Narrative in the Photographic Work of Ahlam Shibli

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We are in a moment of the utter atomization and derangement of photography. The images of photographic practice have become at once palpable and inconsequential, especially in their ability to speak to a thousand horrors on one hand, and inability, on the other, to transmit the effect and shock that lies outside their digital inscription. Nonetheless, the photographic image is proliferating at an unimaginable rate. In the last decade two dominant yet contradictory impulses have taken hold of photography, pushing the medium to a near delirium—either towards a pictorial formalist orientation or in a documentary and narrative direction. Around these two modes of photographic practice have arisen not only the question of their aesthetic and ethical legitimation but also, importantly, that of the very eidetic relationship that photography has to the real: to events, the political, and the social. For some time it seemed as if the pictorial formalism of photographers such as Thomas Struth, Elger Esser, Andreas Gursky, and Candida Höfer, and the expanding scale and giantism of their respective images, was threatening to push into oblivion the gritty, raw, emotion-encrusted documentary and narrative work of artists such as Nan Goldin, Alfredo Jaar, and others, or the calculated, coolly precise yet ambiguous documentary work of Stephen Shore, David Goldblatt, and William Eggleston. Because pictorial formalist photography was scaled to correspond to the epic ambition of history painting, it tended to drive photography towards a type of reductive spectacularization of the real as if in competition with modes of advertisement. In the case of artists such as Jeff Wall, whose monumental backlit lightboxes announce an ambition that restages the real in a defamiliarizing way, and James Casebere, whose reconstituted models emit a kind of solitary otherness in their eerie emptiness yet still manage to serve as direct referents to the real, pictorial references tend to mimic the standards of the cinematic screen. In both Wall's and Casebere's pictorial allegories, the backlit screens and digitized prints emerge from the inscrutable anonymity of the studio into a state of theatricality that further distances viewers from the real even as it engages them in an emotional, direct relationship with subjects that documentary forms usually explore.

This state of photography as an exemplar of high art—nominally connected to the medium only through the objective conditions of mechanical or digital reproduction—is increasingly being troubled by an aggressive return to documentary realism, to the photographic essay. This return tends to have the greatest potential in parts of the world with unfinished histories, in societies with unresolved relationships to the past and undergoing reorganization of their social, political, and economic arrangements. In these societies—in Palestine, Mozambique, Nigeria, India, Bangladesh, Angola, South Africa—artists and photographers alike tend to gravitate towards documentary modes. As a consequence, there has been growing interest in the possibility of photography, in its sustained accumulation of information—as opposed to the distillation and isolation of a single temporal frame—as a method of pursuing other objectives in representation. The documentary form is, in fact, a return to photography's native ground, particularly as it seeks to re-establish a relationship between photography and its subject, between an image and the real, between documentation and fact. In this view of photographic practice the question at hand is not the affective power of the pictorial, but concerns, instead, research into photographic analysis as a practice of studying or narrating events.

On the one hand the pictorial format of large-scale photography with its deeply rich, resonant, saturated colors and single frames tends to dehistoricize, even to erase the event, while on the other hand, the documentary with its narrative, incomplete, open structure emphasizes the event and its relationship to the real. These contradictory impulses are not new to photography. In fact, the tension between pictorial formalism (with its pristine, ordered, polished, and resolved frames) and the documentary (with its unfinished, narrative, essayistic deportment) seems to present viewers with two opposing values of the photographic event. However, the reception of these two impulses has started to reveal a level of antagonism that goes beyond the conceptual and methodological differences between them. There has emerged a certain hostility on both sides that goes beyond questions of aesthetic propriety. This dispute sometimes takes on a moral imperative relative to the capacity of the image to speak to the truth of representation. The underlying question is whether photography has this capacity of evidentiary truth. More to the point is whether the documentary form, with its putative connection to a verifiable real, is in fact what it supposes itself to be. The point of reviewing this tension at this historic moment is that events around the world are increasingly bringing photography to account.

To understand the root of this antagonism we need to go back to the very origins of photography, to its petit bourgeois aspiration to rise beyond being a mere technician's tool for imitating nature and ascend to the rarified perch of the fine

arts. Over the years this early aspiration to mimic the conventions and pictorial language of painting by setting aside the documentary, evidentiary specificity of photography has led to the destabilization of the medium's relationship to recorded fact. By deploying the pictorial conventions of large-scale painting, photography, in the mode of the singular frame, was producing an argument for its own artistic quality, a return to the auratic principles of fine art. In this way photography essentially functions more like a support that mimics painting than a medium of indexical transposition of event and evidence. Its vital relationship therefore became increasingly connected to the image agglutinated to the surface of the picture plane. It demanded museumification. And that demand today is being lucratively rewarded in the starkest way possible in both exhibition and market terms.

But changes in exhibition practice and marketing and their rewards should be seen in proportion to the changes in the narrative demands of photography that have come with the rise of mass media. Large historical events—especially political events—and contexts of reception, such as the web and the proliferation of sources and counter-sources of authority and legitimation, have conspired to reorient the practice of photography, democratizing the means by which it reaches us. No more do skilled technicians and institutions hold the monopoly on both the production and reception of photography. Nor do they wield authority over the field of representation. Given its global audience, photography's popular impact is mostly commensurate with the social meaning it carries and transmits. What can be observed today is that the rules of photographic engagement are in constant transformation. They consistently thwart attempts to domesticate photography's various agendas by single institutional protocols, be it the mass media or the museum. From the pictures of the Abu Ghraib torture scandal to those deployed in the propaganda battle between the American military and Iraqi insurgents, or those between Hezbollah and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), photography is no longer under the control of global media, nor is its proper interpretation limited to institutions of display such as museums. It has become the common tool of both local and global actors in a deterritorialized media environment. An excerpt from a long letter allegedly written by Al Qaeda second-in-command Ayman al Zawahiri to the slain Abu Musab al Zarqawi makes this clear. In the letter he comments: "We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media." Thus, an image broadcast on Al Jazeera tells a rather different tale from the same image seen on CNN. The Abu Ghraib photographs shown on the walls of the International Center of Photography in New York propose an entirely different discursive context than on an Islamist website. The same image, different narratives. The common rule of thumb in the battle for hearts and minds has made

photography become insistently partial of late, partisan, and, as such, radically enervated. The democracy of the web has had much to do with this through its obliteration of the authority of traditional circuits of reception and the reordering of the hierarchies of production and dissemination.

We have seen this change in hierarchies and the connection to historical events before. In the early days of the medium in the 1850s, events such as the Crimean War and the American Civil War were elegiacally documented by photographers such as Roger Fenton and Matthew Brady. Far from positing a neutral view of war, these photographers embedded subtle ideological messages within the sorrowful depiction of massacred soldiers. Similarly, the socially committed photography of the Victorian era expanded to the reportage, documentary, and photojournalism of the 20th century. The place of the photograph as a mass medium was cemented, only to be subverted a century later by the regressive return to the artistic economy of high art. Now an entirely new mood is making its way back, setting up a dialectical confrontation between the acolytes of pictorialism and those of realism.

Haifa-based Palestinian photographer, Ahlam Shibli, is one of a new generation of artists and photographers working in the Middle East today who have taken up the complicated dialectic between realism and narrative. This group includes the Moroccan Yto Barrada, Lebanese Lamia Joreige, Egyptian Randa Shaath, and others. Each of their works explores a specific subject matter through an extended analysis of its specific photographic and narrative possibilities. Two very fine examples of this narrative drive can be found in Barrada's *A Life Full of Holes* in her ongoing *Strait Project*, which documents the situation of North Africans seeking to migrate to Europe across the Strait of Gibraltar, and in Joreige's similarly ongoing *Objects of War* which explores through the interview format the personal testimonies of the Lebanese as they recount the effects of the Civil War and Israeli occupation on their lives.

Shibli's *Trackers*, a recent photographic essay comprising eighty-five images arranged in seven sequences, is part of this genre of telling complicated stories through images by adopting the narrative possibility of the essay form to explore historical subject matter. *Trackers* is a powerful combination of realism and narrative. Its agenda is polysemous, in so far as its narrative disposition speaks to a multiplicity of discourses simultaneously: testimony, witness, journalistic, documentary. It is both social commentary and political dramatization. Focused on the private and professional lives of Arab-Israeli soldiers who work within Israeli Defense Forces, *Trackers* is a diagram of the impasse that exists between allegiance to the nation and loyalty to the tribe. It is a document of a scorned people, both in

the specific sense of the soldiers who choose to serve the Israeli military machine and of Palestinians caught in between two separate national movements. With its focus on the conduct of a despised, invisible minority working to fulfill the sinister agenda of a majoritarian ideology, *Trackers* examines the contradictions inherent in existing in a state of total opacity to the Israeli military machinery and the community subordinated to it. Its complicated emotional appeal is indirect. Even when it seeks to repudiate the role the army trackers working for the IDF play in disrupting Palestinian aspirations, in fact, in betraying it, there is a degree of empathy towards the young soldiers who are represented in a state of total vulnerability both to the nation and tribe. In Shibli's view there are no moral certitudes in the conduct of the soldiers who serve a despicable master, yet answer to the choice of serving rather than resisting. In the questions it seeks to ask, especially in relation to the ethical position of an utterly subordinated and deracinated minority, *Trackers* embodies the ambivalence of distance and social detachment from the real that documentary work engaged in complex political analysis must assume. Conversely, it proposes a certain proximity to its subjects by the use of close shots, by literally embedding itself in the daily activities of the platoon.

The project interrogates two issues simultaneously: one is the disjunction between realism and pictorialism (between the blandishments of aesthetics and artifice and the moral conundrum of pixellated truth); the other is the modern abstraction of nationality and ethnicity and the value of each in modern identity formation. If the nation is a fiction—an idea that finds its most vituperative expression in the eyes of those who abjure the very existence of Israel—and identity a social invention, what fiction does the Arab-Israeli inhabit as a citizen and how does that hyphenated identity translate into a stable, coherent cohort? Citizenship is the mantle of the secular humanist tradition based on the logic of equality, justice, and belonging. Identity is the onerous echo of its translation. However, in the context of Israel this secular tradition is much more complicated, especially in relation to the idea of its realization within a *Jewish* state. Being a Palestinian/Arab within an Israeli nation that assiduously represents itself as exclusively Jewish in its identity begs the question of the equality of the non-Jewish citizen. In fact, at the crux of this state of being is the place of a minority whose very status as citizens is constantly threatened by its explicit non-inclusion, its non-belonging (and, as Shibli would argue, its non-existence) within a Jewish identity, an identity adopted and codified by the state as the first priority of its national self-understanding. Under these circumstances all minorities are permanently excluded, and no service to the national interest short of conversion into its originary, non-secular identity can recuperate or make them whole as proper citizens, for Jewish identity has priority

and always supercedes secular Israeli citizenship. Here, *Trackers* seems to posit the Palestinian/Arab-Israeli population as nothing more than social proxies for Zionism.

All of these issues and more are subtly underlined in Shibli's careful, elliptical investigation not only of actual soldiers, but also of their family contexts, social networks, and the landscape they occupy. At first glance, one sees the soldiers as no different from any Israeli soldier. There is nothing that sets them apart physiognomically. The changes are only apprehended at the level of detail, particularly in the shape of specific cultural symbols such as inscriptions on gravestones written in Arabic script, or graffiti scrawled on walls where the soldiers are shown resting. One such image captures a soldier adding his own graffiti to a wall. Close scrutiny of these details serve as explanatory shorthand for what is not immediately revealed. Other details are rendered through portraiture of the soldiers in both civilian and military contexts, in fragmentary shots of cemeteries, neighborhoods, domestic interiors containing souvenirs of military service, architecture, and landscape. As one moves from one group of images to another there is an arching contemplative approach to Shibli's mode of working, such as in the frontal compositions of the young soldiers dressed up in battle greens with grease-smeared faces or lying about in groups—resting, studying manuals, training, horsing around, or pensive before the start of a night of patrols. The sequences follow the soldiers in various contexts of their social and political existence, for instance in images of those who have returned back home to the humdrum limbo of their unique predicament, living with nothing to do, perhaps even afraid to venture beyond the villages that keep them apart from both Israeli and Palestinian communities. It is as if the subjects in these moments of solitude are out of time and tune with their own past and future. Their condition exemplifies a state of permanent loss and exile in an existence of incompleteness and impossibility. Because of their status as *askari*, as collaborators, they are marked with shame and consistently ostracized. Shibli's work is both emotionally charged and politically loaded. At the same time, beyond its narrative thrust, it is neither condemnatory nor redemptive.

Rather than relying on the power of any individual shot, the images in *Trackers* foreground their meaning through the essay's cumulative narrative thrust. In truth, Shibli's attempted analysis becomes its own form of tracking, insistently following the footsteps of these "betrayers" of Palestinian nationhood and Arab identity as a competitor of the Jewish citizen. *Trackers* is to my mind one of the few, if not the only artistic representation of the *askari* in recent artistic practice. It is an exploration into the unspoken, an attempt to render the unspeakable. In Arabic *askari* means soldier. But it is usually used with reference to indigenous soldiers serving

a colonial regime against their own people, and in that sense traitors. The a*skari* played a crucial role, especially in East Africa, during various colonial wars of conquest. In Apartheid South Africa, they collaborated with the regime and were used as spies to penetrate the cells of resistance fighters, agents willing to betray their own people's cause. Spies, informants, collaborators, agents, *askari*, whatever the description, they are caught up in the haunted enclosure of a certain type of existential marginality that represents the limit of their existence. In the Israeli/Palestinian equation, being an *askari* is a devastating and dangerous occupation, for the *askari* is both an agent of disidentification and a figure without identity, nation, or homeland. He is an anomalous being. Because it is a derogatory term, describing people who have turned evidence against their own community, race, and identity, Shibli's own position vis-à-vis these outcasts of national allegiance and ethnic identification remains at best unexplained.

As a consequence of the psychic devastation and alienation that underline the situation of the subjects of *Trackers* and their families, Shibli asks us to think in broad terms about the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and how the conduct of the *askari* marks a gap in modes of identification. *Trackers'* central problematic therefore springs from a place of loss, one connected to the history of expulsion, the nostalgia for the pre-1948 world of the Arabs, and the geography of displacement and occupation in which Palestinians in general live. In the process of interrogating these issues the situation of the *askari* becomes the chief emblem of the struggle centered around the politics of identification and disidentification that bedevils those Palestinians who live within Israel. This condition is again being put to test as Israeli forces continue to bombard Gaza and Lebanon. Ironically, Arab-Israelis have born the brunt of Hezbollah's rocket strikes against Israel. Yet, to think of oneself as Palestinian under the conditions of occupation and exile in which most Arab-Israelis exist is not the same as being Israeli. These two aspirations, Israel and Palestine, are secular instruments for imagining the nation and the homelands to which they are separately attached. However, the passions of the nation-state and its putative homeland inscribes within it the tension between being Arab and not being Jewish and vice versa. This is an old argument, one that takes up one of the most atavistic forms of identity politics. The struggle between Arabs and Jews, Palestinians and Israelis, Zionists and Islamists exemplifies the intractable nature of these negotiations.

A Palestinian who holds Israeli citizenship today exists in a state of opacity in the sense that he or she has been forgotten by the master planners of a *new* Middle East. Within Israel itself, the Palestinian is not simply invisible, he or she lives within the context of a permanent civil war. In this equation the Arab-Israeli

soldier who works for the Israeli Defense Forces as a tracker of members of the Palestinian resistance movement in the Occupied Territories is the most wretched of beings. *Trackers* vividly brings these issues and their contradictions to the fore. Shibli's work exemplifies the resurgent attempt to return to narrative in places where history remains unfinished. Hers represents a type of documentary photography coming out of societies in conflict. These narratives form part of a national allegory. Her work is a commitment to realism and humanism at one and the same time. It is not essentially truth seeking, rather it proposes a view of the photographic record as part of the account of historical testimony.

Perhaps, this is where Shibli reveals the real point of her inquiry: in the gloomy plunge of her subjects into non-being, she shows through the photographic essay the inclemency of the progress towards nationality (citizenship) and identity (ethnicity). Paradoxically, this essay is as much about Jewish Israelis. For in the same way that the non-inclusion and non-citizenship of the Arab-Israeli within the Jewish state registers his or her incompleteness, this exclusion weighs equally upon the completeness of the Jewish state as a legitimate entity as long as there exists within it an invisible minority. The situation of the Arab-Israeli is one of exception, a suspension between the abyss of being and becoming. This situation, as Shibli argues in the short text that accompanies the essay, offends the fundamental issue of equality and justice under which Israel is constituted as a democracy. *Trackers* unmasks the false dichotomy between Jew and Arab as a false choice in a Jewish state. The eighty-five images in the series comprise a document towards the task of unmasking the contradictions that underlie the relationship between Arab and Jew. The realism of the pictures, however, does not lie in the event structure of the documentary style. Rather, it reveals how the documentary's purpose is to complicate and make visible the reality outside the photographic frame. This is the achievement of *Trackers*, that it shows so much, with neither sensationalism nor partisan emotionalism. It simply adds one more chapter to the growing narrative of Palestinian dispossession.

Ahlam Shibli Trackers

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