

Title of Dissertation: HAUNTING IMAGES: DIFFERENTIAL
PERCEPTION AND EMOTIONAL RESPONSE TO
THE ARCHETYPES OF NEWS PHOTOGRAPHY - A
STUDY OF VISUAL RECEPTION FACTORED BY
GENDER AND EXPERTISE

Arielle Susan Emmett, Doctor of Philosophy, 2011

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Excerpt and Conclusion for ICA 2011 below

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Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1. Fault lines and Fractures in the American Iconic Canon

This foundational study has produced a granular, “bottom up” examination of aesthetic, narrative, audience, and content factors affecting the perception and memory of powerful news photographs. Many of these photos, by content and emotional inflection, fall outside the American iconic “canon” identified by the authors Robert Hariman & John Louis Lucaites (2007), among many other media critics strongly influenced by social constructionism.

The aggregate results of this study strongly suggest that superb news images, whether iconic or archetypal according to the definitions and proofs I have laid out, elicit far more complex, variegated responses among viewers than a top-down approach theorizes. The notion of the “collective we,” even “collective memory,” demands further study. The abstract conceptualization of an American mainstream and even an “iconic” mainstream receiving pictorial ideas that “drive” public opinion and concepts of civic participation and attitude has been deconstructed in this study through active viewer research, both quantitative and qualitative. These viewers – male and female, visual experts and non-experts, and, in many cases, viewers with different racial backgrounds and ethnicities – produced a rich, diverse fabric of narrative responses to the images in question. Their candid interviews cast doubt on a strictly social constructionist view that photographic icons represent the “zenith” of liberal-democratic photojournalistic communication, or that such icons construct a “main wave” of societal response by

inscribing hegemonic power relationships and openings for participation defining what it means to be a citizen.

Instead, the four study groups I examined (n=113) converged and ranked as “best” many offbeat (but very powerful) news photographs that told alternative stories. Prompted by recollections of these photos, survey participants recognized and told their own stories of trauma and personal exposure to war, violence, and even political suicides of classmates that were related, in their minds, to the depicted events in particular images. Interviewees also told stories about witnessing public news events both exhilarating and horrific, expressing shock, surprise, disgust, fascination, aesthetic pleasure, pain, and strong empathy for the most abject photo subjects in the survey images, especially children. Virtually every visual non-expert, both male and female, conveyed feelings of being “haunted” by particular survey images that reminded them of their own pasts. None described the events or “message” of the images they favored or recalled first in political or ideological terms.

The combined data from testimony and survey, therefore, indicate that *multiple factors*, including *temporal proximity to the news event*, *gender*, *professional training and judgment*, and *family background* (including, possibly, a viewer’s ethnicity and religion), are at work in helping viewers decide which news images are most trenchant, memorable, and valuable to them. Moreover, several of the highest-ranked images in this survey were *not iconic* or “canonic” in the Hariman & Lucaites sense (meaning “famous” news photos that are widely disseminated and copied by mainstream and populist media sources). Consequently, the following study hypotheses appear strongly supported:

- **H6: Temporal proximity and exposure to the news event depicted in a photo heightens viewers' perception of the image as important, newsworthy, and emotionally expressive as compared to depicted news events that are more distant in time.**

- **H7: The viewer's gender and personal knowledge of the depicted news event will have more impact on the emotional arousal (empathy) and recall of the image than its aesthetics or the viewer's perception of its novelty.**

The implications of the above hypotheses are many. One is that “iconic” news photos expressing moments of national crisis are likely to fade or gain “distance” in viewer memory with time. Meanwhile, other archetypal images may come serendipitously to the fore and become “viral” or “generational” icons, especially with the advent of citizen journalism and the instant upload capabilities of the internet.

In this survey, the age of the image appeared, at least partially, to tarnish its relevance, especially to visual non-experts (mostly young students). All viewing groups ranked only one World War II photograph (Walter Hahn's 1945 image of a stone angel overlooking a bombed-out Dresden) in the top ten among the “best,” images, and its position was number 10 (mean =3.8425, SD = .08482; see page 149). The “top ten” list was dominated in the quantitative survey by images from recent headlines: September 11, 2001, the Iraq and first Gulf Wars, and the Haiti earthquake. In the qualitative portion of the survey, the oldest and most popular “first recalled” image was that of Martin Luther King Jr. (1963), standing before thousands of supporters (one of the few positive images in the survey, but ranked only 6 or 7 in the quantitative portion). The other most popular

“first recalled” images came from 1960s and early 1970s Vietnam (two icons: Nick Ut’s Accidental Napalm [1972] and Eddie Adams’ Death of a Vietcong Terrorist [1968]), along with three more recent archetypal images (not iconic) from Bangkok, Iraq, and Haiti (see pp. 283-284).

The visual language and locations of these most favored and remembered images are telling. Many of them depict news events and situations outside of US borders; virtually all produce humanistic and “universal” statements of life-and-death struggle and tragedy that place them squarely within the world of archetypal news imagery rather than the politically constructed iconic world. As I have defined it in this dissertation, the archetypal news photo fulfills three criteria: 1) it is authentically shot (no restaging); 2) it exemplifies the highest levels of photographic achievement; 3) it produces a rare, emotionally trenchant capture of an *actual* life-and-death predicament of such magnitude and seriousness that it warrants public attention. For example, Neal Ulevich’s *Brutality in Bangkok* (1977), one of the most “popular” and first recalled news photos, shows a man in the throes of bashing a chair on the head of an already-lynched left-wing student as a crowd of youth laughs and cheers. The image is an archetype of extreme human cruelty. Moreover, it is captured at a “tipping point” in the narrative arc (the body is *about to be bashed*), compelling viewers to imagine its horrific conclusion. One professional participant described the photograph as an archetype of “man’s inhumanity to man” (Wendy H. personal communication, April 10, 2010). The photograph evinces no particular political ideology, even with a caption; neither does Patrick Farrell’s beautifully executed image of the Haitian father tenderly embracing his drowned five-year old daughter. Survey participants took these most popular images as is, giving them

emotional interpretation. And by “vote” in the nominal portions of the survey, all viewing groups noted that facial expression, body language, and gesture were *as or more important to the emotional effect* of the image than its narrative, aesthetic appeal, or split-second capture of action (haunting effect and historical context were, in some images, also highly rated). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 seems well supported, although further study on the impact of facial expression and body language is warranted with an eye toward extend this finding as a ‘teaching point’ to photo editors of the future:

- **H1: In non-panoramic news photographs depicting human subjects, *facial expression, body language, and gesture* are more important to viewers’ overall assessment of the emotional magnetism of the image than factors of aesthetic presentation, narrative clarity, or split second capture of action.**

The fact that panoramic images from September 11th and its aftermath occupied the three top slots in the quantitative survey (but not in the qualitative “recall” survey) strongly suggests that the most *extreme* archetypal images are “anonymous” – they subsume facial expression and body language in the imagined horror of millions of faces and bodies consumed in Armageddon, everyone’s worst nightmare. The explosions of September 11, 2001 (and their top rankings in this survey) are salient examples of how powerful and personal images of apocalypse can be.¹ The archetypal image, therefore, does not appear to require close-ups of the face and body to be effective, especially if the viewer’s exposure to the trauma depicted is recent. But for those non-panoramic news

¹ The images of “mushroom clouds” over Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the Armageddon archetypes of World War II. If a survey had been taken at the time, the ‘mushroom clouds’ might have been voted as the top-ranked “icons” of the era; by contrast, the “archetypes” of human faces and bodies seared in the blasts were hardly ever seen, and only published in American media in the 1950s.

images in which humans carry the action, either currently or in the historic past, the “dance” and drama of faces and bodies in motion appears to be the essential carrier of information eliciting both *pathos* and empathy. At the same time, the danger of “memory fade” and lack of viewer context requires more than ever that textual captions accompany even the greatest news photographs. Even if certain generational “icons” become clichés, viewers eventually will grow “young enough” to forget or confuse what the originals were all about. Therefore, “no caption needed” is not a viable option either for image archetypes or icons if they are to remain true to the photojournalistic principles for which they are intended.

Two other research hypotheses (H8 and H9) related to 1) effects of gendered subject matter on image recall (including the ‘haunting effects’ of gendered pictorial subject matter); and 2) the *accuracy* of image recall for the most salient images both require additional study. Though both qualitative and quantitative results suggest that gendered subject matter does indeed elicit strong feelings of empathy and concern, including cross-gender empathy in many instances, a new study should be conducted with a greater range of images and larger sample sizes. The importance of gendered response *could be* a key finding for the theory of news photo archetypes. At present, though, the effect of gendered subject matter on image recall cannot be confirmed or rejected:

H8: Viewers of either sex will report a ‘haunting’ or lingering effect in memory more frequently for high quality news images with *gendered subject matter* than those that appear ‘neutral’ or non-gendered.

By the same token, the evidence of the qualitative survey is not sufficient to affirm or reject Hypothesis 9.

- **H9: The primary visual details of a superlative news photo, including central figures and spatial relationships among figures, will be recalled more accurately than details of either prototypical or ordinary news photos.**

As detailed in Chapter 5, several survey respondents confused or conflated the visual details of their “favorite” or “first recalled” images. However, they remembered the *gestalt* of the image, capturing an overall emotional impression that appeared indelible to them. Further research may be required to ascertain whether the image ‘archetype’ is more clearly recollected than ordinary news photos of routine or strictly informational character. Again, if the archetypal image is recalled more clearly than ordinary photos and is viewed as more emotionally compelling, news directors and photo editors might aim for greater exposure of such images in the “prime real estate” of news websites and printed publications. Since the photo has been documented as a clear and compelling “entry point” for viewers of textual stories – Poynter Institute research shows that 90 percent of readers enter a story through large photos, artwork or display type, and that readers are three times more likely to read at least some text if a visual element accompanies it (Moses, 2002), the positioning of archetypal news images could be a more critical communications element than ever.

6.2 Fulcrum of Percepts: Effects of Gender & Expertise

One of the underlying themes of this study pertains to the complexity of how viewers actually perceive and prioritize news images and their salient qualities. Again, a

bottom-up analysis of actual viewer rankings and preferences appears to be more instructive than abstract theories of audience response. In the ordinal portion of this study, in which viewers examined 21 news images for 12 different qualities, the four study groups showed a surprising “split decision” in both the perception and ranking of photographic qualities (see Figure 108). Moreover, that split decision showed statistically significant differences when factored by gender and expertise (see pages 162-163). Several image qualities appear to be perceived “universally,” with strikingly similar rankings across all study groups (these qualities include *newsworthiness*, *emotional arousal*, *memorable quality*, *novelty*, *haunting quality*, and, *narrative power* and *moral issue*, which show larger, though not statistically significant differences in the comparative sampling groups). By contrast, image qualities pertaining to news photos’ aesthetics (i.e., “beauty”), composition, expressive mood, and overall image quality, the latter often a strong indicator of emotional effect on the viewer, were *rated variably by expertise and gender*. For example, independent samples t tests (see p. 162) show statistically highly significant differences in *expert vs. non-expert* judgments on news photographs’ aesthetics (Sig. = .000), composition (Sig. = .007), expressive mood (Sig. = .006), and overall image quality (Sig = .000). For gender, statistically significant findings were also found for aesthetics (Sig. = .001), composition (Sig. = .019), expressive mood (Sig. = .030), overall image quality (Sig = .023) and narrative clarity and interest (Sig. = .033):

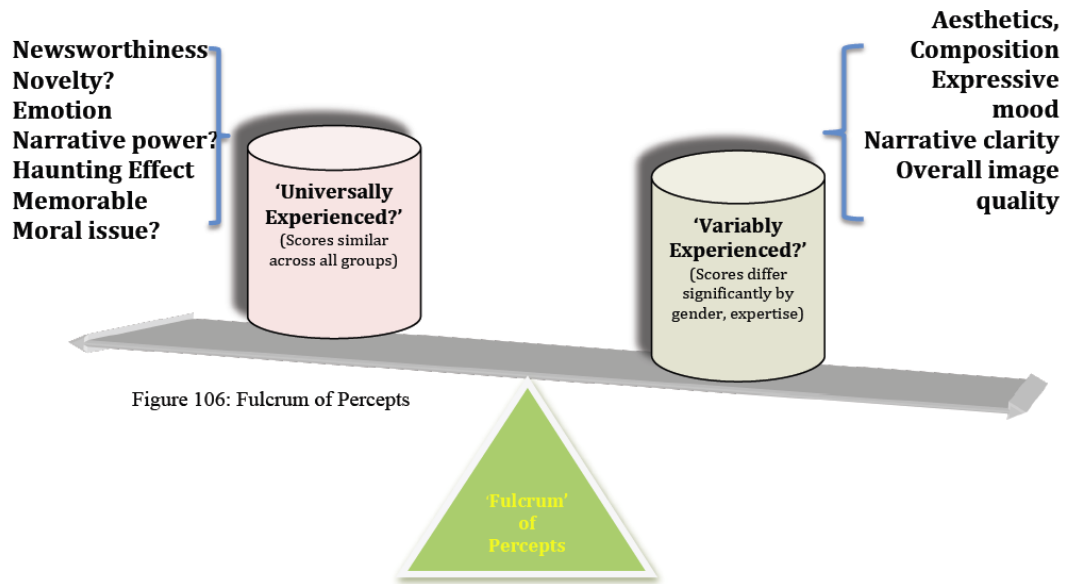


Figure 106: Fulcrum of Percepts

The “see-saw” effect is intriguing and should be investigated again with larger sample sizes to corroborate or adjust the “fulcrum.” However, the data of this research show clearly that perception of news images and news image qualities is neither uniformly “universal” nor uniformly “variable,” but selectively one or the other. Certain characteristics do appear universally shared among viewers in all study groups; other characteristics centering on the emotionally expressive, aesthetic, and “holistic” quality of the photographs appear “variably” experienced.

Moreover, the apparent disparity in aesthetic, expressive, and holistic judgment between visual experts and non-experts is easier to explain than the one for gender. Experts by nature are ranking images and image qualities through the eyes of professional visual practitioners who compete with each other for assignments and accolades; many of them were male in this survey. In most but not all ordinal assessments of the news photographs tested, female visual experts judged the character and quality of these images more closely to their male counterparts than to female non-experts. Hence, a strong divide in perceptual results between visual experts and non-experts.

In addition, visual experts, male or female, may have interpreted the ranking equivalencies of the Likert scale (1 – 5, poor to superb or ‘archetypal’) more rigorously than non-experts. In other words, they may have been “tougher” on the images’ aesthetics, expressive, and overall (holistic) qualities. A review of individual images in Chapter 4 shows how the “professional ethic” played out with lower scores than the non-experts, except for a few distinctly “gendered” images with subject matter appealing to

the professionals (example, Vietnam war demonstrators – appealing to male professionals, and soaring lone pilot in the sky over Wake Island – appealing to female professionals).

Non-expert females, however, consistently ranked the majority of survey images and their discrete aesthetic, composition, and expressive qualities much more highly than males (either expert or non-expert). They “saw” these qualities more favorably and were quick to express enthusiasm and admiration for the best images. Their differences were highly statistically significant for aesthetics, narrative clarity and interest, expressive mood, and overall image qualities. The research literature thus far has not presented a robust or empirically convincing case ascribing greater overall empathy or enthusiasm among women for photos/pictorial subjects (Strauss, 2004). However, the weight of evidence in this foundational study indicates that gendered differences in perception do exist for certain qualities – among them aesthetic judgment and overall image quality, expressive mood and, particularly, narrative clarity and interest. Females judged the “stories” of the images as clearer, richer, and more compelling than the males. These findings lend support to Hypotheses 3, 4 and 5, as follows:

- **H3: Differences in gender and expertise *do not* produce significant differences in the perception and ranking of such news image properties as newsworthiness, novelty, moral issue presentation, and memorable effect.**
- **H4: Differences in gender and expertise *do* produce significant differences in the viewer’s rankings of news images properties such as aesthetics, composition, expressive mood, and overall image quality and effect.**

- **H5: Females of any level of expertise will judge and rank the aesthetic, expressive, and narrative qualities of news images differently from males, expert and non-expert.**

The current study suggests that female non-experts *do exhibit a highly developed sensitivity toward news image aesthetics* that approach archetypal or iconic quality. For reasons unknown, that level of sensitivity appears more acutely developed than that of novice males. The question of whether females experience the power, moral message, and emotional arousal of news photographs more acutely than males remains open. Certainly the aesthetic and expressive qualities are experienced very differently; and young males especially seemed indifferent or “colder” to many of the photographs. A more granular investigation of exactly which emotions and empathetic responses are elicited in both females and males of varying ages is warranted as part of an ongoing examination of *real* news audience reception and behavior. The current study did not attempt to measure either gendered or expert vs. non-expert differences in affective vs. cognitive empathy while encountering the photos in question. But future research should, especially because too many cultural critics have assumed that news audiences respond to visuals in a uniform way.²

²Many of the novice males, though, scoring the images generally lower in the quantitative portions of the test, nonetheless spoke movingly and effusively about certain images in the qualitative portion of the survey. Are males being desensitized to news images of violence through such practices violent video game playing or watching R-rated movies? This study does not seek to establish any causal link, although follow-on research could certainly explore gender differences in image perception and emotional response using a larger and more historic profiling of male and female preferences for media and entertainment.

6.3 Uncanny Convergence: Prioritizing the most Salient News Image Qualities

The current research contained an unexpected surprise: While all viewing groups exhibited variable perception of aesthetic, expressive and overall image qualities, apparently all groups, regardless of expertise, identified the most *salient* qualities in each news image in virtually identical order of priority. The uncanny convergence of rankings across male/female, expert and non-expert supports Hypothesis 2 (see pages 198-202).

- **H2: Experts of both sexes prioritize and rank (ordinally) the most important stimulus qualities of a news image in the same order as non-experts.**

The evidence further suggests that people of different backgrounds and levels of visual training appear to know which elements are most important or prominent in a news image regardless of its content or level of professional achievement. Consequently, experts and non-experts alike, completely unaware of the opinions of their peers, chose the same two or three “top qualities” for each ordinally ranked image simply by rating those qualities the highest. Even with discrepancies between expert and non-expert viewing groups, the ordering of the top qualities was virtually identical for all 21 images evaluated, with few deviations by gender. I’ve attempted to explain this uncanny convergence of ranking with a cultural explanation (i.e., learned heuristics for prioritizing what is “newsworthy” or expressive). The ability to prioritize what is instantly important in a news image may also have roots in biology/cognitive behavior (p. 196). One argument is that archetypal images showing life-and death predicaments may operate biologically to teach and enable faster cognitive processing and recognition of threatening faces and scenarios. Another plausible explanation is that many of the

conventions of news image presentation are already well understood by the time most media-literate teenagers reach young adulthood, and thus “parsing” the image for salient qualities becomes a common, learned skill. None of these explanations appear exactly right. Follow-on research with larger sample sizes and more variable news imagery would be required to confirm and possibly elucidate this finding. However, the fact of common prioritizing registers once again the complexities of ‘universal’ vs. ‘subjective’ understandings of percepts and whether or not disparate viewing groups are in this regard more similar than different.

6.4 Icons as a Form of Celebrity Worship

Hariman & Lucaites have mounted an ambitious argument to elevate the status of certain famous news images over others, identifying them as national “icons,” much in the vein of presidential historians who liken greatness to the images carved on Mt. Rushmore. Influenced by social constructionism and its belief in images that promulgate “consensus narratives” among the liberal-democratic mainstream, Hariman & Lucaites have led the vanguard in offering a top-down analysis of a very limited number of news photographs they claim exert hegemonic and long-term impacts on American public culture. These images ostensibly “work” by binding the mass public through common visual touchstones that model civic participation and performance. Such images are thought to fuel the *collective memory* of a society principally conceived as a “collective we.”

Icons are further thought to produce “constructions of viewer response” and “management” of American rhetorical culture (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007). The list of news icons cited by Hariman & Lucaites is short (they discuss only 9; they theorize that

at most a dozen or two images have been iconic in all Western culture). All but one of the photo icons in their top list have been produced by American photographers (the exception is a picture of an unidentified man standing before a tank in Tiananmen Square). Icons, they further argue, appeal to middlebrow sensibilities, showing historic turning points while providing visual motifs and codes (e.g., flags, fireworks, screaming women, soldiers at war) that communicate values such as heroism, patriotism, (acceptable expressions of) dissent, calamity, and stoic survival. Moreover, iconic photographs are deemed *exclusive* to the photojournalism of liberal-democratic societies because their power is supposedly magnified by continuous reproduction, interpretation, and parodying by both established media and populist sources.

However, Hariman & Lucaites do not corroborate their claims for icons through empirical research on viewing audiences. Their theoretical “proof” lies in their own highly elastic, values-driven interpretations of these images and their offshoots.³ For example, the Kent State massacre, photographed by John Filo (1970), is interpreted implausibly as a statement *both* against anti-war movements *and* against established American mainstream powers.⁴ The critics strain the limits of credibility by offering a naïve and elaborately sexist reading of the Kent State image as a “gendered” emotional display leveraging the stereotypically inarticulate screams of a woman (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, pp. 141, 142).⁵ This and other interpretations in *No Caption Needed*

³ The list of nine iconic photographs Hariman & Lucaites examine in detail include Dorothea Lange’s Migrant Mother, flag raisings at Iwo Jima and Ground Zero, Filo’s Kent State, Nick Ut’s Accidental Napalm, Tiananmen Square, and the Hindenburg and Challenger Explosion photos.

⁴ “Their social mediation of the image directs the viewer to be critical of military action at home and, by extension, abroad, while it construes the antiwar movement as a paramilitary action that also should be stopped” (p. 142)

⁵ “Not only is it considered more appropriate and more natural for a woman to cry in response to distress or loss, but women also are the standard vehicle for representing emotional response in public....the cry has stereotypically become more legitimate as a public act when coming from a woman, who becomes the sign

appear especially far-fetched because the authors never asked or recorded what viewing audiences *actually* felt or thought by examining these same photographs. The authors' greatest weakness is to assume that all audiences think and feel *exactly like them*. They neither test their interpretations among real viewing audiences, nor do they question even once their assumption that iconic image power resides exclusively in the photojournalism experience of Western liberal democracies and specifically, American democracy.

In fact, icons have been generated throughout 172 years of photographic history by regimes autocratic, democratic, socialist, and communist. The abundant numbers of politically inspired icons across cultures – from Marx to Hitler to Mao Zedong, from the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto to the sacrificed children of Cambodia's Tuol Seng prison – strongly validate the idea that icons can be trans-cultural and certainly not the exclusive property of liberal-democratic societies alone.

The focus of much of social constructionist criticism is how American media maintains the status quo. But the status quo cannot be neatly maintained if news consumers interpret and offer "oppositional readings" to those materials ostensibly described as "dominant" and hegemonic. Therefore, an instructive follow-on study might be to take the very same icons that Hariman & Lucaites propose and subject them to recorded interpretations by a variety of viewing groups. Only then would the authors' analyses enjoy a true test, and the media critics would get to see how viewing audiences actually respond to these image "celebrities."

of both domestic order and its collapse" (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, pps. 141, 142). The commentary proceeds to interpret the presence of long-haired male students caught in the action as a paean to unfeeling masculinity. "Like the other men behind him, his stance matches that of the National Guardsmen standing outside the frame: alert, calculative, focused on the enemy" (p. 142)

6.5 The “Icons + Archetypes” Model

As a cornerstone finding, viewing audiences in my study recalled and ranked highest several comparatively “unknown” archetypal news images that fell *outside the iconic canon*. Even more, few of the participants described these images in any terms reminiscent of mainstream ideologies or political values (although a few were critical of American involvement in recent wars). What emerged instead was an empathetic sharing of memory and, quite often, alternative, idiosyncratic, and, occasionally, “oppositional” readings to what was shown. Though some images did not move participants at all, and many were deemed interesting curiosities or pictures too graphic to handle, participant testimony was filled with lyrical and oxymoronic descriptions of “terrible beauties,” and with memories of watching September 11th unfold and worrying about parents working downtown; along with emotion-laden stories of resistance, pity, and fear for those who suffered in war and other natural and manmade calamities.

In all, the news photos that my survey participants ranked as “the best” in nominal and ordinal portions of the survey proved to be a combination of relatively famous and widely distributed news photos, two of them apocalyptic visions from September 11th (a third, from the same period, was ranked #2 but was not a “famous” or iconic photo), along with several lesser-known, superbly executed news photos that were more intimate and facially expressive (these included the photos by Michael Yon, Patrick Farrell, and several unidentified photos of war and rescue). I have described the reasons why this latter category of news image “archetypes” can be so emotionally trenchant. Given the three possible theorized outcomes for study subjects ranking all images (see pages 149-151) which were described in my Methodology (see pages 113-118), the

combined data support Hypothesis 10, outlining the emergence of an “icons + archetypes” convergence model of image reception, as follows:

- **H10: A consistency of ranking, memory, and viewer choice of just a few extraordinary images across all groups strongly suggests that archetypes of content and predicament do exist, producing a greater emotional effect on viewers than ordinary or average news images without this content.**

This model supports the idea that viewers *generally* agree on the best and most moving photographs, although the ranking order is not exactly the same for each group. The “top” photos ranked both for excellence and memorable character consist of a wide range of image archetypes, some iconic, some not. The findings strongly suggest that iconic imagery is a political construction; in effect, it is as much a measurement of cultural dissemination and copying as of personal or community relevance, emotional traction, authenticity, or aesthetic and narrative excellence. The findings of this study also suggest that icons are “made,” not born (Perlmutter, 1998). We might therefore consider an expansion of the iconic image ‘canon.’ And, if we are to take this survey data as evidence that news photos count, emotionally and intellectually, we must look more carefully at the images that mainstream and alternative media *do* show, along with those images that are overlooked or suppressed.

Condition #3: Universal Consensus on Diverse ‘Archetypal’ + Iconic Images

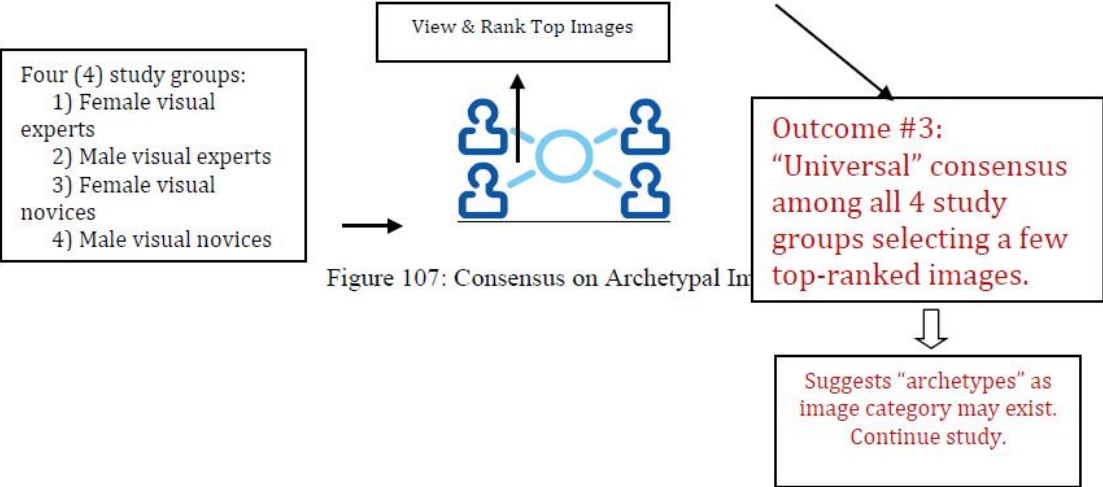


Figure 107: Consensus on Archetypal Im

6.6 The Archetype as a Warning System

“The image as shock and the image as cliché are two aspects of the same presence,” wrote Susan Sontag, one of the great critics of photography (2003, p. 23). “The hunt for the more dramatic (as they’re often described) images drives the photographic enterprise, and is part of the normality of a culture in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value” (p. 23). Photojournalism today represents the accidental tourism of cameras that fix and “sell” images of calamity from worlds away, enabling anyone, anywhere to regard other people’s pain with just enough psychological distance to withstand the initial shock—and then to put it away, she asserts. “Wars are now also living room sights and sounds,” Sontag wrote (2003, p. 18). Those sights and sounds, easily muted with a push button remote, are the unfortunate consequence of mediated technologies in which direct experience has been replaced by photographs and film, “to which the response is compassion, or indignation, or titillation, or approval, as each new misery heaves into view” (p. 18).

While Sontag’s view represents a legitimate lament of the war weary, I would argue, based on the results of this study, that great photographs have at least two other purposes: instruction for survival and community building—early alert, in other words—along with “making special,” the conveyance of joy and beauty (Dissanayake, 1998). The key to this argument is two-fold. In Chapter 4, pp. 193-195, I have reviewed some of the cognitive processing literature indicating that faces are processed holistically, unlike other visual objects, to promote instantaneous recognition (Yovel & Kaniwisher, 2004). Further, a pre-attentive level of visual processing segregates regions of a scene into figures and ground so that a subsequent attentive level can identify particular objects

more rapidly and efficiently (Triesman, 1986). Humans display a seemingly effortless ability to perceive meaningful wholes in the visual world; however, this ability depends on a complex assembly process in the brain that proceeds along a “features, then objects” visual orientation. Faces, though, appear to be processed instantaneously. As I stated before, facial processing operates more efficiently than the cognitive processing of other ordinary objects (Yovel & Kanwisher, 2004), lending support to the idea that recognizing faces (friend or foe) in life and death predicaments—*archetypal predicaments, in other words*—has a developed, evolutionary purpose.⁶ We may be able to distinguish and parse the features and then objects of an image in rapid succession, but the human face is something we receive first and instantly—its expressions, its intent to heal or harm. The face in the context of bodily expression (psychological gesture) produces in the viewer an impression—the *gestalt* of emotion to which we take heed. Is the face a threat? Is it evil? Will it do harm or good? Do we fly, stay, or fight? In milliseconds we are making these decisions based on the visual information we receive.

Dennis Dutton (2009), Ellen Dissanayake (1998), Di Dio (2007), and others argued for the biological, evolutionary, and survival advantages of the “art instinct.” But what of *archetypes* in photojournalism? Even at the pre-attentive level of visual processing, the archetypal photograph appears to be an especially efficient carrier of

⁶ Evidence that perception of faces is mediated by special cognitive and neural mechanisms comes from fMRI studies of the fusiform face area (FFA) and behavioral studies of the face inversion effect. Here, Yovel and Kanwisher (2004) reported that they used two methods to ask whether face perception mechanisms are stimulus specific, process specific, or both. Subjects discriminated pairs of upright or inverted faces or house stimuli that differed in either the spatial distance among parts (configuration) or the shape of the parts. The FFA *showed a much higher response to faces than to houses*, but no preference for the configuration task over the part task. Similarly, the behavioral inversion effect was as large in the part task as the configuration task for faces, but absent in both part and configuration tasks for houses. These findings indicate that *face perception mechanisms* are not process specific for parts or configuration *but are domain specific for face stimuli per se*.

visual information related to life-and-death struggle. It is not simply a form of drama. It is, at least in one sense, a warning system, with an occasional promise of relief, satisfaction, or fulfillment. If the archetypal photograph is indeed the instantaneous communication of a human predicament of the utmost *seriousness* and magnitude; if it conveys a critical juncture or plot point in a narrative arc of human life (or the life of human groups in community); if it relies principally on *facial expression and body language* to communicate its meaning; and if it displays with great aesthetic clarity the elements of tragedy impending or past (*hamartia, anagnorisis, peripeteia, and pathos*), it is very likely to command our attention—possibly again and again.⁷ Allport (1989) has argued that our attention span and allocation of cognitive resources are actually quite limited due to the problems of competing cognitive domains (e.g., perceptual-motor domain) and restricted information processing resources in the brain.⁸ The archetypal image provides a competitive advantage. Inundated by visual information—news photographs, films, real-world events—people are much more likely to “stick with” an image that emulates persuasively the “friend or foe,” “fight or flight,” or “defeat or triumph” predicaments and threats that have shaped our life chances from the beginning. Certainly, while every archetype is not a direct relay of conditions of threat or immediate survival, the quality of great photographs provides the most instantaneous

⁷ Panoramic photos likely command attention by showing an event that is bound to involve unseen expressions and gestures, as in the World Trade Towers and the Hindenburg conflagration.

⁸ Allport (1989) identifies problems in the integration and coordination among different cognitive domains in the overall control of behavior. He also adopts David Marr's imperative: that we need a clear, explicit formulation of a computational theory that states the overall purposes or goals of a given category of cognitive processes (1982). What would this theory be like? Many theorists in recent years have been inclined to conceptualize attention and attentional selectivity as essentially the consequence of limited or insufficient processing resources or processing capacity in the brain. Much of the empirical research on attention has been concerned with identifying the nature of system limitations and their within the cognitive architecture. Allport details the issues of behavioral coherence and univocal perceptual-motor control in determining the nature of attentional selectivity.

communication of what is, what was, and what could be—fuel for the mind, engagement of the senses, and contemplation of our social role and our will to act.

6.7 The Archetype of “Making Special”

And what of “making special?” Dissanayake (1998) has argued that the human impulse for beauty and “dressing up” is an innate and biologically advantageous aspect of human inheritance. In the archetypal image, “making special” is a matter of memory preservation—assigning priority to a particularly cogent, distressing, or pleasurable image and the message(s) that go with it. When a moment provides aesthetic and even cognitive instruction or pleasure (the Martin Luther King Jr. image is an example), it may also “make a space” within the limited resources of memory that we do have. It may force us to compare the moment captured in the image to the reality of all that has passed since. King’s beguiling smile in that image, standing before a tapestry of thousands, perhaps a million faces, is the “making special” that constitutes our greatest survival advantage: optimism and hope.

But even if the biological argument for a category of superlative photography—archetypal photography—proves to have no basis in advancing human survival, certainly its cultural advantages to community are beyond dispute. As I stated earlier in my definitions, an iconic photograph—a widely popularized and distributed photograph—may indeed show the characteristics of the archetypal predicament, both theme and plot. The question is whether media criticism’s focus on the icon has actually undermined belief and attention to the “the other images” —the category of superlative (but not iconic) “archetypes” I’ve described in some detail. Though social constructionism arises from some insights into the role of socialization in image reception, its approach to news

photographs should not be nearly so elevated or dominant or autocratic or ideological as its proponents represent it as deserving. The data collected even in this comparatively limited study on gender and expertise difference in the responses to news photographs strongly suggest that there is not one “audience” or one “viewer group,” all happily consenting and interpreting icons equally. There are many interpretative communities; and to each of them, photographs of political and possibly “iconic” import communicating “consensus narratives” are not all created equal.

So, do archetypal images exist? The combined data of this study show the convergence of opinion regarding the most salient photo qualities and the “top-ranked” images. In the top ranks, many lesser-known images depicting powerful, emotional predicaments were chosen, along with a few of the certifiable American icons. The variety of choice strongly suggests that Hypothesis 10 has merit:

Table 37: Recap of Top-Ranked Images of 4 Viewing Groups

Image	Female Students		Female Professionals	Rank	Male Students	Rank	Male Professionals	Rank
World Trade Attack	4.49	1	4.3	3	4.25	1	4.24	2
Lower Manhattan Post 9/11	4.45	2	4.42	2	4.15	2	4.04	5
Ground Zero 9/11 (Nachtwey)	4.38	3	4.58	1	4.04	4	4.39	1
Hooded Man Abu Ghraib	4.29	4	4.27	4	4.0	5	3.84	8
Fireman rescuing baby	4.29	4	4.06	9	3.86	6	4.08	4
Incinerated Man	4.28	5	4.19	7	4.08	3	4.17	3
Martin Luther	4.22	6	4.22	5	4.0	5	3.86	7

King Jr.								
Haiti Rescue	4.09	7	3.88	12	3.79	8	3.82	9
Mourning	4.015	8	4.21	6	3.83	7	3.91	6

Table 37 shows that while viewing groups did demonstrate some difference in exact preference and order of ranking, the panoramic archetype of Apocalypse and survival in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 predominated. Other top-ranked images included the icon from Abu Ghraib and many lesser known images from September 11, the Iraq war, a fireman’s rescue of a baby, and, of course, the inspirational Martin Luther King Jr. and Haiti images. In the qualitative interviews, a mixture of “icons” and superbly executed “archetypes” were also selected and discussed as “first remembered.” These included the images of Martin Luther King Jr. (7 “recollections”), Eddie Adams’ Death of a Vietcong Terrorist (6), Neal Ulevich’s Brutality in Bangkok (5), Nick Ut’s Accidental Napalm (5), Karim Kadim’s Ali Hussein being Pulled from the Rubble (5); Michael Yon’s Soldier Embracing a Dying Child (5); and Patrick Farrell’s Franz Samedi Embracing his Daughter, Tamesha Jean (5).

Table 38: Recap of First-Recalled Images by Study Group

Experts Males	Expert Females	Non-expert Males	Non-Expert Females	Total Image Tally	Quantitative Survey Grand Means Ordinal Ranking
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⁹ The Abu Ghraib image is memorable for its documentary force, but not for its excellence as a photograph.

Martin Luther King, 1963 (AFP) *2 votes XX	Martin Luther King, 1963 (AFP) 2 votes XX	Martin Luther King, 1963 (AFP) 1 vote X	Martin Luther King, 1963 2 votes XX	XXXXXXX (7)	6
Eddie Adams' Death of Vietcong Terrorist 1968 1 vote X	Eddie Adams' Death of Vietcong terrorist 1968 1 vote X	Eddie Adam's Death of Vietcong terrorist 1968 2 votes	Eddie Adam's Death of Vietcong terrorist 1968 2 votes X	XXXXXXX (6)	Not ranked (nominal ranking only)
Bangkok hanging 1 vote	Bangkok hanging 1 vote	Bangkok hanging 1 vote	Bangkok hanging 2 votes	XXXXXX (5)	Not ranked (nominal)
Accidental Napalm 2 votes XX	Accidental Napalm 1 vote X	Accidental Napalm 1 vote X	Accidental Napalm 1 vote X	XXXXXX (5)	Not ranked (nominal)
Ali Hussein Pulled from Baghdad rubble 1 vote X		Ali Hussein Pulled from Baghdad rubble 1 vote	Ali Hussein Pulled from Baghdad rubble 3 votes X	XXXXX X(5)	Not ranked (nominal)
Haitian Dad embracing drowned		Haitian Dad embracing drowned	Haitian Dad embracing drowned	XXXXXX (5)	Not ranked

daughter 1	daughter	daughter
vote	1 vote X	2 votes XX
1 vote X		

Even with these preliminary results and a wide range of mitigating factors, the presence of a rich and varied “new canon” of archetypes (many of them poignant, trenchant, and negative) is surely evident. Some images obviously registered differently among the groups for gendered content and aesthetic (photographic) achievement. Some photographs registered strongly among the young because they were recently taken. But the overall “picture” of this study is that the best and most emotionally provocative images, several of them “non-iconic,” rose to the top among all the groups. This confirms that the superb photograph depicting both tragic and optimistic human events can contribute immeasurably to our lives. Further, this insight suggests that a shift in media priorities would be beneficial. News photographers and editors can look much more discerningly at the images they do record and publish, realizing that audiences do appreciate a full range of truth and dilemma beyond the visual cliché. A photographic archetype is a capture of reality at the finishing line; it is worthy of our deep appreciation. We must use it as a guide, as a warning system, and as a “making special” of moments that give us our best hope for survival.

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