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Hindenburg Disaster Pictures: Awarding a Multifaceted Icon

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Prizes and distinctions awarded in the field of photojournalism confer symbolic and economic value on press photography through the celebration of news pictures epitomizing recent newsworthy events. Photojournalism competitions such as the Pulitzer, the World Press Photo, and the Pictures of the Year serve to recognize the excellence of pictures taken or published during the previous year. Pictures of the crash of the dirigible the *Hindenburg* in Lakehurst, New Jersey, on 6 May 1937 are emblematic of such photographs. In 1948, the National Press Photographers Association (NPPA) instituted a contest called “The Best Picture of My Life!” which was to “be one of the knockouts of the year—holding to photography the position of the Kentucky Derby has in horse racing.”¹ The first prize went to Murray Becker’s shot of the *Hindenburg*, a photograph taken, however, eleven years earlier (Fig. 2.20a).

The photograph chosen by the NPPA jury shows the burning German airship touching the ground as people run from the landing site. The NPPA contest was not the only competition to pay such a late tribute to a photograph showing the *Hindenburg* disaster. In 1958, the University of Missouri School of Journalism organized a photographic selection of the “Fifty Memorable Pictures of the Last Half-Century.” This group of famous pictures of course included a photograph of the dirigible, but this one was taken by Sam Shere, an International News Photos photographer.

These tributes to Becker’s and Shere’s pictures correspond to a post-war need to enhance the professional recognition of press photographers through contests and institutional acknowledgments. Picking historical gems on which to build current legitimacy was part of this recognition process—which was a complex one, as the pictures receiving retroactive awards had to fulfill photojournalism’s new expectations. In the case of the Hindenburg disaster, the honor went to several photographers, including amateurs, and the winning pictures were the outcome of a fluctuating recognition process irreducible to the praising of a single shot. Although various in terms of authorship and news value, images such as those of the *Hindenburg* disaster soon became invaluable benchmarks of the evolving history of photojournalism. What exemplary merits are they said to be epitomizing? Because the *Hindenburg* crash occurred at a time when the normative precepts of the press picture were in the process of being formalized, we must consider the use of these pictures by those who were establishing the canons at the time.

Guides and manuals for amateur and professional photographers, biographies, and volumes on methods of picture editing published in the 1930s and 1940s are invaluable for studying embryonic



Figure 2.20a Murray Becker, *Death of a Giant*, 6 May 1937, as reproduced in *The Complete Book of Photography* (New York: National Press Photographers Association, 1950), p. 30. Getty Images.

criteria for the "good" picture. The considerable growth in the number of photographers and the constant flow of pictures sent to editors of illustrated dailies and weeklies required the institution of an evaluation criterion to identify the best images. Three volumes in particular, Jack Price's *News Pictures* (1937), Aaron Jacob Ezickson's *Get That Picture: The Story of the News Cameraman* (1938), and *Pictorial*

Journalism (1939), by Laura Vitray et al., all recognized the *Hindenburg* pictures as emblematic of the highest standards of photojournalism, and all played an instrumental role in endowing such pictures with a lasting paradigmatic value.²

Getting the big picture

A former student of the Columbia University School of Journalism in New York and a staff member of the Wide World Photos agency, Aaron Jacob Ezickson devoted almost an entire chapter of his book to the *Hindenburg* pictures. In his account of the forty-nine seconds that “turned a glistening monarch of the air into a fiery mass of twisted aluminum ribs,” he focuses particularly on how fast and clever the photographers, agency staff, and editors were in bringing the pictures to the eyes of readers. Before discussing how people at Lakehurst managed to rush out the pictures, Ezickson first praises modern photographic transmission techniques for having dramatically reduced the delay from production of the pictures to their distribution in the media. From planes chartered to carry negatives to trains equipped with darkrooms for processing pictures, mobile newsrooms for captioning the images, and motorcycles racing to shuttle editorial staff and photographers from offices to newsworthy sites, Ezickson reviews all the means used since the 1920s for winning the race against time—and, more important, against rival media outlets.³ A frantic quest for scoops and profit seems to have motivated this ingenuity in speeding up the manufacturing of visual journalism. This hymn to speed and time-reducing methods provides the framework within which Ezickson assesses the media coverage of the *Hindenburg* pictures, which were rushed to editors’ offices by all available means. International News Photos, for instance, chartered two planes for the purpose of producing and dispatching the pictures taken. A first plane was used for taking photographs from the air when the *Hindenburg* flew over New York, and a second one sent to Lakehurst was still on the landing field when the explosion occurred and was used to get the pictures out of the site. International News Photos took substantial advantage of this logistical asset. “Their [Charles Hoff’s and Robert Seelig’s] first plates were handed to the pilot who flew them back to North Beach, Long Island, and then rushed by car to the News office. As a result, the News was the first on the streets in New York with the pictures of the disaster.”⁴ Similarly, a representative of American Airlines “raced from cameraman to cameraman, collecting their holders,” and had them flown to Newark Airport, where motorcycle drivers were waiting to bring the plates to their syndicates’ offices in New York. “An outstanding example of speed in picture reproduction,” Ezickson writes, “was the ability of the *New York Times* to place the pictures of the disaster in its first edition, a little more than an hour and a half after the first flames were sighted on the *Hindenburg*’s tail.”⁵ Ezickson’s narrative of the *Hindenburg* crash is a statement about the intertwining of modern transportation and transmission systems and visual journalism in a context of fierce competition among photographers and editors. His colorful story draws a portrait of intense visual economy fueled by the pictures taken at Lakehurst. In his view, the media coverage of this catastrophe was an invaluable case study for assessing efficient dissemination of press pictures. Very little is said about the pictures themselves, whose value, in his account, relied mainly on their ability to trigger a media frenzy.

In the introduction to Jack Price’s book *News Pictures*, Roy W. Howard, president and editor of the *New York World-Telegram*, wrote, “No writer, had he written with the pen of a genius, could have portrayed the horror of that holocaust with anything approximating the realism of the pictures taken at the very instant when the probable death-knell of lighter-than-air aviation was being rung above Lakehurst field.”⁶ Published

a short time after the event occurred, *News Pictures* covers a series of topics—assignments, the market for pictures, news coverage, use of miniature cameras, and so on—all considered through the prism of the pictures taken at Lakehurst. Price discusses pictures of the tragedy taken by amateur photographers in greater depth. These photographs were widely and immediately disseminated and published in major newspapers and magazines whose editors were already praising the value of miniature cameras used by non-professional photographers.⁷ Price reminds the reader that the New York *Daily News* published two pages of photographs taken by a Chinese-born amateur, Foo Chu, who was at Lakehurst for the landing of the zeppelin.⁸ Showing the disaster from beginning to end with a camera loaded with multiple-exposure film rolls, this double-page spread sets out the course of the catastrophe. The editors were not alone in looking for pictures made by amateurs; officers from the Board of Inquiry investigating the disaster were also looking for such images. Price quoted from the New York *Herald Tribune*, “Lieutenant Watson appealed to amateur motion-picture photographers or still camera enthusiasts who may have been at Lakehurst last Thursday and filmed the tragedy from beginning to end to send in their pictures to him to assist in the current investigation.”⁹ Investigators requested these filmstrips made by amateurs because they allowed them to visually re-enact the scene, something impossible with single shots, even those as sensational as those made by Becker and Shere. According to Price, this appeal for photographic evidence “is high endorsement of the value of chance shots made by amateurs.” Using amateur pictures of the *Hindenburg* disaster as forensic evidence is not only a way to acknowledge their evidentiary value, but is also a plea for a visual economy whose standing relies also on unqualified press photographers.

Reproduced on the back of Hoff’s picture, next to the title page (Fig. 2.20b), this epigraph opens *Pictorial Journalism* (1939), a book that provided readers with a broad base of knowledge regarding changes occurring in visual journalism: “The prize photo of the Hindenburg explosion on the following page is by Charles Hoff, of the New York *Daily News*.” Throughout the book, the authors address topics related to newspaper planning and production—picture editing, photo equipment, layout, types, front-page issues, captioning, ethics, and other issues—as did similar guides published at the time. Most of the themes covered pertain to practical matters. There is, however, a chapter (“Judging Newsphotos”) that deals with more critical and interpretive issues. In this section of the book, the authors are trying to establish news value criteria and photograph-rating methods. Here Charles Hoff’s *Hindenburg* is used as a template for judging the newsworthiness of press pictures. Laura Vitray and her colleagues are attempting to determine quantifiable criteria for helping editors in the picture-selection process. They developed a rating system according to which, in regard to a given picture, “33 1/3 percent is given for the importance of the personality involved; 33 1/3 for the news it reports; and 33 1/3 percent of the amount of action portrayed.”¹⁰ As Hoff’s picture had no “personality involved”—or, indeed, any visible human presence—it seemed to fall short in terms of human-interest content and thus received the moderate score of 66 2/3. Nevertheless, this “amazing frontispiece shot of the explosion of the dirigible *Hindenburg*” was outstanding enough a picture to be the introductory icon of the book.

The human-interest value has to be found elsewhere than in the visual content of the picture, something that Vitray and her colleagues’ evaluation method was unable to take into account. As mentioned above, the *Hindenburg* pictures were praised not for their aesthetic value but for the performative conditions of their making. The recording of the landing was supposed to be a routine assignment. Twenty-two photographers and cameramen were there that day to cover the arrival of a zeppelin that had already made seventeen successful round trips between the United States and Europe.

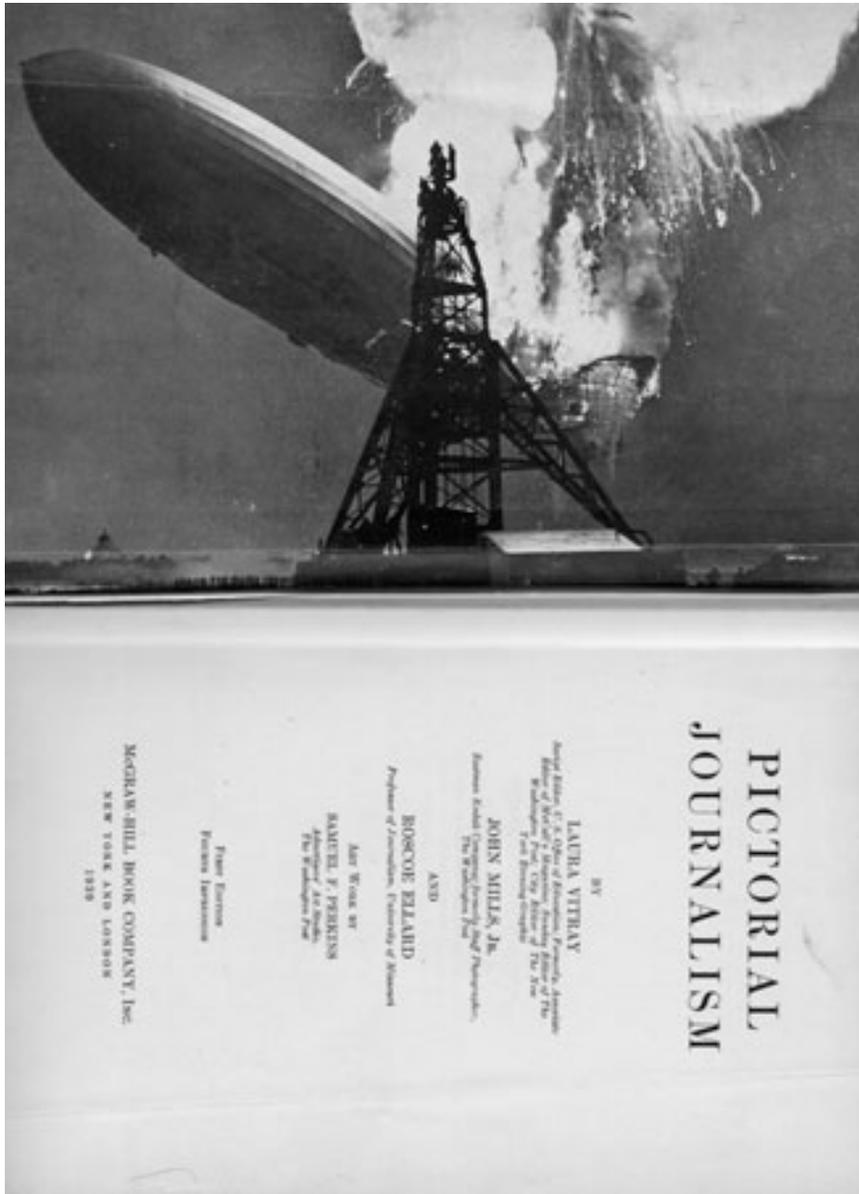


Figure 2.20b Charles Hoff, *Hindenburg Explosion*, 6 May 1937, as reproduced in Laura Vitray, John Mills, Jr., and Roscoe Ellard, *Pictorial Journalism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939). Corbis Images.

The explosion was the unexpected outcome of a presumed controlled situation. This is where the human factor comes forward and worms its way into the photographic act. Ezickson intuited better than the authors of *Pictorial Journalism* how this event reconfigured the hierarchy of merits by highlighting ethical qualities rather than aesthetic skills. Indeed, according to Ezickson, “nerve-shattering” events offered an

opportunity for the photographer to show his ethical stature. “The Hindenburg crash, the Panay bombing—no other stories have ever tested the cameraman’s courage more. Amid two outstanding trials of peace and war, the newspaper photographer has proven that he will never flinch in the line of duty. He does not have to be told: ‘Get that picture!’ He gets it!”¹¹ Ezickson admired these photographers, who “steeled themselves to rigid control of hands and eyes” when facing the tragedy. He interpreted this behavior as a sign of moral elevation, a self-denial reaction inherent to dedicated photographers. Ezickson’s account suggested that the moral qualities of the photojournalist had become a criterion of excellence, whatever the aesthetic value of the image.

This seems particularly true when the event occurs unexpectedly in front of an untrained photographer who happens to be there. In its 17 May issue, *LIFE*’s coverage of the event underlines photographer Arthur Cofod’s behavior when the first flames burst out, and how that reaction is translated into one of the pictures taken: “The effect on him, as on others, was so nerve-shattering that his hands shook. You can see the resultant blurring in the second picture below.” A representative of a firm specializing in speeding parcels to US Customs, Cofod, was actually there that day “to get a package of photographs arriving from the *Hindenburg* to *LIFE*.”¹² Cofod, using a Leica, took a series of pictures showing the unfolding of the catastrophe, from the *Hindenburg* preparing to land to the horrified spectators reaching the photographer’s position. *LIFE* reproduced a spread of nine of these pictures taken by this amateur photographer. It is worth mentioning that, in addition to Cofod’s pictures, *LIFE* published shots by Murray Becker and Sam Shere, the photographers who later received awards from the National Press Photographers Association and the University of Missouri School of Journalism. It was not unusual to reproduce within a single photographic essay pictures taken by both amateurs and syndicated photographers. However, this essay can be viewed as a visual statement on the newsworthiness of pictures taken by chance, regardless of the skill or professional status of the photographers featured.

In 1950, following the awarding of Murray Becker’s *Hindenburg* picture, a debate occurred at the NPPA about whether or not shots taken by chance by amateur or professional photographers should receive an award. Judges wondered whether “spot-news photos taken, because a photographer happened to be at the right place at the right time, should get the lion’s share of the recognition.”¹³ The debate around the recording of an unforeseen event was fueled by an editorial by the American Society of Magazine Photographers that criticized the 1950 Pulitzer Prize¹⁴ because “once again the highest honor in journalism goes to a man who got his picture by accident.”¹⁵ On the other hand, Bernard Hoffman, a society trustee, wrote in the January 1951 issue of *National Press Photographer* that Bill Crouch, a photographer from *The Tribune* (Oakland) who had just received a contested Pulitzer Prize for a picture of two planes colliding at an air show, “obviously recognized a good picture when he saw one. That was no accident.”¹⁶ At about the same time, Wilson Hicks, picture editor of *LIFE*, addressed this issue in his book *Words and Pictures: An Introduction to Photojournalism*, taking as an example Sam Shere’s shot of the *Hindenburg* explosion. “Frequently the event, not the photographer, makes the picture,”¹⁷ he wrote regarding this picture, which was reproduced alongside another one made by an amateur, showing a falling man seen from the terrace of the Empire State Building in New York. Both images show the outcome of a presumed controlled situation, he argues in support of his assertion that “good pictures are taken accidentally every day . . . But it is the event that is good or great, not the photograph.”¹⁸

Globally reproduced in the media, and instrumental in the formation of a nascent historiography of photojournalism, the *Hindenburg* pictures were the subject of public discourses, corporate assertions, professional speeches, and collective remembering. Whether for discussion of the circulation of press

pictures, appraisal of the newsworthiness of amateur photographs, or assessment of the news value of a photographic shot, they were unanimously seen as authoritative benchmarks and unprecedented accomplishments for visual journalism. Both the May 1937 issue of *LIFE* and books published in the following years acknowledged this through a set of new requirements: the shortest time between the making of an event-related image and its distribution; the acquisition of pictures from a variety of sources, amateur or professional; and standard appraisal of news pictures through charts and quantitative methods. Picture-press magazines and books published before World War II, as well as later contests and commemorative exhibitions, instituted and recalled how the *Hindenburg* pictures played a seminal role in shaping the newsworthiness of press photographs. Not assignable to any single photographer or any specific moment, the *Hindenburg* pictures work as a multifaceted icon praised by a global system of excellence.

Notes

- 1 Claude H. Cookman, *A Voice is Born: The Founding and Early Years of the National Press Photographers Association* (Durham, NC: National Press Photographers Association, 1985): 142.
- 2 Jack Price, *News Pictures* (New York: Round Table Press, 1937); Aaron Jacob Ezickson, *Get That Picture! The Story of the News Cameraman* (New York: National Library Press, 1938); Laura Vitray, John Mills, Jr., and Roscoe Ellard, *Pictorial Journalism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939).
- 3 See Aaron Jacob Ezickson, "Charter III: The Train, Plane, Pigeon, Wire and Radio Carry the Picture," in Ezickson, *Get That Picture!*: 33–48.
- 4 Ezickson, *Get That Picture!* (New York: National Library Press, 1938): 195.
- 5 Ezickson, *Get That Picture!* (New York: National Library Press, 1938): 196.
- 6 Price, *News Pictures*: xii.
- 7 For a discussion about the use of the miniature camera in the news at the time of the *Hindenburg* disaster, see Duane Featherstonhaugh, *Press Photography with the Miniature Camera* (Boston: American Photographic Publishing, 1939).
- 8 Price, *News Pictures*: 118.
- 9 Price, *News Pictures*: 13.
- 10 Vitray et al., *Pictorial Journalism*: 30.
- 11 Ezickson, *Get That Picture!*: 200.
- 12 "Life on the American Newsfront," *LIFE*, 17 May 1937, 28. For many years, the *Hindenburg* had been used as a picture carrier, a means on the verge of being outdated by new transmission technologies such as the wire. Its destruction on 6 May was an allegory for its obsolescence. The pictures taken at the time were evidence of this.
- 13 Cookman, *A Voice is Born*: 145.
- 14 The award went to Bill Crouch's picture, "Near Collision at Air Show."
- 15 Cookman, *A Voice is Born*: 145. The "once again" may refer to Arnold Hardy, an amateur photographer from Atlanta, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1947 for a picture showing a woman falling out of a window.
- 16 Cookman, *A Voice is Born*: 146.
- 17 Wilson Hicks, *Words and Pictures: An Introduction to Photojournalism* (New York: Harper, 1952), 74.
- 18 Wilson Hicks, *Words and Pictures*: 88.