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From Galilee to the Negev  
מן הגליל עד הנגב  
מן הגליל إلى النقب





# Hostage

## Steve Sabella

*The question to ask of pictures from the stand point of poetics is not just what they mean or do but what they want – what claim they make upon us, and how we are to respond. Obviously, this question also requires us to ask what it is that we want from pictures. — W.J.T. Mitchell<sup>1</sup>*

How is identity created? Is it in our own hands, or in the hands of the images that represent us? Even though we often recognize people in pictures, over time pictures develop an identity of their own, detached from their creator or detached from the person they portray. When most people look at an image of a well-known person their impression is usually formed by the media's portrayal of them, but the media can propagate a false sense of a person's 'reality'. As spectators, we are often only aware of the media-driven portrait of public figures – he or she might be completely different from that image. As participants (those whose images have been photographed), the media-driven image can influence or determine how we perceive and live our lives. If people perceive our image as successful we find ourselves working tirelessly to protect it, especially if it assumes the status of an icon or a symbol.

Art historian and critic John Szarkowski argued, 'Like an organism, photography was born whole'<sup>2</sup>, suggesting that we are still at the very beginning of understanding photography and its complex connection to reality. This might explain why images in the media have such power over us – we have no idea, at least not yet, how to control the influence of photos and their impact on our lives. No matter how much effort photographers put into controlling how their photographs mediate the scenes they depict, it is impossible to control how the image is read, interpreted and reinterpreted.

My reading of this image photographed by Stephen Shore may not necessarily originate from the image itself, but rather from what this image may trigger me to think about. Even 'banal' photography is not, after all, that innocent. Images, especially those that come from Israel and Palestine are, as you would expect, highly coded and politically charged. They are in conflict with themselves because people do not look at the photo as an art object: they look at what it depicts or represents. This makes photography confusing: what it conceals far exceeds what it shows.

This photograph shows a painting of a seemingly regular

soldier held in captivity, without a name, background or history. Each spectator develops their own imagined narrative. Yet, once we place this soldier into context, we learn about the power of this image and how it played a part in creating a war that caused pain and loss for thousands of people. Gilad Shalit's liberation was one of the Israeli objectives during the 2008 Gaza War, in which 1,380 Palestinians and 14 Israelis died. We are looking at a painted image of a shackled soldier whose uniform has been stripped of its stars of rank. Locked in darkness, the soldier is engaging us with a stare that is concurrently defiant and scared. Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier, was on duty when Palestinian fighters from Gaza abducted him on 25 June 2006.

The year before Shalit was captured on the Gaza Strip border, I was kidnapped by a group of Palestinians in the heart of Gaza. They belonged to the Jenin Martyrs Brigade (affiliated with Fatah) and were demanding the release of Jamal Abed, a family member of theirs held hostage by the Palestinian Authority. They were searching for foreigners and, while touring the Gaza Strip, mistook me for a European. Danny Rubinstein, a leading Israeli journalist, described the incident:

*The kidnappers were certain that Steve was a foreign citizen. His appearance is the opposite of what is called an 'Eastern look.' His complexion is fair, his hair is long and he dresses like a young Roman or Parisian.<sup>4</sup>*

Confined to a room, suffering from the summer's heat and surrounded by armed men, I felt powerless and could only focus on my impending release. It was the longest day of my life. I little imagined that my image would soon receive new and multiple identities in the public eye. Many journalists mistook my nationality and misspelled my name. I 'discovered' a lot about myself through the media's portrayal of me, as they wrongly assumed, for instance, that I was an Armenian from the Armenian quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem. The incident created an iconic image of my identity, and even now, eight years later, people often introduce me with reference to the images of my kidnapping.

As for Shalit's image, it became a symbol of nationalism for every Israeli. Looking at Shore's photograph, one may wonder why the soldier is not escaping if there is ready-made hole in the

wall! Why is he stuck? There are clearly obstacles forbidding his escape. If in reality he was held in a dungeon, then his escape would have required the use of tools to chisel this hole and find his way to the light. But this is not reality. It is a painted image by an artist whose name is inscribed in Hebrew letters at the lower right corner. The likelihood that the painter had met Shalit is remote. It is more likely that he based the painting on photos shown in the media immediately after Shalit's captivity. And now, Shore's act of photographing this painted image adds another layer. In the world of images, escape is not through a photographed painted hole in a painted concrete wall.

This painting is one of many representations of Shalit that appeared in the public domain while his image was repeatedly painted, reproduced and animated. Thus his image began a life of its own, growing, changing shape and developing its own history. When the media follows someone's life, this process is especially apparent. Shalit was no exception. In exchange for his release, Hamas had demands. Israel released 1,025 Palestinian prisoners. The critical question is whether the soldier's image has continued to be held captive even after his physical release in 2011. Shalit had been imprisoned in a dungeon in Gaza, a physical place with GPS coordinates. He was physically freed, but maybe his image remains trapped for ever in the world's consciousness, a place without coordinates. Shalit, to a large extent, lost control of his image: it has a life and a destiny of its own.

One of Barbara Kruger's artworks, made in 1985, reads,

HELP!  
I'm locked  
inside this  
picture<sup>5</sup>

Kruger demonstrates that once we are locked inside the images of ourselves, these images take on a life of their own, influencing and sometimes controlling our own lives. These images often outlast us and can replace us as the remembered 'reality'.

Almost two centuries after we initially learned to fix an image on glass and paper, I suspect it might be time for us to start exploring the 'unfixing of images' so that we can set ourselves free from the influence images hold over us. The alternative is to

delve into the world of images and find peace within this fictional photographic archive that is constantly expanding. It is a battle in which perhaps the human race will remain hostage to its image. The irony for Shalit is that with his 'image captivity' he regained his stars by becoming a 'celebrity' – a star. Or is it his image alone that achieved this status?

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- 1 W.J.T Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2004, p.XV.
  - 2 John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1966, p.11.
  - 3 Kevin M. Cahill, 'Gaza – Destruction and Hope', Gaza Report, United Nations, p.4, available online at <http://www.un.org/ga/president/63/news/GazaReport.pdf> (accessed 2 September 2013).
  - 4 Danny Rubinstein, 'People / Steve Sabella: Blurring the lines', Haaretz, 3 November 2005, available online at <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/features/people-steve-sabella-blurring-the-lines-1.173173> (accessed 26 July 2013).
  - 5 Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (We are astonishingly lifelike/Help! I'm locked inside this picture)*, 1985, lenticular photograph in artist's frame, edition of 6, 56.5 x 56.8 cm. A photographic portrait lies beneath the lettering.