (photographs are the part of instrument for rehabilitating *sensus communis* [261]), *activation* (Michal Heiman as an artist “activates” photographs—their activation causes them to lose what might have been thought to be their stable content), *rediscovery* (to find “the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten

moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it," in Azoulay's quotation from Walter Benjamin [377]). In its critical activities, here, the book reveals that it is under a spell. It is preoccupied with the question of dealing with the past—a past from which ghosts have come to haunt the present, and these ghosts should also be also dealt with. And this repetitive *re-* shows the frequency of their appearance.

That is why the book is full of traces—traces of citizens, traces of past images of women that affect them now, traces of the voices that ascribed magic to photography (voices that were opposed to photography in its simple operation instructions and its institutionalization [251]), and traces of identity remaining in the photograph (350). Azoulay writes,

The spectator employs the gestures of identification to banish the *ghost* [emphasis added] of the photographed person. . . . [T]he person in the photograph comes to life out of the picture, makes demands, activates, tries to pull strings, hovers in the air, commands, seduces, repels, troubles, and irritates. But she always also remains opaque, dumb, distant, locked in a space separate from the surroundings of the spectator. (375)

No matter how much she insists on the positive aspects of the social relationships between the photographed and the photographer, no matter how much she repeats the positive possibilities offered by the contract between them, the language that Azoulay must rely on here itself reminds us that the reconstruction in question can do nothing with the fact that the photo shows us the trace not of a person so much as of a ghost.

Ghosts and specters are used here not in Siegfried Kracauer's sense, in which they were treated as holding funny and horrible features simultaneously.<sup>4</sup> But the crucial point is that, for Kracauer, too, only the spectator's intention can animate what is seen in a photograph, and this animation would mean that we *see* it. That is why specters do not necessarily belong only to the past from which they appear over and over again. As Jacques Derrida has shown,<sup>5</sup> relations with specters might be a way to reveal slices/zones of life that were hidden or suppressed, which, with the help of specters, appear before our eyes. They help us to discover the gap—the spacing wherein the present does not correlate with itself. And this gap would be the source of some more life for us. That is why, if we now return to Azoulay's argument, the photographer and the photographed person both need that "universal spectator" who has a strange mode



of existence, revealing himself in a kind of empty space, directly accessible neither to the spectator nor to the person photographed. . . . So what we here have is a question of communication, however delayed but still finding a way to take place, here, *through the mediation of photography*. This communication, very human, is a part of the life that we share, and it seems more important than the abstract question of citizenship. Further, what we may say about this life, what we may deliver to others about what we have seen, that would be more of a confession—like a confession that we have seen a ghost—than a judgment (which Azoulay seems to see as a kind of elite, personal act) or even less a report (which Azoulay views as an acceptable form of almost immediate violent reaction to what is seen, which certainly has the connotations of wartime).

Azoulay mentions the term *confession* only once, when she writes about the impossibility of gazing directly at a photographed person. But what she writes some dozen pages later, is it not a confession, even a poetic one?

Without photographs, one can go insane. . . . There was someone else there, and sometimes it takes weeks to see the part of it that is the foreign presence, sometimes days, never immediately, at least an hour . . . but in the

end, the silver iodide will burst into dance and disrupt the limits of the photograph. (411)

If it takes weeks, it is not a report. It is a sort of synthetic action, of cutting and framing, of adding words, of printing, of discovering stories. And there are artistic practices of that kind, too, like Heimen's, whose three projects the author takes as an example. These projects are not the work of a photographer but a work with photography—with photography made by others. And this synthetic work is a way to confess the impossibility of staying alone with photographs, of seeing them alone. *To be without* photographs is to go insane, but then *to be with* photographs is then also quite a difficult and unpleasant thing. What is to be done then? One must *share*—insist on making photographs and discussing them, writing whatever the circumstances. One must address oneself to others.

*Nina Sosna is a member of the Institute of Philosophy at the Russian Academy of Science. Her areas of interest include critical theory, image theory, media analysis, and the history of photography.*

## Notes

1. It seems to be out of the question for the author that photography and citizenship are linked. For example, "Anyone who addresses others through photographs or takes the position of

photograph's addressee, even if she is a stateless person who has lost her "right to have rights," as in Hannah Arendt's formulation, is nevertheless a citizen—a member in the citizenry of photography" (85).

2. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor et al., *Theory and History of Literature*, ed. Wlad Godzich and Jochen Schulte-Sasse (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 35.
3. For example, "These collections of photograph-complaints would be worthless, however, if it were not for the citizenry of photography and its citizens" (132). Quite oddly, Azoulay writes, a few lines before, that

"photography can be put forward and read as a nonmediated [*sic*] complaint attesting to situations in which citizenship has been violated" (132); "It is impossible to photograph all the cases, but even if this were possible, there would be no one to look at all of them. But this technical impossibility to photograph, show or view does not mean photographs should not be taken" (314).

4. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
5. See Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

