

**A short analysis of the „Palestinian Rights of Return Protests“ by Mustafa Hassona
in combination with „La Liberté“ by Eugène Delacroix**

*„The flag I was carrying is the same one I always hold in all the other protests I've attended.
My friends make fun of me, saying it is easier to throw rocks without holding a flag in the
other hand, but I got used to it.“*

(Aed Abu Amro, depicted Palistinian „Freedom Fighter“)

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|------------------------------------|----|
| 1. Introduction | 1 |
| 2. About the images | 2 |
| 2.1. Mustafa Hassona's Photography | 2 |
| 2.2. Eugene Delacroix' Painting | 3 |
| 3. Image analysis | 4 |
| 3.1. Use of Image | 6 |
| 3.2. Reception of Image | 7 |
| 3.3. Appropriation of Images | 8 |
| 4. Conclusion | 9 |
| 5. Source | 11 |

1. Introduction

This paper will give a short analytical insight into the combination of Eugène Delacroix' „La Liberté“ and Mustafa Hassona's „Palestinian Rights of Return Protests“, that was shot for Andalou Agency for Getty in 2018, and was a winning image of Leica Oscar Barnack Award 2019.

I choose the combination of the two images because I used to work as a photographer and have a very personal approach to photography. my own experience told me that photography is not just seeing and capturing what happens – it's choosing a moment. The photographer doesn't just get a moment delivered for him to make the photography – he or she is waiting for, seeing, choosing, and capturing the very moment that he or she is deliberately choosing to capture. He or she chooses the light, the angle, the technical facilities, the perspective, the frame, the time, the place, and so on. In all that the scenery they wish to happen needs to happen so they are able to capture it, of course. But all of this is contributing to what makes the process of taking a photography comparable to painting an image. My research question for this paper is:

„How can „Palestinian Rights of Return Protests“ by Mustafa Hassona, in combination with „La Liberté“ by Eugène Delacroix be analyzed together?“

The main focus in the contextual background must be on Hassona's Photography, since I want to explore the combination of the two images in public together, which is grounded on the current image of the Palestinian fighter, that is accompanied by the historical painting.

I will shortly give an insight into the two paintings and how they originated in the first part of the paper. Then in the second part I will ask the question of how they can be analyzed, or rather, how can photographic images be analyzed in general, and how does this apply to Hassona's photography. I am further going into the use of both images together as mass media that was broadcasted widely online, i will explore a possible reception of the images in which I will also explain the effects they had on me when I was watching at them in the looking process that we were supposed to undergo throughout the semester. And last but not least I am looking into the appropriation of images. All three of these ways of analysis are

methods that Müller & Geise suggest.

2. About the images

Warfare itself and its visual representations of heroism are historically connected. French impressionist painters in the nineteenth century like Ingres, Delacroix, Fromentin, Gerome or Ziem were following events to paint and cover them. A few examples of such events are: the Military campaign in Egypt in 1798-99, the Greek War of Independence in 1821-29, the Crimean War in 1854-55, and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. They translated their impressions into idealized images for their European audience. The peak of French impressionist orientalism was between 1855-67 when the world exhibitions (Expositions Universelles) were held in Paris. Later on followed British, German, and other painters, who took on Middle Eastern, Indian and North African Subjects. (Van der Grijp: 89f.). Also in Modern photography, images of the contemporary Middle Eastern world are showcased all around the world in different contexts. Narrativization is a key element of photographic practice: the single moment that is shown in a photography is narrating a story as a simple act of showing how it is (Summers: 445) The two images together combine these aspects in different ways. They are both depictions of war as well as showing a certain narrative that stands as a symbol.

2.1. Mustafa Hassona's Photography

The Image by Mustafa Hassona is showing a Palestinian man from Gaza. The conflict in the region is an ongoing issue since over hundred years. Since 2018 Palestinians in Gaza are protesting every week at the Israeli border. The image is not only compared with Delacroix' *La Liberté*, but also with the biblical King David myth. David killed the giant Goliath as a young shepard boy, using only a slingshot. The mythological Goliath is said to have been a military leader of the Philistines, who were at the time occupying the same area as today's Gaza strip is in. Hassona's photography series and this particular picture were shot on 22.10.2018. Hassona is born in Gaza city in 1981 and is working for the Turkish state news agency Anadolu, assigned to the Gaza Strip. (*Leica Oskar Barnack Award Website*)

The man in the photograph was identified as 20-year-old Aed Abu Amro. He says, he doesn't go to protests to get pictures taken of him, but this image encouraged him to continue demonstrating. *„I was surprised this picture of me went viral,‘ he told Al Jazeera. „I participate in protests on a weekly basis, sometimes more. I didn't even know there was a photographer near me.“* The protests were trying to end an – at the time – 11 year Israeli blockade (Aljazeera: 24.10.18). *„A call to the Great March of Return on Earth Day, March 30, 2018, mobilized 30,000 demonstrators along the border fence: some peaceful, some militant. The Israeli security forces responded with tear gas and rubber bullets, while sharpshooters dealt with anyone trying to climb over the fence. According to Arab sources, there were at least 15 deaths. Since then, every Monday in the Gaza Strip, there is a demonstration for the right of return.“* (Leica Oskar Barnack Award Website) The 2018 Gaza border protests, or as they are called by the organizers: „The Great March of Return“, started on March 30, 2018 and are still continuing ever since. Initially there was five tent camps set up between 500-700m from the border, and 30.000 Palestinians participated in the first protest on 30 March 2018. Each week the protests continued, up until 11 May, with each involving at least 10.000 protestors (Wikipedia). From March 2018 up to the image was taken in October 2018 Israeli forces killed more than 200, and injured more than 18,000 Palestinians in the besieged coastal enclave, including journalists and paramedics. *„The flag I was carrying is the same one I always hold in all the other protests I've attended. My friends make fun of me, saying it is easier to throw rocks without holding a flag in the other hand, but I got used to it.“* *„If I get killed, I want to be wrapped in the same flag. We are demanding our right of return, and protesting for our dignity and the dignity of our future generation.“* (Aljazeera: 24.10.18)

2.2. Eugene Delacroix' Painting

„Delacroix's historical and political painting—a blend of document and symbol, actuality and fiction, reality and allegory—bears witness to the death throes of the Ancien Régime.“ (Louvre Website)

The Painting La Liberté – Liberty Leading the People takes place on the background of the

Paris uprising of July 27-29, 1830. The uprising is known as *Trois Glorieuses* ("Three Glorious Days"), and was initiated for violation of the Constitution by the Second Restoration government, by the liberal republicans. Charles X, who was the last Bourbon king of France, was overthrown at that revolution and replaced by Louis Philippe, the Duke of Orléans. Delacroix himself was a witness of the uprising: „*Delacroix depended on commissions from institutions and members of the royal family, and his personal ambiguity probably confined him to the role of simple bystander (noted by Alexandre Dumas), but as a citizen-artist he helped protect the Louvre's collections from the rioters and, nostalgic for the Napoleonic Empire, was moved to see the tricolor hoisted to the top of Notre-Dame by the insurgents.*“ The work was rejected by the critics and hidden from the public until 1863, when it entered the Musée du Luxembourg, later on from 1874 it went to the Louvre. (*Louvre Website*)

3. Image analysis

How can images be analyzed, and how is a photography formed? The uniqueness of the analysis of visual communication lies in its specific associative logic, as opposed to the argumentative logic that can be found in textual communication. Images can be analyzed adequately, when their principle of communication is being recognized and methodologically and theoretically reflected. Visual communication is following a principle of an association of logic, and follows its own non-rational argumentative, presentative and holistic logic. (Müller, Geise: 37)

It is possible to research the use of an image (*Bildnutzungsforschung*), as well as the reception of an image (*Bildrezeptionsforschung*), or the appropriation of images (*Bildaneignungsforschung*). (Müller, Geise: 2015) In the research about use it is important to ask questions about the quantitative use of audiovisual media. The research of reception of an image is looking into how recipients become aware of a certain audiovisual specter. How intensely recipients are interacting with the media, how do they perceive them on a sensory level, and how they are processing it cognitively. (78) It asks, what people are doing with certain media and images. (79f.) After the phase of the reception of an image, there is often the phase of image appropriation. The research about this is asking, how people are making

the use of images and audiovisual media to their own, and how they integrate them meaningfully into their lives. (81)

According to Jäger, images should be seen as important aspects of social communication. He suggests that the historical aspects have to be included in an analysis, as well as their social and cultural meaning. Also it is important to him, to include the always changing aspects of time and space in an analysis of images. (Jäger: 154)

The context of reception of an image is being influenced by knowledge about the image. This knowledge contributes to different cognitive and emotional reactions when looking at them. So the impact of an image is formed through two factors: the relevance of an image and its contextual knowledge, which includes ethical, moral and political valuation and judgement. These judgements and valuations are being taken almost automatically at an instant. (Müller, Geise: 49) Heringer is introducing several components that together form a photography:

The subjects in the picture: The people who are the subjects in a photography are most relevant for decoding the symbols of the image. It is, according to Heringer, important to ask if they are aware of being photographed. (Heringer: 137)

The photographer: He or she is the most important producer of symbols. The photographer has various possibilities to influence the symbolic character of an image. He or she is deciding to „take“ an image at a certain point in time, and consciously. chooses the moment that he or she wants to have captured. The modes of retouch are also a way of influencing an image, as well as the social and cultural background of the photographer is playing a role, since it influences the symbols and the message. (Heringer: 139)

The camera: The camera gives a certain amount of options to choose from, where for example the frame and the perspective need to be chosen to create the image in a certain specific way. (Heringer: 140)

The textual message: In press photography the textual message means the title of a photography, and furthermore an article or a longer capture that describes the message of the image. According to Heringer, it is important to see the textual message separately from the

image itself, since it can either support the message of the image, or also alienate, modify, limit or reduce the pictorial message. Obviously it includes language, so it can also reduce a circle of recipients who are able to understand the language that is used, as well as the fact of being literate itself, whereas an image is understandable by everybody who is able to see. (Heringer: 140)

The agency: Also the editorial office of the agency has a major role in deciding the message of a press or war photography. For many photographers it is a necessary station in order to publish their images. The agency decides over the choice of the medium (print, internet, ...) and greatly also over the choice of texts that accompany the image. (Heringer: 141)

The visual resemblance of the two main characters in the two images is remarkable. not only that they are both fighting bare-chested, also they are both wearing a red fabric around their hip and carrying a three-striped flag, with a white stripe in the middle.

3.1. Use of Image

Around 1900 photography was becoming a mass medium, or rather a medium of mass-usage, which accompanied a „revolution of communication“. (Jäger: 155) When Müller and Geise talk about the research of use of media (*Bildnutzungsforschung*), they talk about looking at the quantitative aspects of use. They are asking about the scope of audiovisual media. (Müller, Geise: 78) In the case of my chosen images, there is a whole story around their mass media use, which is creating their special connection with each other.

The combination of images went across social media after Hassona's photography was becoming visually recognized online in 2018. According to BBC (BBC Trending: 25.10.18), many social media users linked it to Delacroix's „liberty leading the people“. The Independent criticized the romanization of an image representing the ongoing war crimes in Gaza as if it was only a depiction of beautiful scenery (The Independent: 26.10.18). When a lecturer in Middle Eastern Politics, Professor Laleh Khalili shared Hassona's image on twitter one day after it was pictured in Gaza, her tweet attracted more than 30,000 retweets (44,737 on 06.08.2020) and 80,000 likes (121,312 on 06.08.2020), as well as tens of thousands

upvotes on Reddit (BBC Trending: 25.10.18). Her added depiction of Delacroix' painting has over 1000 retweets and almost 6500 likes (06.08.2020). Even Aljazeera (Aljazeera: 24.10.18), as well as the website of Leica Oskar Barnack Award, mention the reminiscence of the two images. According to the German photography magazine Monopol, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is also a conflict of images. The Israeli imagery is showing mostly military actions and the Palestinian images are emotional pictures of resistance and an individual strive for freedom (Monopol: 26.10.18). While the resemblance of the two images is merely a visual one and not so much a contextual one, it is still possible to see this aspect of resistance and the fight for freedom in both.

3.2. Reception of Image

This part about reception of the images I chose, should be firstly answered by the watching process that we went through throughout the semester. We were advised to print the image(s) and put them somewhere, where we would look at it/them (in my case two) often, and observe how the way we looked at them would change over time. I put my printed images above my desk.

In the beginning I noticed my own admiration for the figures and that I would connect very emotionally with them. I would more feel than I would think. I observed my way of looking was rather a personal one than it was connected to the images themselves. Their story was not really in my perceptive field, I would rather look at them as somebody would maybe look at action figures or heroic idols, rather than historical or political representations of actual events. It was a very primordial way of seeing them, more like just joining force with a power that would maybe be similar to mythological heroes and idols.

Also over time, when I researched more about the actual background of the images, I would still be drawn back to looking at them in a very dreamy and mythological way and disconnect them from their actual stories. This effect might be explaining the effect the images have in speaking to a broader range of people and gathering popularity.

The process of seeing depicted persons as somewhat mythical heroic creatures might be a

factor in iconification of imagery. An image is an icon when it becomes a symbol of something else, and that might be connected to an emotional response as well. As Heringer explains it: the most important aspect of a symbol is its function as a replacement. It becomes a symbol when it stands for something else. When it comes to war photography, the symbols in the image need to be decoded by the recipients. (Heringer: 135)

I personally would point out the emotional connection to an image. When an image is able to create an emotional response in the viewer, it gains the power to have a personal connection with the viewer, gets remembered and associated to other sceneries and events that evoked similar emotions. I argue that not only the stream of thoughts create associations to certain other events that make a connection to an image, but it is rather the emotions that re-awake certain thoughts about associated sceneries.

3.3. Appropriation of Images

The appropriation of images asks, how people are making the use of media to their own, and how they integrate them meaningfully into their lives. One aspect of the popularity of the combination of my two chosen images is heroism, ideology and power related political issues. In impressionist orientalism, war imagery is being created like the classical heroism. Works by Susan Sontag (1979), Roland Barthes (1981), Victor Burgin (1982), John Tagg (1988) or Stuart Hall (1997) are focusing extensively on the photographic representation in regard to ideology and power. The social role of photography issues around interpretation and meaning of photography in ways of how photographs represent and structure identity and subjectivity (Summers: 446). The appropriation of the two images together is based on a representation of war and power, and the escape of suppression which creates freedom.

Rowe writes about reconstructing a cultural past through Dabkeh, a traditional dance in the Middle Eastern region. What he says about dance can also in a way be applied to the appropriation of an image, that stands as a symbol in connection with Delacroix's piece of art. What he says about dance is, that both within Israel and Palestine, the search for historical precedents is a basis for contemporary cultural actions. It can be of particular urgency and interest amongst population groups that have experienced collective traumas.

Experiences like war, exile, colonization, or other political and natural disasters can dislocate people from their cultural pasts, which often leads to threatening a population's existing bonds and networks. It is often helpful to revive elements of the distant cultural past. Reconstructing them as a shared traditions can demonstrate that the past is not lost, but rather continues on into the future. The traumatic events themselves are also often projected across generations through cultural lamentations. Folksongs, dances, oral histories, and other arts and rituals can be a medium for these stories. The disrupted social bonds of a traumatized community can thus appear resilient to the traumatic events. Folk dances can therefore be perceived as carrying both an ancient cultural past and a reminder of the threats to a traumatized community. (Rowe: 364) Through the appropriation of the combination with Delacroix, the freedom fighter becomes a more classical and traditional aura. It is associated with „traditional art“.

For the Palestinian appropriation, an image of something or somebody familiar (the Palestinian freedom fighter), that evokes the association of a famous renaissance painting that holds the power to historically speak to the whole world (*la Liberté*), can emotionally charge the photography with a stronger sense of power and ability to contribute a certain personal Palestinian message to the world, that they have not as much access to, as they would wish. It gains a certain popularity for Palestinians through this double meaning of personal experience and emotional connection, and transmission to the world through a painting that in itself conveys a similar strong story historically and broadly.

As for the appropriation of the Western viewer, through the connection of something familiar (*la Liberté*), to something that is for many maybe not so familiar (half-naked contemporary war fighters with slingshots), may evoke a more detailed interest in the photography and the political and social issue behind it. The combination may awaken interest in the story behind Hassona's image and draw in an attention for a narrative that would have otherwise maybe just stayed a neutral depiction.

4. Conclusion

As impressionist painters followed warfare and heroism to depict them, also photographers in

today's world are following and capturing war scenes to make them accessible to the world and a broad audience. If it is Westerners photographing for the West in different countries, or people from countries in the global South-East who are broadcasting for the whole world, it comes to a similar situation as it was intended by nineteenth century impressionist painters: To make something heroic and war-related visible for a broader specter of people, in order to make more people understand what is happening in the situation of war, who fight and what is being fought for. The narrativization of a situation through an image.

Visual communication follows a specific logic, as well as its analysis does. Visual communication is a form of social communication. It is important to include a social, cultural and historical component into an analysis of an image. The cultural knowledge is forming certain cognitive and emotional reactions when the images are being looked at (Jäger, Müller & Geise).

Socially, Hassona's image in combination with Delacroix, represents freedom and a fight against injustice for the Palestinian people and anyone who identifies with their situation in whatever way, which can include any other form of injustice in any other form of minority or suppression. Both images are depictions of uprisings and resistance, both depicting symbols for freedom and stand as icons against injustice, connected with the myth of David who fought against Goliath.

Even though they are culturally little connected when they stand alone, their combination is a connection of cultures. As mentioned above, through the use of the images together is connecting a Western audience and a Middle Eastern audience, both with different cultural backgrounds, and different connections to the images.

Also historically the two images are rooted in very different contexts. While Delacroix's painting is showing the *Trois Glorieuses* uprising of 1830, and is showing an allegorical image of freedom as a person, the Palestinian freedom fighter is an actual human being of current times, though symbolizing in his actuality a timeframe and historical happenings of more than 70 years.

When it comes to image analysis, there is several aspects in use, reception and appropriation

of the chosen combination of images. The symbolism and symbolical scope is amplified when using the two images in combination. The combination has stirred a much broader and more wide-spread response than the freedom fighter would have had on its own, as well as the Liberty has in today's day and age. They are both stirring different emotional as well as associative responses in reception. The freedom fighter becomes the symbol of liberty, of the famousness and solemnity of Delacroix' renaissance painting. The mythological associations reach up to the fight between David and Goliath and through Delacroix a real Palestinian person reach an almost supernatural aura of magic, by being depicted similar to an allegorical figure of liberty.

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