Mattia Arioli

Framing a Shot: Intercode Adaptations and Ethical Remembrance of the Vietnam War

Abstract: This essay analyzes the remediation of Eddie Adams's photograph *Saigon Execution* (1968) through various (pop culture) media, focusing on how graphic narratives have adapted this iconic shot. These adaptations problematize the construction and perception of the narrative embedded in the photograph. Various comics have appropriated and subverted its embedded narrative by "framing this shot" within a broader (set of) image(s). Indeed, the framing of *Saigon Execution* within a sequential graphic narrative opens up new possibilities for interpretation, raising questions about the role of the "industry of memory," the framing gaze of the (American) photographer, the racial body of the Vietnamese subject, the ethics of memory, and the osmosis between private and public images.

Keywords: Adaptation, comics, photography, Vietnam war, ethics, memory

Vietnam: an iconic (tele)visual war

The Vietnam War launched a new way of narrating conflicts, being the first to be *fully* televised. The images that appeared on television were particularly shocking for American viewers because they showed explicit violence on a scale and with an immediacy that had been absent from the coverage of World War II and the Korean War. The (tele)visual elements were so pervasive that this conflict was defined as a "living-room war."[1] Between 1965 and 1975, footage of the U.S. military engagement in Vietnam dominated the news, and only the domestic crisis caused by the Watergate affair would deflect public attention from what was happening in Vietnam for a considerable amount of time.[2]

This brand-new way of broadcasting the news was a consequence of the technological developments in American society. In the 1950s, the television was a central piece of furniture for many American families, replacing the radio as the primary source of daily information. This saturation of media coverage helped turn the narration of the war into an "iconic event."[3] However, it is interesting to

---

1 Hallin 1989.

2 See Patterson 1984a; 1984b.

3 Leavy 2007.

note that the visual archive of this war did not contain moving images but still photographs. The prominence of photography can be explained by the ease with which still images can circulate in other media (i.e., history books). Thousands of photographs were taken, but only a few became iconic, thanks to their use in documentaries and books. As Hagopian observed, "frequently reproduced photographs become part of a self-reinforcing circuit. Images that are published again and again are those that first come to mind when lay people, writers or documentary producers think about the historical events they depict."[4] Yet, each replica entails a new context of circulation and may produce a new interpretation. In fact, frames do not contain but break apart every time, and this perpetual break is "subject to a temporal logic by which it moves from places to places."[5]

Even though early accounts of the war were still jingoistic, once the inability of the U.S. to win over the 'hearts and minds' of the Vietnamese became self-evident, war photography progressively became charged with anti-war rhetoric, gaining the ability to question U.S. imperialism. Hence, for photography to truly impact the viewer, it needs a (counter)narrative attached to it to produce change. As cultural trauma theorists have argued,[6] cultural trauma always needs "carrier groups" capable of fostering a certain reading of the past, even when it is extremely polarizing. The anti-war movement used photography to shock the audience and challenge the official narrative of the war. From a rhetorical point of view, these photographs were used to achieve three main effects: to reveal what was going on, to confute the reasons for U.S. intervention, and to reinforce anti-war rhetoric. Yet, when analyzing these photographs and the sociocultural impact they had, we must also acknowledge the importance of *momentum.* For instance, according to Hamilton,[7] Eddie Adams's *Saigon's Execution* (1968) was successful precisely because it resonated with the news of the escalation of the Tet Offensive. This was a pivotal moment in the Vietnam War, as it became clear that the conflict was far from over and that political leaders were lying about the real situation. Therefore, context helps us understand the success of a photograph. In fact, earlier photographs portraying a similar subject (a summary execution) were discarded by the press, suggesting that the time was not yet ripe for such a photograph.[8]

The anti-war movement (and media) selected certain photographs because of their evocative power. Images showing impending death are more likely to be reproduced multiple times, as their value lies not in the novelty or timeliness of the

---

4 Hagopian 2006, 203.

5 Butler 2016, 10.

6 See Alexander 2004; Alexander *et al.* 2012; Eyerman 2019.

7 Hamilton 1989.

8 See Zelizer 2010, 227.

image, but in the emotional response they can generate.[9] Emotions trigger the attribution of meaning and possibly the urge to act; viewers have to decide where they stand in response to what they see. Images work on a neurological and cognitive level, eliciting emotional responses and being able to "address the spectators' own bodily memory" and "touch the viewer who feels rather than simply sees the event drawn into the image through a process of affective contagion."[10] However, these emotional responses do not fully explain why certain images are selected to the detriment of others. Yet, looking at the broader context of circulation, it becomes clear that ideology determines what becomes iconic.

From media coverage to pop culture

The continued circulation of war photographs occurs not only through extensive media coverage and political appropriation, but also through their remediation in popular culture. Mass culture can disseminate images and narratives about the past, but the memories it creates are never natural or authentic.[11] Photographs become a common currency for memory because of their reproducibility, which increases the possibility of sharing an experience among different groups. As Sontag noted, "[a]ll memory is individual, unreproducible – it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating."[12] Therefore, photographs are often subject to a permanent recirculation that wants to ensure a certain reading of the past. Because of this appropriation process, a traumatic event must be studied as a complex performance and not as a mere fact. Cultural trauma is thus constructed as a mediated event that we may not necessarily have experienced as individuals. It involves both the telling across generations, or "postmemory,"[13] and projected "prosthetic memories,"[14] including books, movies, documentaries, graphic novels, and artistic expositions. Hence, photographs function as "points of memory," that is, "points of intersection between past and present, memory and postmemory, personal remembrance and cultural recall."[15] This passage from the public sphere to the private and back to the public (thanks to media dissemination) is well captured by Dinh Q. Lê's photo weaving, *From Viet-*

---

9 See Zelizer 2010.

10 Bennett 2005, 36.

11 See Landsberg 2004.

12 See Sontag 2004, 76 – 77.

13 See Hirsch 1997; 2012.

14 See Landsberg 2004.

15 Hirsch 2012, 61.

nam to Hollywood, in which public photographs, images from Hollywood movies about the Vietnam War (including *Born on the Fourth of July*), and pictures of everyday life during the war are visually interwoven and thematically linked to the artist's family history. Through this appropriation, what was once public enters the private sphere and is relocated into the present through an act of projection.

Moreover, the recurrence of these iconic photographs in various cultural artifacts involuntarily testifies to America's inability to come to terms with its failed military experience. For instance, Adams's photograph is remediated by movies dealing with the legacy of the Vietnam War (i.e., Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*, 1978), but also by cultural products that do not comment on this historical event, but on war in abstract terms, such as Woody Allen's *Stardust Memory* (1980), Billy Joel's music video "We Didn't Start the Fire" (1989), and Mike Stimpson's *Classic photographs* series (for which the artist used Legos to restage Vietnam War pictures). As the original context of these photographs becomes tied to the past, their significance becomes blurred, and new viewers are tempted to interpret them according to the needs of the present. These photos partially lose their indexical nature to become symbols of war atrocities and U.S. imperialism, a connection well captured by Banksy's reinterpretation of the "Napalm Girl."

Adapting Adams's photograph to the graphic form

Adaptation reinforces *subjectivity*, since it involves transcoding, creativity, and intertextuality, with the source material serving as a palimpsest. As Linda Hutcheon and O'Flynn argued, "adapters must have their own personal reasons for deciding first to do an adaptation and then choosing which adapted work and what medium to do it in [...] An adaptation can obviously be used to engage in a larger social or cultural critique."[16] In addition to reinforcing the subjectivity of adaptations, the change of medium also highlights their political agendas. This is particularly evident in the inter-code adaptation of photographs into comics; while photographs claim to tell the truth (standing as physical proof that something happened or existed) because of their indexical nature, drawings do not. Illustrations present a "narrowly selective interpretation" of the world.[17] Comics materialize the visual framing present in all media, and they are aware of their own mediation.[18] This

---

16 Hutcheon/O'Flynn 2013, 92–94.

17 Sontag 2008, 6.

18 See Chute 2016, 16–17.

intervention materializes not only through the use of a visible frame (the panel grid), but also through the use of drawings, which make the hand of the creator perceptible.

In the case of the Vietnam War, the decision to use drawings is not primarily dictated by the lack of images of the conflict or the inaccessibility of the camera eye to the event. Hence, the decision might be dictated by the perceptive dynamics that denote each medium, which are the cognitive and emotional responses they activate in the viewer. As Marshall McLuhan famously said, comics is a "cool" medium that demands a higher participation than photography, a "hot" medium.[19] It processes information in "low definition" and forces its audience to activate all senses in the communication process; by contrast, photography simply 'extends' our vision, facilitating our understanding of the conveyed graphic information. Moreover, the fact that photography is contained within another medium (comics) is not at all problematic, because – as the scholar explains – "the content of any medium is always another medium,"[20] an idea that Bolter and Grusin implemented and referred to as "remediation."[21] In other words, media can be embedded within other media, generating hybrids. In particular, comics can interact with photographs in two ways: reproducing them as they are or adapting them to the comic form. The adaptation can either use the same style as the comics or develop a more realistic tone.

It follows that the hybrid nature of these adaptations aims to overcome/problematize the limits of photography. As John Szarkowski observed, the photographer's "work, incapable of narrative, turned toward symbol."[22] Comics try to regain a narrative dimension by putting the frame in relation to other images, thus generating "closures"[23] and/or "inferences."[24] The language of comics frames photographs into a sequential/tabular narrative. But unlike film or television, where each image cancels what came before it, in comics the stream of images does not produce an overlap, because the medium benefits from both the fixity of the panels (allowing the viewer to linger on the images) and the sequentiality, which can be used to complicate the preexisting narrative embedded in the image. Comics can therefore appropriate photographs and their entrenched narrative in order to subvert them, producing "counter-memories."[25] The latter can re-

---

19 See McLuhan 2017.
20 McLuhan 2017, 17.
21 See Bolter/Grusin 1999.
22 Szarkowski 2007, 42.
23 See McCloud 1993.
24 See Cohn 2019.
25 See Lipsitz 1990.

construct what the image cannot tell, what preceded and followed the shot, thus exploiting the photograph's "inexhaustible invitation to deduction, speculation, and fantasy."[26] These adaptations also raise questions about the "ethics of memory"[27] and problematize the purpose behind each memory project.

Hence, the change of medium reveals that photographs are also interpretations, as their embedded meaning changes in response to the context of the photograph. Photographs only describe the present in which they are shot, and for this reason, they function as memento mori.[28] The link between death and photography is well captured in Adams's *Saigon Execution*, which depicts Nguyen Ngoc Loan, a South Vietnamese general, summarily executing Viet Cong suspect Nguyen Văn Lém in Saigon on February 1, 1968, during the Tet Offensive. This image was particularly shocking because it fixed the imminent death of the war prisoner by freezing the exact moment the trigger was pulled. Although the photograph was not the first to depict an act of violence emerging from the Vietnam War,[29] it captured the public's attention and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize a year after its first appearance. It was reproduced countless times, becoming an iconic example of the inhumanity of war. Despite representing an ordinary event during a conflict, the photograph was charged with anti-war rhetoric,[30] as it cast doubt on the worthiness of U.S. allies by providing evidence of a war crime.

This photograph became more than just a news story. It was widely recycled, and each reiteration capitalized on its "subjunctive value,"[31] that is, its ability to evoke different interpretations. Indeed, about-to-die images give the viewer the responsibility to frame the image by "filling in the gaps," often with the help of captions. The unsaid is often used to trigger not only the viewer's curiosity but to draw them into the scene. This characteristic is amplified by the adaptation of photography to the comics form, which—according to Julia Watson—betray untold stories, offering occasions for introspection and asking the reader's complicity.[32] By doing so, these adaptations also reveal how the past has ramifications in the present.

---

26 Sontag 2008, 23.
27 See Nguyen 2016.
28 See Sontag 2008; Barthes 1981.
29 See Chong 2012.
30 See Hagopian 2006.
31 See Zelizer 2010.
32 See Watson 2008.

Doug Murray's *The 'Nam #24*

The 'Nam #24 describes the Tet Offensive and uses Adams's *Saigon Execution* as a point of memory, to use Hirsch's concept; the photograph is reproduced through "a double-frame image – two images presented one inside the other. The camera lens serves as an inner frame for the restaging of Adams's photograph reflected in vivid color."[33] This visual solution allows the reader to see the photographer shooting the scene. The agency of the American photographer is therefore called into question; his decision becomes subject to public scrutiny, as he is responsible for framing the scene.

Photographs are not just mere depictions of an event; on the contrary, they have an agenda of their own. Indeed, "photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have the right to observe."[34] They do not depict the world as it is, but they construct it through the photographer's lens (and epistemology). They can only produce fragments of knowledge, capable of orienting the viewer. In many cases, the photograph is interpreted behind the camera lens. The reflection on the limited vision and understanding of the viewer is reinforced by the fact that the reproduction of Adams's photo is incomplete; the camera eye mainly focuses on the shooter, while the image of the victim is cropped.

This stylistic choice not only reflects the patronizing view of the photographer but also creates a parallelism between Adams and the general. They are both shooting, and their actions are synchronized. Adams's photo was awarded precisely for its composition and timing, as it captured the exact moment the persecutor pulled the trigger. The photographer's presence in the panel questions his agency, as he is not a mere spectator or a witness to a violent act; he participates in the scene. He even urges the shooting of the scene: "[H]olly –! Suu, Keep shooting! Just Keep shooting!" As Sontag observed, "photography is essentially an act of non-intervention […] the photographer has the choice between photograph and a life, to choose the photograph. The person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene."[35]

However, this rendition of the photograph reminds us that Adams is not shooting the victim but the general. The camera eye is aiming at the general in the same way that the latter is aiming at the prisoner. This visual solution seems to anticipate some of the key concepts of the eulogy published in *Time*, which Adams wrote for the general: "The general killed the Viet Cong; I killed the general

---

33 Earle 2017, 140.

34 Sontag 2008, 3.

35 Sontag 2008, 3.

with my camera. [...] People believe them, but photographs do lie, even without manipulation. [...] This picture really messed up his life."[36] Adams regretted taking the picture and the impact it had on his and the general's lives. In fact, it haunted them until they died. Hence, the political appropriation of a photograph may not always echo the author's intentions.

Finally, *The 'Nam #24* also reflects on the impact that this photo had on the war, influencing the morale of a nation. American people started to mistrust its government and wanted the war to end. The Pentagon papers accelerated the process. This relationship between cause and effect is reinforced in the scene following the double shooting, where a Vietcong hidden behind a wall predicts the demise of the foreign enemy. Yet, the myth of photography as a disruptive element should be debunked. Divisive stories about the war circulated through the media only when members of the government started to question their actions.[37] Indeed, those photographs were able to circulate thanks to the very war machine they supposedly denounced.[38] Photographers were able to go in and out of the war zones because the soldiers allowed them to do so and protected them.

Zimmerman and Vansant's *The Vietnam War: A Graphic History*

Zimmerman and Vansant's *The Vietnam War: A Graphic History* (2009) frames Adams's photograph within a television screen, reminding the reader both of the existence of film footage of the execution and of the media's role in covering the event. This graphic narrative denounces the media coverage of the war and the presumed conflictual attitude of the press during the conflict, suggesting that their portrayal of the events placed disproportionate responsibility for the horrors of the war on the U.S. soldiers who fought in Vietnam. The authors create a new frame for Adams's photograph and seek to control/correct the readers' interpretations through captions and bold fonts, overwriting the anti-war rhetoric by making the narrator's voice heard. In comics, the presence of a narrator is a marked feature,[39] and it is interesting to note that here, there is almost no dialogue between the characters, whereas the narrator's voice establishes a narrative continuity.

---

36 Adams 2001.
37 See Hallin 1989.
38 See Nguyen 2016.
39 See Barbieri 2017.

The Vietnam War: A Graphic History focuses primarily on individual suffering,[40] while the enemy and the anguish of the South Vietnamese people are almost forgotten. The narration of the event is reduced to a discussion about the ethics of the conflict and the media's role in destabilizing the morale of the nation. The media are thus accused of having undermined America's success because of their "tendency toward sensationalism" and "antiwar bias."[41] As in *The 'Nam #24*, Adams's photograph is used as an iconic representation of the conflict. Yet, both adaptations fail to reflect on the role of the people depicted in the photograph and the racial implications of the scene. They both enact the "oriental obscene,"[42] as the Vietnamese are portrayed exclusively as either violators or violated bodies. The depiction of the violence of the war through the Asian body alone is a tactic to distance oneself from the violence of war and to avoid taking responsibility for military action. It also shows that, in the United States, violence on Asian bodies tends to be more tolerated than the wounds on the body of (Caucasian) U.S. soldiers, an aesthetic choice that has its roots in World War II photography and propaganda.[43]

A diasporic South Vietnamese perspective

Diasporic South Vietnamese graphic artists remediate Adams's photograph in their works to criticize the oversimplification of the Western narratives of the conflict. To achieve their goal, they often try to unveil the context sealed in that photograph. They avoid universalistic and moral interpretations of the image by closely engaging with the indexicality of the photograph (which belongs to a specific time and place). Marcelino Truong's *Give Peace a Chance. Londres 1963 – 1975* (2015) uses arrows to name the characters involved in the scene, whereas Thi Bui connects General Nguyen's story to her father's. This appropriation of Nguyen's identity allows them to explore the reasons behind the general's actions: resentment and a desire for revenge. These graphic narratives question the prisoner's status as an innocent victim, reminding the observer that before being arrested he had murdered a family. These remediations complicate the moral narrative that usually frames war stories, where the good guys fight the bad guys, stressing that this narrative often fails to describe reality.

---

40 See Nguyen 2016.

41 Zimmerman and Vansant 2009, 89.

42 See Chong 2012.

43 See Moeller 1989.

Marcelino Truong contests the anti-war movement's appropriation of Adams's photograph and the depiction of the general as pure evil. He graphically illustrates this ideological appropriation by reproducing Adams's photograph three times; the first time, he adapts the photograph of the shooting to the graphic form, changing the point of view so that the reader can see Adams pointing his camera at the scene; the second reproduction shows the actual photograph; the third places the photograph on a protest placard. This last remediation shows the anti-war movement's appropriation of the photograph, as the protesters juxtapose the image of the general with a swastika. This choice reflects on the sedimentation of meaning, showing that there is an interrelation between 'new' and 'given' information, and that the pacifists transformed the photograph into an icon of the "dirty war."

Thi Bui also reproduces Adams's photograph three times, each time concentrating on one of the characters involved. In particular, she focuses on Adams's regret for taking the photograph, as he knew that there were many things that his photograph could not reveal, and he felt remorse for how his shot negatively influenced the general's life. Bui also uses this photograph to make the suffering of South Vietnamese people visible. It was not a two-sided conflict, and "for the Vietnamese the war continued whether America was involved or not."[44]

However, it is important to note that even though Truong and Bui try to reconstruct the context of the shooting, their argument is never apologetic. They simply want to affirm an ethical form of remembering that takes into consideration the "inhumanities"[45] committed by all sides. Finally, they both frame Adams's photograph within their family histories in order to show how this shot affected their lives and the perception of their community worldwide. In other words, they deconstruct the "oriental obscene" by appropriating that image. The violence against the Asian body is no longer a universal and timeless symbol of the atrocity of war, but a reminder of a fratricidal conflict whose legacy endures in the memory of different generations. The photograph, then, becomes a central element in the reconstruction of the memory of a community that strives to reconcile with its past. This reconciliation is only possible through an ethical questioning of the (contrasting) memories generated by a photograph; these do not undermine the reliability of the narration, but they validate the historiographic research behind these works.

---

44 See Bui 2017.

45 See Nguyen 2016.

Conclusion

All adaptations discussed in this essay challenge some aspect of the ontology of photography in order to promote a counter-memory of the event they narrate. However, each adaptation raises ethical questions about the aims behind the projects and the perspectives adopted. An ethical remembrance can only be achieved through a narrative that recognizes the sufferings of all the parties involved in the conflict. Comics can participate in this process by reproducing iconic images and problematizing their content. These graphic narratives ask the reader not only to look at history from a different perspective, but also to bear witness to traumatic events. At the same time, they raise questions about the photographs that were never taken or simply neglected. As Truong observes in his graphic narrative, we have a huge visual archive of the atrocities committed by the U.S. and its allies, but not of those perpetrated by the communists.

References

Adams, E. (1998), "Eulogy", in: *Time*, 27 July. https://time.com/archive/6733190/eulogy-general-nguyen-ngoc-loan/ (last accessed 03/03/2022).

Alexander, J.C. (2004), "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma", in J.C. Alexander *et al.* (eds.), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Berkeley, 1–30.

Alexander, J.C. (2012), *Trauma: A Social Theory*, Cambridge.

Allen, W. (1980), *Stardust Memory*, United States.

Barbieri, D. (2017), *Semiotica del fumetto,* Rome.

Bennett, J. (2005), *Emphatic Vision. Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, Stanford.

Bolter, J.D./Grusin, R. (1999), *Remediation. Understanding New Media,* Cambridge.

Bui, T. (2017), *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir*, New York.

Butler, J. (2016), *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?,* London.

Chong, S.S.H. (2012), *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era*, Durham.

Chute, H.L. (2016), *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*, Cambridge.

Cimino, M. (1978), *The Deer Hunter*, United States.

Cohn, N. (2019), "Being explicit about the implicit: Inference generating techniques in visual narrative", in: *Language and Cognition*, 11(1), 66–97.

Earle, H.E.H. (2017), *Comics, Trauma, and the New Art of War*, Jackson.

Eyerman, Ron (2019), *Memory, Trauma and Identity*, Cham.

Hagopian, P. (2006), "Vietnam War Photography as a Locus of Memory", in: A. Kuhn/K.E. McAllister (eds.) *Locating Memory: photographic acts*, Oxford, 201–222.

Hallin, D.C. (1989), *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam,* Berkeley.

Hamilton, R. (1989), "Image and Context: The Production and Reproduction of The Execution of a VC Suspect by Eddie Adams", in J. Walsh/J. Aulich (eds.), *Vietnam Images: War and Representation,* London, 171–183.

Hirsch, M. (2012). *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust,* New York.

Hutcheon, L./O'Flynn S. (2013), *A Theory of Adaptation*, London.

Landsberg, A. (2004), *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, New York.

Leavy, P. (2007), *Iconic Events: Media, Politics, and Power in Retelling History*, Lanham.

Lipsitz, G. (1990), *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*, Minneapolis.

McCloud, S. (1993), *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art*, New York.

Moeller, S.D. (1989), *Shooting War: Photography and the American Experience of Combat,* New York.

Murray D. (1988), *The 'Nam #24,* New York.

Nguyen, V.T. (2016), *Nothing Ever Dies,* Cambridge.

Patterson III, O. (1984a), "Television's Living Room War in Print: Vietnam in the News Magazines", in: *Journalism Quarterly*, 61(1): 35 – 136.

Patterson III, O. (1984b), "An Analysis of Television Coverage of the Vietnam War", in: *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 28(4): 397 – 404.

Szarkowski, J. (2007), *The Photographer's Eye*, New York.

Sontag, S. (2008 [1977]), *On Photography,* London.

Sontag, S. (2004[2003]), *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London.

Truong, M. (2015), *Give Peace a Chance. Londres 1963 – 75*, Paris.

Watson, J. (2008), "Autobiographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel's 'Fun Home'", in: *Biography*, 31(1), 27 – 58.

Zelizer, B. (2010), *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*, Oxford.

Zimmerman, K./Vansant, W. (2009), *Vietnam: A Graphic History*, New York.