

Rethink photographic narratives: historiographical insights into Magnum Photos and the legacy of Sergio Larraín

Repensar narrativas fotográficas: reflexiones historiográficas sobre Magnum Photos y el legado de Sergio Larraín

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Abstract:

Photography, as a medium, has long been recognized for its unparalleled ability to capture and convey stories, with Magnum Photos standing as a testament to the profound influence of visual narratives on shaping global perceptions and historical interpretations. This essay delves deeply into the historiographical intricacies of Magnum and the enduring legacy of Sergio Larraín. It underscores the delicate interplay between objective documentation and the inevitable subjective interpretation that often accompanies powerful imagery. Larraín's distinct humanistic approach, which prioritized the intricate subtleties of human experiences amidst broader socio-political landscapes, frequently found itself juxtaposed, if not overshadowed, by Magnum's commercial and editorial imperatives. Such reframing not only alters the essence of the captured moment but also raises critical questions about the ethics of photojournalism and the overarching responsibilities of influential photographic agencies. In today's digital age, where the rapid dissemination of images can lead to widespread reinterpretation, the imperative for a more ethically grounded and transparent approach to photojournalism becomes even more pronounced. Through this exploration, the essay underscores the transformative power of photographs, emphasizing the importance of preserving the sanctity of the original vision while also acknowledging and respecting the myriad interpretations that such images can evoke.

Resumen:

Este ensayo profundiza en la compleja relación entre la objetividad fotográfica y la interpretación subjetiva dentro del ámbito de Magnum Photos, centrándose particularmente en el legado del fotógrafo chileno Sergio Larraín. A través de su lente, Larraín buscó capturar la esencia humana en medio de contextos sociopolíticos cambiantes. Sin embargo, su trabajo, al igual que el de muchos otros fotógrafos de Magnum, a menudo fue reinterpretado y recontextualizado para satisfacer imperativos comerciales y editoriales. Esta transformación no solo altera la esencia y el mensaje del momento capturado, sino que también plantea preguntas críticas sobre la ética y la integridad del fotoperiodismo. En una era donde las imágenes se difunden y consumen rápidamente en plataformas digitales, la necesidad de un enfoque ético y reflexivo en el fotoperiodismo es más crucial que nunca. El ensayo subraya la importancia de preservar y respetar la visión y la intención originales del fotógrafo, al tiempo que reconoce y valora las múltiples interpretaciones y narrativas que una sola imagen puede evocar en diferentes contextos y audiencias.

Palabras clave: Fotografía; Magnum Photos; Sergio Larraín; Estética; Historeografía Visual.

Keywords: Photography; Magnum Photos; Sergio Larraín; Aesthetics; Visual Historeography.

1. Introduction

The intricate tapestry of photography's history is punctuated by continuous historiographical and methodological reassessments. These are not mere scholarly endeavors; they mirror the evolving societal, cultural, and political interpretations of photography's role and influence over epochs. At the heart of this evolution stands Magnum Photos, an iconic photo agency established in 1947 by four trailblazing photographers: Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa, George Rodger, and David Seymour. Their wartime experiences, particularly Capa's haunting memories of the Spanish Civil War, imbued them with a unique perspective, driving them to create an agency that would redefine photojournalism.

Magnum Photos emerged in the post-World War II era, a time rife with socio-political upheavals. Its founding was not just a response to the war's aftermath but a visionary endeavor to chronicle global events with authenticity and artistic flair. The agency's ethos, as George Rodger articulated, was shaped by the "emotional excesses" experienced during wartime, leading to a unique blend of artistry and journalistic integrity (Manchester, 1989, p. 118).

This essay delves into the symbiotic relationship between Magnum Photos and the illustrious Chilean photographer, Sergio Larraín. It aims to elucidate how Magnum's foundational principles influenced Larraín's oeuvre and how his work, in turn, enriched the agency's legacy. Two pivotal themes underpin this exploration: the nuanced interplay between freedom and visual territory, and the intricate dynamics between media's expansive reach and the veracity of photographic representation.

Magnum's inception in 1947 was not merely a commercial venture; it was a profound response to the war's ramifications. The agency's mission transcended mere documentation; it sought to capture the human essence amidst global adversities. This ethos resonated with Sergio Larraín, whose poignant depictions of Santiago's streets mirrored Magnum's penchant for highlighting societal disparities. As Susan Sontag astutely observed, witnessing calamities in distant

lands has become a defining experience of modernity experience (*Regarding the Pain of Others*, 2004).

Scholars like Geoff Dyer have lauded Magnum as a repository of historical imagery, a beacon guiding viewers through the labyrinth of the 20th and 21st centuries (Hoelscher, 2013). Fred Ritchin's characterization of Magnum as embodying 'méfiance' or 'defiance' underscores the agency's rebellious spirit, challenging both photographic conventions and societal norms (Manchester, 1989, p. 143). This spirit of defiance and innovation is palpable in Larraín's work, which seamlessly melds artistic vision with socio-political commentary.

In the context of both post-war events and the photographic tradition, historiography involves the study of how history is written, documented, and interpreted, focusing on the methods, sources, and narratives used by historians and photographers. In the aftermath of war, the historiographical lens examines furthermore the reconstruction of geopolitical boundaries and the ensuing quest for universal human values. Photographers like Henri Cartier-Bresson and those mentioned by Clément Chéroux, captured pivotal moments and pursued ideals like liberty and dignity, reflecting the era's realities and shaping public perception and historical memory (Chéroux, 2017, p. 14), values that resonated deeply with the Chilean photographer.

In conclusion, this essay endeavors to weave a narrative that intertwines Magnum Photos' pioneering spirit with Sergio Larraín's evocative imagery. By juxtaposing Magnum's global perspective with Larraín's intimate portrayals of life, we gain a deeper understanding of photography's transformative power and its enduring impact on historical narratives.

2. Freedom and Visual Territories

This analysis integrates a philosophical framework into historiography by examining the interplay between Magnum's cherished principle of freedom and its expression through Sergio Larraín's visual narratives. By critically assessing Magnum's political stance on otherness and exoticism as depicted in Larraín's portrayal of local territories, we can see how these perspectives influence the

construction of historical narratives. The study utilizes Edmund Burke's influential 18th-century discussion on the sublime and beauty as a foundational theory. This approach is crucial for comprehending how Burke's philosophical ideas have continued to influence historical records and interpretations up to the present day. This approach offers insights into Magnum's ethos of authentically experiencing the world and its enchantment with the unique cultural tapestries of distant cultures, reflecting a historiography that values a multiplicity of experiences and the intricate fabrics of historical events and cultural identities.

Magnum's core ethos rooted in the value of freedom, distinguishes itself from other photographic agencies of its time. This principle, more than just an internal guideline, was strategically publicized to champion the preservation of authorial rights. At its heart, this meant that photographers retained ownership of their creations, safeguarding their "copyright as authors of their imagery" (Hoelscher, 2013, p. 2).

Gerry Badger, a renowned English curator and writer on photography, delves into the essence of a Magnum photograph. He underscores the significance of photographers retaining rights to their images post-publication, noting that such a practice was unconventional for the era. Badger attributes Magnum's profound cultural influence to this steadfast commitment to freedom. He elucidates that Magnum's inception was not solely about capitalizing on markets; it symbolized a collective of photographers united by a shared vision. They sought assignments that resonated with their beliefs and, crucially, retained the copyrights to their work (Lardinois, 2007).

This paradigm shift facilitated Magnum photographers' global visibility, enabling them to undertake extensive projects that reflected their individual artistry and passions. However, these endeavours were always aligned with Magnum's overarching ethos: an ethical-political directive. Badger articulates this principle as a mandate for photographers to uphold a certain calibre in their work. It encourages them to operate with as much autonomy as feasible, even within the confines of their chosen commercial domains (Lardinois, 2007).

In the nascent years of Magnum, photographers wielded significant autonomy over their work. They had the prerogative to dictate the terms of publication, even to the extent of withholding their photographs from media outlets that diverged from their political ideologies. This unparalleled control, coupled with the allure of a broader commercial platform, made Magnum an enticing proposition for many contemporary photographers.

One such illustrious name drawn to the agency was the Swiss photographer and journalist, Werner Bischof. By 1949, he had the distinction of being the first photographer to join the ranks of the founding members. Bischof, who once remarked on the insularity of a life of abundance, blinding many to the stark realities beyond their immediate surroundings, found in Magnum an avenue to transcend these confines. The agency's ethos resonated with his aspiration to traverse uncharted territories and, as he put it, to "venture forth and explore the true face of the world" (MagnumPhotos, "Werner Bischof", n.d.). This quest for authenticity, however, inadvertently positioned this burgeoning cohort of photographers in the role of explorers, charting and claiming the unfamiliar terrains of the world.

Edmund Burke, the eminent Irish philosopher renowned for his aesthetic-political discourses in the 18th century, posits that the allure of the novel and uncharted is deeply ingrained in human nature. He characterizes curiosity as one of the most rudimentary human affections, albeit one with a voracious yet easily satiated appetite. This inclination, according to Burke, is rooted in the innate human desire to exercise certain faculties and passions upon the object of their intrigue (Burke, 1757:1823, pp. 31-3).

Drawing parallels with Magnum's ethos, one can infer that the agency's espoused freedom embodies this very active power that Burke alludes to. Driven by an innate curiosity and the allure of pioneering new frontiers, Magnum empowered its photographers to venture into the realms of the unknown and the 'other'. This was not merely a quest for novelty but a deeper pursuit of aesthetic gratification, facilitated by the agency's commitment to unbridled exploration and representation.

Magnum's sense of freedom transcended mere philosophical musings, manifesting itself in tangible political and commercial strategies. Over time, this empowerment evolved into a strategic marketing initiative, opening doors to fresh cultural and commercial horizons. Central to this was the ambitious endeavor to curate a visual archive of the world, a mission of "rediscovery" through the discerning lens of Magnum. As Steven D. Hoelscher (2013) elucidates in *Reading Magnum*, this was not just an artistic venture but a geographical project, aimed at reshaping the world's aesthetic in the aftermath of the harrowing events of World War II.

To realize this vision, Magnum adopted a strategic approach, designating specific global regions to each of its founding members. David 'Chin' Seymour was entrusted with capturing the essence of Europe, Bill Vandivert was to document the United States, George Rodger was assigned the vast landscapes of the Middle East and Africa, Cartier-Bresson was to traverse Asia, while Robert Capa, with his dynamic flair, was given the liberty of free-roaming assignments, capturing stories wherever they unfolded (Hoelscher, 2013). This allocation was not restrictive but rather a testament to the agency's commitment to freedom. The photographers were not bound by their assignments; they retained the autonomy to engage with multiple projects or none at all.

This strategic approach to global coverage, coupled with the allure of documenting uncharted territories, gave birth to what Badger terms the "traditional Magnum style" (Hoelscher, 2013, p. 140). A style that celebrated the novelty of diverse worlds and the allure of distant lands, and which continues to define Magnum's legacy to this day.

Magnum's dynamism as an organization is evident in its evolution, adapting and transforming in tandem with the shifting landscapes of global markets. Yet, the quintessential images that have become synonymous with the agency's identity are deeply rooted in its pioneering approach to capturing "otherness." This innovative perspective often gravitated towards themes of war, political upheavals, and calamities, as highlighted by Lardinois (*Magnum Magnum*, 2007, p. 9). Such a global photographic narrative emerged during the golden era of photography, a period that saw the rise of illustrious photographers, including

the likes of Sergio Larraín, who was invited to join Magnum in 1959 directly by Henri Cartier-Bresson, becoming thus a pivotal element within the agency's second generation of photographers.

For Magnum photographers, the freedom to traverse the globe and maintain authorship was a double-edged sword. While it granted them the autonomy to interpret and document the world through their unique lenses, it also pigeonholed them into specific labels and narratives. They became emblematic of the regions and themes they captured, and their identities intertwined with their subjects. Sergio Larraín's work exemplifies this duality. While the broader audience perceived Latin America through the lens of protests and political oppression, Larraín delved deeper, capturing the subterranean life that thrived amidst the political chaos—scenes from nightclubs, tango bars, and bordellos paint a vivid picture of resilience and cultural vibrancy (Farago, 2014).

Magnum's endorsement provided Larraín with the platform to contribute to *O Cruzeiro Internacional*, a leading Latin American magazine with global resonance. Here, Larraín showcased a diverse range of works, both in imagery and narrative, while also experimenting with his distinctive photographic style. His unconventional compositions, as observed by Miguel del Castillo during Larraín's exhibition "Um Retângulo na Mão" at the Instituto Moreira Salles in Brazil, often featured dominant floor perspectives, blurred foregrounds, and dynamic motion captures. This vibrant collection, juxtaposed against his more recognized monochromatic Magnum contributions, offers a panoramic view of Latin American places, from Santiago to Patagonia (Castillo, 2018).

A noteworthy contribution is Larraín's "La Ciudad Colgada de los Cerros" (The City Hanging from the Hills), published in 1959 in *O Cruzeiro Internacional*. This tribute to the city of Valparaíso encapsulates Larraín's signature style and his alignment with the European canon's penchant for novelty (F1)¹. Accompanied by his evocative writings, this photo essay, which later became part of the Valparaíso series, remains a cherished gem in Magnum's illustrious collection.

¹ F1. Reportage "La Ciudad Colgada de los Cerros", Valparaíso, 1959 – Photographs by Sergio Larraín. Online archive Instituto Moreira Salles (IMS), retrieved from https://ims.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/cruzeiro_valparaiso_1920px.jpg

Unlike traditional reportages, this work does not adhere to a linear narrative. Instead, it is a layered, aesthetic exploration of the city, a testament to Larraín's personal vision and artistry.

In the vast expanse of Valparaíso, the city emerges as a testament to human tenacity, a vertical defiance against the imposing backdrop of the Andes. Through Larraín's lens, the city's architectural marvels are not mere structures; they symbolize humanity's audacious challenge to nature, juxtaposing man-made verticality against the natural grandeur of the mountains. The inhabitants of this city, while integral to its essence, often recede into the background of Larraín's compositions, becoming mere specks in the vast tableau of verticality.

The two photographs in question, though distinct in their angles, echo a similar narrative. One captures the city from a high vantage point, looking down, while the other gazes upwards, emphasizing the towering structures. These images, rather than narrating a sequential story, converse with each other, encapsulating the essence of Valparaíso—a city that demands to be navigated vertically, whether ascending its heights or descending its depths. When one truly beholds the city, its inherent beauty unfolds, reminiscent of a woman whose allure needs only "dark eyes, flowing hair, and red lips to dazzle" (Larraín, 1959, p. 94-5).

For Larraín, Valparaíso is akin to a mysterious woman, her charm lying in the labyrinthine streets that wind up and down the hillsides. The city's vibrant hues and the enveloping sensation it offers evoke a profound sense of enchantment. Through his photographs, Larraín extracts a nuanced melancholy from the stark urban landscape, offering viewers a glimpse into both his personal aesthetic journey and the city's unique character. In his portrayal, Valparaíso embodies the unsettling beauty of Chile, a beauty he attributes to "el imperio de los Andes"—the empire of the Andes.

Crucially, while Larraín's exploration is deeply personal, his symbolic imagery seems crafted for a wider, international audience. The cover photo of this essay diverges in style from the subsequent images (F2)². It presents a panoramic view

² F2. Reportage Cover "La Ciudad Colgada de los Cerros", Valparaíso, 1959 – Photograph by Sergio Larraín. Online archive AbeBooks, retrieved from https://pictures.abebooks.com/inventory/31678651185_2.jpg

with the cobblestone streets taking center stage. This classic Larraín capture features pigeons in the foreground, a blurred couple in the distance, and a perspective that grants the ground a dominant presence. This image, though of the same city, doesn't directly correlate with the vertical shots that follow. Instead, Larraín employs it as a gateway to a European and more familiar perspective, where either elements and landscapes resemble the ordinary, suggesting that while Valparaíso is intrinsically a Chilean far-reaching piece of land, its allure transcends borders. He articulates this sentiment, writing:

El escenario compuesto de un banco y dos personajes dramatizando la vejez; las farolas colgadas de los postes de cemento y el panorama de grúas en la penumbra del 'fog', nos dan un aspecto del amanecer en Londres. Sin embargo, esta instantánea fue tomada a millares de millas de la capital londinense. Es sencillamente un aspecto del puerto de Valparaíso, balcón chileno frente al Pacífico, la ciudad que también tiene claros amaneceres y mediodías pletóricos de sol.

In Larraín's visual narrative, there's a profound exploration of the familiar and the unfamiliar, a bridge between the known and the unknown. By drawing parallels between Valparaíso and London city, Larraín finds a unifying language in cobblestone, foggy views hiding objects, and cool-breezed and mildly warm sunshines, he invites viewers to find commonalities in seemingly disparate landscapes. This approach underscores the universality of human experience, suggesting that while cultures and geographies may differ, there are shared elements that resonate across borders. The photographer's role, as Larraín sees it, is to decode these shared symbols, making the unfamiliar accessible to a distant and broader audience.

This theme of bridging the familiar and the unfamiliar is further evident in Larraín's reportage on Tierra del Fuego, featured in the renowned Paris Match magazine in 1960³. The archipelago, often referred to as "the end of the world," presents a landscape both hauntingly beautiful and desolate. Larraín's portrayal

³ Founded in 1949, in the aftermath of the Great War, the French magazine covers until these days major national and international news along with aspects of celebrity lifestyles.

captures this duality, juxtaposing the region's stunning natural beauty with symbols of isolation and abandonment. The title "Je Reviens Du Bout Du Monde" encapsulates this sentiment, suggesting a journey to the very edges of the known world and a subsequent return.

The photographs in this series are a testament to the region's stark beauty (F3),⁴ showcasing its dramatic landscapes and the indomitable force of nature. Yet, amidst this natural splendor, Larraín highlights symbols of desolation—wrecked ships, skeletal remains, and scorched forests. These images serve as poignant reminders of the region's harshness and the challenges it poses to both man and nature.

Larraín instinctively distanced himself from the young boy, realizing that despite their shared Chilean heritage, the child was a member of the Alacalufes, a nomadic tribe that led a life of perpetual motion, enduring exceptionally harsh conditions.

Larraín's portrayal of Tierra del Fuego is layered with meaning. Firstly, his return from "the end of the world" positions him as an emissary, one who has ventured into the unknown and returned to share his discoveries. Secondly, his focus on the region's desolation underscores its remoteness, emphasizing its distance from the familiar comforts of urban life. The sunken ships and skeletal remains are metaphors for the challenges and perils of navigating this remote landscape. Lastly, the image of the young boy, shrouded in shadow, serves as a poignant contrast. While they share a name, their worlds are vastly different. This juxtaposition underscores the vast chasm between their experiences, highlighting the gulf between the familiar and the unfamiliar:

J'ai rentronné ce petit Indien près de Farway. Il porte le même prénom que moi: Sergio. Sa famille appartient à la tribu des Alacalufes, pêcheurs de coquillages et chasseurs de lions de mer. Ils vivent en nomades sur cette terre désertique au climat inhumain, mais la toile à voile a remplacé sur leur tente les peaux de phoque traditionnelles (Larraín, 1960a, p. 70-1).

⁴ F3. Reportage "Tierra del Fuego: Je Reviens Du Bout Du Monde". *Paris Match*, 24 September 1960, n598, pp. 68-77 – Photographs by Sergio Larraín.

In both the "Valparaíso" and "Tierra del Fuego" reportages, certain elements consistently stand out in Larraín's photographic narrative. The northern and southern regions of Chile are characterized by their vast and dramatic landscapes, imbued with an aura of melancholy and isolation. Nature's overpowering force is a recurring theme, often depicted in its confrontation with humanity. Whether it's a city precariously perched on hillsides or a tumultuous strait at the world's edge, where violent storms threaten to obliterate ships and lives, Larraín captures a haunting otherness that holds a potent allure for foreign audiences. Through his contemplations on the sublime and the beautiful, Burke allows us to identify an existing paradox in Larraín's work. It is a kind of tragic allure, where the allure of the unfamiliar and the potential peril it represents culminate in an overwhelming sense of sublimity:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience (Burke, 1757:1823, p. 45).

Larraín's oeuvre is a testament to the intricate dance of tragic beauty. While he delves deep into the nuances of otherness and tragedy, he simultaneously maintains a symbolic detachment, allowing viewers to perceive the beauty without being overwhelmed by the pain. Yet, his work never strays far from the familiar tones and codes of the old world.

The seeds of freedom were sown early in Larraín's life, independent of Magnum. While Magnum's ideology emphasized the freedom to travel and work autonomously, fostering a sense of authorial independence, Larraín sought a personal liberation, distancing himself from familiar and political pressures to explore photography as a means of self-expression. His initiation into the world of photography was through his dear friend Jorge Opazo, a Chilean portrait photographer closely associated with the Larraín-Echeñique family. Opazo

ignited Larraín's passion for photography, a passion that Larraín recalls in "El Escribidor Intruso" as one that grew into a vocation, offering him the freedom he yearned for (Donoso, 2004, p. 66).

This newfound freedom allowed Larraín to distance himself from his aristocratic upbringing and conservative family ties (Leiva, 2012, pp. 23-4). His journey eventually led him to Magnum, where his explorations of Latin American cities resonated with Magnum's ethos, allowing him to capture unique perspectives without editorial constraints.

Yet, despite his quest for autonomy, Larraín's work was inevitably shaped by his elite background and influential connections, aligning his photographic narrative with the Western cultural zeitgeist centered in France. His images encapsulated the Western aesthetic that revels in dualities, a sentiment echoed by Burke, who speaks of the intertwined emotions of love, desire, and the beauty found in contrasts (Burke, 1823, pp. 125-6). Magnum's appreciation for Larraín's work wasn't merely for its documentary value but for its evocative portrayal of otherness that resonated with a European audience.

Magnum's philosophical commitment to freedom and authorship propelled it to the forefront of visual storytelling, with a mission to challenge conventions and redefine history (MagnumPhotos, "Overview", n.d.). While Larraín may not have initially created his works with Magnum in mind, his association with the agency amplified his reach, ensuring his images were widely disseminated with retained rights. Consequently, much of Larraín's work resides within Magnum's institutional archives. Despite his free-spirited wanderings and distinctive style, Larraín's legacy in many publications remains intertwined with Magnum, as evident in the credits "Sergio Larraín-Magnum".

3. Long Range Histories and Photography Truth Claim

Magnum Photos' meteoric rise in the world of photography can be attributed to its unparalleled ability to capture and disseminate images that not only narrate significant global events but also become historical archives over time. In the era

preceding the ubiquity of television in the 1980s, photography's golden age was intrinsically tied to the proliferation of knowledge via print media. Magnum's extensive coverage, spanning from the tumultuous 1930s, encompassed diverse realms such as wars, industrial advancements, politics, culture, and public life. However, the significance of this vast documentation is amplified by its photographic representation in media. It's crucial to note that not all these photographs align with editorial or political agendas, leading to a dichotomy where some images gain prominence, while others remain obscured in archives.

The act of viewing certain photographs transcends mere visual consumption; it becomes an avenue to witness fragments of personal truths and derive experiential knowledge. Barthes' concept of "esprit de finesse" elucidates the innate human tendency to imbue images with profound meaning (1984, p. 38). Hoelscher's insights into the Magnum archive underscore the dual nature of photographs: they simultaneously capture pivotal moments and exist as tangible entities. This perspective offers a groundbreaking understanding of photography's multifaceted impact in contemporary society.

While various disciplines, including arts, philosophy, history, and aesthetics, have delved into the intrinsic value of images, the political significance of photography remains relatively uncharted territory. The author ventures into this underexplored domain, examining the Magnum photo-archive's nuanced value. Central to this exploration is the interplay between a photograph's role as a bearer of "social and cultural meaning" (Hoelscher, 2013, p. 6) and its tangible existence in the material realm. The act of publishing a photograph marks a transformative moment: an ephemeral event crystallizes into a concrete form, transitioning from a private memory to a shared cultural narrative.

Fred Ritchin's discourse in *Magnum Photobook* illuminates the intricate relationship between the evolution of photographic technology and the political visualization facilitated by mass-circulation media. Ritchin underscores the pivotal role of iconic magazines like "*Vu*, *Regards*, *LIFE*, *Look*, and *Picture Post*," which not only enhanced the quality of photographic reproduction but also ensured its widespread dissemination across various nations (Ritchin, 2016, p. 6). These publications catalyzed the organic expansion of Magnum and its

photographers, serving as essential conduits for the dissemination of visual narratives during the agency's golden era, which spanned the tumultuous period of World War II to the advent of transformative technologies like image-manipulation software and television in the late twentieth century.

In this dynamic epoch, photographs transcended their visual essence; they were interpreted and contextualized within specific narratives, often morphing into politically charged artifacts. The interplay between the intrinsic visual narrative and the imposed political context occasionally led to a distortion of the photograph's authentic 'truth.' This transformation was not incidental but a meticulously orchestrated process to render the images newsworthy and politically potent.

The scrutiny and subsequent approval of photographs, as experienced by photographers like Larraín, were not governed by aesthetic or artistic considerations but were intrinsically political. Ritchin echoes this sentiment in "In Our Time", invoking Philip Knightley's critique of the portrayal of Capa's iconic "The Fallen Soldier." The narrative surrounding the image was not an objective recounting but a politically charged interpretation, underscoring the inherent bias in the presentation of visual narratives (Manchester, 1989, pp. 421-2).

The dichotomy between the photographer's intent and the editorial narrative is not a contemporary phenomenon but has historical antecedents. A quintessential example is Yousuf Karsh's renowned 1941 portrait of Winston Churchill. Initially, the image was perceived as a visual epitome of England's indomitable spirit amidst the looming threat of Nazi Germany, a narrative that aligned seamlessly with the political climate of the era. As William Manchester remembers: "the prime minister's defiant expression seems to reflect England's resolution as she stood alone, facing the prospect of defeat at the hands of a merciless Hitler" (In Our Time, 1989, p. 13). However, Karsh's subsequent revelations unveiled the nuanced dynamics that unfolded during the capture of this iconic image:

Churchill's cigar was ever present. I held out an ashtray, but he would not dispose of it. I went back to my camera and made sure that everything was

all right technically. I waited; he continued to chomp vigorously at his cigar. I waited. Then I stepped toward him and, without premeditation, but ever so respectfully, I said, 'Forgive me, sir,' and plucked the cigar out of his mouth. By the time I got back to my camera, he looked so belligerent he could have devoured me. It was at that instant that I took the photograph (Fielder, n.d.).

The intricate dynamics between photographers and editorial discretion is a recurring theme in the annals of Magnum Photos. Hoelscher's insightful essay underscores this tension by highlighting the works of Susan Meiselas on the Sandinista Revolution in 1978 and James Nachtwey's haunting captures of the Rwandan genocide in 1994. These photographs, by virtue of their profound impact, not only "broke the news" but also transcended their immediate contexts to embed themselves in the collective consciousness over time (Reading Magnum, 2013, p. 4).

Susan Meiselas, an American documentary photographer affiliated with Magnum Photos since her 1976 project, poignantly articulates the inherent challenges of capturing the multifaceted realities behind the lens. Her six-week sojourn in Nicaragua was marked by a persistent quest to delve beyond the overt events and capture the underlying emotions and sentiments of the people. She remarks, "I'm really interested in how things come about and not just in the surface of what it is" (Molocha, 2016). This profound commitment to capturing the essence rather than the mere spectacle is emblematic of Meiselas's approach.

Among her extensive body of work on the Sandinista Revolution, one image stands out with unparalleled resonance - the iconic "Molotov Man". This photograph, capturing a moment of raw defiance and revolutionary fervour, metamorphosed into a symbol of the revolution, as acknowledged by *TIME*'s editorial team. Its inclusion in the "TIME 100 Photos" project is a testament to its enduring impact. The "Molotov Man" was not merely a photograph; it evolved into a potent symbol of resistance and hope. Its widespread dissemination by the Sandinistas, manifesting in diverse forms from matchbooks to billboards, underscores its transformation from a visual capture to a cultural and political emblem (Gibbs, 2016, p. 77).

In the realm of iconic photography, Thomas Hoepker's evocative image from September 11th, 2001, stands out, not just for its content but also for its journey to public recognition. Remarkably, it took half a decade for this photograph to see the light of day. The primary reason for this delay was its perceived lack of immediate drama and tragedy, especially when juxtaposed with the more visceral images captured by Hoepker's contemporaries on that fateful day.

However, by 2006, the narrative around the photograph began to shift. Critics began to view it not just as a mere snapshot of a moment, but as a profound commentary on the American zeitgeist. The image, once overlooked for its seeming detachment from the day's horrors, was now lauded as a symbol of America's culture of dissociation. This evolving interpretation of the photograph was further cemented when Frank Rich, a columnist for *The New York Times*, referenced it in his thought-provoking piece titled "Whatever Happened to the America of 9/12". The photograph's journey from obscurity to iconicity underscores the fluidity of interpretation and the evolving nature of visual narratives in the socio-political landscape:

Mr. Hoepker's photo is prescient as well as important — a snapshot of history soon to come. What he caught was this: Traumatic as the attack on America was, 9/11 would recede quickly for many. This is a country that likes to move on, and fast. The young people in Mr. Hoepker's photo aren't necessarily callous. They're just American. In the five years since the attacks, the ability of Americans to dust themselves off and keep going explains both what's gone right and what's gone wrong on our path to the divided and dispirited state the nation finds itself in today (Rich, 2006).

Following the publication of this evocative image, an unexpected twist occurred. Two individuals featured in the photograph came forward, contesting Rich's interpretation. They asserted that they had been deeply affected by the day's events, emphasizing that it was "inherently inconceivable for them to remain untouched by such a catastrophe" (Hoelscher, 2013, p. 6). However, their personal testimonies could not alter the overarching narrative that the photograph had come to symbolize. The image had transcended its immediate

context, embodying a broader political and cultural commentary that resonated with the American psyche of that era.

The transformative journey of Hoepker's photograph began in earnest in 2006 when it was thrust into the public domain and subsequently amplified by critical discourse. What was once dismissed as a non-newsworthy shot evolved into a poignant reflection on history and human resilience. As Jones (2011) aptly noted, the image encapsulates a universal truth: life's rhythm persists, even in the shadow of profound tragedies. This photograph, with its layered meanings, surpassed both the initial editorial judgments of that fateful day in New York and even Hoepker's own anticipations, cementing its place as a significant cultural artifact.

Photographers often grapple with the unpredictable nature of their work's reception, especially when it comes to publication. They must navigate the delicate balance between artistic integrity and the demands of the media landscape. Sergio Larraín was one such photographer who felt particularly stifled by the constraints of media manipulation. In a candid letter to Cartier-Bresson in 1965, he expressed his disdain for the relentless pace of journalism, lamenting that it eroded his passion and focus for his craft (Sire, 2013, p. 387).

Every photograph that finds its way into the public domain undergoes a metamorphosis. It assumes a mediatic value, which can either align with the photojournalist's original vision or deviate from it. Larraín often felt torn between these two paths: producing images that catered to the market's appetite or staying true to his artistic ethos, hoping that his work would eventually gain recognition.

For Larraín, the act of compromising a photograph's essence for the sake of publication was akin to a personal betrayal. He believed that over time, photographs inevitably drift away from their creator's intent, becoming fragments of societal narratives. He once remarked, "I want my photography to be an immediate experience, not something to be digested. Like any art, it must be sought deep within oneself" (qtd. in Larraín, *El Rectángulo en la Mano*). Despite his aversion to the commercial-political interpretation of photography, Larraín's work has inadvertently become a beacon of political consciousness.

Among his most notable works is his coverage of the Algerian War of Independence in 1959. This assignment, along with his expose on the Sicilian mafia, marked his initiation into Magnum and is regarded as some of his most impactful work (Leiva, 2012, p. 33). His extensive documentation of the conflict zone, particularly Casbah, resulted in over 1350 individual photographs⁵.

Around 50 years later, when Magnum released *Magnum Revolution* in 2012, Larraín's coverage of the Algerian conflict was prominently featured. Anderson, in his piece "Blood and Hope", delves into the symbiotic relationship between Magnum's photographers and global conflicts, emphasizing the agency's commitment to chronicling revolutionary times (2012, p. 6).

Larraín, representing the newer generation of Magnum photographers, continued this legacy. His images from Algeria were emblematic of the nation's struggle against French colonialism (Anderson, 2012, p. 224). However, Larraín's approach was distinct. Instead of capturing the overt violence and chaos, he sought human stories, reminiscent of his earlier work in Valparaíso. He looked for people and places as he did in the past. In the original series held by Magnum, the bulk of the photos show people in their natural context, portrayed under Larraín's authorial gaze. The photographs are taken in low/high angles and people are used as vanishing points, their faces are usually blurred or not shown and/or they have their backs to the camera (F4)⁶. His unique perspective, characterized by unconventional angles and often obscured faces, offered a more nuanced portrayal of the conflict.

Yet, the political interpretation of these images was largely shaped by the context in which they were presented. Certain symbolic elements, such as traditional attire and architectural motifs, coupled with the backdrop of revolution, influenced the viewer's perception. Without these markers, the images could be open to vastly different interpretations. This underscores the complex interplay

⁵ Binder n5, "Algerian Farmer Roll Caption and Information (for NYT)", Sergio Larraín archive. Magnum Paris, August 2019.

⁶ F4. Coverage of The Algerian War of Independence. 1959 – Photographs by Sergio Larraín. Archive Magnum Photos Paris, retrieved from

between a photograph's inherent message and the external narratives that envelop it.

Leaving aside the premise of violence for a while, when reading Larraín's roll captions on Algeria,⁷ his own approaches are marked more by a humanist outlook than by a raw, objective reportage. Concerning a farmer family, for example, his understanding is that "their main problem is keeping the ever-increasing [muslim] population fruitfully occupied to prevent *fellagha maquis* from recruiting them and taking over the region" (Larraín, "Algerian Farmer Roll Caption and Information -for NYT-, 1959)" Larraín wrote.

In his pictures, the photographer was trying to understand people's situations regarding the political conflict, a psychological kind of violence, perhaps, but not the standardised one concerning gun power and mass destruction. Larraín even utilises the expression *fellagha maquis*, an Arabic expression for anti-colonial guerrillas (*fellagha* refers commonly to the Algerian nationalist in French North Africa, and *maquis* to the FLN *maquisards*, which stands for the rural soldiers of the National Liberation Front).

Sergio Larraín got involved in people's lives and assimilated the multi-layered and humanitarian context of Algeria, where despite the conflict, locals had to keep on with their lives: "family at dinner / in father's office after dinner... atmosphere of tension, keeping close together for protection... putting up iron shutters for the night / Bernard in his own library with his books" (Larraín, "Algerian Farmer Roll Caption and Information (for NYT)", 1959).

This is why these photographs do not necessarily show the means of revolution Magnum writes about. The images correspond to a different narrative: the first one is a high-angle of a narrowed line with a fully covered person in the background, wearing a white dressing gown and veil, carrying a few items; the line is shaped by heavy concrete walls and contrasted with asymmetrical lighting work; in the foreground, a donkey head pops up from the right side as if approaching the person at the back. The next picture shows a soldier wearing a

⁷ Binder n5, "Algerian Farmer Roll Caption and Information (for NYT)", Sergio Larraín archive. Magnum Paris, August 2019.

rifle on his back and control-checking a person with their arms raised (F5)⁸. In the same graphic sequence, the last picture exhibits a commercial line in a lower-angle style; different varieties of fruits are seen on sale, and people seem to be spending a regular day in their lives; one soldier is leaning over a fruit stand in the middle of the composition; he is the only character that stares directly at the photographer's camera. Nothing graphic enough reveals either violence or revolution in the work of the Chilean.

These photographs, as any other, however, placed in the right context and by the right speech, may articulate a guided visual narrative in specific directions that, in this case, becomes an aesthetic of the revolution.

Magnum utilized media's long-range spread as a channel to materialise cultural meaning through photographs. This process influenced both collective memory and history. The focus was not necessarily on the photographer's ulterior motive at the moment of shooting or the photograph's claim to truth. Instead, emphasis was placed on image quality and the potential to contribute to a larger visual narrative. The rationale flow thus subtly unveils Magnum's role in shaping both local and global imaginaries exposing it as an institution that, rather than creating, grants partial and restricted access to our world through edited and selective content.

For Larraín, Magnum Photos, even though a second-to-none experience in his personal and professional formation, meant an irreversible wound in the usage of his work, changing the original claim of the photographs: the case of Algeria and the portrayal of revolution, the poverty through the Street Children series and the reportage on the Sicilian mafia are only a few examples of this. As mentioned by Magnum's editorial team, "when you picture an iconic image, but can't think who took it or where it can be found, it probably came from Magnum (...) Magnum Photos reaches a global audience and has established itself as the authentic, storytelling photographic brand" (MagnumPhotos, "Overview", n.d.).

⁸ F5. Coverage of The Algerian War of Independence. 1959 – Photographs by Sergio Larraín. Online Archive Magnum Photos through Pinterest Gallery, retrieved from <https://www.pinterest.cl/pin/612278511823195011/>

Magnum is not precisely its photographers; it is a complex organic institution that “for over sixty years has been responsible for taking some of the world’s most memorable photographs, images that have become an instantly recognisable part of our cultural landscape” (Lardinois, 2007, p. 8).

Like the work of Yousuf Karsh, Susan Meiselas, James Nachtwey and Thomas Hoepker, Larraín’s work has constantly been subjected to certain deformities of its original meaning, transforming the figure photographer into an uneasy, tormented professional. Nonetheless, this phenomenon has been established as an increasingly commercial aspect for Magnum.

As with the work of many other photographers, Larraín’s photographs have helped to recreate visual experiences of history and truth. However, the primary function of the collected material has so far failed to exhibit its condition as objective and unique photographs but has succeeded as meganarratives, keeping the photograph’s claim of truth in most cases completely veiled.

4. Final Reflections

Photography, as a medium, has always been a powerful tool for capturing moments, telling stories, and influencing perceptions. Magnum Photos, with its illustrious history and roster of iconic photographers, stands as a testament to the profound impact of visual narratives on our collective consciousness. However, as we delve deeper into the historiographical insights of Magnum and the legacy of Sergio Larraín, it becomes evident that the line between objective documentation and subjective interpretation is often blurred, leading to a reframing of photographic narratives.

Magnum Photos, since its inception, has been at the forefront of photojournalism, shaping the way global events and stories are perceived. Its influence is undeniable, with its images often becoming the definitive visual representations of historical moments. Yet, this power to shape narratives comes with its own set of challenges and responsibilities. The

agency's commercial imperatives and editorial decisions have, at times, overshadowed the original intent of photographers, leading to a transformation of the image's context and meaning.

Sergio Larraín's association with Magnum offers a poignant case study in this regard. A photographer with a distinct humanistic approach, Larraín's work in Algeria and other regions captured the nuanced human experiences amidst larger political and social upheavals. His images, devoid of overt violence or revolutionary fervor, focused on everyday moments amidst conflict. However, when viewed through the lens of Magnum's editorial choices, these photographs were often repurposed to fit broader, more commercially viable narratives.

This reframing of Larraín's work raises pertinent questions about the ethics of photojournalism and the responsibility of agencies like Magnum. While it is undeniable that certain images, when contextualized appropriately, can fit specific narratives, it is crucial to acknowledge and respect the photographer's original vision. Larraín's photographs, with their emphasis on human experiences and subtle storytelling, challenge the conventional paradigms of photojournalism that often prioritize sensationalism over depth.

Furthermore, the legacy of photographers like Larraín serves as a reminder of the transformative power of images. Photographs, once released into the world, take on a life of their own. They become open to interpretation, appropriation, and even manipulation. Larraín's "Molotov Man" or Thomas Hoepker's 9/11 photograph are prime examples of how images, over time, acquire meanings and connotations that might diverge from the photographer's original intent.

In the age of digital media, where images are disseminated rapidly and widely, the reframing of photographic narratives becomes even more pronounced. Magnum Photos, with its global reach, plays a pivotal role in this landscape. The agency's decisions on which images to promote, how to contextualize them, and what narratives to weave around them have far-

reaching implications. It underscores the need for a more introspective and ethically grounded approach to photojournalism, one that respects the sanctity of the original image while acknowledging its potential for diverse interpretations.

In conclusion, the historiographical exploration of Magnum Photos and the legacy of Sergio Larraín offers valuable insights into the complexities of photographic narratives. It underscores the dynamic interplay between objective documentation and subjective interpretation, between the photographer's vision and the agency's commercial imperatives. As we reflect on the power of images to shape histories, perceptions, and truths, it becomes imperative to approach photographic narratives with a sense of responsibility, integrity, and respect for the multifaceted stories they tell. The legacy of photographers like Larraín serves as a beacon, guiding us towards a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of the world around us, one frame at a time.

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