

An Introduction. Three Thoughts on 'Controversy'

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1. The Event / The Banal

We see a large colour print of a landscape with olive trees. Instead of shooting this landscape, Max Pinckers and Sam Weerdmeester have scanned it. The image consists of 46 scans. First they divided the scenery into nine rectangles, and within each rectangle several scans focused on a different depth of field. Some focused on the trees that are standing on the foreground, others on the grass or on the horizon. While a digital photo camera invents many pixels of an image it creates, the technology that has been used to create *Controversy* tries to register each of them. It causes small fragments of the image to colour intensely. The imaging technology that is used for *Controversy* is usually applied for reproductions of artworks, such as paintings. The result can only attain its maximum sharpness when the subject is not moving at all. Here some grass and leaves that moved while scanning have lost their shapes, and small instants of a pictorial madness appear.

Controversy shows us the spot where Robert Capa most likely had photographed his *Falling Soldier*. In 2009 professor José Manuel Susperregui located this spot near the Spanish town of Espejo, situated in the region of Andalusia, suggesting that Capa had staged the event – there was no fighting in Espejo at the time the picture was taken. Today this landscape remains quiet. It's nicely cultivated, seemingly banal for a local inhabitant of the area. Whatever made it interesting in the past, is no longer there. The location where Capa might have staged his *Falling Soldier*, can only be identified by the contours of the hills at the horizon (also known as orographic accidents). The

most relevant aspects of this landscape can probably be discovered in the findings of Susperregui, who had to raise his camera by five metres and ignore the olive trees in the foreground.

2. To Fall / To Lie

Robert Capa photographed a falling soldier. Falling usually happens in an instant of time, analogous to the shooting of a hand-held camera and the idea of the decisive moment that we have learned to associate with it. We associate falling with shooting, and shooting with death – the latter association often being projected on photography and its technology. By contrast, Pinckers and Weerdmeester have scanned a landscape. Where Capa's soldier is falling, their landscape is lying. Different meanings of the verb *lie*, here understood as "(of a person or animal) be in or assume a horizon or resting position on a supporting surface" or "be, remain, or be kept in a specified state" (Google), as well as its etymology, might help us to continue thinking about *Controversy*.¹ Lying can imply stretching out both space and time; it can refer to a body or a thing that remains (alive). Instead of pretending to capture a moment, the size of the print that is framed and presented, resembles that of a monumental history painting. After Capa most likely staged his picture, olive trees have been planted and have grown. The total scanning time was four hours. This picture embodies a large amount of time. Its technology embodies it, and the landscape it shows, does too.

Falling and lying have one thing in common, though. Neither is generally understood as an active gesture

or movement, but rather as a passive one. The same goes for both pictures that are referred to in this introduction, and the processes of creating them. In October 1947, ten years after the photo was published in *LIFE*, Capa stressed the fact that while taking it, “I never saw the picture in the frame, because the camera was far above my head.” Another seventy years later it is far from sure if Capa spoke the truth, but he did at least partly refuse the usual idea of authorship of a photo. Knowing that he staged it, did he attempt to deny for himself the responsibility of having done it deliberately – composing and authorising it? Concluding this catalogue Hans Durrer stresses the difference between seeing and registering: “We want photos to be authentic, and true, and we want them to capture moments and scenes that our eyes often only register but do not see.” If we believe Capa when he told his interviewer in 1947 that he held his camera above his head when shooting *Falling Soldier* eleven years earlier, Capa did register a scene that he failed to see.

The same might be true for *Controversy*. A camera has scanned the landscape and created an image that is so sharp and full of light that the human eye seems no longer needed to help create it. Composing and framing the picture was largely determined by the work of J. M. Susperregui. This landscape looks as if time has cleansed it, and the same can be said about the technology that created its picture.

¹ (The verb *lie* in English can also bear the sense of speaking falsely. Although it is tempting to mention this in the context of Capa having staged *Falling Soldier*, its etymology is

different and shares no common origin with *lie* in the sense of resting horizontally, alas.)

3. Are We Looking at a Guilty Landscape?

All seems quiet in *Controversy*'s landscape. It is well kept and likely to embody a long period of peace. Most olive cultivators need their trees to grow for many years before their first fruits are harvested, which makes them an easy target to disrupt a local economy in times of war. However, its title refers to a context of a photo that has become one of the most powerful images of war.

Are we looking at a guilty landscape? This landscape might not be guilty due to a war event that Capa documented, but exactly the opposite: the absence of such an event, as he might have staged it. The scenery with those same hills at the horizon where olive trees are now growing, has become guilty in a different sense. This landscape carries a burden that photography has projected on itself: a story of a truthful technology and practice. If the thesis of Susperregui is correct, we can only speculate on a sense of guilt that Capa might have felt afterwards, embodied by his medium and its capacity of making things up and fictionalising them.

Eighty years after Robert Capa might have staged the most famous photo of the Spanish Civil War, can this story be connected to history again? Does *Controversy* tell us something about history, after all? The picture that Pinckers and Weerdmeester have created is installed permanently in the town hall of Espejo, where local visitors can be heard commenting on the growing of the olive trees.