

Book Reviews



No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy. ROBERT HARIMAN and JOHN LOUIS LUCAITES. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007. 419 p. ISBN-13: 978-0-226-31606-2.

The book *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* examines the creation, dissemination, impact, and continued use of iconic American photographs; images that are instantly recognizable by the general public and capable of evoking memories of particular events in American history. Think of the Vietnam War and you may recall the image of a naked girl, the victim of a napalm attack, running screaming down a road in Vietnam. Think of the end of World War II, and you may remember the much-reproduced photograph of a sailor bending a nurse backwards in a passionate kiss in Times Square. Both of these images, and seven others, are considered by authors Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites to be iconic photographs, and they are discussed at length in their book.

Each of the eight chapters of this scholarly text examines one or two iconic images in regard to certain themes of communication and gender, as well as how they relate to aspects of American identity. The authors include a history of each image, including the photographer, the news magazine (if any) that employed them, and how the image came into being. In addition, each photograph's composition is analyzed, explaining why it is so successful in capturing an entire war, or famine, or even just a feeling in society at the time it was created. By setting each photograph in its historical and cultural context, the reader is thus able to understand what the image represented at that time for its viewers. The two authors, both professors of communication in the United States (Robert Hariman is a professor of communications at Northwestern University and John Louis Lucaites is an associate professor of communication and culture at Indiana University), show how certain compositions from art history (such as classic mother and child poses) have appeared frequently in the visual record. They also discuss how imagery from the world of contemporary fine art, advertising and popular culture, such as *The Simpsons*,

has taken on a life of its own. The authors provide examples for each of the images they discuss to illustrate how the photographs have been altered and adapted for new purposes decades after their initial publication.

Discussion of the photographs begins in chapter three, “The Borders of the Genre,” with *Migrant Mother* (1936), by famed Farm Security Administration photographer Dorothea Lange, and *Times Square Kiss* (1945), by Alfred Eisenstaedt. Lange is one of America’s greatest photographers and is the only woman to be featured in the book. Her work, the incredibly moving portrait of a woman, impoverished and made destitute by the Great Depression, surrounded by her two young children, with a baby in her arms, shows what the authors feel is a classic example of the gendered roles of representation in visual culture: woman with her children (maternity), concerned for their survival (duty), showing anxiety, panic, and fear in her face (emotion).

The *Times Square Kiss* photograph, on the other hand, depicts traditional heterosexual roles of gender in 1945 New York. The man is clearly the aggressor in the photograph, with the woman bending (not exactly comfortably) with the kiss, and they are shown by their uniforms to be employed in traditional roles for their genders: he is a sailor and she is a nurse. The impromptu mood of the kiss and the festive scene around them also depict the nation-wide feeling of freedom and relief that the war was over.

The fourth chapter, “Performing Civic Identity,” examines two photographs of flag raising, one by Marines at Iwo Jima in 1945, and a more recent example, *Three Firefighters Raising an American Flag* (2001), at Ground Zero in the aftermath of 9/11. While the Iwo Jima image is certainly well-known and was recently the subject of a feature film by Clint Eastwood, the reviewer was not familiar with the 9/11 shot. Perhaps not enough time has passed to determine whether or not the 2001 image will “stand the test of time,” and be remembered and reused for decades to come like its 1945 counterpart; its similarities in theme and composition, however, make it worthy of analysis next to the more recognizable Iwo Jima shot. These images speak to the traditional gender role of men working rather than reacting or emoting, and highlight the qualities of teamwork and logic, typically associated with male occupations (one a group of Marines, the other firemen).

Authors Hariman and Lucaites get into a discussion of gender and emotion in the fifth chapter, “Dissent and Emotional Management.” In this chapter, they focus only on the photograph *Kent State University Massacre* (1970), which depicts a young woman crying out in shock and angst as she crouches down by the body of a slain student, shot dead by National Guardsmen. Issues explored in this chapter include why a woman’s reaction seems so much more powerful and acceptable than if it were a man crying out in grief. The image at Kent State, like many others discussed in *No Caption Needed*, is compared to other images taken at the same event. Hariman and Lucaites provide in-depth explanation as to why the iconic image became the more memorable

and evocative photograph.

Chapter six, "Trauma and Public Memory," focuses on *Accidental Napalm* (1970), the image of a young and naked Vietnamese girl, having just been bombed with napalm, running down a road in rural Vietnam. The gender issue is examined here again, as are the nudity, age, and ethnicity of the victims. The subject of the war in Vietnam and how it continues to shape American identity is also reviewed at great length, as well as how this photograph represented a turning point in public opinion toward the war. The authors do an excellent job of relating photojournalism during the Vietnam War to the coverage of America's current war in Iraq.

The photograph of a lone man standing in front of a line of Chinese tanks during the Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing in 1989 is the subject of the seventh chapter, which is entitled "Liberal Representation and Global Order." This chapter and its subject differ from the others in that the US was not directly involved in the protests at Tiananmen Square. The authors discuss how photojournalism and photographs such as this help to transmit global politics.

The final chapter, "Ritualizing Modernity's Gamble," examines two photographs: *Explosion of the Hindenburg* (1936), and a photograph of a more recent disaster, the NASA photograph, *Explosion of the Challenger* (1986). Hariman and Lucaites examine these two emblematic photographs, taken fifty years apart, as illustrations of "the paradoxical relationship between progress and risk, or control and catastrophe" (p. 244). With so many discussions about global warming and the depletion of fossil fuels, these two photographs continue to demonstrate the tenuous relationship of humankind with the Earth.

Most interesting to the reviewer was how some of these iconic images have been used in the decades after their creation (seventy years in the case of Lange's *Migrant Mother* and the Hindenburg explosion photograph). Examples featured in *No Caption Needed* include commentary on current American injustices and betrayals, such as aspects of *Accidental Napalm* being used to show Vietnamese girls working in Nike sweatshops, as well as the torture of prisoners by soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Some of the iconic images have been reused throughout the decades to elicit response on civic issues, as when the classic American 1945 image of the sailor kissing the nurse in Times Square was referenced in a 1996 *New Yorker* cover illustration that showed two male sailors kissing. The title story in the *New Yorker* was, of course, on the topic of homosexuals in the military.

Also relevant in showing how these emblematic photographs continue to play a role in visual culture are more pop culture references, such as a dorm room poster showing the Hindenburg bursting into flames below a captioned expletive, and a still from an episode of *The Simpsons*, when Homer eats a potato chip replica of the Marines planting the Stars and Stripes at Iwo Jima. That these images continue to appear in popular culture twenty, thirty, or even

seventy years after they were first taken, speak to their symbolic nature. Hariman and Lucaites argue that the original images are strengthened by this reinterpretation and that their iconicity stems, in part, from their ability to be reused for many different purposes without losing their initial impact.

As is evident from the images used, this book focuses solely on American content. As a Canadian reviewer, questions came to mind while reading the book including, do Canadians relate to these American images in the same way that Americans do, and what examples are there of iconic Canadian photographs? Given the amount of American media available to Canadians, and the artistic quality and visual impact of the photos themselves, they are, of course, known by Canadians, but are they illustrations of the American psyche only or do they echo what Canadians feel? The reason that these photographs are iconic is not just that they are beautifully composed (whether they have been posed, like Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* or more spontaneous, such as *Kent State University Massacre* by John Filo), but also that they illustrate often intangible states of emotion, such as the feeling of euphoria and relief that people, especially servicemen, no doubt felt at the end of World War II, or the disbelief in America when National Guardsmen shot and killed unarmed student protestors at Kent State.

No Caption Needed uses archival photographs to examine and illustrate complex subjects such as history, communication, gender, emotion, and culture. Certainly, a way to dissect the American identity is to examine its totemic images, and the authors have done a wonderful job of researching and drawing upon a variety of sources to explore the continued life of these photographs. This book is quite academic and dense, and although very interesting, a reader with a background in media and cultural studies may glean even more from it.

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