ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER: AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTIONS TOWARDS AN ETHICS OF DOCUMENTARY 'PHOTOGRAPHY-MAKING'

Manuel Francisco Sousa, *London College of Communication, University of the Arts London*

ABSTRACT

An account of some of my experiences with Nadezhda, Henri, and A., is the ground from which I address the encounter with participants within the practice of documentary photography. Approaches to the theory of photography mostly deal with the photograph as an object in relation to its viewing. We look at photographs, we are interpellated by them, we establish relationships with them and their seductions of reality. But how does or should a theory of the ethics of the documentary encounter between practitioner and participant look like? Azoulay calls "the photograph's illegitimate sovereignty" to its value as a precondition to discuss or understand the event. What happens when a photograph is not made available for us to see? And what about the photographs which are not taken at all? I shift the focus from the photograph as an image to photography as an event. And here, I also make a reversal of terms, from an ethics of visibility to a visibility of ethics. The reversed term addresses the voices which collide in the spaces and in the process of the production of photographs, in conflict or finding ways to collaborate. How can the conditions in which the photographs of others are created be made manifest at the centre of a documentary practice? This question leads me to a definition of the events of 'photography-making', and to the application of Levinas' concepts of ethics to the relationship between practitioner and participants.

KEYWORDS

autoethnography, ethics, documentary, photography-making, storytelling

BIO

I work with documentary photography, portraiture, and printmaking. I am also a researcher. In my practice, I am interested in foregrounding the conditions in which photographs of the other are created, and the participants' agency in the voicing of their representations. I am also particularly interested in mutually shared narratives, collaborative processes, and the application of anthropological and ethnographic methods to an understanding of documentary practice. I have developed projects across Portugal, Brazil, and Ukraine, where I have worked regularly since 2010. In the aftermath of the Maidan revolution, I engaged with testimonies and stories of people and places for the Beyond the Square project. These were exhibited the following year as part of the visual programme of the CANactions "Urban Studies" festival in Kyiv. I am currently a PhD candidate at the London College of Communication, University of the Arts London. My object of research is the ethics of the encounter with the other within the practice of documentary photography. I have an MA in Photojournalism and Documentary Photography from the London College of Communication, UAL, and a Master's degree in Design and Visual Culture with specialisation in Photography Studies from the Escola Superior de Design, IADE Lisbon.

m.prazerescoelhodesousa0620171@arts.ac.uk

1) Nadezhda

Nadezhda was the first person I met in Kryvyi Rih – a very industrial city in Ukraine, six hours by train east of Kyiv. The time I and my interpreter spent with her did not always involve the presence of a camera. Neither did it carry the expectation of a photograph at all times. On one occasion we met Henri, another participant whom I photographed, at her home. She is the central figure of a local group of mothers. When we met her, she was extremely welcoming and seemed glad to see us in her home. She laid a small table with tea, biscuits, and chocolates, and brought out photos of her sons and several of their certificates and diplomas to show us. She talked about them as she went through the photographs on her lap. I photographed and filmed her.

She talked to us for quite some time about her sons. I was not quite expecting the account she gave and the very visible grief it entailed. She had lost them both to homophobic violence. One was gay, the other was not. I remember becoming very self-aware of the camera in my hand. Of its weight as I held it between our faces. Of my posture. But especially of what my role there should be. What, and how, I should photograph. Or if I should simply put down the camera. I pictured her holding the photographs of her sons and their friends (Figure 1).

Figure 1

She appears in the pictures, her gestures are seen, and her voice is heard in the videos, but at the same time her face in front of me is hidden from the shutter.

Later I took her portrait outside, in the empty playground in front of her home (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

I think this has been the encounter that questioned me the most in my position. Several times, I could not hold the camera up to her.

As I have started to type the words and organise the paragraphs that will come together to constitute this text – I am picturing a parallel here between this space of writing and the gesture of editing photographs, that is, deciding which ones will be shown, in what order, or left out to never be seen – I am again vividly remembering that encounter. It was almost two years ago, but I have thought about it, and the responsibility I had towards Nadezhda, on several occasions since. I will return to this word – responsibility – and its phenomenological and ethical context towards the other, later in this account. For now, I want to address some other initial aspects of my experience facing her with a camera.

Reflecting on that gesture's possibility, to point the camera at Nadezhda in that moment, it carried with it – and carries even today, already far removed from that event – a sense of violence[1] and of the exercise of sovereignty. Perhaps that is why I decided in that initial moment not to include her face in the frame. In a way, it was as if the camera enhanced and solidified, through the noise of the shutter, the violence in her account within her image.

The expression 'sovereignty' is used by Azoulay to denote configurations of control over the political space of photography. She argues that the encounter between the photographer, the photographed person, and the camera, displaces the possibility of any completely sovereign representation any one part might wish to impose. Absolute, or stable control over the reconstructed points of view of photographs is not possible[2]. In this context, introducing dimensions of time and movement to the act

[1] Speaking about the photograph as the result of an encounter where an image of a person is inscribed, Azoulay observes this encounter always involves a measure of violence, even when the participants have fully and explicitly consented to it – "the violence is inherent in the instrumentalization of the photographed person in order to produce an image of him, within which context the photographed person can have as much of a vested interest as the photographer." (Azoulay 2008:99) This relates to issues of ownership, both the photographed person's material conditions and those that surround the production of the image, and the participant's own intentions, which are left obscured – lacking – in, and by, the photograph.
An additional question can be made of the right to photograph. Azoulay traces the operation of the shutter to a mobilisation of a regime of imperial rights, which presumes the world to be made available to be exhibited to certain audiences. "The violence of forcing everything to be shown and exhibited to the gaze is denied when the right in question is only the right to see. If the right not to exhibit everything is respected, the right to see that endows "everybody" with unlimited access to what is in the world cannot be founded." (Azoulay 2019:5).

[2] For Azoulay, photography's unique status lies in that it is the product of an encounter in the course of which, neither the photographer, the photographed person, or the camera, can become an absolute sovereign, "such that even when one of them

of "watching" a photograph, becomes the foundation for her conception of an "ethics of the spectator" – who has the possibility to posit themselves as the addressee of those photographs. This is an ethics which sketches "the contours of the spectator's responsibility toward what is visible" (Azoulay 2008: 122). The photograph always inscribes something beyond – in excess to – the intentions of each one of its participants. And it is also always lacking. But its excess and lack are not "evenly distributed among the participants in the photographic encounter and cannot be subordinated to the point of view of any single participant" (Azoulay 2012:184). This gap opens the act of watching an image to the possibilities of meaning and intervention. Azoulay is working in the context of a political ontology, where subjects appear as referents of speech, of the gaze, and of the actions, of others, "in which the camera or the photograph are implicated" (Ibidem :28). She defines it as an ontology of "being-together, of an encounter, whose traces the photograph bears and renders present (Ibidem: 121).

With Nadezhda, our presence had been invited, and we shared a common understanding of purpose. Nonetheless, I was acting upon my own set of expectations and objectives for that encounter. At the same time, I was going to take pictures of someone who I did not know before – I was learning from my interlocutor what those objectives I had brought with me should perhaps instead be. They were confronted by the encounter with her perspective, by what she wanted to show, or better, what she wanted or would be willing to make visible. As the photographer, I took control of the framing of the picture, of what would or would not appear inside the frame, and of the moments and the frequency of the shutter's action[3]. But these were never complete. From her part, Nadezhda would tell us of certain objects she wanted included, and to be photographed with.

Being in front of Nadezhda with my camera placed a strong questioning to my own self. This was twofold: at the same time to myself as a person who was facing another in their account of their own life – one that entailed deeply painful memories – and as a documentary practitioner who wished to know and represent her story, a story of an other. I wanted to photograph her. I wanted to produce something that I would use in my research, and that would be faithful to the account she wanted – or better, that I asked, and she agreed – to tell us. Or, better still, that would reflect something of our encounter and time together, this would be a more accurate way to put it. Maybe it was precisely that questioning that could open the possibility to know something of her, beyond myself, and to tell something of my experience of that encounter.

The verb 'placed', in the previous paragraph, denotes that sense of questioning's material aspect that I experienced as part of our shared sensory environment. I would like to diverge momentarily and refer to an anthropological understanding of place.[4] The idea of place as something that is lived[5] opens the question of how the participants – as a practitioner, I am also a participant – are part of the production of, and present in, the places of photography that they share. In that sense, to talk about the documentary photography encounter is to consider the ways, the mutual understandings, and the environments in which a photographer enters in a relationship with someone with the intention of producing their

seems for a moment to possess the means of production, he or she or it is in fact no less operated than capable of operating." (Azoulay 2008:27).

[3] To use Azoulay's terminology, I took sovereignty over these aspects. As she observes: "When one of the participants in the event of photography takes sole control over a variable, he effectively designates himself sovereign by virtue of this very control, given that his actions not only affect the photographic object – as property – but affect all of the people involved in its production" (Azoulay 2012:36).

[4] Reading from Pink, this allows me to conceptualise how participants "are emplaced in social, sensory and material contexts, characterised by and productive of particular power configurations, that they experience through their whole bodies and that are constantly changing (even if in very minor ways)" (Pink 2015:60).

[5] Casey offers a phenomenological description of place as event – "Rather than being one definite sort of thing – for example, physical, spiritual, cultural, social – a given place takes on the qualities of its occupants, reflecting these qualities in its own constitution and description and expressing them in its occurrence as an event: places not only *are*, they *happen*." (Casey 1996:27). Additionally, Ingold conceptualises places as being delineated by movement. "Lives are led not inside places but through, around, to and from them, from and to places elsewhere. I use the term wayfaring to describe the embodied experience of this perambulatory movement. (...) Proceeding along a path, every inhabitant lays a trail. Where inhabitants meet, trails are entwined, as the life of each becomes bound up with the other. Every entwining is a knot, and the more that lifelines are entwined, the greater the density of the knot. Places, then, are like knots, and the threads from which they are tied are lines of wayfaring (...) in short, [they] are delineated by movement, not by the outer limits to movement." (Ingold 2011:245-246) As such, they "do not so much exist as *occur* – they are topics rather than objects, stations along ways of life. Instead of saying that living beings exist in places, I would thus prefer to say that places occur along the life paths of beings" (Ingold 2008:1808).

representation through photographs. This implies a process, the experience of multiple ongoing aspects of being subject to power, and diverse conflicting or cooperating expectations over their results.

To begin delineating an approach to an ethics of documentary 'photography-making', I first would like to move the spectators6 – and, for now, also the photographs[7] – to a position of hypotheticals that are imagined by those taking part. There are participants, whether they willingly came forward into this stage, or whether they unwittingly had it thrust upon them. There is a camera. There is a place, an arena where variable conditions of speaking are given or allowed to these participants. In this perspective, I will consider the practitioner who stands face to face in a relationship with a photographed person.

Levinas calls ethics that which challenges me before the other – "We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics" (Levinas 1991:41). My encounter with the other questions and makes demands on my own self. Their face offers a refusal to be contained – "it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed" (Ibidem: 184). Their transcendence – their independent existence beyond my own self and my own context of understanding of the world – calls my experience into question. Their address questions my spontaneity.[8] In this sense, my recognition and response to the other is the ground from which all other questions can be spoken to. Levinas adds that "The welcoming of the other by the same, of the Other by me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge" (Ibidem :41). Levinas distinguishes between a type of process that reduces the other to my own sphere of comprehension, and another which is "a relation with being such that the knowing being lets the known being manifest itself while respecting its alterity" (Ibidem :40). My encounter with the other, as an ethics, is a movement which goes against the set of totalizing concepts within myself, within my thought.

In this sense, ethics is not a prescriptive approach. It does not become a set of *a priori* rules, or something to be judged and evaluated in a context of spectatorship. It exists in conversation with others. Levinas places the act of knowing as something that is already in dialogue. To understand the other is already to have him as an interlocutor – "the two relations are merged. In other words, addressing the other is inseparable from understanding the other. To understand a person is already to speak to him" (Levinas 1998:6). Ethics is thus instead both a foundational relation, through its expression in language and the address of the other, and it precedes ontology – "preexisting the disclosure of being in general taken as basis of knowledge and as meaning of being is the relation with the existent that expresses himself; preexisting the plane of ontology is the ethical plane (Levinas 1991: 191).

It is relevant to note that while I have been intentionally talking about the practitioner as a participant – and this is useful for conceptualising their movements and mutual engagement within the environment of the encounter – I will from now on differentiate between them. When I describe being before Nadezhda and being questioned in my own self, this relation is asymmetrical[9]. She also experienced me as an other but, phenomenologically, I am speaking of how she constituted 'my' experience as a challenge upon myself. More importantly, it starts to make a dimension of the practitioner's responsibility for the participant clearly visible within this text.

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[6] To clarify any possible ambiguity of meaning, throughout the text I use the term 'spectator' in the usual sense of those who view and enter in relationships with photographs, not as other eventual parties that might be physically present when the act of photography is taking place.

[7] As Azoulay observes, it is the presence of the camera, and the idea of the possibility of the image, not the actual production of a photograph, that effects the event. "The camera has the capacity through its sheer presence to set all of these effects in motion without even taking a single shot. Nor are such influences contingent on the actual pictures produced." (Azoulay 2012:30).

[8] To approach the other is to put in question my "spontaneity as a living being," that is to say, my domination over things, "to which everything is permitted." (Levinas 1991:283).

[9] Crowell asserts that "the asymmetry in question is irrevocable, since it is a phenomenologically necessary feature of how the Other is constituted in my experience as command and obligation." (Crowell, 2015:579). He further notes that it is not necessary to understand the other has having their own sense of ethical responsibility. Because this is a phenomenological argument, it "starts with, and remains within the scope of, first-person experience. From that perspective, I do not need to 'know' anything about the objective features of the one who issues the command. To say that the face is not perceived is to deny that *any* objective properties underlie my response to the command." (Crowell 2015:586).

2) A.

A.[10] works at a steel production factory. He is gay but not openly as he would certainly face heavy discrimination in his workplace. He enjoys a good relationship with his parents though. He is a participant but does not want his image associated with the mention of LGBT issues, which I do talk about when I discuss the context of these encounters. So, I am not showing it at all. Some time after we took his portrait, we had a drawing done from one of his pictures. It is rich in details, but his face is not visually identifiable there, so I use it instead of the actual photograph. The technique used was a line drawing, which uses only contours without any shading or *chiaroscuro*. In a way, it is a trace of a trace.

As for the photograph itself, I did a large print of it, and I offered it to him. He also has a digital file, but he is not sharing it anywhere. So, it has only been seen by me and my interpreter, by him and his mother – and I would assume also by his father, whom I did not meet – and an illustrator I had also done a portrait of, and who did the drawing from the photograph. The ownership over the availability and visibility of this photograph belongs to him.

Although I have shown this drawing on some occasions when talking about these encounters, I am not doing it here now. I could also describe some of the details of the living room where we took his portrait, describe the environment that surrounded us, but I will leave that empty. I want to visually emphasise the question of what happens when a photograph is not made available to be seen. This interrogation can also conceptually be extended to the photographs who are not taken at all, when the camera's shutter is not pressed. Azoulay calls the photograph's 'illegitimate sovereignty' to its value as a precondition to discuss or understand the event. There is a parallel between these two actions and decisions not to render something visible, although the second is anchored in the photograph's indexical authority, and the first in its ownership.[11]

The question of ethics in documentary photography is situated in the field of the visible. We look at photographs, we are interpellated by them, we establish relationships with them and their seductions of reality – Cowie relates documentary with the desire for a reality which is accessible and made available for review, that is, "of reality beyond oneself but graspable and available to be held in an image" (Cowie 2011:8). Photography satisfies the desire for an ordering of the images of the world, produced as a signification through which the observed can be integrated into a field of knowledge and power. The spectator is interpellated by documentary and placed as a subject of knowledge. "At the same time, as spectators, we address the documentary with our desire, demanding knowledge: we want it to know the world for me and, therefore, know me. It is a demand for identity" (*Ibidem* :103)

But how does or should a theory of the ethics of the photographic encounter look like? I am shifting the focus from spectatorship to making, from the photograph as an image to photography as an event. And here, I also want to make a reversal of terms, from an ethics of visibility to a visibility of ethics. The reversed term addresses the voices which collide in the space and process of 'photography-making', in conflict or finding ways to collaborate.

In that sense, my definition of the events of 'photography-making' are the encounters which are constituted by the participants' movement towards their perceived and desired potential of a picture, within the environments of their ongoing address and response. This allows for encounters where photographs are not produced by a camera, or where the actual camera might not be present at all.[12] The interpretation of the event as a movement starts before and continues after the actual perceived capture of any individual picture.

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[10] 'A.' is not the initial of his real name. I'm using it merely because it is the first letter of the alphabet, both Latin and Cyrillic. It would be very difficult, if not impossible, to identify him through his first name only – which he has told me to go ahead and use. Nonetheless, I decided to also hide his name in this text.

[11] Azoulay describes two principles that sustain this privilege that is added to the photograph: its interpretation as a testimony connected solely to what was in front of the lens when the shutter was pressed, "so as to say, "*This* is X," as if it were possible to cut the event generating the photograph into two", and the "identification of ownership of the means of production of photography with ownership of the photograph as such," so that the owner possesses the sole authority to determine the availability of the image for the event of photography to continue to unfold (Azoulay 2012:33).

[12] This draws from Azoulay's view of the photographic event as having two different modalities, the first "in relation to the camera or in relation to its hypothetical presence," and the second "in relation to the photograph or in relation to the latter's hypothetical existence" (Azoulay 2012:35). I am considering only a considerably narrow subset of what this description encompasses, though.

3) Henri

Thinking on how I should give an account of my encounters with Henri, the most vivid image that comes to my mind is of his often very strong and intense gaze, and the controlled and self-directed posture that he assumed in front of the camera. As I navigate through my notes and memories, I have this mental picture of someone who was very aware of how he wanted to show himself. I had interpreted this as something that comes from his public work as an activist and human rights educator. I still think so. During our photographic encounters, I remember noticing how he was always paying attention to small details, both symbolic and scenic.

I wanted to represent him. To take his pictures, to record him. My actions, gestures, my operation of the camera, were my movements towards my desire that in that encounter some pictures would bring together a statement that would tell something of his story – to know something of him through representing him. But I also felt he was very deliberately presenting and representing himself. Very shortly after we started photographing, I already had a sense that he was aware of his own posture in relation to the style and characteristics of the image that would be produced at any moment, to the background. As we were photographing, he would comment on this as he posed. "This will be a good sitting portrait", he said at one point, facing the camera with his body at an angle, one hand on the cup of tea, the other resting on the table. He gestured me to wait while he placed and adjusted a wristband with the pride flag colours. This was very interesting for me. I wanted participants to take as much control over these events to themselves as they were willing or able to.

I met Henri and his mother, Tanya, through Nadezhda. Our first encounter was at Nadezhda's home. She had told my interpreter that she had invited them over. It was better we met them there because they had been having some renovations at their house and they would not be very happy to have someone taking pictures there at that time. I felt disappointed to hear about this though. I did not want to photograph them at Nadezhda's place.

Our second encounter was later the same day. He had gone to put up a small tent booth at the park in front of one of Kryvyi Rih's shopping areas. He was doing some public surveys for his organisation and had asked if I would be interested to photograph there. I imagined doing some reportage style photography, picturing his work. He was already working when I arrived. It was a very cold end of the afternoon, with a harsh freezing wind. But our discomfort was not just due to the weather. I felt quite uneasy. There were a few people standing at a small distance, observing. A woman he was talking to when I approached became very angry when she spotted the camera. She spoke no English, and my Russian was inadequate, so my interpreter had to assure her I was not photographing her. There is great hostility to LGBT issues and activism in Ukraine. Henri asked me to take a photo just of himself and his mother, and afterwards invited us to his home, which was in an apartment block five minutes away. Walking along the backyards behind the buildings heading to his place, he told us that he has a keychain he ordered online with a panic button that emits a very loud alarm if he ever finds himself in some trouble. He had already had to use it before.

Because of renovations at their apartment, the kitchen was the only place where we could photograph. It was very small, so I hardly had any place to move. I just huddled in one of the corners. He prepared some very fragrant herbal tea, telling us that he had been learning to cook and was becoming pretty good at it. He joked that since he was not going to marry a girl that would cook nice food for them, he might as well learn to do it himself. He went to pick up a pride flag to hang behind him and sat with his mother while we talked (Figure 3).

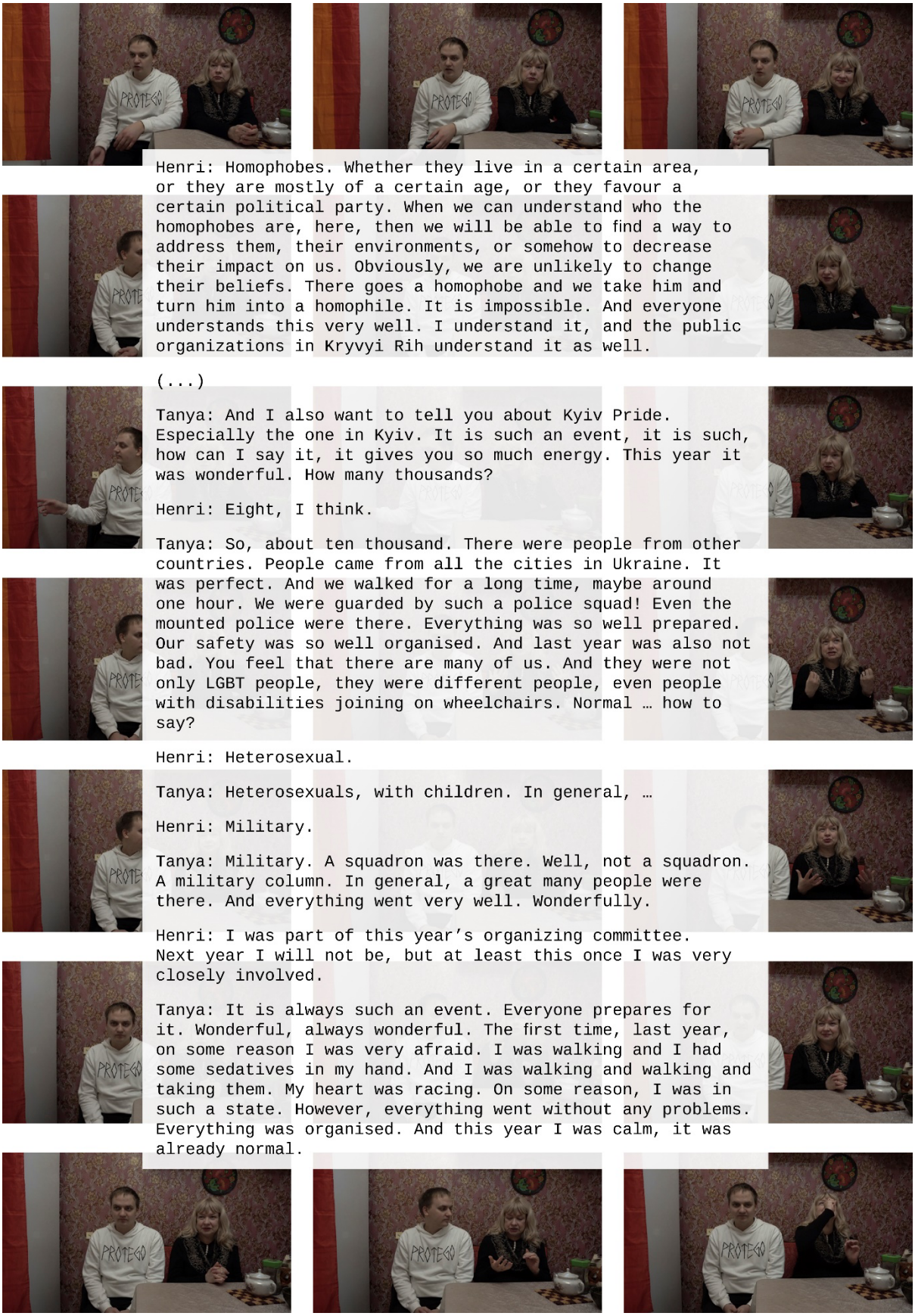
Henri: Homophobes. Whether they live in a certain area, or they are mostly of a certain age, or they favour a certain political party. When we can understand who the homophobes are, here, then we will be able to find a way to address them, their environments, or somehow to decrease their impact on us. Obviously, we are unlikely to change their beliefs. There goes a homophobe and we take him and turn him into a homophile. It is impossible. And everyone understands this very well. I understand it, and the public organizations in Kryvyi Rih understand it as well.
(...)
Tanya: And I also want to tell you about Kyiv Pride. Especially the one in Kyiv. It is such an event, it is such, how can I say it, it gives you so much energy. This year it was wonderful. How many thousands?
Henri: Eight, I think.
Tanya: So, about ten thousand. There were people from other countries. People came from all the cities in Ukraine. It was perfect. And we walked for a long time, maybe around one hour. We were guarded by such a police squad! Even the mounted police were there. Everything was so well prepared. Our safety was so well organised. And last year was also not bad. You feel that there are many of us. And they were not only LGBT people, they were different people, even people with disabilities joining on wheelchairs. Normal … how to say?
Henri: Heterosexual.
Tanya: Heterosexuals, with children. In general, …
Henri: Military.
Tanya: Military. A squadron was there. Well, not a squadron. A military column. In general, a great many people were there. And everything went very well. Wonderfully.
Henri: I was part of this year's organizing committee. Next year I will not be, but at least this once I was very closely involved.
Tanya: It is always such an event. Everyone prepares for it. Wonderful, always wonderful. The first time, last year, on some reason I was very afraid. I was walking and I had some sedatives in my hand. And I was walking and walking and taking them. My heart was racing. On some reason, I was in such a state. However, everything went without any problems. Everything was organised. And this year I was calm, it was already normal.

FIGURE 3

His identity as a LGBT activist is very important to him, and one that he wanted to state, to reaffirm, and to project as a fundamental part of how he was represented. But also, his relationship with his mother which, at first, I overlooked. He told me that my selection was "quite good, I would say even excellent" (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4

But the picture he called my attention to was one I had not included in my first selection, his portrait with his mother holding his arm (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5

Methodologically, this interests me particularly. It is not simply about a selection of images, which in itself is never simple, or neutral, at all. It shows what Henri thought and said about the way I pictured him,

about the story I told about him. It is about how his voice impacts what I tell about him in my own voice. Feld, talking about his field experiences while doing his ethnographic work, discusses his concern with the notion of authoritative representation – "the power to control which voices talk, when, how much, in what order, in what language" – and describes 'dialogic editing' as a form of discourse to speak to it.[13] I have applied it, as a method, to the context of documentary photography, in my own relationship with the participants with whom I have been working with in the past two years. Here, Henri's address within the subsequent encounter – his view on the way I was showing him in those pictures – again challenged and refocused my own account.

His mother is looking at him, and you can see in the way she is holding him, and in her expression, that she is proud of him. And I realised that I was not telling that. In the photographs I had selected, I was not speaking to that important element of his story that he wanted to be told. He wanted to show his mother as his family.[14]

These movements can be understood narratively, highlighting the issue of self-representation against the set of agencies that produce the environment of the encounter. Henri addressed me in his ongoing self-narration towards his perceived idea of how he appears – and wanted to appear – to others.[15] This manifests itself in the way sovereignty and control over the various aspects of the encounters can be differently shared at any given moment. One of the initial questions that I then continuously asked myself, throughout these encounters with Henri and other participants, was about my own relation to those various aspects of sovereignty. That is to say, about the extent of my exercise of an authoritative voice, which I wanted to reflect upon. It was not so much only a question of what control the person I was photographing had over the ongoing conditions of their representation, but also what they perceived themselves to have, and even what they actually wanted to take. The movements that constituted the different places of our encounters are examples of effecting those conditions. Henri called me to photograph him while he was doing public surveys, and thus set a scene for those photographs. Later, when he invited me – and my camera – to his home, he was again constituting the place for our photographic encounter.

4) A., part 2

I met with A. and his mother the next time I returned to their city, to review the photos we had done with them before. They had already seen them. I had sent them a small selection by email not long after our first meeting. But I had taken a binder with several printed images with me, so that we could just go over them as we talked. On that day, they were going out for a walk so they invited me to meet them outside. This time, I did not take my camera. To me, this was as much a photographic encounter as our previous one, but I had no intention to produce any new actual photographs. My plan was to talk about my edit and, more importantly, I wanted to hear more in detail about their thoughts on our previous encounter and the resulting work. I had some delays, the address they gave me was almost on the other side of the city from where I was, and it was a long taxi ride, so I arrived rather late, which I was stressed about. They had told me to catch up with them at a park by the river. My interpreter was also there with us. It was a busy day at the park – many young couples, families with children, and wedding parties taking photographs. We walked a few minutes to find a quieter place under some shade, to sit and talk.

Towards the end of our conversation, I asked A. and his mother how they viewed the conditions of his participation. Some of the issues I wanted to touch upon included why they agreed to participate, what control they felt they had in the way we worked, and over the photographs, and the notion of consent. For me, this was especially relevant, taking in account the limited ways the photographs could ever be used,

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[13] Feld relates the dialogic dimension in his work to "what Kaluli and I say to, about, with, and through each other; with developing a juxtaposition of Kaluli voices and my own". And he gives a definition of dialogic editing as "the impact of Kaluli voices on what I tell you about them in my voice; how their take on my take on them requires reframing and refocusing my account" (Feld 1987:191).

[14] Henri's mother had told me and my interpreter, on a different occasion, that his father had not accepted the fact that he was gay, and they separated. After that, Henri had his own name legally changed.

[15] Cavarero foregrounds the question 'who are you?' to a "*narratable self*, immersed in the spontaneous auto-narration of memory" and in their relation to their appearance to others in the world. It is not necessary that a "personal memory be explicitly solicited in its autobiographical exercise, that is, memory need not make of itself an active remembering. The narratable self finds its home, not simply in a conscious exercise of remembering, but in the spontaneous narrating structure of memory itself." (Cavarero 2000:67) This is further emphasized in her assertion that "at once exposable and narratable, the existent always constitutes herself in relation to an other." (Cavarero 2000:74).

and the very real and significant potential of risk for him, because of the topics we were engaging in. He told us about a previous bad experience he had had with the use of some pictures where he appeared. I think it is highly relevant, so I will tell it also here.

A. had previously volunteered with a local nongovernmental organisation which, one year, decided to organise a flash mob to mark the international day against homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia. They organised the release of rainbow-coloured balloons to the sky. There was a photographer from that organisation taking pictures that day, and he asked the volunteers if they minded that he was there, to which everyone casually replied it was ok. They had thought the pictures were just meant for an internal record of the event. But that organisation later printed a magazine about LGBT issues to be distributed to other Ukrainian organisations within the same area of intervention. Without their knowledge, A. was part of a group of people who were visible in a photograph that was featured in the cover. They only found out about it when they were asked for help to distribute the magazine and saw themselves on the cover. For him, it was a moment of shock.

He had said to them that he didn't mind that they were taking photographs, but they did not discuss with him if, and where, they could be used in the future. It went completely out of control. He told us that period was very stressful for him. The photo had been taken from afar, and the faces could hardly be made out, but nevertheless he was afraid that someone who knew him personally might recognise him. The other volunteers that also appeared in that photograph shared his shock and concern, but they could do nothing about it. A few thousand copies had already been printed and sent out. Luckily, that he knows about, no one did recognise them.

So, I returned to the question of why they had agreed to let me photograph them. My own position was very clear to me. The experience of working with them had provided me with very interesting insights, not only about them, but about my own photographic practice. It gave me material for research. My objectives did not relate to his photographs in themselves. They would not be, and are not, available to be shown. But I knew I benefited from it, from what they gave me. Both him and his mother then offered me an explanation that left me momentarily at a loss. They simply said, "we trust you". Nothing more.

I felt the weight of that word – "trust" – on me. It hit me with a sense of guilt. But, in this case, it was not a guilt in the meaning of an assignment of culpability, or a reprimand I directed at myself. On the contrary, in an ethical sense, it meant a demand. But this is not a violent demand, it does not offend my freedom, "it calls it to responsibility and founds it" (Levinas 1991: 193).

It is relevant here to note some interpretations of Levinas' description of the relation between myself and other, as a responsibility. Several authors have commented on the heaviness of his conception of ethics' demand on the knowing subject. Cooper, in her analysis of French documentary filmmaking, remarks that Levinas' "ethical position itself is set up as extremely uncomfortable, even though this is registered as discomfort with positive, uplifting benefits" (Cooper 2005: 23)

It is a permanent questioning that never allows the subject to settle. She views this as "the fundamental starting point for the rupture of totalizing thinking that takes us beyond ourselves, by opening to the infinite and, therefore, to others" (Cooper 2010: 58). Critchley, on the other hand, centres his analysis on the notion of trauma. It is a traumatic demand – "something that comes from outside the self, the irruption of a heteronomous fact that can strike without warning". It comes from outside, but "leaves its imprint within the subject". The relation to the other is thus the "experience of a responsibility that persecutes me with its sheer weight" (Critchley 2012: 54-56).

Piotrowska, in her investigation of the ethics of documentary film, reaches a – in my view rather pessimistic – conclusion that Levinas' paradigm puts "extraordinary pressures on the encounter", and the filmmaker's pursuit "will almost automatically, inevitably and perhaps unconsciously put the Other in danger. It might even indeed be that it is close to impossible to make documentary films and be ethical towards the Other" (Piotrowska 2014: 214). Finally, Crowell, confronting and objecting to Sartre's idea of shame as the original experience of the Other as another subject, asserts Levinas' phenomenological motivation

> It is not because the Other is another consciousness like myself that I encounter the Other-as-subject in the form of a judgment that objectifies me affectively as shame. Rather, it is because I experience myself as judged – that is, in shame acknowledge the arbitrariness, the 'unjustified' character, of my freedom – that there is an Other for me, a 'face'. The reversal lies in the fact that, for Levinas, I can only attain to the phenomenon of the Other, radical alterity, if I acknowledge a *command* (Crowell 2015: 578).

This command, one that is inherent in the possibility of risk for A., highlights my ongoing and infinite responsibility towards him. My responsibility towards the participants does not only pertain to the moment of the release of the shutter, when the photograph is produced. Nor only to any of the possible subsequent 'photography-making' events that might occur between us. It stays – will stay – with me throughout all those photographs' lives.[16]

Before we finished our conversation that day, A.'s mother also had one last question for me. She asked me why I liked that particular portrait I had chosen. It was an interesting question. I hadn't thought before to verbalise why I had selected that image. I was not expecting that she would, in a way, reverse back to me the question that I had been putting to them. I mentioned some of the formal aspects that I thought worked well in the picture, but for me the point was that it was an image where I saw no tension, both in himself and between him and his environment. There was a sense of calmness and belonging in his expression and posture, in the way he was standing in that place. It was calm and confident. She replied that she saw the same thing, that she looked at her son, in that photograph, and saw a self-sufficient and confident person. She added: "My opinion is the same, our opinions agree, we understand each other".

I was relieved.

5) Epilogue

"In this world where violence and justice are unequally distributed, struggles over narrative agency are struggles over the possible" (Meretoja 2018: 346). Reaching for a conclusion, I return now once more to reflect on my act of writing. The thoughts and choices that it embodies and represents also carry with them an idea of purpose. When I use the word 'photography-making', for instance, my intention is to highlight the relationship between practitioner and participant in their act of doing. It is a gesture to position ethics as the centre and the ground of that relation. Ethics then becomes something concrete, tangible, and emplaced, that is constituted by the encounter with the other, and is participated in. It questions what it is to know the other, to tell the other, to tell a story of the other, which is integral to the definition of documentary I am alluding to.

I am considering documentary as the representation of others. It is a kind of 'story-telling' of an other, and here I separate the 'story' and the 'telling' components of this word purposefully. This is to highlight both the self of the story and the voices which speak. In this sense I also particularly like Minh-ha's notion of 'speaking nearby' (Minh-ha 1999: 218).[17] I find it quite poetic in its formulation, but it relates to a very practical stance. It is an invitation to position one's voice close to the voice of the other, as opposed to capturing it and speaking "about" or in-stead.

I am also employing concepts and methods from anthropology and ethnography to engage with, and write about, documentary practice. I have already referred to them in the previous sections. It is not the object of this writing, nonetheless, it is probably appropriate here to make a very brief reference to some of the more recent discussions on the ethics of visual research within these fields. In his survey of contemporary debates, Clark highlights the questions of consent, privacy or confidentiality, and ownership, as being fundamentally linked.[18] He discusses ethics in a relation between an institutional and

[16] For Levinas, this responsibility is not an act of choice that I make, it does not originate in my decision, "the unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a "prior to every memory," an "ulterior to every accomplishment" (…) prior to or beyond essence." (Levinas 1991b:48). He reasserts this idea as a proximity – "The face of a neighbour signifies for me an unexceptionable responsibility, preceeding every free consent, every pact, every contract. It escapes representation" (Ibid., p. 128).

[17] Speaking from the field of documentary film, Minh-ha raises the concept of 'speaking nearby,' to be applied not only to filmmaking but also to writing. She speaks about it as something that "is not just a technique or a statement to be made verbally. It is an attitude in life, a way of positioning oneself in relation to the world." She understands this as a voice that reflects upon itself and positions itself close to the other. It does not appropriate them to speak "about" them, and it is continuously opening itself in moments of transition, layers, and forms of indirectness. She defines it as "a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it." (Minh-ha 1999:218).

[18] Clark points out that the question of ownership is "not simply about determining who has legal ownership, but also about who can consent to the inclusion of images in research, and about who has a say in how images are used" (Clark 2012:23).

a 'situated' approach.[19] This is also addressed by Wiles and Prosser (Wiles, Clark, and Prosser 2011). They discuss consent, anonymity, and the dissemination of images, and understand these issues as something that is situated within a series of contexts and dialogues. Pink calls visual ethnography an ethical practice.[20] She considers a 'future-focused' idea of responsibility which is entailed when a research practice is part of processes of change (Pink 2021: 51). Eglinton[21] looks at a set of ethical challenges, and analyses reciprocity and reflexivity in the context of her work with marginalised young people, on their use of visual representations. Thinking of reflexivity and in the context of working with others, I find Ingold's assertion that we always need to consider "the challenges they present to our assumptions about the ways things are, the kind of world we inhabit, and how we relate to it" (Ingold 2018: 17) to be especially relevant.

In this text, I have applied a Levinasian ethics to documentary 'photography-making', which I have approached through these four small accounts from the field. This has allowed me to describe three principal movements. First, the challenge that the encounter with the other, and their alterity, places upon the practitioner – a questioning of myself. Second, the placing of the desire and possibility of knowing the other within the scene of address, as first an ethical gesture. Third, the founding of the practitioner's – "infinite" – responsibility for the participant.

Regarding the latter, it is important to note that it also relates to the issue of consent. I have not discussed consent within documentary practice – a complex subject in itself – in this text. But the idea of an infinite responsibility, which precedes any decision, pact, or contract, positions the practitioner in a role of an obligation towards the participants, beyond any institutional context. This reflects itself on the ongoing conversations between practitioner and participants around consent. Even when the risks – present and potential – are well understood between me and the participants, and there is a willingness to share them, to accept a risk for the sake of a common goal, in the end, I am the practitioner. I have an ongoing responsibility for them which I cannot escape.

I have also decided, in this text, not to confront a Levinasian approach to ethics with psychoanalytic thought. This has been previously explored both in a philosophical context and in the context of documentary film theory.[22]

There is a parallel between the theory and canons of a given discipline or practice, and my role as a documentary photographer in the field. We both become apparatuses and embodiments of positions of power with all their historically attributed imperial rights. In photography, there are conditions that command

> what sort of things have to be distanced, bracketed, removed, forgotten, suppressed, ignored, overcome, and made irrelevant for the shutter of the camera to function, as well as for a photograph to be taken and its meaning accepted (Azoulay 2019: 2).

I do not know the extent to which a complete refusal or sharing of this power is materially possible. But that is not the question I am asking when I look to an ethics of photography-making. It is instead a question about my relationship with the other, and the conditions of our encounter that we experience in different ways and from different perspectives.

In that sense, my own autoethnographic voice positions me within the process of photography-making and is an attempt to make visible, unsettle and subvert an authoritative voice attributed to the photographer. It calls a reflexive challenge upon myself as a practitioner, and on the visibility of the exercises of sovereignty over the places of speaking and telling within photography.

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[19] Decisions about the issues previously mentioned, as well as others, run throughout research practice, and in particular social, political, and cultural contexts. Clark argues that a situated approach enables researchers to make informed decisions in collaboration with participants and in consideration of those contexts. (Clark 2012:28-29).

[20] For Pink, visual ethnography is an ethical practice "in its approach to research and in our engagements with participants in projects, and beyond that in its ethical commitment to the world in the present and future. (…) It demands that we interrogate our encounters with participants in research. It also requires us to examine the politics, power relations and inequalities of the worlds we live in, and the stakeholders and emerging technologies through which they are articulated and sustained" (Pink 2021:42).

[21] Eglinton, Between the personal and the professional: ethical challenges when using visual ethnography to understand young people's use of popular visual material culture, 2013.

[22] See, for example, Cooper, 2005, Critchley, 2012, and Piotrowska, 2014.

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