

# Icons of war photography

How war photographs are reinforced in collective memory  
A study of three historical reference images of war and conflict

by

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## **Declaration**

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the owner of the copyright thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

Date: 17.02.2009

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## **Abstract**

There are certain images of war that are horrific, frightening and at the same time, due to an outstanding compositional structure, they are fascinating and do not allow its observers to keep their distance. This thesis examines three images of war that have often been described as icons of war photography. The images “children fleeing a napalm strike” by Nick Ut, “the falling soldier” by Robert Capa and Sam Nzima’s photograph of Hector Pieterse are historical reference images that came to represent the wars and conflicts in which they were taken. It has been examined that a number of different factors have an impact on a war photograph’s awareness level and its potential to commit itself to what is referred to as collective consciousness. Such factors are the aesthetical composition and outstanding formal elements in connection with the exact moment the photograph was taken, ethical implications or the forcefulness of the event itself.

As it has been examined in this thesis, the three photographs have achieved iconic status due to different circumstances and criteria and they can be described as historical reference images representing the specific wars or conflicts. In this thesis an empirical study was conducted, questioning 660 students from Spain, South Africa and Vietnam about their awareness level regarding the three selected photographs. While the awareness level of the Spanish and the South African image was rather high in the countries of origin, they did not achieve such a high international awareness level as the Vietnamese photograph by Nick Ut, which turned out to be exceptionally well-known by all students questioned. Overall, findings suggest that the three selected icons of war photography have been anchored in collective memory.

Keywords: Apartheid, awareness level, children fleeing a napalm strike, collective memory, Hector Pieterse, icons of war photography, Nick Ut, Robert Capa, Sam Nzima, semiotics, Spanish Civil War, the falling soldier, Vietnam War

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

### 1.1 Aims of the study

This thesis sets out to investigate if and due to which factors the three selected photographs have attained icon status. The question to be investigated is if there are certain criteria that must be fulfilled for a war photograph to enter collective memory and thus achieve what is referred to as iconic status. It is assumed that there are a number of factors that have an impact on a war photograph's prominence. It is, however, also assumed that these factors vary greatly regarding different war images. The following study focuses on three war photographs with the general aim to clarify due to which factors, circumstances and criteria the photographs have achieved iconic status.

The selected images of conflict and war have often been described as icons of war photography or as historical reference images that came to represent a war and have been committed to collective memory. However, until now there isn't any proof that the specific photographs are actually recognised by a majority.

In this thesis the hypothetical assumption of a high awareness level with regard to the three selected photographs shall be corroborated or rejected through questioning 660 students in the three different countries (South Africa, Spain and Vietnam) in which the images were taken. In this thesis it will be examined how well the photographs chosen are known by a sample of students. It is of special interest to find out if the students to be questioned are aware of the particular photographer who took the picture and the conflict or war during which the image was taken. The study aims to find out how many out of 660 students, 220 from universities in South Africa, 220 from universities in Vietnam and, 220 from universities

in Spain, are familiar with the selected war images and to what extent. It will be of special interest to find out if and how the answers of the students from different countries and universities differ from each other in order to get a global perspective concerning the awareness level regarding the specific photographs, wars and photographers.

## **1.2 Background**

### **1.2.1 Photographs**

This thesis examines three war photographs that are believed to have achieved iconic status, war images that are believed to be anchored in what can be called a collective memory or conscious.

It will be investigated why and how the three chosen photographs achieved such a status, since they originate from three different time episodes, three different wars and were taken from three different war photographers. It shall be investigated if there are particular criteria that imprint a war image to the memory of millions of people even decades after the event has taken place. It is assumed that all three war photographs differ highly regarding in what way they achieved iconic status. It is furthermore assumed that different criteria such as ethical implications, aesthetic connotations as well as the conflict situation itself during which the photograph was taken or the exact moment in which the image was taken play a crucial role concerning the impact level of a war photograph. However, it is also believed that such criteria differ greatly regarding each individual photograph, as some photographs have reached prominence on the basis of their pictorial composition, others by capturing a single moment of high intensity and others through their ethical implications that have given rise to ongoing discussions.

### **1.2.2 Relevance of the study**

This thesis is an attempt to contribute new knowledge towards an explanation whether there are photographs that have achieved iconic status. It will furthermore be investigated if the selected images are anchored in collective memory. The examination of the images from different perspectives aims to describe and explain the criteria and circumstances that make the photographs achieve iconic status.

It is of importance to investigate why the selected images can be described as iconic images in order to gain a better understanding of what makes a photograph an icon photography and what criteria are responsible for a photograph to be remembered by a majority; to come to represent a war.

It is furthermore of significance to gain new knowledge about how well acquainted the public, in this case students, really is with the selected images, the photographers and the associated wars and conflicts. This will be observable in the conducted empirical study.

Overall, the findings of this thesis will be important for students as well as for lecturers and scientists in the fields of journalism, media, mass communications and related subjects. While a lot of information was available on the photographs “the falling soldier” and “children fleeing a napalm strike”, the information on the photograph of Hector Pieterse by Sam Nzima was rather scarce, especially regarding its compositional structure and formal perspective. It is therefore especially important for students and educators in South Africa to acknowledge the existence and importance of the country’s most famous photograph in an international comparison.

### **1.3 Delimitations**

As for adequate delimitation and conceptualising of the field and subject of research the author of this thesis found that it would have been a great idea to consider other icons of

war photography and explain why, what and where criteria could have been drawn from these. However, it was furthermore found that such a consideration is far too complex and too extensive for this thesis. Moreover, the impact of technology on war photography would have been an interesting additional topic but again, this topic seems too extensive to be included in this thesis. However, it was tried to cover the topic in the subchapters 4.1.3 War photography during the Spanish Civil War, 4.2.3 War photography during the Vietnam War and 4.3.3 Journalism and war photography during apartheid although not in depth.

The theoretical framework chapter on semiotics could have been explored with more regard to the functionalism aspect of the media, which is one aspect that could have enriched this study. Future studies could touch on that specific aspect.

#### **1.4 Literature review and preliminary literature**

According to Hüppauf (in Jolly, 2003:100-101), two distinct forms of war images, namely emergent and residual, can be identified within the theory of war photography. While the emergent form shows that industrial war is abstract and technical and requires an absence of human consideration, the residual image attempts to display shock and horror by aestheticising the war's destructive effects on human experience. In order to do so this type of image draws on a set of visual codes, the codes of pictorialism, which contain the idea of portraying individual experience. Morality and heroism are to be separated from an abstract and depersonalised representation of modern war. The important point is that aesthetic photographs with pictorial values emphasising the human presence and the heroism of soldiers or troops have, according to Hüppauf (in Jolly, 2003:101), a great chance to survive into the post-war era and beyond, which might partly explain the iconic status of the selected war images even decades after their first publication.

In his introduction to *Visual Culture* (1995), Jenks (in Roberts & Weber, 1999:2) discusses the centrality of the eye, emphasising that visual ability has become affiliated with cognition and that looking, seeing and knowing have become intertwined to a great extent. Jenks' (in Robert & Weber, 1999:2-3) theories suggest an understanding of society's dependence on the pictorial representation of events which has led to a cognitive-based, 'seeing is believing' trust in photographic recording. From the point of view taken by Jenks (in Roberts & Weber, 1999:3), it becomes clear that visual images play a crucial role in people's perception of the world.

From an ethical point of view the obvious claim to be made is that photographs are published responsibly. War images are not to be published to shock viewers or increase circulation figures, as for an ethically responsible journalist, the reactions of audiences and possible further consequences should be a dominant concern regarding the publication of a photograph. However, most war images are shocking and they often portrait an intrusion of media photographers on the privacy of individuals. What justifies the publication of a disturbing war image is its news value, a decision to be taken if the photograph is essential to the story and if it provides significant information or contributes to understanding. Such values have to be weighed against competing principles such as good taste and the respect for human decency and privacy (Day, 2006:329).

For the proposed study three war photographs have been chosen for examination from different angles. The selected war images will be Robert Capa's "the falling soldier", Nick Ut's "children fleeing a napalm strike" and Sam Nzima's picture of "Hector Pieterse". The choice of these three images is supported through intensive research that confirmed that a great number of researchers count these photographs to be amongst the world's most outstanding war images (Blum, 2005; Greslé, 2006; Kershaw, 2002; Knopp, 1994; Koetzle, 2002; Paul, 2005; Sontag, 2003).

The first photograph to be examined will be Robert Capa's "the falling soldier", which was taken during the Spanish Civil War, 5 September 1936. Capa's picture of a soldier who has just been shot and is about to fall to the ground is one of the most discussed in the history of war photography (Kershaw, 2002:57). Haim Bresheeth (2006:59) points out that "the falling soldier" is one of the most "disturbing, and continually contentious, iconic images of war"; an image that signifies the hopelessness of the struggle of the Spanish republic against the brutal forces of Generalissimo Franco. One of the reasons why this image is still at the centre of debate is a continuing discussion about the veracity of the picture. Some historians and journalists, notably Phillip Knightley (1975), have argued that it is a faked image, with the soldier posing for Capa's camera.

The longevity of this controversy is in itself evidence of the great importance put on truth value and authenticity of war photographs. Sontag (2005:57) points out that it is of great importance that "the falling soldier" reports a real, coincidental, recorded moment since it would, according to Sontag (2002:57), lose its value if it was found that the soldier was posing in front of Capa's camera. However, according to Paul (2004:189), the authenticity of the photograph is not of first priority, but it is rather the expressiveness of the image that is of major significance. In the proposed study it will be discussed how important authenticity is as part of an ethical discussion in the field of war photography. An attempt to unveil the truth about what happened on the day of the death of the republican soldier portrayed will be made.

The second picture to be focused on is Nick Ut's horrifying photograph of Vietnamese children fleeing from a napalm strike, with a frightened naked girl in its centre, which was taken during the Vietnam War, 8 June 1972. From an aesthetic point of view, the composition of this photograph can be regarded as outstanding. The diagonal composition of the children in the picture reflects three phases of running, which allows a spatiotemporal fragmentation. The viewers' attention is additionally captured, as the portrayed path of motions processes

from front left to the back right, which complies with the usual direction of reading. Paul (2005:5) furthermore points out that the ascending smoke in the background of the picture explains why the children are running towards the photographer, which, according to Paul (2005:5), makes it a narrative photograph.

This photograph gave rise to a challenging debate and called for a potentially controversial decision on the question whether or not to publish frontal nudity. “Pictures of nudes of all ages and sexes, and especially frontal views were an absolute nono at the Associated Press in 1972” (Faas & Fulton, 2000:1). However, it was argued that an exception must be made, and it was agreed that “the news value of the photograph overrode any reservations about nudity” (in Faas & Fulton, 2000:1). It was finally decided to “sacrifice the girl’s privacy, and perhaps to offend their readers in order to present an unflinching picture of the conflict and ultimately to serve the greater good” (Bersak, 2006).

The third picture to be at the centre of interest is Sam Nzima’s photograph of “Hector Pieterse”, which was taken during the Soweto uprising 16 June, 1976, in South Africa. This photograph can be regarded as a symbol of the events of June 1976 and the brutality of the apartheid regime. The photo, which managed to attract the attention of the world, shows Hector Pieterse, age 12, as he is dying in the arms of another school boy, Mbuyisa Makhubu, after he was shot by a police officer (Davie, 2001). The fact that the museum and memorial in Soweto are named after the victim Hector Pieterse portrayed in Nzima’s famous photograph shows the significance of the photographic image (Greslé, 2006:13). Sontag (2003:53) points out that recording a death actually happening and making it last for eternity is something only cameras can do. It is therefore not surprising that pictures taken by photographers at the moment of, or just before, death are amongst the most celebrated and most often reproduced of war photographs. This is the case with two of the chosen photographs to be examined – “the falling soldier” and the image of “Hector Pieterse”.

The three photographs briefly described above show tragedy or even death and have been published numerous times. Some have achieved rewards, but all of them can be regarded as icons of war photography. Ethical implications, outstanding aesthetical compositions as well as the great importance of the exact moment the photograph was taken at are only some of the factors that explain the iconic status that these war images have achieved.

### **1.5 Research problems and objectives**

In an age dominated by an abounding mass of information, photographs provide a quick way of capturing something, and a compact form of memorising it. Susan Sontag (2002:87) goes on to say that “photography has kept company with death ever since cameras were invented, in 1839“. War photographs can capture a single moment for eternity and allow its observers from the present to look into the past (Rademaker, 2004:9). Although photographs might not tell its viewer something new, they visualise information and thereby create understanding.

There are certain war images throughout the history of war photography that are anchored in what is called collective memory, pictures with such strong subjects and explanatory power that they attract and fascinate the viewers and secure their attention (Paul, 2005:1). War photographs reporting the cruelty of war in an intensity that written words might not be capable of are striking because they shock the observer and often don't allow for any distance. There are a large number of memorable photographs taken by photojournalists during political conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Greslé, 2006:13). Some photographs, however, have achieved iconic status; they have come to represent an event, an era, a war or an emotion.

It is assumed that a number of factors have an impact on a war photograph's prominence and ability to reinforce itself in what is referred to as collective awareness or

memory (Paul, 2005:4). Evidently, the composition of each picture in connection with the exact moment the photograph was taken is of major importance.

According to Gerhard Paul (2005:6), the compositional structure of the picture as well as the gesture and mime play a crucial role on its impression on viewers. Although Roger Scruton (1982:115) points out that it would be “difficult to have an aesthetic interest” in war images, it is fascinating how “a documentary photography taking the most profound forms of human suffering as its subject matter” (Friday, 2000:356) achieves the status of significant art. Jonathan Friday (2000:367) poses a challenging question: “[If] photographs in some sense represent the real world in the manner of visual simulacra of the appearance of real objects, then are we not in some sense seeing real horror and suffering when we look at documentary photographs?” However, Sontag (2003:36) points out that there is a demand for photographs showing horror scenarios and that it seems as if “the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked”.

- Although war photographs depict horror and war, they often appear aesthetically outstanding and somehow beautiful, due to their compositional structure. It shall be investigated if this contrariness assists the manifestation of the images in a collective memory.
- It remains unclear if war photographs consequently achieve iconic status if certain conditions are fulfilled. It shall be investigated if there are specific criteria that make a war photograph achieve iconic status.
- Although it has often been said that the selected photographs are anchored in a collective memory, this has not yet been proven in any study.
- It is assumed that there exist war photographs that came to represent an era, an emotion or a whole war.

## **1.6 Outline of remainder of thesis**

After an introduction chapter, chapter two outlines the research design and methodologies of this thesis. Chapter three deals with semiotics and visual semiotics; the theoretical framework of this thesis.

Chapter four examines the three selected war photographs “the falling soldier” by Robert Capa, “children fleeing a napalm strike” by Nick Ut and the photograph of Hector Pieterse by Sam Nzima. After a short biographical introduction of the photographers, each photograph will be examined from an aesthetical point of view, from a formal perspective including the study of the compositional structure. Furthermore, the images will be compared with similar images, such as famous paintings or reproductions by artists that have been inspired by the selected images. In order to gain a more complete picture of the selected photographs, the wars and conflicts during which the photographs have been taken will be brought up. Moreover, It will also be discussed how photography during the associated wars was operated.

Chapter five examines how well acquainted students from three different countries, Spain, South Africa and Vietnam, are with the three selected images, the photographers, and the era the photographs were taken. 660 students, 220 from Spain, 220 from South Africa and 220 from Vietnam have been questioned. Since students are from the three different countries in which the selected photographs have been taken, it is of special interest if students are more acquainted with the images from their country than with the others. Furthermore, since students have been divided according to gender, age-group and field of study, it is of interest to find out if data suggest significant differences regarding these variables.

Chapter six deals with conclusions based on research findings of the three selected iconic war photographs that have been made in this thesis. Attention will also be drawn to recommendations for possible future research.

## Chapter Two

### Research design and methodologies

#### 2.1 Introduction

Overall, the photographs are examined from a historical point of view. Historical studies in the field of mass communication and journalism have been neglected for a long time, as attention was drawn to more contemporary issues in the field. Only in the past few decades have communication scholars begun to pay attention to historical studies. This development has different reasons. While communication science was considered to be a discipline with the aim of “formulating general and timeless principles valid for all forms of communication” (Du Plooy, 2001:88), historical research has been dismissed as it was considered to be unscientific. At this point the author of this thesis would like to consider that for a field like mass communication science, among other social sciences, it is nearly impossible to formulate such principles that can be generalised and be considered valid at all times, as society, culture and the environment in general are constantly changing. However, historical research is rather concerned with the task of understanding than that of generalising. Therefore, mass communication science should rather be considered as a discipline that constantly has to rethink, reanalyse and reconsider once valid doctrines and adjust those to newly gained knowledge. A credo of historical research should be applied to mass communication science: “in order to go forward, we should first go back” (Raab, 1993:68). Carr (1989:20) subscribes to this view, saying that the function of historical research is to “master and understand it [the past] as the key to the understanding of the present”.

However, nowadays the historical research method is considered a scientific and valid approach through which new knowledge about communication is gained. It is thus surprising

that history research, historiography or any related terms are not to be found in the “Lexica of communication and media science” (Bentele, Brosius & Jarren, 2006) which can be considered one of the latest reference books in the field of communication science and media science.

## **2.2 Approaches of historical research**

Broadly, two main groups of different approaches in historical research can be distinguished: humanist and scientific historians (Du Plooy, 2001:92). Communication historians following the humanist approach focus on a particular historical event or period and concentrate on individuals’ thoughts and activities at that time and try to understand rather than to generalise. Other than that, the scientific approach to communication history follows ideas and methods from the social sciences with the aim to quantify data. In this thesis a combination of these two general approaches was used with the general aim towards getting a more accurate and precise picture of the examined photographs.

In this thesis a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods with more emphasis on the qualitative methods was used. To a great extent this thesis uses a historically qualitative research design approach in order to make an attempt to understand and describe why the three selected war photographs have reached what can be called icon status among war images. Qualitative research emphasises that there is no objective reality that could be observed neutrally and quantified. Qualitative research is analytic and interpretative with no attempt to control variables or events but with the general aim to understand phenomena (Du Plooy, 2001:33). Therefore, intensive literature research and content analysis with a focus on the scientific discourse regarding the metaphorical language of the three selected war photographs will be applied.

Interviews conducted elsewhere, either with figures depicted in the selected photographs or with people that have expressed their personal memories of the events illustrated by the images, will be used in this thesis in order to gain a better understanding. E-mail contact has been established with artists and professionals in the field of war photography in order to gain more qualitative valuable information.

### **2.3 Quantitative research**

Although “the researcher who uses a questionnaire may not venture into the field himself, he at least gathers data from the field and analyses” (Roy and Carter, 1956:138) and interprets them. For that reason, such supplement field techniques will be included in the present thesis.

According to Gunter (2001:215) questionnaires are explicitly recommended if “polar questions” (or yes-no questions) are predominant or if respondents’ attitudes and opinions are to be measured on a certain scale. The advantage of questionnaires compared to in-depth or semi-structured interviews is that findings can be compared, analysed and interpreted more easily, and tendencies or trends can be identified. As self-completion questionnaires might be posted to respondents, who complete them in their natural surrounding at a time suitable for them, they must be self-explanatory, because the people questioned are not guided through the questions by the researcher. This problem can be avoided if the researcher gives on-the-spot support (Gunter, 2001:215). In the used questionnaire, students were given the opportunity to contact the author of this thesis in case of any questions. However, none of the participants used this opportunity to express any questions about the survey. Instead, a great number of students used this opportunity in order to make contact, express their thoughts about the chosen topic and the photographs and to send their best wishes for further research.

Generally, there are a few aspects to be considered when formulating questions. One would be the importance of exact wording of the questions, as “seemingly small changes in wording can cause large differences in responses” (Sudman and Bradburn, 1989:1). Noelle-Neuman (1970:191) subscribes to that view, by stating that the results of a structured questionnaire are highly dependent on details of questionnaire construction and wording.

In the case of the proposed study the author has suggested to use both, qualitative methods as well as questionnaires in order to get a more accurate picture of the setting. By using qualitative research as well as questionnaires with a quantitative orientation, an attempt can be made to describe the three selected images from various points of view and try to understand what makes an iconic status.

The questionnaires handed out to 660 students collect quantitative data with an attempt to generalise and interpret them in connection with the qualitative findings. The quantitative methodology has been additionally applied in this thesis with an attempt to approve or disprove the hypothetical assumption of a high awareness level of the selected images among students. Quantitative research is principally empirical or experimental with the general focus on the measurement of quantity or amount. Quantitative methodologies try to control phenomena and manipulate variables (Du Plooy, 2001:32-33).

#### **2.4 Three selected images**

Three war photographs that are believed to have achieved iconic status and are believed to be anchored in a collective memory are examined in this thesis.

The first photograph to be examined is Robert Capa’s “the falling soldier”, which has been taken during the Spanish Civil War, 5 September 1936. Capa’s picture showing a soldier who has just been shot and is about to fall to the ground is, according to Kershaw (2002:57) one of the most discussed in the history of war photography.

The second picture at the center of focus is Nick Ut's war photograph "children fleeing a napalm strike". The photograph showing a group of children running from their by napalm burnt village, visible in the background of the image, has been taken during the Vietnam War, 8 June 1972. In the center of the photograph a little girl is running naked and screaming towards the observer. The compositional structure of this photograph has often been referred to as outstanding (Paul, 2005:5).

The third picture to be at the centre of focus is Sam Nzima's photograph of "Hector Pieterse", which has been taken during the Soweto uprising 16 June, 1976, in South Africa. This photograph has often been referred to as a symbol of the events of June 1976 and the brutality of the apartheid regime. The photo, which captured the attention of the world, shows school boy Hector Pieterse, age 12, as he is dying in the arms of another school boy, Mbuyisa Makhubu, after he was shot by a police officer (Davie, 2001).

## **2.5 Data collection**

660 students, 220 from Spain, 220 from South Africa and 220 from Vietnam have been interviewed about their familiarity with the three selected photographs "the falling soldier", "children fleeing a napalm strike" and the image of Hector Pieterse, the associated photographers Robert Capa, Nick Ut and Sam Nzima and the corresponding wars in which the pictures were taken: the Spanish Civil War, the Vietnam War and the Soweto uprising during Apartheid. Questionnaires in three different languages (English, Spanish and Vietnamese) have been distributed online, via different social network websites such as *Facebook*, *studivZ*, *my language exchange*, in University student discussion forums and via a large number of personal e-mails. The author of this paper corresponded with founders of relevant study and University groups of *Facebook* in order to distribute the questionnaire. Such groups were: University of Social Sciences and Humanities - Ho Chi Minh City,

Universidad de Huelva , Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Universidad Autonoma de Madrid. Furthermore, people from the following forums have been consulted: Dave's ESL Café's Student forum, Actvosa-forum, RMIT portal, Vietnam Education Webinar. Students have also been addressed personally via e-mail. E-mail addresses have been found via the above mentioned forums, Interpals and Stellenbosch real-time application database. Students were asked to forward the questionnaire to their student friends. The questionnaires have been distributed from the beginning of July till the beginning of September 2008. Data were collected via an online form and then stored and evaluated in a MySQL database. After 220 filled out questionnaires from a country have arrived, this was checked on a daily basis, the data were evaluated and no more questionnaires from this country were included.

In the section "personal data" of the questionnaire, students were classified according to various categories, one of them being gender; concerning their age they were classified into four groups: 18-21; 22-25; 26-29 and over 29. Furthermore, classifications were made regarding the students' field of study: humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, formal sciences and professions, and applied sciences. Students were furthermore required to name the University they were currently studying at, to make sure they were actually studying in Spain, South Africa or Vietnam.

The general aim of the second section of the questionnaire was to gain an idea about how acquainted students are with the three selected war images, the photographers, and the era the photographs were taken in. The four questions to be answered were as follows:

- Have you seen this photograph before?
- If yes, can you recall where you have seen this photograph?
- Do you know who the photographer of the picture is?
- Do you know where and in which war/conflict the photograph was taken?

In the last part of the questionnaire, students were given the opportunity to leave their e-mail addresses if they were interested in receiving the results of all students questioned. Furthermore, students could get in touch with the author of this paper via e-mail.

## **2.6 Data analysis**

Data about the questioned students' age, gender, and field of study allow making distinctions, to analyse and interpret. In order to gain significant data, the answers regarding the four questions asked will be combined with personal data such as age group, gender, field of study or the country students where from. Through this way it will be possible to gain knowledge whether or not students from different age groups are rather familiar than those from other age groups, or if students studying in the fields of social sciences and human sciences are rather acquainted with the selected images, the wars and photographers than students studying in other fields of study etc.

## **2.7 Validity**

Since the number of students from each country was 220, the evaluated data demonstrate a real tendency. However, the data sample is too small to represent the student population. Furthermore, it has to be kept in mind that questionnaires have been distributed via the World Wide Web. Although this is convenient and inexpensive way of distribution it remains difficult if not impossible to prove the validity of declared data. In this sense, a student could claim he or she is from Hanoi, 20 years old and studying in the field of social sciences, while he or she is actually German, 40 years old and working. The only data that could be proved via IP-Address was from which country the questionnaire had been sent off. However, since the Questionnaire had been distributed during summer or winter holidays in

South Africa, Vietnam and Spain, the possibility that South African, Vietnamese or Spanish students sent off the questionnaire from another country was given. Since this could not have been proven, such questionnaires have been dismissed. It can be said that highly controlled conditions and a distribution of paper questionnaires on location could have guaranteed higher validity and a more definite target group. However, due to high costs involved, the author of this thesis was not in a position to travel to the three selected countries and conduct research locally.

## **2.8 Research questions**

- Are there certain war photographs that have become manifest in collective memory and have therefore reached what can be called icon status? If this is the case, what are the characteristics of such war photographs?
- To what extent can the specific photographs be connected with the appropriate conflict or war, Spanish Civil War, The Vietnam War and Apartheid (or Soweto Uprising), in which the selected images were taken?
- How often are the selected images associated with their photographers, Nick Ut, Robert Capa and Sam Nzima?
- Do differences regarding the awareness level of the photo images, the wars and the photographers occur in the three chosen countries and do they occur regarding responses from students of different age groups, fields of study and gender?
- Are students rather familiar with photographs that have been taken in their home country?

## **2.9 Summary of chapter four**

There are certain war photographs that have become manifest in collective memory and have reached iconic status; it has been assumed that among them are the three selected war images. After content analysis of existing literature, the author of this thesis assumes that

among the three selected photographs, the war image of Nick Ut, „children fleeing a napalm strike“, is the best-known, due to its outstanding aesthetic composition and multiple reproductions worldwide. It is furthermore believed that people who recognise the photograph of Ut are able to ascribe it to the Vietnam War. However, it is also assumed that the photographer Nick Ut is rather unfamiliar to respondents. It is believed that the photographer Robert Capa is well-known internationally and associated with the war image “the falling soldier” due to a number of factors such as the ongoing debate about the picture’s authenticity or the fact that a prize for photography was named after him. It is also expected that the photograph of Sam Nzima depicting Hector Pieterse would be well-known among South African students, but its degree of familiarity is estimated to be far lower with Spanish and Vietnamese students. However, if the photograph was recognised, it is assumed that students are aware that the image originated from the Soweto uprising, which happened during apartheid. Due to the fact that the photographer Sam Nzima did not own the credits to this photograph for such a long time it is believed that he is relatively unfamiliar.

Overall, it is assumed that students will rather recognise the photograph that was taken in their own country than the two photographs that have been taken elsewhere. Moreover, it is assumed that students studying in the field of humanities, social sciences and familiar fields of study will recognise and know more about the war images than students studying in the field of natural sciences or formal sciences.

In order to prove or disprove the hypothetical assumptions above, questionnaires have been handed out via online networks, personal email to students of the three countries, Vietnam, South Africa and Spain, with the general aim to collect data that will clarify the students’ familiarity with the selected images. If data confirm that the selected images are known by a majority of students this will furthermore confirm the achievement of an iconic status.

## Chapter Three

### Theoretical framework: Semiotics

#### 3.1 Introduction

In the late 1960s semiotics began to become a major approach to cultural studies, which is at least partly a result of the work of Roland Barthes (1977). Semiotics is a field of study that involves a wide range of different theoretical viewpoints and methodological tools. One very broad definition of semiotics is that of Umberto Eco (1967:7) stating that “semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign”. Daniel Chandler (2001) points out that “in a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects”.

The philosopher Charles Peirce (in Chandler, 2001), founder of the philosophical doctrine pragmatism, defined semiotic as a formal doctrine of signs which is closely related to logic. He furthermore pointed out that “every thought is a sign” (as cited in Chandler, 2001). Other than Peirce (in Chandler, 2001), contemporary scientists working in the field of semiotics do not tend to study signs in an isolated environment but rather tempt to study signs as part of semiotic sign systems (Harrison, 2003:47).

An existing sign must contain meaning or content that is “manifested through some form of expression or representation” (Harrison, 2003:47). Such signs exist within semiotic systems.

“Semiotics provide us with a potentially unifying conceptual framework and a set of methods and terms for use across the full range of signifying practices, which include gesture, posture, dress, writing, speech, photography, film, television, and radio [...]” (Chandler, 2001).

It has often been argued that semiotics as well as semantics, as a part of linguistics are concerned with the meaning of signs (Chandler, 2001). However, John Sturrock (1986:22) argues that while semantics focuses on *what* words mean, semiotics studies *how* signs mean. Charles Morris (in Chandler, 2001) points out that semiotics not only include semantics, but also other traditional areas of linguistics. Thereafter, semiotics could be divided into three branches:

- Semantics: the relationship of signs and the things they refer to or stand for.
- Syntactics (or syntax): the formal or structural relations of signs to each other.
- Pragmatics: the relation of signs and their impacts on interpreters (Morris in Chandler, 2001)

According to Chandler (2001) semiotics is often used in the analysis of texts. A text in this context refers to a message that exists in any medium and has been recorded in some way. Such a text may be verbal, non-verbal or both and is physically independent of its sender or observer. Moreover, a text is an assembly of signs such as words, images, gestures etc. Rather than representing any independent academic discipline, semiotics represents a wide range of studies in literature, art, anthropology and the mass media. Semiotics is of importance because it partly explains how reality as a system of signs exists and how meaning is produced. Therefore, the study of semiotics can help becoming aware “of reality as a construction and of the roles played by ourselves and others in constructing it”. Semiotics emphasises that meaning is not linearly transmitted but rather proposes that individuals actively take part in the construction of meaning according to a system of codes. Semiotics suggests that the world is a construction of signs and the only way of understanding anything is that through such signs and the codes into which these are organised (Chandler, 2001).

### **3.2 Visual semiotics**

Pierce (in Chandler, 2001) pointed out that photographs are not only iconic but also indexical because the observer is aware that images depict exactly the objects of reality. This similarity exists due to the production process under which photographs are “physically forced to correspond point by point to nature” (Chandler, 2001). In this sense, photographs belong to the indexical class of signs that are connected physically. It can therefore be safely assumed that all unedited photographs are indexical, since the image always is “an index of the effect of light on photographic emulsion”.

Deacon, Pickering, Golding and Murdock (1999:188) suggested that the real force of photographic images is to be found in its iconic signification. Photographs can also be iconic and to some extent representative of people, places and events which are depicted. Barthes (1977:17) argues that photographs require mechanical reduction such as certain perspective, proportion and colour as well as human intervention as in the choice of subject, framing processes, angles, focussing, printing etc. Regarding the photograph’s indexical nature, Barthes (1977:44) notes that such images exist through a mechanical process which strengthens the assumption of its objectivity. Barthes (1977:18-19) furthermore points out that a press photograph is an object that has to go through different stages at the level of production as it is chosen, composed, edited according to certain criteria, positioned etc. Furthermore, at the level of reception, the photograph is received, read and connected by the part of the public that consumes it.

At this point Barthes (1977:28) is of the opinion that the reading process of a photograph is always historical, as it depends on the observer’s knowledge and acquaintance of certain signs. In this sense there cannot be perception without some kind of categorisation.

Reading an image furthermore always depends on the reader's cultural background, knowledge of the world and his or her ethical and moral positions.

### **3.3 Semiotics and iconic images**

An image is according to Harrison (2003:50) iconic if the resemblance to something already known is given. Regarding this definition the three photographs chosen could be classified iconic as they tie in with well-known Christian motifs as it is the case with the photographs "children fleeing a napalm strike" and the image of Hector Pieteron. In the case of "the falling soldier" the resemblance with a famous painting, namely "mortally wounded" by the Russian painter Vasily Vereshchagin, is given.

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996:1) have introduced the first social semiotic framework to analyse how images are used to produce meaning which has then been modified by various researchers such as Stuart Hall (in Chandler, 2001). He pointed out that news photographs operate under the hidden sign "this really happened, see for yourself" (Hall as cited in Chandler, 2001). Furthermore, Hall (in Chandler, 2001) emphasized the importance of the choices of the exact moment depicted on the image, of the selected person(s) rather than others, of the chosen angle instead of any other and the selection of the photographed event to represent a sequence of events and connotations. These choices can, according to Hall (in Chandler, 2001) be described as a highly ideological process. Since news photographs are believed to depict what really happened, they reproduce events suppressing any interpretation. Thereby, they warrant objectivity which supports the credibility of the specific medium. In this sense they "neutralize its [the medium's] ideological function" (Hall in Chandler, 2001).

Visual semiotics emphasises that photography involves visual codes (Chandler, 2001). Although it has been argued that photographs are somehow objective, John Tagg (in Chandler, 2001) is of the opinion that the camera is not neutral and the photographs produced

are coded. Photographic codes include: genre, camerawork (lens movement, camera movement, angle, lens choice, focus, camera position), film (quality, type, colour), composition (framing, distance, angle), developing (exposure, treatments) and printing (medium, paper, size, cropping).

As it has been examined in Chapter 2, the cutting of photographs can have a strong impact on the image's impact. Therefore, it can safely be assumed that the strong impact of Nzima's photograph depicting Hector Pieterse is partly a result of the cutting, which moves the three figures into the center of the photograph and allows them filling out the whole image and cuts out the student crowd in the background that might have deflected the viewers' attention.

In the case of the photograph by Nick Ut "children fleeing a napalm strike" the cutting of the photograph moves the screaming girl as the symmetric central character into the exact center of the image with the girl's centerline being identical with the vertical and horizontal center of the image. Furthermore, the photographer in military uniform in the right corner of the photograph has been cut, since it might have sidetracked the observer's attention (Blum, 2004:31-32). It can be assumed that the photograph owes its high awareness level to its composed image format.

When Robert Capa's photograph "the falling soldier" is at the center of focus, it can be said that the photographer deliberately chose a lens that resembles human vision, with the intention to produce a feeling of being right next to the soldier. Capa furthermore took the photograph from the perspective of the shooting soldiers out of a trench which suggests that the photographer could have been at the risk of his life (in Woodward, 2002:45).

According to Chandler (2001) the depiction of reality and objectivity in iconic signs involves codes which have to be learned before they become conventional. Through the introduction of such visual codes meaning can be produced and guided to a certain direction.

This thesis examined three icons of war photography. Thereby, the photographic codes have been examined in order to explain how the selected images create meaning, why they have achieved iconic status and why they came to represent a certain war or event. As it has been examined in this thesis, the ability to choose certain signs in certain ways and not use others can affect and alter meaning (Harrison, 2003:48).

Reading signs and images always depends on the reader's cultural background, and his or her knowledge of the world as well as ethical and moral stances. This thesis tried to examine how well acquainted students from three completely different cultural backgrounds are with three selected war photographs. In this sense, the students' ability of reading the selected images has been examined, under consideration of different factors such as age, gender, field of study, country of origin that might partly be accountable for the student's knowledge or ignorance of the chosen images.

### **3.4 Summary of chapter three**

This chapter studied the theoretical framework of semiotics, which was found to be a suitable theoretical framework for this thesis. Since semiotics can broadly be described as the study of signs or anything that can be taken as a sign (Eco, 1967:7) it was found that the study of the three selected war photographs "children fleeing a napalm strike", "the falling soldier" and the photograph of Hector Pieterse would best be examined from a semiotic background.

## Chapter Four

### Examination of three war photographs

#### 4.1 Robert Capa – The falling soldier



Figure 1 Robert Capa: The falling soldier. Death of the Loyalist Militiaman Frederico Borrell García, Cerro Muriano (Cordoba Front). 5 September, 1936. © Cornell Capa; International Center of Photography

#### 4.1.1 Short biography of Robert Capa

Robert Capa, alias André (or Endre) Friedman, was born on October 22, 1913, to Jewish parents in Budapest (Whelan, 1999:v). In May 1931, at the age of seventeen, André was arrested for leftist student activities against the proto-fascist regime and he got jailed overnight. When he got out due to good connections of his father it was agreed that he would have to leave the country after his final examinations in high school. In July of the same year

he emigrated to Berlin to study photojournalism and journalism. Because his parents could not afford him to study, he started working at the photojournalistic agency *Dephot* as errand boy, afterwards in the darkroom and then as an apprentice photographer. Forced to flee Germany in March 1933, after Hitler's assumption of dictatorial powers, Friedman went to Paris where he was to meet well-known photographers like David Seymour and Henri Cartier-Bresson. He also met Gerda Pohorylle (better known as Gerda Taro), a German Jewish refugee, who became the love of his life. After he changed his Name to Robert Capa, he went to photograph the Spanish Civil War together with Gerda, who did not survive the war; she was crushed to death by a Loyalist tank. Capa never really recovered from his grief about this loss. In 1947 Capa together with his friends David Seymour, Cartier-Bresson, William Vandivert and George Rodger founded the cooperative photo agency *Magnum*. All together, Capa photographed five different wars, namely the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the Chinese resistance to the Japanese invasion (1938), the European theatre of World War II (1941-1945), the first Arab-Israeli War (1948), and the French Indochina War (1954). On his assignment in Indochina, Capa was killed by a landmine on May 25, 1954 (Robin, 1999:21; Whelan, 1999:v-x).

Reading Capa's book *Slightly out of focus* (2001:3,232), one notices that he begins and ends his book with the same sentence "There was absolutely no reason to get up in the mornings any more". Capa chronicles his experiences photographing World War II and tells dramatic stories of getting the picture. He also tells stories of getting drunk, playing poker and flirting with women. Overall he depicts himself as a heroic macho, just as his friend Ernest Hemingway once described him. Robert Capa did not receive any awards while he was alive. However, the announcement by the *Picture Post* of the greatest war photographer of the world can be seen as a great achievement. Since 1955 the *Overseas Press Club* and *Life Magazine*

founded the Robert Capa award, named after Capa “for superlative photography requiring exceptional courage and enterprise abroad” (Whelan, 2000).

“No one has ever photographed war with greater bravery or with more intense compassion” (Whelan, 1999:v).

#### **4.1.2 The Spanish Civil War**

In February 1936 communists, anarchists and socialists of the *frente popular* came into power in Spain (Robin, 1999:21). General Franco organised a military coup, which led to a Civil War. The nationalists were supported by Mussolini and Hitler while thousands of international brigades supported the republican troops. The Spanish Civil War is known as an especially propagandistic war in which both sides tried to control the particular image of the war that was nationally and internationally communicated (Robin, 1999:21). When the war ended in April 1939 with the victory of the supporters of Franco, more than half a million people had died (Robin, 1999:21).

#### **4.1.3 War photography during the Spanish Civil War**

At the time of the Spanish Civil War the quality and the quantity of war coverage progressed visibly. New technical possibilities, the consciousness use of film and photography as political instruments and a growing international interest resulted in an unprecedented richness of material concerning war reports, with a special emphasis on print and pictures (Brousek, 2003:71). The Spanish Civil War was, according to Caroline Brothers (1997:2), the first war “to be extensively and freely photographed for a mass audience”. As Sontag (2002: 86) explains in an article in *The New Yorker*, the Spanish Civil War was the first war to be witnessed in a modern sense - by a group of professional photographers right at

the lines of military engagement and in the towns under bombardment. The photographs could then immediately be seen in newspapers and magazines in Spain as well as abroad. Paul (2004:174) points out that the Spanish Civil War was one of the first wars in which the media in the forms of film and audio broadcasting were consistently exploited. Regarding press photography it can be recorded that this war was a breakthrough of investigative photojournalism mixing humanitarian appeal, documentary objectivity and sensationalism into a new formula. For the first time war was waged in front of the lenses and for the lenses of the cameras. Furthermore, the Spanish Civil War is often described as the first media war, as both sides tried hard to shape a specific image of the war and therefore made use of the media for propaganda purposes.

During the Spanish Civil War the traditional view of photography upon war was somehow revolutionised. Due to reduced distance of the photographer toward a subject the view changed from profiling the shown person or the result of a certain action toward the action itself (Paul 2004:179). David Mellor (in Paul, 2004:174) points out that the Spanish Civil War meant an alteration regarding the status of war photography. The good war photograph “became the one marked by the making presence of the endangered body of the photographer” (Mellor as cited in Paul, 2004:174). Press photographers not only documented warfare but could with some justification be described as soldiers of public opinion. War photography during the Spanish Civil War can therefore be described as a participative form of war reporting.

Two of the main reasons for such intensified war reportage were developments in the areas of technology and publishing. The Leica miniature camera, for example, allowed the photographer to act in a mobile and flexible way. For the first time, war photographers were given the opportunities to step close to warfare and take photographs of moments of war. Supersensitive films from Ilford and Kodak, which allowed shorter exposure times, also

alleviated working conditions for war photographers. However, one of the main reasons for increased news coverage and photographic reports was the desire for photographs from the front, as demonstrated by the steep increase in the number of magazines after the First World War (Paul, 2004:174).

#### **4.1.4 Robert Capa's "falling soldier"**

The first photograph to be examined is Robert Capa's "falling soldier", which was taken during the Spanish Civil War on September 5, 1936. Capa's picture of a soldier who has just been shot and is about to fall to the ground is one of the most discussed in the history of war photography (Kershaw, 2002:57). This icon of the Spanish Civil War went around the world and denounced the senselessness of dying in wars without any words to comment on the situation or to formulate the message (Brousek, 2003:72).

Bresheeth (2006:59) points out that the photograph of the falling soldier is one of the most "disturbing, and continually contentious, iconic images of war"; an image that signifies the hopelessness of the struggle of the Spanish Republic against the brutal forces of Generalissimo Franco. One of the reasons why this image is still at the centre of debate is a continuing discussion about the veracity of the picture. Some historians and journalists, notably Phillip Knightley (1996), have argued that it is a faked image, with the soldier posing for Capa's camera. This subject will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4.1.6.

#### **4.1.5 History of origin**

There exist at least three different versions about the history of origin concerning Capa's image "the falling soldier". The realities about the circumstances under which this photograph was taken on 5 September, 1936, have not yet been explicitly clarified. The

ambiguous versions about how, when and under which circumstances the photograph was taken put the picture in completely different contexts and build up some kind of intransparent obscurity around the image (Kershaw, 2002:58).

### **1) Interview for the New York World-Telegram**

One year after the photograph of the falling soldier was taken, on 1 September, 1937, Capa (in Kershaw, 2002:58) gave an account of the circumstances in which he had taken his at that time famous photograph in an interview with the *New York World-Telegram*.

Robert Capa explained that he and the soldier whom he was to photograph were both stranded in a trench on the Córdoba front and the soldier was impatient to get back to the republican lines. Every now and again he peered over the sandbags but the machine-gun fire made him turn back. Eventually he muttered something about taking a chance and clambered out of the trench and Capa followed with his camera and shot the famous picture instinctively as the machine-guns opened fire, then fell back into the trench alongside the body of his companion. Two hours later he made it to safety, crawling back under the cover of darkness. Only later did he discover that he had shot one of the most dramatic photographs of the Spanish Civil War (Miller, 1999:28; Kershaw, 2002:58-59).

Richard Whelan<sup>1</sup> (1994:96), however, points out a discrepancy as Capa's description of the circumstances claims that he was alone with the soldier on the hillside, whereas the image of the falling soldier belongs to a sequence that shows the loyalist among a group of soldiers jumping across a ditch and firing over the far edge of that ditch.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Whelan is the author of *Robert Capa: A Biography*. He has edited several books of Robert Capa's photographs together with Capa's Brother Cornell Capa (Capa, 2001:xxii).



Figure 2 Federico Borrell García and a group of soldiers waving their rifles; September 5, 1936. © Cornell Capa; International Center of Photography

## 2) Hansel Mieth – an ear witness

March 19, 1982 Hansel Mieth, a friend of Capa's, wrote a letter to Richard Whelan about "the falling soldier". She described how Capa once told her about the situation in which this famous photograph was taken. Capa (in Kershaw, 2002:60) reportedly observed that he "[...] knew him [the soldier] when he was still alive". Capa (in Whelan, 2003:13) furthermore pointed out that the soldiers were fooling around but there was apparently no shooting. Capa (in Whelan, 2003:13) reported that when the soldiers came running down the slope he also ran and took photographs. Mieth then asked him if he told the soldiers to stage an attack which he denied heavily. Capa (in Whelan, 2003:13) pointed out that the situation changed instantly when the shooting began.

Capa furthermore told Mieth that this episode haunted him badly and that he felt partially responsible for the man's death. He seemed concerned about not making this feeling public, which might be an explanation about why he altered various details in his several accounts of the circumstances under which this famous photograph was taken (Whelan, 2003:13; Kershaw<sup>2</sup>, 2002:60).

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<sup>2</sup> According to Kershaw (2002:60) it was Otto Mieth that Capa told about the circumstances under which the famous photograph was taken and not Hansel Mieth.

### 3) Radio interview WNBC New York

In an interview with the broadcasting station WNBC New York on 20 October, 1947, Capa portrayed what had happened the day the photograph of the “falling soldier” was taken (Kershaw, 2002:61). Capa recalled that he had taken the photograph in Andalusia, while accompanying a group of republican soldiers. Capa (in Kershaw, 2002:61) described the soldiers as men, who, in their conception, died for freedom and fair battle. Capa (in Kershaw, 2002:61) explained how he and about twenty other men, all armed with rifles, remained in a trench. The men were firing at a machine gun on the opposite hillside, then climbed out of the trench, screaming “Vamos!” towards the gun. The machine gun was opening fire, which made the soldiers run back and hide in the trench. This scenario recurred about four times. The fourth time Capa remembered holding his camera above his head and taking a picture, when the men were jumping over the trench (Kershaw, 2002:61).



Figure 3 Robert Capa: Republican soldiers firing at a machine gun on the opposite hillside. The arrow points to approximately where Borrell must have been standing when he was shot. The cross indicates where Capa must have been. © Cornell Capa; International Center of Photography



Figure 4 Robert Capa: Soldiers running over a trench. © Cornell Capa; International Center of Photography

#### 4.1.6 Fake or not

When the photograph “the falling soldier” was first published, in the September 23, 1936, issue of *Vu*, another photograph, showing another man in a state of collapse, was published directly below it on the same page (Whelan, 1994:96) . It has been argued that both photographs show the same man, but careful examination confirms that they display two different men, which is obvious as the two were wearing different clothes. What is interesting is that if one looks carefully at the ground in the photograph “the falling soldier” and in the second photograph and compares the two, it seems as if the two men are both shown falling on almost precisely the same spot. It is therefore not surprising that this has raised the question why it is that although the two men fell within a short time of each other, which can be inferred from the cloud configurations that are almost identical, in neither photograph there is even the trace of the body of the other man on the ground (Whelan, 1994:96-97). Knowing of the existence of the two photographs but not knowing about the exact circumstances under which the photographs were taken, it is not anymore surprising that there has been a great deal of controversy about whether or not Capa staged this famous photograph.

COMMENT  
ILS  
SONT TOMBÉS

## LA GUERRA CIVIL EN ESPAGNE



Le soldat est, le public en veut, lui! en même, de déshonneur le geste révélateur d'un dévouement... (caption text is partially obscured and difficult to read)

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COMMENT  
ILS  
ONT FUI



Telle une ombre vagabonde sur le Bélar, les villes de nos... (caption text is partially obscured)



Longtemps les vols infatigables, les enfants, les femmes, les hommes... (caption text is partially obscured)



C'est la migration de peuple d'une province... (caption text is partially obscured)



Plusieurs villages de réfugiés, gravement touchés de la guerre... (caption text is partially obscured)



Surtout, les femmes marchent sans bruit sur les routes... (caption text is partially obscured)

79-445 [VI] P. 1107

Figure 5 First publication of “the falling soldier” and another photograph of another man in a state of collapse; *Vu*, 23 September, 1936

According to Richard Whelan (2000), the controversy over the authenticity of Capa's photograph “the falling soldier” began when Gallagher O'Dowd, a British journalist, charged that the photograph was staged. The elderly South African born journalist, whose memory was, according to Whelan (1999: xiv), no longer reliable, charged that Capa had made his famous photograph of the falling soldier during training exercises and not during a real battle. This claim was then published in Knithley's (1978) book *The first casualty: from the Crimea to Vietnam: The war correspondent as hero, propagandist, and myth maker*. Whelan (2000) points out that Gallagher's allegations spread rapidly and disproving evidence was largely ignored.

Peter Härtling (1984:70-71) discusses Gallagher's interpretation of the way the picture originated in his book *Der spanische Soldat (the Spanish soldier)* and calls it a malicious

invention. Härtling (1984:71) furthermore points out that Capa never expressed himself with regard to Gallagher's allegations. Moreover Capa apparently never affirmed or adjusted the second version, which was known to Härtling (1984:71) and which was recorded in a radio interview of the channel WNBC in New York.

Rainer Fabian (1983:254) reports in his photograph collection *Bilder vom Krieg* (pictures of war) that the war correspondent Gallagher from *Daily Express* claimed that the photograph was taken near San Sebastian. At that time Gallagher and Capa shared a room in a hotel while waiting for news from the civil war front. Gallagher alleged that war games were arranged for reporters. Franco soldiers were, according to Gallagher, dressed in uniforms and equipped with rifles; they played war and atmosphere was created with smoke bombs. Apparently, Capa told Gallagher that he had taken some pictures of the staged scenery which were then publicised in newspapers that claimed they were real.

This version of circumstances is inconsistent with Whelan's (1994:96-97) account of the situation. Whelan (1994:97) points out that inconsistencies in three published accounts given by Gallagher recommend dismissing his claims that Capa staged his picture in northern Spain. Whelan (1994:97) also states that Gallagher, who claims to have been sharing a hotel room with Capa at the time, probably did not meet the war photographer until the fall of 1938. Nevertheless, there is no convincing evidence in Whelan (1994) to support his allegation that the two reporters did not share a room in 1936. However, in September 1996 this discussion about the authenticity of the photograph was, according to Whelan (2003:18), settled in Capa's favour, as the identity of the man in the photograph, Federico Borrell García, whose death at the front of Córdoba, to be specific at Cerro Muriano, on the exact date the photograph was taken is recorded in the Spanish government's archives in Salamanca. The soldier's identity was moreover confirmed by his younger brother Everisto (Whelan, 2003:10; Koetzle, 2002:20-21). Although the Spanish loyalist soldier in the photograph was identified

by the historian as well as the family as Federico Borrell García (Whelan, 1999:xiv-xvi), this did not help to end the public discussion as - no - up to that point unknown and convincing evidence had been brought forward.

It is a fact that we shall most certainly never find out what exactly happened on that hillside on September 5, 1936. Although Capa told several friends the story about how he had taken the famous photograph, these accounts conflict (in retelling) and do not throw much light on the questions raised by the visual evidence. If one wants to believe Capa's statement,

“No tricks are necessary to take pictures in Spain. You don't have to pose your camera [i.e., pose your subjects]. The pictures are there, and you just take them. The truth is the best picture, the best propaganda” (Whelan, 1994:97; Kershaw, 2002:57).

In an article of 5 July, 1998, published in the London *Night & Day*, Phillip Knightley (in Whelan, 2003) states that he had repeatedly asked Robert Capa's brother Cornell Capa as well as Magnum to release the roll of film on which the two photographs of falling soldiers appear so that it would be possible to see the whole sequence of shots being taken that day. Since Knightley's requests have not been met he complains and implies that the negatives must support his allegations, which is not a completely absurd idea, although Whelan (2003:7) states that this conclusion “is nonsense”

According to Whelan (2003:10) a comparison of a portrait of Federico (above left) and the man depicted on one of the photographs of Robert Capa made on 5 September 1936 at the front of Cordoba shows “the same high forehead, large ears, heavy eyebrows, down turning lower lip, an pronouncedly jutting chin”.



Figure 6 Left: Family photograph of Federico Borrell Garcìa / Right: Robert Capa: Federico Borrell Garcìa – cut-out from a group picture Figure 2 © Cornell Capa; International Center of Photography

Whelan (2003:12), who is convinced that Capa's photograph is not staged, once contacted Robert L. Franks, the chief homicide detective of the Memphis Police Department and a sculptor and photographer to have a professional look at the photograph of the falling soldier.

Franks (in Whelan, 2003:12) states that the human reflex response visible in the photograph suggests that the image is not posed. The soldier's left hand, which is partially visible under his left leg, is in a semi-closed pose. If the photograph was staged the hand would typically be open to catch the fall, which is a self-preservation reflex in order not to get hurt. Franks (in Whelan, 2003) furthermore pointed out that the fact that the fingers are curled toward the palm indicates that the soldier's muscles have gone limp and that he was already dead. Franks (as cited in Whelan, 2003:12) pointed out that "it is nearly impossible for any conscious person to resist the reflex impulse to brace his fall by flexing his hand strongly backward at the wrist and extending his fingers out straight".



Figure 7 Robert Capa: "the falling soldier". Soldier's left hand in semi-closed position with curled up fingers. © Cornell Capa; International Center of Photography

Interesting enough, on January 28, 2008, Magnum (2008) announced the discovery of a collection of over 3.500 negatives of the Spanish Civil War by Magnum photographers and founders Robert Capa, David Chim Seymour as well as Capa's former partner Gerda Taro. The film rolls that had been created between 1936 and 1939 were found in three small cardboard boxes, together with some short strips of negatives. Some rolls could be identified by photographer while other attributions were based on comparison to known works by the three photographers. According to a press release by Magnum (2008), Capa left the suitcase containing the negatives behind when he fled Paris in 1939 on his way to the United States. In 1995 word began to spread that the negatives had somehow survived. It is assumed that after taking a journey from Paris to Marseille and then, in the hands of a Mexican general and diplomat who had served under Pancho Villa the suitcase containing the negatives landed in Mexico City. It is, however, not definitively known how the negatives ended up in Mexico amongst General Aguilar Gonzales belongings.

Apparently, Robert Capa assumed that the negatives had been lost during the Nazi invasion. In January 2008 the suitcase was handed to the International Center of Photography (ICP) in Manhattan, founded by Robert Capa's brother Cornell Capa. According to Brian Wallis (as cited in Kennedy, 2008:1), the center's chief curator, "this really is the holy grail of Capa [sic!] work". The discovery has excited the photography world, as it is hoped to finally settle the question whether or not Capa's most famous photograph was staged. The discovery of the negatives in the original sequence, showing the photographs that were taken before and after the famous image, could end the debate about the authenticity of the photo (Kennedy, 2008:1). The research on the photograph could also lead to the determination that some of the photographs attributed to Capa were actually taken by his close friend Gerda Taro. According to Wallis (in Kennedy, 2008:3) the two worked closely together and used to mark some of their work with joint credit lines, which sometimes made it hard to appropriate creatorship

decisively. Wallis concedes that there is a remote possibility that the photograph of the falling soldier could have been taken by Taro and not by Capa (Kennedy, 2008:3).

However, half a year after the discovery of the long thought to be lost forever negatives (August, 2008) no news about the negatives have been published by Magnum or the ICP, which could be because it takes a long time to appropriately investigate all the negatives. According to Ron Steinman (2008) who spoke with Cynthia Young, a curator at the International Center of Photography who is working with the cache, the process of unravelling all the negatives will take at least a year. Matt Murphy (2008), who is working for the Magnum Archive, wrote in a personal e-mail from 12 August, 2008 that

“[...] the digitalization of the found negatives is about 1/3<sup>rd</sup> complete. So far it’s evident that many of the images on the negatives are already known to us as prints had been made circulated at the time. Since the negatives had been stored in tight coils for 70 years, the digitalization process required the creation of a sort of curved brace to allow the film to be fed into the scanner without having to force the film flat, as it [is] usually done with film.”

Murphy (2008) pointed out that due to this complex technique the scanning process will take a long time and he suggested that the earliest date to expect the photographs on the Magnum website would be February, 2009.



Figure 8 Cardboard box containing negatives of the Spanish Civil War by Robert Capa, David Seymour and Gerda Taro, recovered by the ICP in December, 2007. The negatives had been missing since 1939. © Cornell Capa; International Center of Photography

#### **4.1.7 The importance of authenticity**

The longevity of this controversy is in itself evidence of the great importance put on truth value and authenticity of war photographs. Sontag (2005:57) points out that it is of great importance that “the falling soldier” reports a real, coincidental, recorded moment since it would, according to Sontag, lose its value if it was found that the falling soldier had been posing in front of Capa’s camera. However, according to Paul (2004:189), the authenticity of the photograph is not of first priority, but it is rather the expressiveness of the image that is of major significance. Whelan (in Koetzle, 2002:27) supports this statement, saying that it is trivial and morbid to insist on knowing if the photography actually shows a man at the moment of his death through a bullet. He furthermore points out that the worth of the image lies with its symbolic value and not with the literal exactitude as an account of a man’s death. Contrary to Whelan’s perception, Sontag (2005:57) points out that if a photograph is at the centre of focus, everyone absorbs the image with literalism.

The author of this thesis agrees with Koetzle (2002) and Paul (2004) as it seems that further discussions about the authenticity of the falling soldier might sidetrack viewers from the true value and importance of the photograph. Truly, it is not only the exact moment of death caught in the photograph that makes it so exceptional.

#### **4.1.8 Capa’s style - slightly out of focus**

Capa’s choice of a type of lens that closely resembles normal human vision, probably around 50 mm, allows for a feeling of being right next to the soldier as he is about to fall. The fact that there is landscape around and behind the “falling soldier” is an indicator that Capa was not hidden safely and photographed from a distance, but was closely engaged with the action (Woodward, 2002:45). Capa took this picture from the perspective of the shooting

soldiers out of a backing or a trench which suggests to its viewer that the photographer himself was at the risk of his life.

Görling (in Paul, 2004:179) points out that Capa's photographs display "fragments of an event" or an action. Therefore the closeness to such an event became a central criterion of authenticity. Capa was often quoted saying: "If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough" (Capa, 1999:xi).

Even so, according to Woodward (2002:45) many of Robert Capa's war photographs such as the image "death of a loyalist soldier" might not seem particularly dramatic when viewed today, whereas in the 1930s they were sensational. *Life* gave the story two pages, *Regards* gave it five pages as well as the back cover and the British magazine *Picture Post* devoted eleven pages to the photographs (Woodward, 2002:26). Capa's photograph was accompanied by captions such as "In the heart of the battle: The most amazing war picture ever taken", and "You can almost smell the [gun] powder in this picture", or "This is war!" (Woodward, 2002:45-46).

His photographs are dramatic, but according to Woodward (2002:40) they also exude some sense of humility, which makes them engaging. Woodward (2002:40-41) furthermore points out that Capa's photograph "the falling soldier"

"creates drama with a close-up depiction of the moment of death and conveys a macho persona with the clear implication of Capa's decision to place himself in close proximity to danger".

Robert Capa often told young war photographers that if they were not satisfied with their photographs it was probably because they were too far from the action. He furthermore pointed out that a photo reporter cannot be detached from something with which he has not been involved. Journalists must move closer and closer in order to get the best possible picture of a scene. According to Kirkhorn (1990:12)

“the only detachment which has the least value is the detachment which comes through the effort, moral, intellectual, physical, of extricating oneself from a story closely observed and deeply understood”.

#### **4.1.9 Analysis of the photograph**

According to Paul (2004:189), no photograph demonstrates the “romanticised transfiguration and aesthetisation of death in war” more distinctly than Robert Capa’s photograph of a falling republican at the moment of his death. Paul (2004:189) goes even further and calls the famous photograph “the historic reference picture par excellence”. The photograph advanced to an icon of war photography, to an image which shaped our conception of the Spanish Civil War more than any other. As Paul (2004:189) points out, it is of no importance whether the photograph with the high suggestive power of a man during the moment of his assumed death was a deliberate staging or an actual snapshot. The collective memory does not differentiate such circumstances. What reinforces itself in the collective memory is an image with seemingly consciously composed constructional elements in the style of a romantic painting – the open sky, from which the sun highlights the scenery, the natural landscape in the background of the picture and the falling man with his rifle. All these elements make the picture a projection screen that allows diverse perceptions and interpretations (Paul, 2004:189).

According to Mira Beham (1996:52) this picture allowed an aesthetisation and glorification of the Spanish Civil War. The photograph depicts the intended dignity of the Spanish people fighting for its freedom. Ernest Hemingway (1939) confirmed this idea of dying honourably, saying that

“those who have entered it honorably, and no men ever entered earth more honorably than those who died in Spain, already have achieved immortality” (Ernest Hemingway, 1939).

Cary Nelson (1997) note that the “aura of the cause glows in this image that incarnates the ultimate gift of self-sacrifice”,. He furthermore points out how important it is that the falling militiaman is a republican soldier, which makes the photograph “a kind of sacred relic, transporting us to the moment of death in a great struggle between light and darkness” Nelson (1997). He proposes that the photograph itself suggests that

“only a soldier of the Republic could be photographed in this way, that only the transcendent nature of the cause of antifascism makes possible the representation of this uncanny transitional moment” (Nelson, 1997).

Capa’s photograph does not record a news event of obvious importance. It does not show us Franco’s military attacking republican soldiers, but instead offers “time slowed, as one anonymous soldier passes from life to death” (Nelson, 1997). It might be interpreted that the photograph displays how “republican soldiers apparently hover for a blinding moment like angels half in life and half in death” (Nelson, 1997). Although this is a photograph of war, we do not see the brutality and horror of war on display, but instead the power of virtue as apparent from the soldier’s belonging to the “right” side in the conflict. Brothers (1997:183) describes Capa’s photograph as an archetypal symbol of death in war. However, she also points out that this image does not fit the experiences of war in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

“What this image argued was that death in war was heroic, and tragic, and the individual counted and that his death mattered. The very fact that the unknown soldier was photographed at all testifies that his death was noticed. [...] his sacrifice was in the name of a cause, and was

steeped in the idealism with which he fought. Moreover, it was aesthetic” (Brothers, 1997:183-184).

It seems admissible therefore to claim that Capa’s photograph does not so much display an actual historic situation, but is rather an indicator of collective wishful thinking of people about the nature of death in wars.

#### **4.1.10 Capa’s photograph compared to similar images**

Capa’s photograph has often been reprinted and reproduced. It has been found that the painting “mortally wounded” (1873) by the Russian painter Vasily Vereshchagin displays a subject that is very similar to Capa’s photograph. Therefore, Capa’s painting ties in with a well known painting but the photograph “the falling soldier” has also often been used as a model picture that has often been reproduced and redesigned by various artists as well as amateurs. It is interesting why people chose Capa’s image as a model for their own work.

**1) Capa's photograph and Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin's painting "mortally wounded"**



Figure 9 Left: Robert Capa – cut-out of Figure 1, 1936. © Cornell Capa; International Center of Photography; Right: Vasily Vereshchagin – "mortally wounded", 1873. Oil on canvas. ©The Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia.

According to Paul (2004:189), the famous photograph of Capa ties in iconographically with the painting of the Russian painter Vasily Vereshchagin (1842-1904) which was made in 1873. Fact is that both pictures feature certain similarities, for example the displayed moment of injury, the dumping down rifle and the shadow of the two soldiers.

Vereshchagin's painting shows a moment in the middle of combat, which allows imagining an additional pictorial space. The smoke in the background of the painting, the injured men lying on the ground and the soldiers standing behind the central character of the painting somehow let the viewer participate in that war. One can almost hear the loud roar of the rifles and the pain of screaming soldiers, and it is easy to imagine that the smoke which is concealing the sight smells of gun powder. In the same way one imagines when examining

the falling soldier how he just got hit by an enemy bullet and in the next moment, while his rifle is gliding of his hand, is about to fall to the ground. In contrast to Vereshchagin's painting the surrounding seems to be displayed in a different mood in Capa's photograph – more silent, heroic and harmonic. One could imagine that after the Spanish soldier falls to the ground and probably screams out loud one last time, an oppressive silence disperses. Vereshchagin's painting, on the other hand, supports the assumption that no end is in sight, there are no winners or losers, the combat is under way and it seems as if the fight will last until the last soldier has died (Paul, 2004:189).

## 2) Death of an insane screw – George Estreich



Figure 10 George Estreich: “death of an insane screw”, © George Estreich; George Herman Artworks

George Estreich (2008), the creator of the image “death of an insane screw”, recalls that he created the image specifically for the website [screwasylum.com](http://screwasylum.com).

“I found this one screw with the top lifted up in much the same way as I remember the skull fragment lifted on the soldier's head of the famous Capa photograph. I guess I made the

connection because I have such a vivid memory of the picture from an old textbook when I was in high school” (2008).

Estreich (2008) furthermore points out that he remembered Capa’s photograph to be especially powerful when he first saw it and that he never forgot it. Estreich (2008) reports that he was able to “draw it perfectly from memory [...] ever since [he] first saw it”. The artist is of the opinion that Capa’s photograph is a legendary war picture that made a significant impression on most people who saw it. This is, according to Estreich (2008), why it is possible that other people instantly know what the spoof is on when he shows them his rendition.

### 3) Lego falling soldier

Robert Capa’s photograph “the falling soldier” has often been reproduced. One kind of reproduction was a Lego reconstruction with a little Lego figure holding a rifle in its right hand, while falling to the ground. Two different artists, Marcos Vilarino and Mike Stimpson, better known as Balakov, constructed two different “Lego falling soldier” images.



Figure 11 Preto de Cerromuriano, 1936 Robert Capa © Marcos Vilarino; cefvigo 2008



Figure 12  
A Lego reconstruction of Robert Capa's 1936 picture the falling soldier  
© Balakov

Stimpson (2008) recalls that he got the idea to recreate Capa's photograph "the falling soldier" after searching through the work of Magnum photographers looking for iconic photographs that he rated suitable for such a Lego recreation. On 30 October 2007 the photograph of the falling soldier Lego recreation, the third Lego image of Stimpson (2008), was taken. Stimpson (2008) points out that he chose Capa's photograph because he thought it to be instantly recognisable, which was an important fact for him to use it for his Lego recreation. He furthermore points out that "everyone I've shown it [the Lego construction] to so far has recognised it [...]". Regarding the question about the photograph's authenticity, Stimpson (2008) points out that "Capa must have been incredibly lucky to get that shot. [...] experienced war photographers must have a sixth sense for when something interesting is about to happen"

#### **4.1.11 Conclusion – Spanish image**

The photograph of a Spanish soldier at the instant he is hit by an enemy bullet through the head came to stand for the tragic reality of the Spanish Civil war. It has been hailed as an

icon of war photography and as a powerful and timeless image due to the exact moment displayed as well as its compositional structure.

While Whelan (1994; 1999; 2000; 2003) has no doubts over the authenticity of the photograph after investigating the case in the spirit of a detective, others like for instance Gallagher or Knightley (1975; 1996) are not persuaded by Whelan's arguments and still claim that the image was staged. This claim is especially understandable regarding the second photograph of a falling soldier that has been taken from the same angle, with the same composition and within a few minutes. On the other hand, there is the limp hand which apparently proves that the man who is about to fall to the ground is already dead. The fascination with the photograph's veracity might be interpreted as a struggle regarding the relationship between photojournalistic objectivity and the documentarian intervention, which seems to be contradictory.

This debate is not closed yet and the exchange of arguments could probably go on for a long while with no side having the absolutely convincing argument. The question remaining is whether or not it matters if the photograph is a true image or not. Whereas this issue is equally contentious, there is a lot to be said for Sontag's (2003:55) position:

“We want the photographer to be a spy in the house of love and of death, and those being photographed to be unaware of the camera, “off guard.” No sophisticated sense of what photography is or can be will ever weaken the satisfactions of a picture of an unexpected event seized in mid-action by an alert photographer.” (Sontag, 2003:55)

This chapter tried to examine the photograph “the falling soldier” from different perspectives with an aim to approve or falsify the photographs authenticity. Although it was of special importance to the author of this thesis to clarify whether or not this icon of war photography is staged, no definite answer can be given at this point. Whether Capa's

photograph was staged or not might never be clarified with ultimate certainty. But the discovery of the negatives has created a new situation with the inherent chance that the truth will be discovered – and then published. However, while examining the photograph and engaging in an ongoing discussion about the photograph's veracity the author of this thesis found herself hoping that the image would be a true image of what has happened on September 5, 1936, on a hill of Cerro Muriano.

After the thorough examination of Robert Capa's photograph it can be said that this image owes its iconic status not only to the ongoing discussion about its arguable authenticity but also to the exact moment of death caught in the photograph. Through the examination of the photograph it became clear that the combination of the exact moment the photograph was taken with the exceptional compositional structure of the image is subsequently responsible of the photographs achievement of an iconic status.

## 4.2 Nick Ut – children fleeing a napalm strike



Figure 13 Nick Ut (Huỳnh Công Út): Children fleeing a napalm strike. Trang Bang, June 8, 1972 © Nick Ut; Associated Press

### 4.2.1 Selected biographical details: Nick Ut

Born in Long An, in the southern Mekong Delta province of Long An, on March 29, 1951, Huỳnh Công Út began to work for the Associated Press in Saigon at the age of 14. He was looking for work and Horst Faas, then head of the Saigon photo department in Saigon, hired him in 1966. Ut was the younger brother of the Vietnamese photojournalist Huynh Thanh My, who had been killed while photographing combat action in the Mekong Delta in 1965. When he started working at the Associated Press, his job was to mix photo processing chemicals and keeping the darkroom clean. One year later he was an accomplished news photographer, which his images of the communist Tet Offensive proved.

Working as a war photographer, Ut was injured twice during the Cambodian battle and one more time close to where he had taken the photograph of Kim Phuc: “I rushed towards the area where I knew Kim Phuc was when a mortar exploded in front of me. I was hit. My colleagues rushed me to the hospital. I still have some shrapnel in my leg” (Nick Ut as cited in Faas & Fulton, 2000:6).

After working seven years with the AP, the then 21-year-old Nick Ut took the Pulitzer Prize winning (1973) photograph of “children running from a napalm strike”. The image also received the George Polk Memorial award and an award from Worlds Press Photo, Sigma Delta Chi, the Overseas Press Club and the the Associated Press Managing Editors. In 1977 Ut went to Los Angeles where he continued to work as an AP photographer on general assignment work. He had also been working for the AP in Hanoi, Tokyo and South Korea. The then American citizen Nick Ut returned to Vietnam for the first time in 1989. Today he lives in California with his wife and their two children (Faas & Fulton, 2000:6).

#### **4.2.2 The Vietnam War**

The Vietnam War lasted from 1959 to 1975 (Paul, 2004:311). The war was fought between the communist North Vietnam and its communist supporters and the South Vietnam that was supported by the United States. The United States entered the Vietnamese War in order to prevent a communist takeover of South Vietnam. The involvement of the United States was very controversial, especially towards the end of the war. Due to a widely spread anti-war movement, the United States withdrew troops and in June 1973 the Case-Church Amendment even prohibited further US military intervention. In April 1975 North Vietnam seized South Vietnam’s biggest city Saigon or Ho Chi Minh City and North and South Vietnam were reunified in 1976 (Paul, 2004:311).

Paul (2004:311) points out the politically biased character of the war. On the one hand it was a postcolonial war about a country that was then liberated from former colonies. On the other hand, the Vietnam War was the attempt of the United States to fight against the communists' striving for power in South East Asia. Furthermore, the United States attempted to impose the American version of democracy and culture on the Vietnamese people. Insofar, Paul (2004:311) argues, it was a war for freedom for one party and a pacifistic war for the other party. From a military point of view the Vietnam War was the last big industrialised war of the USA, in which destructive weapons like machine guns, combat helicopters and bombers were used. In the Vietnam War the USA fired off more than twice as much ammunition as was used through the entire Second World War. The Vietnam War exacted an immense human cost. About three to four million Vietnamese people from both sides lost their lives. Another two million - Cambodians and Laotians - had been killed and about 58.000 American soldiers lost their lives (Paul, 2004:311-312).

#### **4.2.3 War photography during the Vietnam War**

The Vietnam War can be described as a qualitative indentation in the history of visualising modern military conflict. The non-fictional film, as well as the pictorial press, were strongly linked to the new electronic medium of television (Paul, 2004:312). At the peak of the Vietnam War, television reached the majority of American households due to its possibility to broadcast the latest pictures of warfare as fast as possible. The Vietnam War is therefore often referred to as the first television war in history and since the Vietnam War television and war belong together (Paul, 2004:312). The director of CBX News in Washington, William Small (in Knighthley, 1975:411) reported:

“When television covered its ‘first war’ in Vietnam it showed a terrible truth of war in a manner new to mass audiences. [...This] was cardinal to the disillusionment of Americans with this war, the cynicism of many young people towards America [...]”.

However, even though television was of great importance during the Vietnam War, war photography was convincing from a qualitative perspective (Paul, 2004:312). According to Paul (2004:312) war photographs from the Vietnam War somehow resemble images from the Spanish Civil War in their directness of approach.

In contrast to the Second World War, the US-government did not manage to control the journalists and photo-journalists so that a consistent image of the Vietnam War was communicated. But although no formal US-military censorship took place, open and free news coverage was not possible as correspondents had to adhere to internal principles and instructions from editorial departments. On January 14, 1966, the Assistant Secretary of Defence (Public Affairs) Arthur Sylvester (in Fabian & Adam, 1983:326-327) called on all US-American broadcasting services and daily newspapers to moderate the news coverage of the Vietnam War. In a letter he suggested that photographs of wounded or dead Americans as well as bodies torn to pieces and similar images should not be published.

According to Paul (2004:314) the Vietnam War was exceptional insofar as it suggested a degree of authenticity, directness and immediacy never seen before. The Vietnam War is often referred to as the living-room war because it reached people evening after evening in their private homes and to a certain extent involved them into the warfare, which displayed the characteristics of an event.

Not only television but also magazines and newspapers brought war into the living rooms of Americans. About 1.500 photojournalists were covering the Vietnam War equipped with small Leica or Nikon cameras that allowed war photographers to be quicker and more flexible than camera crews with their heavy cameras and equipment. Moreover, with the first

coloured picture coverage in *Life* (Paul, 2004: 324) a new era of press photography dawned. However, a lot of war photographs of the Vietnam War were still kept in black and white rather than in colour.

#### **4.2.4 Children fleeing a napalm strike – an icon of war photography**

The second photograph to be examined closely was taken by Huỳnh Công Út's, better known as Nick Ut. It has been called "children fleeing a napalm strike", "terror of war" or "napalm bomb attack" and was taken in a village called Trang Bang northwest of Saigon in Vietnam on June 8, 1972 (Chong, 2003:10-11). It shows a group of five children screaming and running down the street after a strike of napalm from supposedly South Vietnamese aircraft. Among the children in the middle of the picture is nine year old Kim Phuc. The little girl's upper left body was badly burnt from napalm (Chong, 2003:89).

Phillip Knightley (2003:202) describes the photograph as "one of the most iconic war images of all times". According to Blum, Sachs-Hornbach and Schirra (2007:125) the photograph "children fleeing a napalm strike" by Nick Ut is one of the reference images of the Vietnam War. It is suggested that this photograph is familiar to people all over the world. Blum et al. (2007:125-126) suggest that this photograph, which raises the issue of war and crime on children, is likely to be more prominent than the most famous paintings and graphic art works displaying the same subject matter such as Nicolas Poussin's *Bethlehemitischer Kindermord* (1628-1629), Peter Paul Rubens' *the massacre of the innocents* (1611-1612), Francisco Goya's *desastres de la guerra* (the horrors of war) (1812-1815) and maybe even Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937).

The question is: Why has this photograph, as one of very few among thousands of photographs of the Vietnam War, not been forgotten, but has been imprinted on what can be called the collective memory? And why is this photograph the only image among hundreds of

photographs that depict the bombing of the village Trang Bang by South Vietnamese troops on June 8, 1972, that has not disappeared in the archives?

It is interesting to note that it was Nick Ut's photograph of the scene and not the film clip of the NBC cameraman Le Phúc Dinh that were committed to the collective memory (Paul, 2005: 4). This confirms Sontag's (1977:17) statement that it is less the elusive pictures of film and television that get imprinted on someone's memory but rather the still exposures of photography. Sontag (1977:18) contends that each "still photograph is a privileged moment, turned into a slim object that one can keep and look at again". According to Hariman and Lucaites (2003:41) photographic images operate meaningfully without connecting syntax and "give specific events a singular significance, but they leave larger articulations of purpose outside the frame".

The circulation of the photograph "terror of war" was supported as it played an important role for the anti-war movement in the USA and in the North Vietnamese news coverage of war. The publication of the photograph in the press all over the world in the days after June 8, 1972 called for responses and reactions. Nowadays, according to Blum et al. (2007:126-127), people are not familiar with the name Nick Ut, but rather know the photograph and recognise it in connection with the Vietnam War without knowing about the exact circumstances of its origin and the original background of its publication.

From an art historic perspective it is suggested that the photograph is so effective and impressive because of its motif, which is horrifying, and the facial expression and gesture of the little girl Phan Thi Kim Phuc and especially the frontal nudity depicted, which appeals to its viewer. Moreover, iconic and formal qualities as well as affinities with traditional iconography play an important role (Blum, et al., 2007:127).

#### 4.2.5 History of origin

In an interview Nick Ut (in Paul, 2005:4) explained what happened on June 8, 1972 in Trang Bang:

„When we moved closer to the village we saw the first people running. I thought ‘Oh my God’ when I suddenly saw a woman with her leg badly burned by napalm. Then came a woman carrying a baby, who died, then another woman carrying a small child with its skin coming off. When I took a picture of them I heard [sic!] a child screaming and saw that young girl who pulled off all her burning clothes. She yelled to her brother on her left.”

“Too hot, too hot, in Vietnamese „Nong qua, nong qua!“, the little girl was screaming. Ut gave her some water before he took her to the Cu Chi hospital, trying to save her life (Lucas, 2007).

The incident in the village Trang Bang on June 8, 1972, happened because of an airstrike that had been requested by a commander of the Vietnamese army division. The strike was then provided by the Vietnamese controlled air force squadron with Vietnamese pilots flying the planes. At that time the ground units as well as the air force squadron had no US advisors attached to them anymore. In June 1972 most American fighting forces and soldiers had been withdrawn. Almost one year later all the US forces had left Vietnam and the Vietnamese fought on their own, until defeat in 1975. It has often been speculated that the bombing on June 8, 1972 might have been an American attack, and in 1996 the former US Army captain John Plummer even confessed to have taken part in the air-strike that day (Faas & Fulton, 2000:5). His claim that he had ordered the attack was disbelieved one year later after thorough investigation because it was found that the then Army captain had lacked authority to correspond with the Vietnamese Air force at that time (Faas & Fulton, 2000:5).

Kevin Marvel (2000), a reader of the *International Herald Tribune*, wrote in a letter with the intention to end the discussion of the question who had dropped the bomb:

“While nothing can change the tragic reality that Ms. Kim Phuc was severely burned by napalm on that day in 1972, it is good for the facts to be set straight. However, the power of the photo has nothing to do with who was responsible. It results from its depiction of the unimaginable pain and suffering that war brings to all who play a role in its ugly chain of events”.

What Marvel (2000) brings up is an interesting point: although it is important to know what exactly happened that day in Trang Bang, the photograph remains the same. It remains one of the most disturbing, shocking, horrifying and impressive images of war. A similar statement has also been made regarding Capa’s photograph “the falling soldier”. Although there is an ongoing discussion about its authenticity, the fact that this is one of the most impressive photographs is undoubted. Therefore, it could be argued that discussions about the authenticity, reality or the circumstances under which the specific photograph was taken do not influence the photograph’s expressiveness or its impact quality.

The photographer, Nick Ut (in Paul, 2005:1), documented the photograph as follows:

„That photo showed the world what the war in Vietnam was about. People, regardless of their nationality or language, could understand and relate to the tragedy. [...] The picture for me and for many others could not have been more real. It was as authentic as the war itself.”

#### **4.2.6 The question of authenticity**

Unlike Robert Capa’s photograph “the falling soldier” the authenticity of Nick Ut’s photograph is beyond question. According to Sontag (2003:68) the photograph of Huỳnh Công Út is the epitome of horror of the Vietnam War. This photograph is part of a kind of image that cannot be faked. Paul (2005:5) supports this assumption referring to formal elements like the cutting of persons, in this case the boy in the lower left corner of the picture,

who seems to vanish from the camera's field of view the next moment, which refers to a spontaneous and hasty origination of the photograph. Because the lower legs are cut in the photograph, the question about authenticity does not occur but it rather seems as if an authentic situation has been recorded in a photograph.

#### 4.2.7 Nick Ut's photograph from a formal perspective

The original photograph of Nick Ut was cut in the photographic editorial department of Associated Press in Saigon in the evening of June 8, 1972, the day the photograph had been taken. According to Blum et al. (2007:127) it was of major importance that the photograph was cut, as the new composition of figures depicted is largely responsible for the visual perception of the horrific image. It is interesting to note that the strong impact of this photograph might be a result of the similarity of the image in its cut version to the composition of the classic figure paintings of western culture.



Figure 14 Nick Ut: Children fleeing a napalm strike / Terror of war – uncut version. Trang Bang, June 8, 1972 © Nick Ut; Associated Press

This would explain why the photographs that were taken shortly before this image have been more or less forgotten although they represent and show the horror of war just as apparently (Faas & Fulton, 2000:2). One shows Kim Phuc's grandmother and her grandson dying from napalm; another, Kim Phuc's aunt holding a baby boy while fleeing from napalm; and a third, Kim Phuc taken shortly after showing her burns from behind.



Figure 15 Nick Ut: Kim Phuc's aunt, Nguyen Thi Xi, holding a baby boy as she is fleeing a napalm strike on her village. The baby died ten days later from his injuries. Trang Bang, June 8, 1972 © Nick Ut; Associated Press

Figure 16 Nick Ut: Kim Phuc's grandmother holding her dying grandson after a napalm attack. Trang Bang, June 8, 1972 © Nick Ut; Associated Press



Figure 17 Nick Ut: Kim Phuc burned from napalm. Trang Bang, June 8, 1972 © Nick Ut; Associated Press

In “terror of war” the little girl is naked and running towards its viewer, looking right at its observer, crying out. Although the burns themselves are not visible in the photograph, it is her pain and the way she communicates this pain that is, according to Hariman and Lucaites (2003:40) the central feature of the picture. By running away from the cause of her pain she somehow projects the pain forward, once again towards the viewer. Blum et al. (2007:128) also point out that the screaming of the girl seems to fill out the whole image and the figure of the screaming girl seem to be a personification and visualisation of all the conceivable pain and suffering depicted in the photograph. This is the case because the little girl appears pathetic and helpless and because of the position of the girl in the cut version of the photograph.

Kim Phuc appears as a symmetric central character positioned in the exact centre of the photograph, her centreline is identical with the vertical and horizontal centre of the image format. Moreover, her belly button as the body center of the girl is nearly identical with the absolute midpoint of the image and the slants of her downwards outstretched arms, being observed as formal criteria, form ideal lines that meet at the open screaming mouth of the girl. The bright, screaming face of Kim Phuc is so strongly visible because of a dark figure of an anonymous soldier behind her, and the boy in the left front of the photograph extends the almost audible screams and the pain through his frontal position (Blum, 2004:31-32).

It can therefore safely be assumed that the photograph owes its high awareness level to its composed image format. However, according to Blum et al. (2007:129) the uncut version of the photograph (Figure 14) is somehow even more shocking regarding the content of the motif, as it shows a photographer in a military uniform at the right image border, busy with his camera, instead of helping the burned children. Apparently, the uncut version, which does not feature the compositional attributes discussed above, only met with faint response. Hariman and Lucaites (2003:43) point out that in the uncut picture the soldiers as well as the

photographer in the right part of the photograph seem to be walking along slowly, as if the situation was an everyday experience. From this viewing angle a great contrast with the children's sudden excessive and horrific experience of terror can be noticed. The obvious conclusion from the perception of an image so rich in contrast is that looking at the girl or the boy at the left front of the photograph is that this is a rare and horrifying situation, whereas observing the soldiers in the photograph it seems to indicate that this is a situation that happens again and again. The awful truth is that it must happen so often that one becomes indifferent and capable of not reacting in the face of utter human despair.



Figure 18 Nick Ut: Children fleeing a napalm strike in Trang Bang, behind them are soldiers and photographers. 8 June, 1972. © Nick Ut; Associated Press

#### **4.2.8 Compositional structure, gesture and aesthetical perception**

The children depicted in the photograph appear in a diagonal line with the little boy in the foreground on the left, the naked screaming girl Kim Phuc a little smaller but very central in the picture, and two children holding hands in the background on the right. Those three positions of characters also depict three phases of running, which divides the space temporally. Furthermore, it is important to note that the children are not only running towards the viewer, but the movement from the left front to the right back also conforms to the usual reading order, which attracts additional interest (Paul, 2005:5). Another formal aspect is the horizontal line evolving because the eyes of the naked girl are in one exact line with the heads of the other children. This horizontal line separates the background from the foreground. Vertically, the picture can be divided into three stripes of the same size because of the three groups of figures.

Blum (2005:185) describes the sense of sight as our most immediate and most excitable sense, which explains why we are hardly able not to react to something that is moving in a frontal pose towards us. According to Paul (2005:6) the photograph also evokes a so-called synaesthetic perception, meaning the evocation of a particular sensation through stimulation of another sense organ. The visual gesture of the main figure generates an acoustic imagination of screams of horror and cries for help, while the smoke in the background of the image evokes infernal noise like the sound of explosions and burning fire. The smoke also produces an imaginary picture space outside the image, as it suggests the existence of a bombing aircraft or a similar endangerment. The ascending smoke in the background of the photograph also explains why the children are running and screaming, which, according to Paul (2005:5), makes the photograph a narrative image. The point is that even though the photograph's viewer does not hear the children screaming or an actual explosion, one can imagine such a sound setting, which supports further involvement and attachment.

Paul (2005:5) suggests that the emotional appeal of the photograph is to be found in the “gesture figure”, meaning the single person or group of persons whose gesture, e.g. posture, gesticulation and facial expression, originates from an affective condition and signifies an existential emotion. Regarding the gestures of the running children it seems as if their bodies no longer react due to conscious control but are rather subject to a currently predominant emotion.

Furthermore, the direct addressing of the little girl defines her relationship to her viewer. By facing the lens and therefore the viewer “the demanding reciprocity of direct, face-to-face interaction” (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003:40) is activated. The photograph is capable of projecting the girl’s pain into our world and leaves its observer with a feeling that disrupts and breaks up our world’s pattern of confidence and assurances (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003:40). According to Hariman and Lucaites (2003:42), viewing such vulnerability, symbolised by the nakedness of the little girl, addresses our moral awareness as it can be interpreted as a call to obligation. It is known that the photograph contributed to the anti-war movement in the United States. However, it has to be acknowledged that the photograph was published at a time when the public was realising that their government was waging war without legitimacy and without the prospect of an end. The former illusion of strategic control had been devastated in 1968 with the Tet offensive and the delusion of agreement and compromise had disappeared in the 1970 shootings at Kent State. By 1972 disengagement and missing encouragement spread and it seemed as if the war made no sense any more (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003:41).

#### **4.2.9 Breaking the taboo of frontal nudity**

With this photograph and the particular direct appeal that it has on its viewer, a taboo that had been in operation for a long time at the Associated Press, namely that of frontal

nudity, was broken. According to Faas and Fulton (2000:1) the photograph of Kim Phuc running down the road without clothing was at first rejected by an editor at the Associated Press precisely because it showed frontal nudity.

“Pictures of nudes of all ages and sexes, and especially frontal views were an absolute no-no at the Associated Press in 1972” (Faas & Fulton, 2000:1).

The argument whether or not the photograph should be published went on until German photographer and then head of the Saigon photo department, Horst Faas, explained to the New York head office that in this case an exception must be made (Faas & Fulton, 2000:1). The ultimate decision to publish the photograph on the front page of the *New York Times* was most certainly not an easy one, since from an ethical perspective it might have been better or more appropriate to protect the girl’s privacy and not to sacrifice it. Furthermore, there was a chance that readers might feel offended (Bersak, 2006). What justified the decision to publish the image was the assumption that the news value of the photograph overrode the restrictions concerning nudity (Faas & Fulton, 2000:1).

Hariman and Lucaites (2003:41) point out that the violation of news media norms or propriety further amplifies the little girl’s pain. The image depicting the girl’s undiluted and authentic nudity somehow “shows what is hidden by what is being said in print – the damaged bodies behind the U.S. military’s daily ‘body counts,’ ‘free fire zones,’ and other euphemisms” (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003:41). Therefore, the photograph violates one set of norms but simultaneously activates another. In other words, for a moral purpose, propriety is set aside. Clearly, children should not be shown naked in public, but at the same time civilians should not be bombed and burnt. By publishing this photograph with the frontal nudity contained, one form of propriety was violated, but it allowed the disclosure of human behaviour in times of war (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003:41).

#### 4.2.10 Ut's photograph compared to similar images

Paul (2005:6) points out that the chance of a contemporary picture to be recognised as familiar and remembered is far better, if it alludes to or shows affinities with a well-known painting. On the other hand, according to Janis Edwards (2004:179), it is “not unusual for iconic images to be appropriated to new contexts, creating analogies that recall past moments and suggest future possibilities”. Iconic images such as Nick Ut's image “children fleeing a napalm strike” echo in the public consciousness due to their unique compositional structure, their subject matter or their resemblance to other remembered images.

##### 1) Ut's photograph and Munch's painting “the scream”

Norbert Bischof (1998:133) states that in his expressionistic painting “the scream”, Edvard Munch confronts the viewer with the panic and fear of the frightened person in the foreground that does not allow the viewer to keep any distance. In the same way Nick Ut's photograph captures its viewer and through frontal confrontation makes the observer look and involves him or her to some extent. Sachs-Hornbach and Schirra (2006) point out that several formal aesthetic similarities exist. These resemblances are especially visible if a cut-out of the center of Nick Ut's photograph is opposed to a cut-out of “the scream”.



Figure 19 Left: Nick Ut – cut-out of Figure 13 © Nick Ut; Associated Press; Right: Edvard Munch – cut-out of “the scream” 1892-1895. © National Gallery, Oslo

Paul (2005:6) points out that the painting “the scream” of Edvard Munch is one of few lithographs able to express the phenomenon of fear as an existential human condition in such

an impressive way. Like in Ut's photograph a scared screaming human being seeking for help moves towards his viewer with his mouth wide open. Both main characters move in a nearly identical running direction towards their observers.

Werner Haftmann (1980:67) points out that the main character of the "the scream" gives a scream of despair, which spreads like sound waves over the whole painting. Similarly the scream of the naked girl Kim Phuc seems to permeate the whole picture (Blum, 2004:32). The nakedness of the girl in Ut's photograph is an additional factor enforcing the horror depicted. Furthermore the bridge on Munch's painting can be compared to the street in Ut's photograph. Both images depict dark figures, in Ut's case it is a soldier standing in the background. Although their role cannot clearly be identified, they somehow seem rather threatening than helpful. According to Paul (2005:6) it has been researched and proven that contemporary pictures stand a greater chance to be remembered if they correspond with and refer to such 'pre-pictures'.

## **2) Edward M. Chilton: "Veritatis Vietnam"**

Iconic images that have been distributed all over the world often turn into resources in an emotionally charged public debate. This is how the Vietnam veteran and anti-Vietnam War advocate Ed Chilton (in Hariman & Lucaites, 2007:189-191) used Nick Ut's iconic war image for his artistic purposes. The image displays the napalm photograph combined with a photograph of Cardinal Spellman, former archbishop of New York, against the background of the United States flag. The image, which was created in 2000, triggered a public controversy, and the website is no longer accessible. Cardinal Spellman was a supporter of the Vietnam War and, obviously enough, it was Chilton's intention in his visual collage to expose the Cardinal and the attitudes he represented to criticism. In a personal e-mail, Chilton (2008) recalls that "at some point in my youth I decided that the most powerful form of communication is the medium we call the political cartoon". Chilton (2008) points out that he

created what he refers to as a montage or graphic for visitors of a website page dealing with a decade of historical research about the Vietnam War.



Figure 20 Edward M. Chilton: "Veritatis Vietnam", photo collage, 2000. © Edward M. Chilton

The provocation of this collage lies in the fact that Ut's iconic photograph once again touches its viewer with an aesthetical and moral disruptiveness. Once again, the image tells its viewers that things have happened that should not have happened and it therefore appeals to the public conscience. With this collage Chilton restores "the iconic photograph to its rightful place in public discourse" (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007:191). The iconic image with the naked girl in the center should not have been inserted into the image of the American flag, just as the terrified girl should not have suffered as she did. The combination of the war image, the photograph of the Cardinal with two crosses displayed on his shoulders, and the U.S. flag make for a direct clash of symbols in one collage. This image captures the trauma of the past

and reinserts the past into the present. Therefore, this collage hampers moving beyond past conflicts and historical responsibilities but rather suggests that the guilt of the past is now always connected to the flag of the United States and has become a permanent part of the American legacy (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007:190).

### 3) Zbigniew Libera: “Nepal”



Figure 21 Zbigniew Libera: “Nepal” part of the exhibition “positives” © Zbigniew Libera

The Polish artist Zbigniew Libera experiments with our collective memory insofar as he re-works iconic news photographs like Nick Ut’s iconic photograph of a naked and napalmed Vietnamese girl. The image has been transformed by the Polish artist into a positive image of a nude and smiling European girl at play. This image also called for discussions and one strong view was that some pictorial subjects are not to be dealt with in such a manner (Sandstein, 2007:94). However, by re-making such an iconic photograph, Libera successfully forces the viewer to reconsider the emotions such as repulsion or horror that are automatically triggered when viewing a tragic and horrifying image. No matter if one is impressed or

disgusted by Libera's image, the image calls for an emotional response and is therefore a powerful image that leaves a "confusing effect on the psyche [...]" (Ozuna, 2006).

#### **4.2.11 Analysis of "terror of war"**

Gaye Green (2000:20) points out that the effects of images such as Nick Ut's photograph are long-lasting and often come to represent and define an entire historical event. The photograph "children fleeing a napalm strike" still endures in the minds of people that have experienced the Vietnam War and it is also anchored in the consciousness of those for whom information about the war is second-hand. Sontag (2003:89) points out that "narratives can make us understand: photographs do something else. They haunt us".

Iconic war images such as Nick Ut's famous Vietnam photograph are capable of changing public perception and opinion. The iconic image of a naked injured screaming girl running down a road away from a napalm strike was able to change public attitude towards the war and motivate private action. By confronting citizens of the United States with that image and at the same time with the indelible character of their actions, a more sceptical perspective towards the war was the result (Hariman & Lucaties, 2003:38-39). It is a legitimate question to ask why this picture was able to captivate the public conscience because at the time the image was published the public had seen horrific images of the Vietnamese war such as a Vietnamese prisoner being shot, people's skin being burnt and a number of other images with similar content.

As examined in chapter 4.2.7 and 4.2.8 formal elements, the compositional structure of the image as well as the haunting gesture of the little girl make the photograph an aesthetically outstanding image. It is emotionally appealing and does not allow its viewer to keep distant but rather forces its observer to look and engage with the visual subject. This effect is furthermore supported by the movement of the children towards the observer and

especially due to the nakedness of the little girl in the centre of the picture (Paul, 2005:5). Although its outstanding compositional structure is more impressive than many staged photographs, Ut's picture is clearly authentic and therefore tends to be "viewed as an eyewitness account and is taken to be more reliable than verbal accounts and narratives of the same event" (Ty 2006:133).

This photograph has, according to Eleanor Ty (2006:133) often been misused, misinterpreted and adapted. As chapter 4.2.10 explains, remakes of Nick Ut's photograph differ in intention, purpose, and taste. Although the newly designed collages and pictorial compositions might seem distasteful and repulsive, it is out of the question that the repeated use and publication of this disturbing image makes its viewers recall and remember over and over again.

Sontag (2003:115) points out the importance of remembering as ignoring this photograph is "to deny one of the most powerful ways to remember the massacre". Remembering as an ethical act and remembering the victim's pain and suffering is therefore, according to Sontag (2003:115), a way of honouring the victims. According to Ty (2006:135), Kim Phuc, the little naked child in the photograph, "became symbolic of the assault on the innocent, the brutality of war or terrorism or horror". The exact identity of the girl has no effect on the impact quality of the photograph; what is important is what she stands for as a victim of senseless violence and the horror of war. Nowadays, the photograph not only tells Kim Phuc's story, but due to reproduction and different purposes of use it has become the story of all children suffering.

#### **4.2.12 Selected biographical details: Kim Phuc**

After the photograph had been taken, the photographer Nick Ut and the girl in the picture, Kim Phuc, became lifelong friends. Ut, who drove her to a hospital after the napalm

strike, later helped her to relocate to Canada (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003:45). Kim Phuc, whose name means golden happiness, spent fourteen months recovering from her third degree burns that covered half of her body and had to undergo seventeen transplantations and other operations and years of therapy. In November 1997 Director General Frederico Mayor named her a Goodwill Ambassador for the culture of peace by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco)". Speaking at the Unesco ceremony, Kim Phuc (as cited in Faas & Fulton, 2000:6) noted that he wanted "to give back in the same way that so many gave to my healing",. She also pointed out that she had forgiven but not forgotten, and she publicly pardoned the person who had launched the napalm bombing in Trang Bang in Vietnam.

"I only want you to remember the tragedy of war in order to do things to stop fighting and killing around the world. [...] Even if I could talk face to face with the pilot who dropped the bombs, I would tell him we cannot change history but we should try to do good things for the present and for the future to promote peace" (Phuc, 1996).

In 1997 she established the Kim Foundation International – healing children of war with offices in Ajax, Ontario, Canada and Chicago (Kimfoundation 2008; Faas & Fulton, 2000:6). In 1999 the book *the girl in the picture: the story of Kim Phuc, the photographer and the Vietnam War* by Denise Chong was published, telling the story of Kim Phuc's life.



Figure 22 Company logo of the Kim foundation © Nick Ut; Kim foundation

#### 4.2.13 Summary – Vietnamese image

As this chapter examined, the photograph “children fleeing a napalm strike” is one of the most disturbing and at the same time one of the aesthetically most perfect images of war. This combination of seemingly incompatible controversies, such as horror and suffering with exquisiteness and beauty might have had an additional effect on its viewer, which might have added this compelling element that keeps the observers from distancing themselves. As with Capa’s “the falling soldier” the exact moment plays a crucial role regarding the impact quality of Nick Ut’s image, which becomes evident when comparing it with the photograph that had been taken seconds after the iconic image and seeing that it is not nearly as expressive. In addition, the way the image was cut was ingenious and most probably contributed substantially to the impressiveness of the photograph.

In contrast to “the falling soldier”, the story of the characters displayed on the photograph still goes on, and a number of narratives have resulted from the image. The story around the photograph, told by the survivor of the drama, Kim Phuc, has an important effect on the photograph because the drama is now personified. Kim Phuc is alive, if marked with scars all over her body, and so is the photographer Nick Ut, who is still working as a photographer, although not in wars and conflicts. With Kim Phuc and Nick Ut the story of what had happened in Trang Bang on June 8, 1972, is still alive.

Hariman and Lucaites (2003:41) have come up with a clever phrase saying that this is “a picture that shouldn’t be shown of an event that shouldn’t have happened [...]“What happened that day was terrible and shocking, just as the photograph itself, but it helped drawing worldwide attention to Vietnam and called for action.

After the examination of the photograph from different perspectives it can be said that although the exact moment the photograph has been taken is of importance, the main reason

of the photograph's achievement of an iconic status is because of its outstanding compositional structure combined with meaningful formal elements.

Furthermore, it can safely be assumed that the story behind the photograph, the circumstances that led to the situation of which the photograph originated and the fact that the little girl is still alive today is of great importance and is amongst others a main reason for the photograph's iconic status.

### 4.3 Sam Nzima's image of Hector Pieterse



Figure 23 Sam Nzima: Mbuyisa Nkita Makhubu carrying Hector Zolile Pieterse bleeding from his mouth, who was shot by the police during the student protest against Afrikaans as the school language; Running alongside crying is Hector's older sister Antoinette Musi, Soweto. June 16, 1976. © Sam Nzima / South Photographs

### 4.3.1 Short biography of Sam Nzima

Masana Sam Nzima was born 8 August, 1934 in Lillydale, a small village in Bushbuck Ridge, where he grew up on a farm (n.a., 2008b). Being fascinated by cameras and the process through which photographs are produced, Nzima bought his own camera, a Kodak Box Brownie, while he was still at school. After he made his first experiences working as a photographer at the Kruger National Park, where he charged people to have their photograph taken by him, he was working as a gardener and a waiter but he was always photographing on his days off. Inspired by the articles of the then *Rand Daily Mail* editor Allister Sparks, Nzima decided to become a photojournalist. In 1968 after Nzima had been freelancing for *The World*, he was offered a fulltime job as a photojournalist and accepted. On June 16, 1976 he got famous for the photograph of Hector Pieterse during the Soweto uprising (n.a., 2008b).

According to Simbao (2007:2), Nzima's name as a photojournalist was practically unknown. His famous photograph of Hector Pieterse has often spuriously been ascribed to the photographer Peter Magubane. The photograph was sold and resold thousands of times but Nzima received no more than a 100-Rand bonus and the congratulations of his colleagues and the editors at *The World* until more than 20 years afterwards, when he finally obtained the copyright for his photograph. He obtained the copyright in 1999 when the Independent Group bought the Argus Group of newspapers which *The World* belonged to (Marinovich & Silva, 2001:133-134).

Nzima, who went into hiding in the Transvaal Province (today known as Mpumalanga) shortly after the publication of his iconic image, became the owner of the Nzima bottle store in Lillydale in 1977, close to the Mozambique border. He later served as a member of parliament in the homeland Gazankulu government. He was then running a school of photography in Bushbuckridge, where he also serves as a district health councillor (Davie, 2001; Polandt-McCormick, 2006:1).

With the photograph of Hector Pieterse, Sam Nzima has taken what is the possibly most famous South African picture of all time.

### **4.3.2 Apartheid**

Apartheid was a system of policies and laws of racial segregation in South Africa (Tyson, 1993:9). It began in 1948, when the National Party, representing nationalist Afrikaners, came to power. The rise of apartheid in 1948 seems to be complex and historians are not in agreement upon the way apartheid policy originated. While some believe that it was linked to the evolution of South African capitalism and its reliance on cheap black labour, others claim it was a result of earlier prejudices and policies imposed by former settling colonial powers. What is most likely is that it was a combination of different factors, such as the land dispossession, colonial conquests and economic impoverishment. Apartheid enforced segregation aggressively and led to a systematic deterioration of the situation and status of black people in South Africa. The then leaders of the National Party, Daniel Malan and Hendrik Verwoerd introduced and shaped apartheid. South Africa's people were classified into racial groups (black, coloured, white and Indian or Asian). Black South Africans were stripped of their citizenship and they became citizens of self-governing tribal Bantustans, also known as homelands. Mostly, these homelands were located in economically unproductive small areas of the country, away from the cities. Through these identified homelands and the restriction of the inhabitants on voting in South Africa, the government also segregated public services such as education and medical care. Apartheid ended in 1994 when Nelson Mandela was elected President of South Africa in the first democratic elections. Today, South Africa has a very progressive constitution, which grants human and civil rights to all people (Tyson, 1993:9-12; n.a., 2008c). It is not exactly known how many people lost their lives during apartheid and in the fight against this repressive system.

### 4.3.3 Journalism and war photography during apartheid

After the nationalist government came into power in 1948 in South Africa, many nationalist speeches across the country criticised the English press for being hostile and foreign. Most of the English-language papers were still run by British-born editors and values, “especially those concerning independence and freedom” (Tyson, 1993:11) were shared with newspapers in the English-speaking world. Tyson (1993:12) points out that after the English press had been criticised sharply for not supporting the system, political action followed. The so called sins of the English-language press were investigated; Legislation against the freedom of speech followed and then censorship laws were established. Then came waves of harassment, threat and “dirty tricks” (Tyson, 1993:12). From the end of the 1980s even more and stricter media regulations were introduced. The apartheid government not only undermined intellectual life but also censored books, radio and television programs. Censorship “reached absurd proportions, exemplified by the banning of the children’s book *Black Beauty* and the tardy introduction of television in 1976” (n.a., 2008c).

According to André Wiesner (2000:7), during apartheid, the photographers’ confrontation with traumatic and violent situations and the exposure of these events to a wider world played a key role in effecting the end of the old government. One of the war photographers from *Drum*, Peter Magubane, states that it was not easy to be on an assignment during apartheid:

“We were not allowed to carry a camera in the open if the police were involved, so I often had to hide my camera to get the pictures I wanted. On occasion I hid my camera in a hollowed-out Bible, firing with a cable release in my pocket. At another time, at a trial in Zeerust from which the press were banned, I hid my Leica 3G in a hollowed-out loaf of bread and pretended to eat while I was actually shooting pictures; when the bread went down, I bought milk and hid the camera in the carton. And I got away with it. You had to think fast and be fast to survive in those days” (n.a., 2008b).

During apartheid it was not unusual that journalists and photographers were arrested and interrogated and sometimes they were even put in solitary confinement and into jail (n.a., 2008a).

#### **4.3.4 Soweto uprising – June 16, 1976**

On June 16, thousands of students from three local schools<sup>3</sup>, Belle Higher Primary, Phefeni Junior Secondary and Morris Isaacson High, planned a protest march to the Orlando football stadium to hold a meeting. The uprising was caused by the government's decision to make Afrikaans the compulsory language of instruction in all South African schools. Afrikaans was regarded as the language of the oppressor, the language used by magistrates, the police and the Boers (Davie, 2002). From mid-May 1976 about a dozen schools went on strike. The students never arrived at the stadium, as the police intercepted them along the way, to be specific in Moema Street, and opened gunfire (Marinovich & Silva, 2001:83-84). Within 36 hours of the start of the march by about 10 000 pupils protesting against Afrikaans, 29 students were dead and 250 injured (Newscast, 2006).

Photographer Sam Nzima remembers the day that was about to change South Africa's destiny and his personal career as a photographer. In an interview with the *Mail & Guardian* (Cartiller, 2006), Nzima, at the time of the interview aged 71, recalls what had happened that day in Soweto: "They were all happy. They were carrying placards, not guns. The shooting was just at random."

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<sup>3</sup> According to a newscast from June 16, 1976 (in Radio Diaries, 2006), students from five schools in Soweto, intending to protest the Afrikaans issue.



Figure 24 Sam Nzima: Marching kids, protesting against the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in schools. June 16, 1976. © Sam Nzima / South Photographs



Figure 25 Schoolchildren protesting against the use of Afrikaans. June 16, 1976. © Bailey's African History Archives

Nzima later told South Africa's *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* that the march on June 16 was peaceful from the beginning (Purtilo, 1999:22).

“They were carrying placards on which were [sic!] written: ‘We are not educated but certificated,’ ‘Afrikaans must be abolished,’ ‘We are being fed the crumbs of education’” (in Purtilo, 1999:22).

According to Nzima’s statement to the Commission, the police gave the students three minutes to disperse and when the students refused to leave, one of the officers “pulled out his firearm, and he shot directly at the students. Now all hell broke loose. All these policemen were shooting at the students randomly” (in Purtilo, 1999:22). Bongi Mkhabela (2006), who was one of the students protesting on June 16, recalls:

“I’ve never seen that many police. And you didn’t only have police at that time, you had the Defence Force. [...] I don’t know why they decided to shoot. I can only think it was black life and it didn’t count. Life of African people had always been cheap.”

Another member of the student crowd, Nthato Motlana (2006) remembered that “they [the police] intervened by, first of all, setting dogs. And I saw these police dogs set onto these kids”.

The exact circumstances that led to the Soweto uprising are not fully known even today and have often been misrepresented (Davie, 2002). There is for instance, according to Davie (2002), a still on-going debate about the extent to which student organisations were involved in the lead-up to the uprising and exactly what role the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) played. Chief curator of the Hector Pieterse Museum in Soweto, Ali Hlongwane (in Davie, 2002) points out that “the re-representation of the story is an ongoing process”, with new puzzle pieces being discovered and filling the gaps.

#### 4.3.5 The Hector Pieterse-photograph – history of origin

Antoinette Sithole, Hector Pieterse's 17-year-old sister at the time, recalls the happenings of June 16, 1976:

"On the day [...] there were younger children at the march who shouldn't have been there. I don't know why they were there - Hector was one of them. There were random shots, we were not familiar with teargas shots. [...] I came out of hiding and saw Hector, and I called him to me. He was looking around as I called his name, trying to see who was calling him. I waved at him, he saw me and came over to me. I asked him what he was doing here, we looked around, there was a shot, and I ran back to my hiding place. When I looked out I couldn't see Hector, I waited, I was afraid, where was he?" (as cited in Davie, 2001).

Sam Nzima was assigned by *The World* newspaper, which was later banned and closed down in 1977, to cover the student protests. He was in the middle of the student crowd when police opened fire. Hector Pieterse was gunned down by a bullet to his head. A student colleague, Mbuyisa Makhubu, picked him up to take him to the hospital when Nzima took six shots with his Pentax SL. The third shot turned out to be the one to achieve iconic status. It shows the lifeless body of Hector Pieterse carried by Makhubu whose face is torn by pain; Hector's distraught sister Antoinette is running alongside (Cartiller, 2006). Hector Pieterse was placed into Sophie Tema's (a colleague of Nzima) Volkswagen Beetle and taken to the Phomolong Clinic, but it was too late and the boy died (Marinovich & Silva, 2001:133; Venter, 2007:14).



Figure 26 Sam Nzima: Makhubu is taking Hector Pieterse to a car to bring him to a hospital, Soweto. June 16, 1976. © Sam Nzima / South Photographs

Nzima recalls that he removed the film from his camera after he had taken the pictures and hid it in his sock. Hours later it was to be seen on the front page of *The World* with the caption "The schoolkid killed in today's riot in Soweto ... [at] the time of going to press ... had not been identified" (in Simbao, 2007:54), the next day it appeared in British newspapers, and then the image was published around the world. The image raised an international outcry against apartheid. With this photograph, the world got to know about the brutal repression of the student uprising of June 16, 1976, in Soweto. For Nzima the publication of the photograph not only brought him fame but he was also harassed by the police. He left his job and went into hiding. Mbuyisa Makhubu, the 18-year-old student carrying Hector Pieterse, disappeared a few days later and never returned. His mother told the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* that she received a letter from him in 1978 from Nigeria but she had not heard

from him since. It is not known what happened to him or where he might be staying or whether he is alive (Venter, 2007:14-16; Davie, 2001).

June 16 became the day symbolising the resistance to the brutality of the apartheid regime. In 1995, June 16 was declared National Youth Day, a public holiday calling for official public rituals of commemoration and celebrations through which South Africans honour young people and give thought to their needs (Cartiller, 2006; Marshall, 2006:151).

Although it is widely believed that Hector Pieterse was the first child to be killed and he is often referred to as the first casualty, Davie (2002) points out that Hector was not the first child to die in the Soweto uprising. It is not widely known that another boy, called Hastings Ndlovu, was in fact the first child to be shot during the student protest on June 16, 1976. When Hastings died, there were no photographers nearby and his name never became well-known.

#### **4.3.6 The authenticity of the photograph**

The question about whether or not the photograph depicting Hector Pieterse is authentic has not been raised or has at least not been found by the author of this thesis in any reviewed literature. Similar to Nick Ut's photograph "children fleeing a napalm strike" a cutting of persons - in this case Mbuyisa Makhubu's feet have been cut - which can be interpreted as an indicator of a hasty and not pre-conceptualised origin of the image. Furthermore, on the basis of Nzima's photograph hundreds of eyewitnesses have recalled what happened; one of them is Antoinette Sithole, Pieterse's sister, who is depicted in the photograph, running alongside. The fact that the question about the photograph's authenticity has not, or at least not often, been asked can be interpreted as another indicator for an authentic situation being recorded in the iconic photograph.

#### 4.3.7 Formal perspective and compositional structure<sup>4</sup>

Sam Nzima took six shots of the scene in Soweto, June 16, 1976. The one photograph that achieved iconic status was cut, so that the background was basically cut out and the three children are filling the whole picture. In the right lower corner the shadows of the children are visible and are connected with each other.

The strong impact of Nzima's photograph might partly be a result of the cutting, because it moves the three figures into the center of the photograph and lets them fill out the whole image and cuts out the student crowd in the background that might have deflected the viewers' attention. On the other hand, viewing the uncut version of the photograph, the observer gets an idea of the possible cause of horror and suffering, because a seemingly anxious crowd of young people is visible.

Regarding the compositional structure of the photograph, Mbuyisa Makhubu appears in the exact center of the image, dividing the rest of the image into two vertical halves. In his arms, he is carrying Hector Pieteron, who divides the photograph horizontally. In combination, Makhubu's and Pieteron's form a cross and divide the photograph into four parts of very similar size. In the left half of the photograph Antoinette Sithole, Pieteron's sister, is running in her school uniform, slightly behind Makhubu; she is holding up her right hand with her fingers spread. A diagonal line connecting Sithole's spread hand, her head and Makhubu's head is evolving. In the right part of the photograph a diagonal line connecting Makhubu's head, the head of the dying Hector Pieteron, and the shadows of the three students in the lower right corner can be drawn. Parallel to this diagonal line another line appears, connecting Makhubu's right leg with Pieteron's upper legs and Sithole's shoulder and neck.

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<sup>4</sup> The iconic photograph of Hector Pieteron has not yet been discussed regarding its formal perspective or its compositional structure in any scientific literature.

Due to those fluent lines in the photograph, the composition of the image seems extremely accurate and a well constructed overall picture emerges. The shadow in the lower right corner of the photograph could be misinterpreted as the shadow of two people holding each other. This aspect suggesting harmony is, of course, in a sharp contrast with the three main characters depicted in the photograph, thereby enhancing the overall effect of disruption and utter pain and sadness. This inherent contrast, which will be unconsciously taken in by the viewers, is also a strong indictment asking who is responsible for the loss of harmony and the upsurge of violence.

In the upper right corner a person dressed in white is visible, but it is not fully clear what role the figure has. However, it seems significant that she has turned her back, and her face is directed towards the area where the three characters have been running from. Thus she connects the foregrounded scene of agony to its source. In a way she also introduces a second time level as the invisible background strongly connects to the time before the incident in the photograph when the deadly shot was fired. Her stance also implies that the violence in the background is still going on, riveting her attention and preventing her from following the main characters with her eyes.

Similar to “children fleeing a napalm strike” by Nick Ut, many narratives have resulted from the photograph of Hector Pieterse. For example, Antoinette Sithole is now working at the Hector Pieterse museum, but also many other students survived apartheid and are now telling their experiences and share their memories of what had happened on June 16, 1976.

#### **4.3.8 An iconic image**

Ruth Purtilo (1999:22) points out that “no image captures the brutality and horror of apartheid rule like this heart-wrenching photo by [...] Sam Nzima”. The picture editor at the

South African daily newspaper, the *Sowetan*, Paul Velasco, points out that the picture remains one of “the single most important images to emerge from the South African struggle” (in Purtilo, 1999:22). Tyson (1993:109) adds that “in the young faces of those two [Antoinette Sithole and Mbuyisa Makhubu] is mirrored the shock and tragedy of all that happened in Soweto that day ... and in the days to follow”.

According to Greslé (2006:13) certain photographs that have achieved iconic status “come to represent an event, an era or an emotion. [...] These particular photographs capture [...] humanity in all its terrifying vulnerability”. As an example of such a memorable photograph Greslé (2006:13) mentions Sam Nzima’s image of Hector Pieterse.

According to Sontag (1980:19) „the quality of feeling, including moral outrage, that people can muster in response to photographs of the oppressed [...] also depends on the degree of their familiarity with these images”. What Sontag (1980:22) explains through her own experiences with war images and photographs of conflict is that an event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it could have been without seeing these images. Photographs are therefore not only valuable because they transport information, but also because they are somehow interconnected to a wide range of emotions. It is therefore believed that the photograph of Hector Pieterse has achieved iconic status especially in South Africa due to its proximity to the event, whereas it is believed that the image does not reach such a high awareness level in other, more distant countries.

#### **4.3.9 Nzima’s photograph compared to similar images**

Kerkham Simbao (2007:54) points out that Nzima’s photograph reframed history “in the processes of healing and commemoration and in the shaping of a new consciousness in the lives of today’s youth”. Nzima’s famous photograph has often been reproduced as protest material during apartheid. It is an image that ties in with the well-known Christian motif of

the pieta: Christ's mother Mary holding her crucified son in her arms. Such iconic images have a greater chance to be remembered by a majority because of their resemblance to other known images.

#### **4.3.10 Hector Pieterse's image as protest material**

In the 1980s the image was used as protest material that "flattened the image both literally and metaphorically" (Simbao, 2007:54). In the 1990s the image was rearticulated in an artistic way in a so-called post-protest. It was then interpreted and examined from different perspectives. The shadow behind the three main characters that had been largely omitted in former protest images serves "as a symbolic framework for the re-reading of this photograph" (Simbao, 2007:54), which was once again brought to life at the thirtieth anniversary in June 2006. However, although the famous image of Pieterse was recognised by the majority of South Africans, only few were familiar with Sam Nzima, who had gone into hiding after he was harassed by the apartheid police for taking this image.

Until today the photograph of Hector Pieterse has been endlessly reproduced onto T-shirts, on posters and front pages of newspapers and has thereby become a visual synonym of June 16. However, Simbao (2007:54) raises the question if such reproduction and re-usage of an image has a negative effect on the reception and interpretation of the photograph. The question to be asked is if the image loses its impact because of its assimilation into other visuals. According to Richards (in Simbao, 2007:54) powerful images can be vulnerable, because what they depict can suffer from overexposure and then leave a dulling feeling.

When Sam Nzima's photograph was used by anti-apartheid protestors, small details and the potential for different interpretations were not given attention in this context since the main focus was to express a message. As Albie Sachs (in Simbao, 2007:57) points out, the

extraordinary power of this photograph lies “in its ability to expose the ambiguities and paradoxes of a particularly horrendous moment in apartheid history”.



Figure 27 The photograph of Hector Pieterse had been silkscreened onto many T-shirts during the liberation struggle. © Sue Williamson



Figure 28 A one-dimensional version of the Hector Pieterse photograph on a poster produced at the 1984 Alexander Youth Congress Screen Training Project in Johannesburg. © Courtesy of South African historical archives. Wits University

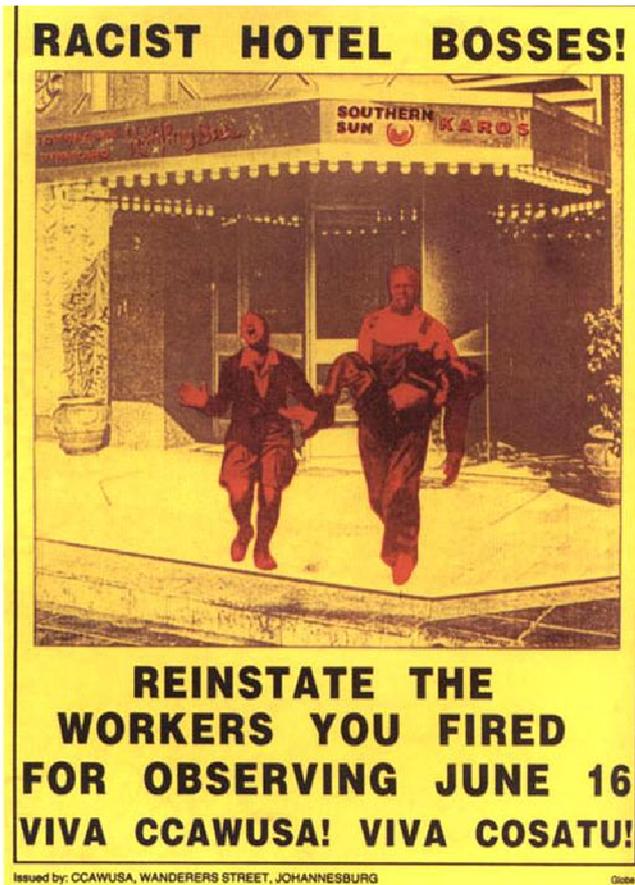


Figure 29 Catering and allied workers' union of South Africa: Incorporation of the Hector Pieterse photograph in a 1989 protest poster. The original shadow behind the characters in the photograph has been omitted. © Courtesy of South African historical archives. Wits University

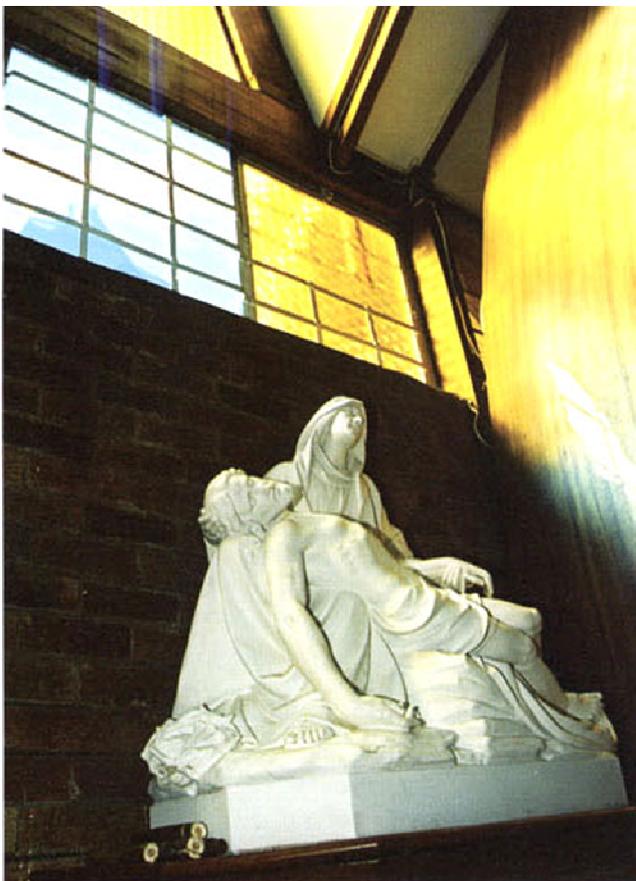


Figure 30 Regina Mundi Church in Soweto. The statue depicting Mary holding Christ's lifeless body can be compared to Nzima's photograph in terms of composition which reinforces the iconic status of the famous image. © Ruth Simbao. June 16, 2006

#### **4.3.11 Nzima's photograph and the "pietà" in Soweto**

The "pietà", an image of suffering in which mother Mary is kneeling down hunkered over Christ's dead body is evocative of Sam Nzima's photograph in which Hector Pieteron is lying in the arms of Makhubu. A comparison of the three-dimensional pieta inside the Regina Mundi church with Sam Nzima's photograph suggests that the figures in both cases form a triangular composition. As Sabine Marshall (2006:157) points out, the Hector Pieteron image adapts and modifies the Christian story of salvation. All the emotions of suffering, fear and horror are projected "onto one person, whose suffering represents that of all those nameless and faceless others" (Marshall, 2006:157). The symbolic and emotionally charged image of Hector Pieteron became, according to Marshall (2006:158) an icon of the liberation struggle that comprised the oppression of the apartheid regime and the fortitude for freedom in one single photograph. The photograph not only owes its iconic status to its content but it immediately captured the public consciousness because it reminds people of a well-known Christian iconography and follows a familiar compositional schema.

#### **4.3.12 The Hector Pieteron museum and memorial**

At the corner of Khumalo and Pela Streets in Orlando West, Soweto, where Hector Pieteron had been shot on June 16, 1976, at the beginning of the Soweto student uprising lie the Hector Pieteron museum and memorial. According to Darren Newbury (2005:275) the Soweto uprising and the death of Hector Pieteron and other schoolchildren like him clearly warrants commemoration, but "without Sam Nzima's photograph of the 13-year-old [sic!] Hector being carried through the streets, the museum would not take the form it does."

The museum is a two-storey red-brick building with noticeably irregularly shaped windows. As the community requested, the museum is in keeping with the houses surrounding it. The museum follows the chronology of events leading to 16 June, 1976,

starting with tensions being built up amongst Soweto's schools, with one school after the other going out on strike (Davie, 2002). According to the curator of the Hector Pieterse Museum, Ali Hlongwane (in Davie, 2002), after the museum has opened and the exhibition has been completed, it will be continued to record people's stories and add them to displays:

“We may get someone come into the Museum, look at the photograph and say: ‘This is me’, or ‘I know that face’. We will then record and archive their experiences” (as cited in Davie, 2002).



Figure 31 The Hector Pieterse museum in Soweto.  
© MastBaba



Figure 32 The Hector Pieterse memorial – “To honour the youth who gave their lives in the struggle for freedom and democracy” © Globetrotter

The interior rooms mainly consist of red brick walls, with some areas being either plastered or painted in black and white, and some left in grey concrete. Large windows at the top of the ramps in the high-ceiled rooms allow views of significant sites around the suburb – Orlando football stadium, the Orlando police station and several of the schools in the suburb. A slightly different version of Nzima’s photograph titled “eyewitness accounts” is enlarged and placed on the wall at the top of the second ramp of the museum (Davie, 2002). As on this photograph a crowd of students is visible in the background, it makes the main figures appear less dominant, which is assumedly a reason why this photograph has not been chosen for publication and has not achieved iconic status (Simbao, 2007:61). One walled-in room in the museum is the Death Register, a room that records the names of the children who died over the period from June 1976 to the end of the year 1977 (Davie, 2002).



Figure 33 Sam Nzima: "eyewitness accounts", Soweto. June 16, 1976. © Sam Nzima / South Photographs

#### 4.3.13 Summary – South African image

As this chapter examined, the photograph of Sam Nzima, depicting Hector Pieteron being carried by Mbuyisa Makhubu with Pieteron's sister Antoinette Sithole has achieved iconic status. The reasons why this image is anchored in the collective consciousness are of a different nature. On the one hand, the political situation, June 16, 1976, as the exact day of the student uprising in Soweto, and the exact moment of the three main characters running towards the photographer Nzima and its viewer play a crucial role. The cruelty and the inhumanity of the happenings of that day evoke emotions of horror and antipathy as well as commiseration and sadness at the same time. It has often been cited that a picture can tell more than a thousand words. However, with this image, the history of origin, the story behind the picture is just as important to know. Through the present research process, the author of this paper has experienced herself that once the circumstances and the background of what exactly happened on June 16, 1976, in the township of Soweto are known to the viewer, the photograph addresses its viewer more hauntingly and it develops an even stronger emotional appeal. The photograph clearly depicts the horror of apartheid.

The events of 16 June, 1976, and the following months encouraged many people in South Africa to stand up against the oppression of the apartheid government and help bring

down the system of racial discrimination. Venter (2007:50) points out that there had been a quiet period before 16 June 1976, because political protests were largely crushed by the government. However, June 16 motivated people to fight for their rights and a lot of people became politically active. Therefore, the youth uprising in 1976 can be regarded as a turning point in South Africa's history; 16 June, 1976, marks the beginning of the end of apartheid.

However, as it has been examined, the photograph does not only owe its iconic status to its content but has achieved it also because it ties in with a well known Christian iconography. Hector Pieterse is the one person, onto whom all horror and emotions are projected, standing for the pain and the suffering of all the other combatants. The photograph's adaption with the narrative of the Christian salvation, which is well known, and its imitation of a well-known Christian iconography reinforced the photograph's potential to engrave itself in the collective consciousness (Marshall, 2006:158).

A third reason that partly explains the photograph's iconic status is the commemoration of the youth uprising. June 16 is now celebrated as *National youth day*, a public holiday on which the sacrifices and contributions of the students to the struggle against the oppression of the apartheid regime are being memorised. The emergence of the Hector Pieterse museum and memorial is another indication of the importance of the commemoration of the student uprising.

According to Hlongwane (2008:141), curator of the Hector Pieterse memorial and museum,

“the memory and place of the June 16 1976 uprisings in South Africa's political consciousness is probably the most contested societal arena of memory and a representative platform of memory and history as dialogue about the past and present”.