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The Iconic News Image as Visual Event in Photojournalism and Digital Media

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Abstract

This thesis shows how the uses and meanings of the iconic news image have changed with the emergence of digital media. Most of the iconic photographs of the twentieth century were produced by photojournalists and published in mass circulation newspapers and magazines. In the twenty-first century, amateurs have greater access to image producing technologies and greater capacity to disseminate their images through the Internet. This situation has made possible the use of iconic news images to support political agendas other than those promoted in the media institutions and beyond the range of censorship imposed by those media.

In order to demonstrate the functions and understand this unprecedented situation, this thesis explores how iconic news images produce meaning. I consider formal definitions of iconic news images but adopt Nicholas Mirzoeff's theory of the visual event to explain how the meanings of iconic news images are impacted by historical context, media institutions and viewer responses. This dynamic model of visual communication allows us to see that iconic news images indeed function as events and that there is a political struggle over the creation, staging, publication and interpretation of those events.

The thesis develops this argument by analysing a series of historical examples. The images range from the iconic news images of World War II used in the official propaganda for the war effort, through the combination of amateur and professional images used in the 9/11 visual canon, to the activist images of the ongoing Syrian Civil War. The significance of 9/11 is that although some images produced by amateurs did

become iconic (for example Holocaust photographs or from the Kennedy assassination) it was not until the 9/11 attacks that the amateur production of the image began to be directly assimilated into mass media.

What this means is that the media institutions are no longer the sole arbitrators of the images that represent world events. Instead, using digital media, anyone including the media institutions, activists, military and terrorists create events that are so powerful in their traumatic impact, that they have to be published. Protest and terrorist movements have long understood that their impact depends on media coverage. Now images themselves can be more directly mobilised through digital media to reach viewers. They no longer require the media institutions or their resources.

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