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# Iconic Photographs in the Newsroom: An Ethnography of Visual News-making in Italy and France

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# Iconic Photographs in the Newsroom

## An Ethnography of Visual News-making in Italy and France

by Andrea Pogliano

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### 1. Introduction

This paper presents the results of an empirical research on the process of visual news-making, which was carried out in Italy and France over the last decade through an ethnography within major newsrooms and photojournalistic agencies as well as through qualitative interviews with photographers and photo-editors of newspapers and newsmagazines. This article focuses specifically on the ethnographic research conducted within the newsrooms of four national newspapers: *Corriere della Sera* and *il Manifesto* in Italy, *Le Figaro* and *Libération* in France. Such a choice was strategically oriented to highlight the process of visual news-making in each country both within an authoritative mainstream daily newspaper with the largest circulation but only relatively innovative visual strategies, as well as an alternative daily newspaper of overt left-wing inspiration which is more experimental in visual terms.

In this work I present and discuss empirical data from the three-year period between 2003 and 2005. I specifically focus on the following case studies: the invasion of Iraq in 2003; the terrorist attack in London on July the 7<sup>th</sup>, 2005; and other significant events such as the massacre in Beslan and the Pacific Ocean Tsunami (both in 2004.)

This period of time is widely recognized as a seminal transitional phase in the field of journalism, which was particularly affected by the emergence of new relationships between professional journalism and so-called citizen journalism. Both in the

sociology of media and journalism and in wider visual culture studies, the existing literature on news images has dealt with the complex relationships between amateur images, digital journalism, cultural (and artistic) production, and public opinion – focusing in particular on the case studies of the first phase of the Iraqi War [Griffin 2004; Zelizer 2004; Tomanic Trivundza 2004; Mirzoeff 2005; King and Lester 2005; Schwalbe 2006; Machin 2007; Silcock *et al.* 2008; Fahmy and Daekyung 2008; Matheson and Allan 2009; Parry 2011; Parry 2012], the Abu Ghraib prison tortures [Taylor 2005; Delage 2007; Andén-Papadopoulos 2008; Matheson and Allan 2009; Mitchell 2011; Solaroli 2011; Binder 2012; Phelan 2012], the Asian Tsunami [Chouliaraki 2008; Liu *et al.* 2009], and the London terrorist attack [Allan 2006; Allan 2007; Delage 2007; Rose 2009; Sjøvaag 2011; Chouliaraki 2013.] According to this literature, the transformations that these events have produced may be interpreted by studying news images, their use and diffusion. In this paper, I propose to go back to these events and to concentrate on these cases, in order to offer original empirical material, an alternative analysis and a new theoretical framework that might constructively interface with the existing literature.

From an empirical viewpoint, I present ethnographic material that offers an “internal” vision of the mechanisms of news selection and presentation of the digital photographs in the press. In fact, the case-studies herein presented will be analyzed focusing on the visual choices made and the aesthetical and political dilemmas faced in the newsrooms. On this basis, this empirical material might offer a contribution towards the interpretation of the above-mentioned “turning point” in journalism, by stressing the importance of ethnographic studies.

From a theoretical viewpoint, I intend to discuss these ethnographic data by offering an analysis that relates the sociology of journalism with the sociological literature on the iconic power. As this paper will show, these two areas of sociological inquiry could and should be reciprocally connected – as a real and proper exchange. On the one hand, by focusing on icons, the sociology of news production can extend its horizons towards those symbolic objects that can last in time and act as crucial elements for the construction of news-frames and for the production and reproduction of collective memory. Moreover, the focus on icons could represent a way to (at least partly) reduce the “distance” that was pointed out twenty-five years ago by Schudson [1989], at the end of the first wave of ethnographic studies on news-making: the distance between the “culturological” approaches and the “organizational” approaches. According to Schudson [*ivi*, 275]:

Molotch and Lester, Tuchman and others who emphasize the “production of culture” do not focus on the “cultural givens” within which everyday interaction happens in the first place. These cultural givens, while they may be uncovered by de-

tailed historical analysis, cannot be linked to features of social organization at the moment of study [...] I think that most understandings of the generation of news merge a “cultural” view (or submerge it) with the social organization view.

The divide between the two approaches doesn't seem to have been totally healed today, apart from a few significant exceptions [see Cottle 2007.] Despite the fact that the emphasis has shifted from routine to practice, the organizational approach seems to prevail also during the last wave of ethnographic studies on news-making [Paterson and Domingo 2008; Ryfe 2009; Domingo and Paterson 2011; Usher 2013.] Although these new ethnographies of news-production are characterized by outstanding elements of novelty – among others, the tendency to look into the correlation between structure and action by means of finding back the value of journalists' agency and the use of Action-Network-Theory as a mean for recognizing a crucial sociological role to technologies in editorial work – it could be argued that these works did not overall succeed in finding a common approach that could be able to leave behind the theoretical divide between cultural and organisational approaches. The cultural aspects in journalism studies remain mainly “confined” to the studies on information professionals, their ethical values and social dispositions, and to the studies on news content as story, narrative, myth and ritual [i.e.: Carey 1988; Lule 1995; Berkowitz and Nossek 2001; Rothenbuhler and Coman 2005; Smith 2005], which look only slightly connected to productive processes.

However, cultural sociology on iconic power can benefit from the understanding of the news-making practices concerning photographs that are treated in the newsrooms as potential icons. In fact, even the most recent studies on iconic power have not yet given attention to visual news-making and to the construction – within journalistic practices – of a trustworthy relationship between photographic images and their publics. The public trust in potentially iconic photographs is a key element in the process of iconicity, which cannot be fully understood without deeply analyzing the process of media framing. The production and reproduction of cultural frames offers the crucial context that allow audiences to think to a news image in term of an icon. This process – which sees news photographs as framing devices as well as cultural objects which become powerful icons thanks to the framing process –has to do also with a set of “strategic rituals” such as objectivity [Tuchman 1972], emotionality [Wahl-Jorgensen 2013] and transparency [Pantti and Andén-Papadopoulos 2011.] These elements can become precious conceptual tools for sociologists that deal with iconic photographs, especially if they are directly relate to the journalistic definition of icon and to the journalistic attempt to influence the iconic power of news photographs.

On the basis of the collected ethnographic data, which will be analyzed in details in the following pages, it is possible to identify three main practices that highlight and problematize the relationships between visual news-making and iconic production: *the search for a necessary icon*, *the management of potential icons* and *the negotiation around iconic contamination*. The first practice is illustrated through the empirical materials related to journalistic representations of the London bombings. The second practice is introduced by analysing newsroom activities related to the first phase of the Iraqi War. The third and last practice is proposed by reference to newsroom dilemmas and debates which arose in the coverage of events such as the Asian Tsunami and the Beslan massacre. All these case studies will be individually described and briefly analyzed in paragraph 3 (“Necessary icons, potential icons and iconic contamination in news-making”), while they will be collectively discussed in paragraph 4 (“Discussion”).

Before presenting and discussing the empirical research, the next paragraph offers an introductory but potentially fertile theoretical dialogue between the sociology of news production – in particular, the sociology of visual news-making, which deals with professional newsroom practices of selection and presentation of photos in newspapers and newsmagazines – and the literature on iconic photography that has recently developed within or parallel to the so-called “iconic turn” in cultural sociology.

## **2. Connecting the Sociology of News Production with the Iconic Turn in Cultural Sociology**

In the interdisciplinary field of visual culture studies, although they came from different theoretical traditions, underwent different routes and reached different theoretical results, many authors from Panofsky [1962] to Mitchell [1986; 1994] to Boehm [1994; 2001] to Belting [2005], paid particular attention to the “meaning-generating process” of the images, and to the complex relationships between the images, the practices of looking [Sturken and Cartwright 2009], and wider dynamics of power. Among these authors, Mitchell was the one who most of all linked icons together with ideology, therefore conceiving a “pictorial turn” “in the expanded field of social and political issues” [Boehm and Mitchell 2009, 119.] Starting from a common rejection of the “firstness” of language, as a consequence of the “linguistic turn” [Rorty 1967], these authors have laid the grounds for a new reading of the role of images in the production of social knowledge,

which have, in many ways, interweaved with the philosophical tradition of hermeneutics.

The “Yale school” of cultural sociology has recently recovered in particular the works of Boehm and Belting, in order to set up a sociology of iconic power at the heart of the “strong program” in cultural sociology.<sup>1</sup> From a sociological viewpoint, this project has the great quality of re-framing the literature about icons by placing them within a cultural approach that goes beyond their connection to ideology.

However, so far, even within the “cultural turn” of the strong program in cultural sociology very little attention has been paid to the processes of visual news production (selection, editing and presentation,) particularly in the field of photojournalism.

In one of the most interesting studies on the relationship between photojournalism and cultural icons, Hariman and Lucaites [2007] analyzed nine photographs and defined their iconic significance within US public culture according to the following criteria: *a*) social-political placement (in terms of collective memory and image/event association,) *b*) emotive impact, defined as identification and appropriation, *c*) initial use and re-cycling of the image (i.e. the history of its circulation.) In some cases, in reconstructing the social history of the iconic images, the analysis took into consideration also the photographers’ own personal memories, but only rarely did it include the discursive accounts of the journalists involved in the process of selection, editing and presentation of the images within the newsrooms, and never did it investigate the relevance and meaning of such social and professional practices. Furthermore, even when some of these elements were addressed, they did not influence or contribute in any way to the theoretical models developed to understand how and why certain photographs became powerful cultural icons.

In another recent and relevant cultural-sociological contribution to the analysis of the “iconic power” [Alexander, Bartmanski and Giesen 2012], the iconic process is explored within a historical-cultural research on the emergence of shared meanings that icons condense. In particular, iconicity is claimed to be about the interaction of “surface” and “depth,” where the specific aesthetic composition of an icon points to (and expresses) “an invisible discursive *depth*” – thus revealing a profound and complex cultural structure. It seems that, instead of focusing on the practices of their production, many scholars are rather interested in the circulation and the relative cultural autonomy of the icons. Such an autonomy would be granted by the icons’ “meaning portability,” which assure citational quality [Bartmanski 2011.] Therefore, according to the existing literature, the meaning and power of the icon lies in its

<sup>1</sup> See for reference Bartmanski and Alexander [2012] and Bartmanski 2012b.

performative role, in its existence as co-agent in a variety of social performances. Attention shifts to “what the icon does,” whilst the question of “what makes an image into an icon?” is frequently reformulated as “which attributes must an image have in order to become iconic?”

Within a variety of interdisciplinary subfields, this reformulated question is often answered via a semiotic or rhetorical analysis of the images and their circulation. Alternatively, from a cultural-sociological perspective, the question may retain its original form and a response be given instead by looking at the “critical mediation [of icons] by independent institutional and interpretative power” [Bartmanski and Alexander 2012, 6.] But most of these studies have not yet focused on actual newspaper/newsmagazine photographs, concentrating instead on other objects of material culture. For example, in Alexander [2012], the intermediary role of journalists is examined by focusing on the analogous position of art critics. Alexander sees the critics as vital intermediaries between the work of art and the public, capable of actively influencing the iconic process. In the case of news photos, however, the process of intermediation and construction of an engaged audience is decidedly more complex and cannot be ascribed to the role of one sole professional figure.

Moreover, while in the study of iconic photojournalistic images it is certainly fruitful to look at “books, Web sites, museum shows, and related media regarding visual history and the history of photojournalism” [Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 309], it is equally logical to assume that the specific choices of photographic images made “on the spur of the moment” during a newsroom’s daily work are neither secondary to, nor less influential than, the wider social process of conferring iconic status on photographs. They may, on the contrary, constitute an essential precondition to the secondary selection stages made for books and other works regarding visual history and the history of photojournalism. Furthermore, as will be shown, this crucial role does not only merely refer to the choice or rejection of the images, nor even to the selection of a specific image for the front page, or for the internal pages. The news-making process also involves the decision to either limit or highlight the iconic potential of the pictures through strategies of selection and presentation. This may be achieved, for example, by relating the story of the images in the style of a critic who (by writing in a certain way about a material object) “creates interpretations of an icon for an audience but also creates an audience for the icon” [Alexander, 2012, 32.]

In order to reciprocally connect the existing bodies of literature and research on journalism and on the icons, it might be useful to recall the works of Bennett and Lawrence [1995] on “news icons,” and of Kitzinger [2000] on “media templates.” While not strictly dealing with photographs, these two articles introduce and discuss two concepts operating in the field of news-making, even comparing them with other

successful concepts, such as news frame. The underlying question is crucial and deals with the relationship between familiarity – constructed mostly through analogies with the past – and novelty, i.e. the journalistic need to represent the world on a daily basis in a continuous flow of new(s) events.

Defined by the author as “rhetorical shortcuts [...] intended to forge a narrative around particular social problems, leading public discussion towards past, present and future” [Kitzinger 2000, 61], media templates can be defined by their level of closure, by which “they reify a kind of historical determinism which can filter out dissenting accounts, camouflage conflicting facts and promote one type of narrative” [ivi, 76.] News icons, on the contrary, take their power from the ability to create an opening by being introduced into other types of stories and thus “break[ing] down narrative boundaries and open[ing] the news to [...] linkages between otherwise isolated events” [Bennett and Lawrence 1995, 20.] Reference to isolated images or events allows therefore for the interpretation of new images or events as required. Depending on whether the reference (be it explicit as in a quote, or implicit) leads to an interpretive closure or an opening towards interpretation on different levels which may not be predicted, we may refer to templates or to news icons. In discussing photos of the war in Iraq in 2003, Zelizer [2004] examines the relationship between images from the past and current images in typically photojournalistic terms, identifying three strategies for presentation of war images on the press. Her study refers more to media templates than news icons, as it emphasizes the aspect of closed (rather than open) interpretation. Zelizer [ivi, 125] argues that:

The past [...] intrudes into the present of news photographs by acting as a carrier for symbolism and connotative force. Bringing systematic messages about what matters, this involves a slew of recycled associations that link new wars with familiar experiences of patriotism, civic pride, heroic sacrifice, and the durability of the nation-state.

Studying the iconic imagery of the battlefield from the First World War to the War on Terror, Chouliaraki [2013] offers a partly similar (i.e.: the increasingly explicit visualisation of war; the tendency to emphasise the emotional) and partly different account of news images from contemporary humanitarian wars – by stressing elements of change in visual representations rather than continuity and “recycled associations.” Chouliaraki [ivi, 319] claims that:

[T]he force of habituation that marks the war imaginary as a performative mechanism of moral dispositions can never be a purely mindless repetition of moral norms. It requires instead a reflexive re-engagement with the particular contexts of its emergence and, hence, entails an always renewed performance that may subvert these norms in the act of reproducing them [Chouliaraki 2012.] It is this iterative process,



whereby the imaginary is transformed through the very representational practices that reproduce it, which bears the potential for a historical account of change in war photojournalism.

Zelizer's analysis does not explicitly refer to iconic power. However, it clearly emerges the idea that the iconic power of war news-photos is contained by explicit flanking strategies, because reference is being made to a distant past, which is already myth. The process does not lead to further empowerment of the current news image but to its use within a discourse that goes far beyond the image itself. The image is disconnected from the action and returned to "History" or "Myth." Thus, the emotion produced via the act of flanking is one which detaches and drifts away from the specific news image in question. What is reproduced is an ideological theme. In short, the flanking of an extremely current newsworthy image with one from the past can produce a distancing effect and an abatement of the iconic power of the current image.

The possibility hidden in the concept of media templates – which Kitzinger [2000] does not develop, thus reaching conclusions that are similar to Zelizer's – is instead establishing a "performance" by the arbitrary flanking of recent sequential events as if they were part of an on-going phenomenon, as in the case of "media-led moral panics" [Maneri 2013.] In this case, media templates can also be read as a crucial step in the construction of a social performance, playing an iconic role in a way similar to that of "news icons." In the light of such a theory, it may be hypothesized that the updating and de-updating of news images is a process that depends on the ability of the emotional connection produced by the image to project us into the future or the past. As we will see, journalists construct and manage the moral legitimacy of image-emotion connections also by taking into account the intensity of immediate reactions to the images and the events they depict (reactions which may remain on an individual emotional level or may lead to collective protest actions).

The analyses of the strategies of presentation of news images advanced by Zelizer [2004] and Kitzinger [2000] could be strengthened by referring more directly to the research done over the years in the field of the sociology of photographic production [Boltanski 1965; Hall 1973; Rosenblum 1978; Schwarz 1992; Frosh 2003; Machin 2004; Pogliano 2009] and to classic works in the literature on news-making such as Galtung and Ruge [1965], Halloran, Elliott and Murdock [1970], and Tuchman [1973; 1978.] This would help integrating more text-oriented analyses with analysis focusing on the social practices of cultural production. For example, the use of quotes, analogies or substitutional depictions [Zelizer 2004] does not only fail to cover the entire relationship between journalistic news-making and photographic production of cultural icons but it cannot also succeed in representing a comprehensive overview without referring to the complex relationship between expectations and

consequences in terms of selection and presentation strategies. The news icons are not only a “framing device” [Gamson and Modigliani 1989, 3] which “lies somewhere between the metaphors and the exemplars” [Kitzinger 2000, 75]; rather they also maintain other and more complex relationships with the editorial process of framing, which can be better understood by analytically detailing those journalistic practices that explicitly tackle the theme of the photographs’ iconic power. Similarly, even if Perlmutter [1999] was arguably the first scholar in the field of media studies to develop and employ a typology that speaks about journalistic images in terms of icons, such a research fail to adequately account for the complex social relationships informing the practices and strategies of selection and presentation of the press photographs. The typology developed by Perlmutter [*ivi*] includes: *a*) the importance of the event depicted, *b*) metonymy, *c*) celebrity, *d*) prominence of display, *e*) frequency of use, and *f*) primordiality. However, when this typology is applied to specific objects, such as the image that anticipates the death of Carlo Giuliani during the 2001 anti-G8 collective protests in Genoa [Perlmutter and Wagner 2004], the explanatory weakness of a strictly news-content analysis turns out to be particularly clear, especially regarding the journalistic role within the process of iconic construction. Finally, the theoretical framework developed by Chouliaraki [2013] does include the dimension of the practice, but icons come to be defined in operational terms, on the basis of their circulation (similarly to Hariman and Lucaites), rather than of their process of journalistic production.<sup>2</sup>

In order to overcome the limits of these approaches, let us recall the rare yet fruitful work done in the field of the sociology of photojournalism over the last forty years. In his pioneering work on visual news-making, Hall [1973] proposed an analytical methodology capable of holding together both a neo-Marxist approach to ideology and the organizational approach proposed in early works on news-making. In highlighting the ideological function of newspaper photographs, Hall adopted a news-values stance, developed around the concise and relevant expression “the unexpected *within the meaningful and the consonant*” [Galtung and Ruge 1980, 55.] Such an expression encapsulates the features that confer journalistic value to both events and images. It refers to the idea – shared by newsroom journalists – that single news items or events are newsworthy precisely because they produce a sense of nov-

<sup>2</sup> Iconic imagery is defined as follows by Griffin [1999, 123]: “the enduring, ubiquitous and recurring presence of particular photographs that have historically acted as ‘symbols of cultural and national myth’ and so shaped the war imaginary of the West” [in Chouliaraki 2013, 320.] Chouliaraki [*ivi*, footnote 5] also specifies that “[d]ue to its temporal proximity, War on Terror photojournalism does not yet enjoy the universal recognisability of earlier visualisations. In this case – she adds – I define iconic photojournalism as award-winning (Pulitzer and World Press Awards) or globally influential photojournalism.”

elty within familiar ground, i.e. within a “common knowledge of the world” [Hall 1973] that the news ideology produces and reproduces via the formal criteria of selection and presentation practices.

This same idea can also be identified in the form of the requests made by photographers to photo-editors [Rosenblum 1978; Schwarz 1992], or it may be extended beyond newsroom selection practices to even more pervasive processes of image production and distribution, such as those in digital photo stocks [Frosh 2003; Machin 2004.] In some of these cases, the images will rarely be considered iconic. Stock images for example tend to evoke emotion anchored to aesthetic forms by the production and reproduction of linked images and tags, presuming upon their marketability and therefore public circulation. These however lack restraining power over affective events, as they are often seen and represented as “chaotic, dangerous or disturbing” [Hariman and Lucaties 2007, 13.] This leaves them unable to offer themselves as images able to generate and support social performances.

However, in addition to the routine practices of news production and commercial strategies, it is interesting to consider also the role of expectations in yet another sense, i.e. the desires that journalists create regarding events. This aspect was considered by Galtung and Ruge [1980, 54-55]:

The fifth hypothesis links what is selected to the mental pre-image, where the word “expects” can and should be given both its cognitive interpretation as “predicts” and its normative interpretation as “wants.” A person *predicts* that something will happen and this creates a mental matrix for easy reception and registration of the event if it does finally take place. Or he *wants* it to happen and the matrix is even more prepared, so much so that he may distort perceptions he receives and provide himself with images consonant with what he has wanted.

This question of prediction and expectation can be applied to single individuals (the gatekeeping model,) towards newsrooms (the news-making model) or even to a much wider information environment (the gatewatching model.) Its meaning can also be transferred from the concept of waiting for the event to waiting for the pictures of an event. For example, the predictability of pictures arriving from Iraq in the early stages of the war of 2003 led to a complex game of expectations. On one hand, many of these pictures (produced largely within a model of embedded reporting) seemed familiarly similar to war photos from the past [Zelizer 2004], which helped increase their appeal for journalists. On the other hand, many editorial teams (highly critical of the war and its rationale) were expecting images of “collateral damages” and “civilian casualties.” The wait for these pictures was lengthy, so much so that the Abu Ghraib images, although of a completely unexpected form and origin, were images in fact expected by different newspapers as a sort of “unexpected *within the meaningful and*

*the consonant.*” Moreover, the frustrated expectations regarding these pictures arriving from Iraq created in journalists a form of suspicion that led to reinforcement of distancing strategies. As we will see, by analyzing specific cases of photograph selection and presentation strategies regarding the conflict in Iraq, much can be gathered about journalism methods designed to handle the power of potential icons.

Taking these presuppositions into account, an ethnographic approach to visual news-making which also attempts to contribute to the literature on the iconic turn presents both advantages and disadvantages, which need to be made explicit. The main weakness lies in the fact that photographers and journalists do not clearly and certainly know which photos will become iconic. Their role in icon production is certainly significant but much of the “social life” of the photos will develop after or in parallel with, and mostly independently of, the journalistic work.

So how can an ethnographic study of visual news-making contribute to the analysis of iconic power? Is it limited to demonstrating some production and selection mechanisms, providing some comment on the media logics and the gatekeeping processes characterising visual news-making, offering itself as a useful appendix but generally remaining parallel to the discussion currently developed in the literature on the iconic turn, or could it instead enter directly into such a discussion?

One example to show how thinking in terms of visual news-making can actually prove useful within a wider discussion on iconicity can be provided with the case of the Abu Ghraib scandal photographs, which have been widely analyzed in studies on visual-cultural icons [i.e. Andén-Papadopoulos 2008; Mitchell 2011; Solaroli 2011; Binder 2012.]

Among all the torture photographs taken within the Abu Ghraib prison, the picture of the “hooded man” was selected and discussed much more frequently.<sup>3</sup> I argue that the ethnography of visual news-making could help in better understanding the meaning of the hooded man photograph, redefining it – at least regarding the first part of its “social life” – in terms of journalistic practices. In fact, the discomfort encountered when faced by images of a more gruesome nature, and the more general discomfort when faced by photographs taken by non-professionals (e.g. citizen journalism) led to the adoption of editorial strategies of containment and distancing. As Pogliano [2009] and Becker [2011] explained, three specific strategies were created. The first strategy involved the printing of photographs featuring torture with a

<sup>3</sup> Various interpretations have been given of its significance. Binder [2012] summarised some of these theories (those proposed by Mitchell [2004], Sharlet [2004], Sontag [2004], and Smith [2008]), within a wider theoretically attempt to build an interpretative model articulated through four dimensions of iconicity. On this basis, Binder indicating these multiple interpretations as evidence to support one particular dimension of iconicity: the paradigmatic openness.

clearly visible CBS logo or other newspaper title imprinted over them. This was an initial distancing strategy, which transformed the images into meta-images by “signalling the accountability of that other source for the content” [Becker 2011, 34.] The second strategy aimed at discussing the photos (in the surrounding written texts) “as pictures, including why they had been made, the position and state of mind of those who had made them, on what authority they were acting and the effects of these degrading forms of representation on the prisoners themselves” [ivi.] The third strategy aimed at reproducing the image judged to be journalistically most “acceptable” in order to symbolize the “event.” As a whole, a major advantage of the hooded man photograph was that it summed up the scandal whilst taking distance from the bodies’ nudity and the disturbing graphic or sensationalist nature of the other torture photos taken within the Abu Ghraib prison. In the words of the photo-editor of the French newspaper *Libération*:

We immediately looked to that image [the hooded man] because amidst the incredible ambiguity of those photos, it was the least distant from journalistic usage, in the sense that it was, if nothing else, of the least disturbing graphic nature. The fact that the body was covered and the subject not directly recognisable respected at least our professional code of ethics – even though it dealt with a photograph taken by torturers for reasons far removed from journalistic purposes, as were the others. We had to choose its page position very carefully [...] We decided to put it alone on the page, with an article about those photographs because in that case the news was in fact the photos themselves. [...] Then we decided to show some more of those terrible pictures, being careful as to how we presented them to our readers. But when we took up the case again, we also used that particular image [...] [because] it was different from the others yet it still belonged to the group [...] It was a way of looking at one to remember them all.

This third strategy, underlined by all the photo-editors who were interviewed for this research both in France and in Italy, had an immediate effect on the public circulation of the hooded man as a potential icon. It is also probable that this first selection for publication conditioned the iconic process as far as it affected the following non-journalistic selection and appropriation strategies. There is no doubt that in the shift from being the symbolic image of the Abu Ghraib scandal to being a cultural icon, many other factors emerged. However, in this context, it is crucial not to exclude the first intermediaries, as we attempt to answer the question “Which social conditions transform a news image into an icon?”

### **3. Necessary Icons, Potential Icons and Iconic Contamination in News-Making**

In line with the second wave of the ethnography of news production [Cottle 2007; Stonbely 2013], my work can be defined as a “multi-site ethnography,” because it is conducted in several sites (newsrooms; photo agencies; stock agencies.) However, for the purpose of this article, the analysis will be specifically focused on the newsrooms. In discussing the process of selection and presentation of the images that are chosen for the final publication in newspapers, the analysis will make a direct use of ethnographic field-notes in order to show the discursive debates, social mechanisms and culturally productive strategies through which journalists in the newsrooms define photographs in terms of cultural icons, negotiate their meaning and decide either to support or to contrast their impact, within the wider and complex context of networked journalism in the new media ecology.

In fact, newsroom journalists develop their strategies fully aware of the highly changed role and impact of the journalistic work in a post-industrial, internet age – from “gatekeeping” to “gatewatching,” to use a provocative and fruitful expression [Bruns 2005; Bruns 2008.] Gatekeeping and gatewatching have always been side by side in journalism and, if we look at the press, gatewatching has become very important since the arrival of television. Nevertheless, following 24/7 news channels, digitalisation, and the increased importance of news agencies and the internet, the significance of gatewatching practices in newsrooms is today greater. Part of the new ethnographic studies on news production investigates exactly this transformation. However, the impact of this transformation in the journalistic production of iconic images has not yet been taken into account properly. This paper is thus based on the idea that the gradually increasing importance of gatewatching has completed the transformation of journalists from “actors” to “actors-spectators.” In such a transformation, the journalists who select the photographs for publication are entitled to include their own emotions as spectators within the news frames. Moreover, there are entitled to find new strategies for presenting photographs in the press which either contrast or support the power of potential icons, which are interpreted as such by the journalist-spectators (even while surfing the net, or watching television.)

The herein presented ethnography of photojournalistic production took place in those areas within the newsrooms where journalists deal with the choice of photographic images. It is mainly based on participating observation, but in some important aspects it relies on professional testimonies collected through interviews and in retrospective accounts of media production and organisational factors, all of which come into play within the newsrooms. For example, during the London terrorist

attack I conducted participant observation within the newsroom of a major Italian newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, while I consequently had to rely on retrospective accounts in the other newsrooms where I carried out my studies in the following period of time.

Drawing on my ethnographic research, this paper identifies three major signifying practices: *the search for a necessary icon*, *the management of potential icons* and *the negotiation around iconic contamination*. These practices either promote or restrict the iconic power of news photographs in the processes of news production, and as such, in this context, they are analytically isolated from other practices and routines characterizing the daily newsrooms work on photographs.

These three practices will be analysed in greater details in the next three sections: each of them will refer to a specific case study. As it will be clear, while the linear chronology of the case studies is somewhat sacrificed, the criteria of diffusion of the journalistic awareness of iconic power is favoured. *The search for a necessary icon* – which is always connected to the exposure of exceptional breaking news – is, out of the three, the practice that best reveals the general awareness of journalism on its own role of producer of culture (and not just of information.) The second practice – the *management of potential icons* – is not universally shared as the first one, but it is also part of a precise journalistic attention to the potential of the icons – an attention that has increased in diffusion and importance with the emergency of a new media ecology ruled by digital media and satellite news channels. The *negotiation around iconic contamination* is, instead, more sporadic and less widespread, therefore it becomes relevant in a directly proportional way to the presence in the newsroom of a photo-editor or other professional journalists with a deep visual knowledge, and in proportion to their effective decisional power.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.1. 7/7 and the Search for the Necessary Icon

The London bomb attack of 7th July 2005 has been widely considered as an extraordinary, momentous and dramatic event. That day I was conducting newsroom ethnography within the Milan headquarters of the most-widely diffused newspaper in Italy, *Il Corriere della Sera*. The entire newsroom was shocked by what happened and closely followed the unfolding events for the entire day. The choice of the photos was hugely significant. Archivists and graphic journalists worked all day moni-

<sup>4</sup> Looking at the daily press in Italy and France, this practice is – generally, besides a few exceptions – relatively weak, but its weight could be decisively greater in other countries and on other traditional media (especially the newsmagazines).

oring the pictures which arrived from London, constantly checking the sites of the major photographic agencies and the pictures chosen on rival publication websites (particularly, the British ones) by the hour. They looked at the national and 24-hour international TV news images, they checked amateur photographs on shared network platforms such as Flickr, and they waited for any phone calls from photographers offering photos for exclusive publication, even soliciting such photos.

At *Il Corriere della Sera*, when exceptionally “newsworthy” events occur, photographs are subjected to an initial selection stage before being printed and hung on a display wall in the graphics section, so that sub-editors, the managing editor and others involved in photo selection can view them. One of the main objectives in these cases is to offer readers a “coherent direction” [Breed 1955], a coherent narrative of the event developed by the newspaper. This coherent direction is produced via a non-contradictory relationship between photographs, headlines, subtitles and captions, accompanying article and any eventual vignettes on the front page. Coherence is attained by a defining frame or, paraphrasing Gamson and Modigliani [1989], a central organizing idea or story line that offers meanings (on the basis of the choices of production or selection) to connect, highlight and evaluate a series of elements that constitute the final product. The frame emerges during newsroom meetings and discussions taking place at regular intervals during the day and involving the leading figures of the newspapers (editor-in-chief, managing editor, news editor, and various section editors).

The choice of photos and their page position is usually made by the head of photography – art director or photo-editor – with the aim of offering an overall view of the event in line with the frame more or less strictly and explicitly defined during those meetings. Other criteria (news-values,) including those linked to visual culture such as aesthetic or historic motives behind the photo, are usually established by the head of photography and translated into selection criteria to concur with this principle criterion of frame adherence.

Within the newsroom, the choice of the front page photograph is particularly relevant. In some cases, this image is chosen with the intention of showing something unique and surprising. As a graphic journalist of *Corriere della Sera* explained:

With all these hugely momentous and exceptional events, we always need to find an iconic image – a picture that sums up the event in a special way [...] which then becomes the icon i.e. a photograph that in the future will always evoke the memory of that event because it was the only time such an image was shown... [...] and it must be an image that involves me, that affects me.



Thus the goal is to present a front page photo that is both frame-coherent and at the same time unique, so that in the future it may be recognised and remembered as *the image of that* event. The fulfilment of this dual journalistic requirement reveals an underlying logic based on the relationship between aesthetic surface and discursive depth which, according to Alexander [2008], is at the heart of the construction and power of cultural icons. The following analysis sheds new light insofar, while many other newspapers selected different front page photos that day, the two newspapers under analysis published in their front pages two photographs that then became arguably the most popular ones, in the sense that they were the most commonly reproduced images of 7/7 within a variety of books and photojournalistic albums.

### 3.1.1. From Frames to Icons

The *Corriere della Sera* and *il Manifesto* adopted two different frames of the London terrorist attack of 7th July 2005. In both cases the event was displayed as a terrorist attack but different senses were attributed to the event, it was linked differently to other events, and variations existed also in the catchphrases used, and the keywords/metaphors associated with it in the editorial meetings, which in turn influenced the coverage choices.

In the case of *Corriere della Sera*, the theme of irrationality emerged frequently in the meetings which I attended during my research, and the attack was closely linked to the holy war (Jihad) frame. In particular, Islamic terrorism was defined as being something unacceptable, even as something incomprehensible. Terms such as “absurd” and “surreal” were used throughout the entire day by the newsroom staff entrusted with the photo selection. They used such words to justify their choices to their colleagues, who had not been present at the editorial meetings and who were participating in discussions about photos that they had themselves printed and hung on the graphic display walls.

The by now famous photograph that was chosen for the front page showed a boy in a white shirt and blue rubber gloves aiding and accompanying a woman whose face was entirely covered by a white mask. The art director made this comment after first choosing the photo as a possible candidate for the front page: “This photo screams out, it conveys all the craziness that is going on. It’s a photo that says just how absurd this all is.” The woman’s white mask is indeed enigmatic. The next day a graphic journalist wondered whether the mask was a protective cover for burns or whether it was a strategy to prevent wounded faces being seen, like the white cloths that are usually used by the police to hide shocking scenes from the journalists’ lens. The mask was the *punctum* [Barthes 1980.] By not being able to identify the woman,

it projected something different from the pain of a victim or the act of assistance. The art director went on to say that the image represented terrorism. It is noteworthy that, even some years after the event, that same picture was interpreted as an image of pure horror, echoing Munch's famous "Scream" [Cavarero 2007.] The photograph was unique and memorable, the one which (according to all the journalists interviewed) "stood out a mile." It was published under the title "Terrorism attacks London" (Fig. 1.)



FIG. 1. Corriere della Sera, 8th July 2005, p.1.

In response to a specific request from the art editor, the “surreal effect” was produced by the interplay between this photo, a photo of a mounted policeman facing

a small crowd of London city workers, filing out of their offices with clear confusion on their faces, and another photo of a wrecked double-decker bus reduced to a single deck. These last two pictures were chosen for inner pages. Also, to fulfil the demand for a visual narrative with a surreal atmosphere, archives were trawled for a photo of Abu Hamza al-Masri, former imam of a London mosque and a well-known public face following his much-publicised arrest just a few months earlier (26th August, 2004) for inciting terrorist acts, as well as his trial on a request of extradition to the United States. The demand for this photo was driven by a visual characteristic pertaining to Abu Hamza al-Masri – his metal hook hand – and only after that (as a justification for the photo’s publication) to his role in events. The graphic journalist responsible for the presentation of this photograph gave instructions to the technicians to preserve that particular feature of the photo if, for any reasons, editing had been necessary. “We want it plainly on view” he said before leaving their office (Fig. 2).



FIG. 2. *Corriere della Sera*, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2005, p. 9.

The journalistic frame was further reinforced by the graphic designer who suggested a satirical sketch for the front cover with the image of Christ crucified on the Union flag (see Fig. 1,) a suggestion which won him compliments for the interpretative coherence of his idea. “I think it goes great with what we’re saying,” the art director said, with a nod of approval from the managing editor. In fact, it ensured that the London attack was tightly linked to the theme of religious fanaticism in its closest sense (in-frame,) detaching it at the same time from war events in progress in Afghanistan and Iraq (out-of-frame.)

This is why the event was shown and, indeed, intended to be seen as a sequel to 9/11 in New York and 4/11 in Madrid. It was the link with these other events (here considered as single events, just as unjustifiable and incomprehensible as 7/7) that produced a journalistic narrative of the London event fulfilling the terms of the “unexpected *within the meaningful and the consonant*” [Galtung and Ruge 1980, 55.] The result was an iconographic representation which on the one hand attempted to translate the main frame in images linked to the themes of incomprehensibility and irrationality, whilst on the other hand offered an image of Londoners as being generally stiff upper-lipped and uncomplaining. Images of blood were avoided, as were the most disturbing pictures, or they were grouped together on a single spread (such as on page 10.) This decision – which proved prophetic, if one considers the type of pictures that would soon arrive from London – fulfilled a precise demand to restore emotive feeling to an event via an analogy between the three attacks and the absence of linking with other events. In the words of the art-director:

Remember that London was after Madrid and New York. It was the sequel already. It was no longer possible to show desperation and anguish. There was no longer a need to see the blood. This was a later event and we needed to remember that.

It was also decided not to put pictures of these two events next to pictures of 7/7. The reason given was that so little time had elapsed as to make the photo’s “citational probability” higher. However a form of visual reference was still made. The art director asked that the front page cover depicting the Madrid attack be reproduced identically in terms of characters and font size for the titles and subtitles as well as the exact page layout.

Journalism is often influenced by a dual need that conditions visual choices. On the one hand, there is the need to maintain a tie with specific coverage from the past, i.e. creating a sense of familiarity, of shared expectations when faced with the unexpected or unfamiliar. On the other hand, there is the need for distancing, of depicting something new and different whilst still adhering to the journalistic frame. However, the selection of visuals that best respond to all these demands is an interpretive operation requiring careful attention. Often these visual choices are the subject of discussion between an editorial board and the head of photography (photo-editor or art director.) Their arguments may clash and it is in these cases that the interpretive steps will be made explicit. The ethnographic notes that follow provide an example and show other emerging aspects, such as the importance of rival newspapers’ strategies for those editorial staff members who perform initial monitoring on the public circulation of potential icons.

It's late in the evening, the current issue is going to press; the managing editor comes into the office (graphics) saying very loudly and agitatedly that he saw both on TV and on the website of *Repubblica* (a rival major Italian newspaper) a photograph taken on a mobile phone in the underground station by a survivor of the Tube bomb attack. He shouts out "It's everywhere, how couldn't you see it? Do you know what I'm talking about? We should have had that on the front page! That is live action drama!" The art director replies, throwing out his arms: "*But we've been going on all day about what an absurd and inexcusable act this is! So how do you want to represent it, with a totally realistic photo?*" The managing editor takes a long breath, apologies, pats the art director on the back and says: "Have we got it inside at least?" The art director shows the managing editor a preview of page 5. The managing editor complains "It's not even the biggest one!" Then, worried that it's too late to make big changes to the graphics layout, he decides to contact the article writer and ask for that photo to be given more attention "At least we can do it with words!" he says, leaving the office. (my emphasis).

The page 5 article accompanied four non-professional photographs (including the one taken in the underground station, although not highlighted on that page) under the title "Nightmare images taken by survivors." It described some amateur photographs from London and taken from Flickr, offering a quick parallel comparison with pictures of the Madrid attack (Fig. 3.) The incipit – added as the issue was going to press on request of the managing editor resulted as:

Those people walking in rows along the tracks is the image of 7th July 2005, maybe the one that we will most remember along with the woman coming out of the Tube station with a white paper mask over her face. Almost certainly it was the first picture taken inside of the hellish scenes (my emphasis).

Then the article writer highlighted the description of the photo and named the amateur photographer who took it, thus enhancing its impact. Also, a subtitle was given: "From TV and the internet: the photos and videos taken on cell phones by those escaping along the underground tunnels." However, only one photograph of people escaping through the tunnels arrived that day; other amateur photos had been taken outside the underground stations. The need to make a paratextual reference to an iconic image which had been previously underestimated created a slightly ridiculous effect, thanks to the hasty manner in which it was added.

**ATTACCO LONDRA TELEFONINI**

**LA TECNOLOGIA** Quella di Madrid fu in qualche modo la strage dei cellulari. Li usarono i terroristi per fare esplodere le bombe. ■ È passato poco più di un anno e negli attentati di Londra il telefono mobile è diventato una telecamera nelle mani di chi sta scappando all'inferno

# Le cic dall'incubo scattati dai sopravvissuti

*In tv e su Internet le foto e i video fatti con i cellulari da chi scappava nelle gallerie della metropolitana*

...elle persone in fila indiana che cam-  
ano sul binari è l'immagine del 7 lu-  
2005, forse quella che ricorderemo  
insieme alla donna che esce dalla  
ropolitana con una maschera di can-  
lana sul volto. Quasi certamente è  
a la prima immagine scattata den-  
l'inferno: il tunnel inverte di cavi-  
ci di emergenza, un giovane in pri-  
piano con un orecchino luccicante e  
specie di giubbotto peloso fuori sta-  
e addosso, diretto come gli altri ver-  
salvezza alla stazione di King's  
s.

on l'ha scattata un fotoreporter pe-  
ato nell'underground superando il  
fione della polizia. L'ha scattata un  
ravvisato, il pendolare Alexander  
dwick. L'ha fatta con il telefonino  
che dall'incubo. È finita sugli scher-  
elle tv impiesi, qualche ora dopo gli  
riati. È circolata subito su Inter-  
rifornciata dai vari fotoblog che rac-  
celevano materiale sulle bombe di  
dici. Non è l'unica. Basta andare sul  
www.flickr.com/groups/bombpool/  
avere un'idea. È un diario di massa  
da condividere, in maggioranza pre-  
all'esterno. Un giornale online co-  
cque preziosi. C'è Marty che ha in-  
trato una coda inconsueta per il tra-  
to a Canary Wharf che ricorda un  
palle di New York l'11 settembre:  
idea della città bloccata che cerca  
enare a casa. GinnyReddy con il suo  
diare ha ripreso un avviso scritto su  
lavagna di scuola o di un asilo. «Ple-  
so not inform children of the... explos-  
». Per favore non informate i bam-  
bi. Forse Ginny è una maestra, forse  
baldetta. Di certo coglie un elemen-  
tale, che tornerà a preoccupare nei  
sini giorni le famiglie non solo in-  
cosa dice ai bambini.

forze dell'ordine, la televisione e  
a volere gli stessi attentatori que-  
volta hanno facilitato il compito di  
orti e insegnanti. Non circolano, al-  
rizon ancora, immagini troppo rae-  
ceccanti. Londra 2005, pullman a  
in larga misura una strage poco  
scelere. Appunto, sotterraneo. «A  
basso», così lo descriveva l'eri mat-  
s ospite di Sky tv. Un caos calmo,  
per questo ancora più spettrale.

I treni di Madrid fu diverso. L'im-  
e dell'11 marzo è uno spazzo dis-  
scopolgono i sacchi neri con i ceda-  
selle vittime. Il film è quello, imper-  
la stazione di Atocha: una nuvola  
a che inghiotte ogni persona sulla  
fina. Madrid 2004 fu in qualche mo-  
strage dei telefonini. Lo usarono  
egitatori della cellula marocchina,  
do saltare i dieci zainetti esplosivi  
timer collegato alla sveglia dei  
tri. Lo usarono i sopravvissuti, cer-  
di chiamare casa, provando con  
is mentre tutta la rete telefonica  
in tilt, lo usarono gli amici e pa-  
dei dispersi, delle 191 vittime, spe-  
di avere da loro una risposta. E lo  
no i cittadini di Madrid, dopo, co-  
ossapolaro per ritrovarsi in piazza,  
astato poco più di un anno e negli  
ati di Londra il cellulare è diventa-  
telecamera nelle mani di chi sta  
pando all'inferno. È stato girato  
con una memoria di pochi KB, il  
filmato dal metro ripreso poi dai  
i tutto il mondo — il buio sui vas-  
strati che sembrano reitati sotto-  
li, i finestri rotti con gli estintori  
segreti che non volevano morire  
jati come ha raccontato appena  
sti in salvo (naturalmente via tele-

**IL DOLORE** Una ragazza esce dalla stazione di Edgware Road (Ap)

**GLI SCATTI FUGACI DELLA GENTE**

Le immagini scattate dai viaggiatori del metro londinese in una giornata che non dimenticheranno mai. Ecco i passeggeri mentre cercano di salvarsi camminando incolonnati lungo le gallerie: li ha ripresi il pendolare Alexander Chadwick col suo cellulare. All'esterno di una caffetteria della catena Starbucks un cartello spiega la chiusura anticipata - per gli eventi di questa mattina (qui a fianco). Lo sgomento e la disperazione nei volti degli scampati (sotto)

**I FOTOBLOGGER**

*Inseguiti dalle grandi reti di news si rifugiano nel simbolismo*

**IL PRIMO FILM DAL METRÒ**

*È stato girato con una memoria di pochi KB e ripreso da tutte le tv*

**FOTO SIMBOLO**

*Quelle persone in fila indiana sui binari è l'immagine del 7 luglio 2005*

...fionno la turista svedese  
a un giornale di Stoccol-  
partie, anche gli inviati di  
me tv come la Cnn ieri a  
in Iraq, usavano il videote-  
copiando i fotoblogger e  
immagini imperfette che  
della presa diretta e forse  
Inseguiti dalle grandi re-  
bali, i fotoblogger si rifug-  
lismo. Alcune immagini  
www.flickr.com avevano  
re. Ecco la foto della pag-  
di un quotidiano in una f-  
titoio piemontese che è  
sterina vacillano per pa-  
terroristica. Ironico o p-  
chi spedisce online il f-  
mucca punk, una statua  
gadget dell'Underground  
una tazza del Millennium  
«You can't beat the syste  
battere il sistema. Si più  
un sistema  
di ieri? Il fo-  
twin cosa u-  
gio, con un  
di Bush si  
una buca  
metto. «V-  
questo è  
l'under?».  
Si ride a  
prattato il  
scattano f-  
email agli  
mail. L'11 s-  
trono mo-  
ni e parole  
ni che siat  
in flamm  
fonate e  
passaggi  
moglie dal  
dare l'assa  
di grido d  
Londra 20  
una strage  
l'audio att  
nare è imp-  
sa con la  
ca ieri pomeriggio Della E  
re dalla sua servanzia ch  
Russell-Squire, quella è  
chiaro. Fa la ricercatri  
School of Hygiene and  
ses, Della. «Anche se è  
qui fuori per capire che s-  
mo usare Internet». Vi  
email. Della arriva al la-  
piedi. Mi sono accorte  
sa che non andava per tu-  
co che diceva: «Non mi m-  
spovarmi». L'ho chiamat  
tutto», prima che il traf-  
nie quello stradale si ri-  
«Zero movimento», scri-  
È il responsabile di un  
sporti privati. «Senza lea-  
dalla mia finestra, e un p-  
tembre, ancora una vo  
Amy Hinkley. «La gente  
rendo, sto morendo» scr-  
al sito di Sky tv. «E' nat-  
nate rimaste con la bla-  
per l'esplosione, face-  
grondavano sangue».  
Un tranquillo caos. «Ci  
sperare a tornare» ca-  
lia. «Facciamo finta di la-  
sto silenzio è assordante  
io dalle raffiche di son-  
ti insieme». Piccoli segni  
indimenticabile. «Qui n-  
cosi lasciare il cellulare e  
sparano addosso i cecch-  
no ha tolto la suoneria».  
umanità».

FIG. 3. Corriere della Sera, 8th July 2005, p. 5.

It was this picture – taken with a mobile phone in the London underground tunnels – that was chosen for the front page of *Il Manifesto*. The reasons for the choice were again influenced by the dual demand for frame adherence and search for an iconic image. The journalistic frame created by this newsroom connected the London attack to a wider group of events that – whilst including the New York and Madrid attacks – also comprised and highlighted the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as shown in the front page editorial. This frame did not show 7/7 as an incomprehensible event but the exact opposite – an event that could be interpreted as a fervent reaction within the frame of an asymmetric war taking place on a huge

global stage. In adherence with this frame, the front page title was “Western Front” and the editorial title “War Time.” The front page satirical sketch showed an underground station exit covered in black smoke forming a figure of death, the Grim Reaper (Fig. 4.) The sketch was explained in an article by the artist himself, where once again 7/7 was closely linked to the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The most striking phrase, in terms of textual frame construction was: “It is the disregard for human life in theory and in practice which links war and terrorism, rendering these two terms not only incomparable but also synonymous.” The newspaper’s photo-editor explained the frame of that day with these words: “We had to show that we were living a time of war, in a world where such things could now happen everywhere.”

How did the process move from this frame to the choice of one of the photographs arriving from London? Which steps were involved? Two aspects were identified by the photo-editor: the search for a typically war-time image and – although it may appear paradoxical at first – the banality of the image conjured up by this photo. Regarding the first aspect, according to the photo-editor the image of people on foot, filing through the underground, was that which most summed up the idea of war. Specifically, “the image recalled photographs of the Second World War period, taken in the same underground tunnels when they were used as air raid shelters.” The second aspect instead was explained as follows:

It’s precisely because of this viewpoint, through the eyes of the man in the street, that this photo shows how it could happen to anyone, that we’re at war , up to our necks and that we need to get used to these images. We can no longer view them as being part of a reality belonging only to others, to those in the South of the world or the Far or Middle East. No, this is right here and now, among us.

# il manifesto

quotidiano comunista - anno XXXV n. 165      VENERDÌ 8 LUGLIO 2005      euro 1,10  
con Le Monde diplomatique euro 2,00 in più  
con il libro "Piazza bella piazza" euro 8,00 in più

## Tempo di guerra

GABRIELE POLO

Viviamo in guerra. Non sappiamo bene quando è iniziata, se nel 1991 in Iraq o in Jugoslavia, nel 2001 a New York o in Afghanistan, oppure nel 2004 a Madrid. Sappiamo che ha trasformato tutto il mondo in un unico fronte, che ha la sua prima linea, lunghissima come mai prima nella storia, dall'Europa all'India: che ha ragioni economiche ma anche profonde matrici identitarie che costruisce le sue ideologie, benedette persino da un papa: che è combattuta da militari in divisa e da guerrieri nell'ombra, che chi la dirige - da una parte e dall'altra - cerca legittimità soprattutto nell'avversario, al punto da esserne il necessario corrispettivo. Non siamo in grado di dire chi la sta vincendo, ma sappiamo bene chi la sta perdendo: le vittime in carne e ossa, ma anche la civiltà politica di cui ci vantiamo essere culla.

Sarà bene chiamarla col suo nome: guerra. Smetterla di pensare che esista una sua versione legale da cui ricavarne una illegale chiamata terrorismo. Che differenza c'è tra chi muore nella metropolitana di una grande città occidentale mentre va al lavoro e chi nella capanna di un piccolo villaggio mentre prepara il pane? Il distacco semantico, basato sulla diversità tra le sue forme belliche, serve solo a rinsaldare i campi d'appartenenza da quando il diritto internazionale è stato liquidato, da quando la politica si è trasformata in esercizio della forza, da quando c'è chi bombarda in nome di democrazia e libertà e chi assassina in nome di religione ed emancipazione. E sarà bene affermare che in questa guerra globale democrazia e fede sono diventate parole vuote, schermi che servono ai G8 per blindare il proprio potere, ai tanti bin laden per i rispettivi affari di famiglia.

Gli attentati di Londra, dopo quelli di New York, di Madrid (ma anche di Bali o di Nairobi) dimostrano che questa guerra non si vince né con la repressione, né con i controlli di polizia: si può pretendere di chiudere a chiave una città - occidentale, africana, orientale - di monitorare minuto per minuto la vita dei suoi abitanti? Non si può. I tanti morti in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestina, ci dicono che nessuna liberazione può arrivare dal tritolo: si può pretendere di terrorizzare un esercito occupante dotato di tecnologie inarrivabili? Non si può. Alla fine la guerra serve solo a riprodurre se stessa e a dimostrare un'efficienza bellica che si annulla reciprocamente: è produzione di morte per mezzo di morte.

Questa guerra non la vincerà nessuno: chi lo promette - qualunque lingua parli - fa solo propaganda, pure scadente. Gioca sulla paura, sull'affidarsi delle potenziali vittime. Imbroglia, senza sapere dove lo porterà l'avvitamento della spirale che ha messo in moto, perché tutte le guerre sono iniziate per essere brevi e vittoriose, ma sono diventate lunghe e devastanti, anche per i vincitori.

Chiamiamolo col suo nome: questo nostro tempo che può sembrare un viaggio nel lontano passato delle bande mercenarie, quelle che terrorizzano molto gli interni, poco le schiere nemiche. Diciamo pure che siamo in guerra, ma non per arrenderci a una rassegnata paura, arruolandoci tra i propagandisti dell'occidente ferito o tra i vendicatori del realtà di un'era storica terribile, così diversa dalla contemporaneità in cui siamo nati e cresciuti, ma per praticare il più coraggioso dei gesti, la diserzione di fronte al nemico.

SEGUE IN ULTIMA PAGINA



# Fronte occidentale



TARIQ ALI

### Da Londra a Baghdad

Non ci sono mezzi pubblici a Londra. La metropolitana è chiusa e la polizia sta escortando la gente a non avvicinarsi al centro della città. I feriti sono centinaia, i morti decine. La prima reazione alle bombe scoppiate durante la rush-hour in metropolitana è stata quella di pensare che fossero causate da un guasto elettrico. Poi un autobus turistico è saltato in aria a Russell Square, nelle vicinanze del British Museum. Era ovvio che questo non potesse essere un "guasto elettrico", ma il ritorno di attacchi terroristici a Londra.

SEGUE IN ULTIMA PAGINA

IDA DOMINIANNI

### Tre voragini

Si assomigliano tutte le metropoli globali segnate dal terrorismo e dal terrore. Uguali gli edifici sventrati, le lamiere ammaccate, i fischii delle ambulanze, i caschi dei pompieri. Uguali le facce scolorite e le voci impaurite, uguali le ferite che sanguinano e le persone che si abbracciano, uguali gli ospedali che traboccano e i telefonini che si bloccano. Uguali il fiume di immagini che ci raggiunge nelle case e nei computer. Ci stiamo assediando a questa estetica della metropoli ferita?

SEGUE IN ULTIMA PAGINA

JOHN PILGER

### Le bombe di Blair

Le bombe che hanno causato morte e distruzione a Londra sono cominciate ad arrivare il giorno in cui Tony Blair si è unito a George Bush nella sanguinosa invasione e nell'occupazione dell'Iraq. Nessuno dubita che queste siano «bombe di Blair». Per la verità, nella fase che ha preceduto l'invasione dell'Iraq, l'unica segnalazione dell'intelligence britannica rivelatasi affidabile è stata la previsione di un brusco aumento del terrorismo, con la Gran Bretagna e i britannici come bersaglio.

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FIG. 4. *il Manifesto*, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2005, p. 1.



At the same time, the photograph was equally unique and striking for various reasons, including its ability to show the “dramatic live event,” the origins of the photo, the unique quality of an amateur photo taken by a survivor in such a moment. Finally it should be noted that the first photo to follow this for *Il Manifesto* (tightly cropped on page two) was that chosen for the front page of *Corriere della sera*. The photo-editor of *Il Manifesto* recalled:

That was the other memorable picture of the day. It was a photo that stood out from the others, eye-catching and thought-provoking. The mask covering the woman’s face as she held it and that boy supporting her led to many questions. It was symbolic yet at the same time curious, raising questions about the two of them. Who were they? Why was that mask so precarious and crude? Who gave it to the woman? What was it for? And then, the fact that she was barefoot [...] There were questions raised in that photo, it wasn’t simply the photo of a survivor and her helper [...] but it wasn’t our front page choice [...] It was a great picture but it didn’t immediately communicate what we really wanted to say.

On this basis, it becomes clear that the relationship between the search for an iconic image and the emotive frame produced by such an extraordinary and momentous event is a very special one. In order to fully understand it, it may help to briefly outline the case of the front cover photograph of *Corriere della Sera* of the following day (8th July 2005.) The relevant ethnographic note follows:

At 9pm the newspaper’s managing editor enters the graphics room. The archivist [who had spent all day pre-selecting the pictures of the “day after the London attack,” printing them and sticking them up on the wall next to his desk] and the art director are out of the office for a moment. The managing editor asks loudly who is supposed to be looking at these photos. He is in a hurry so the graphic journalist takes him to the wall to see the photos for himself. He is told that two people are continuously looking at them. He asks: “Have they made a shortlist?” “I don’t think so” comes the reply. To which he uncrosses his arms and starts looking at them. After a moment, he takes one off the wall and goes out. Two minutes later the art-director and archivist return. They are immediately told what happened and ask which one he chose. “The one of the policewoman laying a bunch of flowers at the gate.” The archivist wails “We’re putting a bunch of flowers on the front page?!” “Awful, isn’t it?” is the reply. “It’s so banal” he retorts. And a colleague adds “It was the most banal of the whole lot.”

In that case, the managing editor was only interested in coherently restoring the journalistic frame. The fact that the picture was ordinary, in no way exceptional, was a point in its favour. It indicated a return to “normality,” a way to de-exceptionalize the event. By exaggerating the banal, highlighting a sober gesture and the calm, rational reactions which emerged from it, a particular frame emerged – a frame of strong values and beliefs of a social world and – through this – of a whole civilization (“ours”

vs. “theirs”.) The art director – the only graphic journalist who participated in the newsroom meetings – did not complain about the selected picture and ignored the complaints of his colleagues. In an interview with me the following day, he admitted that the journalistic search for an iconic image is usually connected to extraordinary events, that the emotion evoked by the image in the first instance belongs to the event. When this condition is not satisfied, the need for an iconic image becomes irrelevant and the rules of frame adherence take precedence over all.

### 3.2. *The 2003 Iraqi War and the Management of Potential Icons*

It may happen that even in the absence of a truly extraordinary event, of a breaking news item that interrupts the normal news-making routine, a newspaper is still faced with unexpected pictures evaluated as high-impact affective images connected to politically or morally relevant themes. In such cases, news editors often feel obliged to print these pictures, even on the basis of their increasing popularity and widespread circulation – in other words, due to the fact that other media outlets are showing them or certainly intend to. These are the pictures that I call, from an ethnographic point of view, potential icons. They are viewed as such in the newsrooms because they somehow challenge the journalistic frame as regards the macro-event or the subject/events addressed in the photographs.

In the digital era, it is still possible to adopt a strategy of containing the power of certain information or images by simply “burying” them, but in many cases this is judged to be the wrong choice. The risk of being exposed is still high and goes hand in hand with the risk of a potentially strong backlash from both media rivals and the general public who have embraced the internet as a tool for criticism, through which it is possible to circumvent other traditional forms of mediation. This innovation has led to an increased adoption of image-distancing strategies. Two strategies in particular – balancing and *décryptage* (*decoding*) – have taken on a significant role in contemporary news-making. By using these two strategies, journalists avoid accusations of bias and, at the same time, by addressing the issue in an explicit way, they create a special form of sharing with their readers/audience.

Balancing is produced by flanking one highly emotive picture with another and adding a title and/or text and/or caption that directly relates the two photos. The subject of this strategy is almost always a war victim and the accompanying photo frequently depicts a victim from the opposite side of the same war. In the 24th March 2003 issue of *Libération*, pages 10 and 11 show a montage of twelve photographs under the title “Faces of War” (“Les visages de la guerre”). Six photographs of Iraqi

victims of war (four wounded in hospital and two dead on the field) are accompanied by six photographs of American victims (Fig. 5.) These include four close-ups of U.S. soldiers captured and shown on TV by the regime, and others of two dead marines in the field. The photo-editor explained these choices:

We had received these photos of US soldiers imprisoned in Iraq and released intentionally for media attention by the Iraqi government. It was clear that we would show them but we didn't want them to simply cause a "those poor American soldiers!" reaction. We did want this to be said, but not only this. So we decided to take advantage of the double-page spread to put these pictures next to ones of suffering Iraqis, which were greater in number, and most of them were innocent civilians – they hadn't chosen to be in that situation, they had simply found themselves under surprise attack by those bombs.



FIG. 5. *Libération*, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2003, pp. 10 & 11.

However, the situation can become more complex and this combination of photos can lead to a redefinition of geographic and semantic contours of the conflict itself. Balancing in these cases leads to a type of rewriting that produces arbitrary levels of abstraction in the relationship between images and events. One interesting example appeared in *Le Figaro* on 2nd April 2003. The photo of an Iraqi man crying over the open coffin of his parents killed in a coalition attack was put on page 5 alongside the photograph of a military funeral at a US base camp. However, one significant detail must be highlighted – this photograph, despite being subtitled

“The war in Iraq” was actually an image from the Afghan war. The photo-editor explained:

We were looking for a photo of a dead US soldier but, as you know, that type of picture had not yet arrived. They did in fact appear in the following days, but at that point there were still no real war images [...] We had a couple of pictures of wounded soldiers and we suggested these to the heads but they said that they wanted a photo of a funeral, with a coffin, just like that photo. So we suggested that one, even though we knew it could be wrong to use a picture of Afghanistan to counterbalance one of Iraq.

To overcome this problem, the photographs were printed with a title and accompanying article that traced the entire history of events – from the 11<sup>th</sup> September attacks to Afghanistan and then to Iraq. In that context, the photograph of a man despairing over his children’s and wife’s coffins, one of the most dramatic to appear in the early days of the war, was distanced and its iconic power contained.

Balancing is characterised then as a tool of strictly political stance used by a newspaper. Such a stance begins with the forecast of impact on public opinion caused by a potential iconic image and follows with the attempt to contain such an impact.

Décryptage, on the other hand, presents an image in such a way that incites discussion on the salient aspects of its production, the context of when/where it was taken or even its circulation history. It is concerned therefore with treating what could be viewed as the event-image (i.e. a documentary photograph of the event) as, rather, an object-image. Décryptage as practised by newspapers often handles an image adopted by TV news the day before (or the same day, in a working sense,) treating it as an object-image. Intended as a distancing strategy, the merit of décryptage lies in its role in questioning the documentary value of images which are already circulating in the media. As a visual presentation strategy, it opens up debate on the ability to contain the power of a potential iconic image. During the war coverage of Iraq, in many cases newspapers used a strategy of décryptage to present the images as propaganda items from both the Anglo-American contingent and Iraq. One example came from the front page of *Il Manifesto* of 14th December 2003, regarding the capture of Saddam Hussein. The photo of his capture was printed under the title “Il trofeo” (“The Trophy”), with the obvious intention of shifting attention from the event to the issue of propaganda. The choice of satirical sketch to accompany this front page photo was also interesting as it adhered to the established journalistic frame, but a brief explanation is necessary in order to decode its sense. During the first months of war, a recurring theme in many newspapers was that of Saddam Hussein’s double, due to the fact that rumors were circulating about the presence of a double of Saddam Hussein during his public appearances. *Il Manifesto* – unlike other newspapers such as *Corriere della Sera* – always reported these rumours as a propaganda strategy

aimed to create suspense for the ideal climax of the tale – the fall of the dictator. Such a narrative served to frame the war as a humanitarian act of liberation. Since immediately after Saddam Hussein's capture the first photos to be printed showed the dictator undergoing medical tests by army doctors, and since these tests were claimed by some TV news programmes to prove that the man really was Saddam Hussein, *Il Manifesto* interpreted the release and circulation of this photo as a prime example of propaganda action which now needed to remove all doubts regarding the existence of a double. Their satirical sketch of the day showed three marines, each of whom pointing a gun at a man with his hands in the air as a sign of surrender. One soldier is saying "I got two," another "Three for me!" and the third "I just gone one but he was a big one!" The choice of title, satirical sketch and article content helped to distance the published pictures of Saddam Hussein's capture from those shown on TV and discussed by many newspaper on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2003.

Balancing and *décryptage* can also work in unison. At *Le Figaro*, a high number of pictures from the early stages of the war were framed as propaganda photos, often balancing one assumed to be an example of "US propaganda" with one taken as "Iraqi propaganda," together with an article that compared the two and discussed their circulation and any eventual censorship applied to them. At the same time, the strategy of *décryptage* was rendered even more explicit by attempting not only to treat them but also to present them as object-images, by the adoption of static shot TV images with network logos or clearly visible imprinted text across them. This treatment of the pictures can be seen as coherent with the journalistic frame, influenced by the journalists' difficulty to form a clear position on the war, in line with the wavering hesitation displayed by the French government at that time. After its clear refusal to participate in the pre-war period, the French government had attempted to rebuild some diplomacy bridges and was making clear efforts to guarantee a role in post-war decision-making, citing humanitarian rights as its guiding force. In this uncertain climate, *Le Figaro* initially attempted to report on those first few months of war whilst strictly containing any form of potential iconic image. To cite just one example, on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2003, a photo of an Iraqi hitting a huge poster of Saddam Hussein with a shoe was flanked by that of two dead Iraqis in a trench with a white handkerchief (that is, a sign of surrender) abandoned at their side. The captions stated that the photograph of the dead Iraqis had not been published by US media whilst the other had been censored by the media in Iraq. The summary ("Les télévisions sélectionnent les images pour influencer les opinions") ["The television news selects images to influence public opinion"] and the title ("La propagande ne fonctionne que sur le plan intérieur") ["Propaganda is effective only for the domestic public"] completed the distancing strategy (Fig. 6).



FIG. 6. *Le Figaro*, 25<sup>th</sup> March 2003, p. 5.

To conclude, it may be interesting to show an example of two radically different coverage of the same subject to show how, by following precise presentational strategies, newspapers can attempt to construct an iconic image or, alternatively, to restrict its iconic power. The example deals with photos taken in a hospital of a child injured by US bombing in Baghdad in the early days of the war. *Il Manifesto* published these photos for the first time on 23<sup>rd</sup> March (Fig. 7.) The face of the crying child is visible with the head partly covered by a bandage. The subject of the photo, the child, is the centre of attention – all surrounding background has been removed. The image of a crying child contributes to a condemnation of the

situation in Baghdad, thanks to the newspaper's favoured strategy of counterpoising a "good" news item (the article refers to just three deaths in the capital despite the enormous bombing attacks) with a contradictory photo displaying the suffering of innocent individuals to counteract the officially released statistics. On 27<sup>th</sup> March, another photo of the same child was published by *Il Manifesto* (Fig. 8.) Once again, his face is revealed from the same photographic angle as before but this time the child is looking at the camera (and thus the reader). He is no longer screaming but his expression can be seen as a cry for help. This subtle change corresponded to a clear change in policy regarding the purpose of the photo. It is in fact a cry for help – not for money but for participation in a general strike called by trade unions to protest against the war. The title is thus an explicit request: "Let's strike to stop the war." In short, the newspaper tried to transform a visual news image into a cultural icon.



FIG. 7. *Il Manifesto*, 23<sup>th</sup> March, p. 4.

A very different presentation was given by *Le Figaro* (Fig. 9.) Here, the picture became part of the column "L'image télé du jour" ("TV news 'image of the day'") which aimed to treat as object-images images that were massively diffused by the rest of the media as event-images. The photograph chosen to represent that decision stood out from those of *Il Manifesto* because in that case the surroundings were awarded more attention and other figures were included – a hospital doctor aiding the child and a crowd of photographers and journalists. The text begins by describing the doctor and his aid to the child, narrating a novel-style tale of this photograph. This story is injected with a bitter reflection on the subject of war, showing its deep

contradictions. It states that the Ministry of Information took journalists there to testify to the harm being done to civilians, according to a precise propaganda strategy: "Ce n'est plus un enfant blessé, mais un dommage collatéral dont la presse doit témoigner" ("He is no longer an injured child but collateral damage, which the press must report to the world".) The use of the expression "collateral damage" within a text of this type makes it even more explicit that the article must be interpreted as a criticism of propaganda and counter-propaganda.

# La resistenza operaia batte cassa

La Fiom riscopre le Casse di resistenza. Sorte nell'800, nel passaggio dalle Società di mutuo soccorso al classismo delle Leghe per affrontare lo strapotere padronale, oggi tornano d'attualità per contrastare l'attacco ai diritti e l'obiettivo delle imprese di voler dominare su tutto

**GABRIELE POLO**

La resistenza s'incarna in un unico, evoca immagini affetti e col cappello flog, odora di polvere di li-  
scivola sul ferro del  
Ottocento. Eppure la  
pena deciso di costituirsi  
sostenere i lavoratori  
iniziative di lotta gra-  
angate nel tempo. Sarà  
un versamento volon-  
tari metalmeccanici  
contributo di tutti coloro  
o solidarizzare con essi.  
ca in via di definizione  
pri di gestione, il sito  
del sindacato  
glia) fornirà le infor-  
Fiom risolverà uno  
ai antico del movimen-  
lungo usato e poi per  
abbandonato? L'ipote-  
za è che di fronte a una  
confitto profondo e  
non sono più sufficienti  
i edimetri (la cassa dete-  
ne frutto del tessera-  
reggere lo scontro e le  
sul reddito dei lavora-  
mento è alle grandi ver-  
all (Fiat su tutto) e con-  
costano decine di ore  
i lavoratori. Ma, più nel  
si rifa al concetto di so-  
no valore costitutivo del  
perano, quello che face-  
sionatori delle prime Ca-  
ono «Uniti siamo tutto,  
anaglia». In un caso co-  
l'aprezza dello scontro  
come radice del movi-  
ma sorprendente analo-  
sime istituzioni del mo-  
raio, di fronte a un rap-  
pre sempre più precario-  
to su basi individuali,  
casse di resistenza na-  
esaggio dalle società di  
oro alle Leghe di resi-  
ste sul mestiere), nel  
epara il solidarismo in-  
del mutuo soccorso da  
telle delle Leghe (base co-  
sindacati di categoria e  
riere del lavoro). E nel-  
dell'industrializzazione  
la rivoluzione dall'alto  
mo di fabbrica che si  
otivamente il rapporto  
ra borghesia liberale  
proletariato industriale,  
una politico in cui il fa-  
lismo non ha alcuna  
sta politica e il diritto  
sora fissato per censo  
998-unitaria potevano  
me 40.000 adulti ma-  
popolazione di 26 milio-  
ti). E lo scontro sociale  
oni e sul prezzo fissato  
ta del lavoro che spinge  
samente alla creazione  
zioni autonome dei  
una prassi che ha al-  
es della solidarietà, della  
legaglianza: proiezioni  
tre parole chiave della  
del 1789.  
libera - dove tutto av-  
all'industrializzazione

ne preoccupano, come evidenzia la circolare inviata da Paolo Onorato Vigliani, ministro di Grazia e giustizia, ai magistrati nel 1873, anno di grandi scioperi: «Queste associazioni - si legge - eccitano gli operai e compilano statuti con cui costituiscono Casse di resistenza per dare sussidi a coloro che si portano in sciopero, ovvero, dopo avvenuto, aprono sottoscrizioni e fanno deliberazioni a pro degli scioperanti». E il ministro sollecita i procuratori del Regno a procedere «contro i colpevoli con sollecitudine e vigore».

Fino alla fine dell'800 le Casse di resistenza crescono e si moltiplicano, costituiscono la rete solidale per i lavoratori, non li lasciano in balia del mercato e del rapporto di lavoro individuale, sono un welfare dal basso. Poi, con la nascita del Partito socialista, dei sindacati di categoria, della Cgil, passano la mano ad altri istituti: la solidarietà si dota di nuovi strumenti, più a carattere nazionale e più politici e col decennio giolittiano lo stato accetta la logica del compromesso sociale, avvia le prime riforme, mentre il rapporto di lavoro diventa sempre più collettivo e nascono i primi embrioni di contratti aziendali e di categoria. La solidarietà di classe trova nuove forme e il ruolo dei partiti politici diventa sempre più forte nel sostenere le lotte di resistenza. Il '900 formalizza un doppio livello di solidarietà di classe: quello ufficiale che istituzionalizza un compromesso sociale tra borghesia e proletariato nelle varie forme statali di assistenza sociale al lavoro (persino il fascismo - col corporativismo, le case popolari, i dopolavori - accetta, a modo suo, la logica della mediazione sociale) e quella informale, fatta di iniziative ad hoc, organizzate principalmente da partiti e sindacati per sostenere le lotte dei lavoratori (dai polli dei contadini emiliani per gli operai delle Reggiane nel loro anno di occupazione della fabbrica nel '50-'51 alle sottoscrizioni per i lavoratori della Fiat durante i 35 giorni dell'autunno '80). Lo spirito delle Casse di resistenza sopravvive così, nelle forme centralistiche tipiche del '900 ma nutrendosi sempre, sotterraneamente, della cultura solidaristica e di affermazione dell'autonomia del lavoro dal capitale che le aveva ispirate. Ora ritornano anche come «istituzioni», rilanciate da un sindacato alle prese proprio con l'individualizzazione del rapporto di lavoro, forte compressione dei salari (quelli dei metalmeccanici italiani sono i più bassi d'Europa), di fronte a una controparte che, spalleggiata dal potere politico, persegue lo smantellamento di tutti gli istituti che hanno segnato la mediazione novecentesca tra capitale e lavoro. In un panorama che nega al lavoro qualunque diritto all'autonomia, che lo riduce a semplice merce da comprare al prezzo più basso possibile e assottiglia il dominio dell'impresa e del mercato su tutti gli aspetti della vita. In una parola nell'era della precarizzazione totale che fa dell'insicurezza la condizione quotidiana di milioni di persone. Una scelta, quiet-

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**CON MANIFESTAZIONI PROVINCIALI E REGIONALI**

**PROMOSSO DA TUTTO IL SINDACALISMO DI BASE**

FIG. 8. *Il Manifesto*, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2003, p. 13.





FIG. 9. *Le Figaro*, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2003, p. 8.

### 3.3. *The Indian Ocean Tsunami and the Beslan School Massacre: the Iconic Contamination Dilemmas*

Previously-established icons play an active part in the process of iconic visual representation. It could even be argued that the whole visual news-making process deeply draws on past images, and that inter-textual relations are vital in the process of visual production at every level: from the moment in which photos are taken, to the moment in which they are archived and distributed by photographic agencies, to the moment in which they are selected within the newsrooms and displayed by the newspapers, to the moment in which they circulated and they are consumed through

different practices. The fact that the photos assume power or legitimacy through their ability to evoke a famous iconographic image is more than simply an idea but is rarely proven in ethnographic terms. However at times it is possible to see and trace this process during ethnographic research – in these cases, the inter-iconic quality of the image initiates a process of production and reproduction of visual stereotypes that can be identified and reported. During a 2005 interview, a photographer of *l'Agence France Press* made an important point about his experience as a photographer in Baghdad:

I believed I had a precise journalistic responsibility. I didn't want to produce one of those over-the-top dramatic images echoing yet again the photos of Vietnam that war photographers are always inspired by. There were lots of opportunities to photograph soldiers in action, with shouting, running, jumping over bridges. All of that was there, but it didn't match the reality of this war that was characterized almost by the lack of a visible enemy, by the few risks being run by soldiers. A true record had to forgo such surely fascinating but inaccurate photos. And that's what I tried to do [...] But the problem was that there was huge competition. Many photographers were young, they had never worked for newspapers before. For them – and I understand them because nobody in the office had ever taught them how to do their job – it was all about getting as many photos as possible, as spectacular or as close to their idea of war as possible. Everyone was pushing them to do this – from the agencies that demand loads of photos, to the newspapers which, by simply failing to interact, give you the impression that you're on the right track. By limiting yourself, deciding not to take certain photos, you're hoisting your own rope and risk losing your job. I think that now this strategy has become impossible to follow and useless as well.

This photographer's comments can be compared with comments given years earlier by Saussier [2001] regarding the exaggerated deadlines given by newspapers to photographers. Saussier claimed that this organizational constraint leads to a tendency to reproduce/recycle famous images. It becomes not so much a question of cognitive schema as, above all, a practical restraint, the impossibility of developing one's own personal interpretation of the events to be photographed. Many photographers have stories to tell about how agencies or newspapers commissioned them to provide bespoke photos, i.e. images which included precise visual details without which they would not be accepted for publication. These requests regard visual elements considered to be part of a shared view of place and social/human conditions that are expected from both cognitive and logical viewpoints. These expectations are generated via previous images as a result of the need to consolidate or remain within a narrative. However, here we consider the intertextual relationships between images (a current one and an older one) that provoke reactions which may be ethnographically recorded and which does not concern recognisability but rather emotive power.

During the editorial selection of current newsworthy pictures, an appropriate iconic image from the past is rarely identified. In these cases, however, journalists may later decide to recover one from the archives and publish it to highlight an analogy. In most cases, however, this does not regard a specific icon but a *sui generis* iconic image. While not referring to a particular image, the journalists evoking it raise the question of analogies with the picture they are viewing and evaluating for publication purposes. A *sui generis* icon can refer to a specific historic event (such as the Holocaust, as we will soon see) or may redirect to a wider field of imagery (such as cinematic imagery.) Such icons involve a potential risk of overstepping perceived boundaries of “acceptability.” Some comparative analogies are considered legitimate, others less so according to the perceived legitimacy or illegitimacy of emotions created by inter-iconic contamination. Such a situation evolved during the selection process of the images of 7/7. In that case the analogies with other terrorist events or the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were viewed as part of a wider and overall legitimate approach. Nevertheless, writing about 4/11 whilst depicting and writing about 7/7 was considered legitimate although printing photographs of 4/11 whilst depicting and writing about 7/7 was not. With reference to 7/7 and Madrid, the analogy regarded the events and the argument concerned the images; whereas in the example of iconic contamination outlined above, the analogy arrived via the photos whilst the discussion revolved around the events and their significance.

Thus, while some inter-iconic analogies are underlined and made explicit, as in the cases described by Zelizer [2004] or in the case of two photos of fire-fighters at Ground Zero and the attack at Iwo Jima [Ch eroux 2007; Hariman and Lucaites 2007], in other cases the fact that the current newsworthy photo clashes with specific or *sui generis* icons, may cause it to become a subject of contention, the subject of animated arguments among newsroom staff in charge of selecting the photos.

During my fieldwork at *Il Manifesto*, I had various opportunities to speak with the photo-editor about certain photograph selections they had made in the past. The photo-editor paid close attention to the resemblances that certain photographs might share with other important historic images. In particular, iconic photos of the Holocaust were presented as historical metaphors establishing the boundaries of acceptable imagery [see Zelizer 1998; Alexander 2009.] Looking at a “hardcore” photo of the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, which showed a pile of corpses rescued from under mounds of earth by a bulldozer, the photo-editor told me:

I really clearly remember that I didn’t want to use that picture. It invited comparison with those taken by photographers behind the armies as they entered and liberated concentration camps straight after the defeat of Germany [...] There is no reason to recycle that iconic imagery which depicted such a harrowing chapter in world

history [...] We had huge arguments with the foreign affairs journalists and the editor-in-chief over that photo. The only possible justification for using it was the historic *gravity* of the event, the number of victims.

In other words, a news-value (quantity) contrasted with a “disturbing” aesthetic-figurative representation, positioned on the virtual boundaries of legitimacy of the imagery. Precisely because the two events were so different, the analogous comparison that the image produced was seen as “wrong,” “without reason.”

The photo-editor of *Il Manifesto* often had to argue with the rest of the editorial team over the use of certain photos. He said:

Sometimes I have to be a journalistic gatekeeper because – and its normal – whoever doesn’t have a background in this job tends to confuse images arriving from photojournalism with those from a fictional or cinematographic provenance, as they don’t have any standards to measure their decisions against. It has happened more than once that editorial staff or the chief editor have liked a photo because it evoked an image from the past which sometimes wasn’t actually from the history of photojournalism but from cinema or TV. This is why I’ve had to argue a million times to keep the imagery of photojournalism separate, as it should be. And when dealing with that imagery, you have to tread carefully. The question is very delicate, the authenticity of our feelings when looking at those images is at risk.

On another occasion, we talked about the newspaper’s photographic coverage in the case of the Beslan school massacre, in Northern Ossetia at the beginning of September 2004 when 186 children were killed. In an event accompanied by such intense ethical connotations, journalists are first and foremost passive spectators, emotively affected by the tragedy. The photo-editor commented on those photos:

As you can see, the photos that we chose for the front pages of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> September were images of hope. Here (2<sup>nd</sup> September) there’s a man carrying a child to safety, whilst here (3<sup>rd</sup>) there’s a woman holding her child, one of the sixteen just freed. We saw through their eyes. You can see all their desperation, but also the hope they have. At that moment, in the newsroom we were right there, supporting them all the way.



FIG. 10. *Il Manifesto*, 4<sup>th</sup> September 2004, p. 1.

This is why the photograph that the head editors chose for the front page of 4<sup>th</sup> September (Fig. 10), after the massacre was over, was not approved by the photo-editor. The picture shows a strong and sturdy man carrying a wounded girl to safety. The photo-editor explained:

When everything went wrong and all hope was gone, the head editors saw this photo on the website of *La Repubblica* and everyone loved it [...] And, in fact, it's a great photo. Maybe they liked it because that macho Russian guy seemed almost like an action hero. Then, the tense arm of the girl, the way she holds her hand, reminds me of a Renaissance Christian icon. But it's incoherent with the sequence of events, because it's still a photo of hope, just like the days before. And that day all my hope had gone, as had the others'. In fact, look – a photo that encourages hope topped by a title without hope (“No tomorrow”) and an article that talks about death (“Mercy is dead”). There's not even a coherent page organization. It's as if nothing had changed, which is not true because our feelings had completely changed.

In this case the intertextual relationship between images (*sui generis* cinematography icon, and *sui generis* icon of Renaissance art) is what the photo-editor believes to have pushed (perhaps unconsciously) the head editors of his newspaper to choose that photo as a potential icon. In this case, the roles were inverted, as in the example above (paragraph. 3.1) of the argument over the photo of 7/7 in *Corriere della Sera*, with the photo director trying to successfully adhere to journalistic frame despite the need to search for an iconic image of an extraordinary event.

#### 4. Discussion

The main aim of this study is to discuss the methods and strategies of selection and presentation of what the journalists themselves identify as necessary or potential visual news icons, as well as the role played by iconic photographs in the news-making process and in their relationships with the “iconic power of events” [Bartmanski 2012a.] Particular attention is paid to the strategies that journalists develop in order to manage and exploit the emotive power and symbolic complexity of specific images. This process may be defined as “the journalistic discourse of event-images.”

An iconic image may be strategically searched for to satisfy a specific need, as often occurs with exceptional breaking news. In some cases, a newspaper or news-magazine may feel obliged to print an unexpected or striking image due to the fact that the rest of the media have already done so or are about to do so. Some of these pictures are labelled as being “potential iconic images” – i.e. having the power to influence public thinking on a particular topic and/or to produce emotional reactions that journalists often judge to be even inappropriate or dangerous. These presumptions, in tension with the shared belief that the image must be shown, lead to specific “restraining” or “containing” strategies being put into play in order to limit their iconic power. Finally, there are certain photographs which are viewed by journalists as closely tied to pre-existing iconic images. Such analogies may be considered more

or less legitimate according to the emotions they are assumed to produce. In these cases, the question of inter-iconic cross-referencing becomes accountable whilst also raising the question of the power and value of icons within the newsroom's work. In other words, the question of intertextual relationship between images shifts to the question of iconic contamination as photo selection becomes part of a wider code referring to the emotions produced by the images, which are in turn guided by events construed and constructed by the journalistic process as highly emotive. It is this very relationship that can be viewed as being at the root of iconicity (and more widely and theoretically – it could be argued – of the iconic turn in cultural sociology itself.)

If we consider iconic contamination from an ethnographic point of view, in the sociological field of visual news-making, it is essential to underline how it interweaves with the dual journalistic demand for the production of familiarity and “coherent direction” [Breed 1955], as occurs, often competitively, during daily news-making and reproduction of a journalistic frame – and the search for news via iconic images often beginning from a shared pool of available photos. It is no coincidence that the question of iconic contamination emerges as problematic and becomes accountable at the exact moment that an extraordinary event arises, when journalists feel more than ever responsible for containing or controlling their audience's emotions, taking on themselves the roles of emotively affected spectators. The delicate process of visual transcription of these emotions, led by the analytical obligations of opinion journalism shows the fundamental ties between journalistic practices and the complex social production process of cultural icons.

On the basis of the ethnographic study presented in this paper, it may be useful to recall and discuss the four criteria of iconicity proposed by Binder [2012]: reference (or authenticity), transcendence, syntagmatic openness and paradigmatic openness.

Drawing on Barthes' interpretation of “shock photos,” the rhetoric of which is too weak to appear authentic [Barthes 1957], Binder [2012, 106] argues that “[a]uthenticity has to be regarded as the outcome of a pictorial performance. Performances can fail, but only a successful reference turns the image into an ‘emanation of the referent’ or an ‘emanation of a past reality’ [...] and shocking photos into gateways to the sacred and terrible pain of others.” Regarding this first point, the herein presented ethnographic study explains these performances in terms of a journalistic negotiation, and at the same time it pushes the discourse on authenticity towards the wider area of the complex relationships between the news story and the presumed emotional power of images (be those emotions considered legitimate or illegitimate.) An interesting ethnographic example regarding this point comes from the refusal of the photo-editor of *Il Manifesto* to publish the photo of the dead in New

Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, some days after the catastrophe. In the interview she explained:

The news story about New Orleans signed off in our newspaper by citing a certain number of casualties. Then it was revealed that the number was much higher and we said to ourselves that the number of photos published was scarce in comparison. Also, when the news was already cold, lots of really dramatic photos started to arrive, loads of photos of victims that we hadn't had access to before because for some days most of those dead bodies had been under water. Should we now print them to show our readers the terrible results of what had happened? Or to support the strong criticism being made of the Bush administration policies? We didn't show them. We thought it made no sense to show those dead bodies when the disaster was over and the question had now turned to the mismanagement. At that point, printing photos like that is unjustified and public denouncement of political policy – an undeniable right – should be made in other ways.

If authenticity is to be seen as the result of a performance that affects the feelings of the spectator, this performance not only regards the aesthetic and compositional aspect of the photographs but also affects the relationship between written texts and photos within a complex news-making process. Thus reformulated, the criteria of authenticity remains central to that of iconicity, whilst also raising the question of the legitimacy of public consumption of the images, i.e. the process of selection of possible icons.

The second criteria introduced by Binder is that of transcendence, i.e. the ability of the image to transcend the subject and the event that it represents. From an ethnographic point of view, transcendence should be linked to the question of the news framing, which also concerns the positioning of those subjects and events within a wider frame agreed on by the editorial board. The journalistic frame offers narrative continuity, inserting the news into a familiar cognitive schema. As we have seen, the process of narrating a frame via one of the many photos arriving from the scene of the event is of vital importance primarily for the front page photo, a privileged position where the first battle for journalistic iconicity takes place. An antithetical demand comes from the search for visual novelty. Icon here means a picture “never seen before” or a special picture of that particular event. Together, these two journalistic demands compete in the selection process, in a performance that not only chooses potential icons but also produces audiences for possible icons, creating a link between the discursive level (of analogies and cause-and-effect relationships) and the aesthetic surface, i.e. the material photograph, whose reference value is always at least partially transcended by its own presence in print next to other framing devices. This anchoring of the photo to the frame shows the role of journalism in the production of an audience for its icons in an over-crowded competitive media environment. It is a role



performed within a context of global representations and local interpretations. Thus revisited, the criterion of transcendence appears more complex and at the same time the most stimulating when tracing the relationship between the sociology of visual news-making and the literature on iconicity. What level of symbolic extension do these local frames have? And what level of symbolic extension do the pictures have, independently of the local frames produced about and through the images themselves by the news-making process?

The third criterion, of syntagmatic openness, can be traced directly back to the above quoted questions of the photo-editor of *Il Manifesto* (paragraph 3.1.1.) regarding the picture of the woman with the white mask being taken away by a boy on the day of the London terror attacks (“Who were those people? Why the mask? What was it for?”.) Nevertheless, viewing this interpretive openness not in general terms but as a possible selection criterion for photographs once again shows the importance of ethnographic viewpoints when discussing the selection of potential icons. Furthermore, ethnographic study introduces the issue of presentation strategies for images. The practice of using an image specifically due to its syntagmatic openness can lead to opposing strategies able to either increase or contain the iconic potential of the photo.

The final criterion is paradigmatic openness. This deals more with the practices of picture appropriation and diffusion through different spaces and times (with multiple participants and intermediaries) than with the daily newsroom work. However, also this criterion can find its initial entry point in daily journalism and indeed – in ethnographic terms – is not substantially different from the question of transcendence.

## 5. Conclusion

After the long silence that followed the empirical studies conducted in and around the 1970's, in recent years ethnography on news production has had a revival. Cottle [2007] and Stonbely [2013] put into light its importance and limitations, highlighting the novelties brought from the “second wave” of studies. In particular, the important re-evaluation of journalists' agency, which had been suppressed by classic studies, and the shift from the original emphasis on routine to an emphasis on practices, stand out. Speaking about journalists, seen from the perspective of recent production ethnography, Cottle [2007, 10] wrote:

They are not, in other words, “unwittingly, unconsciously” serving “as a support for the reproduction of a dominant ideological discursive field” [Hall 1982, 82.] This shift of approach helps, then, to bridge the theoretical divide between political

economy, cultural studies and organisational studies approaches to news [Berkowitz 1997; Schudson 2000.] Markets, cultures and production practices all interpenetrate and are actively negotiated in the moment of production.

Cottle calls for a relatively new and discourse-oriented ethnographic approach, which “signals both a sense of ‘practice’ and the ‘administrative’ in the enactment and regulation of social processes.” To this end, he recalls a number of works [Bell 1991; Cottle 1993; Pedelty 1995; Clausen 2001; Forde 2003; Matthews 2003] which “lend support to this more ‘productive’ view of news practices”. Following this direction, this paper showed that it could be possible not only to bridge the theoretical divide between cultural and organisational approaches, but also the theoretical divide between the sociology of news production and the iconic turn in cultural sociology. In fact, looking at the news-making process by focusing on icons and iconicity allows to partially restore the divide between organisational and cultural approaches as it was described by Schudson [1989; 2000.] As this paper shows, both the awareness of the inter-textual relationship between images and the journalistic discussions about the need to manage this inter-textual relationship in terms of iconic contamination reveal an important aspect of the role that cultural frames play in the production of news. In this sense, the organisational approach and the cultural approach bind together.

Another aspect that stands out from the second wave of ethnographic studies deals with the need of going beyond the newsrooms, considering the deep change that media has undergone, with the advent of satellite television, and then with internet. From this perspective, networked journalism requires a multi-site ethnographic approach in order to be studied in its complexity.

The new media environment is central also for the study of photographic icons in cultural sociology, but in this case its importance mainly refers to the diffusion of these images in the longest periods of time that follow the first publication of the photographs. There is no doubt in fact that the two matters of decentralized production and the widespread diffusion of visual materials are important factors in the process of iconicity.

The new media environment created by satellite and digital technologies has a great influence on editorial expectations regarding the circulation of potential icons. The very fact of watching the same news channels as the competitors, of having shared photograph archives and the possibility of checking in real time the visual choices made on-line by rival newspapers does not have the effect of creating a sense of frustration or impotence regarding the ability to influence global circulation of the photos, but rather of helping newsroom editors to understand which photos are potential icons and enabling them to activate specific presentation strategies of such photos. These expectations play an active role in the visual framing process

and produce representations which arguably construct specific relationships between aesthetic surface and discursive depth during the circulation of news photos. In the context of the gradually increasing importance of gatewatching rather than gatekeeping [Bruns 2005; 2008], this effect turns out to be particularly relevant. This shift does not bring to a loss of importance of the newsrooms being object of sociological attention, but rather to the possibility of looking at newsrooms as if they were indeed privileged sites – both because they attempt to create a public and a durable frame around images of single events that are proposed as cultural icons, and because they fight to reduce the power of icons that are in the process of being established.

Editorial work on images shows in fact the constant attempt to manage the emotional impact of images that are thought in terms of icons. It is exactly in the relationship between the news frames and emotionality [Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen 2011; Wahl-Jorgensen 2013] that the newsrooms play a role in the process of iconic construction. Emotional power is considered to be an essential element of iconicity. However, the emotional power is built within a balance between the production and re-production of a frame and the search for the right distance between other images or iconic events. It is a delicate balance that provokes particular journalistic tensions, whether it is about looking for a necessary icon or to contrast an icon that is in the process of being established, or to manage the contamination produced by an already established icon. A series of “strategic rituals” intervene in this process. If one reads such rituals through the lens of iconic power, then they can be seen under a new light – as this paper aimed to show, by offering a few conceptual elements that can promote a dialogue between visual culture studies, journalism studies and cultural sociology. Moreover, analysing the complex journalistic process of emotional and moral balance between events and images further shows how the theme of the production of a proper emotional and moral distance between images and spectators links journalistic, aesthetic and ethical issues together [Boltanski 1993; Chouliaraki 2010a; Chouliaraki 2010b; Becker 2011.]

In conclusion, as it emerges from this research, the object of study of “the journalistic process of management of the iconic power of photographs” can overcome the limits of the organisational functionalism that is typical of many works about news-making as well as of the “strong” culturalism that is typical of many works about iconicity. By making these two approaches communicate in a fertile way it will be possible to develop a new conceptual tool-kit both for the sociology of journalism and for the study of iconic power.

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## Iconic Photographs in the Newsroom

### An Ethnography of Visual News-making in Italy and France

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**Abstract:** This paper presents and discusses the results of an ethnographic research on the process of visual news-making, which was carried out within the newsrooms of four national newspapers: *Corriere della Sera* and *il Manifesto* in Italy, *Le Figaro* and *Libération* in France. It analyses a few case studies: the invasion of Iraq, the massacre in Beslan, the Pacific Ocean Tsunami and the terrorist attack in London (7/7). The ethnographic data are discussed by offering an analysis that relates the sociology of journalism with the cultural-sociological literature on iconicity. Three major signifying practices are identified: *the search for a necessary icon*, *the management of potential icons* and *the negotiation around iconic contamination*. These practices demonstrate the crucial role of newsroom work in either promoting or restricting the iconic power of news photographs.

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**Keywords:** *News-making, Iconicity, Digital Photojournalism, Crisis Events, Framing.*

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