Introduction to the Special Report: [“Contestatory photographs, contested usage](https://www.cairn-int.info/numero.php?ID_REVUE=E_CEA&ID_NUMPUBLIE=E_CEA_230)”

**Images in retrospect: Re-reading official histories**

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“Where photography is concerned, we tend to take everything literally”, says Susan Sontag (2003: 55) in her essay Regarding the pain of others, even though, as she points out, “a photograph has always been capable of misrepresentation” (ibid. 54). And she cites the iconic photograph of the Loyalist militiaman killed in combat, taken by the photojournalist Robert Capa at the very moment that the soldier was fatally shot, and which some believe was in fact staged (Lavoie 2017). Photography is often perceived to be intrinsically endowed with the power of truth, which is why, since the invention of the medium, there has been a prevailing belief that photographic images may be used as “evidence by experts, researchers and historians in cases of crime and of individual or collective violence” (Dufour 2015: 5). However, “while private use of the photographic image predated its use by the police by several decades in Europe, this was not the case in Africa, where ‘documentary’ use of photographic images by the colonial state generally predated private use of photographs by Africans [. . .], a fact which helped to establish the concept of photographic truth” (Werner 2002: 26-27).

Numerous works on the photography produced by Europeans in Africa (Zaccaria 2001) draw attention to the way it was used as a tool of political and scientific coercion, citing colonial photographic practices, such as the reification of bodies in anthropological photographs as part of the process of continually reworking racial typologies (Edwards 1992, 2001, Jehel 1994-1995, Boëtsch & Savarese 1999, 2000). The testimonies left by those who participated in such missions of scientific discovery, however, provide evidence of many examples of African resistance to the camera or measuring instruments.

In the wake of studies showing how this medium was very quickly reappropriated by Africans (Geary 2002, Werner 2002), which led to a number of original practices emerging from various socio-political contexts (Haney 2010, Sohier 2012), our intention in this paper is to explore the development of a form of photography that contests, “resists”, and even emancipates. In what contexts is such photography created, by whom, for whom and how? What are the networks, both physical and digital, that make it accessible or, conversely, render invisible the stories that such photography refers to? This question seems all the more imperative at a time when an *o*ther form of photography is spreading across the continent: a form of photography that is driven by the digital revolution, with its own tools for broadcasting information—festivals,[[1]](#footnote-1) publications, artist collectives—and that is rising to the challenge of countering the vision of a poverty-stricken Africa, monopolized for too long by the Western gaze that is, albeit sometimes unconsciously, blinded by stereotypes and racist prejudice.[[2]](#footnote-2) While these changes are now being made possible by a “takeover” of the camera, which is creating greater equity in the “gaze trade”, there have nevertheless been numerous challenges—throughout the history of photography and from various perspectives—to the image of the inferiorized African that recurs throughout the colonial archive.

Shown in 1955 at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York before being taken on world tour until 1962, the exhibition of The Family of Man[[3]](#footnote-3) was designed to celebrate the “great family of mankind” throughout the stages of life, from birth to death. The main legacy of the exhibition is Roland Barthes’ scathing criticism (1993 [1957]) highlighting the careless intent of a project that paid little attention to the historical context of the photographs on display, thereby obscuring the power relationships at play. Few authors, however, have paid any attention to another challenge made to the exhibition in its day. In 1959, Theophilus Okonkwo, a Nigerian medical student and political activist, slashed four photographs at the exhibition when it was shown in Moscow. He explained his actions in an issue of Afro-American:

The selection of images showed Americans and other white Europeans in positions of cultural worth—affluent, healthy, and educated—and by comparison the Black Americans, Caribbean people, Africans and Asians [appeared to be] socially inferior—sick, ragged, needy, physically debilitated. African men and women were shown either partially clothed or naked. I could not stand this vision. It lacked dignity, it was insulting, tendentious (Kratz 2002: 266).

These observations are similar to those made by a reader of the French journal Foyer chrétien in February 1958, quoted in this issue in the article by Louise Barré:

The photographic postcard editions display Africans in a pornographic manner, or in a way that makes them appear like cavemen [. . .]. If we were to judge Africa on the basis of these postcards, we would believe that all black people live naked! [. . .] a significant number of these postcards has been made available to tourists [. . .] these images are far from reflecting our lives [. . .]. Our morality is undermined by displaying such images of nudity in exhibitions and public places.[[4]](#footnote-4)

According to Louis Kaplan (2005: 75-76), Western media coverage of Theophilus Okonkwo's action minimized its political significance, portraying it more as an act of vandalism by a deranged individual. One source (Associated Press), for example, reported that the man “disliked” the photographs. In an echo of Okonkwo's gesture, half a century later, the Everyday Africa project (which has triggered an impressive volley of articles in the international press by publishing online everyday photographs taken on the continent in order to counter the often caricature-like and fundamentally negative image that prevails in the Western media) has been compared in a recent article (Hughes 2014) to a modern version of The Family of Man. But, in a twist of irony, the project has nevertheless been challenged “about the meaning of these very personal clichés, which are published with no explanation of what we are viewing, and which only tell us as much as our own sensibilities can discern” (Giudice 2014).

This is a project that has taken full advantage of the potential of social networks and mobile phones (with a presence on all the major platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and blogs) and that is being led by a generation of photographers and artists who have an awareness of the ethics of the gaze. With this context in mind, can its reappropriation of an “image of Africa” that has long been eurocentric really be considered a challenge? Moreover, does it follow that, simply by virtue of their position and origin, African photographers necessarily produce images that challenge the stereotypes that have historically been constructed by Western iconography?[[5]](#footnote-5) Also, does the fact that so many key institutions are still located in the North (the art trade, museums, publishing houses, and also the laboratories which produce, for example, the photographs shown at the Bamako Biennial show) have an impact upon the project's power to challenge?

As Elara Bertho points out in the opening article of this issue, the defiant gesture of protest photography “is not the only way that an image can derive the power to challenge: in fact, a photograph may derive its subversive possibilities in terms of use and circulation from the very sense of calm emanating from it, however paradoxical that may initially seem”.[[6]](#footnote-6) Accordingly, she invites the reader to participate in “a study of calm” with the aim of revealing the asymmetrical power relations that underpin the production of images and, thereby, the wider underlying political context. “Above all”, she continues, “on another level, it is the life that a photograph takes on beyond its context of production that can pose the challenge: the scope and aura of an apparently serene image may be manifest in the way that it is used, and often reused, strikingly and subversively, in the name of protest”.

In continuation of the debate that began during a panel session at the European Conference of African Studies (ECAS) in Paris in July 2015, and in the light of the growing desire in this digital era to reappropriate historical images, this special issue engages with the stories and the individual trajectories of a photograph as much as it engages with any given corpus of photographs or set of archive(s), looking at the way that a photograph has been “contestatory” or “contested” at different stages of their social and political life: from their production, to their circulation, to their disappearance. The ten contributions by researchers across various disciplines working in Europe, Africa and America create a map of actions, actors, and political contexts that draws attention to the extraordinary flexibility of photography. The articles also reveal a wide variety of dynamics related to the challenge posed by these images. These may be of “miniscule” scope, like the photographic series rescued from oblivion by Helihanta Rajaonarison, which shows a gathering of Europeans in Antananarivo, Madagascar, in early April 1947, protesting against the central administration in the aftermath of the insurrection of March 1947. They may be more “subtle”, almost insignificant, as suggested by Louise Barré's attentive reading of two portraits of Ivorian women, published in 1963 in Fraternité, the single party state publication; the two pictures were contrasted to support the new civil code, with the first portrait symbolizing a past that they were trying to put behind them, while the other was the promise of a bright future. Others are of “larger scope”, such as the struggle against the apartheid regime in South Africa and its painful protractions, as discussed in the articles by Feizel Mamdoo and Kylie Thomas.

Throughout its history, the photographic image has found itself at the heart of major political, social and ethical issues because, as the art historian and curator Daniel Girardin aptly reminds us:

The question that is implicit within photography is that of power, in the broad sense of the term. Cultural, political, ideological and financial power. Creating an image that challenges, criticizes or transgresses a norm is a seizure of power. […] Those who control images by circulating them—or censoring them—hold power. Armies control images, publishers make choices, copyright managers lay down the law through the selections of images they make available, or by denying access to entire collections of archives or photographs (Girardin & Pirker 2008: 8).

While each of these could easily be discussed at length, we will focus on three examples here for illustration.

The first example is the case of Al Mujahid, the official newspaper of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), which played an important role in the international recognition of the Algerian cause during their war of independence (1954-1962). In order to overcome the problem of accessing images of the conflict (due to strict censorship and a lack of means), the editorial team had to rapidly find ways of competing with the French monopoly in this “war of images”, by getting hold of propaganda photographs published by the French army and adapting the captions so that the message served the purposes of the Algerian FLN (Chominot 2012).

At the current time of writing, the National Geographic April 2018 issue, dedicated to the question of race, has published a mea culpa in the form of an apologetic letter from editor Susan Goldberg. Following a critical excursion into the archives of the magazine, which was founded in 1888 at the time of European colonial conquest in Africa, the letter acknowledges the active role played by the magazine in the creation of racist stereotypes (Lutz & Collins 1993). The article also turns a critical eye upon the editorial policy of the magazine, which included the criteria to publish “nothing unpleasant”, to the extent that a 1962 issue on South Africa makes no mention whatsoever of the Sharpeville massacre of March 21, 1960, when police opened fired on citizens protesting against the “dompas”, or laws that constrained black citizens to carry a pass intended to control and monitor the urban movements of black populations. Moreover, black people were represented in the publication as characters “doing exotic dances … servants or workers” (Goldberg 2018).

As for the management of rights relating to images and their use, it is important to consider the work of artists such as Maryam Jafri who, in her series entitled “Getty vs Ghana/Kenya/Mozambique” (2012), questions the ownership of images by the American giant Getty and other public news institutions (Bétonsalon 2015: 2).[[7]](#footnote-7)

The political context, which is often the legacy of colonial history, thus plays a large part in these contemporary reinterpretations and practices, whereby the unremarkable images of yesterday can be transformed into something explosive in protest against the established social order. This was the case of the symbolic burning of photographic portraits of white academics adorning the walls of South Africa's University of Cape Town (UCT), epicenter of the “Rhodes Must Fall” (Msimang 2016) student movement that sought to initiate a process of decolonization of higher institutions of knowledge production, which had been heavily Eurocentric. While some photographs, often “official” portraits, have been destroyed for being the symbols of a contested authority, others are used in completely different ways even as part of the same protest movements. In the case of Burkina Faso, a news item on Radio France Internationale (RFI) stated that “a month after the popular uprising that ousted former president Blaise Compaoré, a souvenir market sprang up in Ouagadougou around the photos and films shot during demonstrations” (Boudani 2014). This phenomenon raises many questions and can be extended to the protest movements that have been rocking the continent since the Arab Spring, in Senegal[[8]](#footnote-8) and Burkina. While it may be the case that some images of the “Spring” are in public circulation, and have thus also acquired an economic value, others, produced in the same context of uprising, have disappeared, which raises questions about sources when writing their story. Recently, a conservation project has collected and deposited in the Tunisian National Archives 1000 photos and 800 original videos that “both bear witness and gave impetus to” (Bobin 2017) the Tunisian Spring:

There was nothing durable about the abundance of videos filmed anonymously during the fever of revolution and which, by means of the global internet, told the tale of the end of Ben Ali's dictatorship. Many of these records were fragile, and some were starting to disappear. […] It is now up to documentalists and historians to reveal their scientific meaning (Bobin 2017).

In Zimbabwe, the Lost and Found exhibition directed by head curator Raphael Chikukw in early 2018 at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe told the story of the people's march of November 18, 2017 that led to the departure of President Robert Mugabe. The works on display (photos, videos, paintings and posters) had been created by both artists and anonymous citizens. This exhibition reasserted the artist's status as first narrator, allowing voices “from below” to be heard. For example, in a work titled “Zimbabwe Solidarity March”, Zimbabwean documentary photographer Davina Jogi shows that the march to oust Mugabe proved, for the first time in nearly four decades, that Zimbabweans could protest publicly without fear of reprisals. The primary motive of this exhibition was to break the habit of self-censorship, which was very powerful in Mugabe's time, in order to allow Zimbabweans to tell their own stories (Reuters 2018).

These examples demonstrate the range of social lives of photographs that, at one time or another in their history, have documented or even—sometimes fortuitously—prompted major social or political upheavals.

In the light of the numerous forms and configurations of this relationship between photograph(s) and contestation(s), this topic may seem to be inexhaustible, and this issue is certainly not intended to be exhaustive. The majority of these articles focus on the contestatory uses of images rather than on images that were actually designed to challenge a given social or political situation. Two central themes emerge from the analyses of uses of images: on the one hand, we see the way in which certain historical figures have become iconic, as discussed in the articles by Bertho, Paoletti, and Viti; while a retrospective reading of images that are more or less related to official stories is common to all the articles in this issue.

How does the state, on different levels, make use of the medium of photography in the colonial and postcolonial periods? This is the question addressed by two articles, either by discussing the issue of censorship (Rajaonarison) or, at the other end of the spectrum, the production of normed and gendered modern ideals (Barré).

Citing research by Stoler (2013: 26), who states that “researchers in colonial history are now focusing on archives that attest to the fragility and vulnerability of colonial regimes, internal conflicts between their leaders and the diversity of their practices”, Helihanta Rajaonarison examines a set of ten photographs produced by the colonial propaganda and information service. These photographs depict settlers demonstrating against the central administration in Madagascar, following the Malagasy insurgency on the night of March 29-30, 1947. According to Rajaonarison, this event (overlooked by research into the insurgency) highlights a fracture line that is becoming increasingly evident in colonial society. Although the author did not find any record of these demonstrations in the administrative archives in Madagascar, she was able to reconstruct the fragments of the event, relying particularly on sources from the local press (produced by settlers). The photographs of these demonstrations—which, according to the author, went against the normal course of history, as the demonstrators seemed “to forget that the main reasons for the insurgency included the ill treatment, exploitation and abuse that they had enacted against their Malagasy employees”—would ultimately be used by the colonial government, “which did not appreciate being opposed by their own people, hence the disciplinary measures taken against the ‘trouble makers’”.

Louise Barré's article on the Côte d'Ivoire, meanwhile, “aims to repoliticize propaganda photography, by examining the construction of an official image of the private sphere”. Her approach is based on an analysis of two photographs of women shown in the state newspaper to illustrate the domestic change that the new Civil Code of October 1964 was intended to bring. These images contrast a portrait of the “woman of yesterday”, presented in a rural setting that is clearly old-fashioned (described by the author as aesthetically “ethnographic”) with a “portrait of an educated and sanitized female employee, the counterpart of a new economically responsible version of masculinity, [incarnating] the way the nationalist patriarchy was attempting to shape new official gender types”. This analysis allows Barré to draw attention to the societal codes and mentalities advocated by the authorities in the Côte d'Ivoire in the 1960s, highlighting the way they can shed light on “understandings of progress, gendered tasks, and the mentalities of development”. Through representation of a disciplined female body, continues Barré, “domestic prosperity indicates the prosperity of the whole nation”.

## Taking possession of one's image

Several of the contributing authors in this issue agree that despite the coercive role of photography in Africa during the colonial era, the subjects photographed soon learnt to defy the camera (Geary 2002: 20). Despite limited scope for manipulation, they were never completely passive when faced by the colonial camera, and, in some cases, managed in some part to control the way they were represented photographically. This is the angle Fabio Viti takes in his article, 'Some reflections on images of Baoulé leaders. War photography (Côte d’Ivoire, 1893-1910)', where he explores a set of three photographs taken between 1893, when the conquest of Baoulé began, and 1910, when the rebel chiefs were finally defeated. Forming a “narrative sequence” when examined as a group by Viti, they were all taken by army cameras at different moments. While the first photograph analyzed shows Chief Akafou as a free man, striking a proud posture, the two postcards that are then considered depict prisoners, as evidenced by the accompanying paratext: one of the two captions, for example, indicates “Chief N'gban as prisoner”, while “on the postage stamps, the stern look of the French General Faidherbe and the image of the French ‘Semeuse’ icon [the female 'sower' symbolizing national pride that is found on French stamps and coins] provide a timely reminder of colonial power”. Viti asks, however: “Is it possible to distort or even contradict the meaning of an image merely with a look? The subjects represented here seem to have the ability to subvert colonial representations”.

Carefully taking into account each different historical context as well as the specific nature of each medium (photography/film), historian Sylvie Lindeperg's reflections on the “image-archive” (in this case, certain sequences of Nazi filming of the camp ghetto in Theresienstadt in 1944) have a particular resonance:

All these years later, these traces bear witness to a painful film shoot with many internees displaying their hostility or contempt for what they viewed as a sordid farce. In Theresienstadt, these gestures, made defiantly in the face of the totalitarian setting, became a precious visual testimony. These fleeting traces evaded the attention of the cameraman to send a message to the future. Thus the image-archive, unlike written narrative, has the capacity to assemble various elements that will travel across time until someone notices them. . . (Lindeperg 2011: 38, our italics).

These “fleeting traces”, these “rebellious details” (Lindeperg 2013: 14), inscribed onto the film roll despite the intentions of their creators, form a focus of attention for the authors of this issue. Drawing heavily on the writings of Georges Didi-Huberman (1992, 2003, 2009, 2012), Viti emphasizes the importance of imagining what is missing from the frame: “It takes images to make history, especially in the era of photography and cinema. But it also takes imagination to reread the images and, accordingly, to reimagine the story” (Didi-Huberman 2009: 251, author's italics).

Devoting her article to a portrait of Samori Touré “with the Koran”, Elara Bertho is also interested in the circulation of images taken by the French colonial military at the end of the 19th century: “When, in 1898, Henri Gaden and Henri Gouraud photographed their famous prisoner, Samori Touré, who had stood up to the French and British colonial troops for more than twenty years, they were above all immortalizing the victory of the French army and the advance of the colonial conquest”. However, the fate of the portrait was to be entirely different: Sékou Touré, first president of Guinea and a descendant of Samori Touré, would later use the portrait to establish his political legitimacy, creating a completely different reading of the image. It is undoubtedly the perception that Samori was “taking possession of his image” that allows Sékou Touré to make the “vanquished of yesterday [. . .] into the founding father of today”. The reappropriation of this photograph thus challenges the way in which it was used at the time of its production.

There is also the notion of truth that is traditionally attributed to photography: “For Sékou Touré, having access to such documentary resources about Samori Touré was a piece of good fortune”, adds Bertho. “Photography bears witness: in this case, it was proof of the reality of anticolonial resistance. In a way, it was a testimony to the national narrative developed by the socialist regime—even if this narrative demanded a complete reinterpretation of colonial clichés”.

This was to be only the first of a long and ongoing series of reappropriations.

Giulia Paoletti's article also deals with a photograph that testifies to the beginning of colonial domination: the portrait of the founder of the Mouride Brotherhood in Senegal, Cheikh Amadou Bamba (1853-1927), in captivity, published for the first time in 1917 by colonial administrator Paul Marty in his book Études sur l’Islam au Sénégal (Studies of Islam in Senegal). This portrait would become an icon in both religious and political terms during the struggle for independence, displayed everywhere and across all platforms in Mouride spaces, from Touba to New Yorka and from Dakar to Beijing. Following its publication in 1917, in the context of the new policies designed to control Muslim leaders in French West Africa, the portrait of the Sufi saint thus moved out of the classified colonial archives and into the public domain, changing from a document that had been produced in the context of colonial surveillance to a icon that was reproduced endlessly. Paoletti points out that the case of the iconic portrait of Amadou Bamba, originating from the “colonial archive”, is in line with Ariella Azoulay's argument. What happens if our reflections upon the origin and meaning of an image do not stop at the initial “occurrence” but extend to its “next utterance” (Azoulay 2008: 138)? Although Paoletti's article does not attempt to trace the complicated sequence of the many reproductions made of this photograph, seeking rather to document its origins within its political context, the article nevertheless takes account of the reinterpretations and understandings that the Mouride *talibés* have of the history of this devotional image and its meaning, interpretations that not only challenge the monolithic interpretation of this portrait as an image of surveillance produced in a colonial context, but also as an image that documents the “real”. Moreover, there is a repeated insistence that Bamba must have consented freely to this shooting, suggesting that he was on an equal footing in this photographic transaction: this scenario tends to destabilize the classic narrative of the passive victim of the colonial apparatus . . . And according to Azoulay, it also returns agency to viewers of the image, with a role in renegotiating its meaning.

“What lies in”[[9]](#footnote-9) these portraits of vanquished chiefs is thus a “message to the future” inviting “subsequent narratives” to be produced by different ways of looking which, thanks to a temporal and spatial distance, are able to question and accordingly destabilize the official narrative. Azoulay (2008 and 2012) argues that the active engagement of the viewer with photography encourages the development of a “civil imagination”, allowing the viewer to see beyond the authority of the political discourse inscribed in the picture. This “civil imagination” is practiced by some artists, as in the case of Nadia Seboussi's Hidad, a video collection remediating an iconic press photograph by Hocine Zaourar that was widely distributed during the civil war in Algeria, and which represents the extreme pain on the face a mother who has lost her family during the Bentalha massacre (1997). Another example is the photographer Santu Mofokeng's Black Photo Album/Look at Me (1997), which rehabilitates and interrogates portraits of black South African families taken from the end of the 19th century and which had been buried, erased from memory by the official narrative; their “significance lies beyond the framed image” (Mofokeng 1999: 69) in relation to African vernacular photography, which was becoming more known in the West.

## Exhuming the archives

In her article “Exhuming Apartheid: Photography and the South African Missing Persons Task Team”, Kylie Thomas studies the case of Siphiwo Mtimkulu, an anti-apartheid activist student who was kidnapped and murdered with his friend, Tobekile “Topsy” Madaka, by the security police in April 1982. The remains of Mtimkulu and Madaka were located by the Missing Persons Task Team (MPTT) in 2007, ten years after the security police who had murdered them lied to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) about how they had been tortured and killed. Although the disappearance of Mtimkulu has been recounted in a documentary film (Kaplan 2005), the details of his murder are not known; and although the version of events told to the TRC by his assassins, who were members of the security police, is false, it is this version which is documented in the TRC report and which therefore continues to circulate and to be accepted.

Thomas looks closely at three photographs of Siphiwo Mtimkulu and a photo of his mother, Joyce Mtimkulu—who is holding up a fistful of her son's hair, in a portrait taken during her TRC hearing—in a form of exhumation. Thomas evokes the stories buried within these photographs, which are like the exhumed remains of the disappeared, allowing us to trace their life and their death. During the post-apartheid transition period, the need to know the truth went hand in hand with the need to “bury the past”. Although this desire may have been politically appropriate at the time, the author argues in her article that it has had profound consequences that continue to have a negative impact in the present. She quotes Kracauer (2014: 32), who posits that photographs do not transmit but rather embody the story of the people they represent, transforming their story into something tangible but that remains out of reach, “as if it were buried under a cloak of snow”.

In conclusion, Thomas argues for the importance of re-reading the images of apartheid in order to better understand the post-apartheid condition. Accordingly, what do the stories behind the images tell us in the context of the Marikana massacre of August 2012 (when 34 striking miners were killed by the police), or in the context of the violent response of the post-apartheid state to the 2015-16 student protests in South Africa?

Sheila Petty's article engages with Algerian-Canadian artist Nadia Seboussi's video installation Hidad (2015), which means “mourning” in Arabic and offers a performative reinterpretation of an iconic photograph by journalist Hocine Zaourar (AFP), taken the day after the Bentalha massacre, September 23, 1997. Petty reminds us of the primary vocation of this collection by Seboussi, which is to absolve the traumas of violence and silence, in a collective attempt to reconstruct memories of the “dark decade”,[[10]](#footnote-10) a time that had been lost in the amnesia created by political powers (Moussaoui 2001).

Feizel Mamdoo also examines an iconic photograph of a traumatic event, taken by Sam Nzima in Soweto on June 16, 1976, selected by Time Magazine as one of the 100 most influential images ever and,[[11]](#footnote-11) like Zaourar's photograph, often likened to a pietà, a feature which partly explains its emotional power and effectiveness. The numerous ways in which this image has been used and received, from the moment it was published in The World, then the most read newspaper among black South African populations, are reviewed in the article in the light of a dual personal perspective: the author has made a documentary about one of the stories contained in this image (What Happened to Mbuyisa?, 1998), and the student uprising in Soweto took place while he himself was a young anti-apartheid activist. It should also be noted that his article opens by reflecting on the reception of this image following the release of his film in the post-Marikana context of 2012—when police brutality seriously undermined the “founding myths” of post-apartheid South Africa as symbolized by images like Nzima's; this context explains the title of the article, “The Dynamics of Context. Reflections on the Changing Meanings of Sam Nzima's 16 June 1976 Photograph”, a dynamic conception of the photographic image, and of its ebb and flow, in an understanding that would be shared by many authors of this issue.

## Viral photographs and protest on social networks

Just as in the past, photography is still the most popular platform for representations of protest, as evidenced by the Arab Spring and the various social movements that have followed it, all aided by a technological revolution (Jurgenson 2012) that has been indispensable to the speed and scope of the radical social and political relations and transformations of recent years. While many platforms, in France and elsewhere, are preoccupied with the way some shared images go viral on the Net, George Emeka Agbo takes up the case of a violent altercation between parliamentarians in the Nigerian National Assembly on November 20, 2014, which led to the sharing of many videos, photos and other associated images which went viral on Facebook. This is the basis of the author's argument that digital photography, and the associated tools that enable us to publish, disseminate and construct meaning, place “ordinary” citizens at the center of political discussions and allow them to challenge authority (Azoulay 2008, 2012). Deborah Dike takes a similar line of thought in her study of Nigerian memes,[[12]](#footnote-12) including memes made out of the photographic images that were widely available on the Nairaland website during the 2015 presidential campaign.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In the midst of celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of 1968, a year that is remembered for its protest movements that set the world on fire, from Prague to Mexico City via Dakar which, like Paris, had its own May '68 (Gueye 2017), the articles in this issue all testify to the original contribution that the study of photography and, more broadly, of visual sources, makes to the human and social sciences.

1. The 2017 edition of the biennial Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie in Bamako took its title from the work of the Senegalese intellectual F. Sarr (2016), Afrotopia, of which one chapter title uses Fanon's words, “To name oneself is to be cured” and states that “[. . .] more than a lack of image, it is from a lack of thinking about, and production of, its own metaphors for the future that the African continent suffers” (ibid. 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mark Sealy, organizer of the Human Rights, Human Wrongs exhibition, asks, “What does it mean for Africans, Salvadorans or Palestinians that their struggles are almost exclusively represented through the eyes of foreigners? And, perhaps even more problematically, how can one trust images made and shared in 'a very particular context associated with Eurocentric concerns'?” (O'Hagan 2015, our translation). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The exhibition designed by Edward Steichen, then director of the photography department of MoMA, is now part of UNESCO's “Memory of the World” programme. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Foyer chrétien,No. 24, February 1958, BnF, Cote FOL-JO-10617, Paris. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is one of the questions asked by R.Y. Belete (2014), in a thesis analyzing the output of Ethiopian photographers working for international NGOs in a humanitarian context (along with photographs produced to document their achievements, these organizations also commission images to generate global solidarity). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This echoes Barthes’ (1980: 38) thinking in his famous essay Camera lucida: Notes on photography, when he stated that “Photography is subversive, not when it frightens, repels or even stigmatizes, but when it is pensive” (original italics). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [Jafri](#re6no6), “Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale vs. Getty vs. DR Congo”, 2015. On the subject of the accumulation and control of photographic archives, which are themselves transformed into capital, we should also mention the work of Alfredo Jaar, “Lament of the Images” (2002,2nd edition) (Solomon-Godeau 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In April 2012, Raw Material, an arts center in Dakar, rapidly organized a collective photographic exhibition that was then the basis of a book: Chronicle of a Revolt: Photographs of a Season of Protest, a project that had the “aim of depicting the protests that have sprung up all over the country since the people's movement of Y'en a marre (‘We've had enough’), from June 23, 2011 until the [presidential] elections in February and March 2012”, and to “celebrate the involvement of the photographers who play a leading role in the dissemination and reception of information” (Kouoh & Ostermann 2012: 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. We have borrowed this concept/formulation from S. Lindeperg, from one of her papers in French titled “Prise et reprise: ce qui gît ou résiste dans l’image d’archive”, given at a conference, *Lorsque Clio s’empare du documentaire,* Bordeaux, 13-15 November 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The “dark decade” is used to describe the civil war in Algeria (1992-2002) that began with a military coup against the electoral process that began in December 1991 and would have brought to power the Islamic Salvation Front. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See <<http://100photos.time.com/photos/sam-nzima-soweto-uprising>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “The meme seems to have become a cultural practice born of digital social sharing, becoming both content and symptom. It consists of an element of content that is taken up, shaped, and reappropriated massively on the Internet. An unusual image, a drawing, a catchy song and its video, a film scene or a graphic element are modified with additions or alterations that change the original meaning and give them a second, third or fourth element of meaning that is intended to make people smile, to create a sense of connection between insiders. They are also used as a form of sarcastic reaction on discussion forums, in response to another user's comments, through a visual mode that allows the expressions of feelings without any written text”. (De Beauvillé 2013: 146-147, author's italics). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The very popular Nairaland site (made up of 'naira'*,* the name of the Nigerian currency, and 'land') was created in 2005 to host the first online discussion forums on all Nigerian societal issues. Today, this site attracts 55 million visitors and has 2 million subscribers [↑](#footnote-ref-13)