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(doi: 10.2383/80393)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2015

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# Icons, Iconicity, and Cultural Critique

by Robert Hariman *and* John Louis Lucaites

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## 1. Introduction

As the authors of a book-length study of iconic photographs, we have experienced a wide range of interest and recurrent concerns regarding icons and their influence [Hariman and Lucaites 2007.] Some of these issues are specific to iconicity as it is a mode of symbolic action, and some channel more general questions regarding the nature, effects, and interpretation of visual media *tout court*. Although we focused on a specific genre of news images, by the end of the project it had become clear to us that icons were condensing social, political, and cultural functions that were operating across the public sphere.

In a review of our book for this journal, Marco Solaroli laid out an agenda for identifying “the culturally associative connections between iconic news photographs and deep moral structures of the civil society” [Solaroli 2011.] To that end, he asked, “How can we develop a methodologically and analytically refined empirical investigation of the processes of symbolic connection between images and imaginaries, or between specific media frames and wider cultural narratives, to better understand what and how contributed to create and radicate over time a visual-cultural hegemonic structure?” We will simplify this question to underscore its foundational significance: What constitutes the right method for connecting image and culture to understand social order? Needless to say, we did not fully answer that question earlier, and will not do so now. We will suggest an interpretive model that addresses each of

the three parts of the question: *the method* can be curatorial, intuitive, allegorical, and deliberative; *the connection* can become accessible via a richer conception of both social surfaces and visual reportage; *understanding* includes responding to a prophetic function that articulates possible futures for moral accountability.

To provide context for these claims, we first will identify a few problems constraining the study of visual culture and then review our previous work on iconic images. We should caution, however, that we are not sociologists, and we hope that any of our errors in disciplinary translation can at least lead to additional conversation.

## 2. Icons and Visual Culture

Although beloved by many people, iconic images are subject to strong criticisms in the academy: they are examples of mystification in a society of the spectacle that has little place for deliberative rationality; they normalize oppressive norms of race, class, and gender while sustaining illusions of political consensus that marginalize democratic dissent; they exemplify processes of repetition, commodification, and fetishization that turn citizens into consumers while hollowing out aesthetic and moral values. We could go on, but you get the point. Our book, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*, offered a different assessment which need not be rehearsed here. What is of more interest for the moment is how iconic images allow scholars to work around several predicaments in the study of visual culture. These include: the plethora of images; the range of effects or responses; the vagaries of circulation; and transition from modern to postmodern theoretical contexts. Each of these can be sketched briefly.

Over 200,000 photos are uploaded to Facebook every minute; Instagram adds another 27,000, and then there is Flickr and Tumblr and email and much more as well [Internet.org 2013; Horaczek 2013.] While looking at (or glancing across) our phones, tablets, laptops, and other screens, we also are surrounded by a constant parade of images and other signage on billboards, posters, clothing, cars, and every other available surface including skin. This gargantuan archive presents a challenge to the study of visual culture. On the one hand, it would seem that only practices, rather than individual images, should have any salience for social research. To understand what people are doing with images, one would have to study how they handle large numbers of images rather than dotting on any one. There certainly is merit in taking that approach, but on the other hand, iconic images acquire special evidentiary value for much the same reason. Amidst the inflationary spiral, they become something like a gold standard. While most images seem dispensable, icons stand out: they have

been seen by many and are known to have a large audience. Instead of being merely a personal favorite, the icon is something known to be shared with many other people, most of them strangers. Shared enough, that is, to qualify as emblematic of a culture.

The contemporary immersion in images might seem to confirm fears about media saturation, technological determinism, and similar tendencies in modern society. More realistically, the range of effects is very wide and often hard to sort out, even in the particular case. Affordances, the co-production of meaning, and other attempts to conceptualize the reciprocal development of media technologies get at some of it, but hypodermic effects still can occur while branding and other forms of continuous saturation work as well. More to the point, the social and political effects cover the waterfront. Media literacy or dumbing down? Enriched social networks or new forms of conformity? Liberalization or *resentiment*? Democratization or infantilized citizenship? Compassion or compassion fatigue? The resurgence of reception theory and increased use of ethnographic methods has provided a strong response to these conditions, but not to eliminate the problem. The variance isn't explained by external factors alone, which keeps the focus on the engagement with the image and the plurality contained within the image. None of this is news, but it might help to note that it creates a need for signature events, texts, and images, and at a time when the very idea of a representative moment is increasingly suspect.

Enter the icon, for reasons both good and bad. The downside is that some people want to believe that some symbols produce determinable and perhaps transcendental effects. Instead of being dragged down into the vortex, the icon offers a safe haven in the storm: shared perception, a sense of the sacred, ritual intensity, and continuing influence across borders and time. Amidst the deep pluralism of modern life, the iconic image can anchor meaning: better yet, it seems to anchor meaning in a real, stable referent while holding open a horizon of meaning never reducible to the calculation of known interests. Similarly, the icon is equally attractive to those who want to expose and disable that conception of meaning and the cultural homogeneity attached to it. Although this pairing might recommend doing without the concept, the icon offers another approach to the basic problem of wanting to specify media effects in a dynamic system where individual events are highly overdetermined. What the icon offers is the opportunity to parse a range of effects in a single image-text, and one that can be tracked across locales and over time. We suggest that icons emerge in part because they are particularly well suited to "carrying" multiple effects, which can be traced in the composition of the image and then through its history of appropriations. Thus, the icon is built for tracking reception: it contains multiple patterns of identification and invokes strong emotional responses, while its wide circulation includes both likely similarities and obvious differences in use.

Tracking the images is itself a problem, however. Gone are the days of only a few television networks, several news magazines, the local paper, and the family photo album. There is no doubt that circulation is no longer an element of media production alone – that is, something done by the “circulation department” and measured in terms of purchase, pass-along rate, and so forth – but also something initiated and controlled by media users. Audiences still can be sold to advertisers, but a lot of media use, and particularly photo use, is outside of those organizational channels. Once again, the icon then offers an intermediate solution. Icons are found in institutional, commercial, and vernacular venues, they are not specific to any one event, topic, genre, or site, and they appear in search engines and are otherwise widely recognized. Indeed, this may be why the tag “iconic” now is used so extensively (look at the Ngram for “icon”): those using the label are trying to mark, track, or boost circulation. By saying a particular image is iconic, one supplies a context that includes sharing. This image has already been shared and seen, so seeing and sharing allow you to join and participate in that collectivity. Additional use also is enabled by the contextual assumptions: this image is special, it merits attention, it rewards emotional investment, it can be used to influence others, it will last. The researcher benefits from these assumptions, as it allows one to track collective orientation. That said, one must be aware that the icon is being created because of desire for a stable sign in a dynamic sign system, and that the status attribution will often prove to be misplaced or ephemeral. Even the most prominent iconic images have a half-life, and circulation and reception are continually shifting anyway. At the same time, the expanded conception of iconicity represented by this journal issue offers additional opportunities for tracing patterns of circulation large and small.

These problems in locating media culture are matched by the changes in intellectual context of the past several decades. The “visual turn” is emblematic of the paradigm shift from modern to postmodern contexts, even if some scholars in the area are reluctant to rely on those labels. There are several different angles of approach. For some, iconic images offer ready examples of how social phenomena are aesthetic, emotional, embodied, material, performative, and mediated, while also confounding such binaries as high and low culture, official and vernacular discourse, and sacred and profane signification. For others, icons exemplify a persistent modernism, reinstating deference to the transcendental symbol, universal reference, and elite control of mass culture. (Despite our repeated claims to the contrary, we have been misread as approving of such revisionism.) Rather than settle an increasingly dated dispute, we suggest that “icon” is salient because of how it can mediate this paradigm shift in social theory. Icons work because people do grant them “timeless” properties that are based on modernist assumptions regarding meaning, social organization, and cul-

ture, yet they also provide ready examples of how media incorporate and are incorporated into social practices that are aesthetic, emotional, and otherwise more than merely rational actions, normative habits, or functional routines. Icons do operate according to the communication processes that have been exposed so powerfully by deconstruction and other critical methods, but they also prompt other modes of reception and other effects that are denied, misrecognized, condemned, or ignored by a thorough-going hermeneutics of suspicion. If they fall short of modernist ideals of stable reference, specified functionality, individual agency, and authentic experience, they also offer persistent examples of how images and other media are being used to negotiate relationships in a world where things held in common are continually shifting and increasingly unstable.

### 3. Iconic Photographs

Our book was one attempt to identify the resources that iconic images provide for public identity, thought, and action. We focused on those news images that had become iconic in the US. We defined icons as those photographic images appearing in print, electronic, or digital media that are widely recognized 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. We were not interested in limiting the definition of “icon” to this relatively narrow ambit. We were interested in understanding how the photographic icon was a genre within the public art of photojournalism, and with that, indicative of significant tensions and tendencies underway in US public culture.

Many images meet some of the criteria noted above, but relatively few meet all of them. That small number is never quite fixed, for news production never ceases, there are individual and demographic differences in reception, and time and chance doth happen to them all. Even so, these images are not hard to identify, and we then selected from among those the Migrant Mother with her children staring into the Great Depression, the Marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima, the Times Square kiss on V-J Day in New York City, the napalmed girl running down a road in Vietnam, a young woman screaming over a student shot at Kent State University, the man standing before tanks at Tiananmen Square, and the explosions of the *Hindenburg* dirigible and the *Challenger* space shuttle. The selection was somewhat arbitrary, although these allowed us to trace the borders of the genre and to cover pertinent themes such as civic identity, dissent and emotional management, trauma and public

memory, liberalism and global order, and modernity's fraught relationship between progress and catastrophe.

Our most important decisions were those regarding theoretical context and interpretive method. We positioned the project between ideology critique and public sphere theory, as we were sure that neither approach could recognize key features of iconic mediation and response as they occurred in the virtual reality of public culture. Individual images then lead us to address additional theoretical questions, e.g., regarding affect, collective memory, and so forth. And like many scholars today, we drew eclectically on the technical concepts provided by many disciplines, including art history, cultural studies, rhetoric, semiotics, and others in order to explicate form and function in the specific images; but that alone doesn't constitute a method. There were six key points of departure in that regard, which we will summarize briefly: respecting aesthetic conventions, shifting from representation to performance; charting semiotic transcriptions; entering into emotional scenarios; engaging constitutive contradictions; and tracking subsequent appropriations. Although these do not suffice to accommodate the shift from icons to iconicity, they remain important preliminary assumptions for the hermeneutical model that we will set out in more detail subsequently.

### 3.1. *Conventions*

It is all too easy to criticize public art works for being kitschy, sentimental, banal, predictable, compromised, moralistic, bureaucratic, and in any other way too conventional for educated taste or artistic distinction. By contrast, we believe that there is both mediocrity and accomplishment aplenty in the public media (just as there is in the art world), and that it is important to consider how the "inferior" artistic repertoire provides important resources for collective association. Thus, there is reason to be sympathetic to the conventional feelings, popular tastes, and mixed media of democratic societies. We take seriously the reliance on middlebrow arts such as portraiture, popular iconographies such as mother and child, visual grammars taken from advertising and popular film, representational realism, journalistic decorum, and so forth. This heavy investment in conventions also extends beyond the image to include the discursive context of the news media, the genres, topics, ideas, and social knowledge taken for granted in public argument, and other symbolic resources held in common. None of this takes anything away from the fine arts – neither their inherent value nor their capacity to move, provoke, educate, and transform individuals

and societies. It does ask that icons be taken on their own terms, and challenges the scholar to discover how much that entails.

### 3.2. *Performance*

The shift from representation to performance provides a means to both avoid unnecessary problems and identify important features of iconic power. The gains hold even though it is relatively easy to align the two perspectives much of the time, or to translate performative claims back into a representational context. By unnecessary problems, we mean the persistent questions regarding the epistemological status of the image, such as whether it is capable of propositional content, or whether it provides a veridical record of anything outside the frame, or if it has been faked. These have their place, of course, but rarely are helpful for understanding public communication. (Consider how much art criticism could be done by someone who cared only about plagiarism: the answer is both a lot, as any painting can be questioned on that regard, and not much as all, as no painting is created merely to not be a forgery. The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for public art.) Iconic photographs are photographs, which are a mode of representation, but they also function as a mode of civic performance somewhat like epideictic oratory, which is where their distinctive influence emerges.

Most important, the shift from representation to performance brings the question of influence to the fore. Representations can be influential, and performances can fail to persuade, but there is a difference nonetheless. Influence is a problem for a theory of representation: the sources, motives, and means of influence can produce distortions, putting truth at risk. Furthermore, the influence that does occur has to be accounted for via a supplement: the techniques of representation have to be augmented – say, given an emotional charge – in order to account for their social or political effects. By now it should become evident that this epistemological approach is itself a construction, e.g., one in which emotions are presumed (incorrectly, in our view) to be incapable of imparting knowledge. By claiming that a means of representation (photojournalism) also works as a mode of performance, one still has to answer to questions of veracity, but those questions are no longer privileged because the performative relationships and techniques are no longer merely supplemental.

Performances are aesthetically marked, situated, reflexive examples of restored behavior presented to an audience. Photographs might seem not to qualify, as they are or are thought to be mundane rather than explicitly artful, widely reproduced rather than uniquely situated, realistic rather than reflexive, diminished rather than



heightened by posing, and lacking any interactive relationship with a specific audience. This characterization may sustain fine arts institutions, but it leaves too much out of the picture. Photography is performative at several levels. It is grounded in phenomenological devices crucial to performance such as framing, which marks the work as a special selection of reality having greater intensity than the flow of experience on either side of it. This heightening extends to other stylistic features, particularly stance and gesture, with in turn require communicative competence shared across production and reception (which is one definition of culture, cf. Miller and McHoul [1998, 179.]) The photo itself is always of a situated event, while it typically occurs in programmatic (or ritual) settings in the public media. These settings encourage dedicated reflection on social relations as they are shown *in situ* and as they are part of the modern civil imagination that is continuously enacted through photographic spectatorship [Azoulay 2008; 2012.] Thus, as Barthes remarked, the photograph becomes “a kind of primitive theatre” [Barthes 1981, 32; Azoulay 2012, 82-83.]

This performative articulation extends further. Ironically, photography’s dependence on mechanical reproduction provides its closest affinity with live performance. Both create a sense of restored behavior [Schechner 1985, 35-116.] That is, the image is itself a restoration of the “unremarkable twice-behavedness of everyday life” [States 1996, 20], which is possible only because that behavior is already stock behavior, typified social interaction. Photography, like all performance, traffics in conventional repertoires of display, imitates familiar routines of interaction, depends on shared social knowledge, and creates reflexive awareness through dedicated reproduction of such recognizable moments of social performance. And the additional reproduction and circulation of any image further extends this performative relationship, as doing so repeats the behavior being shown, highlights it for viewing, and involves another audience in the co-production of the meaning of both the photo and the event shown. When attaining iconic levels of circulation, the image then becomes a command performance of specific forms of civic life. This performative function is amplified by the role that visual images play in print media: we believe that iconic images are presented as ritual performances that thereby have the function of illuminating what is thought to be unsayable in print. Hence, the iconic sense of an aura emerges, and not from uniqueness so much as from repetition on behalf of structural articulation.

### 3.3. *Transcriptions*

More than one thing is presented in any performance, and one needs to sort out how social knowledge is being presented. Our method for doing so is to identify how the camera has captured the dense interweaving of social codes, starting with the image being coded as a photograph. We draw on Umberto Eco's concept of "semiotic transcriptions," in part because of his sensitivity to how meaning could shift as different cues activated different patterns of meaning extending across and beyond the image. Our attention to layered coding is not merely technical, however, but also reflects a conception of how photography has become a distinctively modern medium for social awareness. In the modern world one lives not only in a particular place with its own mores and local knowledge, but also within society, which is the realm where everything intersects. It is the symbolic space, behavioral field, built environment, and virtual reality encompassing human co-existence. The camera is uniquely capable of depicting social meaning because it will capture everything that is visible in the viewfinder. The photograph is a society in miniature – a place where everything intersects, every visible discrimination and pattern mixed together, whether finely coordinated or jarringly obvious. Class, race, gender, age, health, comfort, wariness, familiarity, alienation – to the extent that these and many other elements of identity and responsiveness can be seen, they will be recorded [Hariman 2013.] Thus, by identifying and extending the codes as they are arrayed in each image, one can begin to explain how that image articulates social order and motivates response, and how response might vary according to the spectator's engagement through one code or array or another. We find that iconic images emerge in part because they provide particularly effective articulation and aesthetic coordination of the codes defining a historical event; as these dense transcriptions are deployed accordingly, they provide a (composite) image of collective experience. As the image is circulated widely, it's relative disarticulation from the original context can involve loss of meaning, but it also allows appropriation of the symbolic resources in the image for interpreting other historical events and defining one's relationship with other citizens.

### 3.4. *Emotions*

Photography displays repertoires and attitudes governing social behavior, and particularly as they are evident in the embodied performance of everyday life. These performances always involve emotional cues, and for good reason: the photograph is a multilayered social experience. One observes people in relationship with one another, those people are put into a relationship with the viewer, that relationship is

embedded in the interaction of media source and audience, and all this is apprehended through the social awareness of the viewer and the interactions encasing spectatorship as it occurs at the breakfast table, coffee shop, classroom, or other settings in which media content is discussed. Every one of these interactions necessarily involves affective response and emotional management. No wonder that images are thought to be emotionally powerful. They are, but that alone doesn't say much. It is necessary to identify the relationship between semiotic complexity and emotional resonance, which can vary considerably. Our work has focused on how images provide not only affective relays but complex emotional scenarios, how they both provide and negotiate stock emotions such as patriotism, how they activate structures of feeling that may not otherwise have been applied to specific political issues, and other considerations as well. We don't pretend to exhaust the range of response. We do emphasize that the emotional dimension of iconic imagery is a valuable resource for public judgment, which would be impossible if left wholly to reason.

### 3.5. *Contradictions*

Emotions often are salient because important issues are at stake: issues of war and peace, poverty and wealth, injustice and justice, resource use and sustainability. Our next critical precept probes this dimension of iconic meaning: we believe that images become iconic in part because they are suited to mediating constitutive contradictions or recurrent crises in the polity. Any foundational tension can be productive and suffuse a wide range of cultural expression, but we find icons to be particularly well suited to acting out and offering some resolution to these problems. This is one way that iconic images can be distinguished from others that are by turns more dramatic, didactic, documentary, or banal. Indeed, this is one reason that icons can circulate so broadly: they are addressing a deep structural tension that may have become visible in one place but is felt much more pervasively. For example, *No Caption Needed* argued that Twentieth century US iconic photographs mediated a foundational tension in the public culture between liberalism and democracy, and that the visual history showed a shift from more democratic to more liberal commitments. Each of the iconic images could be examined through that lens, and in each case significant features of the image and its reception became evident. Equally important, doing so strengthened the analysis of how other, more topical political tensions also were being mediated by the image, and often in ways that confounded typical assessments of the individual icon's normative "message."

### 3.6. Appropriations

There is no one message, of course. Thus, our final precept is that the study of iconic images should include an account of how those images are appropriated for communicative action. This is a procedural requirement, an interpretive technique, and a theoretical claim. The procedure is required because icons are created through extensive reproduction and circulation both within and outside of institutional channels. If you see the same image repeated frequently in the same place, whether a history book or a subway platform, you aren't necessarily seeing an icon: it could simply be a stock image or an ad campaign. If you see the same image in history books, advertisements, roadside memorials, t-shirts, editorial cartoons, political campaign posters, and so on, and across topics and over time, then you have an icon. The interpretive edge comes from examining what has been changed and not changed in reproduction, particularly when taken into other media arts and genres. If a gesture is consistently reproduced while race and gender change – as happens, for example, with the Migrant Mother and the Times Square Kiss – that suggests that the gesture is keying a significant element of social knowledge or emotional response. Likewise, it suggests that some dimensions of the image are more plastic than one might have thought, while also focusing attention on what is being made salient through the current variation. This approach also provides a partial resolution to a basic methodological dilemma, which is how to account for reception without ethnographic research. Although not a complete solution, it provides one account of how the meaning of the image can be created through use. The theoretical claim follows from identifying the range of appropriations and the relationship between image composition and reception as it is evident in appropriation. We argue that widespread copying to create images held in common is an important element of democratic public culture, a culture made of “translations, augmentation, refoundings – in a word, by the copy that is not One” [Zerilli 2000, 174.] The continual variation of the “same” image – think of the Statue of Liberty or the flag-raising on Iwo Jima – is, though not without risk, a democratic virtue. By tracing the many ways in which an iconic image is admired, parodied, exploited, defaced, and otherwise kept on stage in the vaudeville show of public culture, one can trace both the extent of and the limitations of iconic appeal.

## 4. Icons, Iconicity, and Culture

Little did we know how much was bound up in the concept of the icon. As we finished our work on iconic photographs, we assumed that photojournalism was a dying art. Because we believed that it underwrote a particular version of liberal democ-

racy, we assumed that the media art and its historically specific form of polity would slowly disappear together. Instead, photojournalism is undergoing a renaissance as it is being remediating into the digital media environment, while liberal democracy is a site of contestation and experimentation across the globe. Icons have a special place in this environment, but they also are changing with it. More to the point, we now are convinced that the processes condensed in the iconic image operate far more widely. (Our blog, [www.nocaptionneeded.com](http://www.nocaptionneeded.com), discusses how everyday photojournalism exemplifies the eloquence commonly attributed to icons.) This extension from icons to iconicity also has been advanced by the work of the “Yale School” in cultural sociology. Neither project knew of the other, but there are a number of similarities that bear mention.

Although one has to translate between disciplinary vocabularies, the continuity between our work and, for example, *Iconic Power: Materiality and Meaning in Social Life* can be traced almost line for line, and particularly with the work of Jeffrey Alexander there and elsewhere [Alexander, Bartmanski and Giesen 2012; Alexander 2004; 2008a; 2008b; 2012.] These major correspondences include attention to: *a*) “symbolic power,” that is, how texts, images, and other artifacts operate as a mode of action and in particular to create a sense of collective identity; *b*) the important role of images and material objects in the formation of meaning; *c*) the productive relationships between aesthetic designs and moral sense; *d*) the value of the emotions for association, thought, and action; *e*) the role of performance in the constitution of public culture; *f*) developing an appropriate hermeneutic for understanding these phenomena; and *g*) accepting that the study of symbolic power requires moving beyond explanation to critical engagement with one’s society.

There are differences, of course, and many may already be evident. We presume, however, that there is agreement on the need for a more extensive account of “iconic power” as it is generated or relayed by many of the thousands of images appearing in the media environment each day. To that end, we now can return to the three tasks set out at the beginning: to identify *a method for connecting image and culture to understand social order*.

#### 4.1. *Method*

The six precepts we developed for studying iconic photographs benefited from the initial coherence and limited size of the genre. As we turn to the much larger archive of global photojournalism, there is need for a higher order set of protocols. We carry forward the previous assumptions regarding performance, transcriptions,

and so forth, but these precepts have to be incorporated into a larger program of critical inquiry. Although never offered as the method, our approach to photojournalism is by turns curatorial, intuitive, allegorical, and deliberative. Each of these phases can be set out briefly.

The first task of the critic is to salvage evocative images from the instantaneous amnesia that necessarily accompanies the conditions of modern image production. Any published image is useful, yet most are but ephemeral flickers in a vast lightshow of continuous signage on countless screens. This constant stream of visual information requires protective viewing habits to guard against cognitive overload and emotional exhaustion. So it is, in Howard Becker's memorable words, that "laymen learn to read photographs the way they do headlines" [Becker 1974, 4.] And to forget them just as quickly.

Even if individuals had perfect recall, the millions of images would have to be categorized, just as they already are, however briefly. This often tacit organization provides a second reason for a curatorial response, as the artistic value of many images is lost to standard schemes of categorization. Just about any typical category – sports, family, fashion, even war – limits the meaning and significance of the image, especially if it is capable of exposing cultural tendencies that traverse those categories. A curatorial selection, by contrast, would take images because of how they exemplify artistic achievement for that time: that is, how the image can embody what the art should be to fulfill its critical function in respect to the historical conditions confronting the audience [Stevens 1951, vii, 102.] These images (like the icons, incidentally) are not necessarily the "best" in terms of technical accomplishment and certainly not the most inventive or unique, but rather those that exemplify what photographs are capable of doing in order to more fully realize the public art of that time. In other words, the critic's task includes creating a gallery show, and one that suggests how photography itself, in all its expansiveness, is creating a vast, virtual museum, an archeology of the present.

That museum is too big to be seen in its entirety, even though we all have a pass for admission. Thus, the third element of curatorial criticism is to frame the photograph so that it can be seen – really seen, looked at, analyzed, and used as a basis for thinking about something else. Simply selecting the image for informed discussion accomplishes some of this, but the comparison with Flickr is still too close to suggest any enduring influence. That framing has to include as well the marking of the image as aesthetically and culturally important. Topical displacement is a start, although sometimes one wants to stay within the standard category. A key step is to focus on how the formal composition creates a space for dedicated spectatorship. This aesthetic vantage is also political, for the point is to show not how the image is

constructed, but how society is constructed. By highlighting the artistry of the news photograph (rather than art photography, where it is expected), one creates a discussion about perspectives and motives as they are already built into the event being recorded. The image can expose the natural attitude governing those events as well as other perspectives already present in the reflective space of the photograph, and thereby bring their cultural characteristics and political complications forward for audience consideration. This aesthetic attentiveness needs to be suited to the conditions of public art, and ultimately it can become the civil gaze that Azoulay defines as an essential skill for and extension of citizenship [Azoulay 2012, 112, 120-121.] It should not be doctrinaire, however: one can start with something as simple as a sense of amazement, amusement, or strangeness. Nor should it be a study in the intentions of the photographer: the great benefit of photography is that it can create encounters defined far more by the richness, disturbances, and potential vectors of an event than by anyone's prior intention. In short, the curatorial presentation should bring the audience to see how a photograph is engaging them performatively.

As one indication of the need for this curatorial work, a common response to our blog is, "Where do you find those amazing photographs?" The hope, it seems, is that we will reveal an exciting underground network of art houses and alternative communities. The answer is always a bit deflating, as we rely on a few major newspapers and magazines. There surely are exciting alternative networks, but our point is that remarkably artistry is available every day in the public media – and typically overlooked or, even when admired, quickly forgotten. We should add that the loss of the image itself may be a small thing – we emphasize that good public art is continually available – but the loss of the occasion for critical reflection is much more serious. Images provide both prompts to and resources for thinking about public matters, and perhaps especially for discussion of the public culture itself.

But if so many high quality images are available, and many of them richly evocative, how are they to be selected? We accept the label "intuitive" for several reasons that go beyond want of an algorithm. For one, we believe that critical study needs to stay close to the phenomenal encounter with the image: that is how images typically are apprehended, and how the image is positioned within our cultures of erudition as a dialectical counterpoint to abstraction. Stated otherwise, the border between natural and learned perception is more continuously blurred with photographs than it is for viewing illustrations, appreciating fine arts such as painting, or reading anything. By relying at first on intuition, we stay within those channels of perception and response that have become most dedicated to visual experience.

The second affordance follows directly on this unpremeditated encounter. By responding intuitively, the critic can be open to the aesthetic, social, and emotional dimensions of visual meaning. Obviously, we think that these are its most important qualities for constituting public culture. By responding to the sensuous or formal pleasures of the composition, an artistic function becomes possible. By responding to the social cues in both what is shown and its presentation, the communicative relationship shifts from information exchange to interaction. By responding to the emotional scenario being presented, one becomes capable of more acute intelligence, moral reflection, better judgment, and action. What is most important, however, is to linger beyond the initial intuitive prompt to absorb all of these appeals together. Intuition is not always right or even helpful, and it can vary from habit to insight, shock to mystification, natural delight to parochial distaste, idiosyncrasy to deep cultural resonance, and along other dimensions as well. The key intuitive “procedure” is to stay engaged, however inarticulately, with an image in order to discern a distinctive, evocative congruence of the photograph’s formal composition and the recorded event. Here we follow Erwin Panofsky’s definition of artistic “eloquence”: only by discerning a strong relationship between “idea” (the artifact’s meaning or function) and “form” (its artistic composition) can one distinguish between the subject matter of a work and its content. Tellingly, Panofsky defines content as the “basic attitude” of a collectivity [Panofsky 1974, 14], which obviously goes well beyond the literal persons, places, or things that make up the subject matter. (Consider how most of the people in news photographs are anonymous: the unique individuals are mere subject matter, while the content of the image depends on their representative value as it is drawn out by the specific composition.) Thus, intuitive criticism becomes a response to the image that begins within ordinary experience, pays attention to how the image evokes a distinctive kind or level of response, and feels its way into that intensified relationship in order to discern how the image is showing and saying something about collective life.

Even so, the intuitive encounter with the image can only sense these larger horizons of meaning; to chart them one has to shift to a more explicitly analytical practice, one that we label allegorical. Photography’s allegorical dimension is grounded in basic characteristics of the medium: the fundamental disjunction between analogue and code, and its automatic recording of surfaces and thus of the multiple codes that are inscribed there. In other words, the rhetorical modality of allegory provides critical resources suited to the discontinuity in representation and an overabundance of signs that are inherent conditions of photographic meaning.

Allegory was relegated to the attic of modernist aesthetics [Kelly 1997, 1-8; Hariman 2002, 271-272], but it provides the resources needed to develop and move bey-



and what may be the central idea in the twentieth century discourse on photography: the idea that the photograph is “*a message without a code*” [Barthes 1977, 17.] This is more than an observation about indexical reproduction: because photography could show what had occurred without having to first transform the event into a system of signs, it produced a new relationship between denotation and connotation.

The photographic paradox can then be seen as the co-existence of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the “art,” or the treatment, or the “writing,” or the rhetoric, of the photograph); structurally, the paradox is clearly not the collusion of a denoted message and a connoted message (which is the – probably inevitable – status of all the forms of mass communication), it is that here the connoted (or coded) message develops on the basis of a message without a code [*ibidem*, 19.]

Barthes believed this shift in representation was decisive: “Hence the photograph is not the last (improved) term of the great family of images; it corresponds to a decisive mutation of informational economies” [*ibidem*, 45.] Unfortunately, the idea became tied almost exclusively to ideology critique, rather than being a basis for exploring the distinctive affordances of photography. Worse, connotation often is thought to be a merely subjective dimension of meaning, even though Barthes was emphatic that some of the connotative meaning is deeply embedded in the image, not least because the image always is produced within the historically specific collective practices known as culture.

Stated otherwise, photographic meaning is a conjunction of incommensurable modes of representation. The photograph is both analogue and artifact, object and statement, record and presentation, etc. It is made to show something, and to do that it has to show and tell, and reproduce what is known to be there and what else is there, and present something as it is and as it is valued, etc. The relationship between denotation and connotation has become radically paratactic, and therefore always open to contingency [see Zelizer 2004; 2010.] The point here is not that the denotation-connotation distinction per se is objective or sufficient (we don’t think so, and see Chandler [2002, 140-146] for a succinct review of relevant issues), but rather that Barthes’ use of it captures how photographic meaning is internally disjunctive. Image and reality, analogue and message, *studium* and *punctum*, presence and absence, etc.: these and other distinctions that prevail in photographic interpretation each invoke the sense that the image contains a “plenitude” [Barthes 1977, 18] of meaning precisely because what it shows cannot be directly or fully articulated. Thus, any interpretation of a photograph has to bridge that gap between the silent analogue and its possible articulations. More to the point, the photograph exists to prompt that crossing. The mechanical reproduction of an event becomes a

palimpsest of social meanings; the mute image becomes a potential cacophony of voices.

This disjunction is not debilitating, but productive. In particular, the message without a code is useful because it can display whatever codes are visible without having to translate (and value) them. (Obviously, seeing objects or gestures as signs still depends on social knowledge, but the camera and the photographer don't have to have that knowledge.) Because the camera records whatever is there to be seen, the image is crisscrossed with the multiple transcriptions that we identified earlier. Because syntax and narrative are absent, there is no fixed ordering of the codes. Considerable structuring is provided by the formal composition of the image, but viewing necessarily allows for variable attention and multiple points of view. Thus, the image allows and rewards multiple perspectives across many dimensions of interpretation. The photograph contains a plurality of codes, and because none can inhere in the analogue itself, no code can be dominant for all views. This property of the image then is magnified by the variable spectatorship produced through circulation.

So it is that we read the image as an allegory: a figural composition that organizes multiple interpretations regarding collective experience [Hariman 2002, 267.] The term may evoke the medieval hermeneutic of literal, symbolic, ethical, and transcendental levels of interpretation, but one need not follow this scheme programmatically: photographers and editors are not consciously composing in this manner; the status of hierarchy itself has changed considerably, not least for loss of the transcendental anchor; and much else has changed as well. What is important is recognizing how allegory is the symbolic mode foregrounding media incommensurability and radical polysemy, and how a text or image can work at one level for a specific audience and yet have different meanings at other levels as well, and, most important for understanding photography, how literal reference need not prevent or be subverted by additional layers of meaning. Instead of defining the photograph primarily in terms of either veridical reference or the mystification of social relations, allegorical interpretation reads the image as a mode of figural enactment of phenomena that are themselves never expressed directly and comprehensively. Thus, the paradox of photographic meaning is analogous to the experience of reality as such: both are ineffable and yet open to restatement.

It should also be clear that allegory is not limited to excavating the intentions of media producers. Instead, one attempts to identify why some images are particularly rich lodes of depiction, and perhaps how that richness can include its literal representation, symbolic resonance, ethical challenge, and higher order vision of community. Moreover, these and other lines of articulation will have specific relevance and direction as they involve particular events, issues, and options: say, whether the

image content is defined in terms of war, poverty, technology, fashion, law, education, and so forth. Allegorical interpretation doesn't assume that an image can mean anything to anyone, but it does attempt to track all that it can mean, and, more important, where it is presenting a significant insight, warning, or alternative regarding the most important habits and decisions affecting collective life.

It must be admitted that allegorical art and interpretation alike can become routinized, static, and deadening, and at the expense of vital resources, innovations, and messages. These vices are not limited to allegory, however, and are unlikely amidst the comprehensive pluralism of the contemporary era. It also is notable that allegory can guard against such habits, and particularly when they have come to dominate other practices, not least the extent to which realism and a hermeneutics of suspicion have dominated photography theory. Allegory asserts that "all media are mixed media" [Mitchell 1994, 5], and that no sign or anything else is completely transferable into another without remainder. Allegorical compositions are necessarily iconographic, associational, and incomplete – in short, as if they were in ruins, which not surprisingly is the leading metaphor for the mode in the modern era. More to the point, allegory assumes a moving eye, a spectator who need not stay in one place, and whose gaze can be directed here, there, upward or downward, within the composition and without. The allegory is a collection of signs that can only gesture toward unified meaning – an integration that, if possible, has to come from the viewer.

This radical pluralism in the photographic image is one reason why our method also has to be deliberative. Neither image nor interpreter can supply all perspectives, which then have to come from discussion with other people having other standpoints. Closer to home, a critique that is intuitive and allegorical necessary needs to present itself for deliberative review in order to become legible and credible: arguments have to be made and evidence supplied, which is another process of transcription. Interpretations have to address likely counter-arguments, and if possible to show how those alternatives are already accounted for in the image itself. The interpretation cannot be final, but rather always open to additional adjustment as other perspectives provide additional insight, and at some point it will come up against its own limits and have to acknowledge that it can go no farther with current assumptions or resources.

This deliberative process will be devoted in part to negotiating the appropriate contexts for interpretation. Should one favor the context of image production or reception? Collective memory or political agency? Trauma or normalization? Context itself is a troubled concept today: on the one hand, it rightly remains important to determine how meaning is situated; on the other hand, comprehensive practices of

decontextualization have become part of the fabric of modern life. By insisting on the deliberative character of interpretation – rather than, say, either an auteur model or ideological project – we hope to foreground the need to involve the media audience in an explicit practice of establishing the meaning of an image.

Deliberation also carries with it the possibility of challenging three major obstacles to becoming a more thoughtful visual culture. First, it challenges the conventional wisdom that images are merely literal recordings, and the corollary belief that criticism should focus only on the veridical status of the image (whether it shows enough of the scene and whether it has been altered.) One should raise and discuss such questions, of course, but a deliberative engagement with an allegorical exposition of the full richness of the image would go well beyond its literal reference. The focus on literal meaning alone, by contrast, largely cedes participation and judgment to institutional actors and technical experts, rather than to citizens and other spectators.

Second, by opening up the meaning of the image to argument involving diverse points of view, context itself is brought to the fore, which in turn challenges the standard attribution of context that accompanies the news image. Image and caption alike are no longer fixed by the institutional gatekeeper, but open to contestation. Is the photograph of a “settler” or an occupier? Are demonstrators attacking the police or are the police attacking the demonstrators? Is there a peace process or only a policy of endless deferral? Deliberative engagement with and through the image can challenge the standard typifications, geographies, and other elements of the standard world that is being reproduced periodically in the news media.

Third, by grounding public discussion of issues in topically relevant images, the discussion can be focused on concrete, eventful phenomena instead of abstractions. The fragmentary quality of an image remains a liability, but it carries with it the specific materiality of the historical situation. Instead of the “developing world,” stylish jeans; instead of the “real America,” obesity; instead of “civil war,” a refugee camp; instead of “globalization,” another airport. These facts on the ground are not sufficient for understanding – they need to be developed dialectically with theoretical claims, and to be extended horizontally through public discussion – but they can produce different and at times better judgments than would occur if working solely with institutional texts.

The challenge, then, is for spectators to use the images they see to simultaneously encounter the material conditions of the event depicted and connect what can be learned there with the issues, ideas, and fellow citizens that define the public culture. Neither immersion nor abstraction are to be desired, although both remain easy alternatives; instead of too little or too much distance from the event, the goal

should be to find the “sweet spot” where image and culture connect in a manner that allows ethical judgment and political innovation [Hariman 2011.] Not every image may offer enough in this regard, but photojournalism is a public art because many of its images do create this symbolic space, which is at once aesthetic, moral, and political. The problem in seeing this way often is not the image, but rather the conception of the image that informs prevailing habits of spectatorship.

#### 4.2. *Image and Culture*

Thus, we turn to the question of how to conceptualize the relationship between image and a larger social imaginary. To that end, we offer a richer conception of social surfaces than is likely with a depth hermeneutic, and a richer conception of reportage than is recognized in professional journalism.

To speak of a surface logically implies depth: the surface covers something else, something that is not seen and that may provide support or need protection. Thus, the surface seems to be inherently epiphenomenal, and in the case of human behavior, expressive rather than causal. Those social theorists who give greater attention to surface phenomena are caught in a dilemma: to show that the surface has inherent meaning or causal significance, they demonstrate that it has depth: “for a material substance to become iconic, its aesthetic surface must, at one and the same time, stand for an invisible discursive *depth*” [Bartmanski and Alexander 2012, 2.] (For an early discussion of how surface and interior can be used dialectically, see Kenneth Burke on the paradox of substance in Burke [1945, 21 ff.]) For the same reason, they will try to push beyond the metaphor. Alexander notes that “Even as surface and depth must be analytically separated, they need also to be empirically intertwined” [Alexander 2008a, 785-786.] Furthermore, “Iconic power stems from a mutually constitutive (horizontal), not a hierarchical (vertical) relationship between aesthetic surface and discursive depth” [Barmanski and Alexander 2012, 4.] Thus, as the analysis attempts to account for actual experience or gets “deeper” into the material, surface and depth each become more a part of the other. That is not a bad hermeneutic; indeed, it is almost impossible to avoid and it proves to be immensely useful, especially when opposed to a more conventional sense of structural determination.

Even so, the surface-depth binary often becomes aligned with the distinction between aesthetic and moral values – “The aesthetic can be thought of as surface form, the moral conceived as depth meaning” [Alexander 2012, 26] – which is a much less flexible arrangement. Consider how the aesthetic, which has to be evident on the surface, also extends from there into forms of abstraction (think of the sublime,

cubism, and many other examples.) Likewise, morality also can be evident on the surface of things and certainly should not be relegated to a wholly invisible realm of norms or ideals.

Although the emphasis on the surface is indeed an important corrective to the structural tradition, and a significant development of Durkheimian analysis, it could be extended further. At least two lines of development present themselves. First, more can be done to account for the *texture* of things. By texture we mean the manner in which social context is evident on the surface, and how that modulation is one dimension of the overdetermined, performative, and dynamic quality of social experience. Just as surfaces are rough or smooth, so are surfaces rich or poor, relaxed or tense, bureaucratic or sentimental, and so forth, and each of these designs reflect social processes. In the same way, surfaces in any scene are more or less coordinated or uncoordinated, resonant or dissonant, homologous or dissimilar. Thus, surfaces display social relations and emotional valences, and one can consider how they are “talking” to one another, this wall to that chair to the person sitting in it to the person standing before him, hat in hand. Photography provides a continuing case study in the texturing of social reality: although the material surface of the photograph itself is uniformly smooth, texturing extends from its print tonality (glossy or matte, e.g.) to all the elements of visual composition to all the surfaces presented together in the single frame. Indeed, the contrast between smooth surface and continuous texture in the image itself highlights the social content, and not as a surface and depth exchange, but as a series of surfaces, with all their transcriptions traced across them and awaiting activation by the viewer.

The second sense of surface articulation that could be developed further is the lateral extension of meaning. Web, network, force field, tapestry, whatever the metaphor, the individual text or image is always radiant, rhizomatic, intertextual, interactive, contextualized, and otherwise extensive. Perhaps the best sense of how this sense of lateral relay can become a hermeneutic of everyday life is Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects*, which captures the affective surges, connections, and breakdowns that flare, arc, or fail as surfaces are seen, felt, encountered while moving through a material environment [Stewart 2007.] Of course, these reactions are shaped by the social habitus, and one can speak of a structure of feeling, but these, too, are constituted through communication media rather than direct experience. And the media, of course, also work laterally: one doesn’t experience the radio or television or newspapers above or below anything, but rather as inputs that come and go as one moves through various locales and practices.

Finally, and almost as an addendum, a richer sense of the surface involves, ironically, paying more attention to banality while also qualifying the Durkheimian

sense of the sacred even further. Banality is not a minimal level of meaning above which anything important happens; instead, it is one aesthetic among others, and one only contingently aligned with thoughtlessness or evil, and thus one capable of a range of uses from domination to resistance [Hariman and Lucaites 2011; 2012a; 2012b.] Stated otherwise, banality can stand for how appreciating fully the surface of things requires aesthetic theory that avoids the assumptions of both the sublime and the beautiful, even as it also depends on these ideas some of the time. The same holds on the other side of the dialectic, as the sacred (and the dialectic of sacred and profane) is too limiting to stand for the full spectrum of meanings, attitudes, or resonance needed to account for how symbols are used for collective association. One always can use it, of course, but what is occluded is precisely the intermediate range of continuous negotiation and lateral playing off of one another that articulates so much public discourse, which is one of the constitutive discourses of modernity. Again, this is a matter of emphasis. It is important to note that the “circling back and forth between the concrete and the theoretical, the mundane and the aesthetic, the fragment and the icon sits at the core of culture” [Bartmanski and Alexander 2012, 3.] But another kind of back and forth movement can be occluded by the up and down structuring of interpretive analysis, and the lesser status of “concrete,” “mundane,” and “fragment” can prevent full explication of how the surface really is distinctive dimension of social experience.

Another way to put the point is that materiality and abstraction are interwoven in any experience, and especially or distinctively so in those experiences that stand out as such – that are, in John Dewey’s terms, “an experience” [Dewey 1934, 35.] Although not drawing on Dewey, the Yale school is extending the idea that social theory should be able to respect and explain experience, and that interpretive attention to material culture is essential to doing so: in particular, to unlocking how experience always is a combination of embodiment and mediation in a social space, which therefore is necessarily physical, aesthetic, moral, emotional, rational, and spiritual together. Thus, “icon” and “iconic experience” become salient examples of how an experience happens, how that is cultural, and how it might provide a basis for cultural critique.

This rich sense of the image as a textured social object is hardly the natural attitude accompanying the news. So it is that a stronger connection between image and social imaginary also requires an enhanced conception of reportage. This perspective was prefigured in the earlier discussion of method, so let us return to the distinction between subject matter and content. Although the distinction makes sense immediately in painting – Monet’s paintings are not prized because collectors want to look at haystacks – it might seem misplaced in the context of journalism. Isn’t the subject

matter the point? Yes, and no. To sort this out, we can distinguish between two forms of reportage: News<sub>1</sub> and News<sub>2</sub>.

News<sub>1</sub> refers to ordinary reportage. This includes everything that works within the natural attitude of journalism: its typical subject matter, professional norms, institutional roles, and so forth [Tuchman 1978, 47-58.] In this capacity the news photograph is there to report objectively on what happened where, when [Schudson 1978]; the caption is to supply the minimal, non-biased information about the persons, place, things, and time in order to supply basic legibility and historical specification; the distribution agency is supposed to work from reliable sources that would not falsify images or other information; the media outlet is supposed to present the material in an appropriate, timely, and topical manner; the reader is supposed to use the image in conjunction with verbal reportage to form judgments about pertinent individuals, agencies, or actions. Although considerable skill is required to produce such visual and verbal reports, most of the time the skill is supposed to be hidden, not presented to be admired for its own sake. There are exceptions, of course, as when awards are given, and they help to give away the game: something else is going on as well. Something that can't be reduced to the dispassionate presentation of information.

News<sub>2</sub> refers to that something else, which is a different kind of cultural signification for a different kind of public thought. Although always tied to the literal reference and topical categorization of News<sub>1</sub>, News<sub>2</sub> extends the patterns of signification on the surface of the image across all of the boundaries defining that symbolic space: boundaries of time, topicality, nationality, and much more. Most important, the image is seen as both realistic and imaginative: a record of what was there, then, and a framing of that event for an intensified experience of what it might mean (see the discussion of the "human interest" story in Muhlmann [2010, 170-72.]) Likewise, the image is not seen merely as a literal fragment of a larger scene, with the epistemological questions that accompany that definition (does it show enough to be accurately representative? Does it omit information that would lead to a different judgment?) Instead, one also asks how the image is part of a larger vision, which involves both a way of seeing society and a conception of the good society. Along with what did happen, the image asks what might happen and what should happen and what else already has happened that would aid or obstruct these possibilities. This articulation will follow from the social cues and aesthetic designs in the image – as when a victim looks straight into the camera, or the composition presents a horizon that can have allegorical significance – and it is possible only by responding to how the image engages one's imagination.

Imaginative connections can be mistaken, idiosyncratic, tenuous, trivial, and have other problems as well. (Coleridge, Panofsky, Stevens, and others have parsed



imagination and fancy for that reason.) Deliberative testing still is needed, but it no longer is limited to questions of accuracy. Instead, questions of relevance (does the projection tell us what we need to know?), resonance (does it connect with other sources of insight and value?), engagement (does it pull us out of our ordinary indifference?), confrontation (does it challenge conventional wisdom or denial?), and other measures of participation come to the fore. The key is to see such questions as integral to the meaning of the image and not as supplemental or extrinsic considerations. The image is already part of a social imaginary, and it already has received significant social investment. As with the recognition of twice-performed behavior, the image is so fragmentary that it could not be recognized as an image were it not already a figural enactment of a larger conception of the world.

Thus, the photograph is both a recording of specific facts and the act of imagining a world. The first dimension of meaning is the one that is promoted by the episteme and media institutions of modernity, and much has been gained from that. There are costs, however: First, the world that is reproduced most of the time is a standard world, a world determined by the forces and agents recognized as dominant. Second, when the image does provide additional resources for living well in that world or changing it for the better, those resources often are not recognized, or they are only felt or are honored only in exceptional cases. So it is that we have icons: those moments when eloquence is acknowledged, albeit as an exception from the ordinary image world. What is needed is a more continuous engagement with images that push us to think more widely and creatively about what the world might be. Our point, of course, is that those images are readily available every day, waiting only for the spectator to see them as images rather than information.

The importance of recognizing this richer conception of the image was captured by William Carlos Williams: “It is difficult/to get the news from poems/yet men die miserably every day/for lack/of what is found there” [Williams 1994, 19.] One might say that there is precious little poetry in a newspaper, but we suggest that there is quite a bit there, present but unseen. The poetry in this case is the artistry available in photojournalism. Because it is a public art, however, it is caught between appearing merely quotidian, as it often is, and having the special powers of insight and address that are attributed to art. (That special status comes from modernity’s categorical separation of art and news, aesthetics and morality, and is maintained in part by the differences in temporality between them. So it is that the supposed “timelessness” of the iconic image is one marker of the motivation to cross over that divide.) By learning to read this richer sense of the news, one might do as Williams urges, that is, acquire ways of knowing, caring, imagining, and associating with others that could be used to change a civilization’s habits of human sacrifice.

### 4.3. *Social Order and Cultural Critique*

The third task is to understand how images mediate social order, and in particular how they can both reproduce and expose structures of domination, exploitation, and willful blindness. Much has been said and will continue to be said about how images function ideologically, so we need not add anything there. Nor do we identify practices of sub-cultural resistance, as that, too, is well documented. Instead, we focus on how some images from mainstream media provide resources for immanent cultural critique. More specifically, we find that these images show what would otherwise be said prophetically: that is, as a call to moral accountability on behalf of a vision of ethical community.

Critique can always be seen as an “extrinsic” response to the image, and that attitude would seem confirmed by the ordinary practices of advertisers, parents, tourists, and so forth. Photojournalism, however, is more than just a special case, as it channels fundamental features of photography as medium and habitus. Three of these can be noted here: the fact that imagination is required to interpret the photograph at all; the temporal condition of being locked into a single moment; and context of public judgment, which assumes critical reasoning on behalf of common concerns.

If one can grant that the news carries both information and cues for imaginative extension of that information, then the question arises of how it represents not only actual but also possible worlds. When told that there has been an earthquake, for example, the news reverberates across both registers: News<sub>1</sub> tells us, e.g., where it happened, how extensive the damage was, and how the state and other actors are responding. News<sub>2</sub> considers, e.g., whether the disaster is relatively local or indicative of larger dangers, whether it should be defined as a natural occurrence or a sign of poor planning, whether the response reflects human resilience or unresolved tensions in the society, whether the future will be like the past and if that should be seen as sustainability or continued folly. Each of these latter concerns will draw extensively on News<sub>1</sub>, which will already be working in that direction some of the time, but they also require projections of alternate futures. The key point here is that these projections need not be extrinsic, but rather are already present on the surface of things in the picture, already active as transcriptions radiating out from the image. More to the point, the image, unlike the written text, can provide that second dimension instantly, from the very beginning as it were, because those possibilities are in fact already present in the situation itself. Furthermore, by showing rather than saying, the imagination itself can be more directly activated.

These possibilities can only be possibilities because the image can be taken only in the present. You can't take a photograph of the past or of the future, which is a

stark limitation compared to the ease with which verbal composition moves across time. Yet this constraint supplies another of photography's deep correspondences with modernity, as each depends on the continual unfolding of the now. Photography is locked into linear time, as it can only happen there, and the instant it is taken the photograph becomes dated, a record of what has been. Hence the great value placed on its documentary capability: what else could it do so well? But it is doing something else: for the present is recorded because of how it has future significance: because the record will be needed for moral or political accountability, or to measure change, or as a guide to how the future is already unfolding in the present. Again, modernity is grounded in the idea that the future is always unfolding in the present – and one that, if the other elements of modernization are present, will be progressive. Obviously, this is a mythic structure, but one that has become operationalized in the camera.

This imaginative futurity becomes an object of reflection when the context of reception is the public sphere. Are present tendencies beneficial, or not? Will the future be progressive or catastrophic? How does the present contain several possible futures, with the outcome depending on which choices are made now? Photojournalism can't help addressing these issues, in part because of how it has assumed what we will call a prophetic function in public culture. The model for prophetic criticism comes from Michael Walzer. Most notably, prophetic speech is particularistic, that is, set out in terms of a society's own mores, experiences, and values rather than a universalistic rule; public, that is, drawing on common materials and addressed to a wide audience deliberating outside of institutional settings, rather than an esoteric discourse for institutional decision makers; poetic, that is, giving eloquent expression to discourses and values already available in the society; and dedicated to solidarity and fairness [Walzer 1987, 67-94.]

Note how each of these conditions is part of the medium and habitus of news photography: these images are inherently particularistic and depend on easy legibility; they are addressed to a large audience for public judgment; they are artistically enhanced depictions of a common life; and even the last criterion of solidarity is met by photography's "lateral" extension of citizenship to create bonds among citizens instead of merely between citizens and the state [Azoulay 2008, 24-25, 85, 131.] Of course, this critical potential is just that: a potential activation of the image among many other possible uses. That is where the critic steps in: the critical task is to show how images are exposing possible futures and calling the audience to engage emotionally and deliberatively with each other, in order to choose – while they still can – the better vision of a common life.

As one example of how photojournalism can sound a prophetic warning, consider this photograph.



FIG. 1. Firefighters take part in a backburning operation near Bilpin, the Blue Mountains in New South Wales.

*Source:* Brad Hunter/Newspix/Rex Features.

Of course the fire makes the picture, but it's the silhouettes that have the most to say. Which is interesting, as they are enigmatic. Silhouettes often are, which may be why they can stand for a dimension of photographic representation that we often overlook. Alongside the realism, there is a formalism that is especially important for visual meaning; and accompanying the features of specific people and places, there is embodiment of the impersonal poses and attitudes that structure social behavior.

This is not to choose one dimension of the image over another, but to respond as prompted by the photographer's art. And by working into the image along that path, interpretation can lead to much more than documenting circumstances; it leads, in other words, from News<sub>1</sub> to News<sub>2</sub>. The circumstances of the literal reportage may support reflection or become irrelevant for the time being, but they no longer are the primary content of the image

Thus, if the poses still have the traces of Australian clothing and deportment, that may be fact or conjecture, but there is no need to make too much of it. Because little sense of locality remains, the photograph can be imaginatively extended to fires in LA or Arizona or Greece or many other places. But the photo wouldn't be saying

much if it suggested only that fires and firefighting techniques are found in more than one place. Additional significance is again cued by the silhouettes: by explicitly obscuring the textures that one usually sees “first” in a photograph – that is, the way that social context is coded into clothing and facial expressions – the image highlights another texture: the individual stances and proxemic relationships that define interpersonal interaction. Thus, we see the stark contrast between the holocaust in the background and the calm, silent, reflective poses of the people in the foreground. A basic question emerges: why are they standing like that, in that environment? Other than firefighting, what else are they *doing*? What is this photo showing us?

Keeping their distance from one another, staring in different directions, hands in pockets, each seems to be lost in thought and all seem to be standing as if waiting for a bus or train, strangers on a street or platform, nothing out of the ordinary, just another day in the life. They stand as many stand while enduring the obligatory routines of traveling through impersonal public spaces, safe but not familiar with the strangers around them, biding time until they can get to where they are going, each on a private journey made possible by but still separate from what they have in common.

Even when what they have in common is territory on fire on a planet that is getting warmer every year. Which brings us to a sense of what really is being shown. The answer takes us both closer to those in the picture and farthest from the actual circumstances of the moment. More detailed knowledge of the scene probably would verify that they are a close-knit, well-trained work crew, that the fire (which they set) is under control, and that no one is at risk because of their skill, knowledge of the terrain, available escape routes, and similar precautions. Those would be statements of fact. The photograph’s appeal to the imagination moves away from all of that, to get beyond the subject matter of the image in order to reveal its content – that is, to show what really matters.

What matters is that people can get used to anything, that Western culture will follow its commitment to controlling nature to the gates of hell, and that denial of global warming comes as easily as waiting at the bus stop because it comports so well with maintaining the routines that are among the few anchors we have in an era of rapid change. So, we can wait for a cosmic bus to come and take us away to some better place, or we can turn and look around and look at each other.

What matters in the world today is that people stop pretending that there isn’t a fire raging in the background. The photo shows us just how close we can get while still in denial. “Just a back burn; we’ve got this one under control; move along now, these aren’t the causes you want.” Thus, an image reports on a temporary event – for that fire eventually burned out – and on a larger habit of denial that, by extending into the future, makes the recurrence of similar disasters all the more likely.

Prophecy is not prediction; indeed these are quite different mentalities reflecting different epistemes, and the difference is not merely an explicit involvement with moral norms. Note, moreover, that photography is not a predictive art. A prediction is a claim about the future, and it can be right or wrong. Prophecy, by contrast, is about how the future is already present; thus, there is a sense in which the prophet can't be wrong, as the prophetic claim is about what is already happening. The photograph is always right in a similar way: any possible future evident there is already there, however low the probability of its later occurrence. So it is that the prophetic function may be a restatement or elaboration of any iconic image. Iconicity is about how something that is distinctively particular, concrete, material, and otherwise in and indubitably part of a present moment, can nonetheless speak to us about a world to come. Social theory should aspire to no less.

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## Icons, Iconicity, and Cultural Critique

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Abstract: Extending earlier work on iconic photographs, this essay advances an interpretive model that moves beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion to understand how image and culture interact to mediate social and political order. According to this newer model, *the method* of approach is curatorial, intuitive, allegorical, and deliberative; *the connection* between image and culture becomes accessible via a richer conception of both social surfaces and visual reportage; and *understanding* includes responding to a prophetic function that articulates possible futures for moral accountability.

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*Keywords: Iconic Photographs, Allegory, Social Imaginary, Prophetic Function of Criticism.*

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