

Call for papers for

Transbordeur
photographie histoire société

Issue 12

“Photography and anonymity.
Political, Historical and Technological
Stakes of Photographic Identification”



Lewis Hine, “Anaemic adolescent who refused to give his name: Works in Kilburn Mill, New Bedford. (Is probably 13 or 14 years old.) Location: New Bedford, Massachusetts.” August 1914. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-nclc-02246

By refusing to state his name to Lewis Hine – an investigator, social reformer, and pioneer of documentary photography – the “anaemic adolescent” whom the photographer met in New Bedford in August 1914 was jeopardizing a social data collecting operation relying on individual identification. Hine’s caption highlights his resistance, signaling an even broader sense of failure in the picture, as the defiant adolescent’s anonymity spills over to his friends: which of these three young boys is actually referred to? “*Who?*” becomes the subject of the picture for the viewer, just as it was for the photographer.

Taking inspiration from this failed interaction, this issue of *Transbordeur* will explore the relationship between identification and anonymity at the heart of many photographic – and photography-related – visual practices. It aims both to center the analysis on the people in the photographs, and to question what various actors do with images – from photographers captioning their pictures to historians striving to return individual identities to the subjects, not to mention increasingly automated image reading systems. This tension between identification and anonymity plays out throughout the history of visual recording systems, and at each stage in the life of images – their production, circulation, and uses.

The ubiquitous “ID photo” – now virtually naturalized – is but an example of numerous complex operations of individual identification involving visual technologies, from drawing to video recording. Meanwhile, legitimate anxieties about systematic surveillance cannot obscure the fact that photographic anonymity – the nameless body – in turn contribute to relegating the human subject to generic and dehumanizing categories. In the vast visual archives of ethnographic or war photography, individuals are often reduced to types or symbols. Confronted with such images, recent endeavors to identify or re-identify the persons in the photographs can be conceived of as gestures of acknowledgement, or even reparation, towards anonymous subjects, whether in historical visual collections or with the civilian casualties of contemporary conflicts. Recognizing a face in an image, naming a silhouette, allows for reading an event differently, reviving a memory, returning a form of agency to the anonymous in the picture.

Thus on the one hand, anonymity appears as demeaning and possibly dehumanizing; on the other, it is constitutive of a right to escape identification and categorization. By examining this tension, issue 12 of *Transbordeur* invites scholars to explore the complex relationships between images – and the practices they give rise to – and processes of identification.

Identification systems: categorization, surveillance, and desires for anonymity

The critical role of images in the identification of individuals has gone unquestioned for all political, legal, and scientific institutions since the general adoption of bertillonage and other institutional photographic registers in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Invented in France, quickly adopted in neighboring countries as well as the Americas (Galeano *et al.*), but also implemented in colonial territories (About), the systematic identification of criminals through images marks the moment when “photography invented identity,” in a regime where each person’s face has been filed into a comparative archive, a catalogue allowing for the sorting out of citizens, criminals, the marginalized and deviant (Solinas). In the United States, growing anxiety regarding Asian immigration in California gave rise in the 1870s to the first identification documents including a photograph (Pegler-Gordon). All over the world, the development of contemporary administrative systems has relied on the promise of identification through photography.

And yet, photography, while a key part of systems of documentation, classification, and surveillance that have been labeled “paranoid” (Tagg), does not have identifying powers *per se* – as we are reminded today by the emergence of “random face generator” software, offering to produce credible ID photographs of non-existent persons. The photographic image has always been one element within multimedia apparatuses that make it possible to cross-reference and index data, from nineteenth-century police cards to current face recognition software. Beyond the most salient examples of state repression – from Black Lives Matter in 2014 (Marin) to Iranian women’s protests in 2022 (Human Rights Council), through what Amnesty International has called “automated apartheid” in the occupied Palestinian territories (Amnesty) – what stands out is the ever-increasing sophistication of infrastructures for recording and reading images, allowing for the identification of individuals. This might be the contemporary motif of visibility as a form of control (Mirzoeff).

In a context where the possibility of identification is enhanced by the association of photographic images and digital technologies, choosing to remain anonymous no longer seems an option. In addition to police operations, data attached to publications on professional and personal social media makes it possible to identify individuals with or without their consent (Hill). Concerns with the recording and public circulation of individuals’ faces and bodies were raised as soon as the Kodak camera became ubiquitous (Warren *et al.*), yet anonymity remains a key legal issue to this day, in terms of both image rights and privacy protection. Practices as diverse as the publication of medical photographs for therapeutic reasons and research (Roguljic *et al.*), or the digitization of photographic archives (Taurino *et al.*), raise the issue of how to “deidentify” individuals.

This issue of *Transbordeur* will apply a *longue durée* approach to identification systems involving images, looking at their technical, legal, and political implications. From cataloging projects to metadata structuring, this capacity for identification seems to mostly correspond to a horizon of full operativity for images (Meyer), determined by operations with and from pictures. What gives photography identifying powers: visual or metadata? In what contexts can one seek anonymity, and how can it be achieved? Whose gaze motivates this evasion? What forms can resistance to identification take? As lay and expert debates about privacy examine recorded images and procedures for reading and analyzing them, what is the status of pictures of bodies and faces? What rights are affected by these images, and how are visual practices depicting people affected by social norms and state or institutional regulatory system (such as the General Data Protection Regulation or GDPR)?

Anonymization Politics

The distribution between anonymity and identification of people in photographs is of course predicated on specific spheres of reception: identifying “who” is on a photograph also means asking “for whom” a photograph is anonymous. But this binary also points to a distinction between images that exist primarily to portray recognizable people, whose names are familiar to the public addressed by those pictures, and images featuring the faces of unknowns. Such a polarity can be observed between two very different types of advertising images showing famous or unknown faces – or between street photography, which approaches the street as a stage for anonymous interactions, and paparazzi photography, which seeks out public figures in the same space. More generally, active identification inverts anonymization practices often found in the social sciences, and takes the form of professional conventions such as captioning, indexing, and the classification of large collections of pictures in news organizations, for example.

From shooting to circulation, such regimes of identification or anonymity produce political categories. Current conflicts in the Middle East confer renewed urgency to the way identifying individual subjects (with all their social ties) makes it possible to identify to a given community. In humanitarian and war photography, anonymity appears to be weakening citizenship. And while photography has served since the late nineteenth century to identify deviant individuals, the constitutional absence of a name is often the fate of those subjected to projects of photography-based knowledge. A form of sorting happens in the application of photographic apparatuses, depending on whether or not they confer identity to an individual: the example of anthropological portraits is just as paradigmatic as bertillonage in this regard. The underprivileged will be held as representative subjects (including when the photographic record includes social information on their situation), while the elite visiting the photographer’s studio will be portrayed as individual subjects with a biography (Dimock).

This issue will therefore explore how visual regimes construct political bodies through the identified or unidentified status of the people in photographs. How does the presence of recognizable faces in images – be they publicly or privately known – and the inclusion of names or any other identifying information, transform the experience of images, and what conventions can be at work? What invisibilization does anonymization produce? In what ways is the presence or absence of a knowable identity involved in political systems of visibility, and what place is occupied by proper names in the relationship between photography and citizenship?

Reidentifying: Another Look at Images

The “Auschwitz Album” retrieved by Lili Jacob, a picture collection where family members could be recognized, and where victims were identified during the Eichmann trial (Bruttman), underscores how the identification of individuals can transmute the most dehumanizing photographic objects. Exhibitions like *The Black Model (Le Modèle Noir)* at the Musée d'Orsay (2019) ou *Who Are You? Retrieving the Lost Identities of Photographed Persons (Qui êtes-vous ? Retrouver les identités perdues des personnes photographiées)* at the Musée du Quai Branly (2022) suggested that art history and the history of photographic images and practices may be profitably redirected toward identifying who is represented (Bardon *et al.*; Peltier-Caroff). By challenging hierarchies between who is named and who is not, reversing anonymization is not merely the pursuit of historical knowledge, but also a form of acknowledgement and reparation.

Such endeavors give a memorial, political, and sometimes militant dimension to operations of cross-checking and cross-referencing that are central to the work of historians. The power of proper names lies in the ways it connects information and retrieves social ties (Paoletti); recovering the identity of “the girl in the middle” of a photograph makes it possible to redefine context before and after the picture was taken (Sandweiss). This is true even if finding names is not the only task for historians facing the endless crowd of anonymous faces in undocumented collections – which remains the majority condition for the subjects of fixed and animated images once they exit their original, often private, context.

Redocumentation and reidentification efforts have been conceived as a part of counter-forensic methodology (Sekula; Keenan), where state apparatuses are reclaimed from below, so as to denounce crimes but also to rebuild subjectivities. When artistic practices work from the ID photographs of the “disappeared” in Chile, the file itself is redirected as a work of memory (Richard). But what exactly is repaired when Phan Thi Kim Phuc ou Florence Thompson, “icons” of photojournalism and documentary photography, are named instead of being referred to as “Napalm Girl” or “Migrant Mother,” and become part of new media narratives? This delayed identification might also be a way to negotiate consent retroactively, and thus redeem structurally

problematic images while allowing for their continued use – and more generally for the continuation of the scientific or documentary photographic practices they belong to?

Such questions of course also apply to human and social sciences. The non-neutral character of visual recognition tools is debated in digital humanities projects that study old photographic collections. Even in the context of projects that initially seem benign, there is resistance to applying facial recognition models in the case of social groups and bodies that are more generally exposed to persistent forms of profiling. The history of photography itself, as conceived by a journal such as *Transbordeur*, cannot ignore such debates around the circulation of nameless bodies through images (Foliard). Taking into account this necessary work of re-acknowledgement opens up new perspectives based on “looking together” where the subject of the image is associated to the research work (Gürsel).

Contributions to this issue may consider how various social actors work towards identification or identity protection, from the moment of exposure into an extended historical timeline. What expectations does the possibility of a name entail? What knowledge is then made possible, acceptable, or desirable? What relationships can be established between identity and consent? In the end, what does identification stand for, and who cares about naming names?

Editors

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Schedule

15 September, 2026	Abstract submitted
31 January, 2027	First draft of article
February 2027	Symposium
30 April, 2027	Final article submission

Information

Texts can be submitted in French or English.
Abstracts should not exceed 600 words. They should be accompanied by 6-8 images, a brief bibliography and a biographical note.

The publication will be preceded by a symposium in February 2027 which will bring authors together and allow for an exchange between the participants and the editorial committee. The process of combining a meeting with the preparation of a journal dossier requires a tight schedule, to which the authors agree to adhere when submitting their proposals.

By submitting an article to the journal, authors acknowledge that they have read and accept the editorial guidelines and the writing protocol.

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