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Are News Images More Powerful than the Text?

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Are news images more powerful than the text?

It is commonly believed that news images have a bigger effect on the audience than the news text. Political commentators argue, for example, that the television coverage of the Vietnam war has mobilized the public opinion in the US against the war and finally brought it to an end. Similar arguments are made for the American intervention in Somalia, when the US pulled out its troops following the television broadcast of dead American soldiers being dragged in the streets of Mogadishu. Taylor (in Nossek et al.: 2005) mentions the unequal relationship between the effect of images and that of words in the Abu Gharib prisoners' scandal. He stresses that earlier imageless reports from Amnesty International suggesting human rights violations in the Iraqi prison were totally unnoticed because they were not visual. A few months earlier, the US army released video footage of Saddam Hussein in a miserable shape undergoing medical inspection after his capture. The images caused mass demonstrations in Iraq the next day. Thousands of Iraqis went to the streets, broke into government buildings and hung decent photos of Hussein from his days of glory on the walls. History is said to be abundant with evidence of the power of news images.

It is certainly an inherent value of modern journalism that news must be visual, whether in print or television (Tuchman: 1978). For television, the existence of an image will determine whether a story is used or not (Nightingale & Ross). Media professionals argue that vivid visual images make stories more memorable. These images are said to have emotional power, that is the ability to stir up emotional reaction such as outrage, sympathy, or pity. They ultimately create, alter, or reinforce elite or popular beliefs about the issues of the day and further affect government policy. However, to argue that news images as such are more powerful than the text, deserves closer scrutiny. After all, news images are never presented without any kind of text, whether it was a caption, a headline, a commentary or a report. Such a continual image-text juxtaposition renders any qualitative analysis of the impact of images alone very difficult, if not impossible. In what follows, I will attempt to map out several theories that touch upon the power of images and test to what extent these can provide a theoretical basis for the analysis of the power of images.

The Image as a powerful myth:

In media studies, a discipline grown out of mass communication, the media message takes centre stage. In the sender-receiver model of mass media (sometimes called the hypodermic needle model), the media message is created by the media apparatus (media producers, reporters, editors, etc.),

transmitted by the media channel (e.g. the newspaper) and received by the audience. The overall context of a media message at its point of reception can be said to be the result of the interaction between two (sub)contexts: the one determined by the channel and the one determined by the viewers, their interaction among themselves and with the media. A media message is read in the context of the media genre itself (e.g. news), the media channel (e.g. The Guardian newspaper), the sub-channel (e.g. World news), other messages in spacial, temporal or topical proximity to that message (e.g. on the same page or about Iraq, poverty, etc.). The other (sub)context, the one created on the audience side of the process is generally overlooked. Hall (1980) aware of this shortcoming modified this model to include the audience side. The media, Hall argues, tries to impose a dominant reading of the media message, while the audience can take the dominant reading as it is, reject it or develop a negotiated stance that is neither totally in line with the dominant nor totally oppositional to it.

Barthes (Barthes: 2000), focuses on the role of myth in the media message. He takes De Saussure's semiology and defines myth as a second order sign; a connoted message attached to the denoted one which is created by the signifier and the signified. Myth attaches to the denoted message extra baggage that is not inherent in it, a whole set of assumptions, past experiences, ideas, facts and decisions. Hence a myth does not conceal the real, but rather distorts it. He also maintains that in the media message there are two types of myths, or methologized signs: the textual (or the lexico-verbal) and the pictorial (or the image). The pictorial one, he argues, "is more imperative than writing because it imposes meaning at one stroke, without analysing it or diluting it" (p. 110)

In his foundational article 'The Photographic Message'(1977 [1961]), Barthes mentions that despite the fact that we already know a lot about the text, we still know nothing about images (p.16). He later goes on to attempt a structural analysis of the news image based on De Saussure's semiology. He maintains that images are not only perceived, received; they are also read (p.19). He arrives at the conclusion that contrary to the text, an image has two messages: denotative (or a message without a code) and connotative (a message with a code). The image, analogous to the objects it depicts, also connotes meanings that are related to these objects, but are not the objects themselves. This connoted meaning depends greatly on the cultural background of the audience. He also studies the interaction between the image and the text in the news message. He maintains that words constitute "a parasitic message designed to connote the image, to quicken it with one or more second order signified." (p.25). The text, according to Barthes, never describes the image as it is. He maintains that to describe an image in words is to change its meaning, since description always involves interpretation. Such a an image-text juxtaposition makes the connoted message of the

image seem like a natural resonance of its denoted message. In reality such a link between the denoted and connoted message does not exist. The audience is usually unaware of that, hence, the ultimate result of such a media practice is the naturalization of the cultural. The photographic message, although polysemic in nature (i.e. can be interpreted in more than one way), becomes more closed, connoting the meaning inherent in the text. News images are said to be 'over-determined'. They are mythologized by the press to create ideologically motivated signs disguised as innocent eyewitnesses. Consequently, these signs naturalize history and perpetuate cultural hegemony (Hall in Cohen & Young: 1973).

If one focuses on the unit-message in news media (i.e. the news article or report), this message can be said to be the result of the interaction of two structures: that of images and that of the text, or language. The reading of the image is greatly dependent on the meaning the text projects onto it. A classic example on this is the iconic image of a Chinese protester obstructing a line of advancing tanks in Tiananmen Square (Fig. 1). This image was mythologized by Western media as the heroism of a man against an oppressive regime. In Chinese media, however, the same image was mythologized as the restraint of revolutionary soldiers in their ongoing struggle for a new China. One can also argue that images change the meaning of the text. When images and text are presented side-by-side, the meaning of each of them changes. The image articulates the words and the words articulate the image. This juxtaposition of words and images makes the analysis of images more complex.



Fig.1 A man blocking a column of tanks heading east on Beijing's Changan Boulevard (or Cangan Boulevard, sometimes called the Avenue of Eternal Peace) near Tiananmen Square on June 5, 1989. Photo by Jeff Widener (Source: Wikipedia)

Barthes' analysis is indeed quite valuable. However, it has its shortcomings. These shortcomings stem from its underlying theoretical assumptions based on the sender-receiver model and semiology. The sender-receiver model of mass communications overemphasises the media unit-message. The focus here is on the visual sign and its interplay with the textual. Equating the visual with the textual, even if only for the sake of their analysis, gives a false impression that the two function similarly and that their effect is also similar. The focus on the visual message overlooks the whole notion of visuality versus the notion of textuality. Images are not only artefacts to be read or messages encoded by media professionals and decoded by audiences. Images bring with them a whole culture of visuality. They are scenes staged to be seen, to be exhibited and a whole way of

comprehending the world.

W. J. T. Mitchell, writing over thirty years after Barthes, insists that “we still do not know exactly what pictures are, what their relation to language is, how they operate on observers and the world, how their history is to be understood, and what’s to be done with or about them” (Mitchell: 1994, p.16). Mitchell's remarks voice a concern that the analysis of images as a text is in itself inadequate. He maintains that the world has undergone what he calls a 'pictorial turn' in which the pervasiveness of images has brought with it a whole new notion of 'visuality' as opposed to the notion of 'textuality' which the invention of the printing press has brought in the 14th century. However, this should not be simplistically understood as images replacing words. Mitchell's aim was to acknowledge the perception of a turn to the visual or to the image as a commonplace, a basic element in daily modern life that is taken casually and unreflectively about. In what follows, I will now look at certain assumptions about the visual, explain their relevance to news media and explore some of their effects of the visual culture.

Images as the impartial eyewitness:

Since news is essentially about the construction of reality (Tuchman: 1978), the image plays a central role in this construction. News images are sometimes considered mechanical copies of the real. The photographer's role in the imaging process in such a view is reduced to the mechanical push of a button. If he is to be credited, he would be credited in terms of his 'luck', 'talent' or a combination of the two (Burgin: 1976 in Evans & Hall: 1999, p.44). Luck is understood as his fortune to have been at the scene. Talent, is his ability to take 'good photos' in often difficult conditions.

The culture of photojournalism is best illustrated in Andreas Fenninger's photo 'The Photojournalist' (Fig.2). The photo represents a the photojournalist as some sort of a mechanised person. Here, we are looking at the person through which we see the world, but his face is hardly discernible. The person behind the machine is no longer relevant; it is the camera that drives him. His eyes are no longer visible; they have been replaced by the mechanical eye of the camera. The machine



Fig.2 Andreas Fenninger, 'The Photojournalist'.

seems to have taken possession of the cameraman. The resulting 'cyborg' is gazing back at the viewers in anticipation for the right moment, to capture their image with the next blink. One could also recall Dziga Vertov's words (cited in Berger: 1972, p.17):

“ I'm an eye. A mechanical eye. I, the machine, show you a world the way only I can see it. I free myself for today and forever from human immobility. I am in constant movement. I approach and pull away from objects. I creep under them. I move alongside a running horse's mouth. [...] My ways lead towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus, I explain in a new way the world unknown to you.”

Indeed, images have an authority in re-presenting the real that no other media text could ever claim. After all, images are not only interpretations of reality; they are traces of it (Burgin: 1976 in Evans & Hall: 1999 p.44)(Sontag: 1977, p.154). The light that falls off the objects and through the lens to illuminate the emulsion carries with it a stencil of the object itself; a material trace which no other form of image making has. It is this authority of the image that incorporates photography in the judicial system. The production of photographs for court evidence has become a standard practice. Any challenge to the photographic evidence would be made to their interpretation rather than their facticity.

In this light, the news image becomes photographic 'evidence' of the real. The image presents itself as an impartial eyewitness. Such a role cannot be played by the text, since with the text we see the person writing or saying it. The addressor in the text is always visible even if one cannot see him or her physically. Reading a news article one cannot avoid 'imagining' the person behind the words. When the news report is read, the voice of the reporter reminds us of the speaker. With images the situation is different. The photographer is never visible in the photograph. It is the photograph's scene that (re)presents it self to the viewer, not the photographer re-presenting it. In fact photographers are often very careful not have their shadow or any trace of them in the photographic frame; anything that might remind the viewers of their physical presence behind the camera. The journalist presents himself to the audience as the attorney. The image his evidence. The audience becomes the judge of the events. The audience listens to what the journalist has to say and judges the events based on the facts presented to it.

However, it would be rather simplistic to think of images as exact replicas of the real. First, in any news coverage of an event, images merely capture a small fraction of the action taking place, probably, over a vast area and a long period of time (Van Ginneken: 1998, p.171). To photograph is

an act of choice. The photographer selects a handful of views amongst an infinite number of possibilities. Second, the mechanism itself is certainly not impartial. The choice of film, shutter speed and lens have a great impact on the resulting image. Third, the experience of seeing a photograph is very different from seeing in real life (Gombrich in Mitchell: 1980). Fourth, one should consider the possible digital manipulations which images can go through, and the various editorial choices made before an image gets published or broadcasted (Van Ginneken: 1998)(Hall in Cohen & Young: 1973). All this has led Burgin to declare that “manipulation is of the essence of photography” and that “photographers are people who manipulate the physical means of production of photography” (1976 in Evans & Hall: 1999, p.41). Goodman (1976, pp. 27-31) argues that any representation of something or someone is necessarily a representation of that thing or person as *something else*. Perfect mediation where the image is a perfect analogon to what it re-presents, simply, does not exist. What is said about photography can be said about any form of re-presentation, whether it is visual or verbal.

Nonetheless, it would be rather contentious to argue that 'lay-people' might not be aware of the fallibility of images. After all, most people that are exposed to the media are equally exposed to image capturing and editing technologies, be it analogue or digital, still or video. Imaging has become part of the modern daily life that it can hardly be said that people are not aware of its 'limitations' or manipulations. In news media, images are generally considered and expected to be 'real' by their audience and the reputation of the press is very dependent on that (Tirohl: 2000). In fact, so dependent that the editor of the UK newspaper The Daily Mirror was dismissed after publishing fake images of Iraqi prisoners of war being tortured by British soldiers, and the newspaper made a public apology for the incident.

The legitimization of the photographic evidence:

Tagg (1987 in Evans & Hall: 1999) takes a Foucauldian account of photographic history. He maintains that the perceived facticity of photographic images do not stem from the appreciation of their mechanical means of production alone. Perhaps more importantly, they also stem from their incorporation into the state apparatus in advanced capitalist societies with their new knowledge-power structure. This, he argues, started happening in the last quarter of the nineteenth century when the photographic industry underwent a technical revolution that allowed for easy and cheap production of photographic images. The same period saw a shift in state operations from the absolutist system of government to a more subtle one. The new form of state control was less about

explicit, dramatic and total power, and more about the pervasive 'micro-physics of power' operating clandestinely in the daily duties and gestures of individual citizens. These institutions spanned the domains of law, health, education and the media. The new power structure necessitated the creation of new institutions of knowledge with systems of documentation of which photography was one. The camera was used to produce highly coded representations for the sustenance of power within the state apparatus. The images, neatly constructed and produced, were to stand witness to the 'truth' held by the state. In Foucauldian terms, the power of the modern state is what displays itself most and hides itself best, and it is through imaging that this can be best performed.

The incorporation of photography into the state knowledge-power apparatus created a dichotomy between two types of photographic practices: the artistic and the documentary. In the documentary, certain professional rules needed to be instilled to legitimize and codify what is to be considered photographic documentation. For photographs to be used in court, they should steer away from any kind of dramatization and convey accurately what the photographer saw with his eyes. Documentary photographic was codified on the levels of production and presentation. On the level of production, photographs needed to be sharp, well exposed, developed and printed, cover the subject fully, show eye-level of it and have some scale reference to be able to judge sizes from them. On the level of presentation, they needed to be accompanied with the time and date of their exposure along with the original negatives to prove they were not retouched. Guided by these rules, the police photographer's testimony would stand up against that of any other witness rebutting it. The legitimation of the photographic evidence coupled with bourgeois culture of realism gave the photograph its undisputed authority. The object of the photograph is implicated by it since the act of photography has been routinized and the photographer subject, ostensibly, neutralized. There is a striking resemblance between the professional rules of photographic documentation and the Code of Conduct on Images and Messages Relating to the Third World (cited in Van Ginneken: 1998, p.168)

This notion of gaining control through vision and surveillance reverberates in language when one says: "I see what you mean" and "seeing is believing"¹. It is in this privileging of the visual witness over the verbal one that drives news media, the one most concerned with representing reality, in the direction of the visual as evidence. We find this bias towards the visual codified in news media practices through the journalistic adage of "show, don't tell". Media professionals are often

1 Further research needs to be conducted on different cultures to see to what extent this association of vision with control is universal. This association is evident in European cultures (sometimes called Western scopophilia), but is also present in other cultures and languages, such as Arabic. It would also be necessary to investigate the possible impact of the introduction of image capturing technologies into non-Western societies on their perception of knowledge and the power-knowledge structure.

encouraged to provide visual material for the news whenever possible.

Memory also privileges the photograph. The early records of the use of photography in state control apparatuses stress the importance of photographs as means of rapid identification of people. As Dr. Diamond reflects on the value of clinical photography: "I have found the portrait [image] of more value in calling to my mind the case and treatment, than any verbal description I may have placed on record." (cited in Tagg: 1987 in Evans & Hall: 1999) Sontag (2003, p.19), argues that "memory freezes frames; its basic unit is the single image". Images function as mental scaffoldings for information. With the information overload of modern life, images provide a quick way of apprehending something. Classified and stored in the mind, they form a repository of experiences that can be accessed efficiently. With the pervasiveness of news images, every news event becomes associated with a set of images stored in the memory which can be easily recalled. The falling statues of Lenin in Russia and Eastern Europe marking the end of communism, the plane hitting the World Trade Centre in New York, the street execution of the Vietcong prisoner in Saigon, are all but examples of iconic images that have become the staples binding the narrative of news events. This memory bias, coupled with the increased surveillance of news images and the continuous mythologizing of history makes the image "the eye of history" as Mathew Brady, the photographer of the US civil war once said.

Real or simply realistic, images have become the real. The justification of news is the public's right to know 'the truth' and images are brought as evidence of this truth. In an age where most of the information about the world comes from the news, the news become the reality. In fact, Sontag argues that "reality has become more and more like what we are shown by the camera" (1977, p.161).

Images as (simulation of) reality

Indeed violence and control is in the very nature of photography, more so the news photography. The violence of capturing the subject (subjugating it), showing it in a way it does not want to be shown in. It is this why people often feel nervous in front of the camera; because they want to be seen by it the way they want. Baudrillard argues that "the photographic event resides in the confrontation between the object and the lens (l'objectif), and in the violence that this confrontation provokes. The photographic act is a duel. It is a dare launched at the object and a dare of the object in return." (1999, parenthesis in original). As the camera tries to capture 'the other', this other only

allows itself to be captured in the way it wants. This is why many news events have become more and more staged in pre-recorded speeches, news conferences, video footage releases on events, etc.

He (1983) also argues that in our increasingly visual world, images no longer re-present, they simulate. What he means is that when the image is equated with the real, the line dividing the real and the image is blurred and the real becomes a mere simulation. The image moves from being a reflection of a basic reality (image realism), to a mask and perversion of the basic reality (myth), to a mask of its absence, and finally to bear no relation to reality what so ever (simulacra) (p.11).

Simulacra is the substitution of the signs of the real for the real itself . If news is about constructing reality, and the line between the sign and what it refers to has been blurred, then reality becomes a construction of signs. This is why Baudrillard argues that the Gulf War of 1991 did not happen, because people did not really know what happened. Their relationship to the events has become about the consumption of news images which in some cases touch upon real events, in others they were a mere phantasy. Images of US missiles making bull's-eye hits of Iraqi targets turned out to be a simulation. One could also argue that the attacks of Islamic militant groups on American targets were designed to be simulations; to maximize their visual impact. Such attacks in warfare terms make little physical damage, but their visual impact is enormous since they are made to simulate the images in the media.

When images becomes reality, they become as good real event as any other to be picked up and depicted by the media itself. It is this self-referentiality of images that Naomi Klein refers to while commenting on the iconic image of the smoking US soldier in Falluja. The image, Klein says, echoes “the most powerful icon in American advertising (the Marlboro man), which in turn imitated the brightest star ever created by Hollywood - John Wayne - who was himself channelling America's most powerful founding myth, the cowboy on the rugged frontier.” (Klein: 2004). The camera man no longer looks for reality in the real, but in images.

Conclusions:

Despite the many works on the topic in both media and cultural studies; little is known yet about what the effect of news images is. It can be argued that the over emphasis of media studies on the media message and thus the pictorial message might have drawn the attention away from a more potent aspect of the image, that of visuality. Images are not only artefacts to be read or messages encoded by media professionals and decoded by audiences. They are scenes staged to be seen, to be

exhibited and a whole way of comprehending the world.

There is some work on the effect of visibility in Western culture, but these do not construct a coherent set of theories. Further research and analyses need to be conducted on how the all-pervasiveness of images and their large scale incorporation into the modern daily life might have changed people's sense of the world. The study of news images is paramount to the study of visibility because news is necessarily about the construction of reality. Any construct of the real affects the way people perceive the world; as Bakhtin puts it:

“Let the witness see and know only an insignificant corner of existence, and all existence that is not cognised and not seen by him changes its quality (sense), becoming uncognized, unseen existence, and not simply existence as it was before, that is, without any relationship to witness”²

Such research should include the non-West as well as the West to determine the effect of visibility in different cultural settings and assess the impact of these cultures on the notion of visibility. A vibrant and growing media industry has been developing in the south, but little effort has been made to analyse the effect of news images produced there.

² Bakhtin, M., *From notes made in 1970-71*, p.138

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