

Creation and Afterlife of the Iconic Photographs of the Vietnam War

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Biography

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Abstract

Some sensational and violent press photographs have become considered as iconic, in the same sense as artists, movie stars or objects of popular culture, because they have become truly famous and do not require an expert understanding of photography transcending specialized knowledge. This paper explores the processes through which a handful of photographs have acquired this status by focusing on the period of the Vietnam war, during which, it is believed, these photographs became tools of contestation in the media and for social protest movements.

Résumé

Quelques photographies de presse sensationnelles et violentes sont de nos jours considérées comme iconiques, au même sens que des artistes, stars du cinéma ou objets de la culture populaire, puisqu'elles sont devenues véritablement célèbres et ne requièrent pas d'expertise en photographie. Cet article explore les processus par lesquels une poignée de photographies ont acquis ce statut, se concentrant sur la guerre du Vietnam, pendant laquelle il est courant de penser que ces photographies ont été des outils de contestation, dans les médias et les mouvements de protestation sociale.

Keywords

Icon, Vietnam war, photojournalism, Saigon, My Lai, Larry Burrows, Kim Phuc, Nick Ut, napalm attack, Saigon Execution, Eddie Adams, Kent State, John Paul Filo, self-immolation, Buddhist crisis, Malcolm Browne, Pulitzer prize, John Morris, *New York Times*, Madame Nhu, Mike Stimpson, Vicki Goldberg, W.J.T. Mitchell, Tet offensive, Situation room, Wilson Hicks, Don McCullin.

In popular culture, the word “icon” is common and familiar, and generally used to refer to celebrities, trade marks, songs, places, buildings or works of art. Icons are objects or ideas that are famous and universally recognizable. Anybody can mention

Coca-Cola, Madonna, the Eiffel Tower, or Andy Warhol's silk screens of Marilyn Monroe and be understood everywhere, without raising any debate over their iconic status. Famous press photographs are certainly not the first examples that come to mind in a discussion about icons. Yet they are intriguing objects that stand at the crossroad between news, art and popular culture. They have even been compared to the original Byzantine icons, which were religious objects created to transcend the materiality of a picture, and become a vehicle for the greater, insubstantial essence of a deity. In their relationship to history, photographic icons work in a similar way. Though they are secular images, they have come to embody such diverse concepts as freedom, victory, tyranny, or oppression. The *Times Square Kiss* captured by Alfred Eisenstaedt on V-J Day, or the *Raising of the Flag on Iwo Jima* by Joe Rosenthal, have lived on in collective memory and become symbols of values we do not want to leave in the past, even if the details of their contexts have been cast aside. There are a few dozen very famous press photographs that are widely recognized today; some of them are more familiar to American viewers, but a lot of them can also be identified by international communities. If very few people know who created these photojournalistic icons, when and where they were shot, or what their titles are, a couple of words will usually suffice to describe them efficiently in conversation. Online search engines also illustrate this phenomenon, proving that these photographs have been stripped of their historical and social context, only to be remembered through key word of general description. Rosenthal's image, for example, makes up most of the first results of a Google image search for "iwo jima flag" and no other words.

For technological and publishing reasons most of the several dozen recognizable photojournalistic icons were initially taken and then distributed in the written press between 1930 and 1970. It was not until the Nineties, however, that the adjective "iconic" started to be used by historians to categorize them. Before the Nineties they would be called "classic" or "memorable" pictures. In her book *The Power of Photography*, dated 1991, Vicki Goldberg was one of the first historians to actually use the term "icon," which she defined as follows: "I take secular icons to be representations that inspire some degree of awe—perhaps mixed with dread, compassion, or aspiration—and that stand for an epoch or a system of beliefs,"—"Icons almost instantly acquired symbolic overtones" (Goldberg, 135). Less than twenty years later, in 2007, Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, who are professors of communication at Northwestern University and Indiana University respectively, wrote *No Caption Needed*, a book entirely dedicated to the study of photojournalistic icons. They define icons as "those photographic images appearing in print, electronic, or digital media that are widely recognised and remembered, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics" (Hariman and Lucaites, 27). These two definitions complement each other, and include all the characteristics that define *what photographic icons are*. They are also an excellent starting point to understand *how icons function* in collective memory.

One of the first images that correspond to these definition is Robert Capa's *Falling Soldier* from the Spanish Civil War (1936) and it could be argued that we consider some of the photographs from the 9/11 attacks as icons—although the involvement of new media in the "viral" diffusion of these pictures calls for a different type of study. It is clear, however, that the phenomenon of the iconification of press photographs—that is to say how standard press photographs become iconic photographs—peaked during the American war in Vietnam. Four photographs from

that period can be, and have been, called icons: *Napalm Girl* photographed by Nick Ut in July 1972, the *Self-Immolating Monk* of 1963 (by AP photographer Malcolm Browne), and the *Saigon Execution* (Eddie Adams), which took place during the Tet Offensive of 1968. Student John Filo's photograph of the *Kent State Shootings* in May 1970 more easily recognized by Americans than Europeans, but remains a symbol of reactions against the misuse of authority including the violent repression of peaceful protests. That photograph has thus changed its significance from when it was a protest against Richard Nixon's decision to bomb Cambodia and mistakes made on national and local levels trying to contain those reactions. To these four are sometimes added the pictures of the My Lai massacre, that were revealed in the press in 1969. These selected pictures are representative of how photojournalistic icons are created and function in relation to collective memory; they are central to American culture because of the historical trauma that was the war in Vietnam. They are not the most representative images of the conflict. Some people will remember photographs of American soldiers by Larry Burrows or the scene of the evacuation of Saigon in 1975 quite vividly. However, collective memory has operated a process of selection over time, and these other photographs tend to be better remembered by experts, by amateurs of photography, or by the newspaper reading generations from the time of the war, than by the general public decades later.

The aforementioned four and the pictures from My Lai all include the characteristics that define photojournalistic icons, and it is relatively easy to identify their evolution through time. They are exemplary cult photographs, and perfect tools to understand the complexity of all photojournalistic icons and their impact on memory. In retrospect, many see agency and purpose in the creation and publicity of these photographs. We tend to think that their violent content was used to convey a message, to rally the American people to the anti-war movement, or even to stop the war. However, looking closely at how these images were produced in the press, and then at the ways by which they were extracted from it and inscribed in popular culture, we see that they were rarely published or used with these specific purposes in mind. It must also be remembered that, even if they had been intended to stop the war, it is impossible to know if they could have had the desired effect on viewers. Historians indeed agree that gauging the influence of violent pictures on public opinion is virtually impossible. We will see here the details of the process of creation of an icon, or iconisation, and try to determine how they came to embody anti-war tendencies when their initial purpose was merely the objective representation of a military conflict. Although the notion of objectivity in journalism may strongly be questioned nowadays, interviews of photographers and journalists who documented the Vietnam war reflect their strong dedication to factual reports.

Like all photojournalistic images, icons first go through a selection process mediated by professionals. The photographer first decides, on the scene: what he will photograph and choose to exclude, or how his pictures will be framed. Then, picture editors, either for wire services or actual newspapers, decide whether or not an image is worth circulating. The general guidelines at this step of the selection are fairly self-explanatory. As shown by studies of journalistic practices in the 1960s, the ideal press photograph was "an image that managed to miss nothing important about an event, while remaining selective, it was to see better than the eye and was therefore the best representative and informative medium" (Hicks, 27).

After this important paring down of all the available data, we are left with a defined number of images that are then viewed, considered, read, noticed, by two main groups: the general public and prize giving organizations. The general public has been shown to be particularly appreciative of photographs that are deemed both

very newsworthy, and sensational or emotional; it was the case during the Vietnam war and is still the case today. All four icons of the Vietnam War were considered relevant information by editors who published them, and were then noticed and isolated from the rest by newspaper readers. All four are sensational and also contain an element of shock in that they all represent a person facing death, or already dead. This is less patent in the *Napalm Girl* photograph. The girl's body language externalizes her pain and draws in the attention of the viewer right away. Her nudity strongly suggests a deeper problem and invites us to look for further indications of it. Finally, the fact that the girl is running toward the photographer/the onlooker actually *communicates* her pain to us. All this creates empathy and dictates the nature of our response. According to rhetoric specialist Charles Hill, this type of shocking, sensational, and emotional image belongs to the category of "vivid information" (Hill, 31). They are as close as can be to first-hand experience, which gives them great rhetorical power, and accounts for their instant memorability. These images are often, but not exclusively the isolated images that are published on the front page or in very large format. Sometimes, however, part of a longer report, or of a portfolio, can also become iconic. We have examples of this in the *Napalm Girl* and the *Saigon Execution*, which were published alongside other photographs that detailed the series of events written about. When compared with the other photographs in the same reports, it is clear that the ones that were remembered by the public and became iconic are the most informative and sensational ones. They capture the decisive moment.

However, not all photographs that depict some horrible death, or a child victim of a war can become iconic. First, "compassion fatigue" limits the number and intensity of gruesome photographs that the public can reasonably be exposed to before losing interest. This phenomenon is extensively studied by war photography historian Susan Moeller in her book *Shooting War*. Secondly, newsworthiness and novelty remain great components of sensationalism because the general public quickly grows weary of overly similar reports, whether they are gruesome or not. The unexpected is a great recipe for sensation. For example, the napalm attack and the immolation of Thich Quang Duc were two kinds of events that had never been reported in the press since the beginning of the war. The *Saigon Execution* was just as unexpected because until the late Sixties there was little press coverage of the actual battles that took place on Vietnamese soil; and when there was, the South Vietnamese were not the subject. But the details of what happened on the days these pictures were taken have been forgotten in relation to the photographs.

The selection by prize giving organizations has been described as a middle ground between the taste of the public and that of professionals. The guidelines are to award newsworthy, exemplary photographs that capture a special moment. Composition and artistic qualities as a whole remain essential. In comparison, public taste is often considered as more subjective and uninformed. Photographic prizes such as the Pulitzer Prize for Photography and the World Press Photo of the Year contribute to the popularization of the images they reward, because they distribute them and include them in special exhibitions. Before the invention of our contemporary tools of communication and reproduction—mostly digitized newspapers and photographs, and the Internet—, these prizes on their own were what started the process of extraction of press photographs from their editorial context, a process that is central to the creation of a photojournalistic icon. In fact, about half of identifiable icons won at least one, and on some occasions both, of the major photographic prizes. It is to be noted, however, that although sensationalism is important in every step of the extraction process, it has to be carefully balanced;

anything verging on gruesome will not receive that type of attention and recognition. You won't often see blood in iconic photographs. Even the picture of the immolation, which could be significantly more horrid, does not display any visibly burned flesh—that part of his body is in fact concealed by the flames themselves.

These are the main selection criteria that, together, make it possible for a few photographs to be extracted from the press and benefit from uncommonly wide distribution. Not only were these four icons distributed very widely and internationally, this happened extremely fast. The Self-Immolation did face some reluctance on the part of a few editors (notably at the *News York Times* which did not run the story) but mostly, all major newspapers ran their report with the photograph the very next day after the event and many did so on the front page. Adams's photograph of the Saigon Execution became so iconic so fast that it kept reappearing in following weeks; *Newsweek* and *Life* both printed it a second time one month later. John Morris, who was then picture editor for *The New York Times*, wrote that the question was never *whether*, but *how* to publish this image, because it was too significant to be left out. The *how to publish* these images was by narrowing down the input on their context and crystallizing information to the really relevant and usually shocking or sensational. That was done both consciously by journalists in their captions and reports, and unconsciously by readers who, by the following weeks or months, would have a selective and sometimes inaccurate memory of the context. For example, *Napalm Girl* is generally remembered as an example of a wonton American attack on Vietnamese soil, when in fact it was the South Vietnamese that carried out the attack. The *Self-Immolation* picture was used in the United States to show the horrors of religious conflicts in Vietnam, while Vietnamese Communists used it to denounce American imperialism. Both simplicity and selectiveness contributed to making these images viral, but the conciseness of meaning they retained made them easy to manipulate.

This is where the notion of agency proves to be, if not irrelevant, at least tricky to analyze. If we start with an easy example, that of the immolation of Thich Quang Duc, it is clear that the picture had the effect desired—or at least the attention desired. Malcolm Browne has told the story of what happened the morning of June 11, 1963 many times. He was personally called by the Saigon monks to come to their pagoda and bring a camera with him, because a significant event might take place. Reading detailed accounts of the morning's events, or watching videos that were taken that day, make it clear that the whole thing was well rehearsed. The monk had even painted signs in English, foreseeing the international attention the photographer's report would gain. And apart from Madame Nhu's notorious comments about this immolation being a barbecue show, the international reaction to this was compassion and outrage. But this is a rare example of a violent act represented in photography having the results intended by the scene actors and planners. The photograph of the Tet offensive execution got out of hand according to photographer Eddie Adams. Interviews tell us that the execution was not planned, and that Adams was friendly with General Loan (the executioner in the picture). Taking this photograph was merely a photographer's reflex, and this snapshot could have been lost in the profusion of photographs that were published during the offensive, which was chaotic on both military and journalistic levels. The enemy in the picture is the Viet Cong officer being executed, but in the aftermath of the publication General Loan became widely unpopular for killing a man in cold blood and still received hate mail decades later after he moved to the United States.

It is paradoxically because icons are progressively deprived of crucial elements from their context, that they gain a natural eloquence. This eloquence allows them to

be used for new purposes outside of the newspapers and magazines they were extracted from, in many cases very soon after initial publication. Sometimes they become symbols of concepts opposed to their initial purpose, or they simply gain purpose when they were meant to be factual and neutral. For example, the photographs of the *Saigon Execution* and of the *Kent State Shooting* were used on posters to support the anti-war movement and plastered on American and European public walls; however, unlike other such images that were popular for a short while, these were also included in later peace efforts such as the exhibition of the World Disarmament Campaign in 1989—where the Saigon execution was featured—which has remained a symbol of anti-war struggles. Likewise, Napalm Girl gained instant popularity but was also republished in the conclusion to a special on the 1970s published in *Life* magazine in 1979. Being iconic means being appropriated and reused even today, and there are countless examples of this photograph's inclusion in press reports, works of art, historic accounts, and more. As late as 2004, an artist created a cartoon by combining the figure of Napalm Girl with one of the Abu Ghraib prisoners in a statement on the infringement of human rights. Putting the two events together made a strong statement because of the implication that Americans had not learned from history. Icons of war thus become reusable in other representations of war, sometimes in opposite contexts, which would not be possible if they had retained all their initial contextual data. We see a snowball effect with these images: the more iconic an image is, the more it tends to be reused. And the more it is reused, the more it becomes iconic.

Icons also prove adaptable to more strictly artistic or more personal works, and between their first publication and today, artists have contributed to their inclusion in popular culture. As early as 1968, only a few months after Eddie Adams photographed *Saigon Execution*, German artist Wolf Vostell combined the iconic photograph with two other images from its original series into a collage, called *Miss America* meant as a work of pacifist propaganda. In his 1980 film *Stardust Memories*, Woody Allen shot a scene with a background made of that same iconic photograph. The absence of words captioning this photo shows that it works on its own as a symbol of various issues in war and conflict, which are central themes in this particular film. A similar kind of re-appropriation can be seen on the cover of *Rage against the machine*, an album of 1992, which features the immolation of 1963. More recently, independent photographer Mike Stimpson recreated a series of what he called “Classic photographs” using Legos, which are iconic objects on their own. Among these recreations, we find two of our four icons of the Vietnam War. These recreations are extremely popular on the Internet and appear very quickly in Google picture searches of their *original* photograph. I have personally come across these icons on various occasions. As recently as July 2014, an art gallery in the Marais in Paris was selling dozens of paintings by French artist Thierry Rasine, one of which, entitled “Lost Children 1972,” featured *Napalm Girl* photograph in a collage. This shows that even the younger generations recognize and accept such symbols and that these icons are not strictly American objects. These photographs have in fact become a language of their own, and have taken on rhetorical functions. When educated viewers adopt this language, they can participate directly or indirectly in acts of propagation or commemoration.

The exact symbolism and rhetorical functions of icons can be hard to describe in strict terms, if only because they have taken roots in so many different fields and become truly universal. When she introduces *Napalm Girl* in *The Power of Photography*, Vicki Goldberg mentions that, as early as the first days after its publication, viewers saw it as a symbol but they were not sure of *what* (Goldberg, 2).

But in later years *Napalm Girl*, because of its contents and its reuses, came to symbolize many concepts enumerated by Barbie Zelizer: “political innocence, human rights, third world vulnerability and victimhood, mechanized destructiveness, criminal state action, and moral callousness”(Zelizer, 239). If they have an array of very different meanings, it is certain that these icons provide more than just documentation; they provide a space of endless commemoratoin, they become tools for civic performance, and inscribe memory in something that becomes sacred in the eyes of the public. They even sometimes fall into the category of “offending images,” in the words of W. J. T. Mitchell in his influential article, *What Do Pictures Want?* (Mitchell, 25) These images, which he calls magical, have a certain power that makes them hard to categorize or ignore. You can either kneel to them or deface them, but both acts have meaning. In fact, our icons, because of the relative violence of their content, have received tough criticism throughout history. There have often been controversies about the ethics of the photographer who did not help the victim before taking the shot, or controversies about the insensitivity of images that crudely expose the pain of others. Recreations themselves have on occasion become controversial. The two Vietnam icons recreated with Legos by Mike Stimpson had a very hostile reception because of their supposed insensitivity. The artist actually had to remove them from his online galleries after a few months because, in his words, “not many people understand the fact that they are meant to show how iconic an image has become, and that it can be represented in a completely different form and yet still be recognizable.”¹

Controversy, however, never stands in the way of fame and memorability. In the case of icons, controversy increases distribution and supports the theory of influence on public opinion. In fact throughout the historiography of the war in Vietnam there is a predominant belief that these icons played a significant part in ending the war—or at the very least in decreasing its public support. Public opinion was shattered at every wrong step taken by the authorities supporting the war: the Tet Offensive and the Kent State shootings are unanimously-acknowledged to have been turning points in the history of the Vietnam War. If influence is certainly hard to assess, it is quite interesting that most professionals and historians think that these images changed public opinion; it gives them even more weight, more symbolism, more power; they become a new way of reading—and writing—history. In the hands of war historians, the four icons mentioned have become key elements in the end of the Vietnam War. Even if they did not influence public opinion, at least they influence American collective memory, and they do so to this day, because they have colonized new digital tools of communication.

These classical icons are typically American objects from the 1930s to the early 1990s, in recent times we have witnessed an emulation of the mechanisms through which images become icons. Since the early 2000s and the 9/11 attacks, some press photographs have had remarkable distribution, in all kinds of visual media, and some of them have been called *icons*. These contemporary icons do share similarities with modern photojournalistic icons. In March 2011, a picture of a young Japanese woman wrapped in a blanket standing next to the wreckage caused by the Fukushima earthquake made the front page of every newspaper in France and around the world. Some contemporary photographs have not only been repeated in multiple newspapers and over several days or weeks, but have also been considerably reused and quoted. The *Situation Room* photograph—taken during the U.S. capture of Ben Laden—was the object of countless comical recreations and derivations on the Internet. Both of these photographs were called icons very quickly. However, if they share some of the specific qualities of modern icons of 20th century photojournalism,

their notoriety is very much dependent on the Internet, which, by the constant renewal of its content, makes it very difficult for a photograph to acquire sufficient timelessness to be icons in the modern popular culture sense. It is very tricky—and too early—to say if these contemporary icons have what it takes to become the same complex objects that other modern, pre-Internet icons became. The photographic icons are very singular and unique objects. It can be argued that, to some extent, they fulfill Wilson Hicks's unreachable ideal of a perfect image that would not need any words to compensate for the shortcomings of photography in terms of spirit and reality of the subject (Hicks, 33).

In the historiography of the Vietnam war there is a consensus that this war was quite unique and that it has shaped all the wars the United States has been involved in since. It might be so because the war was never officially declared by Congress, or because the United States lost, or maybe because the social protests of the Sixties encouraged Americans to question the authority of the Administration, making any degree of disapproval threatening. The representation of this war in the media was very unique as well. It is generally thought that media coverage was very adversarial and critical of the government and the military, that it depicted violence and death on a daily basis, that it drove public opinion against the military and political administrations that supported it. There is very little evidence to substantiate these beliefs, as the historiography of the Vietnam war shows, but it is very interesting to investigate the reasons why the Vietnam war is remembered with such an emphasis on iconic photographs. It could be argued that this memory of the war has been construed from a retrospective viewpoint, and that when we see these iconic images, all we remember is flashes of history: we remember the hippie culture, the absence of media censorship and technical improvements in photography which meant that more people could become photographers and roam the world with easy-to-carry cameras; we remember the unexpected Tet offensive, and the dramatic evacuation of Saigon. And yet, in the Sixties, very few Americans were involved in hippie culture, or in the antiwar movement, or in any other protest movement; photographers were still very much dedicated to the idea of objectivity in journalism and in representing the facts of the war, and not in an excessive representation of violence; the Tet offensive did not cause an immediate drop in public support for the war, which actually had been decreasing very slowly from 1965 on.

Why is it then that the war is remembered with a decisive photographic component, and that these icons have become its symbols? The fact that there was no victory in Vietnam may explain this general focus of collective memory on the negative. Opinion polls from during the war show that the people often supported the United States' mission in Vietnam, and yet collective memory cannot take it upon itself to glorify this conflict or even support it in retrospect. But why do younger generations remember the girl burned by napalm, or the monk on fire? Why not the documentary-style photographs by Larry Burrows or Don McCullin, who were devoted to exposing the hardships of the average American soldiers in the field? Why do we remember the summary execution in the streets of Saigon during the Tet offensive, and not the photographs of the evacuation of Saigon that meant that the war was finally over? One hypothesis to explain the choices of memory is that the historians, and the American people, cannot reconcile with this failed war. Since the beginning of the conflict, public concern had been focused on the ratio of American lives lost in Southeast Asia against the number of Viet Cong killed as reflected by the regular body counts announced by the Pentagon and relayed by the media. Meanwhile the length of the war, and the escalation of the conflict to unexpected proportions, are recurrent topics in history books and memory. Could it be that

against a background of the compassion fatigue that Susan Moeller describes to qualify the progressively numbing effect of photographs of suffering American soldiers a few horrific photographs of seemingly innocent Vietnamese victims who made up the Vietnamese side of those body counts, could revive compassion and sensitivity and motivate a reconsideration of the war that has never stopped. After all, photographs of dead American soldier had been fairly common since the Civil War. It may be that the seeming pointlessness of the Vietnam conflict, and the receding possibility of victory, made the American public want to turn to the moral high ground. The more exotic figure of the Vietnamese victim of war—often a child or woman—thus became a staple in this apologetic display that became the public memory of the Vietnam war. It would be wrong, however, to think that the memory of the war is only about Vietnamese victims. There is in fact an element of self-reflection preserved in collective memory, and these icons are often seen as saying “Let’s not repeat the same mistakes.”

ⁱ Photographer Mike Stimpson, in a personal email, January 3, 2011.

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