A contrapuntal reading of Catherine Leroy's photograph of a *fedayee* taken during the civil war in Lebanon (1975–1990)

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A CONTRAPUNTAL READING OF CATHERINE LEROY'S PHOTOGRAPH OF A *FEDAYEE* TAKEN DURING THE CIVIL WAR IN LEBANON (1975–1990)

This article examines Catherine Leroy's photograph of a fedayee *as seen in* God Cried *(1984) that offers a nuanced perspective on an unconventional representation of a Palestinian freedom fighter, particularly within the context of the Palestinian liberation struggle in the refugee camps during the civil war in Lebanon (1975–1990). The photograph challenges prevailing western media depiction of Palestinians as subversive terrorists, aiming to restore their humanity and contesting the constructed image of the* fedayee *as a menacing thug. The article demonstrates how Leroy's lens becomes a tool for reclaiming the Palestinians' right to be visible as a human subject, transcending the biased portrayals perpetuated by some Israeli and western media.*

Introduction

How does Catherine Leroy's photograph make visible the *fedayee* and generate new forms of spectatorship? What does it mean to be 'visible as a human,' especially when that visibility contradicts the oppressor's gaze? What role does photography play in disrupting colonial visibility? And how does reading a photograph 'contrapuntally' allow us to understand its hidden layers and political significance?

For clarity, *fedayee* (plural: *fedayeen*) is an Arabic term that refers to a member of an armed group engaged in political or national struggle, typically characterized by a willingness to face extreme personal risk, including death for a cause. Historically, the term has been applied to a range of anti-colonial, nationalist, and revolutionary movements in the Middle East and beyond, and is most prominently associated with Palestinian guerrilla fighters active from the 1948 *Nakba* onward in resistance to Israeli occupation.[1] The label carries strong ideological and symbolic valences — evoking sacrifice, resistance, and armed struggle — and is often studied in relation to

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concepts of martyrdom, nationalism, and insurgency. Situating Leroy's photograph within this semantic and historical field helps us ask whether the image reproduces familiar tropes or attempts to displace them by restoring the fedayee's humanity.

In *To See in the Dark*, Nicholas Mirzoeff introduces the concept of 'visible relation' and 'the right to opacity.'[2] This right challenges the imperative to be constantly visible and surveilled — whether by the heteropatriarchal male gaze, the colonial white gaze, or the pervasive lens of automated surveillance technologies. For Mirzoeff, and in the context of Palestine, visibility becomes a relational and political act: to be seen as fully human, regardless of how the oppressor — here, the Zionist gaze — might frame or distort that visibility. Edouard Glissant describes this relationality as 'the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures,' emphasizing its inherently complex and intersectional nature.[3] Today, these dynamics are reactivated through the visual politics of Zionism and Palestinian resistance, shaping how association and dissociation are lived and represented. Are photographs of Palestinians to be seen in a different way than other photographs? How to read photographs taken by a foreign female photographer in Beirut during the Civil War in Lebanon (1975–1990)? Did Leroy report what she saw on the ground or give readers what she thought the editorial manager believed the readers want? Why and how does the media seem to round on certain groups and demonize others? These are some of the questions that drive this research.

This article uses Leroy's photograph of a *fedayee* (Figure 1) as the site to explore photographic empathy, affect, and counter-histories. It demonstrates how a contrapuntal reading of a fedayee photograph engages the multiple ways photography expands our scope of history and opens new narrative possibilities. That contingency is liberating: it enables a more nuanced reading that transcends mainstream stereotypical representations of Palestinians. Anne-Laura Stoler's discussion of archiving as dissensus asks whether we can think in terms of a 'Palestinian order of things.'[4] Such a question returns us to the opening query: Are photographs of Palestinians to be seen differently than other photographs? Can Leroy's image be read as an intervention that alters Western media perceptions of Palestinians? Why might she have selected this particular image for a chapter titled 'True Fedayeen'? Could her intention have been to display the *fedayee* as human — vulnerable, soft, caring — countering depictions that mark them primarily by accouterments of danger (beards, concealed faces, weapons)?[5]

Photographs can produce enemies as readily as they can restore humanity; they rely on visual signifiers that signal threat and justify defensive imaginaries. This article argues for the possibility of an alternative look: that Leroy's photograph of a fedayee can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the ongoing struggle between Palestinians and the Israeli Defense Forces by offering a perspective grounded in the *fedayee*'s own humanity. Its power lies in the photograph's potential to open new narratives and to reorder how history and perception are constructed.

God Cried: a photobook against hegemonic narratives

The photograph, on page 48 (Figure 2) of Tony Clifton and Catherine Leroy's photobook *God Cried* (1983), appears enlarged in portrait format on the left side,

Fig. 1.   DCL01_183517–19.Jpg Palestinian fighter, Beirut civil war, Lebanon © dotation Catherine Leroy.

facing the chapter entitled 'True Fedayeen.' *God Cried* ([Figures 3](#) and [4](#)) is a photobook co-authored by Catherine Leroy and Tony Clifton, documenting the Palestinian and Lebanese struggle during the early years of the Lebanese Civil War. Both arrived in Beirut in the early 1970s to cover the conflict. Clifton as a foreign correspondent for *Newsweek* and *The Sunday Times*, and Leroy, a photojournalist who had previously covered the Vietnam War, working for Agence Presse as a freelancer and then she went on to publish in the international press. Leroy was awarded the Robert Capa Gold Medal for Best Published Photographic Reporting from Abroad Requiring Exceptional Courage and Enterprise for her coverage of the Lebanese Civil War in 1976.[6]

The fourth chapter in the photobook begins with Clifton's personal account of terrifying experiences in the midst of a war zone. He describes fierce combatants — Israeli and Phalangist soldiers — patrolling the streets of West Beirut in jeeps loaded with heavy artillery, alongside Merkava tanks equipped with powerful 105-mm guns.[7]

Fig. 2.   Pp. 48–49. *God Cried*. London: Quartet Books, 1983.

Clifton recounts the scene through vivid prose, while Leroy documents it through photographs she captured while navigating the Palestinian camps — an especially precarious endeavor for a foreign photojournalist at the time. According to their account, West Beirut had become a perilous zone, particularly during Israeli airstrikes that reduced entire areas to rubble within seconds, targeting hospitals, schools, and other sites where civilians sought refuge.

Edward Said referenced *God Cried* as a book that 'narrates the agonies of conscience, sympathy and rage' surrounding the Palestinian and Lebanese experience.[8] Although he was referring primarily to Clifton's text, Said viewed the book as a testament to Clifton and Leroy's 'awakening of conscience' in the face of Israel's crimes against Palestinians.[9] He discussed the work as an example of the will to narrate against a hegemonic discourse that defends and protects Israel with impunity. This reading is crucial for understanding the context in which the photobook was produced, especially in relation to Western media discourses that have long demonized the Palestinian struggle for liberation as violent or terrorist, while casting the oppressor, Israel, as the victim. *God Cried* must thus be understood not simply as a collaboration in which Leroy's photographs 'complement' the text, but as a deeply interwoven visual-verbal mode of communication-one that is necessary for confronting the layered violence of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the siege of West Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War. The relationship between image and text here operates beyond mere illustration; the photographs function as evidence, testimony, and fragments of a nonlinear narrative. In this sense, they enact what Mirzoeff calls 'seeing in the dark' — a practice that disrupts the colonial viewing
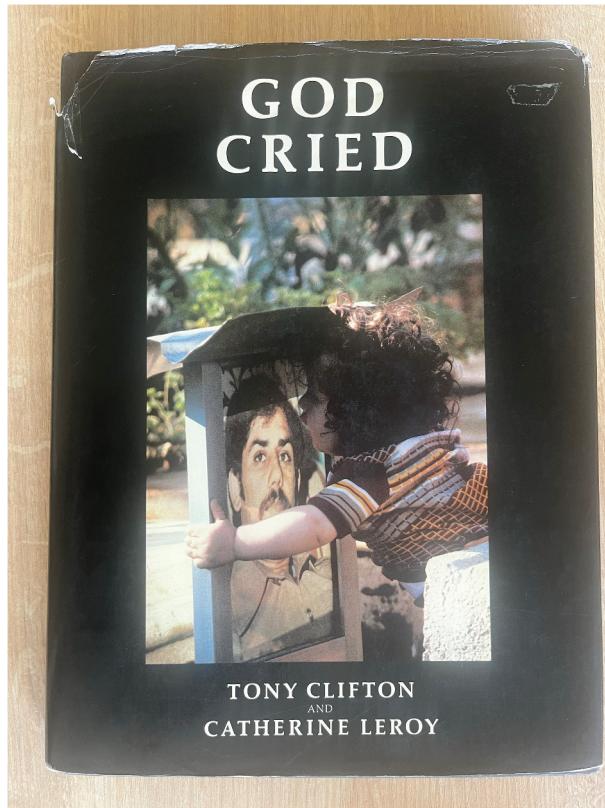
Fig. 3.   Book cover. *God Cried*. London: Quartet Books, 1983.

apparatus and resists the clarity demanded by dominant media representations.[10] Each image in *God Cried* becomes part of a visual sequence inviting readers to engage with what is hidden, repressed, or denied. The photographs evoke layers of emotion; they are not just records of devastation, but affective and political documents. In parallel, Clifton's text does not explain the images but situates them within a larger geopolitical and ethical framework, rendering *God Cried* a form of visual activism that scavenges the rubble of war to construct a narrative that is intimate, resistant, and unresolved. Upon its release, the photobook faced intense backlash, particularly from pro-Israel groups and segments of Western media. It was suppressed in several countries, including the U.S. and Israel, due to its critical stance and graphic content — especially Leroy's haunting images. Its reception underscores the ongoing challenges of narrating and visualizing Palestinian and Lebanese suffering within dominant Western discourse.
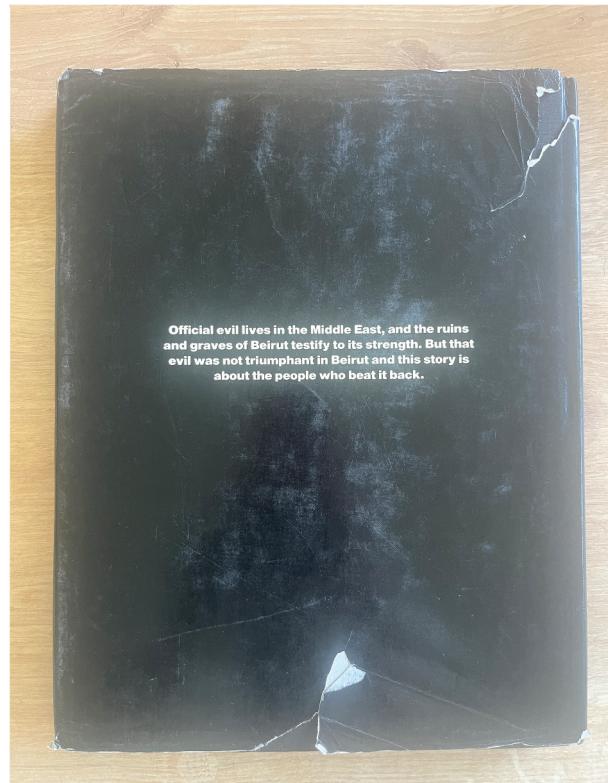
Fig. 4.   Back cover. *God Cried*. London: Quartet Books, 1983.

Seeing otherwise: contrapuntal reading as method in the visual archive of conflict

The article uses a contrapuntal reading of Leroy's photograph of a *fedayee* by first situating the image within its historical context and understanding the sociopolitical conditions surrounding its creation. Second, it considers the cultural norms, values, and symbols present in the photograph, examining how they interact with or challenge the viewer's understanding of the image. Finally, the article analyzes the photograph from multiple perspectives, including those of various stakeholders and the photographer herself. Having shared similar conditions with her subject, Leroy emerges not as a neutral observer, but as one who, through lived experience and empathy, takes a position of solidarity with human suffering, dignity, and resistance — especially in the context of the Palestinian struggle.

In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said introduces 'contrapuntal reading' as a method for interpreting texts produced within imperial contexts.[11] Said uses 'contrapuntal' to describe a critical reading practice that accounts for both the dominant imperial narrative and the suppressed, colonized perspective simultaneously. Adapting Said's contrapuntal method to photography allows us to read

against the grain of visual culture, tracing the unseen forces — colonialism, resistance, occupation — that shape what we see and how we see it. It's a way of ethically engaging with images, especially in contexts of political violence and historical trauma. In a contrapuntal reading of a photograph, attention is paid not only to what is represented but to what is left out — histories, voices, or experiences that are rendered invisible or ambiguous. This is especially relevant when considering visual representations of the Palestinian experience in Western media.

By using a contrapuntal reading, one can uncover deeper layers of meaning and critique the image from a nuanced and multifaceted perspective, often revealing underlying tensions or contradictions that a single, straightforward reading might overlook.

This contrapuntal analysis, when placed in dialogue with interviews and a closer historical contextualization of the *fedayee* photograph, seeks to contribute to the construction of counter-histories that challenge those perpetuated by hegemonic Western media. Drawing on Ariella Azoulay's concept of 'potential history,' the article considers the reconstructive work of reading through gaps and erasures in archival documents as a means of enacting histories that resist the dominant colonial and imperial narratives of oppression.[12] This objective underpins the re-reading of the *fedayee* figure in Leroy's photograph, an image that exemplifies the photobook's broader visual approach. Clifton reflects on this atmosphere of fear and distortion when recounting his own impressions while preparing to cover the war. Watching television images of Israeli airstrikes and Palestinian fighters, he was struck by 'the sheer weight of firepower the Israelis had organized around Beirut and the haunting sight of *fedayeen* prepared to resist at any cost.'[13] In contrast, Leroy's photographs resist these narratives of terror, offering instead an intimate vision of resilience and vulnerability within the camps.

Framing resistance: the *fedayee* in context

To fully grasp the political and emotional charge of the fedayee's portrait and the broader implications of Catherine Leroy's photograph, it is crucial to situate the photograph of the *fedayee* within the historical context of the Palestinian armed struggle and the Lebanese Civil War. The *fedayeen*, or Palestinian resistance fighters, emerged in the aftermath of the 1948 Nakba, gaining momentum after 1967 as they established bases in neighboring Arab countries, including Lebanon. By the 1970s, Lebanon had become a major stronghold for Palestinian factions, particularly the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), whose military and political presence significantly shaped the dynamics of the Lebanese Civil War. The Israeli siege of Beirut in 1982, which followed Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon under the pretext of expelling the PLO, marked a devastating chapter in the broader Palestinian predicament. The siege culminated in the forced evacuation of the PLO leadership and the massacre of civilians in the Sabra and Shatila camps. Within this context, the *fedayee* is not simply a militant figure but a symbol of displacement, resistance, and defiance against settler-colonial aggression. Leroy's images, particularly the one of the *fedayee*, must be read against this complex backdrop: as a visual record of statelessness

and struggle, it evokes not just an individual portrait but an embodiment of a collective history of resistance and survival.

The *Nakba* in 1948 forced around 750,000 Palestinians to leave their homes, with over half seeking refuge in Lebanon.[14] Some argue that the challenge of accommodating this growing Palestinian population in Lebanon played a pivotal role in triggering the civil war in Lebanon.[15] This civil war unfolded as a complex conflict involving various factions and ever-shifting alliances among Lebanese sectarian and non-sectarian groups, as well as Palestinians. Israeli interventions and attacks further complicated the dynamics of this war.[16] Leroy's photographs featured in *God Cried* predominantly capture the early stages of the civil war. It was a period marked by a blurred vision of the conflict, when uncertainty clouded both public perception and personal experience. No one knew how the war would unfold, when it would end, or what the future would hold. Her coverage from this time is particularly insightful as it offers a perspective from inside the Palestinian camps, providing a ground-level view of the unfolding events. Examining this photograph in the context of the current situation — where residents of Beirut live under the persistent threat of Israeli bombings — underscores the ongoing relevance of Leroy's work to contemporary media representations of Palestinians. However, for the sake of a concise and focused argument, this aspect will not be addressed in this article.

Witnessing from within: reconstructing Leroy's Beirut through oral histories

During the period in which Leroy worked in Beirut, most photojournalists familiar with her name had never met her in person. Leroy lived in Beirut and did not just visit like most foreign correspondents. Unlike many journalists and reporters based at the Commodore Hotel during the civil war, Leroy embedded herself within Palestinian camps, spending much of her time among refugees. As she had previously done in Vietnam, she chose to live on the front lines, directly experiencing the conditions of combatants in order to provide deeper, firsthand insight into unfolding events. Consequently, identifying individuals who knew Leroy closely during this period has proven difficult.

In addition, unlike Jacques Menasche's study of Leroy's early career in Vietnam, no personal letters, diaries, or written records have been found documenting her time in Beirut. In the absence of such material, reconstructing the historical context surrounding Leroy's work requires reliance on alternative sources. One such source is the memory accounts and personal notes of Waltraud Grotte — a German pediatrician who moved to Beirut during the same period. Although it is likely that the two women crossed paths in the chaotic environment of the camps, the turbulent circumstances of the time meant that Grotte is unable to definitively identify Leroy as a person. It is probable that they met, but under such conditions, they were not properly introduced or able to form personal connections. Nevertheless, through Grotte's recollections and documentation, it becomes possible to approach an informed reconstruction of the environment in which Leroy was working, offering

valuable insights into the interpretation of her photographs from this period. Through a series of interviews with Grotte, it was possible to piece together the circumstances surrounding Leroy's photograph of the *fedayee*. Drawing on oral history methodologies, this reconstruction offers a 'has-been-there' narrative based on lived experience. While this interpretation may not align with every possible reading of the photograph, it presents a plausible account rooted in the realities of the refugee camps. Grotte's firsthand observations provide critical insight into the situation of the *fedayee* depicted in the image.

Grotte had moved to Beirut with the mission of saving children's lives in war-torn countries. She committed herself to managing the Nasra Hospital in the Palestinian camps, providing care to injured children amid the escalating violence in West Beirut. At the time, Lebanon hosted a disproportionately large Palestinian population, many of whom had fled violence and displacement. The Palestinian refugee camps, often located at the front lines of the conflict, were subjected to intense bombardment and siege. Both Leroy and Grotte shared the precarious conditions of the Palestinian refugees. As foreign women committed to humanitarian causes, they gained unusual access to Palestinian leaders and communities that were otherwise wary of outsiders. Their engagement was not incidental: Grotte's role in the Palestinian Red Crescent network connected her to key figures such as Dr. Fathi Arafat, Yasser Arafat's brother and the founder of several hospitals in the camps, including Akka Hospital and the children's Nasra Hospital, which Grotte managed until 1982—the year Israeli forces invaded Lebanon and expelled the Palestinians. This institutional affiliation anchored her within the Palestinian civil infrastructure at a time of heightened vulnerability. Similarly, Leroy's proximity to Palestinian civilians and activists enabled her to photograph subjects often inaccessible to foreign media. Notably, she was introduced to Yasser Arafat himself — a rare privilege at a time when Arafat maintained extreme caution about his exposure to journalists and photographers. Securing his portrait was fraught with political sensitivity, mirroring the broader challenges of photographing the *fedayeen*, who were often portrayed in much of the Western media as faceless threats. As Clifton notes in *God Cried*, *fedayeen* might evoke fear in mainstream Western coverage, but Leroy's photographs offered a different, more humanizing portrayal.[17] The photograph of the *fedayee* was shared with Grotte, who provided further insight into the situation from inside the refugee camp. Examining the photograph through this lens reveals its potential in restoring humanity to the subjects portrayed. This involves scrutinizing the emotional and human dimensions captured in the image, transcending conventional stereotypes and presenting the individual not as a mere symbol of threat but as a multifaceted human being.

Reading between captions: reclaiming the *fedayee* in the visual archive of war

Scholars have identified a pattern in which the western press has often dehumanized Palestinians by demonizing them in the news.[18] They argue that western media reporting on the Palestinian struggle often downplays Palestinian suffering

and prioritizes Israeli narratives. In a study of anti-Palestinian bias in American news coverage, Holly M. Jackson highlights how the western press employs media practices that obscure Israeli war crimes through strategic semantics and ambiguity.[19] Similar studies underscore the use of disproportionately negative and violent rhetoric to describe Palestinian actions compared to Israeli actions.[20] Pictures that did not depict the Palestinians as wicked were overlooked by the western press said Françoise Demulder, another French photojournalist who also covered the civil war in Lebanon.[21] When pictures that depicted the Palestinians as human fighters defending themselves 'reached the Gamma office in Paris they were disregarded' continued Demulder.[22] Leroy's photograph of the *fedayee*, however, stands in stark contrast to this prevalent visual representation of Palestinians in the western press. It offers an alternative narrative of the conflict, highlighting the humanity of Palestinian freedom fighters. Such a photograph is powerful because it encourages viewers to question prevailing media narratives and consider deeper questions that mainstream media photographs often over-look: What is life like under Israeli occupation? Why do freedom fighters emerge? What does resistance mean? How many Palestinians are currently incarcerated in Israeli prisons?

Captured at the beginning of the civil war in Lebanon, the photograph must be read against the backdrop of a highly charged political moment, where Western media often depicted Palestinian resistance fighters through reductive or vilifying frameworks. While much of Leroy's photographs oscillates between documentary detachment and empathetic engagement, this image of the *fedayee* suggests a rare moment of suspended hierarchy between subject and viewer, complicating traditional representations. At a time when Western media often portrayed *fedayeen* as faceless militants or existential threats, Leroy's image — through its intimate framing and humanizing focus — invites a more layered and empathetic reading. Thus, the photograph operates dialectically: it both resists dominant narratives by asserting the humanity of its subject, and simultaneously remains implicated within broader structures of representation shaped by colonial and imperial gazes.

In her discussion on the two sides of a photograph — the reader and the maker — Susan Meiselas explains that when a photograph is decoded at different points in time and in different ways by different people, it generates different meanings.[23] In Figure 1, we do not know the name of the man, but we do know that Leroy wanted us to see him as she depicted him in this photograph — not armed, and not in an aggressive position ready to attack, but rather in an office, peacefully cuddling a kitten. Susan Sontag reminds us that the way a photograph is read often depends on the identity of the viewer and the context provided through its caption. [24] The connotation of the term *fedayee* in the photograph's caption needs to be clarified. The term carries different meanings for different people across various points in history. To an Israeli Jew, a photograph of a *fedayee* is, first and foremost, a photograph of a terrorist — a Palestinian suicide bomber, a perpetrator, a vile threat to the state of Israel. To a Palestinian, a photograph of a *fedayee* is that of a hero, an icon of resistance, a freedom fighter willing to risk his life to regain Palestinian land.

What happens when the photographed and the photographer share the same living conditions? Did the fact that the photographer is a female foreigner facilitate or present a challenge in taking this photograph? How did Leroy, a French photographer position herself vis-à-vis the *fedayee?* As a photographer, what are the decisions that she had taken in the making of her photos? What did she cut out or include in the frame? When did she deem the right moment and place to take her photograph? The decision on when and where to 'pull the trigger' and 'shoot the photograph' are both political and photographic. The act of 'pulling the trigger' and 'shooting the photograph' evoke a striking parallel between the war photographer and the combatant. This affinity underscores the complex position of the photographer as both observer and potential participant in the conflict. Like the soldier, the photographer aims, targets, and captures — but instead of bullets, the weapon is the camera, and the ammunition is the image. In this sense, the photograph becomes a form of intervention: it can expose, accuse, or defend, depending on who frames it and how it is read. This blurring of roles complicates the ethics of representation in war photography, raising questions about agency, violence, and the power dynamics embedded in visual narratives of conflict.

The photographer's choices, whether to include the *fedayee*'s rifle in the photograph, depict him in his *keffiyeh*, or present him as a vulnerable human being highlighting his soft eyes and friendly smile, keeping his rifle out of the frame, are manifested visually in the photograph.[25] These choices depend on the photographer's viewpoint and the lived circumstances of both the subject of the photograph and the photographer herself.

The unexpected tenderness of war: seeing the *fedayee* anew

There are no signs or any indication that the photographer kept a distance or was fearful of the subject she was taking a photograph of. The close-up photograph tells us that this photo was taken at a relatively close angle of the subject. Leroy shared the same space with the *fedayee*, she might have shared a meal or a coffee with a long conversation prior to this shot. In his exploration of the power dynamics between the photographer and the photographed, W.T.J. Mitchell discusses how the act of photographing human subjects involves a tangible social encounter:

> . . . photographing human subjects requires a concrete social encounter, often between a damaged, victimized, and powerless individual and a relatively privileged observer, often acting as the 'eye of power,' the agent of some social, political, or journalistic institution.[26]

Leroy seems to have eliminated all these constraints in order to establish an equal relation with her subject. The *fedayee* in Leroy's photograph looks through her lens, comfortably sharing his emotions. Instead of widening the gap between the viewer and the *fedayee*–a common practice by western media is to represent the Palestinians as inherently different; for example, Palestinians

are often represented as wretched people who are accustomed to suffering and who live a life so different from other human being — Leroy highlights the human features in her depiction of the *fedayee* such as the vaccine mark on his arm, his smile, his eye contact, and the fact that he is a cat lover. Despite the fact that he does not physically share resemblance with the western viewer — viewers are wired to feel strong emotions towards those who resemble them — through his eye contact, and his smile, the viewer can sense a kind of intimacy with the subject. In this sense, the *fedayee* is humanized in the photograph, he shares human values with the viewers, his humanity is cherished.

Leroy's photograph (Figure 1) is examined for its capacity to construct alternative narratives, serving as a testament to the resilience of the Palestinian people amidst the chaos of war. Her interaction with her subject, her emphasis on empathy, and her commitment to provide a Palestinian lens underscores the significance of her role in challenging conventional power dynamics between photographer and subject. This photographic practice ultimately fosters trust and access to alternative stories.

In theorizing the photograph, Stephen Sheehi writes: 'Photography acts as a means to animate the social relations and their narratives, imaginaries, histories and stories, stories that are told and remain untold.'[27] He explains that when photographs are about Palestinians, they may offer 'evidence of stories.'[28] This evidence is often dampened, displaced, repressed, or excluded from consideration. It appears in images whose indexical nature has been used to justify war and the killing of the Palestinian people.[29]

This particular photograph is evidence of the *fedayee*'s humanity. It presents a portrait of a *fedayee* looking straight into Leroy's lens with a friendly smile. The lens is focused on his eyes and the eyes of the kitten sitting in his lap. The kitten [not the *fedayee*] explains Leroy in her caption, *is* the tough subject in the photograph. This is an attempt by Leroy to play on the unexpected. While Clifton recounts his fear of encountering *fedayeen*, as discussed earlier, Leroy exposes us to a *fedayee* who shares the opposite of what Clifton and the western press and its readers would expect.

The 'looking' and 'seeing' dynamics in Leroy's photograph of a *fedayee* recalls Roland Barthes's discussion on the photographic look that 'has something paradoxical about it which is sometimes to be met with in life.'[30] Barthes speaks about an inconceivable distortion between 'looking' and 'seeing' to explain the way the photograph separates attention from perception.[31] Leroy shared her 'attention' focusing on the *fedayee*'s interior look, surrendering his emotions to the camera, sharing his compassion with the viewer. He looks into Leroy's lens with his sad, fearful eyes. His look retains within himself his emotions, his love and fear communicated to us when looking at the photograph. Looking closer into the photograph, we see a radio set in the background, which tells us that the subject of this photograph, similar to any person living in these circumstances, is attentive to the news. Sitting in a leather office couch, with a bandana on his forehead and the emblem of the Palestinian Liberation Organization on his forehead, the *fedayee* in this photograph looks at Leroy's lens with his hands relaxed, softly cradling the kitten in his lap.

Breaking boundaries: trust, empathy, and solidarity

The photograph is read through Leroy's lens who, having been exposed to narratives that help understand the content of the photograph from a lived experience, seems to sympathize with her subject. Looking at the photograph, one wonders how was a foreign photo-journalist who barely speaks Arabic able to access the intimate space of a *fedayee*. During this period of high tension and adversity between the Israeli-American authorities, the Phalangists and the pro-Palestinian authorities, the western press's portrayal of Palestinian fighters bred distrust and apprehension among the Palestinian fighters towards foreign journalists. In fact, many *fedayeen* actively avoided interacting with journalists and photojournalists due to the perceived threat posed by their cameras and the way their images were often used to support western propaganda against Palestinians. While the camera is often recognized as a tool that 'documents' reality as is, yet when it is wielded by the state or authority — in this case, a foreign journalist roaming around the palestinian refugee camps — it exerts control and shapes knowledge, as explored by scholars like Sontag, Sekula, and Tagg.[32] Leroy's practice seem to diverge from this norm. Leroy in an interview in 1985 mentioned her annoyance when magazine editors decided on the selection of photographs to be published and what to leave out that conflicted with her choice.[33] She expressed her need to go on her own, look around, take her time, and shoot without 'the strict propaganda program' set by press agencies.[34] In the photograph, it is almost as if the hierarchical divisions between photographer and photographed, colonizer and colonized, are being actively challenged.[35]

Leroy was fearless; she was determined to immerse herself in the lives of the *fedayeen*. Unlike many reporters who stayed at the Commodore Hotel, where they shared notes and discussed their experiences over drinks, Leroy must have rarely stayed there. Instead, she stayed in the camps where she successfully built trust with the *fedayeen*, breaking down the traditional power dynamics between foreign photographers and Palestinian fighters. Edward Said has critiqued western photojournalism and reporting on the Middle East, arguing that the coverage on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict often involved significant omissions and distortions. He explained that much of what photojournalists and reporters convey is based on superficial understanding.

> Not knowing the language is only part of a much greater ignorance, for often enough the reporter is sent to a strange country with no preparation or experience . . . So instead of trying to find out more about the country, the reporter takes hold of what is nearest at hand, usually a cliché or some bit of journalistic wisdom that readers at home are unlikely to challenge.[36]

However, Leroy's commitment as a photojournalist extended beyond mere observation; she must have immersed herself in the daily life of the Palestinians in the refugee camps, primarily spending time with young and courageous fighters. These individuals not only shared their experiences with her but also informed her about safe locations within the city. Peter Howe, *Life* and *New York Times Magazine* photo editor, highlights Leroy's photographic work as 'imbued with compassion and affection towards the fighters.'[37]

Leroy's ability to listen to the pain and suffering of her subjects, share in their misery, and identify with their wartime experiences enabled her to bridge the gap between her identity as a French photographer and the Palestinian in the photograph. Similar to Leroy, Christine Spengler, emphasizing the sensitivity of photographing war, attributed her success to empathy.[38] The effort to live the experiences of victims, and empathize with them is deemed crucial in both Leroy and Spengler's practice.

Restoring humanity to the *fedayee*

Leroy's photograph of the *fedayee* presents us with a 'human' subject, a Palestinian that Leroy had met when she came to Beirut to cover what was happening at the time inside the Palestinian camps where she was based. Her living experience with the Palestinian refugees, sharing their poor living conditions, the lack of security and resources (electricity, water, food, and so forth) in the camps appear in most of her photographs — of injured civilians, orphaned and amputated children, and mourning mothers — featured in God Cried. Leroy's approach as a freelancer, capturing the palestinian *fedayee* without a predetermined agenda enables a deeper understanding of the Palestinian as a human with equal rights. Comparing her photographic practices in Vietnam and Lebanon reveals a shift in focus from the camaraderie with American soldiers to a more comprehensive exploration of Palestinian lives in the latter. Could this be the reason why many articles have been written about her photographs in Vietnam while not much has been studied about her combat photography during the civil war in Lebanon? Beirut can be considered the climax of Leroy's career as a combat photographer. While in Beirut, as mentioned earlier, she became the first woman to receive the Robert Capa Gold Medal for her coverage in *Time* of street combat in Beirut. Her photographs challenge the way Israeli military leaders view Palestinians as lesser humans such as expressed by Menachem Begin who repeatedly claimed when he was prime minister of Israel (1977–1983) that 'these Palestinians are not humans. They are animals who walk on all fours.'[39] Mahmoud Darwish, a prominent Palestinian poet and writer, explains that during war and conflict, Israel's military officers' strategy was to strip the Palestinians of their humanity in order to justify their killing.[40]

According to Ariella Azoulay,

> Photographers, like other citizens, are encouraged to see the Palestinian first of all under the resolution of a suspect. This is achieved through the political categories that are imposed on them, the grammatical rules into which their presence and actions are woven, the way space is organized and what can be seen within it.[41]

In 1997, Stephen Rosenfeld, *Washington Post* editor and columnist, observed that 'Palestine is always going to be, at best, a struggling little country perceived first, by most Americans, through an Israeli lens.' Leroy's deliberate focus on a Palestinian lens in God Cried counters this narrative, aligning with the growing global effort to acknowledge the unjust treatment of Palestinians.[42]

Conclusion

Captured during the beginning of the civil war in Lebanon, Leroy's photograph of the *fedayee* must be situated within the broader political and humanitarian crisis that defined that moment. The political context represented a critical turning point, not only for the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Lebanese civilians but also for the ways in which Palestinian resistance was framed and consumed through global media. Western coverage often reduces the *fedayeen* to threatening, dehumanized figures, reinforcing entrenched stereotypes about Palestinian militancy and erasing the political and historical roots of their struggle. Within this context, Leroy's photograph demands a more layered reading. While many of Leroy's photographs maintain a certain journalistic distance, this particular image — through its tight framing, the vulnerability of the subject's posture, and the subtle interplay of gazes — collapses the traditional separation between photographer and photographed. It gestures toward an empathetic engagement that resists the objectifying tendencies often seen in photojournalistic photographs. Moreover, compared to hegemonic media portrayals that depicted the *fedayeen* as faceless or monolithic, Leroy's photograph presents a humanized and individualized subject. The careful attention to gesture, clothing, and environment encourages viewers to see the fighter not simply as an emblem of conflict but as a person embedded within a larger socio-political history. In this sense, the photograph offers a counterpoint to dominant visual narratives and participates, even if ambivalently, in the construction of alternative historical imaginaries. However, the image must also be read dialectically. Despite its moments of humanization, it remains a product of a colonial visual economy, mediated through the gaze of a European photographer. The photograph exists within circuits of visibility shaped by imperial histories and market logics, raising questions about the limits of empathy and the entanglement of documentary practices in structures of domination. Thus, the image enacts a tension: it both disrupts dominant narratives by foregrounding the humanity of the *fedayee*, and yet it remains implicated within broader systems of representation that have historically marginalized Palestinian voices. Through this contrapuntal and historically situated analysis, the photograph emerges not as an isolated artifact but as a charged site of contestation, where competing narratives of resistance, oppression, visibility, and erasure converge. Reading Leroy's photograph alongside the historical moment of its production, the politics of documentary photography, and the broader visual economy of the civil war in Lebanon allows for a more nuanced and critical understanding of how images can both challenge and reproduce hegemonic forms of knowledge.

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Notes

1. Nakba is an arabic term that gained historical currency after publication of the Syrian historian Constantin Zureiq's 1948 book *Maana al-Nakba* (*The Meaning of the Catastrophe*), which framed the mass displacement of the Palestinian people in 1948 as both a collective Arab defeat and a transformative rupture in Palestinian history. The term in Arabic means "the catastrophe." It designates the mass displacement and dispossession of Palestinians that accompanied the 1947–1949 Palestine war, culminating in the establishment of the State of Israel. It refers to the destruction of over 400 Palestinian villages, the depopulation of major urban centers, and the forced exile of an estimated 750,000 Palestinians, who became refugees in neighboring Arab countries. In academic discourse, the Nakba is not only a historical event but also an ongoing process encompassing the loss of land, property, and sovereignty, as well as the erasure of Palestinian presence from much of the territory incorporated into Israel.
2. *To See In the Dark*, 5.
3. Ibid.
4. "On Archiving," 49.
5. Said, *Covering Islam*, xxvii.
6. *Dotation Catherine Leroy*, https://dotationcatherineleroy.org/en/biography/biography-dates/. retrieved on April 30, 2025Leroy 2025.
7. *God Cried*, 15. The Phalangist party in Lebanon is a right-wing Christian political party founded by Pierre Gemayel in 1936.
8. "Permission to Narrate," 41.
9. Ibid.
10. *To See In the Dark*, 10.
11. *Culture and Imperialism*, 12.
12. "Potential History," 549.
13. Clifton, 18.
14. Khalidi, "1948 and After," 317.
15. Fisk, *Pity the Nation*, 27.
16. Ibid.
17. *God Cried*, 49.
18. Parry, "A Visual Framing," 71; Moeller, *Packaging Terrorism*, 113; Livingston, "The CNN Effect," 23).
19. "The New York Times," n.p. This analysis relies on a large database of more than 33,000 NYT articles, revealing a marked inclination towards the passive voice when depicting negative or violent actions against Palestinians.
20. Hamid, R., and A. Morris, "Media Reporting," n.p.; and Zelizer et al., "How bias shapes," 288.
21. Randal, J., "Françoise Demulder." 18 September, 2008, *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/sep/18/photography.women.
22. Ibid.
23. "Body on Hillside," 118.
24. *Regarding the Pain*, 10.
25. The *keffiyeh* is a distinctly patterned black-and-white head scarf that has become a prominent symbol of Palestinian nationalism and resistance since the 1930s.

> Within the current escalating events, the *keffiyeh* has gained popularity as an icon of solidarity with the Palestinians in their fight against Israel.

26.   "Holy Landscape," 198.
27.   "The Presence and Potential," 156.
28.   Ibid.
29.   Ibid.
30.   *Camera Lucida*, 113.
31.   Ibid.
32.   Sontag, *On photography*, 66; Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 7; and Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, 14.
33.   Online interview with Leroy 1985.
34.   Ibid.
35.   Tamari et al. *Camera Palaestina*, 16; and Berdugo, *The Weaponized Camera*, 33.
36.   *Covering Islam*, xi-xii.
37.   Quoted in Cronk Farrell, *Close-up on War*, 115.
38.   Becker, *You Don't Belong*, 102.
39.   Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness*, 77.
40.   Ibid.
41.   "The Lethal Art," 217.
42.   Khalidi, "1948 and After," 316.

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