

Iconic photos of the Vietnam War era: A semiotic analysis as a means of understanding

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Abstract

The Vietnam War was defined as the “first televised war,” but it has been the still photos, the single frames, that have carved its place in history. Eddie Adams’ image of the execution of a Viet Cong member on the streets of Saigon and Nick Ut’s photo of a little girl running naked down the street after being burned by napalm are two examples of “iconic” photos as defined by scholars. These iconic photos have appeared repeatedly in the media, they have been reused and repurposed by popular culture, and they appear in history books as visual representations of the war. For this study, a synthesis of previous literature on the photographs, and a semiotic analysis examined five iconic photos in order to determine the common qualities of a photograph that catapulted these specific photos to iconic status. Results indicated the common threads of emotional outrage, the portrayal of innocence, and the sense of powerlessness existed among the iconic photos.

I. Introduction

Prior to the Vietnam War, censorship in war reporting was used to prevent damage to the spirits on the home front as well as prevent the opposing side from gaining significant information.¹ According to Daniel Hallin (1986), Vietnam was the first war in which journalists were not subjected to official censorship, in large part because the United States government did not recognize Vietnam as an official war. Americans saw the first televised war in their living rooms, and U.S. media gave citizens more information about Vietnam than it had in any prior conflict.²

News photographs added significantly to the impact of words in print media, contributing to the significant role the media played in the Vietnam War.³ The Vietnam War was a turning point for photojournalism. According to Robert Elegant (1981), it was the first war in which the outcome was not determined on the

1 Daniel C. Hallin, *The “Uncensored War”* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986): 127.

2 Sidney W. Head and Christopher H. Sterling, *Broadcasting in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982), 537-539.

3 Ulf Hannerz, *Foreign News: Exploring the World of Foreign Correspondents* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

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battlefield, but rather in print.⁴ Brothers (1997) found that photographs of the Vietnam War “influenced public attitudes to the hostilities.”⁵

Photographs are a valuable source of information in the media because, as many studies have shown, visual images are recalled more quickly and for a longer time than words.⁶ Domke, Perlmutter, and Spratt (2003) found that images have the ability to “trigger” people’s pre-existing values, cognitions, and feelings. These pre-existing ideas can reflect how an image is interpreted.⁷ Mendelson (2003) found that photos are more or less significant based on the viewer’s learning styles because high visualizers are able to store information about individual news photographs, recognize news photographs to be less complex than the written word, and find photographs more appealing than those who are not visual learners.⁸ Historical conditions are also important to the understanding of a photograph.⁹

If people have different learning styles, and some individuals are more susceptible to remembering and digesting visual images, how is it that certain “icon images” are claimed to be understood and recognized by everyone? According to Hariman and Lucaites (2007), Nick Ut’s “Accidental Napalm” photograph is the defining image of the Vietnam War because “that little girl will not go away, despite many attempts at forgetting,” and it confronts U.S citizens with the immorality of the war.¹⁰ Hariman and Lucaites (2001) defined iconic images as those that are recognized by everyone, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional responses, and are regularly reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics.¹¹ Iconic photos also can motivate public action on behalf of democratic values.¹² Michael Griffin (1999) said the “great pictures” typically symbolize national valor, human courage, inconceivable inhumanity, or senseless loss.¹³

Perlmutter (1998) found that iconic images are created and kept in circulation by media elites.¹⁴ Perlmutter also defined many qualities of an icon image, including celebrity, prominence, frequency, profit, instantaneousness, transposability, frame of subjects, importance of event, metonymy, primordially and/or cultural resonance, and striking composition. He said that an icon provokes a strong negative reaction, or outrage. Contrary to popular beliefs, Perlmutter found that the population as a whole is not familiar with “icon images.”¹⁵

II. Methods

4 Robert Elegant, “How to Lose a War: Reflections of a Foreign Correspondent,” *Encounter* 57 (1981): 73-86.

5 Caroline Brothers, *War and Photography* (London: Routledge, 1997): 1.

6 Joseph R. Jenkins, D.C. Neale and S.L. Deno, “Differential Memory for Picture and Word Stimuli,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 58 (1967): 303-7 and J.G. Anglin and W.H. Levie, “Role of Visual Richness in Picture Recognition Memory,” *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 61 (1985): 1303-6.

7 David Domke, David Perlmutter, and Meg Spratt, “The Primes of our Times? An Examination of the ‘Power’ of Visual Images,” *Journalism* 3 (2003): 131-59.

8 Andrew Mendelson, “For Whom is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words? How does the Visualizing Cognitive Style Affect Processing of News Photos?” Conference Papers – International Communication Association 2003 Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA: 1-30.

9 Wendy Kozol, *Life’s America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994): 6.

10 Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photos, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007): 173.

11 Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, “Dissent and Emotional Management in a Liberal-Democratic Society: The Kent State Iconic Photography,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* (2001): 4-31.

12 Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, “Public Identity and Collective Memory in U.S. Iconic Photography: The Image of ‘Accidental Napalm’,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2003): 35-66.

13 Michael Griffin, “The Great War Photographs: Constructing Myths of History and Photojournalism,” in *Picturing the Past: Media, History, and Photography*, ed. Bonnie Brennen and Hanno Hardt (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 131.

14 David D. Perlmutter. *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy*. (Westport: Praeger, 1998): 1-34.

15 Perlmutter, *Photojournalism*, 1-34.

The methods of this research will be a synthesis of the literature on the iconic photos and a semiotic analysis of the chosen photos, searching for themes and gaining an emotional understanding of the images. This research study will examine five iconic photos of the Vietnam War era. The photos include John Paul Filo's "Kent State" (1970), Malcolm Brown's "Self-Immolation" (1963), Eddie Adams' "Tet Execution" (1968), Ronald Haeberle's "My Lai Massacre" (1968), and Nick Ut's "Accidental Napalm" (1972).¹⁶ According to Sturken, all of these photos include depictions of horror, challenge ideological narratives, and have acquired far greater currency than any video of the war. The photos "acquired iconic status by shocking the American public and creating widespread disillusionment over the United States' role in the war."¹⁷ To gain a deeper understanding of the photos, this study will use semiotics to place the photos in a cultural context and examine recurring patterns and meanings to fully understand the photos.

This semiotic analysis will follow the method of Mendelson and Smith (2006), first identifying the signs in the images, then determining what the signs signify, and lastly exploring the meanings of the signs in a cultural context; in this case, the context of the Vietnam War era.¹⁸ The purpose of a semiotic analysis is to understand the meaning of the image, "which arises from understanding the social context in which the images were produced and within the images themselves, as well as from the minds of the audience members."¹⁹ The patterns of composition, specifically the vantage point of the photographer as well as the cultural meaning of the subject matter must be taken into consideration.²⁰

According to Messaris (1994), some aspects of the composition can communicate different meanings to the audience. The audience is more likely to identify with a subject that is in the foreground of a photo rather than in the background. The more a subject is turned to the camera, the more open they are to being understood by the viewer. And lastly, a subject taken from a high angle is considered powerless while those taken from a low angle tend to be viewed as having more power.²¹

Through the method of a semiotic analysis of the five iconic photos, this study attempted to understand the common qualities that catapulted specific photos of the Vietnam War era to iconic status?

III. Findings and Analysis



Photo 1: Kent State

The Kent State Massacre occurred on May 4, 1970, when soldiers of the Ohio National Guard opened fire on students who were protesting the Vietnam War. Thirteen students were shot, killing four. Student photographer John Filo took a photo of a girl screaming out over a body lying on the pavement and the photo went out on the AP wire later that day. That photo would become an iconic photo of the Kent State Massacre and the Vietnam War.

According to the categories that Perlmutter uses to define the qualities of an iconic photo, the Kent State photo is iconic because it has a celebrity quality, meaning people recognize the photo, it instantaneously achieved fame, and it shows a significant historical event.

¹⁶ These photos are defined as iconic images by Hariman and Lucaites (2007) and Sturken (1997).

¹⁷ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997): 89-94.

¹⁸ Andrew L. Mendelson and C. Zoe Smith, "Vision of a New State: Israel as Mythologized by Robert Capa," *Journalism Studies* 7 (2006): 191.

¹⁹ Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies* (London: Sage Publications, 2001): 69.

²⁰ Mendelson and Smith, "Vision of a New State," 191.

²¹ Paul, Messaris, *Visual "Literacy" Image, Mind, & Reality* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1994).

The subject of the photo is not famous, and therefore does not fit into Perlmutter's category of fame because, as he states, only a handful of people alive today could identify the woman kneeling over the body.²²

The Kent State photo has been studied excessively by scholars, finding that much of the power of the photo comes from the expression of outrage on the woman's face. According to Hariman and Luciates, "The girl's cry is a direct demand for accountability and compensatory action."²³ The feeling on her face is powerful not only because of its expressiveness but also because it matches the political situation represented by the photograph.²⁴ The woman draws attention onto herself, away from the boy who is lying in front of her, presumably dead, because of her intense emotional response. In their book *No Caption Needed*, Hariman and Luciates said, "Her scream seems to be ripping out of her heart, spontaneous, uninhibited, and unanswerable—almost if she had been the one shot."²⁵

Hariman and Luciates also believe that the photo has become an icon for the event because the photo is gendered. A woman is a more appropriate vessel for a public emotional response. The woman is positioned between two males, the one lying motionless on the ground and the one standing beside her, seemingly unmoved.²⁶ Hariman and Luciates also pointed out that the Kent State girl acts as a ventriloquist for the murdered body on the pavement.²⁷

One of the less than praising aspects of the photo, as Perlmutter pointed out, is that this photo is technically poor; it violates the techniques of photography because "a fence post grows out of the woman's head."²⁸ This compositional error prevents it from falling into the striking composition category that Perlmutter has determined a quality of an iconic photo.

Photo 1 -- Semiotic Analysis

The victim in the photograph is lying face down. His hair is disheveled and he is wearing a jacket and pants. His clothing has no identifying qualities. His face is hidden and thus his identity is hidden as well. This anonymity of the victim creates a national interest. He could be anyone. He could be any college student—anyone's son, brother, or friend. The anonymity of the victim yields to national outrage and could have created a sympathy and anger on a larger scale than if his face had been clearly shown.

The girl who is crying out in anguish is the focal point of the photograph as her body is open towards the photographer. The emotion on her face is communicated to the viewer and conveys the outrage that she is feeling. Her arms extend out, almost as if she is reaching for something that is not there. She is expressing a loss that she cannot fully grasp onto or understand. Her body posture is similar to the posture of Mary that is commonly represented in the Pieta. Her arms are outstretched as if she should be holding the lifeless Jesus, who in this case is represented by the victim. This creates a maternal quality in the girl and further strengthens the gendered quality of the photo that Hariman and Luciates have established. She also has a white scarf around her neck, which could be a symbol of peace or neutrality, a peace that did not occur that day.

The boy standing in the foreground is looking away, showing disinterest or confusion. His face is hidden by his long hair, which shows ambiguity and rebellion. The boy behind him, with his back to the camera has two holes in the butt of his jeans. Again showing rebellion, this also conveys the idea of being shot or hurt.

The fence in the photograph has been the site of controversy over the years, but the fence also raises questions about the landscape. What was the purpose of the fence? Was it there to keep the students in and the national guard out? It represents a barrier that should not have been crossed. The students should have been safe on a college campus, but that barrier was broken and four were killed.

This photo communicated the anguish and frustration that the nation felt in reaction to the event that took place at Kent State. The anguish on the face of the girl represented the emotions and internal turmoil that the students at Kent State were protesting about the draft and the war in Vietnam. That anguish was

22 Perlmutter, *Photojournalism*, 16.
23 Hariman and Luciates, "Dissent," 9.
24 Hariman and Luciates, "Dissent," 8.
25 Hariman and Luciates, *No Caption Needed*, 140-1.
26 Hariman and Luciates, "Dissent," 8-9.
27 Hariman and Luciates, "Public Identity," 56.
28 Perlmutter, *Photojournalism*, 18.

catapulted to a national level due to the anonymity of the victim who was gunned down by the National Guard who should have been protecting him.

Photo 2: Self-Immolation



The “Burning Monk” photograph was taken by Malcolm Browne on June 11, 1963, when Thich Quang Duc sat down in a busy Saigon intersection and set fire to himself to protest the South Vietnamese government. A march of 300 Buddhist monks and nuns blocked all entrances to the intersection while fellow monks poured a combustible mixture on Thich Quang Duc. He struck a match and was instantaneously engulfed in flames.²⁹ This photograph was one of the first to introduce Americans to the conflict in Vietnam and “its undeniable force transfixed the attention of the American public on the dramatic events portrayed.”³⁰

According to Perlmutter, this photo is one that exemplifies the emotional reactions that iconic images incite. “Typically, the picture is annotated as one that occasioned a reaction of “shock and dismay.”³¹ When he saw the photo for the first time, “President Kennedy’s reaction was undoubtedly similar to that of many others, as he was heard to exclaim ‘Jesus Christ,’ when the morning papers were delivered to him.”³²

According to Hariman and Luciates, the photo indicated that the Saigon government was so powerless that it could not put out the flames as the body burned.³³

Photo 2 -- Semiotic Analysis

In the photograph, the flames are consuming a man and are blowing to the right in the wind. Dark, heavy smoke is coming off of the flames and is hiding the background in the top right corner. The flames are chaotic and look like they could not be contained, but yet they are very focused in the specific area surrounding the man.

The right side of the man burning can be seen fairly clearly. His head is shaved and he is sitting straight up. His posture indicates that he is not scared or stressed, but that he is sitting there with patience and purpose, letting the flames consume him. His posture shows that this is an act of suicide not an act of murder. He is not trying to escape or resist the flames; instead he is allowing them to kill him.

To the left there is a gas can, indicating that the flames are burning on gasoline that has been poured on the man. The gas can is an important element that helps to tell the story of the photograph. As the gas can helps to tell the story, the car with its hood up behind the burning body adds confusion to the photo. The background is lined with people all wearing white robes. The robes are atypical and indicate that they have a religious, or group affiliation. The white indicates neutrality or peace. The people are looking on, observing the act that is occurring in front of them, but doing nothing to stop it.

This was a protest photograph, but the purpose of self-immolation was lost on many Westerners. The exact purpose of the protest might have been lost along the way, but the patience that the monk demonstrated as he experienced the agony of being burned alive communicated his desire for change. The monk died to communicate his message, but it was Malcolm Browne’s photographs that drew international attention on Indochina.

Photo 3: Tet Execution

The photograph that has become known as the “Tet Execution” captured the precise moment that a Viet Cong prisoner was executed at point-blank range. Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, chief of the

29 Lisa Skow and George Dionisopoulos, “A Struggle to Contextualize Photographic Images: American Print Media and the ‘Burning Monk,’” *Communication Quarterly* Vol. 45 No. 4 (1997): 393-4.

30 Skow and Dionisopoulos, “A Struggle to Contextualize Photographic Images,” 396.

31 Perlmutter, *Photojournalism*, 20.

32 Skow and Dionisopoulos, “A Struggle to Contextualize Photographic Images,” 396.

33 Hariman and Luciates, “Public Identity,” 56.



South Vietnamese National Police, shot the prisoner with a small Smith & Weston detective pistol in front of AP photographer Eddie Adams, as well as NBC and ABC camera crews. The execution was aired on television, but it was the still photograph that captured the “decisive moment.”³⁴ According to Sturken, this photo acquired far greater currency than the video footage of the event: The photograph highlights the facial expressions and circulated more easily, while the video footage of the events is actually more chaotic and horrific.³⁵ The photo won the Pulitzer Prize for spot news photography in 1969.

“Eddie Adams’ still photo appeared on the front page of most major newspapers; it was to be reprinted *ad infinitum* in magazines and books to the present day,” fulfilling both the instantaneous and prominence categories of an icon.³⁶ The photo’s prominence in the media yielded the credit of changing the course of history.³⁷ Eddie Adams said, “Still photographs are the most powerful weapons in the world.”³⁸

The photo has a striking composition because it shows the two subjects with the gun in the center. “Its simplicity is crucial—the war depicted in this photograph is man against man, not the complex war of bombs, defoliation, and unseen enemies.”³⁹ The photo “became famous for its depiction of the indiscriminate brutality of the war.”⁴⁰ The executioner’s businesslike manner and lack of emotion indicate that this situation is routine.⁴¹ And the Viet Cong’s expression of the unknown creates an empathy with the viewers. Hariman and Luciates describe the Viet Cong’s expression as one that might be seen in a dentist’s office.⁴²

Photo 3 -- Semiotic Analysis

In the photograph of the Tet Execution, the influence of the camera must be taken into account. The executioner must have been aware of the cameras pointed at him when he chose to point his gun at the Viet Cong prisoner. He turned his body and face away from the cameras, thus concealing his expression and the purpose in his action. On the other hand, the face of the victim reveals the emotions of fear and anguish as he is being shot.

The victim’s disheveled, plaid shirt is the opposite of the typical camouflage pattern of a military uniform, which would be kept in place representing pride. The way he is dressed indicates to a casual viewer that he is not a military party, but rather that he is a citizen who is being shot in cold blood. He received no trial, but instead was shot at point-blank range in the deserted street. He also was not shot with a machine gun or a rifle that a military soldier would typically carry, but a pistol, increasing the inhumanity of the act because it no longer represents a military action, but intimate hatred between two men, or in this case, a hatred between the two sides of the conflict.

The uneven distribution of power can be seen in the arms of the two characters. The shooter’s arm is extended out horizontally. As he clinches the trigger, the muscles in his arm are accentuated, showing the power that he is exerting over his victim. The Viet Cong man’s arms cannot be seen; they are tied behind his back, stripping him of his power and leaving him there with no way to fight back. He is also standing motionless, no one is holding him, but he is not trying to run away. He has accepted his fate and is not even trying to turn his body; he is not cowering from the gun and his imminent fate.

The soldier to the left of the frame is gritting his teeth, the emotion on his face mirrors the gruesome act that he is watching. He is wearing a helmet, which creates irony because the Viet Cong would have benefited from a helmet at this point in time, as he is being shot in the head.

- 34 Perlmutter, *Photojournalism*, 35.
- 35 Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 89-94.
- 36 Perlmutter, *Photojournalism*, 36.
- 37 Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 93.
- 38 *Time Magazine*, July 27, 1998.
- 39 Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 93.
- 40 Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 93.
- 41 Hariman and Luciates, “Public Identity,” 56.
- 42 Hariman and Luciates, “Public Identity,” 56.

This photo created an empathy for the victim and villainized the shooter. One could not understand the situation from the photo, but could empathize with the victim and deem this action inhumane. This scenario is echoed in the lack of understanding for the two opposing sides in the Vietnam War and the misunderstanding for the need to take life during the conflict. The photo shows an inhumane act that emphasizes the inhumanity of the Vietnam War as a whole.

Photo 4: My Lai Massacre



On March 16, 1968, the men of Charlie Company under the command of First Lieutenant William Calley expected to find the Viet Cong. They found no enemy soldiers, only old men, women, and children, but they still killed them all in what would later be referred to as the My Lai Massacre. Army photographer Ronald Haeberle accompanied the troops to My Lai that day and turned in a few black-and-white self-censored photographs of the infantrymen and Vietnamese huts. However, on his personal color film camera, he took photos of the atrocities and murders that occurred that day.

On November 20, Haeberle gave the exclusive rights to the photos to *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

and an unusually large photo of a tangle of bodies, that were clearly women and children, was printed at the top of the front page. The photos were later reproduced in newspapers and magazines around the world, including in the *New York Post* and the *New York Times*.⁴³ The photo became known as “And Babies?” and was used as evidence during the court proceedings that resulted in the conviction of Calley.

Scholars have studied the photo, and Sturken claimed that it “acquired iconic status by shocking the American public and creating widespread disillusionment over the U.S. role in the war.”⁴⁴ Sturken also said that the photograph “depicts terror and American atrocities in intimate detail.”⁴⁵ According to Goldberg, “The ‘And Babies?’ photograph got loose in the culture as an easily recognized symbol of what was wrong with America.”⁴⁶

Photo 4 -- Semiotic Analysis

This photograph was taken from a high angle, portraying the subjects as powerless, emphasizing the obvious, as they are all dead. Everyone in the photo is horizontal, a rarity as people are typically represented vertically. The tangle of bodies creates confusion. Confusion for the viewer to visually untangle the horror that they are looking at and also representing the confusion that the people must have experienced as they were being gunned down.

The focal point of this photo is a baby’s rear, drawing attention to the innocent children who were killed in the massacre. As you look at the people along the road, the composition continues down the road where there are more bodies scattered about. When the frame cuts off the road, the viewer is only left to wonder if there are even more bodies off in the distance.

One body is lying face up with his/her legs spread open and both hands covering the genitals. This covering prevents the viewer from knowing whether or not the body is male or female. If one was to assume that the body was a woman, which would help to explain why she is not wearing any pants: Was she trying to protect herself in the last moments of life? Did she fear rape or other actions by the soldiers who were gunning her and the other people down? All of the people in the photo are barefoot indicating that they were powerless to run away.

In the landscape of the photo, there is a fence running along the road. The fence could have trapped

43 Vicki Goldberg, *The Power of Photography: How Photographs Changed our Lives*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991): 229-36.

44 Sturken, 94

45 Sturken, 93

46 Goldberg, *The Power of Photography*, 236.

them in, preventing them from running away. The fence also appears to be bent down, indicating that it could have been trampled as people tried to escape. This is the only photo of the five iconic photos in this study that was taken in color. In this photo, the color creates contrast. The green grass that borders the road is full of life, it is the only life left in the photo as it surrounds the dead bodies on the road.

The shocking gruesome qualities of this photo were shocking to Americans when they were confronted with the atrocities of the My Lai Massacre. At first they did not believe that their soldiers would commit such inhumane atrocities, but the photo created the evidence that forced Americans to believe. After seeing this one photo, they were forced to conceive that this massacre might not have been the only one, simply the only one that there was evidence of.

Photo 5: Accidental Napalm



The “Accidental Napalm” photo was taken by AP photographer Nick Ut on June 8, 1972, near Trang Bang in South Vietnam. The photo shows children fleeing in terror, with the focus on nine-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc, in the center, who ripped off her burning clothes after she was splashed by napalm. There was a brief editorial debate about whether to print a photo involving nudity, but it was subsequently published all over the world the next day.⁴⁷

According to Hariman and Luciates, “The photo violates one set of norms in order to activate another; propriety is set aside for a moral purpose. It is a picture that shouldn’t be shown of an event that shouldn’t have happened.”⁴⁸ Sturken claimed that the young, female,

naked figure represents the victimized, feminized country of Vietnam.” □

There is a stark contrast between the soldiers and the children, the soldiers’ business as usual attitude contrasts with the girl’s pain and terror. The soldiers show that this seemingly rare event is not all that uncommon. The soldiers are supposed to be protecting the children, but they are merely herding them down the road. □

This photo ignites a strong emotional response. According to Hariman and Luciates, “The dramatic charge of the photo comes from its evocation of pity and terror.” □ Pain is the central frame of the photo. “The photograph projects her pain into our world.” □ The child that is closest to the camera, in the foreground, has a look of terror on his face, resembling Eduard Munch’s famous drawing of “The Scream.”

Sturken claims this photo is one of the most famous images of the Vietnam War and among one of the most widely recognized photographs in American photojournalism. □

Photo 5 -- Semiotic Analysis

The focus of this photo is the little girl who is nude in the center of the photo. She is screaming in pain and her arms are stretched out from her body. The photo provides no details of why she is in pain or why she is naked. The caption that accompanied the photo said that she was burned by napalm and ripped her clothes off of her because they were burning. Her nudity represents innocence, an innocence that has been taken away from her by the war. The children are running right at the camera, creating an intensity and haste. The photographer who took the photo was taller than the children, therefore shooting from above the subjects and deeming them powerless.

The boy who is in the foreground of the photo has a look of terror on his face. He is also closest to the camera of all of the characters so the viewer is more emotionally connected to him. He is also depicted as innocent because of the shorts he is wearing. The shorts indicate youth where pants would have indicated maturity.

The soldiers behind the children appear to be herding the children, moving them along away from the danger. The authority of the soldiers over the children raises questions about their parents. Where are their

47 Hariman and Luciates, “Public Identity,” 39.

48 Hariman and Luciates, “Public Identity,” 41.

parents? Were they killed in the fighting? Are these orphans? The soldiers' actions create a notion that they are herding the children, and that the Vietnamese are animals that need to be tamed and controlled by the Americans. In the background of the photo, the smoke from the fire can be seen. The dark smoke represents the dark, ominous, and dangerous situation that is occurring in Vietnam.

IV. Conclusions

Through this research, the combination of literary scholarship and a semiotic analysis of iconic images from the Vietnam War uncovered the common threads of emotional outrage, the portrayal of innocence, and the sense of powerlessness. The first consistent theme that emerged throughout all of the photos studied was emotion: the emotions that the characters in the photos presented as well as the emotions that are triggered by the photos to the viewer. Perlmutter's idea that an icon provokes a strong negative reaction or outrage was supported by all of the photos.

All of the photos with the exception of the My Lai Massacre photo conveyed emotions through the characters in the photos. In the Kent State photo the girl clearly conveys emotion as she cries out in anguish. In the self-immolation photo, the monk portrays patience and determination, emotions that conflict with those of Americans who saw the photo. The photo of the execution that took place in the streets of Saigon shows the fear of the captive and the hate of the police chief. The little girl who is running naked in the napalm photo demonstrates fear, panic, and pain. The exception of this rule is the photo of the My Lai Massacre, but only because all of the figures in the photograph are lying dead and no longer able to convey emotions. The only emotions that they can communicate are the ones that the viewer can imagine they were feeling in the moments before their deaths.

The semiotic analysis of these photos indicated that they would ignite strong emotional responses by the viewer. Some of the common characteristics that these photos show are death, pain, and suffering. The common viewer would experience strong negative reactions to seeing all of these photos, which is why Perlmutter deemed them "icons of outrage."

Another common theme found through the semiotic analysis was innocence. The killing of the innocent, which, with the help of these photographs, became a common theme of the Vietnam War. In the photograph taken at Kent State, the victim was a student who had been protesting, a right he should have had in America. He was portrayed as a student, not a soldier, whose life was taken because of the war. In the execution photo, the victim is dressed as a civilian, not a soldier. His hands are tied behind his back and he is murdered at point-blank range there in the streets. He was identified as a Viet Cong man, but the photo cannot convey that, the photo shows he was executed without a trial, thus his innocence or guilt could not be determined. He was not taken as a prisoner of war, but was shot; all of these details were not consistent with the American concept of war.

In both the My Lai Massacre photo and "Accidental Napalm," innocent children were the focus of the photograph. The My Lai photo shows small children and babies who were gunned down, murdered for no apparent reason. The baby's rear as the focal point of the photo emphasizes the child's innocence as well as the greater innocence of all of the victims. As the children flee the jungle in the napalm photo, the little girl's nudity represents her young age as well as her innocence that has been stripped from her because of the war. It is also apparent that there are no parents in the photo, only the children. They are alone and one of the girls has taken up the maternal role, helping a younger child. All of these children represent innocence, an innocence that the war has stolen from them.

All of these photos also show the people as powerless. The Kent State girl is powerless because she cannot save the boy or understand the senseless killing. The burning monk is powerless to the flames and in a greater capacity than the frame of the photo can portray, the South Vietnamese government is powerless because they cannot stop the protest. The Viet Cong prisoner is powerless because he cannot control his imminent death. The My Lai victims are obviously powerless because they lay dead in the road, but also because they had no means to fight back against the soldiers who murdered them. Finally, the little girl is powerless to the napalm burning her skin and the war that is occurring in her country. All of these photos show the victims as powerless, but the viewers of the photographs were also powerless. They were shown the war catapulting out of control by the media, but they were essentially powerless to stop it. Only as their dissent grew did the administration start to hear them, but by this point it was too late—too late for the victims in these

photos, photos that have so far withstood the test of time as iconic photos, as well as the countless thousands who were killed in Vietnam because of an ideological battle against the spread of communism.

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