# Controversy Max Pinckers & Sam Weerdmeester



## An Introduction. Three Thoughts on 'Controversy'

Lars Kwakkenbos

#### 1. The Event / The Banal

We see a large colour print of a landscape with olive trees. Instead of shooting this landscape. Max Pinckers and Sam Weerdmeester have scanned it. The image consists of 46 scans. First they divided the scenery into nine rectangles, and within each rectangle several scans focused on a different depth of field. Some focused on the trees that are standing on the foreground, others on the grass or on the horizon. While a standard digital photo camera invents many pixels of an image it creates, the technology that has been used to create Controversy tries to register each of them. It causes small fragments of the image to colour intensely. The imaging technology that is used for Controversy is usually applied for reproductions of artworks, such as paintings. The result can only attain its maximum sharpness when the subject is not moving at all. Here some grass and leaves that moved while scanning have lost their shapes, and small instants of a pictorial madness appear.

*Controversy* shows us the spot where Robert Capa most likely had photographed his *Falling Soldier*. In 2009 professor José Manuel Susperregui located this spot near the Spanish town of Espejo, situated in the region of Andalusia, suggesting that Capa had staged the event – there was no fighting in Espejo at the time the picture was taken. Today this landscape remains quiet. It's nicely cultivated, seemingly banal for a local inhabitant of the area. Whatever made it interesting in the past, is no longer there. The location where Capa might have staged his *Falling Soldier*, can only be identified by the contours of the hills at the horizon (also known as orographic accidents). The most relevant aspects of this landscape can probably be discovered in the findings of Susperregui, who had to raise his camera by five metres and ignore the olive trees in the foreground.

#### 2. To Fall / To Lie

Robert Capa photographed a falling soldier. Falling usually happens in an instant of time, analogous to the shooting of a hand-held camera and the idea of the decisive moment that we have learned to associate with it. We associate falling with shooting, and shooting with death – the latter association often being projected on photography and its technology.

By contrast, Pinckers and Weerdmeester have scanned a landscape. Where Capa's soldier is falling, their landscape is lying. Different meanings of the verb lie, here understood as "(of a person or animal) be in or assume a horizon or resting position on a supporting surface" or "be, remain, or be kept in a specified state" (Google), as well as its etymology, might help us to continue thinking about *Controversy*.<sup>1</sup> Lying can imply stretching out both space and time; it can refer to a body or a thing that remains (alive). Instead of pretending to capture a moment, the size of the print that is framed and presented, resembles that of a monumental history painting. After Capa most likely staged his picture, olive trees have been planted and have grown. The total scanning time was four hours. This picture embodies a large amount of time. Its technology embodies it, and the landscape it shows, does too.

Falling and lying have one thing in common, though. Neither is generally understood as an active

gesture or movement, but rather as a passive one. The same goes for both pictures that are referred to in this introduction, and the processes of creating them. In October 1947, ten years after the photo was published in *LIFE*, Capa stressed the fact that while taking it, "I never saw the picture in the frame, because the camera was far above my head." Another seventy years later it is far from sure if Capa spoke the truth, but he did at least partly refuse the usual idea of authorship of a photo. Knowing that he staged it, did he attempt to deny for himself the responsibility of having done it deliberately – composing and *authorising* it?

Concluding this catalogue Hans Durrer stresses the difference between seeing and registering: "We want photos to be authentic, and true, and we want them to capture moments and scenes that our eyes often only register but do not see." If we believe Capa when he told his interviewer in 1947 that he held his camera above his head when shooting *Falling Soldier* eleven years earlier, Capa did register a scene that he failed to see.

The same might be true for *Controversy*. A camera has scanned the landscape and created an image that is so sharp and full of light that the human eye seems no longer needed to help create it. Composing and framing the picture was largely determined by the work of J. M. Susperregui. This landscape looks as if time has cleansed it, and the same can be said about the technology that created its picture.

<sup>1</sup> (The verb *lie* in English can also bear the sense of speaking falsely. Although it is tempting to mention this in the context of Capa having staged *Falling Soldier*, its etymology is

different and shares no common origin with *lie* in the sense of resting horizontally, alas.)

#### 3. Are We Looking at a Guilty Landscape?

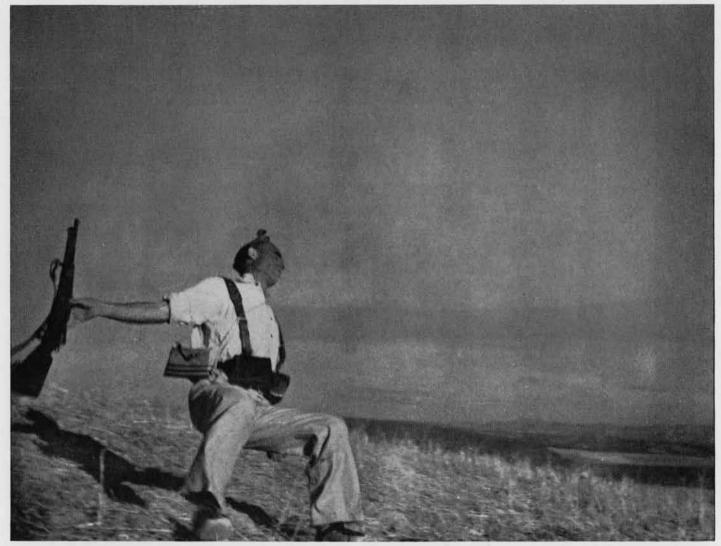
All seems quiet in *Controversy*'s landscape. It is well kept and likely to embody a long period of peace. Most olive cultivators need their trees to grow for many years before their first fruits are harvested, which makes them an easy target to disrupt a local economy in times of war. However, its title refers to a context of a photo that has become one of the most powerful images of war.

Are we looking at a guilty landscape? This landscape might not be guilty due to a war event that Capa documented, but exactly the opposite: the absence of such an event, as he might have staged it. The scenery with those same hills at the horizon where olive trees are now growing, has become guilty in a different sense. This landscape carries a burden that photography has projected on itself: a story of a truthful technology and practice. If the thesis of Susperregui is correct, we can only speculate on a sense of guilt that Capa might have felt afterwards, embodied by his medium and its capacity of making things up and fictionalising them.

Eighty years after Robert Capa might have staged the most famous photo of the Spanish Civil War, can this story be connected to history again? Does *Controversy* tell us something about history, after all? The picture that Pinckers and Weerdmeester have created is installed permanently in the town hall of Espejo, where local visitors can be heard commenting on the growing of the olive trees.







ROBERT CAPA'S CAMERA CATCHES A SPANISH SOLDIER THE INSTANT HE IS DROPPED BY A BULLET THROUGH THE HEAD IN FRONT OF CORDOBA

# DEATH IN SPAIN: THE CIVIL WAR HAS TAKEN 500,000 LIVES IN ONE YEAR

On July 17 the Spanish Civil War will be one year old. In that time it has brought Death to 500,000 Spaniards, has shattered such ancient cities as Madrid, Toledo, Bilbao, Irun and Durango, has kept Europe in a state of jitters. When the war started, most U. S. citizens looked on the Loyalists as a halfcrazy, irresponsible, murderous scum that had turned on its honorable betters. A year of war has taught the U. S. more of Spain.

The ruling classes of Spain were probably the world's worst bosses—irresponsible, arrogant, vain, ignorant, shiftless and incompetent. Some 20,000 landlords owned 50% of the land. They did not give their field hands modern machinery or their land modern irrigation. They refused to rent unused land to landless peasants for fear of giving the peasants dangerous ideas of ownership. The land was only about 25% efficient and much of it was idle. And Spain's mineral resources, among the greatest in Europe, lay almost entirely unexploited. The aristocracy of Spain was still living on the interest on wealth brought home from the Americas by the gold fleets in the 16th Century. To the 20,000 landlords, add 21,000 Army officers, more than twice the total of British Army officers. There was one officer for every six privates, one general for every 150 men. For every \$3 spent on soldiers' pay, food, barracks, ammunition, officers got \$10 in pay—25% of the national budget. The national law made officers semisacred. Just for pushing a policeman of the swank Civil Guard, six Americans got six months in jail in 1935.

Add to the 41,000 landlords and officers, 100,000 clergy, the most top-heavy Church hierarchy in the world, next to Tibet. These also were paid by the State. The Church, with its enormous wealth, naturally took a capitalist's position. It was up to its neck in politics. Peasants were told that to vote against the Conservatives was usually a mortal sin. The Church was in charge of Spanish education. Result: the Spanish people were 45% illiterate. The reason for the civil war was simply that the people of Spain had fired their bosses for flagrant incompetence and the bosses had refused to be fired.

For a new movie of the Spanish war from the Government side, turn page,

# Interview with Robert Capa

"Hi! Jinx", NBC Radio on the Spanish Civil War, October 20, 1947

## [...]

**Capa:** You see this is a cagey question, because you never know, if you have a prize picture or not. Because when you shoot, nearly every picture is the same to you, and the prize picture is born in the imagination of editors and the public who sees them. I had once one picture which was appreciated much more than the other ones, and I certainly did not know when I shot it. It was a specially good picture. It happened in Spain. It was very much at the beginning of my career as a photographer, and very much at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. And war was kind of romantic, if you can see anything like that.

#### Jinx: No, I can't.

Capa: It was there, because it was in Andalucía, and those people were very green, they were not soldiers, they were dying every minute with the great gestures. They figured that was really for liberty, the right kind of fight, and they were enthused, and I was there in the trench, with about twenty milicianos, and those twenty milicianos had twenty old rifles, and on the other hill facing us, was a Franco machine gun. So my milicianos were shooting in the direction of that machine gun for five minutes, and then stood out and said "vámonos", get out from the trench, and began to go after that machine gun. Sure enough the machine gun opened up and moved them down. So what was left of them came back and again take potshots in the direction of the machine gun which certainly was clever enough not to answer, and after five minutes again they said "vámonos", and they got moved on again. This thing repeated itself about three or four times, so at the fourth time I just kind of put my camera above my head, and even didn't look and clicked a picture when they moved over the trench. And that was all. I didn't develop my pictures there, and I sent my pictures back with lot of other pictures that I took. I stayed in Spain for three months, and when I came back I was a very famous photographer, because that camera which I held above my head just caught a man at the moment when he was shot.

Tex: That was a great picture.

**Capa:** That was probably the best picture I ever took. I never saw the picture in the frame, because the camera was far above my head.

**Tex:** Of course there's one condition that you've got to create yourself Bob, in order to get a lucky picture like that, you gotta spend a lot of time in trenches.

Capa: Yeah, this habit I would like to lose.

Tex: Yeah, I remember seeing you after you'd spent a lot of time in trenches in two or three ends of the last war, and somehow you never managed to lose the habit for very long.

Capa: I won't lose the habit, I hope that other people will lose the habit to create those trenches.

**Tex:** Oh, that's another story too. But now, while we are getting stories, Bob, I think there is a very good

story that I'd like to get without having to read your book again, the story about the last man killed in the war and the picture you took of that.

Capa: Oh, yes. That was in ... just before Leipzig. It was obvious that the war was just about being over because we knew that the Russians were already in Berlin and that we had to stop shortly after taking Leipzig. And we got into Leipzig after some fight, just had to cross one more bridge. The Germans put up some resistance, so we couldn't cross, and that was a big apartment building, which overlooked that bridge, so I figured I am going to get up on the last floor, then I will get a nice picture of Leipzig or something, in the last minutes of fight. So, I climbed up four floors and I got in a nice bourgeois apartment, where on the balcony was a very nice young man, a young sergeant who put up a heavy machine gun to cover the crossing. And, he was first putting up this machine gun in the window, but it was not comfy enough, so he just moved out on the open balcony and put up that heavy machine gun. I came out there too, and kind of looked at him to take a picture of him, but, god, the war was over, who wanted to see one more picture of somebody shooting. We've been doing that same picture now for four years and everybody wanted something different. By the time this picture would have reached New York anyway, probably, the headline would have been "peace". So it made no sense whatsoever. But, he looked so clean-cut, he was one of the men who looked like if it would be the first day of the war, he still was earnest about it. So I said, all right, this will be my last picture

of war, and I put my camera, and took a portrait shot of him. And while I shot my portrait of him, from two yards, he got killed by a sniper. That was a very clean, somehow very beautiful death, and I think that's what I remember most from this war.

Jinx: And that was the last, you think, probably the last man killed during the official war.

**Capa:** That's right. I am sure, that there were many last men who were killed, but, he was the last man maybe in our sector, and was just about the real end of the war.

Tex: Certainly a picture of the uselessness of war.

**Capa:** Very much. For me it was certainly a picture to kind of remember because I knew that the day after we would, will begin to forget. So it was a kind of clean definition that he was the last, who will not forget the war.

José Manuel Susperregui

Discussions concerning the authenticity of Robert Capa's photograph titled Falling Soldier have generated diverse opinions and theories but remarkably little research. A version of the events authorised by the International Center of Photography (ICP), New York, was refuted when this author located the photograph at Cerro del Cuco near Espejo and not at Cerro Muriano near Córdoba, where previously it was thought to have been taken. Locating the site of the photograph more exactly required important work method adaptations to features of a new landscape, given that the evidence results from reproducing Capa's framing, the perspective and the orographic accidents seen in the original photo. The application of new technology has played an essential role in obtaining the evidence that reveals that this image by Robert Capa was made at Cerro del Cuco. With this newly defined location Falling Soldier must be seen in a completely different light.

Robert Capa made the iconic photograph, known as the *Falling Soldier* (full title: *Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death, Cerro Muriano, September 5, 1936*), in his early years as a photojournalist during the Spanish Civil War in 1936. It is a simple composition offering very little information in terms of location. The blurred diagonal profile of the mountains in the background descends from left to right, with slightly visible orographic features showing a lightcoloured geometrical shape next to a dark descending hill on the right. These elements make for only 25 percent of the photograph. The remaining 75 percent corresponds to the sky and a few clouds. There is hardly any information available regarding the identity of the soldier, although he is believed to be Federico Borrell García from Alcoy.

Given that the original negative of *Falling Soldier* is missing and therefore not available as a reference, this research was based on the images published in *Vu* magazine [fig. 1], *LIFE* magazine (July 12, 1937) and most notably *This is War! Robert Capa at Work* (Whelan, 2008), the exhibition catalogue published by the International Center of Photography, which contains a series of unpublished photos by Capa.

*Vu*, where this photograph first appeared, published not one but two photos on the same page, both with the same view, the same framing and the same content. A dead militiaman appears on each of these photos; we see two different militiamen in two different snapshots. The photo caption also refers to two men given that the text is in plural form. Upon comparison between the original publication of the two photos in *Vu* with the single photo published in *LIFE*, it is notable that the proportion of the images changes from almost square to rectangular.

In *This is War! Robert Capa at Work*, two previously unpublished images appear along with *Falling Soldier*. They are printed respectively on pages 59, 77 and 85. However, a change of criterion in terms of photo order (59-85-77) places the photographs consecutively starting with *Falling Soldier* [fig. 3-a], followed by a second photo of another dead soldier [fig. 3-b], and finally a photo of a group of militiamen firing towards the horizon [fig. 3-c]. The reordering of these three photos reveals a



Figure 1. Vu, September 23, 1936. Courtesy collection Michel Lefebvre

continuation in the landscape, potentially situating *Falling Soldier* by the wide and easily identifiable landscape of the third photo.

Correlative field research conducted in 2009 proved that the landscape in figure 3-c did not match the one in Cerro Muriano, near Córdoba, where the photograph was supposedly taken. When this was established, the photograph of the landscape in figure 3-c was sent to various town councils throughout Spain. Juan Molleja Martínez, a teacher at the Instituto de Educación Secundaria Vicente Núñez, a high school in Aguilar de la Frontera, showed the photo to his students. Student Antonio Aguilera immediately located the landscape in Llano de Batán, also known as Llano de Vanda, near Montilla. When this newly suggested region was explored, the mountain range near Espejo, which is located 13 kilometres from Montilla [fig. 5], showed remarkable resemblance to the landscape in figure 3-c.

In 2013 the town of Espejo hosted a tribute to Robert Capa on the occasion of his centennial and the mayor announced that the spot where the photograph was taken would be marked with a large sign. This sign was conveniently placed close to the town center to attract visitors, and therefore lacked in its precision [fig. 2].



Figure 2. Sign at la Haza del Reloj. © J. M. Susperregui

The elevation above sea level in relation to the orographic accidents quickly rules out la Haza del Reloj as a potential location, leaving us with only two remaining options: Cerro de Casalillas and Cerro del Cuco, both currently olive groves. More variations in altitude together with a comparison of perspectivechanges in orographic accidents also ruled out Cerro de Casalillas for being too low above sea level [fig. 6-7].



Figure 3 (a, b, c). The reordering of the images reveals a continuation in the landscape (Death of a Loyalist Militiaman, Córdoba front, Spain; Body of Loyalist militiaman, Córdoba front, Spain; Loyalist militiamen kneeling with rifles raised, Córdoba front, Spain, early September, 1936). Robert Capa © International Center of Photography/Magnum Photos

Further in depth comparison was executed at the Cerro del Cuco site.

The research was carried out by applying a methodology adapted to the specific visual features of *Falling Soldier*, and to the physical conditions of the place where Robert Capa took this snapshot, with the aim of finding out how it was made. The olive trees, that are now present, block the overview of the landscape in the background causing the reference points to be obstructed. The applied solution was to elevate a camera five metres above the ground to get a view of the landscape as in Capa's photograph [fig. 4].



Figure 4. Setting up equipment at Cerro del Cuco site. © Estibaliz Iriondo

With the figure in the photograph as the main reference point, the image had to be divided into a grid in order to compare the position of the visual references with the positions of these same orographic reference points as displayed on the computer screen.

The photograph was first divided into upper and lower segments. The lower part includes the soldier

and the field he occupies, the upper part shows the mountain range in the background and its orographic elements, which are minor and weakly defined



Figure 5. Panoramic view from Alcaparra. © J. M. Susperregui

as they appear blurred in the original photo. The references found in the upper part of the photo are the only signifiers usable for a comparison in order to definitively situate the location of *Falling Soldier*.

The lower part of the original photo was turned into a mask to overlay a live-view feed from the camera of the visible landscape, which allowed for direct comparative observation to verify that both compositions matched.

In order to reproduce the exact framing of *Falling Soldier*, the camera had to be tilted 10° to the left. This difference proves that Robert Capa tilted his camera to the left so that the photograph looked tilted to the right; a tilt that is concealed in *Falling Soldier* because the mountain ridge looks virtually horizontal. A left tilt of approximately this degree is also recognised as a formal characteristic of Capa's style, based on previous in-depth analysis of his photoarchive. Applying this tilt in reverse to the original



Figure 6. Panoramic view from the correct topographic level, 355 metres above sea level. © J. M. Susperregui

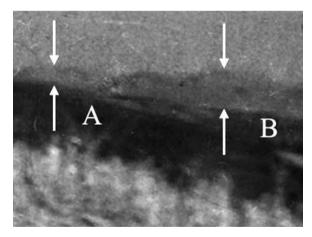


Figure 7. Section of the original *Falling Soldier* photograph. Robert Capa © International Center of Photography/Magnum Photos

photos reveals that the ground under the soldiers' feet is not a slope, but a flat field.

Finally, an exact match between the live-view feed of the landscape in comparison to the landscape in the original *Falling Soldier* photo, was obtained at the Cerro del Cuco site, convincingly proving *Falling Soldier* to have been taken at this precise location (37°40'29.5"N 4°32'36.3"W).

Logically, this must have taken place some time before the first publication of the images in *Vu* on September 23, 1936. According to the research of Francisco Moreno (1985: 202-215) and oral accounts of local inhabitants, the battle of Espejo started on September 22, 1936 and ended three days later. This makes it practically impossible that *Falling Soldier* was taken by Robert Capa during the battle of Espejo, thus suggesting that this photo was staged.

The results of this study call for a revision of all historical research on Robert Capa that is based on *Falling Soldier*. His archives, including 70.000 negatives mostly related to the five wars he covered, deserve to be treated with as much rigor as possible in order to deepen and improve the knowledge on his work.

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Hans Durrer

On 17 August 2009, the International Herald Tribune published an article by Larry Rohter titled "Research raises questions anew about iconic Capa photograph." Oh no, I thought, please not yet another piece on Robert Capa's Falling Soldier, probably one of the most over-scrutinised, over-discussed, and over-valued photographs ever. Nevertheless, I started to read: "After nearly three-quarters of a century, Robert Capa's Falling Soldier picture from the Spanish Civil War remains one of the most famous images of combat ever. It is also one of the most debated, with a long string of critics claiming that the photo, of a soldier seemingly at the moment of death, was faked. Now, a new book by a Spanish researcher argues that the picture could not have been made where, when or how Capa's admirers and heirs have claimed."

The reason? The photo, according to José Manuel Susperregui, wasn't taken at Cerro Muriano, just north of Córdoba, but about 55 kilometres away, near another town, and since "that location was far from the battle lines when Capa was there, Mr. Susperregui says, it means that the *Falling Soldier* photo is staged, as are all the others in the series taken on that front."

Next, Willis Hartshorn, the director of the International Center of Photography in New York, where Capa's archive is stored, said: "part of what is difficult about this is that people are saying 'well if it is not here, but there, then good God, it's fabricated' .... That's a leap that I think needs a lot more research and a lot more study."

I'm not too sure that a lot more research and study is needed when it comes to this photograph.

Besides, I had thought the guestion of how this picture came about was solved when John Mraz wrote in *ZoneZero* that "Republican militiamen were pretending to be in combat for Capa's camera, when a fascist machine gun killed this soldier just as he was posing. It is the coincidence between the fact that the photojournalist had focused on this individual at precisely the second before he was shot that makes this the most famous of war photographs." Moreover, "Capa's involvement left him feeling that he had somehow been responsible for the man's death. Hence, his reticence to discuss the photo, as well as a certain confusion in recounting the events surrounding the photograph's taking, are decisions that are seen in a very different light if we assume that he staged the image. What this case establishes is that our interpretation of a picture is based on the presumptions we bring to the act of seeing it, but that research and reason can enable us to perceive it differently."

So if research shows that this photograph was taken at another place than previously thought, what does that then mean? That it was taken at another place than previously thought, nothing but that. Was it staged or wasn't it? Are Capa's statements in the interviews he gave true or not? Is the account of John Mraz the real story (if there is such a thing at all)? Well, who knows? But one thing is for certain: the photograph cannot show what happened, it can only show what was right in front of the camera at a given moment. In this case: a man in soldier's uniform falling.

So why then has this photograph become such

an iconic picture? Not because of the composition, or the light, or the framing but solely because we want to believe the famous story that accompanies this shot – for we want photos to be authentic, and true, and we want them to capture moments and scenes that our eyes often only register but do not see.

The story that accompanies this picture – a soldier photographed at the moment of his death – is simply too compelling not to be believed. Whatever research will unearth, whatever reason will lead us to consider, our view of this photo will probably not change for we have been brainwashed into believing that in this picture we see a man dying. It might of course well be that this is indeed the case but it is not what the photograph can show. Still most of us continue to believe that it does. How come?

Remember the story of some years ago about the Eskimo/Inuit, who were reported (in *The New York Times*) to have a hundred words for snow? In fact, there is no evidence that they possess more words for snow than, say, carpenters have for wood; the famous Eskimo case for snow is a myth, pure and simple, yet, as Geoffrey K. Pullum states in his *The great Eskimo vocabulary hoax and other irreverent essays on the study of language*: "Once the public has decided to accept something as an interesting fact, it becomes almost impossible to get the acceptance rescinded. The persistent interestingness and symbolic usefulness overrides any lack of factuality."

The same goes for *Falling Soldier* – we continue to see in this photo what is simply not there. What is

there is a man in a soldier's uniform falling on a slope, that's it, and that is a fact. By the way: 'fact' comes from the Latin *facere* and that means 'to make'.

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# COLOPHON

#### Controversy

Max Pinckers & Sam Weerdmeester

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