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Raymond Depardon and *That* Photograph, Beirut 1978.

Abstract

By considering the changing attitude of French photographer, Raymond Depardon, to his iconic action-shot from the war in central Beirut 1978, this article suggests that the Lebanese capital's fate over the last forty years plays a crucial role in Depardon's critique of photojournalism.

Key words: Depardon, 'point-of-view' shot, Beirut, 1978, photo-journalism

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Introduction

[L]a photo ne peut pas être journaliste.
C'est une récupération. (Depardon 2004: 15)

[Photography cannot be journalistic. It is
a form of recuperation]

This article starts from the premise that the work of the world-renowned French photographer and filmmaker, Raymond Depardon, betrays a particular, specific interest in Lebanon and especially Beirut. Since 1965, over forty years, Depardon has visited and photographed the country on at least six occasions, from the peaceful period in the mid-1960s through the wars of the 1970s and 1980s, and into the post-war period of the 1990s and 2000s. Indeed, after Chris Steele-Perkins, the most prolific of photographers who has currently 212 images of Beirut recorded by the photographic agency Magnum, Depardon is next with 158.

This article will also argue that Depardon's photograph from the Lebanese war that has become iconic – an action photograph, point-of-view, classic of photo-journalism (Fig. 1) – actually marks the *end* of a period in Depardon's work (that of the jobbing photo-journalist), following the slow realisation of the compromised nature of photojournalism and inaugurated by the infamous 1968 image captured by his colleague at the start of the Biafran war, Gilles Caron, photographing Depardon himself capturing extreme suffering in Nigeria.¹

Indeed, this capturing by Caron – ethically even more compromised than Depardon's due to his piggy-backing on this most distressing scene – is that which inaugurates a slow, decade-long, realisation that photojournalism is compromised. And yet, the ground-breaking action

image from Beirut 1978 we concentrate on here, as well as marking the end of unproblematic photojournalism for Depardon, is also considered an early classic of the sub-genre, not only as ‘point-of-view’ action-shot but also signifying what today we have been encouraged, during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to call ‘embeddedness’.²



Fig. 1 - Raymond Depardon, ‘Lebanon. Beirut. Civil War. 1978. A Christian Falangist’.

However, it is then to Depardon’s credit that nearly three decades before we started using this notion, he had, already in 1978, become highly suspicious of the close-up, involved action-shot. It may be highly significant then that it is his experience in Beirut in November 1978 that, as we shall see, seems finally to break any unmediated, uncritical use of photography in Depardon’s photojournalism: hence the use of *that* photo, the italics indicative of a problematic status for this image. Since the 1970s – and *that* image in particular – Depardon’s reflection on the compromises of photojournalism have moved him firstly into filmmaking especially documentaries, but also to an aesthetic of what he calls ‘temps faibles’ [actionless shots].

Embedded in Beirut?

[J]e l’ai déjà senti à Beyrouth: on a tendance à photographier plutôt des signes que des événements. (Depardon 2004: 30)

[I already felt it in Beirut: we tend to photograph signs rather than events.]

Miriam Cooke has argued that ‘Beirut is photogenic. Always has been. Always will be’ (2002: 393), her example being Depardon’s eerie 1992 image of Maarad street. This image, taken during Depardon’s return to Beirut in 1991, Cooke suggests, shows Depardon trying to make the city look like a ruined classical civilization. This aestheticised Beirut marks a shift away from war images that had dominated Depardon’s earlier visits, the 1965 work notwithstanding. Depardon had visited Beirut first in 1965, to photograph the new ‘St Tropez

of the Middle East', with its peaceful, beach scenes. But this collection could not be more different from his 1978 work in Beirut, 'le pire souvenir de ma vie', as Depardon later put it, 'bloqué dans le centre-ville' ['the worst memory of my life, [...] locked in the city centre'] (2004: 12).

As we know, the Lebanon war of 1975-1990 begins in April 1975, after Pierre Gemayel, head of the Falangists (a Christian, Maronite army), had (in the January of 1975) demanded that exiled Palestinians leave Lebanon. So begins what Georges Corm has called 'la déchirure libanaise' ['the Lebanese rift'] (1991, chapter 6: 191-241). Syria's imposed cease-fire then divides the city into the West (Muslims, including Palestinians) and the Christian East, which is followed by the failure of an Arab – mainly Syrian – force to maintain peace. In 1978 the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon sees many flee to Beirut, and the establishment of the South Lebanese army under Israeli orders; July-October 1978 sees clashes between Christian militias and Syrian forces in Beirut.

Sent to cover this civil war in Beirut in 1978, Depardon was working for *Stern* magazine (the German equivalent of *Paris-Match*) and he took pictures that were, as he looks back on this 1978 period, 'violentes, accrocheuses, tout ce que je n'aime pas dans la photographie' ['violent, eye-catching, everything I don't like about photography'] (2004: 37). And when shown in *Stern*, these war images had to be double-page, with a change of focus on each page – Christian, then Muslim, so on – and the whole reportage 'a fait un boum' ['made a splash'], and was followed by *Sunday Times* and American newspaper 'commandes' ['commissions']. Depardon also asserts that, whereas the 'left-wing' photographers (Don McCullin, Catherine Leroy) were photographing the victims (mainly Muslim), Depardon, by contrast, went for the less appetising Christian militia, who, even before Sabra and Chatila, he notes, wore black t-shirts, were scarily racist and violent. *That* image then is from East Beirut, Achrafieh, the Christian stronghold led by (often young) 'Chamounist'. In the introduction to the new edition of *Notes* ([1979] 2006: 10), Depardon now acknowledges that the Beirut trip of 1978 was, as well as a commission from *Stern* editor Rolf Gilhausen, also the start of (a test for?) his new role for the Magnum photographic agency.

Lodged with all other photographers in the too-expensive Hotel Commodore in the west of the city, soon all other photographers had left, and he was alone in the conflict area. Depardon remembers how he had to run the gauntlet of check-points; and every time there was the same ceremony: the Christian Falangist fighters would flick the safety-catch on their weapons and tell Depardon *not* to photograph, and then they would do it again and then tell him that now he *had* to photograph (2006: 12). At the start of November 1978, Depardon returns to Beirut, this time with black and white film in his camera, and decides now to live with the 'communauté' ['community'] and not any old one: 'je choisis les plus perdants, les plus encerclés: ceux du centre-ville, toujours vide, les chrétiens de Gemayel' ['I chose the worst losers, those who were most surrounded: those in the city-centre, always empty, who were Gemayel's Christians'] (2006: 14):

La première photo est presque un symbole: le passage d'un angle à risque. Il me fallait courir avec le combattant phalangiste pour surprendre le tireur embusqué et ne pas lui donner une deuxième chance de nous atteindre. J'avais été bien accueilli mais, après dix jours de cave et de bureau vide, je m'aperçus du ridicule de la situation. [...] Sans réfléchir vraiment, je pris une place pour Karachi. (Depardon [1979] 2006: 14)

[The first photo is almost a symbol: the move through a risky turning. I had to run with the Falangist fighter in order to surprise the hidden sniper and not to give him a second chance to hit us. I had been warmly welcomed, but, after ten days of a cellar

and an empty office, I could see the ridiculousness of the situation. Without really thinking about it, I booked a seat for Karachi.]

Thus, looking back, in 2010, to the 1978 visit during the height of the civil war, he remembers:

Parti sur un coup de tête, un coup de cœur, avec le minimum – deux Leica, deux objectifs, un sac de couchage et un stock de pellicules noir et blanc – j’ai passé une nuit dans un hôtel sans confort à deux pas de la ligne de démarcation, pour pouvoir rejoindre vite l’Est et y rester le plus long possible. (Depardon 2010: np)

[Leaving suddenly in a heartfelt manner and with the minimum – two Leicas, two lenses, a sleeping bag and a pile of black and white film – I spent a night in a basic hotel a few yards away from the demarcation line, so that I could get to the East and stay there for the longest time possible.]

Most of Depardon’s images from Beirut 1978 are taken 70-100 metres from the Syrian ‘enemy’ snipers, in the old centre of Beirut, where there is no-one or anything but banks and offices and 20 or so fighters hidden underground: ‘Je ne fais rien de bon’ [‘I am not getting anywhere’] ([1979] 2006, 31), he writes in the accompanying text in *Notes*, which is written as if for the girlfriend he had left behind to go to Beirut in 1978. In fact, all the rest of the Beirut photographs from 1978 in *Notes* are captioned by Depardon as failures. Contrast this with his claims to embeddedness:

J’ai gardé du reporter la rapidité, le silence, l’amour du geste ou son contraire. Mon attirance, c’était plutôt l’amour du vide. Cette contradiction m’a toujours été bénéfique, j’ai toujours cherché à isoler une action, à la rendre plus lisible, à dégager un geste, un visage, à isoler un homme dans la foule, une action dans l’actualité. (Depardon 2004: 16)

[I kept the reporter’s speed, silence and desire for movement or its opposite. What attracted me rather was the desire for emptiness. This contradiction has always been good for me: I have always wanted to concentrate on an action, to make it more legible, to highlight a movement or a face, to concentrate on a man in the crowd, on an action in the headlines.]

Yet Depardon excludes *that* photo in the book’s Beirut section that shows six images from the 1978 visit (2004: 36-43), preferring images of destruction, a car potholed with bullets, a car used in a marriage and a camera on a tripod before a destroyed building. Twenty-five years later after the event of 1978, Depardon appears now to be suspicious of *that* photo, especially as he argues in 2004 for the political nature of photography. Is this indicative of his rejection of the action-scoop, of the ‘point-of-view’ ‘embeddedness’ of *that* photo? *That* photo had appeared as the very first image, with a dozen others from Beirut, in *Notes* (1979), alongside a 1978 photo-essay on Afghanistan. It also appears in the ‘Photo-poche’ volume on Depardon (2002), alongside the bullet-holed car from Beirut in 1978.³ Crucially then, it is Depardon’s return visits to Beirut in 1991 and in 1998, after the war has ended, that seem to begin the reassessment of this action image. In 1991 Depardon is invited as part of the ‘Beirut Photographic Mission’, with other Magnum photographers Josef Koudelka and René Burri, Robert Frank, Gabriele Basilico and Fouad Elkoury, to cover the destruction of the buildings over the fifteen-year war (coll. 1992). Then he returns in 1998 to find a very different place.

In the second return visit, in 1998, Depardon underscores how much Beirut has been radically changed since the 1970s and 1980s.⁴ For example, he is shocked to find that Place des Martyrs has gone.

That image

La photographie donne à voir [...] des choses dures, des choses belles, [...] une réalité adoucie ou plus violente, son « instant décisif » est trompeur, il n'est qu'un moment [...]. On s'apercevra tout de suite que toute photo n'est neutre, donc politique.
(Depardon 2004: 13)

[Photography allows us to see [...] difficult things, beautiful things, [...] a reality that has been softened or made more violent; its 'decisive moment' is a trick, it is but a moment [...]. We can see right away that photography is not neutral, therefore political.]

Using the photographic volume from the 1992 post-war period which includes work by Depardon on his first return visit, Miriam Cooke builds on her aesthetic argument about Beirut, arguing that *Beirut centre-ville* (1992) 'remembers its traces in order to forget them': it 'tells another story that defies moralizing and encourages amnesia' (2002: 393). It is a lavish book, financed by the Hariri Foundation (as in the assassinated Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri). Cooke compares *Beirut centre-ville* of 1992 with another photo-album on the war from 1978, published the same year as *that* photo, called *Harb Lubnan* ('Lebanon's War'). But she sees huge differences between the two volumes: action photos in the latter contrast sharply with the 'ideologically neutral' in the *Beirut centre-ville*: in fourteen years, Cooke argues (2002: 396-7), 'the vision that informs their production [of *Harb Lubnan* and *Beyrouth centre-ville*] has changed from documentary and partisan to aesthetic and impartial'. Cooke seems to be saying that the 1970s trend of war photography in Lebanon, a highly moralizing one, is linked to narrativity, for which she quotes Hayden White's definition as: 'the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality we can imagine' (Cooke: 398). However, given that *that* photo is taken of a side we would not want to be on (Christian Falangist, involved in the Chabra and Shatila massacres in 1982, proto-fascist even) already suggests something else going on in this image. So is there narrativity in *that* photo that eschews moralizing? This is an interesting claim, especially for consideration of Depardon's view of *that* photo. But how documentary and partisan is *that* photo?

Though he visits many war-torn places across his career as photojournalist, Depardon's work is often the opposite of a Gilles Caron – the Gamma colleague he photographed at work in Biafra, who dies in Cambodia in 1970, and on whom Depardon publishes a tribute (1978). Indeed, Michel Guerrin (Photo-poche 2002: v) suggests that *that* photo is an exception in Depardon's work, as he normally avoids close-ups of war. Furthermore, Guerrin argues that Depardon's first proper photo-essay, *Notes* ([1979] 2006), and which starts with *that* photo – marks a turning point in his career, but not for the reasons we have so far suggested. According to Guerrin, Depardon in 1978 now wanted to include himself in his work,

including the text-image dynamic that is begun in *Notes* (published by a poetry publisher, Arfuyen, in Paris).⁵ The idea that any photograph is a trace of the photographing self shocked many of Depardon's photo-journalist friends and colleagues at the time *Notes* was published in 1979, risking what Guerrin calls 'un narcissisme déplacé en temps de guerre' ['a narcissism which is out of place in a war situation'] (2002: vii). Depardon's argument was that, with televisual news-reporting by 1978 the main source of information, he was now deconstructing photo-journalism, avoiding the stereotypes of 'aventure, risque, gloriole' ['adventure, risk, vainglory'] (Guerrin: viii). So the 1979 photo-essay *Notes* – and hence *that* photo – now appears as pivotal in Depardon's career and more widely in what André Rouillé (2005) sees as a growing suspicion for some photographers and theorists, across the late 1980s and 1990s, towards photo-journalism. Interestingly, Guerrin (2002: vii) jumps the gun somewhat, as he argues that *Notes* shows the new theory of Depardon's of 'temps faibles' ['actionless shots'], here in war. But does *that* photo really do this?

1978 is also an ironic moment for Depardon to begin to abandon an unproblematic photo-journalism, for it is at the same time that Depardon leaves the Gamma agency, which he had helped found, for Magnum – the key photography 'agence' of the 'decisive moment', of photographic geometry, of the use of pictorial lights (Guerrin 2002: xi). For Guerrin, this move to Magnum is perhaps an odd decision by Depardon. He sees Depardon's work as part of a different tradition – an American one, of Walker Evans for the aesthetic documentary side, and of Robert Frank for the addition of autobiography to this aestheticised documentary (Guerrin: x-xi); above all, Guerrin sees a 'sobriety' that keeps Depardon attached to his past: does a 'monde mis en scène' ['a world placed on a stage'], Guerrin asks in the voice of Depardon, have to be a 'monde volé' ['a stolen world']? Guerrin says that Depardon manages to keep a distance between any conflating of these two, by instituting his own distance.

Given its inclusion by the French photographer Denis Roche in his collection of 100 classic photographs of 1999, *Le Boitier de mélancolie*, Depardon's image has clearly achieved an iconic status. Therefore, we will finish on this question of iconicity, especially its importance in relation to language, to that of the caption ('Lebanon. Beirut. Civil War. 1978. A Christian Falangist'), and to the commentary on the image, Denis Roche's one-page essay being a good example.

Conclusion: 'If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough...' (Robert Capa)

N'est-elle pas d'abord et avant tout
une photographie, un moyen autonome
d'être politique ? (Depardon 2004: 13)

[Isn't a photograph, first and foremost, an
autonomous way of being political?]

We might respect Capa's photographic injunction – though critiqued by Depardon in his later career (Depardon 2000) – but what does it mean for the viewer of the photo (rather than the photographer themselves), and then for the photo-textualist such as Roche?

In their compelling study of iconic photography and its dissemination across public visual culture, Hariman and Lucaites (2007: 303) argue that '[p]hotojournalism continually

reconnects the liberal individual and the democratic public'. There are many problems with this, politically, which we do not have time to go into here. But one area that goes to the heart of the issue is the question of iconicity.

Profoundly impressed by Depardon's iconic 1978 action-photograph, Denis Roche nevertheless begins his commentary on *that* photo thus:

Je réfléchissais l'autre jour, en déambulant dans les rues qui sont autour de la Nation, à ce qui sépare un texte trop connu d'une image trop vue. (Roche 1999: 194)

[I was thinking the other day, whilst walking in the streets around Nation, about what separates a text that is too well-known from a photo that has been seen too much.]

The pleasure of reading words for the first time is hard to recreate, suggested Roche, and yet a glance at one's bookshelves can remind one of the 'légère mais vertiginieuse décharge' ['light but dizzying release of emotion']; whereas:

La photo trop vue, on ne sait jamais combien de fois il faut être tombé dessus pour en être enfin frappé, pour s'en rendre compte enfin, pour coïncider enfin complètement avec elle, pour être enfin comme elle et comme le fantôme de celui qui la prenait. Au dixième, au centième regard qu'on lui porte, et le jour seulement où ça n'aura pas été par hasard, les 'enfin' s'étant accumulés et rien n'ayant fondu, un plein tout entier voit le jour et s'installe pour toujours entre elle et nous. (Roche: 194)

[With the photo that has been seen too much, we never know how many times we have to stumble on it in order to be finally struck by it, to notice it finally, to coincide completely with it finally, to become finally like it and like the ghost who was taking it. With the tenth, or the hundredth look we give it, only when it is clear that this was not simply chance, when the 'finallys' have got more and more and nothing has melted away, then a fullness comes about and places itself forever between it and us.]

Depardon's photographs *are* political; indeed, the politics of a photograph depends, it would seem, as much on the image itself as how an image is circulated, reproduced, viewed and presented, and ultimately narrated. Is to narrate, we might ask finally, simply to moralize? *That* photo might suggest that this is not necessarily true, at least within the photographic medium.

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¹ Image available at (accessed 3 March 2014): http://www.deltasearch.com/?s=img&babsrc=HP_ss&rlz=0&sd=17&q=depardon%20gilles%20caron%20biafra%201968

² The set of these action images by Depardon from 1978 is available at: <http://www.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&STID=2S5RYDZ1ABTQ> (accessed 26 February 2014). There is something highly skilful about this particular image, even compared to other images from the same moment (with the same caption for the same soldier, now taken from the side and without the street ahead). Is it partly that we are with him, following him, sharing his danger, whereas the side-view seems to remove this?

³ Though *that* image is in black and white, not all the 1978 work in Beirut is; many are in colour, though the bullet-riddled car, for example, is often shown as black and white.

⁴ Recorded in his volume with his wife, confusingly also called *Beirut centre-ville* (2010).

⁵ In a 1998 interview, Jacques Chevrier argues that 1978-1979 was a crisis point for photo-journalism: thanks, firstly, to television's competition, and secondly to the decline of 'reportage d'auteur' ['art-house reportage'] (as in the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Capa, David Seymour) (Depardon 2006: 80).