

# Beautiful Suffering

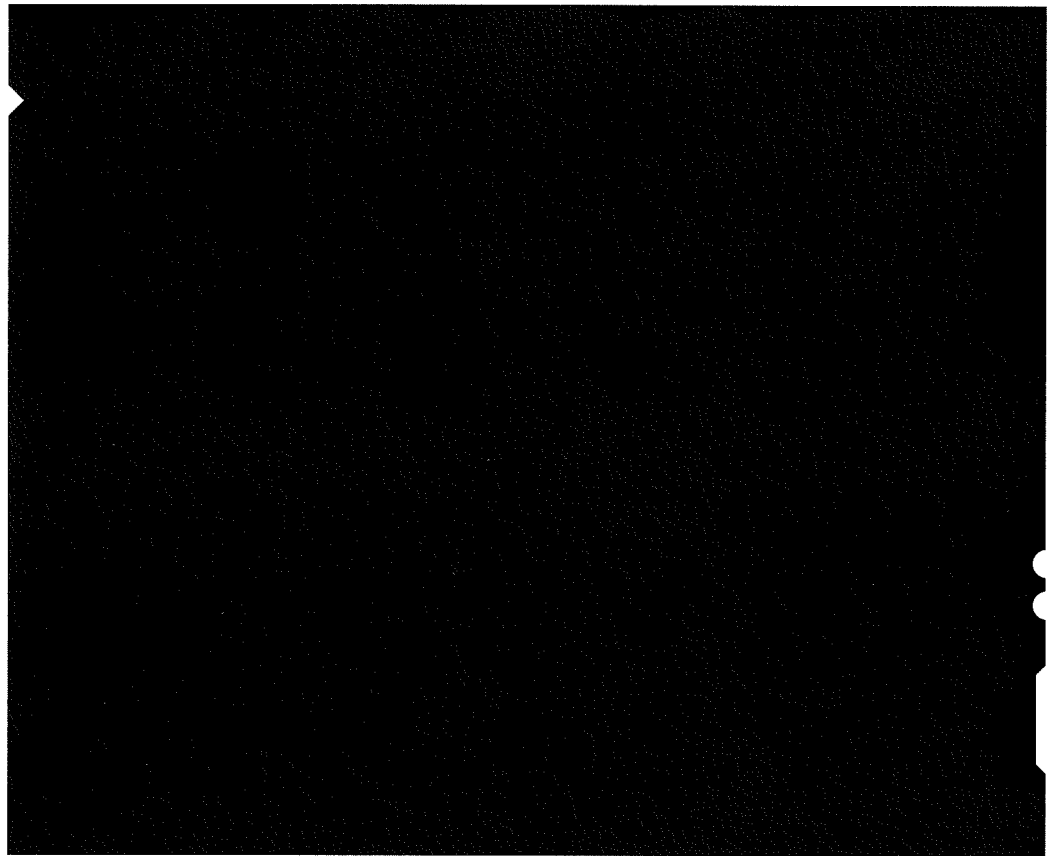
PHOTOGRAPHY  
AND THE  
TRAFFIC IN  
PAIN

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## COVER TO COVER: THE LIFE CYCLE OF AN IMAGE IN CONTEMPORARY VISUAL CULTURE

*Afghan Girl* by Steve McCurry (PLATE 5) first appeared on the cover of *National Geographic* in 1985 to epitomize the plight of refugees displaced by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Since that time, the image has been republished frequently in diverse contexts, its meaning altered and augmented with each reincarnation. The photograph and the photographer gained fame, even as the girl (Sharbat Gula) survived seventeen years of flight and repatriation, unaware of the use of her image. During the Taliban era, *Afghan Girl* became the focus of renewed interest. *National Geographic*, seeking to recapitulate Afghanistan's suffering, launched a campaign to find the person behind the famous face and to tell her life story. The photograph was reprised and revised, serving as the visual lynchpin of philanthropic efforts to raise money for the education of Afghan girls after Taliban power collapsed.

The success of that humanitarian campaign, coupled with the protracted story of Sharbat Gula and her widely disseminated image, pose some important ethical issues: the abuse and suffering that Afghan women and children have undergone in recent decades are incontrovertible; the rhetoric and performance of the resulting charitable campaigns and the role of photography for documentary and philanthropic purposes, however, are

more vexed and contestable. By tracing the story of **Afghan Girl** over time, I hope to call attention to a few of the moral complexities that reside in the overlap between visuality and human rights.<sup>1</sup>

Embedded within that story are myriad quandaries involved in the acts of photographing, exhibiting, and even viewing the suffering of others; standing without the story are other, equally complex issues relating to the more general production and elaboration of visual culture. Positioning **Afghan Girl** at the crux of these two domains underscores the intimacy between ethos and image over time, sustained and complicated by the ever more sophisticated technologies of image production.

My strategy will be to trace the meandering life cycle of a mechanically reproduced image episodically functioning as (but not limited to) document, "art," advertisement, and fundraiser, thereby articulating the traffic in pain that is endemic to contemporary visual culture. My starting point is nebulous and even banal: What is it about this photograph? Why has it enjoyed sustained currency in the public arena and served so many diverse functions? Why have so many people responded to the image in such extravagant, diverse, and personal ways? Men have written to McCurry seeking to marry the girl; couples have offered to adopt her. Most importantly, many people have contributed money to the Afghan cause in response to her image.

That numerous people *have* responded monetarily is striking; that **Afghan Girl** has become a virtual icon in a visually saturated society also demands comment. Countless images (some of them "beautiful," powerful, dangerous, or otherwise provocative) have simultaneously come and gone without a trace in the visual blur to which we are accustomed. Somehow, against the odds, this one has repeatedly reached benumbed and satiated audiences, eliciting fascination and even activism.<sup>2</sup> I would argue that diverse and multiple dynamics must have coincided to keep the image in the public eye over time; no single factor can explain its sustained power and currency.

In order to tease apart those forces, it is useful to consider the photograph not simply as a discrete visual document but rather in/as a relational matrix encompassing image, maker, audience, and era. This matrix is exponentially expanded by the reproducibility of the medium, the encounter between viewers and image endlessly reenacted and constantly recalibrated. Such an approach is doubly pertinent to the study of a portrait, a visual type that activates a peculiarly interactive force field among multiple agents—subject, maker, viewers.<sup>3</sup> Underlying this strategy is the conviction that the image is an agent as well as a manifestation of culture and the viewer is a vector of changing meaning.

This study is loosely diachronic. Such an approach reflects the constantly renewed and revealing topicality of the image, arising out of one of the most symbolically charged and politically complex encounters of the era. **Afghan Girl** gained currency in the context of Afghanistan's struggle against the Soviet Union, the corollary refugee crisis, and America's escalating involvement in Afghanistan; it enjoyed augmented relevance during the Taliban era. What this suggests is that the fame of **Afghan Girl** is part of a larger picture, in which Afghanistan served as a strategic proxy in the burdened contest between the Soviet Union and the United States and then as a charged focal point in the protracted encounter be-

1. Other images have enjoyed similarly protracted and revealing life cycles. See Liz Wells, "Image Analysis: The Example of Migrant Mother," *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 37–48; Stephen Biel, *American Gothic: A Life of America's Most Famous Painting* (New York: Norton, 2005); Donald Sassoon, *Becoming Mona Lisa* (New York: Harcourt, 2001).

2. Susan Sontag's trenchant engagement with the issues surrounding the image glut, as well as the pertinent theories of DeBord and Baudrillard resurface in Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), pp. 104–13.

3. Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 7–21.

tween the Islamic world and the United States. Indeed, it seems likely that **Afghan Girl** has enjoyed prolonged currency in no small part because of its resonance with core narratives of American political dominance in the late twentieth century.

The observation that the fame of **Afghan Girl** is related in some way to the diverse entanglements between the United States and Afghanistan (and by extension, the Islamic world more generally) has certain implications. Most obviously, it points to the relevance of the voluminous discourse generated by Edward Said's *Orientalism*.<sup>4</sup> McCurry's photograph is, after all, about a very specific case of "beautiful suffering"—that of a Muslim, Afghan woman; the manner in which it extends a long tradition of representing the "Orient" or the "East" by means of an exoticized, eroticized female undergirds the following argument in diverse ways. Indeed, this is on some levels a case study of Orientalism in its narrowest sense of defining, documenting, and controlling the (albeit changing) "Orient" as that process has been enacted in the visually aggressive culture of the late twentieth century.

That the photograph depicts a girl widely deemed *beautiful* invokes another matrix of analysis. Following Danto,<sup>5</sup> we must consider the possibility that perverse pleasures factor in the sustained charisma of **Afghan Girl**. Are we relishing her suffering because of her appealing appearance? Are we consoled by seeing one so pretty survive? On the other hand, is she ennobled by this portrait or is she being victimized by our gaze? How do beauty and morality overlap in this viewing experience?

While it might be easy to contemplate her beauty and her predicament in a detached (or reverent) fashion, (there is certainly ample precedent in the history of Christian art for this<sup>6</sup>), the next step would be to consider the voracious consumption of beauty in the present tense. This is beauty in the vernacular sense of a pretty face in the here and now, the experience of physical attraction that is a matter of our tastes, social conventions, and somatic experiences. This kind of immediate arousal has underlain the impact of countless images in the past,<sup>7</sup> but the sustained power of **Afghan Girl** to elicit strong response is augmented by the medium in which she is rendered—photography. She is "real" to the average viewer in part because of the presumed veracity of photographs that is, in turn, corroborated by the shared viewing experience afforded by multiple iterations of the easily reproduced image.<sup>8</sup> When many people see the same image, a consolidated truth value for the image coalesces in the public arena. The image functions as an active agent—shaping and often homogenizing taste and public opinion.

This, then, suggests a final nest of significance—the marketplace. Beauty, in a vernacular rather than in a philosophical sense, is the lynchpin of a vast industry and the currency of consumer society. By embedding the life cycle of **Afghan Girl** in that socio-economic context, I seek to trace the syncopated processes by which the image became simultaneously icon and commodity and to tabulate the benefits that have accrued to those who are needy and those who are safe, thanks to this photograph. In the end, I think, we (the comfortable viewers) are ineluctably forced to confront a hard and basic question: how is our privilege related to her suffering?

When Steve McCurry took the photograph known as **Afghan Girl**, he was an unknown, young photographer with a college degree and some freelance experience.

4. A recent and insightful overview of this protracted discourse appears in Zachery Lockman, *Contending Views of the Middle East* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 182–215.

5. Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), pp. 108–15. There is a mushrooming consideration of the meanings and functions of beauty in contemporary visual culture that is beyond the scope of this essay. Danto's work is the most useful point of reference for the present purpose.

6. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

7. Arousal by image is discussed in detail in David Freedburg, *The Power of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 317–45.

8. The implications of mechanically reproducing images were articulated by Walter Benjamin in the 1930s. For an array of related issues and commentaries, see Andrew Benjamin, ed., *Walter Benjamin and Art* (New York: Continuum, 2005).



His impressive career as a photojournalist affiliated with Magnum was launched when he covered the refugee situation on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Now, one can peruse and purchase McCurry's work online and encounter it in magazines, galleries, and museum exhibitions; recently, a glossy monograph on his work was published.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, according to his early 2006 web site, McCurry is "universally recognized as one of today's finest image makers."<sup>10</sup> Clearly, over the years, he has refined his promotional strategies as well as his art.

On the same web site, McCurry presented a selection of his photographs and singled out one for further comment. Approximately contemporaneous with *Afghan Girl*, this photograph shows a tailor in Porbandar, India, carrying a sewing machine on his shoulder down a flooded street (**FIG. 1**).<sup>11</sup> The neck-deep waters hide everything but the man's head and juxtaposed sewing machine, both of which appear to simply float on the surface of the water in a seemingly whimsical if slightly surreal decapitation. It is an audacious, compelling image and, like *Afghan Girl*, it appeared on the cover of *National Geographic*. That exposure in a high-profile magazine generated, in turn, a showy act of charity—the sewing-machine manufacturer magnanimously replaced the tailor's ruined equipment so that he could recoup his losses and carry on with his life.

McCurry used this exemplary image to articulate his personal stance: "We photographers say that we 'take' a picture, and in a certain sense, that is true. We take something from people's lives, but in doing so, we tell their story. In this case, I took his picture, others saw it, were moved, and reached out to help the man. That is the best possible result." Thus, for McCurry (and others), it is valid and even laudable to photograph the plight of someone else rather than to alleviate it, for by this means, others are inspired to altruism. It is, in effect, the rationale for a division of humanitarian labors: the moment must be captured visually so that the suffering can be remembered, rectified, and (hopefully) not repeated.<sup>12</sup>

The story of *Afghan Girl* entails a more complex rendition of the same attitude. The life cycle of that image involves comparable (and also contradictory) dynamics of witnessing and charity, and it poses vexing questions about exploitation and voyeurism. But in the end, it is more revealing of the embedded ethical quandaries than is the case of the photograph of the stoic tailor. Its unique status and sustained currency are evident on the web site and corroborated in McCurry's other promotional materials, where the image is overtly and repeatedly showcased. It is mentioned specifically in the biography, where it is described as "the most recognizable photograph in the world today." It serves as the icon for the online gallery of McCurry's coverage of Afghanistan, and it reappears as the emblematic image for a link to a charitable foundation, ImagineAsia, set up by McCurry and others to support educational opportunities in rural Asia.<sup>13</sup> It was also the centerpiece for "Face of Asia," an exhibition of McCurry's photographs mounted and circulated by Eastman

9. Anthony Bannon, *Steve McCurry*, (New York: Phaidon, 2005).

10. <http://www.stevemccurry.com>

11. This image appears with short commentary in Bannon, *Steve McCurry*, not paginated.



**FIGURE 1**  
STEVE MCCURRY, PORBANDAR,  
GUJARAT, INDIA, 1983.  
COURTESY STEVE MCCURRY  
AND MAGNUM PHOTOS.

12. This reasoning resonates with David Levi Strauss, *Between the Eyes* (New York: Aperture, 2003), pp. 42–9.

13. <http://www.imagine-asia.org>

14. Nathan Hogan "Face of Asia: Steve McCurry's Photographs," *Afterimage*, vol. 31 (July–August 2003). Exhibition at George Eastman House, April 19–August 31, 2003.

15. The cymbal clash of red and green and the riveting eye color are so deterministic that McCurry's testimony about their authenticity is worth quoting: "Just by sheer luck, the background from the tent was a certain shade of green and her shirt was green as well; so there's a wonderful color thing happening." Simon James, "Steve McCurry: Humanity in Color," *RPS Journal*, vol. 142, no. 6, (July–August 2002): 48–51. The extent to which the palette was enhanced or manipulated in subsequent iterations is open to question: even cursory comparison of the many incarnations of the image reveals considerable variation.

16. This story is recounted in various contexts; I quote it from Cathy Newman, "A Life Revealed," *National Geographic*, April 2002, where the story was published for the first time.

17. See note 15.

Kodak House; the accompanying brochure featured Kodak products in conjunction with a brief biography of the photojournalist and an elaborate time line of *Afghan Girl* entitled "Image to Icon."<sup>14</sup> By the year 2006, then—two decades after its initial appearance—*Afghan Girl* is still resonant and recognized; it has become advertisement, icon, and professional attribute, while McCurry enjoys accrued blessings—monetary and otherwise—as do various commercial and institutional concerns. What follows is, in part, an effort to trace the processes by which that happened.

*Afghan Girl* is a riveting portrait of a female looking over her right shoulder; her eyes blaze. Apart from a few ragged holes in the shawl covering her hair, there are no indications of her status or identity. She is mute and even frozen, but the protective hunch of her shoulder and the slight obduracy of her mouth suggest resilience, or perhaps resistance. Ultimately, it is the eyes that confront and mesmerize. Their color is not inconsequential—they are neither commonplace brown nor crystalline blue, nor does one think to dismiss them as merely hazel. Serendipitously enhanced by the shawl's contrasting hue and the color of the garment underneath, they are a vivid, surprising green.<sup>15</sup>

If she seems bound, so are we—held captive by the girl's unflinching, verdant gaze. We do not look up to her or down to her but rather directly at her, and that face off is crucial to the impact of the image. Indeed, it is her piercing glare that dictates the terms of the encounter and forces a declaration of intent. Looking at her, we must admit ourselves.

Of course, it is more complicated than that. Her gaze is not really directed at us; it is an artifact of her encounter with Steve McCurry and his camera. That instant of eye contact is central to this story, for the terms of that confrontation affect every subsequent reading, whether replicatory, divergent, or contesting. What can be said about that critical encounter?

To answer that question in retrospect, we have recourse to the verbal testimonies of participants. McCurry's description, the publication of which will be addressed later, goes like this:

I remember the noise and confusion in that refugee camp 17 years ago. I knew that Afghan girls, just a few years away from disappearing behind a traditional veil, might be reluctant to have their picture taken by a male Westerner. So I proceeded carefully. I asked the teacher for permission to enter the girls' school tent and photograph a few of the students. The shyest of them, Sharbat, said I could take her photograph and I shot a few frames.<sup>16</sup>

Sharbat Gula's version of the encounter is problematical. Indeed, it cannot legitimately be equated with McCurry's more discursive, personal testimony, as it has been summarized, directed, and stylized by interviewers, translators, and editors. Already the quandaries abound. Do I quote it and gloss over those interventions, or do I resist the reductionist voice-over and delete the report? Condone or erase? For the moment, I will recount it, noting in the process its compromised nature:

She remembers the moment. The photographer took her picture. She remembers her anger. The man was a stranger. She had never been photographed before. Until they met again 17 years later, she had not been photographed since.<sup>17</sup>

Setting aside the contrived ventriloquism, it is clear that there are asymmetries (age,



gender, power) inherent in this meeting. The picture was taken in a setting in which gender segregation was normative and image making was fraught. She was angry and he was an outsider; he "took" her picture. Without presuming to pinpoint her emotional response to this or any other social complexities involved, it seems safe to state that McCurry's codes of propriety and visibility (not hers) dictated the terms of the encounter; that encounter, in turn, left traces on the resulting image.

I go back now to the image itself. Ironically and significantly, the famous photograph is of limited value as a piece of reportage, conveying little of the girl's situation. The image shows a female of indeterminate age against an undifferentiated backdrop; aside from a few ragged places in her shawl, there are no definitive sartorial clues as to her circumstances. Her expression telegraphs unspoken emotion, but it is (already) veiled and—without the accompanying narrative—somewhat enigmatic. In its generic and generalized quality, it is richly ambiguous.

By contrast, other images of the same person from McCurry's roll of film are considerably denser with circumstantial detail (FIG. 2).<sup>18</sup> The thick hands, grimy fingernails, and furtive gestures caught in other images betray the youth, the vulnerability, and the hard life of the girl in ways that preclude fantasy or even multiple readings. These (not surprisingly) less-well-known frames convey more information about the girl but sustain less projection from the viewer. They are not general but rather specific visual notes about a particular person. By contrast, the famous image invites diverse readings and sustains complex projections by virtue of its capacious, generalized character.<sup>19</sup>

This receptivity, while critical to the longevity of this particular image, is not unusual; rather, it is commonplace in commodity culture, especially among stock images of the advertising industry that are archived and sold for diverse marketing purposes. Characterized by aesthetic/technical refinement, generalized content, and lack of explicit "meaning," such images are useful precisely because they can be "branded" or glossed to convey disparate messages in varied commercial contexts. From one iteration to the next, the stock image can change considerably in connotation, depending on the needs of the purveyor.<sup>20</sup>

In this milieu of generic image and protean meaning, the connotational valences of **Afghan Girl** have been specified and can, in turn, be gauged by the varied captions applied to the mechanically reproduced and widely disseminated image. Roland Barthes described this as the "anchorage" function of a caption, tying a picture to certain meanings and drawing it away from others.<sup>21</sup> As cues, captions serve to turn the enigmatic appeal of the portrait to varying ends; as clues, they reveal sponsors and beneficiaries. By considering different iterations of the portrait in conjunction with their appended captions, I will articulate changes in the image's meaning, tune in to its social resonances, and identify the ideological and commercial engines of its dissemination.



FIGURE 2  
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC,  
APRIL 2002, N.P.  
COURTESY STEVE MCCURRY  
AND MAGNUM PHOTOS

18. Fig. 2, for example, has been reproduced frequently without acquiring fame and fortune. It appears in *National Geographic*, April 2002, as well as on the back cover of *Steve McCurry, Portraits* (New York: Phaidon, 1999).

19. The connotative receptivity I refer to was also a formative factor in the life cycle of Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (see note 1).

20. Anandi Ramamurthy, "Commercial photography, image banks and corporate media" in Liz Wells, ed. *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 201–04. See also Douglas Holt, *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2005). Following the latter, this brand of suffering has become an icon, a successful campaign of culturally resonant identity construction.

21. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in Stephen Heath ed. *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 39–40.

First, I want to consider the initial incarnation of **Afghan Girl** and the frame in which it appeared, in June 1985—the immediately recognizable yellow border of *National Geographic's* cover (PLATE 6). As an artifact of the era, the conjunction of image and frame is complexly potent, merging the social charisma and rhetorical style of the magazine with the power of a new and arresting image to capture the attention of the viewing public, thereby projecting a particular worldview. While the growth and character of *National Geographic's* representational traditions as well as its more general cultural clout have inspired considerable comment,<sup>22</sup> the magazine's rendition of Afghanistan has escaped detailed scrutiny. That project lies beyond the scope of the present essay; let it be said simply that a distinct representational template emerges, beginning in the 1920s, particularly with regard to Afghan women.

For example, photographs that accompany Thomas Abercrombie's lead story entitled "Crossroads of Conquerors," in the 1968 issue of *National Geographic*, can typify that rhetorical tradition for present purposes. The cover image is an earth-toned riff on the Madonna and Child (FIG. 3); the second (embedded within the article itself) reprises the common trope of veiled woman as caged bird (FIG. 4). The general prominence and aesthetic virtuosity of both images are dissonant with their minimal captions and narrative insignificance. Indeed, the reader never learns anything substantive about either of the women. They

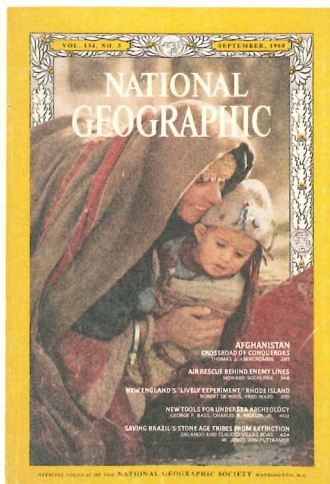
serve circumscribed visual roles indicative of culturally specific tastes—one is a cover girl, the other is a photogenic veil. **Afghan Girl**, appearing on the magazine cover on two separate occasions, conformed to and extended these tropes,<sup>23</sup> in so doing, the portrait fulfilled readers' expectations, even as McCurry's image won acclaim in the public arena.

But these are general observations. In its initial appearance on the cover of the June 1985 issue, **Afghan Girl** was cast in a more particular role, signaled by a few, carefully placed words at the lower-right corner of the image. Those words served to corral the viewer's imagination and focus attention on one particular set of associations: "Haunted eyes tell of an Afghan refugee's fears." With this directive act, *National Geographic* imposed a reading on McCurry's photograph, unilaterally labeling the girl's state of mind and effectively personifying Afghan refugees with a fearful, female victim. Her appearance

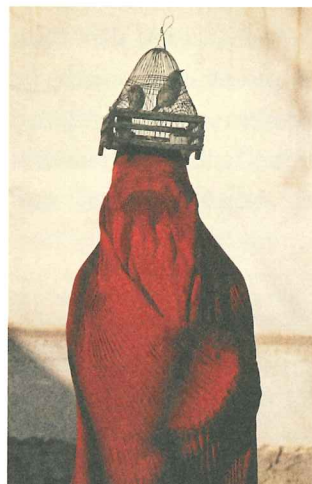
is critical and critically limited as well. Most obvious is the fact that she posed beautifully on the cover and then played no further role in the magazine's description of the plight of Afghan refugees. Nowhere in the article is her name given, nor is her flight from the invading forces recounted. Visually enshrined but personally erased, she is no different from any other cover girl on any fashion magazine.

The resonance between **Afghan Girl** and the ethos of beauty and consumption

22. The most sustained analysis is in Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). See also Linda Steet, *Veils and Daggers, A Century of National Geographic's Representation of the Arab World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).



23. April 1985 and April 2002; Lutz and Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, addresses myriad issues relating to cover design at *National Geographic*. These provide useful analytical context.



FIGURES 3 & 4  
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC,  
SEPTEMBER 1968, COVER AND  
P. 303. COURTESY NATIONAL  
GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE



that dominated America in the 1980s and 1990s was perhaps the critical factor in the photograph's subsequent rise to fame. It was a boom time. Americans were voracious consumers of new goods and new experiences, and affluent yuppies avidly welcomed the beautiful and the exotic as intriguing consumer experiences.<sup>24</sup> Controversy, however, was as endemic as consumption.<sup>25</sup> Robert Mapplethorpe's exquisitely scandalous photos and Andre Serrano's provocative images (PLATE 22) called into question the very codes of conduct that were operative in American visual culture—what was proper and what was off limits? Who had the right to determine (fund) what could be made visual/visible?

In actuality, these questions are central to the study of any visual culture,<sup>26</sup> and not coincidentally, they were the same issues (albeit transposed into a trans-cultural key) that underlay the encounter between McCurry and the Afghan girl and would eventually resurface in the diverse iconoclasms of the Taliban and their impact on *Afghan Girl*. But that will be the climax of the story and we are only just beginning. For the moment, the issue is the beauty of the Afghan girl and how it played in consumer culture.

In the mid 1980s, the general receptivity to other cultures and new looks was manifest in myriad ways in the world of fashion. John Galliano, for example, launched a collection entitled "Visions of Afghanistan: Layers of Suiting, Shirting and Dried Blood Tones" just three months prior to the appearance of the Afghan girl on the cover of *National Geographic*.<sup>27</sup> With hints like this, one begins to suspect that the Afghan girl might have been perceived not simply as a frightened refugee but also as an exotic, intriguing beauty.

This is borne out by evidence of a larger shift in American tastes in the 1980s and 1990s, a move away from the blond-haired, blue-eyed stereotype toward a more inclusive notion of "beauty." A contemporaneous article in *Newsweek* documented this growing acceptance of "overtly ethnic girls," citing in particular Puerto Rican Talisa Soto, "the first to break into modeling's inner sanctum."<sup>28</sup> In heralding this relaxation of norms ("Paper dolls, indeed!"), the article went on to admit that cover-girl status remained a remote possibility for those who did not conform to old stereotypes: "Brunettes who get there tend to have blue eyes." Enter the Afghan girl, a green-eyed brunette—multi-cultural beauty personified. If she had aspired to be a fashion model, she could not have asked for a more auspicious moment to make an appearance.

If the Afghan girl were well cast to be a cutting-edge cover girl of the 1980s, she was well launched by *National Geographic* and Steve McCurry: a comparison of the magazine's cover with contemporaneous *Harper's Bazaar* or *Vogue* covers reveals a striking similarity (FIGS. 5 and 6).<sup>29</sup> Not only do these magazines share a similar page composition—closely cropped portrait surmounted by magazine name and bracketed along the sides by a list of headlines—but also a comparable approach to presenting a beautiful face. Large striking eyes, straight nose, and

24. Kate Mulvey and Melissa Richards, *Decades of Beauty* (London: Hamlyn, 1998), pp. 172–205.

25. For an overview of some of these issues see Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

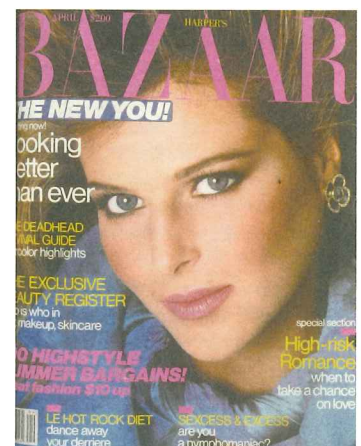
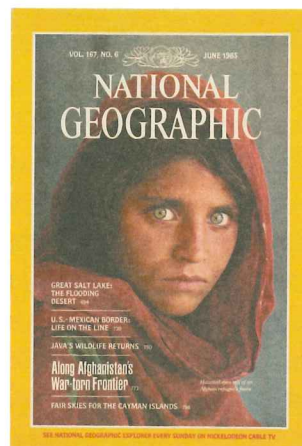
26. W. T. J. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture" in Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey, *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies* (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in collaboration with Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 231–50.

27. Colin McDowell, *Galliano* (New York: Rizzoli, 1997), pp. 79–81 and 91. Galliano's references to Afghanistan are complex—arising in part from history (King Amanullah's dress reforms in the 1920s) but also from a more general interest in what the designer called "wearing two different cultures."

28. Eloise Salholz, "More than a Pretty Face," *Newsweek*, January 14, 1985, p. 74. See also Jennet Conant, "Black Models Back to Stay," *Newsweek*, September 12, 1988, p. 78; Eva Pomice, "Putting Their Best Face Forward," *U. S. News and World Report*, vol. 106, no. 23, (June 12, 1989), p. 45.

29. For example, *Vogue*, January–February 1985; *Harper's Bazaar*, March and April 1985.

FIGURES 5 & 6  
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, JUNE 1985,  
COVER. COURTESY NATIONAL  
GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE.  
HARPER'S BAZAAR, MARCH/APRIL  
1985, COVER. COURTESY  
HEARST COMMUNICATIONS, INC.



full mouth are shown to best advantage posed just so—the face turned slightly down and looking sideways over the shoulder, the body caught in a moment of arrested action directed elsewhere. Most striking is the emphasis on vivid eye color.

One might digress further on the conventions of fashion photography here or, alternatively, shift analytical gears and consider the image in the context of visual anthropology by correlating the portrait with Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins' typologies of gaze in *National Geographic* photography.<sup>30</sup> **Afghan Girl** may pose like a cover girl of the mid 1980s, but she also conforms to a particular type—the non-Western subject that confronts the photographer. The girl looks into and simultaneously twists away from the camera; deemed coy or seductive in a fashion shot, this torsion between pose and gaze also suggests qualified engagement and silent resistance in the realm of visual anthropology.

That **Afghan Girl** occupies an overlap between fashion photography and visual anthropology is not unusual in late-twentieth-century commodity culture. Anandi Ramamurthy articulated this phenomenon in reference to fashion magazines in the late 1980s and early 1990s (for example, *Marie Claire, Company*), citing jewelry and makeup evoking "Arabia behind the Veil" and harem themes as exoticizing fads and marketing strategies.<sup>31</sup> In that larger convergence between fashion and ethnography, **Afghan Girl** effectively reversed those advertising ploys, absorbing the Other into the fashionable familiar.

The implications of this transposition are important. For the purposes of a fashion magazine, a woman is chosen to personify and project the current canon of beauty for its own sake, whereas in this case, the girl epitomizes that canon and simultaneously represents something else—the Afghan refugee. That she might epitomize beauty and typify "Afghan refugee" at the same time suggest that some of the image's power is due to a successful conflation of likeness and alterity. Perhaps the most significant manifestation of this doubled resonance is that the Afghan girl became the *poster child* for the tragic and intractable conflict in Afghanistan.

In order to understand her peculiarly postmodern and remarkably sustained ability to mobilize sympathy, it is useful to look at the history of media-fueled philanthropy. Beginning with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's birthday balls to benefit research for polio (ultimately known as the March of Dimes),<sup>32</sup> many charities have mounted fundraising campaigns that rely on the universal solicitude for and identification with children. Historically, these efforts revolve around images of overt pain or severe physical disability. Thus a "poster child" is often depicted in grim straits, the victim of disease, war, drought, or famine.

In the case of the Afghan girl, however, the mechanism has been shifted. She is not obviously injured or malnourished, nor is she depicted in a ghastly setting. Her suffering has not been valorized or ennobled; instead, it has been aestheticized. Thus, she epitomizes the updated poster child—the beautiful female victim. In image-conscious, voyeuristic America, this is more compelling viewing than graphically explicit deprivation, disease, or injury. She seems exotic, perhaps, but also appealing. In effect, the viewer can envy, relate to or, perhaps most pertinently, desire one so pretty and simultaneously help that person from a position of comfort and privilege. In the words of one online viewer: "McCurry's photograph of the Afghan girl makes her seem real—not an abstract "Muslim" girl, but a girl we might

30. Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins, "The Photograph As an Intersection of Gazes," in Liz Wells, ed., *The Photography Reader* (London/New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 358–62.

31. Anandi Ramamurthy, "Commercial photography, image banks and corporate media," in Liz Wells, ed., *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, third edition, (New York: Routledge), pp. 229–35. This article discusses a particular time period, but there are many chapters in fashion history that might be cited.

32. Scott Cutlip, *Fund Raising in the United States, Its Role in America's Philanthropy* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1965), pp. 351–93. Related but tangential is Jack A. Nelson, "The Invisible Cultural Group: Images of Disability," in Paul Martin Lester, ed., *Images That Injure* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), pp. 119–27. The notion of the "poster child" deserves further scrutiny. "Beyond Affliction: The Disability History Project," a four-hour, National Public Radio documentary directed by Laurie Block, began with a segment entitled "Inventing the Poster Child."

know and care about and want to help."<sup>33</sup>

That the Afghan girl looks like a cover girl but acts like a poster child is consistent with a rhetorically ambiguous realm between fashion photography, advertising, photo-journalism, and humanitarian campaign, in which consumerism and morality overlap in peculiar and problematic ways. Also symptomatic of this complex arena are the controversial advertising campaigns entitled "**Colors of Benetton.**" In one of the advertisements undertaken in collaboration with the World Food Program (**PLATE 44**), an Afghan female is posed frontally for the camera, twice; in the left-hand image, she is completely enveloped in a blue, embroidered *chadri*,<sup>34</sup> whereas in the adjoining image she is shown with the *chadri* folded neatly back to expose her face and to display the elaborate needlework on the fabric now framing it. Thus, the needlework becomes an attribute of the woman and vice versa. This nexus of commodities is where the consumer's eye rests. Immediately juxtaposed with the embroidery/face, a caption provides the imagination with a few factoids:

Food for work.

Basima, 16, is supported with food aid in Afghanistan. She now hopes to find work as an embroiderer in Kabul.

Like **Afghan Girl**, the advertisement leaves much unspecified and capitalizes on the striking appearance of the girl. In this case, however, the open-endedness is vested in the very process of encountering the spread. Simply by reading the page from left to right, as a literate European/American would do, the viewer participates in the act of unveiling the woman; thereafter, the limited palette and the asymmetry of the layout accelerate attention toward the face, then the embroidery, and finally, the color contrasts of the right-hand margin. Veiled and unveiled, the woman is offered up frontally as an object for scrutiny and delectation. Only after that do we focus on the adjoining text (which itself deserves more comment than current space allows).

The aggressive frontality of the figure is critical.<sup>35</sup> Due to this bluntness, the image arguably falls somewhere between police lineup, identity card, and employment agency listing, and we are left wondering how to relate to her. As a veiled victim? Potential employee? Respectfully depicted producer of the embroidery that she wears? All of the above?

Like so many Benetton images, contradictory readings are purposely fostered, and the viewer is variously implicated. While there may be some viewers who linger simply over the aesthetic audacity of the advertisement and others who indulge in fantasy (the perennial "harem" scene with a new twist?) before moving on, all viewers will, I think, be obliged to grapple with the idea of veiling, since that is the action depicted in the photograph. The targeted viewer is expected (presumably) to look long enough to read the words and construct a narrative based on the assumption that the girl, Basima, is the victim of a cultural system that veils (sequesters/abuses) women, leaving them without adequate food or gainful employment.

Thus, the rationale might go, the viewer is seduced and then challenged, prodded to acknowledge if not to alleviate the woman's suffering by contributing to the World Food Program or by buying Benetton products or both.<sup>36</sup> The caption provides further direction, yoking humanitarian organization, commercial backer, and beautiful beneficiary (who, in-

33. Tina Manley, posting to Leica Users Group, March 13, 2002.  
Tina Manley<images@InfoAve.net

34. In mass media, this garment is often called a "burqa." That word is not generally used in Afghanistan; the garment is typically called a *chador* or *chadri*.

35. John Tagg comments on frontality as a signal of inferiority. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), pp. 36-7.

36. Benetton advertising strategies over the last twenty years have been controversial. See Henry A. Giroux, "Consuming Social Change: The 'United Colors of Benetton,'" *Cultural Critique*, no. 26 (Winter 1993): 5-32. Regarding Benetton's collaboration with the World Food Program, see "Benetton ads take a sober look at world hunger," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 8, 2003.



cidentally, looks not unlike the more famous Afghan girl). Can one rationalize this image, then, as an ethical spectacle, letting us look but encouraging us to give? Or not?

Rather than offering answers to such troubling questions, I have tried simply to pose them, situating **Afghan Girl** in reference to a larger ethos of charity, commodification, and consumption (specifically of female beauty) and simultaneously pointing to some concepts and contexts that are pertinent. I turn now to a diachronic consideration of remakings of the image. This, I hope, will serve to articulate how many different ways **Afghan Girl** functioned, to provide a case study in the production of visual culture, and to trace a spiraling process of canonization and commercial gain. For each instance of remaking the image, the applied caption will serve as the key to the recalibrated meaning of the portrait and to the embedded agendas of image purveyors.

Steve McCurry himself capitalized on the power and appeal of his photograph, republishing it in a book entitled *Portraits*, a selection of images depicting people whom he had encountered traveling around the world.<sup>37</sup> First published in 1999, the book has been reprinted at least six times since then, a remarkable entrepreneurial success. It is an album of portrait photographs, laid out to simulate direct and intimate encounters between viewer and sitter. Few words intervene. At the beginning, there is a very short preface written by the author, and each portrait is given a brief caption providing only the place and year that the photograph was taken. The images are, like **Afghan Girl**, mostly bust-length, close-cropped portraits of single individuals looking directly at the viewer from sites ranging from Los Angeles to Hong Kong. Described in the preface as "chance connections in a world of resilience," the pictures are intended to record "the essential soul peeking out, experience etched on a person's face."

Although McCurry began his career as a photojournalist and these images derive from his travels as a reporter, the purpose of such an album was clearly not journalistic but rather, universalizing. As the introduction instructs us, the images were explicitly intended to transcend particular circumstances and to address something more general or fundamental about the human condition. Exhibiting deracinated beauty in this manner effectively presents the anonymous individuals as exquisite objects in a handheld gallery. In the process, the journalist positions himself as a fine-art photographer, and the viewer implicitly becomes the worldly connoisseur. Publishing and captioning his work in this manner was thus an act of contemporary Orientalism in which McCurry recreated himself even as he represented others in the guise and consumption of the photographic image.

Easily McCurry's most famous photograph, **Afghan Girl** serves as the cover image for *Portraits*. While *National Geographic* had specified its meaning as the archetypal Afghan refugee, here the viewer is directed toward the universal appeal of a beautiful face by a new caption, the appended title *Portraits*. The names of publisher and photographer serve as supplemental captions of a promotional nature. ("Phaidon" is the most prominent word on the cover, underscoring the identity of the editor/producer and linking the book with the publisher's other, similarly marketed products.) Thus, the now-autonomously powerful picture functions in a new constellation of meanings to bring luster to its sponsors and affiliates.

37. Steve McCurry, *Portraits* (New York: Phaidon, 1999). Reprinted 1999, 2000 (twice), 2001 (twice), 2002.

If *Portraits* recast the Afghan girl, increasingly disengaged from the specific tragedy of Afghanistan and more complexly entangled in American consumerism, the book provided inspiration for yet another iteration of the photograph, this time on the cover of a glossy calendar for the year 2002 (PLATE 9). In this rendition, the image was cropped almost oppressively close and overprinted in the upper-left corner with the name of the sponsoring institution, Amnesty International, along with the name of the photographer. This act of captioning positioned **Afghan Girl** in a different constellation of meanings, detailed by a text printed inside the front cover.

That text describes Steve McCurry as "photographer, groundbreaker, risk-taker" and also discusses another inspirational figure to whom the calendar is dedicated—Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of Burma's National League for Democracy. After fulsome praise for these two individuals, Amnesty's executive director explained the resonance between his institution's mission and McCurry's photography:

In the introduction to his book, *Portraits*, McCurry writes, 'The portraits...speak a desire for human connection; a desire so strong that people...open themselves to the camera, all in the hope that at the other end someone else will be watching—someone who will laugh or suffer with them.' Amnesty International's message is similar. To the torturers and executioners: know that we are watching. And to the survivors: take heart; we suffer with you and will never give up the struggle.

Thus glossed, the image was deployed as part of a larger promotional package: Amnesty International was, in effect, crafting its own image campaign, affiliating itself with famous people (and photographs) and publicizing its record of "More than Forty Years of Defending Human Rights." This is a significant pivot in the life cycle of the image, for at this juncture the convergence between consumption and philanthropy is most proximate. Amnesty International used **Afghan Girl** for humanitarian as well as promotional ends by marketing a carefully calculated artifact: "This calendar with its vibrant and moving portraits is a must have for any lover of fine photography." Moreover, placing **Afghan Girl** on the cover suggested that this was the finest of the fine photographs. Thus, the calendar provided a site of potent and generative contiguity between discriminating spectatorship and humanitarian activism. Simultaneously, the picture that initially served to illustrate a magazine article was propelled into "collectible" status.

The calendar owner's political convictions and aesthetic standards (solidarity with Amnesty's cause and appreciation of McCurry's photographs) were demonstrated in the act of exhibition, but the calendar itself is an artifact of some ambiguity. Amnesty's text claims a stance of witnessing; McCurry's photographs offer an opportunity for spectatorship. In bringing these positions together, the calendar poses a quandary. Ownership and exhibition, after all, entail the exercise of power and the enjoyment of privilege. What does one do? Look or give?

Some viewers, not satisfied with a mass-produced and disposable calendar but fascinated nonetheless by **Afghan Girl**, might seek to acquire a signed print of McCurry's photograph. Available for purchase through Magnum, McCurry's agency, for a considerably larger sum, with or without a frame, such an artifact is more commonly called "art," a status reinforced by that peculiarly powerful caption, "the artist's signature." Unlike a calendar,

which is overtly time-bound and lacks a grand frame, such a signed print is authentic, unique, costly, and timeless; owning it is the option of an elite clientele with concern for posterity and status.

This tangle of image-making and remaking, witnessing and voyeurism, activism and ownership is emblematic of varied behaviors often termed "Orientalism," in which the visual and material evidence of contact with other cultures becomes the trophy, the treasured possession, the evidence of (Christian) charity. Whether a relic from the Holy Land, a bronze ewer from an "oriental" bazaar, a mass-produced wall calendar, an oil painting over the fireplace, or a signed photograph in the hallway, the transposition of culture into artifact enables the privileged owner to feel worldly, enlightened, and proprietary while maintaining a discrete and safe distance from those who ostensibly need help.<sup>38</sup>

But consider also those who actively seek to help the distant disadvantaged. A photograph taken by Ron Haviv in the Taliban Ministry for the Prevention of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue (**PLATE 11**) suggests some of the complexities of humanitarian activism. It shows materials confiscated from the offices of Shelter Now—an American aid group accused of proselytizing Christianity in Afghanistan—strewn haphazardly across the floor in a still life of evangelical altruism. Here, **Afghan Girl** appears in note-card form with yet another caption: "Greeting [sic] from Afghanistan" and in the lower left in smaller letters: "Eyes of an Afghan (words following are illegible) speak about war and fear." Such a note card might connect an activist in Afghanistan with those in America. Juxtaposed with a two-dollar manufacturer's coupon for a Ross breast pump and the covers of two Christian videos ("Jesus," lauded for its "meticulous attention to authenticity," and "The Bible" on video, specifically the Book of Genesis), the note card closes the circle from journalism to confessional jingoism, undergirding the conviction that the war and fear endemic in Afghanistan might be alleviated by believing in Jesus. And so, we must ask, is this "help" helpful?

But the story is not over. If the saga began with a cover for *National Geographic*, it continued with the magazine's subsequent willingness to capitalize on the fame of **Afghan Girl**. As the photograph captivated public attention, *National Geographic* extended the iconic quality of the image by publishing the photograph in another context, this time in a coffee-table book reproducing the magazine's "best" photographs (**PLATE X**). Again, **Afghan Girl** is on the cover—now a full-fledged icon, a postmodern and endlessly reproduced Mona Lisa.<sup>39</sup>

As such, the portrait had tremendous marketing potential. Editors were clearly convinced that putting that icon on the cover would help to *sell* a book of *National Geographic's* trademark, exquisite photographs. This is the appropriation of a famous, beautiful face for the purposes of making money as well as the fraught slide between art and sales pitch. The image was further absorbed into the arsenal of *National Geographic's* marketing campaigns prior to Christmas 2002 (**PLATE 12**): *The 100 Best Photographs* (with **Afghan Girl** on the cover) was produced in a "Special Member's Edition" to be sent FREE to anyone who ordered a year of *National Geographic* at a forty-three-percent discount. A magazine subscription was trumpeted as "the perfect last-minute gift" and "the easiest gift selection you'll make all year long. Just add your love—let us handle the rest!" The same ploy was simplified for the year-

38. For a general discussion of this phenomenon see Holly Edwards, *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870–1930* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press in association with the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2000), pp. 11–57.

39. Donald Sassoon, *Becoming Mona Lisa, The Making of a Global Icon* (New York: Harcourt, 2001) pp. 239–75.



round campaign wherein the potential subscriber was encouraged to "Remember someone special with a gift membership!" Save forty-three percent off the newsstand price and "Get a Free Gift! 100 Best Pictures." With such rhetoric, **Afghan Girl** functioned as a well-oiled cog in the machinery of *National Geographic* marketing and American consumption, in the guise of an image/object worth owning, a gift worth giving, a prize worth winning.

Arguably, at the height of her face-fame in America, the Afghan girl was still, on some level, the Afghan poster child. But she was an anonymous type, linked almost vestigially with her homeland. At the same time, she had become another type as well, one of the countless cover girls of American materialism, delegated to sell diverse causes and varied products. And so, one must ask, which culture does this image document most profoundly, that which it purports to represent or that which it serves most loyally?

The next layer of the story details an imbricated Orientalism, folded seamlessly over on itself and disseminated widely; in it, the image comes to function both in the culture that it fascinates as well as in the culture that it ostensibly represents. This non-linear phenomenon occurred against the backdrop of political events of the late twentieth century. Afghanistan's refugee crisis had continued to unfold in the late 1980s and 1990s, entailing a major diaspora and brain drain to the West. The Soviets had left Afghanistan ignominiously, the mujahideen ran rampant with weapons supplied by the United States, and finally, the Taliban achieved power in 1996, wresting control out of chaos and rubble. With ghastly implacability, the Taliban moved from moral to pious to rigid. They enacted abusive laws curtailing the actions and the very visibility of women, they prohibited most forms of public entertainment, and they outlawed photography and cinema. In the United States, 9/11 happened, Osama bin Laden was implicated, and Afghanistan was, throughout the process, on the front page.

At the height of Taliban power, press coverage of Afghanistan was replete with familiar tropes—barbaric warlords, iconoclastic mullahs, and veiled women predominating. But even a cursory glance at the mass media of that time suggests that the veil itself seemed to stand between cultures, a symbol of divergent social norms. Lifting the veil became the standard Western metaphor for explaining the situation; shedding the veil was deemed necessary for rectifying the situation.<sup>40</sup>

It was at this juncture that *National Geographic* mounted a campaign to find the Afghan girl. Previously, her anonymity had occasioned little comment. At this point, however, public outrage at the Taliban oppression of women mushroomed, and *National Geographic* sought to address the situation within the pages of the magazine. The goal was to find the girl and document her life as it had unfolded first under the mujahideen and then under the Taliban.

The result was the reappearance of the now-famous image on the magazine's cover—an enigmatic, even surreal contrivance, a picture within a picture (PLATE 10).<sup>41</sup> In its basic features, the composite is no different than the pictures taken earlier in the century: an unknown woman stands totally veiled and minimally contextualized. In this image, however, the woman is clutching a photograph of her younger self—in effect, a matron exhibiting her lost virginity.

40. The sheer number of headlines, book titles, exhibitions, and editorials invoking the veil would overwhelm these notes, but one useful collection of perspectives is David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros, ed., *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2003).

41. Pictures within pictures have a long history, but in cases where the images are photographs-within-portrait-photographs, there is a grammar of honor, commemoration, and exposure that deserves further study.

If there is a sexual valence to this photograph, there is also a flexing of image-making muscle. In veiling and unveiling his subject and recording the results, Steve McCurry (sponsored by *National Geographic*) intervened in this woman's world to determine the terms of her visibility. Had she been left alone, she would have lived her life veiled and segregated, in conformance with indigenous canons of propriety. In this sequence, however, the veil did not provide the protection, status, or respectability that it would ordinarily bring her; instead, the veil effectively became the photographer's trophy and also the symbol of her subjugation for Western audiences.

The woman still remained an anonymous cover girl, in a sense, but this time her image was captioned with a single descriptor, "Found," a word that resonates more with a misplaced mitten than with a person. The primary message of such a gloss is to celebrate the accomplishment of tracking down the girl everyone knows, a victory for the journalist and, by extension, for the American institutions that participated in the search, such as the FBI, capable of finding anyone, anywhere, anytime.

Contrary to expectation, the composite photograph did not signal a feature article about the woman behind the veil. Preceding even the table of contents, the brief text was akin to a news flash—provocative, titillating, and, above all, open ended. In it, we begin to learn something about Sharbat Gula and her harrowing refugee experience in photographs that unceremoniously lay bare her domestic circumstances in a few glossy pages. We also learn quite a bit more about Steve McCurry, his collaboration with *National Geographic*, and cutting-edge forensic technologies. Ultimately, however, the story is effectively the trailer for a movie: "The Search for the Afghan Girl," a video narrated by Sigourney Weaver and available for sale at *National Geographic* stores or online.

In order to appreciate the tone and character of the movie, one need look no further than the cover of the video box. There, the famous photograph, held in the hands of the purple *chadri*,<sup>42</sup> is reprised yet again, framed in *National Geographic's* signature yellow border. The new caption takes yet another tack, identifying the star of the show by her American name, "Afghan Girl," while the third line named the video's narrator, Sigourney Weaver. While it is a testament to the fame of **Afghan Girl** that Ms. Weaver got second billing, the captioning betrays the extent to which the icon eclipsed the living, breathing person—Sharbat Gula.

If the front cover resembles a movie marquee, the text on the back cover reads like a sensationalistic press release, heralding a drama of high suspense in which the viewer is invited to participate: "The search is on to find the nameless woman whose youthful image became a global symbol of wartime dignity, resilience and survival.... Journey to the Afghan-Pakistan border.... Follow clues and rumors through the twisting byways of a teeming refugee camp...witness FBI investigators applying cutting-edge technology to crack the ultimate "missing person" case..."

This punchy language is *National Geographic's* characteristic strategy for providing "unmediated" and exciting encounters with things outside the American mundane, albeit updated for a new medium. Couching the story in mystery and situating it in the "twisting byways of a teeming refugee camp" is not-so-updated Orientalism serving as marketing

42. The color of the *chadri* that Sharbat Gula wears is critical to the impact of the image. While the garment's design is typical of Afghan production, the color is anomalous.

Intended to counter visibility, these veils are usually reticent in hue—gray-blue, light green, sober gold, or plain white. I cannot help but wonder whether the bold purple of this one is an aesthetically motivated contrivance.

ploy. All too familiar also is the contrived storyline itself: in a race against time, the enterprising male journalist penetrates the exotic culture and ultimately gets the girl. Predictable as well is the minimal role allotted to Sharbat Gula. Breathlessly described during the search as the Holy Grail, she occupies only a very few minutes at the end of a video when she is "Found." Otherwise, the video is almost entirely devoted to the experiences and stamina of Steve McCurry and the sophistication of American forensic technology.

While an analysis of this movie is beyond the scope of this essay, one point deserves particular attention. Earlier, I pointed out that Sharbat Gula became the poster child for the Afghan cause. In the context of the video, her potential to generate funds for that cause was deployed in the form of a narrative denouement. This transpires at the end of the video, after Sharbat Gula has been tracked down and definitively identified by examination of her vivid, green irises. Finally, she is interviewed, or having been "found," now she is miked. As the narrator explains, "The face that inspired so many to give now has a voice."

The newly granted "voice" (actually a translator's voice-over) then expresses a desire for her children to attend school. That statement, in turn, provides the rhetorical springboard for a representative of *National Geographic* to come onscreen and invite viewers to contribute to *National Geographic's* Afghan Girls Fund, "created to assist in the development and delivery of educational opportunities for young Afghan women and girls."

Sharbat Gula's participation in this promotional campaign, perhaps levied at the expense of her personal privacy and local dignity, has attracted considerable attention in philanthropic circles. In an article entitled "Face of Afghanistan Prompts Thousands to Give," Tom Watson described how the campaign to find the Afghan girl earned *National Geographic* kudos among charity pundits:<sup>43</sup> in 2003, for its innovative approach to online contributions and direct aid to Afghanistan, The National Geographic Society was a finalist for a Blackbaud Technovation award. With a revised web site, diverse public programs, and an online campaign, *National Geographic* had generated more than half a million dollars for the Afghan Girls Fund at the time of the awards.

In the article, the "viral effect" of this campaign was applauded: the story of the Afghan girl spread quickly and generated large contributions. In explaining these accomplishments, Watson pointed to the photograph of the Afghan girl as "the center of a pioneering fundraising effort," thereby proving the old fundraising maxim that "people give to people": "Her face has become an icon for photographers around the world—the keen, brave and vulnerable face of an Afghan teenager in a Pakistan refugee camp, her sharp green eyes staring at the lens with a directness that was astonishing in a culture that keeps its women veiled from the world." This testimony effectively recapitulated the manner and extent to which the Afghan girl came to serve America and to personify Afghanistan—as cover girl and as photogenic veil.

On one level, the Afghan girl's success as fundraiser highlights the vexed proximity between political activism and transgressive intervention and the fraught overlap between humanitarian aid and condescension. Clearly, the desire to fund schools for Afghan girls is laudable, and clearly, too, the need is great. The challenge, however, rests in the performance of that seemingly altruistic aspiration, for beneath the good intentions, there may be

43. Tom Watson, "Face of Afghanistan Prompts Thousands to Give," [www.onphilanthropy.com](http://www.onphilanthropy.com) October 5, 2003.



44. [www.nycourts.gov/reporter/3dseries/2006/2006\\_50171.htm](http://www.nycourts.gov/reporter/3dseries/2006/2006_50171.htm)

problematical transactions between benefactor and beneficiary in which, for instance, the charitable patron knows best what veiled women need, or the patron unilaterally overrides indigenous cultural norms to provide for those needs in the name of a greater good. In this case, Sharbat Gula knew nothing of the use of her image until she was "found," and its prior dissemination generated no income for her, even as it ran counter to her society's code of propriety and gender segregation. Indeed, Sharbat Gula's recompense (at least, that which is public knowledge) has been mostly abstract condolence—that her "discovery" seems to have had a verifiable and beneficial impact on humanitarian aid.

Significantly, when a similar sequence of events transpired in New York, the story took a rather different turn.<sup>44</sup> Philip-Lorca diCorcia (see his work in **PLATE 29**) photographed random faces in urban crowds over a period of two years (1999–2001), assembled the images in an exhibition, and published them in a catalogue. (Up to this point, the narrative recalls the account of Steve McCurry and **Afghan Girl**; subsequently, however, it betrays a lurking double standard.) When Erno Nussenzweig, one of diCorcia's anonymous subjects from New York, encountered his picture unexpectedly, he sued on the grounds of invasion of privacy and the right to practice a religion that forbids graven imagery. He could do so legitimately because New York State right-to-privacy laws prohibit the use of a person's likeness for commercial gain, advertising, or trade. The suit demanded the halt of catalogue sales as well as more than a million dollars in assorted damages. While the case is still unresolved, it was initially dismissed on the grounds that diCorcia had a right to artistic expression; this stance was defended with reference to the long tradition of street photography epitomized by the work of Walker Evans and Alfred Eisenstaedt.

The parallels between the New York case and the Afghan one are numerous and (mostly) self-evident; what is less clear are the disparities and their implications. If Nussenzweig has a lawyer demanding compensation for damages, why doesn't Sharbat Gula? How is a New Yorker's right to privacy different than an Afghan's practice of gender segregation? Does the practice of one's art trump the practice of another's religion? What rights do Americans enjoy at the expense of Others?

There are countless other iterations of **Afghan Girl**—some legal, some bootlegged—many of which would add nuance and complexity to this story. However, two instances are particularly noteworthy, for they demonstrate how the photograph of an Afghan refugee taken by an American photographer has been absorbed back into contemporary Afghan culture. B. C. C. Breshna Card Company of Kabul, for example, produced a poster version of the image with yet another caption (**PLATE 8**). This time, the portrait was simply entitled "Afghanistan" in large letters, obliging the familiar face to stand for the country as a whole. It is not apparent what market this poster targeted, but it is clear that Afghan entrepreneurs deployed a female face, and an American icon, to represent their own country. Again, one wonders whether Sharbat Gula was consulted.

The extent to which the photograph has been interpolated back with a consumerist twist is evidenced in another incarnation of **Afghan Girl**, this one documented midway through the *National Geographic* video: McCurry's hunt is temporarily stalled and he wanders distractedly in a bazaar in Peshawar, not far from the refugee camp where Sharbat

Gula once lived. There, he unexpectedly encounters his own photograph, illegally reproduced and offered for sale in various different sizes. Stripped of its original narrative, its fundraising connotation, and its iconic (American) significance, the portrait is exhibited for sale in a Pakistani storefront, along with images of Bollywood stars and other items of consumer culture.

Such a shop and such a display would not have been possible under Taliban rule; indeed, it was precisely the plethora and power of such images that the Taliban feared and proscribed. That Taliban iconoclasm and stringent codes of veiling in Afghanistan coincided with the stardom and American exposure of **Afghan Girl** is not without significance. From one perspective in this story, the ideal was a cover girl; from another, the ideal was a covered girl. From yet another vantage point, the visibility and the agency of women are culturally limited in both cases, for while Taliban atrocities were obviously a more egregious transgression of women's rights than the stifling values of fashion-conscious America, declaring that these attitudes are *categorically* different is specious. Such a claim rests on Orientalist convictions about a benighted other and an enlightened self. What the case of **Afghan Girl** additionally reveals, however, is how mechanically reproduced images have contributed to the institutionalization and preeminence of peculiarly American attitudes and practices in the global arena.

#### A CODA

In closing and in passing, I note that **Afghan Girl**, with its original yellow frame, was recently reproduced in *The Abrams Encyclopedia of Photography*. There, the *National Geographic* cover serves as the emblematic example of travel photography, and the photographer adventurer/photojournalist is identified as a key player in contemporary visual culture. Similar publications, often gracing coffee tables, are categorized as "spectacle books," and the armchair traveler is named their primary consumer.<sup>45</sup> In this incarnation out of so many, **Afghan Girl** has been awarded the ultimate academic accolade—taxonomic status. Thus enshrined (and reduced) for the next generation to encounter, the portrait also still graces the cover of a box of note cards for sale at the store down the street in my hometown. This story has no end in sight.

45. Brigitte Govignon, ed., *The Abrams Encyclopedia of Photography* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004), p. 178.