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Picturing Atrocity

Photography in Crisis

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The Girl in the Photograph: The Visual Legacies of War

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The photograph of Kim Phuc, the so-called Napalm Girl, that appeared in newspapers, magazines, and on television screens during the last years of the Vietnam War, shocked the world and still stands as one of that conflict's central icons.

The headline above the front-page picture in the *New York Times* of June 9, 1972 reads: "B-52's Hit North Vietnam For First Time in 7 Weeks." The caption elaborates: "ACCIDENTAL NAPALM ATTACK: South Vietnamese children and soldiers fleeing Trangbang on Route 1 after a South Vietnamese Skyraider dropped bomb. The girl at center has torn off burning clothes." The image of a nine-year-old South Vietnamese girl running naked down a road away from a napalm strike, her child's body on fire, arms outstretched, her face contorted in pain, captured international attention. The original photograph "almost didn't run," senior photo editor, Horst Fass, has been quoted as saying: "An Associated Press staffer thought newspaper editors would find the girl's nakedness offensive." New York, as Fass put it, had rules about exhibiting "frontal nudity" and so he airbrushed out a shadow in the photograph that suggested the existence of pubic hair on the nine-year-old girl.¹ The photograph, which won a Pulitzer Prize for photojournalist Nick Ut, and made the wounded child a symbol of the human capacity for atrocity, belongs to a small number of iconic images that have come to represent the horrors of the Vietnam War's casualties – and indeed, as the image has been recycled over three decades, of war itself.²

In his classic essay, "Photographs of Agony," John Berger describes the dilemma produced by the act of looking at suffering caused by human violence: "the moment of the other's suffering engulfs us. We are filled with either despair or indignation."³ More recently, Ariella Azoulay reframes the stakes of looking at atrocity photographs as a form of reading: "a viewing of the photograph that . . . allows a reading of the injury inflicted on others becomes a civic skill, not an exercise in

aesthetic appreciation.”⁴ Looking at photographs of atrocity forces the spectator into an ethical crisis. Whether or not the casual and often involuntary consumers of such images respond by joining an anti-war movement, for instance, they cannot fail to register the violation of some profound cultural norm. In no universe would the sight of a naked child, running down a road, screaming with pain, seem to fulfill the order of human things. Safe at home, far from the killing fields, we civilians expect children to be kept out of harm’s way, even if they are not our own. The power of an image like that of Kim Phuc implicates the spectator, if not in the creation, then at least in the perpetuation of the war that has claimed her as victim.⁵

As a spectacle, the girl’s trauma – the extreme physical assault on her body – is both hers alone to endure, I want to suggest, and ours to share in secondarily. The trauma also touches the spectator whose safety is by definition complicit with what the girl has lost: civilian protection. This “civilian gaze,” as we might think of it, especially when focused on wounded children in wartime, registers along a spectrum of emotion with a predictable ratio – the more vulnerable the child, the greater the horror and indignation provoked in the viewer. A naked child, a girl on fire, certainly comes close to producing a maximum sense of political outrage.

In her 1973 essay “On Photography,” written during the war, Susan Sontag argued that photographs have more impact on viewers than television because television is a “stream of underselected images, each of which cancels its predecessor.” Unlike television, Sontag maintained, a “still photograph is a ‘privileged moment,’ turned into a slim object that one can keep and look at again.” The example Sontag chose to illustrate her point was that of Kim Phuc: “Photographs like the one that made the front page of most newspapers in the world . . . , a naked child running down a South Vietnamese highway toward the camera, having just been hit by American napalm, her arms spread wide open, screaming with pain – were of great importance in mobilizing antiwar sentiment in this country from 1967 on. And each one was certainly more memorable than a hundred hours of televised barbarities.”⁶ Revised in her 1977 book *On Photography*, the essay drops the adjective “memorable,” perhaps because in the immediate postwar climate Sontag is more concerned with the political effect of images in the moment of their appearance, and their role in civic mobilization, than with the afterlife of the image in national consciousness; but “memorable” was prescient.⁷

While it is true that the prize-winning photograph crystallized anti-war sentiment and may even “have stopped the war,” as many anti-war

veterans claimed, the fate of this particular photograph challenges the opposition Sontag forged between the two mediums' relative ability to affect public opinion. The child's suffering was captured in a still photograph – and the still is what became the iconic image – but the photograph also immediately became a story, and as a story it has also from the beginning been featured as television reporting. In fact the picture appeared in newspapers the day after it broke on television. Put another way, while the still captures the “privileged moment,” and the responses to its reproducibility power the drive to political action, television, with its tendency to repeat and revisit stories, puts the image into narrative motion. But as Griselda Pollock asks in her reading of another Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph, Kevin Carter's image of an infant (also a girl) dying of hunger in the Sudan, what is it about the image that “released the demand for a narrative beyond its iconicity”?⁸ Is a story necessary in order to move the viewer past the traumatizing shock of the still, the power, in Berger's word, of the “*arresting*” image?⁹

The potential for turning the image of an originally anonymous wounded child into a personalized story about the horrors of war was exploited early on. The original television reporting took place on June 8, 1972 on the nightly news. Commentator Roger Mudd showed the filmed footage of the girl running down the road along with other children and relatives, accompanied by South Vietnamese soldiers. The dropping of napalm is presented as accidental, and Mudd comments matter-of-factly, “many were burned horribly.”¹⁰ The South Vietnamese army was trying to drive the Communists out of villages along the road where they were thought to be hiding. The story was reported routinely as part of continued coverage of the war.¹¹ The girl was not singled out in this initial broadcast: “Some stripped bare,” Mudd says (when only the girl was naked), “only to find the napalm still burning on their backs.” In the lower right hand corner of the screen is the daily report on American war casualties – eleven, that day.

But two months later, again on the nightly news, when journalist Dan Rather picks up the trail of the child, she becomes known by her name, Kim Phuc, through the itinerary of the photograph, by then internationally known. Rather recalls the accident and its injuries, evoking the photograph (though not identifying the photographer, whose prize will come the following year). “An AP photographer, who saw the mishap, took this now famous but still tragic picture of a young girl horribly burned, running naked.” In Rather's update, a white circle is drawn around Kim, literally targeting the girl, selecting her from among the victims on the road as the heroine of a tale with a happy ending – a story

that is crafted to make sense in American narrative terms. Remember the little girl who was burned when South Vietnamese planes accidentally dropped napalm on a village northwest of Saigon? “At the time, there was a great deal of doubt about whether she would live.” Then we see another photograph of Kim Phuc in the hospital standing between two nurses. “She’s able to smile now,” Rather points out cheerfully, “her burns are healing, and doctors say she may be released from the Saigon hospital by this fall – in time for school.” In this televised segment, dependent in turn on the template of recovery that typically underpins narratives of suffering in popular culture, Kim becomes just another kid going to school (just like an American child, yours) – a plucky survivor of what might otherwise have been a complete tragedy. As Kim’s body heals, and her experience becomes normalized, the girl also becomes a stand-in for the hope of a wider healing of national wounds – not yet in 1972, but later, in a postwar future, a metonymy of transcendence.

Joe McNally, Kim Phuc, 1995
(original in color).

Indeed, Kim Phuc survived, and since the mid-1990s, photographs of her as an adult woman – as well as a documentary film and a book devoted to her story – have continued the work begun by television reportage in transforming the biographical portrait of a South Vietnamese girl into a North American narrative of postwar reconciliation between the United States and Vietnam. In 1995 Kim addressed veterans of the war at the Vietnam Memorial Wall. The iconic image of the Napalm Girl now coexists in the public spaces of memory with a counter-iconography, whenever Kim Phuc – now a Canadian citizen – offers herself up as an intercessor and an agent of forgiveness.¹²

In that same year, Joe McNally, a photographer whose assignment for *Life* magazine had been to follow up on the lives of people who had been subjects of Pulitzer Prize photographs, explains that he needed to reference the original image in his reprise: “I said to her, ‘Kim, to make this picture work, I have to be able to see the scars.’ And she knew that.” She had been nursing her son, and that activity “gave us a very natural way to show her life, her positive nature, her love for this new child and still show the scars that war had left on her physically.”¹³ As Kim cradles her infant son, pressing her gently smiling face against the baby’s smooth skin, the intricate mapping of scars that cover her left arm and most of her torso stand out like a strange language of hieroglyphs. Through the scars and the traumatic memory they carry, the silent girl war icon becomes a maternal voice for peace.

The caption below the new photograph of Kim as mother reads: “I know my picture did something to help stop the war. My son’s Vietnamese name, Huan, means ‘prospects.’ I have to show him what

happened to his mom, to her country, and that there should never be war again".¹⁴ The McNally photograph won a World Press award.

The original picture of Kim Phuc, designated by Sontag as the "signature Vietnam War horror-photograph from 1972" in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, came back into circulation with the events of September 11, 2001.¹⁵ After the attack on the World Trade Center, two British newspapers of very different journalistic styles, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Guardian*, turned back to the icon. The *Mirror* produced a stunning juxtaposition: poised above the famous photo of Kim Phuc is another woman, who appears to be Asian, escaping from the burning towers, covered in dust. The *Guardian* reporter points out the importance of captions as reminders to viewers of history: "The picture of the girl dashing screaming from the napalm has most power if you know what war it's from." The *Guardian's* title – "The power of a picture" – showed several images of the devastation at the World Trade Center, but the newspaper did not reprint the famous picture of the girl, as if the reference to a collective visual memory would be enough to assure the connection.¹⁶

The association between Kim Phuc and the injuries of war was also made in Britain before September 11. The photograph of the girl was reprinted a few days earlier in an article reporting on the plight of the "terrified Catholic schoolgirls" in Belfast, connecting their picture with those of Kim and the little boy from the Warsaw ghetto with his hands in the air; as well as the baby being carried out of the Oklahoma bombing and the father trying to protect his son during the Intifada. These children, the reporter asserts, "make us remember a time when we expected better of people like us."¹⁷ Photographic images of children, Marianne Hirsch has argued, "elicit an affiliative and identificatory as well as protective spectatorial look," a civilian gaze that expresses our investment in children's innocence and vulnerability.¹⁸ Wounded children thus stand in metonymically with even greater force both for the lost goodness in us and the ultimate cost of atrocity.

Paradoxically, however, the specific injury becomes abstract in the process of generalization. The combined innocence of children's vulnerable bodies and the youthfulness of soldiers leads the writer Studs Terkel to the heights of civilian indignation: "This is the metaphor for one of the crowning obscenities of our century," he declares in a magazine surveying the "photos of the century" in 1999, and referring to the image of Kim Phuc. "The kid in that plane that dropped the bomb probably didn't see this little girl, did not know it hit her or destroyed the world in which she lived. This is what terrorism is all

about. The impersonal aspect of it.”¹⁹ But more often the deployment of the girl’s image and story are enlisted in an all purpose anti-war campaign, multidirectional, devoid of any concrete historical reference. Not long after September 11, for instance, in the build up to the Iraq war, a stylized outline of Kim running from the napalm against the background of an American flag appeared on a sticker with the caption: “Not In My Name.” The text reads: “If I could talk face to face with the pilot who dropped the bomb, I would tell him that we cannot change history, but we should try to do good things for the present.” These are the words Kim Phuc spoke at the Vietnam Memorial wall.²⁰

The fact is, however, that the picture of the girl did change history. But how are we going to remember it? What will be the event’s iconic image? The u.s. postage stamp commemorating September 11 featured three firemen raising the flag at ground zero; the visual inter-text to the iconic image of the World War 11 flag raising was widely recognized. What of the towers, the flames, the people jumping? The cover of *Newsweek* on September 24, 2002 produced a compromise through juxtaposition: the flag-raising rescue workers in the foreground; the flaming towers at the top.

But the anniversaries as well as the future memorial to commemorate the losses of September 11 will necessarily revise memory and decide on its icons, as national memory evolves, remembering and forgetting. Anticipating the first anniversary of the catastrophe, the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* featured a summary of books related to September 11.²¹ Highlighted above the omnibus review was the haunting figure of the dust-covered woman that the British newspaper had juxtaposed with that of Kim Phuc. The photograph also appeared in the collection of pictures from September 11, *here is new york*.²² How long will others make the connection between the unnamed woman’s face of shock as she staggers away from the site of the Twin Towers and the horror-struck girl running from American napalm?

When Joe McNally, the photographer sent by *Life* magazine to follow up on the famous subjects of prizewinning images, described his task he said: “I knew I needed to see the scarring – otherwise there would be no touch point to the original photograph.”²³ By “touch point” McNally meant point of reference; he needed to create a concrete way for the viewer to connect to the original photograph through the sequel. He also needed to touch the viewer – perhaps to reproduce in the viewer the visceral shock of the original, the shock created by seeing a naked girl on fire. Without the touch point of the icon, the photographer worried about the viewer who lacked the initial

traumatic response to the scandal of the image: a little girl running naked down the road, her mouth screaming pain. Without knowledge of the first image, the viewer of the mother and infant photograph might merely see a puzzle: the intricate mapping of skin that looks like an unusual piece of fabric grafted on to the older figuration of Madonna and child. By choosing to place Kim in a beatific pose that carried its own powerful iconographic history, McNally successfully doubled the chances of his image succeeding.

Although iconic photographs share many characteristics, and many powerful images of injured or at risk children feature boys – the boy in the Warsaw ghetto, the Palestinian boy cowering with his father, the hooded Iraqi father and his son that won the World Press Photo Award in 2004 – the particular effect of the Kim Phuc images, both the image of the girl and the mother, derives from the evident marks of gender and the history of its pictorial iconicity. There are other, after all, figures in the original “Accidental Napalm” photograph that equally grip the imagination, notably, the one of Kim’s brother, his mouth open in silent terror, an expression resembling the mask of tragedy.²⁴ And yet it’s the girl who gets targeted as the story, an American story created by and for the media, but also a transnational one. The inevitability of the girl, and her ability to cross borders, should perhaps crucially be seen to exemplify Pollock’s argument that viewers come to images like this one with the “mythic cultural freight that already associates death with the feminine,” an association that makes the child’s suffering, because she is a girl, somehow more “bearable.”²⁵ Moreover, given the strictures around “frontal nudity” – recently violated by the uncensored, digitally circulated images of Abu Ghraib – it would have been and still would be impossible to publish a photograph of a naked boy, in similar circumstances, unless airbrushing techniques could eliminate more than shadows.

The figure of a naked girl looking into the eyes of civilians, and asking us to meet her civilian gaze, has circulated widely in the world since the publication of the image, and continues to stand for an intolerable limit in war.²⁶ The shock produced by this exposure of female vulnerability seems to offer the measure of the extremes of violence performed in wartime, until recently a wholly male affair. The photograph is also, in an age of atrocity, a persistent and troubling touch point for our responsibilities as citizens and viewers.