

PART TWO

**RE-THINKING THE
HISTORY OF NEWS
PICTURES**

INTRODUCTION

Jason E. Hill and Vanessa R. Schwartz

The essays in Part One challenged the predominant orientation in the history of news pictures that has until now focused extensively on the single iconic photograph. By using that familiar structure, they probed and denaturalized the icon in favor of a much richer history of the relation between what is pictured and the process of picture-making itself in the era of the mass press, from the late 1830s onwards. Those essays foreshadowed what this section now foregrounds: that no understanding of a news picture and its significance can bypass the material history of the making of the picture itself, nor the history of the media institutions and people that organize such pictures and transmit them to an eager and interested public. That public has its own investments and responses that then come to shape and remake the media and institutions of news picture making. These varied receptions also help foster the longer life that many news pictures have, in which they go on to multiple uses beyond their initial topical function as reportage, itself ephemeral by definition.

The essays gathered here offer a rich array of sketch artists, history painters, photojournalists, photo editors, and newspaper and magazine editors. They consider the question of “access” to the news (whether that of the journalist or the viewing public) but also account for the censorship or poor distribution of images once made. They describe an ever-changing host of imaging technologies: engraving, photo technologies from flash to the telephoto lens, different camera sizes and negative formats, varied light-sensitivity of film stock, and the preferences concerning color that made news pictures look the way they did. The essays are attentive to print techniques: the halftone process and rotogravure, the advent of speedier presses, vast new paper rolls, and the actual means and pace of the transport of materials.

The essays in this part have been organized in order to identify the essential questions and problems investigated by the scholarship on news pictures. Beyond looking through the news picture as through a window, as inert evidence of the pictured thing or as a discursive construction of the object in the world outside the frame, the essays here concern the complex histories of the news pictures themselves. Going beyond the image as an evidentiary record, much good work on photojournalism, especially, has focused on the ethical and moral dimensions of this kind of pictorial reporting.¹ But too often scholarship overlooks the messy, procedural work of the production of images and their embeddedness within a larger, dynamic system of news picturing—which function as invisible matters upon which all subsequent interpretive possibilities depend.² The essays here offer a history that is contingent, and one whose specificity shapes the very possibility surrounding the social power of news picturing.

The essays also ask deceptively simple questions about such images: How are they secured? What can and should be their subject? What technologies and materials support the system that especially comes to define the speed of what's news? How and where does the public meet and receive the images? What professional and connoisseurial criteria have evolved over time for their evaluation? As in Part One, the essays are organized more or less chronologically within each section. They do not trace a single course of development, because the multiple contexts and cultures under interrogation here are neither universal nor exhaustive.

Part Two also moves more intentionally away from the singular fascination, scholarly and otherwise, with images of war, disaster, anguish, and trauma that have largely dominated this field of study.³ It is true that scenes of conflict have tended to mobilize the news picture enterprise at its most sophisticated and controversial. But, as any consumer of the news will know first hand, news pictures often attend to rather less sensational fare.

In **News Pictures and Press Genres** we identify and explore five dominant rubrics: fashion, celebrity, sports, and crime, as well as war, in order to examine the diverse visual culture of the news that they enable. In **News Picture Media**, essays explore the places where the public meets the image. While we naturally consider a wide range of media throughout the volume, here we focus on the illustrated newspaper, the magazine, the newsreel, television, and the Internet as important sites that suggest that news pictures constitute a public as much as they inform it through their mechanisms of support and delivery. Through these essays, we are not only with the professional press photographer or amateur in the field but we also are exposed to such spaces as editorial offices, cinemas, and the home. Such a diverse approach to news image media we believe helps render the specificity and impact of the digital platform, in which we are currently immersed, even more visible. Originally circulated online before being publicized in the *New Yorker* and *60 Minutes II*, and later mediated variously in documentaries and Hollywood dramas, the nightmarish images produced in the Abu Ghraib prison—the subject of Abigail Solomon-Godeau's essay—have activated all of these media.

This volume's authors are particularly attentive to how the interplay of technological possibility shapes notions of speed and duration. News is predicated upon notions of immediacy, and in **News Picture Time**, essays explore temporality as a material experience facilitated by complex networks of information, transportation, and mobility, as these reshape imaginative horizons amidst a culture of heightened expectations around speed. So if, as Jordan Bear argues, Géricault's painting, *The Raft of the Medusa*, offers a meditation on the challenges of transmitting visual information over long distances, Zeynep Devrim Gürsel observes that, once the wire made all news pictures potentially "fast," it also then put greater pressure on making them "good" instead.

In **Speaking of News Pictures**, the essays examine the many instances in which the picture and the act of picturing behind it—its making and transmission—became the news itself. As we have seen with Tom Howard's photograph of Ruth Snyder's execution, the taking of pictures and their publication often become their own locus of interest (as in Patricia Goldsworthy-Bishop's discussion of the King of Morocco's pictures of his harem). But essays in this section also remind us that the pictorial reporter not only pictured the news but also, in doing so, started to establish the limits of what could be pictured at all, and therefore what could be, in a very real sense, "the news."

Perhaps more surprising is encountering the news picture in the art museum, an institution that seems inherently averse to mass culture at its most ephemeral but which has been more invested in the "art" of pictorial reporting than scholarship has generally recognized. This history is examined in **News Picture Connoisseurship**, which considers attributions of value and the rise of professional standards

among press photographers, the emergence of international juried prizes, and the evolving rhetoric through which institutions police the tenuous border dividing high culture from low commerce, and which permits the migration of press pictures into fine art.

The volume is deliberately broad in its mapping of the field of the news picture, and offers a more complete picture of what news was, is, and will be than those volumes oriented to the darkest and most painful moments in current events that survive in public memory as a form of collective trauma. The news, after all, reports great triumphs as well. We have sought to attain a large temporal sweep in order to establish a sense of news picturing as it has changed over time. We have also looked beyond photojournalism as the predominant visualizing practice. Our geographic coverage is broad but hardly exhaustive: we do not have contributions focused specifically on sub-Saharan Africa or South America, for example. Although many societies have “chronicled” their times since antiquity, the essays in this volume establish a news picturing system that emerged as part of the mass press in the Western world. This press created a consciousness regarding the rest of the world made concrete through picturing, which is as powerful and irreversible a force as the development of large-scale finance to the history of what we now call globalization. Back in 1938, A. J. Ezickson of New York Times World-Wide Photos, whose book *Get That Picture!* inspired this volume’s title, honed in on the process of news picturing and its powerful effect in bridging the gap between the world “over there” and the reader’s field of vision when he wrote, “Into the far corners of the world went the man with the camera, using the fastest conveyance to get to and from the scene . . . Distances mattered not; it was the slogan of the editor then, as it is today: ‘Get the picture! And bring it back first.’”⁴ The history of the news and its picturing is so fundamental a domain through which experience of the world in the last two centuries has passed, that these essays, which examine the cultural expectations and practices it entailed, promise a clearer image not only of where we have been but also of where we might go next, and how fast we will be able to get there.

Notes

- 1 Sharon Sliwinski, *Human Rights in Camera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); and Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2012).
- 2 For an exemplary work that does not have this problem, see Joshua Brown, *Beyond the Lines. Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
- 3 Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Geoffrey Batchen, M. Gidley, Nancy K. Miller, and Jay Prosser, *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis* (London: Reaktion, 2012); and the fundamental, Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador Press, 2002).
- 4 A.J. Ezickson, *Get That Picture! The Story of the News Cameraman* (New York: National Press Library, 1938).