Binary Uses of Duvalierist Photographic Imagery in Public Space

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Throughout the history of photography, from its beginnings in 1839 right up to the present-day, one of the main factors of the medium's success has been its adaptability for multiple uses. The genre of photography analysed in this article is political photography,[1] with a specific focus on François Duvalier, the former President of the Republic of Haiti. This major political figure governed from 1957 to 1986 and has had a profound influence on the form of Haiti's recent history. In terms of post-1986 political activity,[2] both critics and admirers are responsible for somewhat controversial appropriations of his photographic portrait[s?]. Both sides of the political field[3] sustain memorial and social conflicts in the post-Duvalier era. In his article *Portrait photographique, entre identité et image*, Maresca (2015) cites both Galienne and Pierre Francastel (1969 : 12). According to them, "for a portrait to exist, it must feature two characteristics: individualised traits and the possibility of identifying the model". Wicky (2017), meanwhile, writes that "in a portrait, the photographic medium allows us to reproduce the details of the face and its exact expression in a specific moment, which is often the least natural expression. Resemblance can only be achieved (and caricature avoided) by softening the effects caused by the mechanical nature of the medium". Through careful arrangement of himself and members of his political family, Duvalier made his photographic messages seem like informative "announcements" (Deleuze 1987) that nobody could ignore.

Beyond confrontations over the control of Haiti's historicity,[4] legitimate or illegitimate as the case may be, and beyond prearrangements of the regime's photographic messages and the "for" or "against" remembrance work motivating them, how can the political suffering caused by Duvalierism be dealt with without dividing the political field still further?[5] The interviews carried out for this study reveal that social ties between supporters and critics of the Duvalier regime have gradually been forged. Once detached from the context in which they were produced, to what extent can a corpus of political photographs be credible and useful in acknowledging the victim status of the complainants and their families? How can the heirs of Duvalierism be made to admit the negative history of the regime and the consequences thereof? As long as the sociopolitical conflicts ignited between 1957 and 1986 have not been resolved, this "political death" will haunt Haitian society and politics. We

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1   A photograph that forms part of the political debate
2   This period marks the fall of the Duvalier regime and attempts to shift to a democratic era.
3   This concept is operationalised by P. Bourdieu (1981) as a site of competition for power.
4   Alain Touraine refers to the capacities of societies to produce themselves as "historicity". See Lebel 2013.
5   According to E. Tassin (1992), public space should be understood as a space of diffusion because instead of fusing individuals by joining the social whole in its unifying principle, it spreads them in space, externalises them and keeps them at a distance. It also serves as a space for diffusion because it presents itself as the place and mode of transmission between those separate individuals, thereby establishing and maintaining the possibility of communication. Public space should not be apprehended as a contrast between divergence and convergence, diversion and conversion, diffusion and confusion, disunion and communion. For Habermas, public space is "the sum of contradictory positions from groups in tension or of the pooling of individual interests. It is the expression of a general interest shared by all at the end of a process of deliberation based on duly justified arguments" (Lits 2014).

must move beyond fear or adoration of Duvalier's political portrait to be able to enter a phase of mourning. For Hurbon (2016: 16), this phase is highly improbable. In his words, "the impossibility of mourning and the incitement of a policy of forgetting can only serve to exacerbate the suffering of the victims, who remain unable to move on from their suffering". Indeed, as mourning serves as a guarantee against forgetting (Fauré 2004: 27), this article seeks to provide evidence that this phase must be entered now, regardless of any state of awareness.

Photography is perhaps not the best tool for remembrance as it tends to freeze time; the articulation of individual, collective or social memory must inevitably be dynamic and contextual. As Duvalier's photographic portrait continues to divide the nation's shared foundations, we might consider why it is a target of both discord and concord. In ethical terms, photographs are merely a trace of the rays of light reflected by the subject in front of the lens. Generally speaking, any photographic visual regime, such as that of Duvalierism, will destroy the real world by reducing it to a series of images (Loehr 2007). Photography has been accused of being too realistic by the Catholic Church (Michaud 1997): "seeking to fix the fleeting images in the mirror, [...] is not only impossible, [...] but the very desire to attempt it is already an insult to God... The daguerreotype seems to be the work of a vengeful God". Honoré de Balzac, Théophile Gautier and Gérard de Nerval went as far as to attribute magical powers to the invention. New theoretical avenues then opened up, that explored photography as an imprint (Perret 2016). The notion of the index, which emerged with Roland Barthes's *La Chambre Claire*, conceptualises this function. For Barthes, photography does not represent, it refers.

Concerning the different potential used of Duvalierist images, three main functions can be identified:

- perpetuating the memory of the regime's victims with a view to obtaining recognition of their victim status;

- creating a "nostalgic" image of the regime through a wealth of details (*studium* and *punctum*, Barthes 1980);

- presenting an appealing image in the media via negative depictions of post-1986 society to fuel complaints with a view to resurrecting the authoritarian regime.

How can Duvalier's portrait, as a "document",[6] provide evidence of the tyrannical nature of the Duvalier regime? Why do "memory entrepreneurs" (Gensburger 2010) and visual activists use both images of the victims and of Duvalier? In public space, photographic depictions of Duvalierism are presented as if they were documents or evidence allowing the regime's acts to be judicialised. Since it represents reality in the most positive way possible, photography, as Sterlin Ulysse (2020: 46) observes, is perceived as a way of representing the real world of industrial modernity that relies on the positivity and veracity of images. Despite this, the invention and use of photographic images also raised strong concerns and criticism.

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6   Since the 1910 5th International Photographic Congress in Brussels, the term "document" has been reserved solely for images that may be used for research purposes. It was also stated that the beauty of the photographs was secondary.

With regard to public security, urban cleanliness and the construction of nationalism, supporters of the regime react to society's current ills with nostalgia: "When Duvalier was in power, we could walk the streets in peace. Under Duvalier, the streets were clean. Duvalier's rule made other nations respect Haiti", etc. A simple online search on the subject reveals that these clichés are repeated over and over again. Yet as long as there is no in-depth examination of Duvalier's rule and its consequences for politics in Haiti today, any analysis of the imagery used by the fallen regime will be insufficient. It is no antidote to Duvalierism.

Construction and [De]construction of Duvalierist Imagery

In post-1986 political activity and acts of remembrance using Duvalierist images, two main visual regimes may be identified. They contrast with magical interpretations of Duvalier's government. The first is referred to here as the "victim-memorial current", while the second is labelled the "pro-Duvalier commemorative current", which is in favour of the regime's return[7]. The victim-memorial current comprises activists and supporters of the democratic, grassroots movement, from both before and after 1986. It represents the main driving force behind research leading to the dissemination, documentation and publication of the political practices of Duvalier senior and junior. This current advocates a duty of remembrance and justice for the social and symbolic suffering endured by large sections of society throughout 29 years of uninhibited control over their lives, assets and collective imagination, both in Haiti and across the diaspora. It encompasses complainants, human rights organisations, direct victims and their families. Meanwhile, within the pro-Duvalier commemorative current, there is the dream of resurrecting the principles that underpinned the governmental regime of the dogmatic François Duvalier. These actors have reorganised and closed ranks. In this current, iconic depictions of the regime are used in an attempt to bring the figure of Duvalier into the modern-day setting. As a community of values and interests, comfortably seated in total impunity, its supporters use the most representative symbols of father and son to negotiate their presence on the new political landscape.

These two visual regimes [re]frame and [re]contextualise images from the Duvalier government within the country's contemporary memory and politics in a manner that suits their respective interests. One seeks to rehabilitate Duvalierism, while the other mobilises images of the victims with a view to obtaining public recognition and reparation. Between the fall of the regime and the coup d'état that removed President Jean Bertrand Aristide from power in September 1991, a "dominant memory" emerged (Rousso 1987: 12) banning the depiction of Duvalierism in the public space. This widespread taboo pushed for a single and unique interpretation of the past. Contradictory interpretations emerged when the neo-Duvalierist military (1991-1994) followed by neo-Jean-Claudists

7   According to Dominique Valérie Malack (2003: 8), "commemoration is a manifestation of memory. It plays a central role in the process of identity construction. [...]. It is defined as a collective, public act focusing on a figure, an event or a historical episode via a fixed, permanent manifestation or marker. As a collective act, commemoration connects participants: it offers an opportunity to reaffirm their common interests and shared identity. This act is public, or in other words, it is known, open and available to all members of the community and it is organised or supported by a public institution".

(supporters of Duvalier junior) came to power. Since these events, two types of social memory of a single figure and a single place and time have been competing within the public sphere.

Duvalierism in Contemporary Politics

As a result of constant efforts to control Haitian symbols and imagination over the past 29 years, the Duvalierist *habitus* has become deeply rooted. It is now present across the whole of society. "As soon as he came to power, the first task on Duvalier's agenda was to systematically domesticate the nation's entire ideological apparatus: schools, churches, the army, the police, the justice system. Throughout the second half of the 20th century and beyond, he became the most studied political figure in Haiti's history. Due to the absence of a genuine remembrance policy – a series of interventions seeking to generate or even impose common memories upon a given group…" [this is a sentence fragment whose subject still needs to be completed with a verb] (Michel, 2013). The pernicious and very personal relationship between Duvalierism and both public and private spaces continues to exist (Tassin 1992).

Let us now move on to analyse the images used by the two currents. In fig. 1, the father presents his "son and heir", Jean-Claude Duvalier, to the nation. This presentation occurs inside the presidential office, accompanied by the two-coloured flag and with a set of encyclopaedias positioned in the foreground. The frame shows only the father, his son, the flag and the books. The prearrangements, everything that is out of frame, are ignored by the recipient. In order to understand the arrangement of the image, which is firmly anchored in the nation's collective memory, we can draw on the work of Judith Butler: looking at this photo implicitly entails signing an aesthetic or political contract and making a form of commitment (2010: 67). The perspective guides the interpretation of the image. Butler counters the viewpoint of Sontag who had stated that photography itself cannot offer an interpretation without captions. According to Sontag, the silent, singular, sporadic nature of images means that they must be accompanied by written analyses. Images can touch us, but they cannot offer us an explanation of what we are seeing.

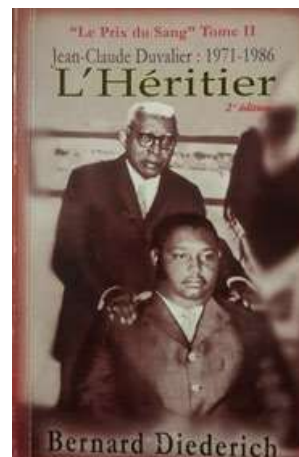Fig. 1 Duvalier and son. Copyright Devoir de Mémoire

Fig. 2 Duvalier and his son, reframed. Copyright Bernard Diederich, 2011.

Can fig. 1 and the [re]framed image in fig. 2 tell us anything about the father's intention to hand power to his son? Despite the merits of fig. 1 as an index, symbol and icon, what truths does it reveal? This question echoes the ambiguity of the Duvalierist visual regime and does little to dispel our concerns. In an age where photographic images are easily reproduced, this image cannot signify good or evil in isolation. In the presence of an image such as this, spectators are faced with a frozen scene outside their time and place. In *Le spectateur émancipé* (2008: 8), Rancière issues a memorable warning:

> Being a spectator is a bad thing for two reasons. Firstly, viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator stands before an image in a state of ignorance of the production process that resulted in this image and of the reality it conceals. Secondly, it is the opposite of acting: the spectator remains immobile and passive in their seat. And so, to be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act.

In *Destin des images, Rancière* (2003: 108), states that "an image never stands alone. It forms part of a mechanism of visibility that determines the status of the bodies represented and the type of attention they merit". Indeed, the two visual regimes relating to Duvalierism draw on fixed or moving images as a way to remember or reminisce, regroup or divide. Having become commonplace, as in the case of fig. 1, they are constantly [re]framed[8] for display in exhibitions, films and historiographical or literary texts. In one way or another, these types of "stylised" image-based interventions fuel the tensions surrounding the memory of Duvalier (Foucard 1964: 19).

For the pro-Duvalierists, the main issue at stake in these images is the return of the fallen regime and/or the enhancement of representations of it, whatever the cost. Seeking links between Duvalier's portrait and the social and political order he established, Frantz Voltaire (2017) of the (CIDHICA)[9] makes several important points. He agrees with Michel Philippe Lerebours, author of *Haïti et ses peintres* (1804-1980), who identified the start of this social practice in Haiti with the coronation of Faustin Soulouque in the 1850s. Lerebours explains that other types of representation, such as engravings and lithographs from the period, may be viewed as precursors to Haitian photography. Among others, Voltaire highlights the way in which the Haitian elite associated photography with truth, although it had to be retouched in order to reflect predominant ideological values (Voltaire 2017: 305-317). According to him, portraiture in Haiti dates back to the accession of Fabre Geffrard (1860). Voltaire explains that the rising elites showed their social credentials through photographs, rehabilitating their image as a formerly colonised people or as worthy heirs of the defunct colonial system. The "manipulated realism" of photographs allowed "civilised" or visually Westernised Haitian figures to enter posterity. In our view, this insight may just as well be applied to the constructed, [re]framed images of the Duvalier regime.

The sample of five images from the Duvalierist photographic corpus, compiled between 2015 and 2021, is quite representative. André Rouillé (2005) would classify them quite simply as "true photographs" or "documents". However, caution must be exercised when it comes to photographic images, which are [re]composed,

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8   See fig. 2.
9   Centre International de Documentation et d'Information Haïtienne Caribéenne et Afrocanadienne (International Centre for Haitian, Caribbean and Afro-Canadian Documentation and Information).

revealed, [re]framed and displayed. Unlike fig. 1, which shows President François Duvalier (known as *Papa Doc*) seating his underage son *Baby Doc* in the presidential chair, fig. 2 is more stylised it removes important information that could be useful in analysing the "presentism" that shaped the Duvalierist political order. The image is the product of a tight [re]framing, focusing on the figures as if the books no longer deserved to be featured. Frédéric Gérald Chery highlights this presentism:

> Speaking of Duvalierism 28 years after its fall with the aim of drawing attention to the regime's victims and revealing its methods of government to those under 30, whilst also seeking to prevent any possibility of a return of Duvalierism in Haiti, albeit in disguise, is problematic these days. This work should already have been done; the memory of Duvalierism should already have been consigned to legal records and history books. […] In other words, writing the memory of Duvalierism is dependent upon a new historical experiment that would equip Haitian society with the means to distance itself from its past and to think differently about what has happened in its past (2016 : 397).

Fig. 3 shows President Duvalier posing with a portrait of Pope Paul VI in the background to his left. Here, the political regime showcases its symbols of power and its social and religious preferences. The image evokes the emotional bond between the Duvalier regime and the representative of the Catholic Church. These highly symbolic photographs of the president, especially ones like this where the Catholic Church is directly referenced, are the foundation of the actions of these entrepreneurs dealing in pro-Duvalierist commemoration. Fig. 4 seems like some sort of initiation ceremony, *Papa Doc* with his son and heir (Diederich, 2011) accompanied by his personal guard.[10] Under their attentive gaze, the president points his gun out of the frame, leaving spectators to guess the target. Between what is said (shown) and unsaid (suggested), the photograph sends an intentionally menacing message.

Fig. 3 Duvalier in his office. Copyright Devoir de Mémoire

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10 Diederich (2011) provides a historical framework to guide the interpretation of this photographic portrait. He writes that François Duvalier practised shooting in military uniform at Fort Dimanche. His M1 was equipped with an extra magazine. From left to right, Jean Claude Duvalier, Colonel Gracia Jacques, Major Claude Raymond and Captain Jean Tassy.

Fig. 4. Duvalier and his son. Copyright Devoir de Mémoire

Fig. 5 depicts the execution of Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin, two young rebels believed to be "Kamoken".[11] On November 12, 1964, they were tied to posts with their backs to the northern wall of the cemetery in Port-au-Prince. At the scene of the execution, a representative of the Catholic Church can be seen. By agreeing to give the convicted men the "last sacrament", does he not become an accomplice to the spectacle of the execution of these young? How can the Catholic Church's role in this execution be interpreted?

Fig. 5. Public execution of Louis Drouin et de Marcel Numa, November 12,1964, Port-au-Prince. Copyright Devoir de mémoire

11 In *Catéchisme* … (1964 :19), the Duvalier regime defines "Kamoken" as someone who is capable of doing harm to the country and the government.

Although the political and memorial motivations to restore dignity to the regime's victims during the post-Duvalier period are all well-meant, these actions must not obstruct an objective analysis of the photographic act. Concerning the polarisation of memory in the public space, Gustinvil (2016: 420) observes that neither the "victim" nor the "executioner" are pre-constituted "subjects" beyond the scene that places them in these roles. Moreover, Midy (2016: 62) notes: "From Dessalines to Paul Magloire, Haiti has known nothing but authoritarian political regimes". This statement could be linked to a question raised by Hurbon (2016: 17): is this dictatorship rooted in history in the sense that it is the product of history or rather, is it an unprecedented event, an eruption, a rupture in the order of our routine lives?

Regardless of the medium or device used, acts of remembrance are just as likely to bring people together as they are to divide them. They can give rise to confrontations, conflicts or "memory wars" (Dorismond 2016). In the case of visual communication, when a public space lacks the necessary critical mass to analyse the images in circulation, the production and reception of political imagery as single-minded and functional as the imagery used under Duvalier can trigger either hatred or adulation. These acts of remembrance are performed with a view to achieving a political outcome.

Claude Cosette (1983) argues that "the meaning of an image derives from the types of relationships it establishes" as a medium between agents (image creators, commissioners, broadcasters and recipients). This points to the need to analyse images in relation to the specific social contexts that lend them meaning. Lavabre (2019), echoes Halbwachs (1925), when he holds that, beyond the social context in which a memory is evoked, the individual evoking it is a pure fiction. Photographs are considered to be part of an analogy for what our relationship with the past has become (Nora 1997). They hark back to a lost world. Baudrillard (2007) viewed photography as "the ideal tool for making the world disappear. The world's dimensions are erased when a subject is printed on film: smell, weight, density, space and time. [...]. Indeed, like death, photography establishes the end of reality and is reborn with a new, autonomous identity". Images of the past cannot represent the past; all they can do is comment on it. Therefore, we posit that photographic images in the form of snapshots torn from the flow of permanent movement are also a mechanism for forgetting everything that is not represented within the frame. Regardless of the status of such images in constructing or [de]constructing a visual regime, this article aims to encourage reflection on the affects of their circulation. This is particularly important as those involved in shaping the memory of Duvalierism are also involved in other political projects.

In practice, seeking recognition of one's status as a victim of a political regime exposes one to communication issues that are no less political. In this regard, there is no difference between the two visual regimes produced by Duvalierism. While obtaining recognition of victims' status remains an important objective for the victim-memorial current, in purely ethical terms, the quest for this public recognition cannot be disinterested. Equally, while mobilising photographic images has an ethical purpose, we believe that without thorough historical documentation of the photographic act (production, dissemination, reception), the emotional burden that it generates can hinder attempts to historicise and judicialise the events in question.

Our analysis of the corpus of photographs used in acts of remembrance "for" or "against" the Duvalier regime suggests that those using these images overlook the unstable, polysemic nature of this type of message. The failure to acknowledge this obstructs interpretation of the signs (symbols, icons and indices) that make up the images. Although Duvalierism refers to a specific temporality, its presence in contemporary politics owes to the summoning of its signified, or rather, to the connotations suggested by its signs. Since the historical past can never be fully grasped in the contemporary era, photographic images cannot be used as evidence. Besides the remembrance work carried out by the victims' families and human rights organisations, other phenomena have also emerged. Survivors appear in the public space and legitimately accuse their persecutors. When images of the regime's torture and memorial sites are available, they are used by survivors to present their victim status. There are competing narratives: that of the victims, that of the victims' descendants and that of the regime's nostalgic supporters.

About (2001) cites Michel Frizot (1996) to emphasise that "by giving tangible form to the facts, photography produces document, the raw material of history". At the same time, visual analysis must look elsewhere for the theoretical and methodological foundations underpinning the medium. Every photographic image deserves to be articulated. Although his theories do not pertain to photography specifically, in *Recherches sémiotiques* (2008), Baetens argues that it relates to history, cultural history, cultural studies, philosophy and the history of technology, "or even to all these disciplines at once". In order to understand the function of "evidence" attributed to this polysemic object, analytical attempts must ponder methodological and epistemological questions concerning the photographic image, and political photography in particular, ranging from the identity of the photographer and model to the subject, date and location, as well as the materials used for capturing the image and producing it. Approaching photographs as sources, About and Chénoux (2001) argue that an inventory of questions should be drawn up and certain methodological precautions, as are commonly adopted by historians, should be taken. Critical analysis also takes the context of production, dissemination and reception into consideration. Any exemption from binary uses is likely to be banal and manipulative, and to instrumentalise or withhold the information needed to appreciate the photographic act. Such an approach threatens to hinder the assimilation of the message.

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