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Newsha Tavakolian's photographs contest stereotypes and defy easy categorization. This is reason enough to look closely at them but, in addition, they convey both knowledge and feeling about people and places that do not figure so often in the cacophony of self-styled news images that surround us today. Although Tavakolian's personal vision is mature and certain, she is still young. We expect her work to be part of our lives for some time. It behooves us to know her now, and to consider how her current work relates to the larger world of photography she is part of. Her fresh and surprising images combine the original vision and creative thought we associate with fine art photography with the immediacy and relevance of photojournalism.

As with most photographs, the place where we see them and the uses to which they are put shapes the way we understand Tavakolian's work. Thus, we may know her as an artist whose prints hang on museum and gallery walls, but the same images in other circumstances show her to be an activist for social change, fitting easily into the rubric of "concerned photographer" that defined Magnum photos – the legendary collective she joined in 2014 – at its inception. She calls herself a social documentary photographer. She is often employed as a photojournalist. None of these categories is discrete or unambiguous and each deserves more attention than this short essay permits, but considering this work in the historical context photojournalism offers us the opportunity to consider contemporary photographic practice of all kinds and how Tavakolian's work fits into, challenges and changes our understandings of it.

From a circumstantial and cultural perspective, photojournalism seems a fitting designation for what Tavakolian does. Her career began at 16 with the publication of her pictures in "Zan", a women's daily newspaper published in Teheran from 1998 until it was banned in 1999. Today her coverage of contemporary life inside and outside of war zones has been widely seen in the mainstream press in European and North America. Her international work began at Visa pour l'Image the international festival of photojournalism in Perpignan, and she continues to use her camera to address current events in a timely, honest and informative manner as photojournalists do. Despite her many exhibitions, it is news periodicals such as "Time", "Newsweek", "Stern" and the "New York Times Magazine" that have been the means by which most people have been exposed to her work.

Photojournalism is a way of using photographs to convey a story of timely general interest; it has traditionally been linked to dissemination in newspapers and magazines, although the rise in digital publication of all kinds has blurred this definition. Photojournalism has long been shaped by protocols and conventions that insist on honesty and impartiality, and, in the more conservative photojournalistic institutions any perceived interference with the veracity of the image – from staging a shot to digitally removing shadows or light leaks – is rigorously forbidden. Consumers generally believe images associated with these sources and institutions to be true and objective and, except in special circumstances, tend to pay more attention to image content than to image-maker.

In the 19th century, discussions of photojournalism emphasized the veracity of the mechanical, a belief in the objectivity of a machine regardless of that machine's "operator" as photographers were then known. Roger Fenton's 1855 images of Crimean battlefields, for example, were described as "real evidence... nature seen through a square mirror, and transferred to the mirror."<sup>1</sup> Today however, for a wide variety of reasons, we are more concerned than ever with the source of the pictures we consume, and the sensibilities and intentions of their makers.

Two essentially contradictory ideas are at the heart of our modern understanding of photojournalism: truth, the belief that the photographs we see in most newspapers (and their websites) represent an effort to convey accurate and literal information in visual form; and witness,

the idea of the photographer as our stand-in, the individual bringing his or her hard-earned knowledge to the eyes of the world. Our demand that the photographer be a truth teller accounts for photojournalism's rigid insistence on objectivity. Our need for witness, on the other hand, is a personalized vicarious experience; consciously or unconsciously, we value the wisdom, beliefs and point of view that called the photographer to depict particular events and subjects in a particular way. Perhaps the distinction is between "operator" and "author."

The great and venerable photojournalist, Don McCullin spoke to this essentially personal and human side of his craft when he said "Photography for me is not looking, it's feeling. If you can't feel what you're looking at, then you're never going to get others to feel anything when they look at your pictures."<sup>2</sup> The ability to convey her own feeling and passion in her treatment of her subjects is part of what sets Tavokolian apart from her peers, but so too does her youth, gender and nationality. If we seek passionate authorship in the pictures that shape who we are and what we know, it is good for us to experience the personal perspectives of a wide variety of people, especially in a field that remains dominated by European and North American men.

Tavokolian's portraits are perhaps what she is best known for and her importance as an individual interpreter of the world is perhaps most evident in this work. Her 2012 series *Look* is not in the exhibition at Atlas Sztuki that this essay accompanies but it represents an important prefiguration of the themes, subjects and approaches that inform the exhibited selections of more recent work. *Look* is a series of images of middle-class Iranian youth that shows collaboration, creativity courage and resourcefulness. At a time when political circumstances in Iran caused her to lose press accreditation she elected to photograph people she knew, consciously choosing people who represented her own vision of her own culture. She set up the shots in the intimacy of her own bedroom, and she tells us; "Once they were there it was as if they were somehow silently confessing all their inner emotions and that is what I tried to capture." This approach is evident even in her street photography – a woman's face, framed by both headscarf and clouds of smoke, emerges from the crowded night scene like a portent. The fleeting and specific qualities of photojournalism are subsumed by the enduring and symbolic qualities of art.

Tavokolian's portraits of the young Kurdish women engaged in the fight against ISIS work in a similar fashion. The images are straightforward and descriptive yet their maker's emotional intelligence moves us beyond both news and heroic cliché. It is the camera that captures the shy schoolgirl-like smile of a heavily armed teenager but it is the sensibility of the person behind the camera that recognizes the significance of that moment. We read these images as the product of a human encounter rather than a mechanical record, because we trust their maker to tell us the truth she sees.

Modern technologies have made real authorship possible and also cause us to value the power of authorship more than before. While photojournalists have almost always exercised personal judgment regarding subject matter and its framing, early photojournalism was rarely the product of a single point of view. Photographers rarely even saw their images, as film exposed in the field was sent to cities where it was processed, edited and published by others. Today, however, we are closer to the ideal of witness – of an individual's truth – than ever before, as images are edited in-camera, with choices of shot, tone, caption and frame made by the image maker before they are sent on. Surely there is more powerful resonance in the choices that feel true to the witness than those made far away by someone else. Our faith in the witness is even more important than the image content. Our trust in the integrity of a photograph's author may lead us to a higher kind of truth, one that – because it is about the creator's knowledge and

choices transcends the literal actuality of circumstantial record.

We hear often these days, that technological advances have made us all photographers. This is true, I suppose, if we understand that being a photographer is merely equivalent to the 19th century idea of photographer as operator. The quick capture of what flashed before a camera phone has value. The ubiquitous posting of all manner of images and reporting may inform. Yet neither action takes the place of what skilled, knowledgeable, passionate and ethical photo-journalists can offer us. Today, in the floods of images, propaganda and lies that surround us, we need visionary guides and storytellers like Tavakolian whom we trust to convey to us the higher truth of what she knows and sees.

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1. Unidentified author, Photographs from the Crimea, in "The Athenæum: A Journal of Literature, Science, the Fine Arts, Music, and the Drama", No. 1457, September 29, 1855, p. 1117, accessed at <https://books.google.com/books?id=HagHAQAIAAJ&pg=PA1118&lpg=PA1118&dq>
2. Donald McCullin, *Sleeping With Ghosts: A Life's Work in Photography* by Don McCullin, New York: Aperture Foundation, 1996, p. 96.