Memory and Icons: Photography in the War on Terror

Still images have a deep affinity with memory. A full recollection—say of a person—almost always involves some visual re-experiencing of expressions, gestures and bearing, some of which are held frozen in the mind.[1] Moreover, traumatic events are more likely to be mentally stilled: people who have undergone severe traumas may flashback to them as isolated pictures, while they recall ordinary events in a narrative manner.[2] Memories continually change through repeated recollection, yet their tendency over time is to a reduction which mirrors that of photography—like a stack of snapshots repeatedly returned to. Such memories become archetypal crystallisations of identity—slides in the carousel of the mind.

David Burnett, Trang Bang, 1972

---

[1] A longer version of this essay appears in *Killing for Show: Photography, War and the Media in Vietnam and Iraq*, forthcoming from Rowman and Littlefield.
[2] Daniel Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, The Mind and the Past*, New York 1996, p. 23.

This connection with individual remembering also extends to the collective. Even in the age of instantly available video, iconic images—those that are reproduced insistently in the media and dwell most saliently in the collective memory—are more likely to be made in still photography. Television crews were present at the execution of Nguyen Van Lam, captured by Eddie Adams, and the escape of Phan Thi Kim Phuc from the napalm attack in which she was terribly burned. Their footage did not achieve anything like the attention of the photographs. While photos were certainly easier to circulate at that time, they also controlled the horror of the scenes by portraying a single moment, and highlighted particular facial expressions.[3] Single photographs also tamed and ordered the horde of contingencies; both the film of Kim Phuc's flight and the other shots taken at the time by Nick Ut and David Burnett lack the singular coherence and sense of the landmark image. Despite the fact that videos of both scenes are now easily accessible, few see them.[4]

Vivian Meier, *Man Sleeping in Newspaper Stand***,** March 1954

---

[3] Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering*, Berkeley 1997, pp. 89–94.
[4] Both are available on YouTube and show views in the low hundreds of thousands, far less than notorious events of which film is the main record, such as the Zapruder footage of Kennedy's assassination.

The many theoretical attempts to prise apart this affinity of memory and still images—by Freud, Proust, Bergson, Kracaeur, Bazin and others—are part of a general suspicion of the visual and its vulgar temptations, and the general intellectual denigration of mass media and the tastes of ordinary people.[5] When Lewis Mumford in the 1950s called for a revolt against the mass of images in promiscuous circulation, it was as a reassertion of a patrician culture of quality against the crowd.[6] This disdain for photography arises out of its ubiquity, accessibility and cheapness. How can something so mechanical and available not be a betrayal of the mental and spiritual infinite that is gestured towards in the philosophical tradition that extends from Bergson to Deleuze? Such writings were published at a time of a new and swiftly intensifying media culture. Large masses of people were confronted with a vast number of commercial images and sounds that increasingly saturated their existence. Nevertheless, from this disorienting whirl of repeated images, there emerged a few 'iconic' examples that would stand above the rest, becoming firmly consolidated in historical memory, and appearing to condense around them wider collective frames of understanding. Yet in recent years this process seems to have faltered or even stalled. How and why?

The ubiquity and number of images has exponentially multiplied, in a way barely dreamt of even in the media-saturated interwar years. This raises a second and interrelated puzzle: does that new saturation, and the way in which the resources of the past—an ungraspable panoply of images— lies at our fingertips bring viewers beyond the situation outlined by twentieth-century theorists of photography and memory? Are there ways of examining these issues that have more to say than the well-worn concepts of trauma, repression and recovery, and the conventional divide between organic memory and mechanical mnemonic fragments?

---

[5] The elite disdain of image power is one of the main themes of David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago 1989; see also Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley 1993; and Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*, Chicago 2010, ch. 1.

[6] Lewis Mumford, *Art and Technics*, New York 1952, pp. 108-9.

Famously, Benjamin describes the way in which relived experiences were bound to a particular context using the notion of aura, 'a strange tissue of time and place'.[7] In modern parlance, aura cast its halo around episodic memory of events and source memory—how and when we came to know something. But the mass production of standardized commodities has eroded auratic experience, for instance through the mechanical repetition of photography. We see the same advertisement over and over again at different times and places, casting the pall of uniformity over unique experience.

Yet, while photographic images are reproducible, the experience of viewing analogue prints was not, being fixed to a location or the event of first seeing them, or the vicissitudes of the print which ages and can be damaged, so fusing source memory and episodic memory. Photography and place are used together as mnemonic props, from the ordering of prints in a family album, to the framed photographs that remain in the same place on a mantelpiece or desk. Plainly, since

---

[7] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', in *Selected Writings, vol. 3: 1935-1938*, Howard Eiland and Michael Jenning, eds, Cambridge, MA 2002, pp. 104-5.

the days of Benjamin's image culture, there has been another turn of the wheel towards increased speed of circulation, magnitude of production, ubiquity, weightlessness and apparent immateriality.[8] In the general media flux, has the power of photography to serve memory been eroded? Can the past, present and future of the image still be developed through sustained reflection in the torrent of fleeting images and words?

Unseen and Unspoken

A critical site of cultural memory and photographic reproduction, the so-called 'iconic' image was regularly generated by the wars of the analogue era but, curiously, those of the digital age yielded such images rarely, and with a very different character than previously. The most sustained account of photographic icons is Robert Hariman and John Lucaites's book, *No Caption Needed*, which defines them as images that cause immediate controversy on publication, contain a contentious mix of familiar elements and newsworthy novelty, and bind up social and political contradictions which generate lengthy debate. Icons are eloquent but in no way experimental or avant-garde. The basis for their repetition and recognizability is that they play to 'middlebrow' cliché, appealing to the liberal-democratic centre with conventional iconography and conservative composition.[9] For Hariman and Lucaites, the icon only operates in democracies, for it endows the viewer with an awareness of social forms and state actions, providing a 'civic education' in democratic ideals. People speak to each other through photographs by performing social roles within them—by what they do, how they behave, how they express themselves in pose and gesture, and how they claim social space. While icons are immediately recognizable for most people, a survey of college students found that they had little specific knowledge of either the photographs or the events that they portrayed.[10] Such images activate tacit knowledge (for instance, of the conduct of war) by placing that knowledge within a conventional, generic scene. Above all, like all photography in uncontrolled conditions, the particular and the general are brought into acute contact. It is one thing to know that napalm burns children, another to have an individual's suffering laid out in prose, and quite another to see the agony on the faces of individual victims. *No Caption Needed* provides the most systematic and carefully researched view of the photographic icon. Yet three questions may be asked of this

---

[8] In 2013, online infrastructure consumed about a tenth of global power, more than was used in aviation. See Bryan Walsh, 'The Surprisingly Large Energy Footprint of the Digital Economy', *Time*, 14 August 2013.

[9] Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture and Liberal Democracy*, Chicago 2007, pp. 29-30.

[10] David Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy: Icons of Outrage in International Crises*, Westport, CT 1998; as cited in Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, p. 310.

account: how does the icon fit into the field of commercial photography as a whole? Who exactly is spoken to? And is there only one type of icon?

Ahmad Al-Rubaye, Iraqi women react as people gather on July 9, 2016 at the site of a suicide-bombing attack which took place on July 3 in Baghdad's Karrada neighbourhood.

On the first question, the interplay between novelty and familiarity is an integral part of capitalist culture, and the balance struck between the two is a core conundrum of commercial imagery, especially in advertising. The viewers' attention must be seized by a puzzle or even by a shocking juxtaposition, yet at the same time the image must be swiftly understood, so that each component tends to lean on well-worn cliché. The advertising image is usually stripped of explicit politics but marinated in the implicit. A perfect example of ideology at work, the artificiality, performance and theatricality of stock images which permeate the visual world are naturalized to appear as real. [11] This is also true of many photo-ops in photojournalism, which are collaborations between the stagers, the subjects and photographers to create an ideal reality so conformist as to be near-invisible. Marta Zarzycycka and Martijn Kleppe analyse tropes in the World Press Photograph competition, those common points at which photojournalism approaches pure convention in scenes of mourning women, a civilian facing soldiers or children playing at war. Related to icons but unexceptional, these are frames which hold familiar and

---

[11] See Paul Frosh, *The Image Factory: Consumer Culture, Photography and the Visual Content Industry*, Oxford 2003.

undemanding content. Ideologically ready-to-wear, they conform to marketable and searchable concepts ('mourning woman'), in which all the familiar hierarchical and gender relations are set in stone.[12] If we think of photojournalism as commercial imagery plus explicit politics, the iconic image is the rare case where the dance of cliché and novelty is so compelling and raised to such a high pitch that it is hard to look away or forget.

To the second question, of who icons address, Hariman and Lucaites identify the middle ground of public discourse, which will mediate the claims of competing interests in the light of the general good. Yet this rational, disinterested model familiar from Habermas underplays the divided character of post-war society.[13] Even in the wealthiest nation on Earth, the liberal and Fordist compact between the state, business and labour was falling apart through the years of the Vietnam War, as the public sphere fissured along class, race and gender lines and on the intimately connected issue of colonial ventures. What is iconic for one group may not be so for another. Hariman and Lucaites point to the disturbing fact that none of the extraordinary photographs made in the US of the Civil Rights or feminist movements have been reproduced enough to attain iconic status—to which one might add the labour movement.[14]

Joe Rosenthal, *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*, 1945

---

[12] Marta Zarzycycka and Martijn Kleppe, 'Awards, Archives, and Affects: Tropes in the World Press Photo Contest 2009-11', *Media Culture Society*, vol. 35, no. 8, 2013, pp. 978-80.
[13] Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, pp. 43, 41.
[14] Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, pp. 288-9.

This brings us to the third question. Hariman and Lucaites place two types of icons in proximity: there is the conventional icon which achieves great circulation and repetition but does not generate controversy, and indeed confirms national and social myths; and the disruptive icon, which achieves similar circulation and repetition because of its contentious power. The first—like Joe Rosenthal's 'Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima'—helps express the unity of a nation forged in war. The other—such as Ronald Haeberle's My Lai photograph of slaughtered children and babies—issued into a society split evenly between those who saw its horrors and those who refused to believe them. Such an icon speaks into the divide and may even widen it by polarizing opinion, condensing conflict into a readily graspable form. Unlike digital fads or jokes that play out on social media, iconic images are proved so over time, their fame being reinforced by repeated reproduction over years and decades. An immediate puzzle about the Iraq War, despite the huge number of professional image-makers who covered it, is that very few images have taken on iconic status, even a decade and more after the invasion—and of those, arguably, none were made by professionals.[15] The only images that appear to have prolonged traction in historical memory were taken by amateurs at Abu Ghraib.

Marines and Martyrs

Luis Sinco, Marine Lance Cpl. James Blake Miller, Fallujah, 2004

---

[15] Janina Struk, *Private Pictures: Soldiers' Inside View of War*, London 2011, p. 147.

Yet there are two very different candidates for iconic status taken by professionals: one of an apparently steadfast and battle-hardened Marine, by Luis Sinco; and a picture of a gravely maimed Iraqi boy, by Yuri Kozyrev. One key to iconic status—which is consciously and actively sought by many photojournalists—is to build in an element of familiarity by referring to well-known images of the past. Many images from Iraq echo, more or less tendentiously, famous ones from Vietnam. Luis Sinco's briefly celebrated picture of a steadfast Marine, taken during the second assault on Fallujah in November 2004, echoes Don McCullin's 'Shell-Shocked Soldier', taken at the battle for Hué. Sinco was embedded with a Marine company during the attack and took the close-up on a rooftop after a firefight, just as the sun came up. As he later described it:

> I noticed the staff sergeant and a few others were giddy. I thought it odd they actually seemed to be enjoying themselves. I sat up against a wall that ringed the rooftop and saw Lance Cpl. James Miller light a cigarette. War paint smudged his face and smoke curled around his head. His nose was nicked and scabbed. I shot a few frames and then started smoking as well. We stared at each other and didn't speak.[16]

At the time, Sinco did not think much of this picture. The mainstream media, however, were on the lookout for American heroism, and found what they wanted: a portrait of a battle-weary but triumphant Marine, importantly, smoking a cigarette. The tobacco smoke stood in for that of battle; the photo became known as the 'Marlboro Marine', and fed into a well-worn narrative of masculine cowboy heroism, drawing upon memories of a notorious 1980s advertising campaign that had for many critics summarized the dangerous military posturing, Hollywood myth-making and conservative sexual politics of the Reagan era.[17] The soldier and cigarette association, an old and manufactured one, feeds into many a cliché, but also opens up a counter-reading in which, from the First World War onwards, tobacco companies used war as a colossal marketing opportunity to hook young users facing imminent death, and employ them as unwitting ambassadors for their lethal industry.[18] Sinco's picture was published on over 150 newspaper front pages in the US, and came to the attention of the White House. Bush even sent Miller cigars, sweets and White House memorabilia.[19] The image was regularly reproduced as a striking

---

[16] Luis Sinco, 'Thousand Mile Stare', *Digital Journalist*, December 2004.

[17] For a broad reading of this configuration within US landscape photography, see Deborah Bright, 'Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography', in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, Cambridge, MA 1989, pp. 125-43.

[18] See Robert Proctor, *Golden Holocaust: Origins of the Cigarette Catastrophe and the Case for Abolition*, Berkeley 2011, part 1, ch. 3. I am indebted to Iain Boal for directing me to this book.

[19] Luis Sinco, 'Am I to Blame for his Private War?', *Observer*, 18 November 2007.

image of America's success in Iraq, as it was then perceived by many in the media. The doyen of news anchors, Dan Rather, lauded it as 'the best war photograph of recent years', and asked viewers to study and absorb it, and 'Then take a deep breath of pride.'[20]

Don McCullin, Shellshocked Marine, Hué, 1968

---

[20] Struk, *Private Pictures*, p. 153.

The comparison with McCullin's Marine is telling. As a disruptive icon, it could equally celebrate the psychological sacrifices of 'our boys', or lament the psychic damage and general futility of war. As with Sinco, McCullin did not realize that this picture, of the many he took at Hué, would have such a sustained afterlife, and it did not appear in his *Sunday Times* feature on the battle.[21] An obvious contrast lies in the sombre black-and-white tones of the McCullin, especially as treated in his later prints, which are rendered very dark for expressive effect. The eyes are treated antithetically in each picture. With McCullin's Marine, they are thrown into sepulchral darkness, glowering in the shadow of his helmet, in what is often seen as a rendition of the 'thousand-yard stare' of the soldier who has seen too much. The man seems frozen in immobility, his hands grip a gun barrel that uselessly points upwards. He leans in towards the camera, hunched in trauma. Although the low viewpoint emphasizes his bulk, he appears as a haunted, damaged and passive figure. Sinco's Marine also looks past the lens into the distance but his gaze seems more focused: his face is illuminated in the dawn light and his eyes are narrowed, suggesting determination and aggression. Though battered, he does not seem traumatized, and certainly not disabled. The portrait's tight cropping, as seen in many newspapers, highlights Miller's expression, gaze and cigarette in near-isolation, beneath the tan halo of his helmet.

The political context of each image could hardly have been more divergent: with McCullin's, it was the shock of the Tet offensive, the crumbling of Pentagon lies about the military situation in Vietnam, and the public display of mass killing. With Sinco's, the picture suited a triumphalist press, lauding the grandeur and unparalleled dominance of US power. Oppositional readings of the image were slow to emerge, and were unsurprisingly little heard in the mass media. Miller, as the press put it euphemistically, was a 'sharpshooter'—in plainer terms, a sniper. His killing was deliberate and personal. Through his scope, he would see his individual victims fall, and know how many had died at his hand. American marksmen in Fallujah frequently gunned down innocent civilians, including children, and shot into ambulances. In this portrait, we are looking into the face of a paid serial killer, fresh from the field. Later, back home, Miller's photographic steadfastness crumbled into prolonged and crippling PTSD.[22] Similarly, the illusion of victory and control, a spectral magic-lantern trickery, faded with the growth of violent anarchy in Iraq. So the image's fame was relatively brief since, as a recognizable piece of propaganda, its plausibility and utility was swiftly lost.

---

[21] Don McCullin, 'Vietnam: Old Glory, Young Blood', *Sunday Times*, 24 March 1968. It was published elsewhere at the time: see Michael Joseph in Charles Harbutt et al., eds., *America in Crisis*, New York 1969, p. 96.
[22] Among a number of accounts of Miller's post-war life, see Sinco, 'Am I to Blame for his Private War?'.

Yuri Kozyrev, Baghdad, April 2003: As American forces bomb Baghdad, Ali Ismail, 12, is attended to by his distant aunt in al-Kindi hospital. He does not yet know that the rocket blast that mutilated him also killed his mother, father, brother and eleven other relatives in the Jisser Diala neighbourhood in the southern outskirts of Baghdad.

Of the few professional images of the war in Iraq that are memorable, another candidate for iconic status is a photograph taken by Yuri Kozyrev. Although the inverse of Sinco's, the use to which it was put was no less invidious. It shows a twelve-year-old boy, Ali Ismail Abbas, who lost both arms in a US missile attack on the southern outskirts of Baghdad, which, still unbeknownst to him, killed his parents, his brother and eleven other relatives. He lies in a hospital bed, attended by his distant aunt. Kozyrev was on an accompanied tour to Al-Kindy, one of the major hospitals in Baghdad, so this image is the result of a photo-op laid on by the Iraqi regime. After a long debate, *Time* published the picture in April 2003 as part of a sequence of photographs about the 'end game' of the war in Iraq.[23] The image and Abbas's story gained prominence in the European and Canadian press, but was much less featured in America.[24] This was part of a pattern in which the US media refused to cover civilian casualties of the invasion.

[23] 'Images of War', *Time*, 14 April 2003, pp. 24-37; the photograph can be seen here: http://time.com/3780725/the-aftermath-of-911-ali-abbas-by-yuri-kozyrev/
[24] See the account in Susan Moeller, *Packaging Terrorism: Co-opting the News for Politics and Profit*, Chichester 2009, pp. 148-50, 52. For an account of its life in the UK media, see Piers Robinson et al., *Pockets of Resistance: British News Media, War and Theory in the 2003 Invasion of Iraq*, Manchester 2010, pp. 143-52.

Even so, the image became widely reproduced and continues to be well known. Drawing on familiar elements, the picture may not be a mother and child, but it looks like one. Aside from the drip and the tarnished metal cage that keeps the blanket from touching the boy's burnt body, the scene looks ancient or even Biblical, an effect emphasized by the aunt's robes. These qualities allow it to be read not merely as a depiction of Abbas's mutilation and suffering but as a quasi-religious and undefined redemption. Michele Stephenson, *Time*'s director of photography, claimed that the Kozyrev image was *the* picture of the war, rendered in a 'powerful, painterly composition' which made it 'transcendent'.[25]

The effect of the image triggered charitable donations for Abbas, which allowed for him to be transferred eventually to the US, probably saving his life.[26] Britain's *Daily Mirror* newspaper campaigned to get the boy medical treatment abroad, concentrating on his individual fate rather than seeing his condition as part of a general situation, and even falsifying the story of his eventual release into foreign hands by misrepresenting a Shia demonstration against what they saw as a PR stunt as a celebration. In all of this, Abbas appeared as a passive victim, and his own views on the invasion—that it was a criminal oil grab—went unreported.[27] His elevation became a way of ignoring the rest of the victims. In an interview for the *Independent*, Moufak Gabriel, the hospital director at Saddam General in Baghdad, asked of the press: 'Why do you all want to talk to Ali? There are hundreds of children suffering like him, and we are getting more every day.'[28] These constant visits by journalists, which clearly distressed Abbas, also endangered him since they were careless of the sterile conditions that kept infection at bay.[29] Photographer Jérôme Sessini reluctantly went on a commission from a British newspaper, noting that the patient, despite his terrible wounds, had no morphine drip. As he watched, a nurse removed Abbas's bandages to wash his wounds, something she had to do each day. Sessini recounts:

> Every day, the entire hospital hears his screams of unbearable pain. I still hear them now. In spite of my discomfort, I take a few pictures, because doing nothing would be like staying silent . . . Later he is transferred to a chic Kuwaiti hospital. 'He'll be fixed up with

[25] Yuri Kozyrev in Bill Katovsky and Timothy Carlson, *Embedded: The Media War in Iraq*, Guilford, CT 2003, p. 103.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Robinson et al., *Pockets of Resistance*, p. 147-8.
[28] Kim Sengupta, 'Frenzy Over Ali, but there are Thousands More Like Him', *Independent*, 12 April 2003. See also Howard Friel and Richard Falk, *The Record of the Paper: How* The New York Times *Misreports US Foreign Policy*, London and New York 2004, p. 136.
[29] Robinson et al., *Pockets of Resistance*, p. 149.

new arms', proudly claims a humanitarian worker. Ali is doubly used—by the Iraqis to denounce the American barbarians, and by the victors to prove their magnanimity.[30]

Nick Ut, Trang Bang, 1972

The fame of the Kozyrev image also seems to have been transient, certainly when compared to that of Nick Ut's photograph.[31] Both show children hideously maimed by military action: Ut's is rawer, for Kim Phuc is still in immediate shock from the attack, and seems to be surrounded by adults who are indifferent to her suffering. Ali Ismail Abbas is at least tended to, though his armless torso terrifies the imagination. But it is once again the political situation that bears on

---

[30] Jérôme Sessini, in Brian Storm, ed., *Desert Diaries: Photojournalists on the War in Iraq*, Santa Fe, 2003, p. 57.
[31] Very few images of the Kozyrev circulate online, and Google word searches on each yield vastly more results for Kim Phuc. Long-term mentions in books confirm the disparity, with instances of the Kozyrev tailing off sharply, while the Ut runs at a high level forty years on, with deep troughs and high peaks of interest.

each photograph's continued renown. After all, there are other depictions of Iraqi suffering that could have fulfilled the role of icon, notably Chris Hondros's shots of a bloodied girl following the killing of her family by US troops, or James Nachtwey's striking photos of dead and wounded Iraqis and their grieving relatives at morgues.[32] These did acquire some of the features of icons: they were often reproduced and generated controversy, but their power nevertheless seemed pallid when compared to those of previous wars. Perhaps this was because most of the mainstream American press seemed to be incapable of taking Iraqi life seriously, and of registering the catastrophe of its loss or ruination.

The point is made powerfully in a passage from the *New York Times*. In March 2003, a missile containing cluster bombs hit Al-Shu'ala market, in a poor Shia neighbourhood in Baghdad, causing dozens of deaths and terrible injuries among the crowd. The correspondent, John Burns, first sought to put the blame on the Iraqi regime, and then launched into this extraordinary obfuscation:

> In the prayer on that muddy ground, in the mosque, at the marketplace amid the pools of blood, at the hospital, nobody, at least nobody directly affected by the bombing, made any mention of Saddam Hussein. In the darkness, it seemed suddenly, to an outsider, that these were people who had made their own quittance with the Iraqi leader, at least in their souls, and that what mattered to them now were ancient truths, and ancient sufferings, that would far outlast the Iraqi ruler, whatever the outcome of the war.[33]

In a parallel to much reporting from sub-Saharan Africa, and from other areas of the Arab world, all violence and suffering is seen as habitual, integral and ancient parts of those cultures. Burns himself notes that the Iraqis at the scene blamed the US or the British—the missile turned out to be an American weapon, as Robert Fisk discovered, simply by examining its fragments. Bruno Stevens photographed the aftermath, as people mourned the fifty-two victims in the local mosque. Why, then, the lack of iconic images from Iraq? First, because Iraqis did not usually appear as victims worthy of consideration and grief.[34] In the Western media, it is very rare that Iraqi victims of violence are named or that journalists follow up their stories by talking to their families or friends.[35] Second, because the lack of a compelling counter-narrative of the war, as emerged in liberal circles and beyond with Vietnam. Without such a frame through which to see

---

[32] See VII, *War*, Millbrook, NY 2003, pp. 316-9, 322-7.
[33] John Burns, 'Iraq Blames US for Market Blast That Killed Civilians in Baghdad', *New York Times*, 29 March 2003; cited in Friel and Falk, *The Record of the Paper*, p. 131.
[34] See Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, London and New York 2009.
[35] Anthony DiMaggio, *When Media Goes to War*, New York 2010, p. 105.

such images, potential icons remained either too secure as propaganda or too radically dissociated from cliché to be the subject of insistent repetition.

The Great Exception

The best test for memory and the iconic image in these new conditions is surely 9/11, that most brilliant of photo-ops, staged in the most media-saturated city on Earth. On that day five hundred photographers were at New York Fashion Week, and fifteen members of Magnum were also gathered for a meeting.[36] It was bound to be intensively filmed and photographed. Lives certainly seen as worthy of grief were taken in a shock event, which rapidly would be held up as being so singular as to stand outside the normal circuits of ritual and collective memory. The scene of 9/11 was bloody but one would hardly know it from the published pictures. When it came to showing the victims, the media's squeamishness was in marked contrast to presenting the enemies of the US, particularly the leaders of the Iraqi dictatorship, whose corpses were put on photographic display.

America's self-image—as the only world power, a beacon of democracy and liberty—produced an exceptionalism of the event and its dead. This has been registered pictorially in a gargantuan sublime—in vast photographic prints and in the massing of amateur and professional snapshots in volumes the size of breeze blocks. In fact, the majority of the photography books about 9/11 are oversize, perhaps to represent the enormity and effrontery of return fire or collective punishment—the old colonial tactic turned against the master nation. It would seem strange if this exceptional event had not yielded exceptional images by which it would be remembered. Two stand out from the many, both arguably iconic, but one conventional and the other highly disruptive: they are Thomas Franklin's 'Raising the Flag at Ground Zero' and Richard Drew's 'The Falling Man'. Each was the subject of diametric public and media responses.

---

[36] David Friend, *Watching the World Change: The Stories Behind the Images of 9/11*, New York 2011, p. xiv.

Thomas Franklin, Raising the Flag at Ground Zero, 11 September 2001

Franklin's photograph of the firemen, taken eight hours after the attacks, charges the highly familiar with the deeply strange in a manner that goes to the core of the iconic effect. There is here an immediate echo of Rosenthal's Iwo Jima image, which Franklin himself recognized as soon as he had taken the photo.[37] His editors at the *Bergen Record* did the same, one remarking on first seeing it on screen: 'That's not a picture . . . It's a fucking icon.'[38] The two are often paired in prose or reproduced together, with the obvious implication that once again American heroism would rise to deal with 'evil' at large in the world. Because of this resemblance, Franklin's image was swiftly raised above the torrent of 9/11 photographs. It made its way through the most prominent media circuits, being reproduced in *Time* and *Newsweek* and numerous TV airings, and soon was turned into collectable memorabilia from Christmas ornaments to seat cushions. American soldiers in Afghanistan used copies as a 'calling card' to leave after raids, and there were reports that it had been painted onto bombs.[39]

Not only does the picture bear an uncanny resemblance to that of Rosenthal, but it also summons an entire tradition of crucifixion scenes. Here, in a conventional triangular composition, the flag takes the place of the sacrificial Christ, and the men gaze heavenward in a gesture of patriotic transcendence. Some have read a cross into the broken beams above their heads. The men raising their flag of defiance point to the military action to come, as promised by Bush a few days later.[40] Franklin, in choosing the moment to take the picture, said it was important that all the men's faces were visible. Franklin could not get near the scene so he used a long 245mm lens that gave prominence to the figures in the frame, and also flattened the foreground and background, bringing the firefighters into closer apparent proximity to the ruins behind them.[41] The image is as clear visually as it is politically. Governor George Pataki said of Franklin's photograph a year later: 'Out of that uncertainty, there arose a symbol of hope, a symbol of the confidence that we as New Yorkers and as Americans have always shown when confronted with evil.'[42] So the photograph should rest comfortably and uncontroversially in the US image world, and in a way it does. As a straightforward celebration of working-class resilience, heroism and patriotism in the face of terror, it does not offer any intrinsic political trouble. The trouble lies outside the image: in the attacks themselves, and the incomprehension felt by many in the US that they should be a target, a problem of education, propaganda and

---

[37] Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, p. 131.
[38] Friend, *Watching the World Change*, p. 321.
[39] Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, pp. 129-31. See also Friend, *Watching the World Change*, pp. 311-12, 323.
[40] 'President Bush Addresses the Nation', *Washington Post*, 20 September 2001.
[41] See Friend, *Watching the World Change*, p. 318.
[42] Karen Mahabir, 'Historic Moment Captured in Wax', *North Jersey News*, 4 September 2002, in Moeller, *Packaging Terrorism*, p. 144.

national self-image. The photograph is a repository of standard virtues, but the ruin driven into proximity with the symbols of heroism presents a monstrous and unfathomable challenge to them.

Richard Drew, A man plummets from the World Trade Center, 11 September 2001

Richard Drew, one of the photographers in town for Fashion Week, made an image of quite another type. Hundreds of so-called 'jumpers' fell from the towers, casting themselves into space to avoid being burned to death, or perhaps were pushed out by the crush of others trying to get to the windows. Again using a long lens, Drew took pictures of the falling people who sometimes jumped in groups or couples, occasionally holding hands. Drew took a sequence of a dozen frames of one man falling on his own, and while many of those photographs show him flailing and buffeted by the air, in one he appears to be falling calmly, as if in control of his fate. He also falls in perfect line with a dramatic change of tone in the tower behind. As Drew said of this image's verticality and symmetry: 'It just had that look.'[43] Again, the effect of the telephoto lens is to bring figure and architecture into intimate closeness, and the picture strangely reverses the order of things: the linear regularity of the building, the viewer knows, is soon to crumble into chaos, while the man's freefall introduces apparent order and sense.

Yet it was not the sense that the American public wanted to see. While video and photographs of the 'jumpers' aired a great deal on news channels outside the US, and domestically on some major broadcasters within the first few hours of the attacks, they were quickly pulled from circulation. Drew's 'Falling Man', as it became known, was likewise widely published in newspapers the day after the attacks, but it was received with such public opprobrium that the image was largely banned from further circulation and removed from newspaper servers.[44] Drew bitterly remarks that it is 'the most famous photograph that no one has seen'. The prohibition was not complete, but it was highly effective.[45] There were concerns that the picture was simply too intrusive and that the man's relatives or friends might be able to identify him. No one, as it turns out, did so or at least would admit to it. The essential problem, though, was that all images of the 'jumpers', no matter how ordered and aestheticized, were of defeat, of people driven out of the building, and at best able to choose the manner and the moment of their deaths. Attempts to read transcendence and salvation into the photos were made but were hardly found convincing.[46] While the Franklin had resonances of death, resurrection and redemption, religious readings of the Drew collided with the Christian prohibition on suicide.

---

[43] Quoted in Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*, New York 2010, p. 45.
[44] For details of the response, see Zelizer, *About to Die*, pp. 43, 47.
[45] On the exclusion, see Friend, *Watching the World Change*, p. 137. See also Tom Junod, 'The Falling Man', in Geoffrey Batchen et al., eds., *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis*, London 2012, pp. 167-75.
[46] Friend, *Watching the World Change*, p. 136.

James Nachtwey, Ground Zero, 11 September 2001

There were plenty of other striking—and perhaps iconic—photographs made amidst the unprecedented spectacle. Of those that are published again and again, religious themes abound in a crowding together of depositions, pietas and, especially, crucifixes. James Nachtwey took one of the most accomplished of them, in thrall to the extraordinary sight of the South Tower falling—'one of the most beautiful visual sights I'd ever seen, just in terms of pure visual grandeur'—and only at the last moment realizing that he was in mortal danger.[47]Among the ruins, workers and photographers kept finding crosses, either actual crucifixes or forms made by the debris. In holding onto religious redemption, the character of the coming war was made plain. As Hal Foster writes:

> the appearance of crosses and stars, is not so benign, for here the experience of the
> sublime and the traumatic is all but captured by the category of the sacred. Early on,
> Ground Zero was described as 'hallowed ground', and to this day 9/11 is often treated as

---

[47] Marco Grob, 'Beyond 9/11', *Time*, 11 Sept 2011, time.com/collection-post/4476643/james-nachtwey-beyond-9-11. The photograph may be seen here: http://www.wpr.org/remembering-9-11-through-lens-photojournalist

an event that cannot be assimilated, which passes all human understanding. This trope tends to render the historical event a theological one . . .[48]

It may be that the most reproduced depictions of 9/11 overturn the view that iconic images cannot emerge in extremely saturated digital environments. The very novelty and shock of the event, and of assured narratives that quickly built up around it, allowed such images to come to the fore. Iraq was a more complicated case because official accounts failed there, and no convincing counter-narrative was found. But it is also true that 2003 was early in the development of visual digital culture, and social media were still in the process of being born.

Mnemonic Politics

The 9/11 attacks, staged at the mediated heart of empire, offered a remarkable opportunity to examine the memory of traumatic events. The model that emerges from recent studies of the brain has implications for the affinity of memory with still photography and the impact of iconic images, emphasizing the power of saturated media environments to influence and alter remembered history. Memories should be thought of as continual reconstructions rather than as recordings, not laid down once and for all, but through a process of repetition and rehearsal which continually alters them. Those that are not revisited fade, sometimes to the point of disappearance, while those that are frequently recalled are reinforced and transformed, and become more resistant to erasure.

When a recent experience is recollected, it is usually rich in detail and little altered by the trigger that brings it back to mind. With a memory of distant events, especially when it has not been much recalled, detail is often lost, a great deal of prompting may be needed to recover it, and the properties of the retrieval cue may leave its imprint.[49] The consolidation of recollections can take weeks or even years, and long-term consolidation, at the level of the entire brain system, arguably never stops, as new memories are adjusted upon each retrieval in the light of old, and vice versa.[50] Memory builds meaningful life narratives, which often falsely emphasize the unity of the subject across time, and edits through forgetting the unimportant so that we are not crippled by the sheer accumulation of detailed reminiscence, like Borges's character Funes the Memorious.[51] The more alien the new material is to the conceptions built up in the old, the longer it takes to

---

[48] Hal Foster, 'The Last Column', *London Review of Books*, 8 September 2011.

[49] Schacter, *Searching for Memory*, pp. 79-80.

[50] This process was discovered as a side-effect of electro-convulsive therapy in the 1940s, retrograde amnesia, in which patients lost memories from before the treatments. See Howard Eichenbaum, *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Memory*, New York 2002, p. 286.

[51] Jorge Luis Borges, 'Funes the Memorious' (1942), in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, Donald Yates and James Irby, eds., New York 1962.

consolidate, and the more likely it is to be forgotten or changed to match better with the subject's regular experiences and view of the world.[52]

In a 1977 study, Roger Brown and James Kulik looked at memories that seemed to preserve or freeze detailed images of shocking events over long periods of time, apparently unchanged. They interviewed adults about how they remembered such events as the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Describing the phenomena as 'flashbulb memories', Brown and Kulik found that episodic and source memory appeared tightly enmeshed, so that subjects vividly recalled not just the events, but where and how they came to know it. Such recollections also seemed to have a strong affinity with the still photograph, to the extent that they were sometimes described as being like a print—static and unalterable.[53] Indeed flashbulb memory may be set off by the shock with which a disruptive icon is first grasped. Sontag, in a famous passage writes of first seeing photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau as a child, describing the experience as a deep cut that transformed her view of the world and would stay with her for life.[54]

---

[52] Eichenbaum, *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Memory*, p. 83; who notes that the idea of the schema goes back to F. C. Barlett's 1932 book, *Remembering*.
[53] Olivier Luminet and Antonietta Curci, eds, *Flashbulb Memories*, Hove 2009, pp. 250-1.
[54] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, London 1979, pp. 19-20.

Brown and Kulik treat flashbulb memories as fixed and accurate, but both of these qualities have been called into question. These imprinted experiences may be more persistent than others, but they do decay and fade nevertheless.[55] While people tend to believe strongly in the truth of such vivid memories, that is no guarantee of their accuracy. For example, the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination is what many Americans remember, as if it was broadcast live and their first exposure to the news: in fact stills from the film were published only a week later in *Life*, and it was not aired until years afterwards.[56] Flashbulb-memory studies of the 9/11 events have yielded mixed results. Some show that such recollections decay at same rate as any other, while being accompanied by greater feelings of veracity.[57] Others have shown greater durability and accuracy over long periods of time, even after several years, with very few distortions. One reason for their strength is that they are likely to be discussed frequently and compared to other people's recollections: they are tied to a social scene.[58] In this interchange, also affected by the media, memories may change. For those who witnessed the attacks first-hand, recollections, forged by the intense arousal of the amygdala, appear to be detailed, accurate and durable. For others, the maintenance of these memories seems to be strongly associated with collective rehearsal, narration and sharing, which can introduce distortions.[59]

While the enhanced and vivid recall of those who experience traumatic events through the media do fade and alter, photographs can protect them, especially when seen repeatedly. Under usual circumstances, the general unreliability of source memory may be compounded by digital interfaces and the rapid consumption of diverse material. If the repetition of orthodoxies—however mendacious—does much to consolidate them in the memory, and if the dearth of alternative views, drives them from the mind, then the mass media wield considerable mnemonic sway. Children have great difficulty remembering source information. Suggestive questioning is very effective in implanting false memories in preschool children, and they will recall these fabrications with confidence and in rich detail.[60] The same can be done to adults with the aid of

---

[55] Schacter, *Searching for Memory*, p. 198.
[56] Kiku Adatto, *Picture Perfect: Life in the Age of the Photo Op*, Princeton 2008, p. 49; Tali Sharot, *The Optimism Bias: A Tour of the Irrationally Positive Brain*, New York 2011, p. 151.
[57] Sharot, *The Optimism Bias*, pp. 156-7. For a summary of the 9/11 memory research, see Bridget Murray Law, 'Seared in our Memories', *Monitor on Psychology*, vol. 42, no. 8, September 2011.
[58] Schacter, *Searching for Memory*, p. 201.
[59] *Flashbulb Memories*, pp. 114-6, 250, 254-6. There are marked cultural differences here, particularly between individualist Western societies and more consensual East Asian ones.
[60] Schacter, *Searching for Memory*, p. 126.

manipulated photographs from their past or of fake political events.[61] As mass-media saturation erodes the reliability of source memory, it threatens to make children of us all.

Is it any surprise, then, in our accelerated mediatized culture, when compared to print, that the most indigestible of the 9/11 images were banished from view—in part because of the demands of the public? Or that the towers themselves disappeared from TV screens in the years after the attacks, cut from shows pre-dating 9/11? Or even more, that memories of suffering caused in Iraq registered so little? If the speeding up of cycles of production, consumption and disposal strike at the material roots of memory and fixed identities, then the fading of the icon and overt manipulation of memory portends cultural disruption or destruction, and acidic demystification.

In a poignant war story by Bao Ninh, as bombs fall on Hanoi, a young man and woman meet and become intimate. He has to leave her to dig people out of the ruins, but, feverish and still dazed from the explosions, he remembers the location of her house in a long street of identical dwellings by the trolleybus parked outside. When he returns, it has gone, and with it any chance of finding her again.[62] The story is a metonym of the experience of millions in the frontline states of the Cold War—in Berlin, Seoul, Taipei or Tokyo—awaking, as it were, from the sprint of capitalist development to find that all of the old landmarks have vanished in an unrecognizable vista.

Selectively biased media and individually tailored newsfeeds alike are powerful means of forming memories, consolidating them into larger worldviews, and gutting the capacity for critique. Yet there has also been a linked and long-term decline of trust in the media's authority. Though a culture of distraction, pushed to the limits of human attention, serves power, we inhabit a globalized media scene that puts into question the old, hierarchical traditions and associations—of nation, locale, religion, race, gender and sexuality—as different roles are rapidly thrown on and off. Once auratic, the icon fused event with source memory and summoned awe, the sublime and transcendent. So should the icon be mourned? The decline of social solidarity that was its bases may be regrettable, but not the dissolving of illusions. Against photographic truth and fixed memories, competing narratives are seen as just that. They could help to create a culture in which it is easier to identify with the Other—who tomorrow may well be you—and harder to treat some lives as expendable and unworthy of public mourning.

---

[61] José van Dijck, *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*, Stanford 2007, p. 101; Alison Winter, *Memory: Fragments of a Modern History*, Chicago 2012, pp. 247-8.
[62] Bao Ninh, 'A Marker on the Side of the Boat', in Linh Dinh, ed., *Night, Again: Contemporary Fiction from Vietnam*, New York 1996.