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MATX 602: History of Media, Art & Text

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December 8, 2008

**Still Photographs as Evidentiary Documents: an Examination of  
the *Saigon Execution* and the Sonderkommando Photographs of the Holocaust**

Photographs as evidentiary documents have never been simple conveyers of historical fact, no matter how much we would like them to function that way. Sontag said that “Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still” (144). Photographs may “imprison reality” by freezing a moment within the flow of time, but what then do we read from that frozen moment? Is its meaning as apparent as it appears? Over time, images tend to become separated from their context. The most successful images become icons that hold symbolic meaning separate from the actual photograph, reproduced in contexts the original photographer never envisioned. While this may not be a problem with movie stills or other images created for entertainment, what are the implications for photographs taken to document violent historical events? And does the repeated viewing of specific images of violence neutralize their impact, with the unintended consequence of distorting historical facts about those violent historical events?

Arguably the most famous still image to come from the Vietnam War was a photograph known as the [\*Saigon Execution\*](#) (see figure 1). Associated Press Photographer Eddie Adams won a Pulitzer Prize for this graphic, visually disturbing photograph of the execution of a Vietcong sympathizer by South Vietnamese police chief, Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan. “Loan,

his arm outstretched, holds his pistol a few inches from the suspect's head. The Vietcong sympathizer appears to wince, in anticipation of certain death" (Culbert 424). A close examination of the photograph and the frames around it reveal that Adams has caught the man, not "in anticipation of certain death," but at the moment of his death. Peter Braestrup, in an interview at a conference 10 years after the Tet Offensive, talks about the problem inherent in reading this photograph:

In journalistic terms, it was fantastic. It is not often that ... a still cameraman ... gets on film happening right there before your eyes one man blowing another man's brains out. ... It evoked strong reactions among those who saw it apparently. ... But in terms of information it told you almost nothing. That's the chronic problem especially for television and for the still photos, the difference between drama and information. (qtd. in Culbert 424).

What we see in this photograph is someone who appears to be a civilian being shot at point-blank range by a military officer. The captions and voice-overs that first accompanied this image told a story of necessary brutality in the face of the Tet Offensive, but the image itself quickly became an icon for the anti-war movement. Nguyen's life would be haunted by the images recorded that day for the rest of his life.

Taken on the first day of the Tet Offensive in 1968, the photograph was shown on all three network news evening broadcasts on February 1. "The next morning it appeared on the front pages of newspapers the world over, an unusual instance of one visual medium reinforcing the impact of another" (Culbert 421). That evening, television footage of the same event appeared on the network news, this time showing the event in motion and full color.

Watching the television footage of the incident illustrates the difference between the two mediums. In some respects, the [television footage](#) is more chilling. As a viewer, I see Nguyen smiling and interacting in a collegial way with his men as a newscaster, in a voice-over, says how Nguyen “gets special attention” from his men and frequently leads them in military actions. He smiles at the camera, walks over to the suspect and, without a word, shoots him in the head. The man falls over, Nguyen walks away, and I see blood puddling under the dead prisoner on the street. The television footage, however, is framed awkwardly and moves so quickly that I find myself wondering what I’ve just seen. I’m left with the impression of a small man, who doesn’t look dangerous to me, lying dead in the street. It is haunting, but in a less fixed way than the still photograph. I remember the shocked feeling, an impression of horror, but not a fixed visual image that I can recall. That may be the reason that Adams’s still photograph has become an icon for the Vietnam War and the television footage has largely been forgotten. At the time it was shown, however, the television footage probably had a profound affect on viewers, especially when it was reinforced by the still photograph.

That this event happened during the Tet Offensive is an important historical fact often overlooked. The timing and scope of the offensive shocked the South Vietnamese and their Allies. Tet, the lunar New Year, is an important Vietnamese holiday and had been a traditional cease-fire in the conflict. In *Patriots*, an oral history of the Vietnam conflict, Christian Appy explains the scope of the “shocking and unprecedented” attack:

“On January 31, more than eighty thousand Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops ... struck five of the six largest cities, thirty-six out of forty-four provincial capitals, and

dozens of airfields, military bases, and government installations. ... It inaugurated the war's bloodiest, most widespread fighting. (285)

Saigon on January 31, 1968, was under attack and under the rule of martial law. "To be armed – the suspect was armed – and in civilian clothes was grounds for being shot" (Culbert 428). In the image, however, none of this context is apparent. According to Robert Hamilton, "the prisoner's only military identification was his possession of a pistol, usually the mark of a Vietcong officer" (173). In the photograph, the Vietcong sympathizer appears harmless. Whatever the reality of the situation in Saigon on January 31, 1968, the still photograph freezes one instance of war and, through it, seems to communicate brute force with a casual disregard for human life and the rules of the Geneva Convention. "The dress of the Vietcong sympathizer is critical in establishing his visual defencelessness. We see a young civilian, his helplessness defined by a plaid shirt, its tail flapping in the breeze" (Culbert 424). The South Vietnamese and their American allies may have defeated the North Vietnamese militarily in the Tet Offensive, but this photograph may have caused them to lose the public relations war.

Hamilton points out that a similar photograph taken in 1962 by freelance photographer Dickey Chapelle was disregarded by the press. He says the photograph of the execution taken by Adams was newsworthy because of the attention focused on Vietnam during the Tet Offensive and because he captured "the actual moment of death. Adams' photograph is a rare, if not unique, image" (174). At the time, it ran over a caption that read "GUERRILLA DIES: Brig. Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan, National police chief, executes man identified as Vietcong terrorist in Saigon. Man wore civilian dress and had a pistol" (Hamilton 176). Clearly *The New York Times* placed its sympathy with the police chief, not with the "defenseless civilian." Captions, voice-overs, and

copy made clear that this “civilian” was really an officer with the Vietcong and responsible for horrific acts of his own. The news media in the U.S. and Britain justified the brutality of the act as an unfortunate act of vengeance in the light of Vietcong atrocities, including the beheading of women and killing of children.

While scholars struggle to prove definitively whether and how the *Saigon Execution* fueled the anti-war movement in the United States, what is certain is that the message conveyed by news organizations and the message conveyed by the image itself seemed dissonant to many viewers. Presidential candidate Bobby Kennedy, in a speech delivered on February 8, said:

Last week, a Vietcong suspect was turned over to the chief of the Vietnamese security services, who executed him on the spot – a flat violation of the Geneva Convention on the Rules of War. The photograph of the execution was on front pages all around the world – leading our best and oldest friends to ask, more in sorrow than anger, what has happened to America? (Culbert 437, Hamilton 179).

Whether this single photograph changed public opinion about the Vietnam War or whether it reinforced a change in opinion that was already building in the U.S. is hard to determine. Culbert says, “It made vivid and particularized, in ways most people could not easily articulate, the frustrating, confusing sense that the war was no longer between the good guys and bad guys” (428). Whatever the reading of the reality of the photograph at the time it was published, it did quickly become a visible icon in the anti-war movement

Taking the photograph had unintended consequences. Eddie Adams had not intended to assist the North Vietnamese and fuel the anti-war movement. When Adams returned to Ho Chi Minh City in 1983, he reported that “he was met at the airport by a North Vietnamese journalist

who wanted to thank the photographer who had helped the war effort” (Culbert 426). In 1978, three years after General Nguyen immigrated to the United States, the Immigration and Nationalization Service (INS) began proceedings to deport him. “He was accused of ‘moral turpitude,’ based on the execution he committed that was captured in Adams’s photograph. Reports of these proceedings were broadcast on television and printed in newspapers, and the Adams photograph began recirculating ...” (Chong 102). While the execution may have been reprehensible, ignoring the rules of the Geneva Convention was commonplace for both sides in the Vietnam conflict. Nguyen was singled out purely because of the Adams photograph. Nguyen was allowed to remain in the country because “President Jimmy Carter pardoned him to avoid a larger public relations scandal” (102). Adams later said that he regretted “having taken the picture because it visually froze Nguyen into the role of the perpetual Asian enemy” (103). Nguyen was never to escape his connection with Adams’s famous photograph. His *New York Times* obituary read “Nguyen Ngoc Loan, 67, Dies; Executed Viet Cong Prisoner” (106).

The image now lives on in popular culture. Sylvia Shin Huey Chong claims, in her article “Restaging the War: *The Deer Hunter* and the Primal Scene of Violence,” that Adams’s photograph is commonly acknowledged as the inspiration for the Russian roulette scenes in *The Deer Hunter*. “Film reviewer Philip Rule stated glibly, ‘Anyone who saw a South Vietnamese policeman execute a North Vietnamese spy before a television camera during the height of the war knows what the Russian roulette scenes were all about’” (Chong 94). She points out that the comparisons need to be examined critically, particularly to account for “both the transference of the violence from the Vietnamese to the Americans and the condensation of interpersonal violence into a self-reflexive act” (94). She particularly focuses on the composition of the shots

in the movie and how they echo the composition of Adams's photograph. Hamilton describes another example of popular appropriation of the image:

A more bitter and satirical use of the image was articulated by Ralph Steadman in his drawing *And Another 45,000 of This Baby Here*, in which a Pentagon general places an order for the gun used in the execution with an arms salesman. The general points to the Adams photograph, which is placed on a rising sales chart. Steadman utilizes the photograph to satirize the immorality of the military-industrial connection (180).

The image has made an appearance on the television show *Miami Vice* and has been included in many anthologies and retrospectives. It has clearly made the shift from news photograph to decontextualized icon. It retains its ability to shock, but perhaps not to inform us about the historical reality of the Tet Offensive and the Vietnam conflict. The *Saigon Execution* stands for more than one frozen moment in time.

The Holocaust is another historical event in which the interpretations we make from existing still photographs are problematic. Since even survivors struggle to understand the Holocaust, the question many scholars have raised is how effective documentary photography can be in understanding an event as horrific as the Holocaust. Sontag says that "Photographs can and do distress. But the aestheticizing tendency of photography is such that the medium which conveys distress ends by neutralizing it" (98). Several documentary images from the Holocaust have become as familiar to us as the *Saigon Execution*. Familiarity, however, does not necessarily bring understanding. Many writers and scholars question whether it is wise for a society to become inured to images of dead bodies from the Holocaust. What are the unintended consequences of our familiarity with these images of "unspeakable horror?"

In attempting to make sense of the Holocaust, artists like Art Spiegelman have appropriated iconic images directly. His graphic novel *Maus* transforms familiar photographs into illustrations which, accompanied by text, retell the story of the Holocaust (see figs 8 & 9). In the case of the Holocaust, these appropriations seem a more honest and compelling way to grapple with the unspeakable than a direct, documentary approach. Artists can, however, decontextualize an image so that it no longer addresses the historical facts in any way. This raises the issue of context and whether an image owes anything to its referent, whether an artist has an ethical responsibility toward the historical facts an image is supposed to represent. This question, as we examined earlier in the Molotov Man controversy, has no simple answer. It seems to me, however, that artists have some responsibility to be aware of the original context of an image so that their decontextualization and transformation of an image are done intentionally, with awareness of the full implications of their work. This is particularly important with photographs taken to document violent historical events.

The most familiar photographs of the Holocaust are those taken by the Allied forces freeing the camp and by photojournalists traveling with them. The Bourke-White photographs Spiegelman used as models for *Maus* show emaciated men behind barbed wire. The more shocking photographs show piles of naked dead bodies. In one documentary photograph, the viewer sees a British soldier on a bulldozer “clearing corpses at Bergen-Belsen” (Hirsch 19) (see fig. 2). In another, U.S. forces are standing around a pile of partially burned corpses at Ohrdruf Concentration Camp (Hirsch 23) (see fig. 3). The Allied photographs were taken after the liberation of the camps; they clearly document the horror of the Holocaust but at a temporal

distance. Once the Allies had liberated the camps, the mass killings stopped. The photographs convey “what happened here” in the past tense.

Unlike the Allied photographs of the Holocaust or news photographs from Vietnam, the Sonderkommando photographs were taken by participants, in this case prisoners of Birkenau. “Specifically, they were taken by one or two members of the Sonderkommando, the special squads composed mainly of Jewish inmates but also of Russian prisoners of war who were forced to work in and around the gas-chambers and crematoria of Auschwitz, in the summer of 1944” (Stone 132). These photographs were created clandestinely and smuggled out of the camp at great risk. In keeping with the belief that photographs provide proof, they were created to provide direct evidence of the atrocities being committed in the Nazi concentration camps. As Sontag says, “Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph” (5). Unlike the Allied photographs, the Sonderkommando photographs convey “this is happening here, now” in the present tense. This is part of their power. As Stone points out, “...the Sonderkommando photographs are especially harrowing, not only because of their content but also because of the extreme difficulties involved in taking them, smuggling the film out of the camp, and having them developed in Krakow” (132). In an event as horrific as the Holocaust, documentary photographs that convey “it’s happening now” have a particular weight, even as historical artifacts.

Photographs taken by the Allied liberators were traditionally composed and clearly show what the photographer intended to show. The Sonderkommando photographs are not traditionally composed and are considered by many to be inaccessible as images. They are rarely shown full-frame. Photographs 280 and 281 (see figs 4 & 5) are generally cropped so that the most

horrifying portion of the image is all the viewer sees. Showing only a portion of these photographs may shock, but it detracts from the real power of these images. Dan Stone, in his article on the Sonderkommando photographs, says that the “distance of the photographer from the corpses suggests that these are no sensational, authorized news photographs. ... It is the very fact of the dead *being dead*, of a more urgent witnessing to murder, that is the point of the photograph” (135). Seeing the images framed by the doorway of the crematorium makes the historical reality of this photograph more apparent and in no way lessens the horror of the scene we see framed.

Photographs 282 and 283 (see figs 6 & 7) are rarely seen because they are problematic as documentary photographs. Photograph 282 was probably shot from the photographer’s hip, with no framing or composition, and the human figures - women who have stripped in the woods before being taken to the gas chambers - are seen in the lower left hand corner of the frame at an angle. Photograph 283 appears to be a failed photograph, with light and few leaves above a solid, dark section. What is obscured by the dark is left to our imagination. Because of their failings as photographs, these two photographs have rarely been reproduced or displayed.

Stone presents a different perspective on these four photographs. “The very angle at which 282 was taken, with the human subjects squashed into the corner of the frame, the very fact that 283 is virtually blank with darkness – these are aspects of the photographs that, when seen next to 280 and 281, are unnerving” (Stone 140). He sees all four Sonderkommando photographs as an effective representation of the Holocaust. “... what we have before us here is a sequence, a basic narrative of the genocide of the Jews that exists even without textual help. Individually, these photographs are far more difficult to read, but together they offer to the

viewer a basic form of understanding” (Stone 141). Ironically, the Sonderkommando photographs may present the best documentary evidence we have of the atrocities of the Holocaust. Perhaps images that say “it’s happening now” and that are hard to read are the most effective evidentiary documents of a violent historical event. The Sonderkommando photographs invite contemplation. Their enduring value and power may be that they resist being made into icons and therefore are nearly impossible to be decontextualized and transformed into anything beyond what they are.

The *Saigon Execution* remains one of the most powerful images to emerge from the Vietnam War. That act of violence, frozen in time, continues to shock. The question of whether the image provides information, as well as drama, however is one that needs to be asked. Blindly assuming that photographs easily function as evidence of historical events is a niavete we continue at some risk. Perhaps the photographs which serve best as evidentiary documents are those, like the Sonderkommando photographs, which resist being made into icons because of the difficulty in separating their meaning from the historical facts surrounding their creation.

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Appendix



Figure 1. Eddie Adams, *Saigon Execution*, January 31, 1968.



Figure 2. A British soldier clearing corpses at Bergen-Belsen, courtesy of USHMM Photo Archives



Figure 3. U.S. forces at Ohrdruf Concentration Camp, Harold Royall, Courtesy of USHMM Photo Archive



Figure 4: #280, Sonderkommando photographs, Auschwitz Museum

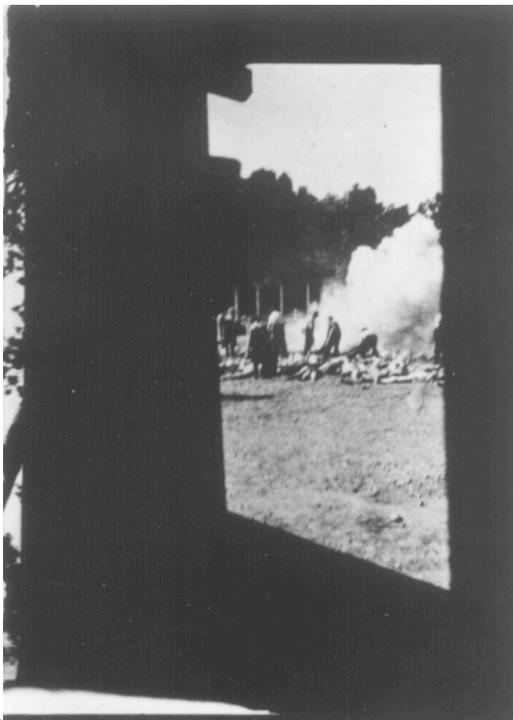


Figure 5: #281, Sonderkommando photographs, Auschwitz Museum



Figure 6: #282, Sonderkommando photographs, Auschwitz Museum

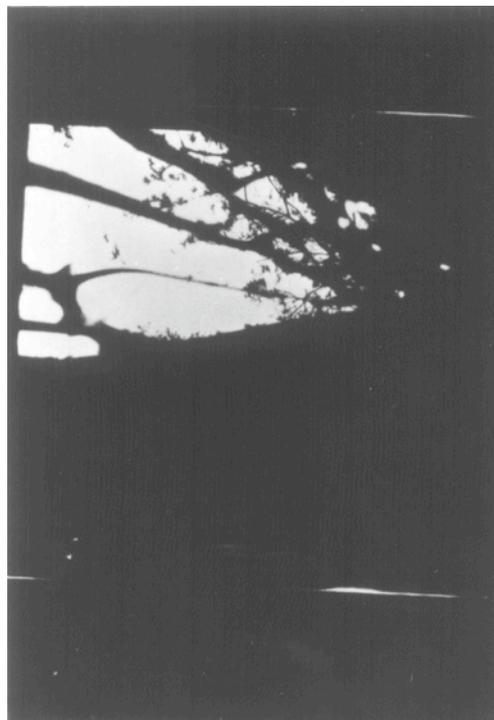


Figure 7: #283, Sonderkommando photographs, Auschwitz Museum



Figure 8. Buchenwald, April 1945. Margaret Bourke-White *Life Magazine* c. Time, Inc.

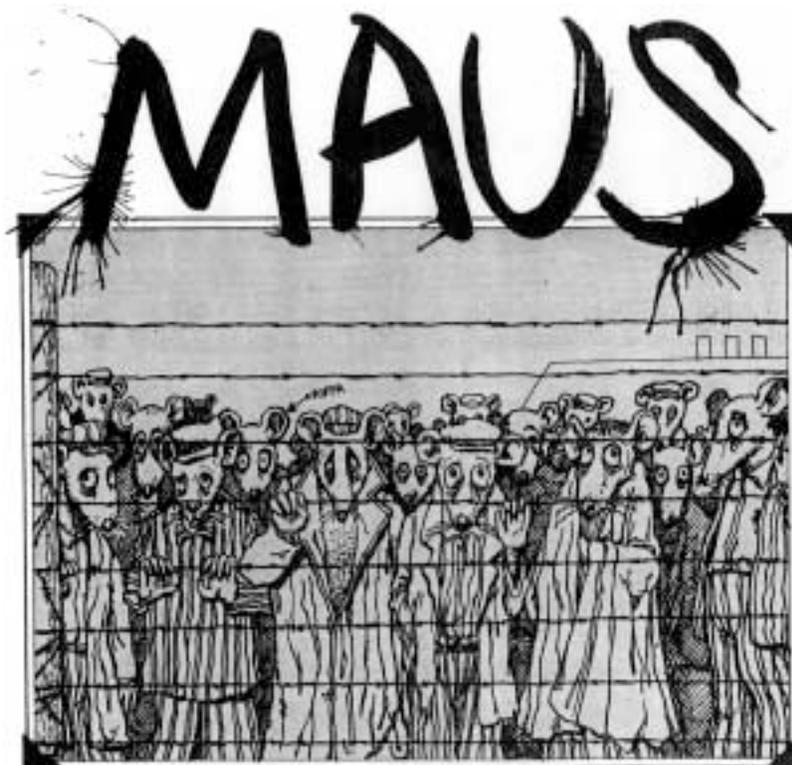


Figure 9. The First Maus, courtesy of Art Spiegelman