

PART ONE

BIG PICTURES

Introduction

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News pictures are limited in terms of the complete performance of their given function: to make the contemporary world, in all its “blooming buzzing confusion,” seeable and therefore knowable.¹ The world is simply too irreducible and the forces shaping the production of any given news picture are too obscure for the practice to reliably produce an entirely satisfactory window onto affairs. But news pictures do stand as unimpeachable evidence in one respect: they invariably illuminate with almost perfect clarity the history of news-picturing itself, as a cultural field and as one of our time’s most important communication technologies. This is precisely the history that concerns us here. Accordingly, “**Part One: Big Pictures**” offers an eclectic survey of provocative episodes within the modern history of the news picture in order to gain insight into the development of the tools, infrastructure, and practices that have fostered its development, as well as the intransigence of the technological and ideological factors whose friction has worked with equal force to shape it. These elements determined what could be made visible and knowable of the present, and have subsequently come to structure our visual understanding of the past.

We trace the movement of news pictures back to the years preceding the establishment in the later 1830s and early 1840s (especially but not exclusively) in the Western world of those three mechanisms most closely associated with journalism’s accelerating development in expediting topical information: the railroad, the telegraph, and photography. We conclude with the years just after 2000, where the conditions for the production, distribution, and reception of news pictures (though always in flux) underwent an especially visible reconfiguration by new digital technologies and their increasingly entrenched journalistic and amateur application. The period highlighted in this volume marks an age that *LIFE* magazine editor Wilson Hicks described in 1952 as the “Age of the Visual Image—the visual image in its ink-on-paper, celluloid and electronic forms.”² This is the age of the visual image’s leap into helping to constitute a particular public culture made possible by the modern press and its attendant media. It is not, however, and as Hicks well understood, an age of public images exclusively dominated by the paper-based photographic practices we tend to associate with photojournalism, a practice that regrettably has become synonymous with news picturing. The short essays gathered here cast their net more widely in order to enfold different practices that (like lithographic caricature) precede, (like television news and home movies) coincide with, and (like the White House’s Flickr page) postdate the age of classical photojournalism.

Although this section is organized around the presentation of individual case studies, we do not regard news pictures as singular pictorial achievements but instead as nodes operating within rich and varied networks of influence, production, distribution, and interpretation. The short essays assembled here therefore challenge the priority of the isolated image and “photo essay,” either as a topical window onto a

distant or local present or, subsequently, as historical evidence, in favor of a consideration of the larger structures of meaning through which these images operated. This section argues that much of what matters most in these pictures cannot be seen on their surface. We maintain an ambivalent posture toward the news picture's iconicity, either in the semiotic sense of its containing some visual resemblance to its reported subject (no story is so simple that it can be reported in this way), or in its more current usage as theorized by our contributors Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, where the very canonicity of a corpus of widely known images might itself be understood to yield heightened insight into the fabric of contemporary society.³ Often (as in Hariman's and Lucaites' hands), these modes of iconicity will generate genuine insight. More often though, iconicity serves both to conceal the larger social, political, and technological structures of which any given news picture is but a symptom, and to obscure the astonishing formal, procedural, and topical heterogeneity of this emphatically public form of visual expression.

In some iconic cases we have even elected not to reproduce the image under discussion at all. The legal embargo against reproducing a famous Eugene Smith photograph of environmental poisoning in Japan, for example, may tell us more about the cultural work of that picture than and now than its reproduction today ever could. In other cases the discussion of a familiar case has been illustrated by an operationally adjacent image: instead of reproducing Joe Rosenthal's photograph of the flag-raising at Iwo Jima, we consider a San Francisco sculpture that Alexander Nemerov argues may have informed Rosenthal's own pictorial thinking.

We also reproduce many pictures that are anything but iconic, because they were never even seen by the contemporary public that would have constituted them as "news," conventionally defined, in the first place. For example, Matthew Fox-Amato writes about an 1850 abolitionist daguerreotype that could only be described but not reproduced in the newspaper. Likewise, Victoria Gao examines a Chinese photograph made during the Cultural Revolution but hidden away until regime change made it safer to publish years later as history rather than as news. Such pictures underscore the central importance of mass visibility to news pictures and the varied conditions—sometimes political, sometimes technological, sometimes both—enabling or disrupting its attainment. In other cases where we have reproduced the iconic image, the discussions invariably range far beyond its reception history or the formal properties and the heroic moment of its production in favor of a consideration of the challenges of bringing the image to its intended public, the unpredictable effects that such pictures subsequently produced, and the problems contained in the very notion of news-pictorial iconicity. Even with icons, we ground their histories in ways that enrich our understanding of their production and distribution so we are not left with the notion that they mysteriously replicate in a viral manner. This should also offer guidance in considering the digital environment in which phrases such as "viral videos" have become commonplace.

The very short contributions in this section are designed as a group to establish a host of issues in the history of news picturing that are more deeply described and questioned in the second part of the volume. Offering a compact survey, Part One can be read as a self-contained overview. Better still, the essays can also be paired with appropriate selections from Part Two that more thoroughly elaborate on the issues raised here. Readers might, for example, supplement Richard Meyer's discussion of a landmark sensational tabloid photograph in Part One with the broader thematic essays by Ryan Linkof and Will Straw on celebrity and crime in Part Two. Michel Frizot's essay on a sports montage in this section may likewise be further contextualized with regard to both Thierry Gervais's essay on the rise of the sports press and Andrés Zervigón's contribution concerning rotogravure.

The entries are titled descriptively and then dated as an incitement to strip their subject images of authorial attribution in the first instance and to complicate their typically unstable relationship to any given

“title” or particular publication context as well. Since our framework is historical, we favor their chronological ordering. Working through the essays here in order may well reveal the parameters of a history of news picturing as we have suggested in the general introduction, but we also recognize that the field is simply too vast and complex to fit comfortably into any single narrative.

Part One, like this volume as a whole, must be understood as a partial account and initial survey that attempts to broaden the base of the research regarding news pictures in order for deeper studies to be subsequently undertaken in light of this volume’s approach. There is a great deal of work to be done, especially in understanding, for example, how the visual culture of the news has functioned in the global South, which the present volume has not to our satisfaction addressed.

“Big Pictures” introduces a series of provocative instances. It begins with an essay by Patricia Mainardi about an 1831 French caricature from the period in which the mass press began to form and in which censorship also shaped the simultaneously sharp and sometimes ambiguous contours of visual expression. This selection introduces the rich tradition of caricature, which constituted an important part of news picturing and reminds us that the news has been pictured in color as much as black and white, despite our post-photojournalistic association of the news with the latter. The essays run right up to the present era, concluding with Liam Kennedy’s consideration of the 2011 photostreaming of “The Situation Room.” The political uses of news picturing continued apace, in this case, political authority is depicted as witness to its own actions through the picturing of the assassination of bin Laden from afar. Simultaneously, the White House serves up the image of their watching as proof to the public that the action happened. The public sees nothing but the instantaneous image of the American government watching, which is disseminated through social media networks. Part Two, “Re-Thinking the History of News Pictures,” develops many of the key themes from the short essays but treats them in greater depth. In both parts, we believe the volume invites further study, research, and scholarship in what remains a wide-open field of inquiry in a domain whose present is both so vital and so rapidly evolving that our grasp of its history seems more relevant than ever.

Notes

- 1 See Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: MacMillan, 1922).
- 2 Wilson Hicks, *Words and Pictures: An Introduction to Photojournalism* (New York: Harper, 1952): xv.
- 3 Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).