

Affective imagery and collective memory: Discursive analysis of iconic images of trauma

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Affective imagery and pictorial representations help constitute our memory of wars, and human sufferings. From the Vietnamese girl running naked from the napalm, to the televised killing of the Palestinian child Mohammed el Dorrah, to the collapse of New York's Twin Towers, our memory of iconic events is inevitably constructed. Nevertheless, the meaning of visual images is intensely constructed, by complex intertwined relationships binding the image depicter, the nature of the news media, the politics delimiting its scope and projection, the way it is interpreted by specific readers/viewers, and the moment of its reading.

Interrogating the different aspects that turns dramatic images of pain and suffering into memorable icons of specific events, yet unable by-and-large to subvert those events, this research tackles the impact of both: (1) the aesthetic nature of painful imagery and the "temporality" of its mediatization; and (2) the politicized fashion in which traumatic images/memories are mediated on "collective memory". While the notion of "collective memory" rests on the metaphors constituting the means by which society preserves and misplaces its information about the past (Edy, 1999, p. 72), it argues, the artistic nature and mediatization of affective images, together with its politicization, not only forge, manipulate and distorts collective memory, but also fail to undermine the policies that caused them or promote democratic values.

Analyzing two of the rare instances when affective images could spark a positive response, I conduct critical discursive analysis on: the Magic Bullet (1972) photo and video representing a Vietnamese girl running naked from the napalm burns, and the video images of Mohammed el Dorrah (2000) who was killed by the Israelis at the outset of the Second Palestinian Intifada. Those images are especially selected for being prominent symbolic icons of resistance for challenging the mainstream discourse at two different historical moments. This analysis aims to illustrate how the inherent ambiguity of affective images, their aesthetic nature, mediatization and politicization, failed to create a durable form of collective memory or promote democratic values.

Key Words: Iconic pictures, Napalm Girl, Mohammed el Dorrah, Palestinian Intifada, collective memory, mediatization, 9/11, Twin Towers.