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Shaping the Notion of Media Influence: The Remediated Images of the Vietnam War

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The photojournalistic icons of the Vietnam War result from a cultural construction and a process of iconization that took place over several decades. With every reprint and remediation, these pictures lost some of their historical context and came to be read as purely symbolic images. Their meaning has been simplified over time to bend them to a media discourse focused on the writing of history, as a brief summary of the historiography of photojournalistic icons will show. This article will then present a detailed examination of the reprints of these images in a corpus of widely circulated American newspapers and magazines between 1960 and 2000. The historic "trace" left by iconic photographs is also made of their remediations in antiwar posters, in documentary movies, in museum exhibitions and, most of all, in photojournalistic anthologies of famous pictures—here regarded as remediations because of their use not as historical documents but as illustrations of media influence. In fact, since the end of the war, icons have come to be chosen as representatives of the war but also of the work of photojournalists. The breakdown of the trace of the four Vietnam War icons will lead to a discussion of their impact on contemporary media content through a comparison with recent "instant icons." These viral images are the digital equivalent of icons from the golden age of photojournalism but make historians question and redefine the meaning of the word "icon" itself.

Looking into the Influence Theory

The war in Vietnam has had a substantial impact on American history and culture. It is remembered for creating a nationwide controversy, for putting a strain on the relationships between the political sphere and the news media, and for creating the first highly visible community of veterans suffering from various forms of post-traumatic shock disorder. This first American defeat altered the country immeasurably and in multiple ways, one of the most intriguing of which is the direction taken by collective memory. The "First Television War" is determinedly associated with the important role played by the media in the information of the American public. News from the war was fast and plentiful, but people also remember the great negativity that characterized news coverage of that time. The historiography of the war, which

consists of academic works as well as journalistic writings, consistently refers to the antagonistic relationship between the media and the political administration during the war. In that era, the successive administrations, both Democratic and Republican, were wary of the harmful influence they thought the media could have on public opinion. President Richard Nixon, though not the sole critic of the media, often stated publicly that media coverage—whose veracity he regularly questioned—impacted the political life of the country and could notably influence decisions taken by Congress (Nixon 115). In fact, political and military administrators were defining actors in the belief in the influence of the media; they forced journalists to reassert their rights and legitimacy both in newspapers and in their own memoirs (Browne, Caputo, Halberstam, *The Making*, Halberstam, *The Powers*).

These prominent discourses greatly impacted the historiography of the war when it started to be written in the 1980s. Among historians of the media specifically, early writings were founded on the assumption that the prominence of the media in political discourse could only mean that they did have an impact on political decisions and public opinion (Garcia, Gustainis, Schudson). This historiographical movement, originating in the antagonistic relationship between the administration and the media, is referred to here as the influence theory. Never fully proven, the influence theory nonetheless became popular in the 1980s because of the convenient scapegoat it offered on which to blame the defeat in Vietnam. As early as 1986 (Hallin), a new wave in the historiography focused on correcting the first wave by closely re-reading media coverage and comparing it to trends in public opinion and administrative decisions. This historiographical wave developed fully in the 1990s (Hammond, Perlmutter) and some of its greatest works are still considered foundational (Gladstone 89). The influence theory however is so popular with administrators that it has managed to seep into public discourse. In the Trump era, the belief in the harmful influence of the media seems to follow partisan divides, but when it comes to the history of the Vietnam War, many people still believe the media had some kind of impact—although the "media" and "impact" remain mostly generic terms—as private conversations often show. Even professional journalists continue to disagree as exemplified by a variety of recent articles. In "Seeing It Now" (2012), Louis Menand looks at the legacy of Walter Cronkite and at how his great popularity with the American public could have contributed to exaggerate the impact of his 1968 report on the Tet Offensive, supposedly a turning point in the public's perception of the war; on the contrary, photojournalists at *Time* focus on the accomplishments of their profession and celebrate it by embracing the term "influential" when referring to its most famous productions (Goldberger).

Photojournalism, in fact, is at the center of the development of the influence theory in the history of the Vietnam War. As a profession, photojournalism thrived during the war, benefiting from the conjuncture of high mass media development, a well-developed and popular newsmagazine industry, and technological advances that made photo cameras more portable and picture reproduction cheaper. Coverage of the war by the written press and television being very extensive, the American public was kept well informed of most of the war's developments. Historically, the number of American casualties was among the most guarded information; but altogether the American news media contributed to creating a solid narrative and imagery of the war that deeply impacted collective memory and popular culture.

For the sake of this study, the war images of Vietnam could be separated into two categories in the visual legacy of the Vietnam War. The "classic" imagery, made of generic photographs of helicopters, American Marines, the jungle, anti-war protests, etc. is used across a range of media to tell visual stories of the war. Few of these can be recognized or identified as lasting visual remnants of the war. They usually merely constitute a *type* of picture from the war and fall into generic categories of visual documents. The second category is a group of four images that has reached a singular status. These images, which we call icons, are all but generic; they do not tell so much as symbolize. The 20th century has seen the emergence of several dozen iconic photographs characterized by their ability to withstand time and to symbolize a variety of concepts internal or external to their visual content. Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, who have studied iconic photographs extensively, offer the following definition:

> [...] Photojournalistic icons [are] those photographic images appearing in print, electronic, or digital media that are widely recognized and remembered, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics. A few images meet these criteria. Others meet some but not all of them. (Hariman and Lucaites 27, authors' emphasis)

In the case of the Vietnam War, the four icons are the photograph of the self-immolation of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc (Malcolm Browne, 1963), the photograph of General Loan executing a Vietcong prisoner during the Tet offensive (Eddie Adams, 1968), a photograph of Mary Ann Vecchio leaning over a victim of the Kent State shooting (John Paul Filo, 1970), and a photograph of Vietnamese children running away from a napalm attack, Kim Phuc naked in the center (Nick Ut, 1972). Other photographs from the Vietnam War are very famous today and can be widely recognized: *Reaching Out* by Larry Burrows (1966) or the two Flower Power pictures by Marc Riboud and Bernie Boston (1967). These photographs have escaped the boundaries of their original context and become adaptable objects that lend themselves to reprints and

remediations: they all became famous through a lengthy process of repetitive reuses in the written and digital press—for the purpose of illustrating a variety of topics—combined with uses of the original images in different visual media—whether that be the inclusion of a still in a documentary film,[1] the reenactments of the events in fictional movies,[2] etc. On many occasions, the evolution of the role they fulfilled in the press made reprints virtual remediations: they went from illustrations, to visual evidence, to historical documents, to incarnations of the powers of the media and of photography. They are now said to be invariably recognized, even when reproduced as sketches or paintings or combined with other images, as in the editorial cartoon "Abu Ghraib 'Nam" by Dennis Draughon (2004). This last example shows how the "Napalm Girl" photograph, having taken on strong antiwar symbolism through the years, transcends the context of the Vietnam War and offers comments on later conflicts—here, the Iraq War and its Abu Ghraib crisis of 2003. Yet the narrative that we tend to see as inherent to these icons, or at least deeply anchored in them, was not always self-evident. In fact, their iconization—the process which extracted them from their editorial context and made them actual *icons*—happened over a very long period; they were only recognized as icons after they *acquired* this array of new meanings in the late 1980s.

Most historians of photography agree with Hariman and Lucaites, who stated that icons are "the signature work of photojournalism" (Hariman and Lucaites 4-5). The bibliography on iconic images which started emerging in the early 1990s is now extensive, having received numerous contributions from journalists and historians of the media, with Vicki Goldberg as one of its pioneering figures. On the basis of the remediations, reuses, and reappropriations as a defining principle of iconic photographs, Hariman, Lucaites, Goldberg, and others, have looked into the various powers and symbols the Vietnam pictures have taken on and proposed that their constant recalling in various media has made them universally recognized objects and is a symptom of the belief in their influence. This is due to readings of these symbolic pictures as inherently rhetorical from the 1990s on, demonstrated in statements such as: "[The Kent State icon] sent a frightful message to Washington" and "With this never-to-be-forgotten photograph

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[1] From historical documentaries such as *Vietnam: A Television History* (PBS, 1983) to more meta-journalistic films such as *Looking for an Icon* (Icarus Film, 2005). The recent 10-part documentary about Vietnam directed by Ken Burns (PBS, 2017) starts with an introductory montage of images taken from events considered as key or pivotal. The four icons presented here are featured either in still or moving form, which points to the fact that the history of the Vietnam War can no longer be told without reference to them.

[2] *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987) includes scenes of urban warfare inspired by the Tet Offensive; the *Kent State* docudrama (James Goldstone, 1981), mentioned further down in this article, reenacts the scene depicted in John Paul Filo's iconic photograph.

[(*Napalm Girl*)], America's longest, most unpopular war was dealt a crushing blow" (Monk 43-44); "[The Execution icon] roused national anger in the United States against the summary street justice administered by a Vietnamese general" (Marien 367). Although this article accounts solely for the process of iconization of these Vietnam pictures, the impact of their creation process on later decades is clear today. Pictures from the Syrian refugee crisis, for instance, have been interpreted as instant icons, which shows how much faster the digital media have made the process of iconization—or possibly that the term "icon" has lost some of its value over time.

The purpose of the present article is not to contradict these findings. Iconic images have long been thought to hold powers of influence over the public and the administration, a theory that *No Caption Needed* and other works (Perlmutter, Hallin) have disproved or dismissed as irrelevant. The icons of Vietnam have specifically been used as visual illustrations of the impact of media coverage on administrative decisions[3] or blamed for causing public opinion to shift.[4] But even though historians of the media have managed to correct these early assumptions with extensive research on media content and evolution of public opinion,[5] the question of *why* these images are thought to be influent remains to be answered. In *No Caption Needed*, Hariman and Lucaites present detailed compositional and contextual analysis, and analyze some reuses and artful remediations of several icons, to highlight and explain their rhetoric. The present study is also founded on empirical research but primarily aims to account for what came before, not after, icons.[6]

Their various reproductions across a range of visual media and the "trace" they left in the press have to be examined in detail, as they outline the different stages in the construction of the theory of influence. Comprehensive bodies of documents have been examined for this study, in order to make out the trends in the process of emancipation of iconic photographs, or how they

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[3] The idea that President Lyndon B. Johnson decided not to seek reelection in 1968 because of the Tet Offensive coverage was, for instance, so often repeated in the historiography that it has warranted many analyses over the years and was discussed and critiqued by Robert W. Merry in *The National Interest* (2012).

[4] The belief in the influence of media coverage, whether it be from newspapers or television reports, on the opinions of the public is recognized by most of the historians of the media (notably Schudson 22, and all of Perlmutter's works mentioned here).

[5] Hallin and Hammond are the pioneers of that movement, looking at primary sources (media coverage, official reports and memos) to highlight the inconsistencies of the influence theory. More recently, Hanusch (2010) wrote a similarly methodical study of the historiography of violent press pictures, noting how previous analyses of their inner rhetoric were too normative (123).

[6] In-depth analysis of the articles mentioned or quoted below, detailed accounts of the methodology used, and further developments of the different stages of iconization are detailed in my dissertation (Rouquet).

became free of their editorial context. The idea that sensationalism and symbolism were the sole causes of iconization is handled with caution, as it seems to originate in esthetic readings of press photographs. This now popular idea will be proved reductive and conceals other signs of agency and purpose. This paper is a short account of the conclusions drawn from an examination of several corpuses: the reproductions of the four iconic photographs of Vietnam between 1963 and 2010 and the reactions to them in letters to the editors of nine national dailies and weeklies (*The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*), as well as the collections of posters and pamphlets from the antiwar movement held at the U.C. Berkeley libraries and on several online databases.[7]

A quantitative approach to this was not sufficient to produce a full outline of the process of iconization. The reduced corpus of images—only four of them are considered icons—made it possible to look for all of their reprints in the selected corpus of periodicals. These were chosen for their relevance in the United States: they are all national papers and benefited from a large circulation from the 1960s to the 2000s. A combination of newspaper indexes (consulted at the U.C. Berkeley Libraries) and of the digital material referenced on the online platform Proquest were used to return as many archived articles as possible. The articles were filtered by using all the key words found in the historiography which described or referred to the four icons. As far as antiwar documents were concerned, since the overwhelming amount of papers make indexation virtually impossible, the decision was made to include only the databases accessible at the U.C. Berkeley Libraries and all authorized online databases; all visual materials were browsed extensively and divided into categories of recurring images.

Initial Reception of Iconic Photographs

Icons are often described as instant antiwar symbols (Goldberg, *The Power* 135; Davis 388; Marien 368; Herring 192) that made a quick imprint on American culture, but looking at their traces reveals that the volume of original reprints of these photographs was not as considerable as it is made out to be. Today, characterizations of icons as ubiquitous are common: "[Napalm Girl] was an image that appeared and reappeared in newspapers and magazines all over the world as a symbol of the ravages of the Vietnam War" (*Washington Post*, 02/20/1997, VA1C).s This is one of many such characterizations found in the press, which became more common in the early 1990s and are still found today. In our selected corpus, however, some of the

[7] References in the bibliography, under "archival material."

periodicals did not even publish the pictures in the first weeks after the correlated event. The following table illustrates in which periodicals the four pictures were published:

Picture and date	**Thich Quang Duc self-immolation, 1963**	**Saigon execution, 1968**	**Kent State shooting, 1970**	**Napalm girl, 1972**
Printed within a month in		*The New York Times*	*The New York Times*	*The New York Times*
	The Los Angeles Times	*The Los Angeles Times*	*The Los Angeles Times*	*The Los Angeles Times*
		The Washington Post	*The Washington Post*	*The Washington Post*
		The Chicago Tribune	*The Chicago Tribune*	*The Chicago Tribune*
	Time	*Time*		
	Life		*Life*	*Life*
	Newsweek	*Newsweek*	*Newsweek*	*Newsweek*

Fig. 1. List of immediate publications in selected corpus

Several factors had an impact on the differences in treatment of the first (1963) and the last (1972) icons. Primarily, the visual culture flourished in the 1960s and the public grew progressively more tolerant of graphic images as they became more common in movies. Regardless, not all of these pictures made it to the front page when they were first published, and most of the periodicals relied on these photographs as mere illustrations of the event, not as symbolic images of the war itself. Their instant echo was limited.

The reception of these images is invoked by historians of photography and of the media as one of the determining factors in the iconization process. Their analyses, as well as those of contemporaries themselves, have often referred to the great impact of shocking images on newspapers readers or on families watching the news on television: "The [film and the pictures of the execution] created an immediate revulsion at a seemingly gratuitous act of savagery that was widely seen as emblematic of a seemingly gratuitous war" (*New York Times*, 07/16/1998, 27). In the case of the Vietnam War, iconic images are also deemed powerful enough to have galvanized the antiwar movement.[8] It is difficult to give strict evidence to substantiate these statements, and even more so to disprove them. For this work, however, it seemed important to give context to them and to qualify them, because they are an integral part of the influence theory. For this purpose, two types of sources were examined: the letters to the editors of national newspapers and magazines—which would shed light on some of the American public's primary reactions to the iconic photographs—and the content of antiwar documents, including

[8] As can be noticed in common assertions such as: "The photo won a Pulitzer Prize for Mr. Filo and became *the emblem* of the anti-war movement" (*New York Times*, 04/25/1995, B4, author's emphasis).

pamphlets, flyers, posters, silkscreens, etc.—to ascertain which types of images were used by the Movement and made up its visual identity (see “archival material”).

The examination of antiwar documents determined that there are some isolated examples of remediations of the future icons in antiwar posters and pamphlets. Nevertheless, these are not in the least representative of the visual productions of the antiwar movement which relied heavily on much more pitiful and graphic images to convey a forceful and moralistic message. Some very gruesome pictures were used over and over by various antiwar groups and contributed to depict the American military as violent; the Vietnamese guerrilla fighters as dauntless; and the Vietnamese civilians as passive victims. In most occurrences, these depictions could warrant only one interpretation, many of them being heavy-handed because of their horrific content.[9] In comparison, the content of the images that have become iconic is more subtle, adaptable, and sanitized because the violence is mostly suggested and suspended. Although shootings, attacks of children, and self-immolations are in themselves emotionally disturbing events, in these specific pictures the absence of traces of blood or other visual signs of physical damage is striking. These harsh pictures are not so graphic that the onlooker is made to look away, as in many examples found in antiwar documents. This simplicity and subtlety meant that iconic images did not lend themselves well to the discourse intended by the antiwar movement, which tried to admonish the American public and administration as harshly as they could. This example of an antiwar poster entitled *Vietnamization* and produced by the Weather Underground in 1970 is one of many representative examples of the daring imagery of the movement and of how brutality was used to attempt to shock the public into a reaction.

As for the letters to the editors, they were not treated in this study as a representative source to gauge public opinion—they are not representative, and such a source does not exist. However, by taking a quantitative approach and reading letters over clearly circumscribed periods, one can perceive potential trends in the reception of these iconic images and shed light on the common assumption that these pictures raised public awareness as soon as they were first published. Such growing concern, or even outrage as it is often described, should have left its mark on this popular newspaper section. The letters to the editors were collected and read over the six weeks (10 to 12 weeks for the weeklies) that followed the first publications of the photographs as

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[9] These are the main categories of images observed in the source materials used for this case study. Though not all groups used the same pictures, these three categories make up the bulk of the visual imagery of the antiwar movement and several pictures were found across the archives of many antiwar groups.

illustrations to their events. The collected data shows that the reactions to the *events* reported were reasonably numerous, but the pictures themselves were rarely discussed. In most letters, the authors wished merely to offer support to American troops, to criticize the war, or to discuss the position or subjectivity of the journalists they wrote to. When the future icons *were* mentioned, it was mostly out of outrage at what was perceived by some as inappropriate content, which could contradict the idea that newspapers in any way influenced a certain reading of these pictures.

It appears that we retrospectively think of icons as instant phenomena because of the space they now occupy in American culture. Many people who experienced the war do remember the first time these pictures appeared in the papers. But the aim of this study, in showing that their echo and influence have been exaggerated by the media and the historiography of the war, is to show that icons have the power to alter memory and impact our own current reception of news pictures.

Reprints and Remediations

Although none of these photographs became instant icons, they were not instantly forgotten either. They benefited from an early cycle of reprints within their original media: the press. Among the reprints of the four future icons that were found in the present newspaper corpus between 1963 and 2010, approximately 40% of them occurred during the 1970s, on three significant dates: 1973, the withdrawal of the American troops from Vietnam; 1975, the official end of the conflict; and 1979, which marked the end of the decade. At such key moments, it had become traditional for the news media to write commemorative summaries of major past events and to commemorate history through illustrated chronologies. On these three occasions, the future icons did appear in some newspapers and magazines, though not all of them, but they never did so as standalone photographs. Most of these 1970s reprints of future icons were part of broader retrospective spreads written about the war, either to retrace its chronology of events, highlight its turning points, or merely look back on its press coverage. *Newsweek* published a very typical spread on February 5, 1973, entitled “At Last, the Vietnam Peace” (*Newsweek*, 02/05/1973, 18-19), in which the photographs of the Tet Execution and of the Napalm Girl were found next to a variety of pictures of American soldiers and Vietnamese victims. Some of those were generic images, indistinguishable from the hundreds of similar pictures published over more than a decade of conflict, and some were recognizable but would not reach iconic status, meaning that they are now reproduced on occasions but are not associated with the influence

theory and are not reproduced across a range of different visual media (Larry Burrows's *Reaching Out* being the most famous of non-icons). In these spreads, pictures tended to hold an illustrative purpose and were used to construct a narrative as they worked in combination with text. In the years that immediately followed the end of the war, no pictures became icons, but cross-referencing all the important spreads of that period uncovers another type of process: the selection of historical documents. It was at that time that future icons and a group of other singular or striking images emerged and were deemed worthy of being remembered.

A second cycle of reprints of the future icons took place in the 1980s in and out of the news media, therefore starting the first cycle of remediations. This cycle is visibly focused on public criticism of the war in Vietnam ensuing from the defeat. Although the first years of retrospective publications strived to ignore the outcome of the conflict, the 1980s saw a rise in new types of stories. Books of non-fiction and news coverage started to increasingly focus on the private difficulties of Vietnam veterans reintegrating civilian life and dealing with PTSD, and on the American public's inability to cope with the blow to American pride. The careful reading of the articles published in the press over this short time period shows that the newspapers started to become increasingly involved in the process of writing of history. They did so by dictating the timing of the national recovery after the defeat. In the early 1980s, there were a lot of in-depth analyses of the mistakes of the political and military administrations in a period that was deeply critical but appeared to be necessary before actual recovery could be achieved. In these years, the press involved itself fully in these written articles and distanced itself from visual analysis and illustration; the corpus analyzed for this study yielded no reprints of the future icons and numerous written analytical pieces from 1980 to 1985. The newspaper articles of the early 1980s did not so much attack past administrations for driving the country into a quagmire, but rather attempted to show the foolishness of holding on to a war which, retrospectively, they were found to be destined to lose.

Future iconic photographs did not fit those in-depth analyses and they remained invisible in the press for a number of years. They did, however, lend themselves very well to a new type of discourse that emerged in those same years, starting the first cycle of strict remediations. As the history of the Vietnam War started to be written, other media became involved in the iconization process—most notably documentary films and school textbooks[10] which used icons as independent visual objects for the first time: they could now be used out of context and without

[10] A separate comprehensive study of the treatment of iconic photographs in American History and Social Studies textbooks (high school and college levels) is currently being developed.

explanations as illustrations of the war in its entirety rather than of one specific event. The docudrama *Kent State*, directed by James Goldstone and broadcasted on NBC in 1981, is a fascinating example of the impact of the Kent State photograph taken by John Paul Filo on the memory of the shooting. This docudrama, as the name suggests, aims not necessarily at documenting the events but at reenacting them in film. Close to the end of the movie, a scene features a Mary Ann Vecchio lookalike finding the body of Jeffrey Miller and kneeling close to it while holding up her arms. A reverse shot shows John Paul Filo—who plays his own role—taking photos of the scene. Although overly melodramatic, this Primetime Emmy Award winning movie gave substantial visibility not only to the image but also to the discourse underlining its importance and alleged powers. This film, among other documentary films as well as textbooks, was one of the starting points of the process of icons being isolated from their original context in order to be considered as special images among the overwhelming number of historical documents available. This process is common in all constructions of history but nonetheless eclipses other milestones of the era, such as the absence of censorship of the press, and the neoconservative and Christian backlash of the 1970s and 1980s.

It is only after 1985 that this more narrow selection of images was mirrored in the press. At the ten-year anniversary of the end of the war, the retrospective articles published in the corpus under study shifted to a more positive tone. After a period of critical analysis of the conflict, the media now took on a more active role in the writing of history and focused their retelling of the war on recovery and on the reconstruction of Vietnam. By the late 1980s, it appears that the memory of the war had been simplified into a series of key moments and been somewhat dramatized. The press abundantly contributed to this new tendency—also visible today in war movies and some history books—by writing new types of cover stories illustrated with the best-remembered pictures from the frontline. This new discourse successfully allowed the future icons to resurface from the visual archive of the war and are now considered by journalists and historians to be symbolic images of the war in general. The different anniversary spreads published in *Time* and *Life* were particularly effective in singling out this handful of memorable pictures chosen as representative of American mistakes in Vietnam. The four icons were among the most popular at that period and would come to carry the weight of the process of atoning for these mistakes as agents of recovery.

The Moment of Iconization

Even though the four future icons and a selection of other now-famous pictures[11] were prominent in all retrospective press articles, they remained closely connected to their original context and were generally printed alongside details about the event they represented. The year 1989, however, was a moment of change: the aura of our four pictures was recognized widely and they reached strict iconic status. 1989 was the 150th anniversary of photography, and therefore of photojournalism, which was an opportunity for picture magazines to devote special issues to the medium. As a news magazine, *Time* reminded its readers of the achievements of photojournalism in a Fall Special Collector's Edition entitled "150 Years of Photojournalism." That year is, here, considered to be the defining moment in the iconization of photojournalistic images because this is when the term "icon" was first used to characterize such images, no matter their context of origin.[12] *Time* magazine seemed to introduce this use of the term in the 1989 issue, in which it described photographic icons as "the greatest images of photojournalism" while providing one of the first historical definitions. The same editorial goes on to explain the difference between photography and photojournalism:

> Think of time as a small stream scattered with flowers and flowing relentlessly past. Pick up a petal. Examine it, savor it, press it away between the pages of private memory. That's photography. [...] Photography has been the best way of making time stand still.
>
> Now think of time as a raging torrent, swollen with the trophies of war, disaster, luck and adventure. Pluck from the current some unidentified floating object. Pass it around. Put it on display. Argue about what it means. That's photojournalism. [...] Photojournalism has remained the best way of freeze-drying history for further inspection. (*Time*, Fall 1989, 4)

According to this definition, the difference between photography and photojournalism, and between private and public memory, is iconic images: their capacity to report the news in turn makes up history. This editorial consecrates iconic images as the embodiment of the work of photojournalists. 1989 is not only a commemorative year; it is the culmination of the collective effort in the photojournalistic sphere in the late 1980s to select the most exceptional of all memorable press photographs and showcase them—in the press and in new gallery exhibitions—to highlight the value and legitimacy of the profession. This tradition existed in previous decades, and periodicals such as *Time*, *Life* and *The Chicago Tribune* did contribute to the

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[11] The most famous of these are *Reaching Out*, "One Ride with Yankee Papa 13" (Larry Burrows), *Shell Shocked US Marine* (Don McCullin), and several photos of American Marines and paratroopers taken by Horst Faas, as well as the "flower power" photographs taken by Marc Riboud and Bernie Boston.

[12] This has been ascertained through a careful reading of all the articles published in the newspapers and articles of our corpus that contained the word "icon" prior to the year 1989.

iconization process by publishing "Year in Review" spreads.[13] It is, however, in 1989 that newly consecrated "icons" from various 20th-century events were gathered together and collectively read and interpreted outside of their respective historical contexts, seen as qualitative productions of photojournalism, and this is when they even became the standalone subject of newspaper stories.

Promoting Influence through Icons

After 1989, the four icons of Vietnam had become more than simple historical documents. Teaching and commemorating history through the cycles of reprints and remediations were no longer their sole purpose. They were now cultural entities whose life would be altered by historical developments, notably during the 1990s. In light of the Persian Gulf conflict, the four new icons became the visual marker of the Vietnam syndrome and were proposed as evidence to the nation's—supposedly collective—opposition to the war, allowing in turn the collective memory of Vietnam to be written in a more positive and remedial tone. During the 1990s, the various reprints of the four icons in the press were indeed often accompanied by categorical statements of their influence and emblematic content, as exemplified earlier.[14]

Coming to terms with the brutal content of the iconic photographs allowed for the victims pictured in them to be brought back into the public sphere and be given reparations. That attempt failed for General Loan, the executioner of the Saigon Execution photo, who was demonized and harassed once he had moved to Washington, D.C.; Kim Phuc and Mary Ann Vecchio, however, were ideal recipients of compassion in public circumstances. The girls pictured in the Napalm and Kent State pictures respectively were both young and female, which traditionally makes them more eloquent victims in patriarchal systems. Numerous articles, of varied length and detail, were published in the 1990s to update the American public on their recovery, the evolution of their private lives, and essentially to show that they had received help, managed to grow into functional adults and family women,[15] and especially that they had

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[13] Vietnam icons can notably be seen in *Chicago Tribune*, 12/29/1969, 18; *Time*, 01/04/1971, 10-11; *Time*, 01/01/1973, 8-9.

[14] "The [film and the pictures of the Tet execution] created an *immediate revulsion* at a seemingly gratuitous act of savagery that was widely seen as emblematic of a seemingly gratuitous war" (*New York Times*, 07/16/1998, 27).

[15] Mary Ann Vecchio was at first the subject of unflattering accounts of her troubles with the police and difficulty to hold on to a suitable job, until the reports announcing her marriage to a Las Vegas resident in 1979. This detail was often recalled in 1990s articles as the start of a happier life for her.

forgiven the United States. This culminated in a 1997 *Washington Post* article, "At Last, a Conflict Ends," reporting on the reunion of Kim Phuc and John Plummer, the man who called for the napalm attack (*Washington Post*, 02/20/1997, VA1-2). This story of forgiveness reads as a necessary step for the full recovery of all people involved, victim and culprit are all described as happy and able to move on, and a change is perceived in the way the iconic image is now published. Its brutality and shocking content can now be overlooked or justified, as one of the underlying discourses is that the image had positive consequences on Kim Phuc's life and that its constant recalling in the press led to a reconciliation.[16]

There are such examples for all four icons. The picture of the execution was paradoxically atoned for through public harassment of General Loan, the executioner, after he emigrated to the United States. The picture of the self-immolation itself acquired a somewhat positive facet through the insistence on the consequences of the sacrifice of Thich Quang Duc, which supposedly resulted in religious tolerance in Vietnam—in this case the belief in the influence of the event is transferred onto the photograph and seems to be the only way to reconcile with its horror. This belief in the influence of the pictures was an integral part of the discourse of recovery built through the 1990s, and it seems to be the result of a need to give them a positive interpretation so that the safe onlookers can look at them with less guilt.

The second major element that led historians to describe these pictures as "influential" also took shape in the 1990s. Although photojournalism as a profession had become recognized decades earlier in the 1950s, it remained part of a broader competitive field and had to publicize itself in order to survive the era of television. After the Watergate scandal, the news media were in a position of strength. With the extraordinary development of visual culture since the 1960s, iconic photographs have been offered as the perfect tools to capture the attention of the public and carry a crystalized, succinct message. Photojournalism created icons, by both producing them and reprinting them—this idea is central to this corpus of archival sources and particularly thanks to the increasingly numerous mentions of the Pulitzer or World Press Photos prizes won by reporters in the 1980s and 1990s. As the field that created icons, photojournalism could legitimately define itself as a discipline at the juncture of news media and popular visual art. By the late 1990s, iconic photographs had shed most of their historical specificities and were regarded as objects of popular culture that underlined the excellence of photojournalism.

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[16] Hariman and Lucaites have a similar reading of the photographs of Kim Phuc as an adult, holding her baby and showing the scars on her back. In their analysis, Kim Phuc becomes "a symbol for the restoration of domestic tranquility" (Hariman and Lucaites 199).

The notion of influence—of the pictures and of the media that created them—served to remind the public of the necessity to preserve and respect the free news media. From the late 1990s, the corpus studied here reveals that icons were now remediated on a *regular* basis. A completely new cycle emerged that was, unlike the previous cycles, marked by continuity. It took advantage of the previous cycles of reprints and remediations that had imprinted the icons in public memory, instead of starting a new type of analysis of the war. This cycle was closely tied to a discourse on the symbolism of the images and the influence of the media while taking some distance from the original context the pictures were taken from. These icons were now more than historical documents, they were full embodiments of the powers of photojournalism and, by extension, of the media. In fact, in the late 1990s and 2000s a meta-discourse about the process of remediation itself started to take shape. One of the earliest signs of this can be found in *Newsweek* in 1997: "['Napalm Girl'] was an image that *appeared and reappeared* in newspapers and magazines all over the world *as a symbol of the ravages* of the Vietnam War" (*Washington Post*, 02/20/1997, VA1-2, author's emphasis).

The Direction Taken by Collective Memory

Today, it is widely believed that the media were influential in turning public opinion against the war in Vietnam. Iconic photographs from the Vietnam War are now still read, by those who remember when and where they were taken, as evidence of the press's antiwar stance.[17] The meta-discourse of symbolism and influence put forward by the press, as it kept reprinting the icons and remediating their artistic or political remediations during the 2000s, certainly strengthened this specific direction taken by collective memory. The three decades that elapsed between the end of the war and the early 2000s saw a progressive paring down of the historical data, as any post-war period would; but a combination of factors gave unexpected prominence to otherwise innocuous historical objects. The involvement of the media in the writing of history is one of the main contributors to the direction taken by collective memory. They had a direct hand in the selection of the events and illustrations that carried the best historical weight and significance, and they set the tone for the retrospective stories of the 1980s. Had icons not been so visually striking, they certainly would not have become iconic. However, their emergence and consecration are exceptional in light of the sheer volume of images they were chosen from. Icons

[17] The idea that the press was actively critical of the war for the better part of the conflict has been widely disproved (Hallin 1986, Hammond 1998).

lend themselves particularly well to the process of constructing the public memory of the war decade by decade and through anniversaries and commemorations, because their striking composition and history helped them to replace a full archive of images that the human mind couldn't remember in detail. These images served specific purposes at specific times; the defeat in Vietnam led to a need to analyze all decisions and isolate the mistakes, and then to start off on the path of national recovery and atonement. These are defining elements in the emergence of icons, which have in turn influenced the history of the war.

Today, it seems that the history of the Vietnam War cannot be told without reprints of these icons, and that they have been so deeply integrated into American culture that they can remediate themselves. At the time of the Syrian refugee crisis of 2015, the pictures of little Alan Kurdi were occasionally compared to the Napalm Girl because of their similar symbolisms (Gunthert) and often instantly called iconic or influential (Mackey, Laurent, Pollack). This demonstrates how fast the iconization process has become in the digital age. Far from denying the visual power of icons, I argue that their powers are such that they have altered public memory not only of the Vietnam War but also of themselves and made us think that they were influential and changed public opinion. There is popular faith in these images, which make the term "icons" well-suited to them.

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