Public Identity and Collective Memory in U.S. Iconic Photography: The Image of "Accidental Napalm"

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Thirty years after the fact, the Vietnam War continues to haunt the collective memory of the United States. One of the primary embodiments of that haunting is the image of a naked girl running down a road toward the camera, screaming in pain and terror from the napalm burns on her back and arms. The photograph, often dubbed "accidental napalm," provides a complex construction of viewer response that was uniquely suited to the conditions of representation in the Vietnam era, while it reflects a continuing struggle within public culture since that time. In this essay, we offer a close reading of the photograph as a performance of public judgment, and we explore its subsequent history of appropriation. We argue that the photograph functions as a powerful emotional and intentional resource for animating moral deliberation and democratic dissent as it mediates the "stranger relationality" central to public engagement. At the same time, the image also motivates dominant narrative responses that reinscribe liberal ideology to inhibit collective memory and public accountability. This ambivalence in the circulation of the iconic image is grounded in fundamental affinities between photographic representation, public culture, and mass media.

The growing scholarly attention to visual culture has special significance for those who study mass media, which now are using ever more sophisticated technologies of visual imaging. For the most part, however, the analysis of visual media has been guided by a hermeneutics of suspicion (Jay, 1993; Postman, 1985; Peters, 1997). From this perspective, it is unlikely that a visual practice could ever be equal or superior to discursive media for enacting public reason or democratic deliberation, or that the constitution of identity through the continual reproduction of conventional images could be emancipatory. Indeed, this skepticism imbues the two most important theoretical perspectives on the relationship between discourse and society: ideology critique and the theory of the public sphere.

Although Jürgen Habermas's account of the rise and fall of an ideal public culture has many critics, few have challenged his assumption that deliberative rationality is subverted by visual display. For Habermas, the verdict is clear: when the public assumed its specific form, "it was the bourgeois
reading public ... rooted in the world of letters" (1989, p. 85), and the subsequent disintegration of that culture was accomplished in part through the rise of the electronic mass media and its displacement of public debate by political spectacles. That said, there is also a strategy of reformulation, employed most recently in the pages of this journal by Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples (2002), which grants the necessity of a public sphere and considers how such a culture could work if it were freed of the constraints of this or that assumption in the classical model. Thus, DeLuca and Peeples argue that in a televangel public sphere, corporate image making is balanced at times by a subaltern staging of image events which demonstrate “[c]ritique through spectacle, not critique versus spectacle” (2002, p. 134; see also DeLuca, 1999).

We want to go a step further to suggest that the public sphere depends on visual rhetorics to maintain not only its play of deliberative “voices,” but also its more fundamental constitution of public identity. Because the public is a discursively organized body of strangers constituted solely by the acts of being addressed and paying attention (Warner, 2002, pp. 65–124), it can only acquire self-awareness and historical agency if individual auditors “see themselves” in the collective representations that are the materials of public culture. Visual practices in the public media play an important role at precisely this point. The daily stream of photojournalistic images, while merely supplemental to the task of reporting the news, defines the public through an act of common spectatorship. When the event shown is itself a part of national life, the public seems to see itself, and to see itself in terms of a particular conception of civic identity.

No one basis for identification can dominate, however, or the public devolves into a specific social group that necessarily excludes others and therefore would no longer be a public. As Habermas notes, “The public sphere of civil society stood or fell with the principle of universal access. A public sphere from which specific groups could be excluded was less than merely incomplete; it was not a public sphere at all” (Habermas, 1989, p. 85). The strategic value of Habermas’s grounding of the public in reading is thus apparent, as the positive content of who is reading what remains tacit. Picture-viewing is another form of tacit experience that can be used to connect people; all seem to see the same thing, yet the full meaning of the image remains unarticulated. Most important, visual images also are particularly well suited to constituting the “stranger relationality” that is endemic to the distinctive norms of public address (Warner, 2002, pp. 74–76). The public must include strangers; it “addresses people who are identified primarily through their participation in discourse and who therefore cannot be known in advance” (Warner, 2002, p. 74). Basic principles of the Habermasian public sphere—public use of reason, the bracketing of status, topical openness, and in-principle inclusiveness—have a fundamental orientation toward interaction with strangers. One need not follow any of these norms to interact with, persuade, be persuaded by, and otherwise live amiably among those one knows; families, for example, typically require these norms to be checked at the door. If photojournalistic images can maintain a vital relationship among strangers, they will provide an essential resource for constituting a mass media audience as a public.
Even if one grants that public deliberation can be mediated visually, the question remains of the extent to which visual practices are subject to ideological control. The belief that a photograph is a clear window on reality is itself an example of the natural attitude of ideology; by contrast, it becomes important to show how a photographic image fails to achieve a transparent representation of its perceptual object. As Victor Burgin notes, all representation is structured, for at ‘the very moment of their being perceived, objects are placed within an intelligible system of relationships . . . . They take their position, that is to say, within an ideology’ (Burgin, 1992a, pp. 45–46, emphasis in original). Photography, it seems, is no exception.

‘Photographs are texts inscribed in terms of what we may call ‘photographic discourse’,” (Burgin, 1992b, p. 144, emphasis in original) and photographic realism is the outcome of an “elaborate constitutive process” (Tagg, 1992, p. 111). From there it’s all downhill: once thought to be windows to the real, photographic images become the ideal medium for naturalizing a repressive structure of signs. And there is no doubt that they can function that way, as both prized shots and millions of banal, anonymous images reproduce normative conceptions of gender, race, class, and other forms of social identity.

This critique relies on a pervasive structuralism – and an accompanying logocentricism – that begs the question before us. There is a reading strategy available for working beyond such structural models, however, which is to emphasize the interaction of the several layers of signification that comprise photographic practices. Roland Barthes, despite his strong use of semiotics, acknowledged that the photographic image does have some degree of representational autonomy, and his critical studies focused on the ability of the image to puncture conventional beliefs (1981). Umberto Eco resolved this tension between the individual image and the social repertoire of interpretive codes by recognizing the ways in which every image operates in the context of “successive transcriptions” (1992, p. 3). Such transcriptions negotiate both the general shift between visual and verbal semiotics, and the more specific shifts in meaning that occur as the viewer is cued to specific narratives or interpretive terms by different patterns in and extending beyond the composition. The question, then, is not the autonomy of the visual or the dominance of the system of signs, but how interpretation necessarily moves across different strata of representation, each of which is incomplete yet partially closed off from the others. The full implication of this idea is stated by W.J.T. Mitchell: “The interaction of pictures and text is constitutive of representation as such: All media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no ‘purely’ visual or verbal arts, though the impulse to purify media is one of the central utopian gestures of modernism” (1994, p. 5). Following the textual metaphor embedded in most critical discourse about visual practices, this correction applies not only to captions and other verbal materials that frame an image, but to all of the codes of the social text as well. No one code controls all signs, and any sign can shift across multiple codes.

To take this idea a step further, we need to recognize the sense in which visual images are complex and unstable articulations, particularly as they circulate across topics, media,
and texts, and thus are open to successive reconstitution by and on behalf of varied political interests, including a public interest. The photographic image coordinates a number of different patterns of identification from within the social life of the audience, each of which would suffice to direct audience response, and which together provide a public audience with sufficient means for comprehending potentially unmanageable events. Because the camera records the decor of everyday life, the photographic image is capable of directing attention across a field of gestures, interaction rituals, social types, political styles, artistic motifs, cultural norms, and other signs as they intersect in any event. As a result, photographs are capable of aesthetic mediations of political identity that include but also exceed ideological control.

The ambiguous potency of photojournalism is particularly evident with those images that become iconic (Goldberg, 1991, pp. 135–62; Hariman and Lucaites, 2001, 2002). On the one hand, these images are moments of visual eloquence that acquire exceptional importance within public life. They are believed to provide definitive representations of political crises and to motivate public action on behalf of democratic values. On the other hand, they are created and kept in circulation by media elites (Perlmutter, 1998), they are used in conjunction with the grand narratives of official history, and they are nothing if not conventional. Most important, perhaps, is the fact that this tension between the performative embodiment of a public interest and the ideological reconstitution of that interest is played out in the process by which collective memory is created through the extended circulation and appropriation of images over time. Even though iconic images usually are recognized as such immediately, and even if they are capable of doing the heavy lifting required to change public opinion and motivate action on behalf of a public interest, their meaning and effects are likely to be established slowly, shift with changes in context and use, and be fully evident only in a history of both official and vernacular appropriations.

The iconic photograph of an injured girl running from a napalm attack provides a complex construction of viewer response that was uniquely suited to the conditions of representation in the Vietnam era, while it also embodies conventions of liberal individualism such as personal autonomy and human rights that have become increasingly dominant within U.S. public culture since then. This ongoing mediation of public life can be explicated both by examining how the photograph’s artistry shapes moral judgment and by tracking subsequent narrative reconstructions and visual appropriations of the image in the public media. In what follows, we show how this photograph managed a rhetorical culture of moral and aesthetic fragmentation to construct public judgment of the war, and how it embodies a continuing tension within public memory between a liberal-individualist narrative of denial and compensation and a mode of democratic dissent that involves both historical accountability and continuing trauma. In turn, we believe, this tension reflects and reproduces essential features of the public itself, a social relationship that, because it has to be among strangers, is ever in need of images.

**Civilians in Pain**

The naked little girl is running down a road in Vietnam toward the camera,
screaming from the napalm burns on her back and arm. Other Vietnamese children are moving in front of and behind her, and one boy's face is a mask of terror, but the naked girl is the focal point of the picture. Stripped of her clothes, her arms held out from her sides, she looks almost as if she has been flayed alive. Behind her walk soldiers, somewhat casually. Behind them, the roiling dark smoke from the napalm drop consumes the background of the scene.

The photo (Figure 1) was taken by AP photographer Nick Ut on June 8, 1972, released after an editorial debate about whether to print a photo involving nudity, and published all over the world the next day. It then appeared in *Newsweek* ("Pacification’s Deadly Price," 1972) and *Life* ("Beat of Life," 1972) and subsequently received the Pulitzer Prize. Today it is regarded as "a defining photographic icon; it remains a symbol of the horror of war in general, and of the war in Vietnam in particular" (Buell, 1999, p. 102; see also Goldberg, 1991, pp. 241–245). Amid many other exceptional photographs and a long stream of video coverage, the photo has come to be regarded as one of the most famous photographs of the Vietnam War and among the most widely recognized images in American photojournalism (Kinney, 2000, p. 187; Sturken, 1997, pp. 89–94). Its stature is believed to reflect its influence on public attitudes toward the war, an influence achieved by confronting U.S. citizens with the immorality of their actions (Sturken, 1997, p. 90; for a more skeptical perspective see Perlmutter, 1998, p. 9).

These claims are true enough, but they don’t explain much. By 1972 there had been many, many press reports and a number of striking photos that would suffice as evidence for any
claim that the U.S. was fighting an immoral war. Indeed, by 1972 the public had seen burned skin hanging in shreds from Vietnamese babies, a bound Vietnamese prisoner of war being shot in cold blood, and similar pictures of the horror of war (see, e.g., Buell, 1999, pp. 62–67, 78–81; Griffiths, 1971; and Faas and Page, 1997). The photograph could not have been effective solely because of its news value, nor does it appear to be especially horrific. In addition, the captioning and other information about the causes of the event and its aftermath would seem to limit its documentary value. The story is one of “accidental napalm” (as the photo was captioned in some reports, e.g., “Accidental Napalm Attack,” 1972, 1A; see also Lester, 1991, pp. 51–52); the strike was by South Vietnamese forces (not U.S. troops); the girl was immediately tended to and taken to a hospital. As an indictment, there isn’t much that would stand out after cross-examination. And why would a still image come to dominate collective memory of what is now called the first television war, a war the public experienced via kinetic images of fireights, strafing runs, and helicopters landing and taking off in swirls of dust and action (Franklin, 1994; Hallin, 1986; Sturken, 1997, p. 89)?

An image of suffering can be highly persuasive, but not because of either the realism ascribed to the photo or its relationship to a single set of moral precepts (Burgin, 1996; Griffin, 1999; Tagg, 1988). A logic of public moral response has to be constructed, it has to be one that is adapted to the deep problems in the public culture at the time, and it has to be consistent with the strengths and weakness of the medium of articulation. This iconic photo was capable of activating public con-

Science at the time because it provided an embodied transcription of important features of moral life, including pain, fragmentation, modal relationships among strangers, betrayal and trauma. These features are strengthened by photographic representation, particularly as they reinforce one another, and their embodiment in a single image demonstrates how photojournalism can do important work within public discourse, work that may not be done as well in verbal texts adhering to the norms of discursive rationality.

The little girl is naked, running right toward you, looking right at you, crying out. The burns themselves are not visible, and it is her pain — more precisely, her communicating the pain she feels — that is the central feature of the picture. Pain is the primary fact of her experience, just as she is the central figure in the composition. As she runs away from the cause of her burns, she also projects the pain forward, toward the viewer, and it is amplified further by the boy in front of her (his face resembles Edvard Munch’s famous drawing of “The Scream”). This direct address defines her relationship to the viewer: she faces the lens, which activates the demanding reciprocity of direct, face-to-face interaction, and she is aligned with the frontal angle of the viewer’s perspective, which “says, as it were: ‘what you see here is part of our world, something we are involved with’ ” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, pp. 121–130, 143). The photograph projects her pain into our world.

This confrontation of the viewer cuts deeper still. Her pain, like all great pain, disrupts and breaks up the social world’s pattern of assurances. Just as she has stripped off her clothes to escape the burning napalm, she tears the conventions of social life.
Thus, her pain is further amplified because she violates the news media’s norms of propriety. Public representation is always constituted by norms of decorum; without them, the public itself no longer exists (see Hariman, 1995). Yet war by its nature is a violation of civility, normalcy, civic order. Thus, a visual record of war will have to negotiate an internal tension between propriety and transgression (on photojournalistic norms governing the portrayal of bodily harm see Moeller, 1989; Robins, 1996; and Taylor, 1998). So it is that lesser forms of transgression can play an important role in the representation of war. The non-prurient nudity of the napalm photo doesn’t just slip past the censor’s rule, for the seeming transgression of her nakedness reveals another, deeper form of concealment. The image 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. The photo violates one set of norms in order to activate another; propriety is set aside for a moral purpose.

Girls should not be shown stripped bare in public; civilians should not be bombed. Likewise, U.S. soldiers (and many viewers mistakenly assume the soldiers are U.S. troops) are supposed to be handing out candy to the children in occupied lands, and the United States is supposed to be fighting just wars for noble causes. Just as the photograph violates one form of propriety to represent a greater form of misconduct, that breach of public decorum also disrupts larger frameworks for the moral justification of violence. Like the explosion still reverberating in the background, the photograph is a rupture, a tearing open of established narratives of justified military action, moral constraint, and national purpose. It is a picture that shouldn’t be shown of an event that shouldn’t have happened, and it projects a leveling of social structure and chaotic dispersion of social energies. The picture creates a searing eventfulness that breaks away from any official narrative justifying the war.

The photograph appeared during a period when the public was recognizing that their government was waging war without purpose, without legitimacy, without end. The illusion of strategic control had been shattered by the 1968 Tet offensive, all pretense of consensus had been killed in the 1970 shootings at Kent State, and by 1972 even those prolonging the war were relying on a rhetoric of disengagement. To those living amidst the public controversy about the war, it seemed as if the war made no sense and U.S. society was coming apart at the seams.

This sense of fragmentation was amplified by the media practices defining the Vietnam War. Day after day the public saw a jumble of scenes – bombings, firefight, helicopter evacuations, patrols moving out, villages being searched, troops wading across rivers – that could seemingly be rearranged in any order. If there was any organizational principle to this flow of images, it was that of collage: a seemingly shapeless accumulation of images that contained moments of strong association, or of irony, or of unexpected allure, but that lacked any governing idea. This continual stream of images reflecting a war without clear battle lines dovetailed perfectly with the government’s lack of either a plausible rationale or coherent strategy. In addition, the reproduction of the details of everyday décor and ordinary
behavior underscored the general substitution of scene for purpose. Try as the proponents of the war in Vietnam might to resurrect the idea of a theater of war with clear battle lines and victories, all on behalf of a justifiable political objective, such ideas were at odds not only with the nature of that war, but also, and perhaps more important for their persuasive objectives, with the visual media that were shaping public knowledge of the war.

In short, what was a sorry truth about the war became a dominant feature of its coverage. The daily visual record of activities was likely to make the war seem to have no purpose. Although this media environment was primarily televisual, it reinforced the most significant effect that photography can have on the understanding of war. As Alan Trachtenberg has observed of Civil War photography, the “portrayal of war as an event in real space and time,” rather than “the mythic or fictional time of a theater,” was accompanied “by a loss of clarity about both the overall form of battles and the unfolding war as such and the political meaning of events” (1989, pp. 74–75).

In other words, the photographic medium is inherently paralectic: because photographic images operate meaningfully without a connecting syntax (Barthes, 1977, pp. 37–46), these images denote only fragments of any coordinated action. They give specific events a singular significance, but they leave larger articulations of purpose outside the frame.

The accidental napalm photograph is a model fragment. Featuring anonymous figures in a featureless scene that could be occurring anywhere in Vietnam, lacking any strategic orientation or collective symbol, confounding any official rhetoric of the war’s purpose or of our commitment to the Vietnamese people, devoid of any element of heroism, and clearly recording an unintended consequence, it would not seem to qualify as an event at all. But it does qualify, because the photo’s fragmentation carries with it a shift in the basic definition of an event. An event is no longer an action that comes at a dramatic moment in a sequence of purposive actions; instead, it is an experiential moment having heightened intensity independent of any larger plot.

The photo’s embodiment of an aesthetic of fragmentation not only captured the character of a purposeless war, it also provided a means for resolving the moral predicament the war presented to the American public. How can any idea of right conduct be established within a condition of political and representational incoherence? It is within this context that the girl’s nakedness acquires additional meaning. As Michael Walzer observes, even hardened soldiers are averse to killing an out of uniform – unmarked – enemy (1977, pp. 138–143). Simple vulnerability, particularly as it is symbolized by nakedness, puts us in an elemental moral situation. More to the point, nakedness in war foregrounds the moral relationships that still bind strangers to one another. The uniformed soldier has an identity; the naked body has been stripped of conventional patterns of recognition, deference, and dismissal. Like the parable of the Good Samaritan, which featured a naked man discovered along a road, the girl’s naked vulnerability is a call to obligation, and, as in the parable, one that has occurred unexpectedly. In the words of John Caputo, “Obligation happens” (1993, p. 6). Obligation can appear out of nowhere, without regard to one’s social position,
directly encumbering one in ways that are decidedly inconvenient and, worse, that may disrupt deep assumptions regarding how one’s life is patterned and what the future should hold. Thus, the photo abruptly calls the viewer to a moral awareness that cannot be limited to roles, contracts, or laws; neither is it buffered by distance. A fragmented world is still a world of moral demands, only now they may be most pressing when least expected, and the demand itself can shatter conventional wisdom.

This identification with the stranger has both a modern face and the structure of classical tragedy. The girl’s nakedness provides a performative embodiment of the modern conception of universal humanity. She could be a poster child for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (and as an adult she has both served as a good will ambassador for the United Nations and founded an international organization to aid children harmed by war). The dramatic charge of the photo comes from its evocation of pity and terror: we see a pathetic sight—the child crying in pain—and as we enter into her experience we feel both pity for her (or compassion toward her) and the looming sense of terror that lies behind her injuries. The terror (or fear or horror) that tragedy evokes comes not from the physical injury itself but from the social rupture behind it, which is why Aristotle noted that the most effective tragedies involved harms done off stage and within the family (Poetics, 1453b). The picture reproduces this design. First, despite its patently visual nature, the napalm attack is already over and the girl’s burns are not visible—most are on her back, and the photograph’s low resolution minimizes the others. Second, she is a child—a member of a family—and familial relationships are either modeled (between the children) or broken (between parents and children, as the biological parents are absent and the other adults are indifferent soldiers). The pity for the child is compounded by this sense of social breakdown—again, the horror of war is the destruction of social order and of meaning itself. Her pain activates the terror of tragedy, which comes from the realization that humans can be abandoned to a world no longer capable of sympathy, a world of beasts and gods, of destructive powers and impersonal forces, of pain without end.

This tragic structure is filled out by the relationships between the children and the soldiers. The crucial fact is that the soldiers are walking along slowly, almost nonchalantly, as if this were an everyday experience. Their attitude of business as usual contrasts vividly with the girl’s sudden, unexpected, excessive experience of pain and terror. The message is clear: what seems, from looking at the girl, to be a rare experience sure to evoke a compassionate response, is in fact, as evidenced by the soldiers, something that happens again and again, so much so that the adults involved (whether soldiers there or civilians in the U.S.) can become indifferent, morally diminished, capable of routinely doing awful things to other people. Precisely because the photo is operating as a mode of performance, its formal implication is that what is shown is repeated, and repeatable, behavior (Schechner, 1985, pp. 35–116; States, 1996, p. 20). The photo that will be reproduced many times is itself not the record of a unique set of circumstances, but rather a dramatic depiction of those features of the war that are recurring over and over again past the point of caring. As
the girl screams and other human beings walk along devoid of sympathy, the photo depicts a world of pain that reverberates off the hard surfaces of moral indifference. This is why knowledge of the circumstantial events (such as the girl receiving treatment immediately) rightly provides no qualification to the moral force of the photograph. The knowledge that would matter would be a demonstration that this was a rare use of napalm, or that U.S. forces and their Vietnamese allies almost never harmed civilians in the war zone. But, of course, by 1972 the truth of the brutality of the war had breached the surface of national consciousness.

The photo is not about informing the public at all; rather, it offers a performance of social relationships that provide a basis for moral comprehension and response (cf., Sontag, 1973, pp. 17–19). These modal relationships in turn can exemplify morally significant actions such as self-sacrifice or betrayal. The full significance of the photo’s depiction of their relationship becomes clear when one recognizes how it also reflects the dilemma of democratic accountability in modern war. On the one hand, the citizen-soldier is both agent and representative of the public; on the other hand, the public has authority for but no direct control over their troops. When those troops are projecting power far away, yet reported on daily in the national media, the situation gets even worse. It is easy for the public to find itself guilty for actions it did not sanction, and for soldiers to be blamed for events no one anticipated. Soldiers and civilians alike can feel betrayed.

The napalm photo features two betrayals. Whether American or Vietnamese, the soldiers are agents of the United States who are supposed to be protecting the girl, yet they appear content merely to herd her and the other children down the road. The soldiers are not helping, they even seem to be treating the children like prisoners of war (for guns are still drawn), and they are indifferent to the suffering before them. Thus, while a little girl seems to appeal directly to the public for help, yet it can do nothing while its representative in the picture adds insult to injury. As the girl is betrayed by the institutional figures who are supposed to protect her, so is the public betrayed by the same institution.1

Although the activity within the frame directs action, the fact that this is a photograph—a “static” image—means that time has been stopped. The picture holds its experience of terror and uncompleted action for all time, while having the activity within the frame eternally repeat itself (for that is what it is, performatively-restored repetitive behavior). This mythic sense of eternal recurrence, and its “vertigo of time defeated” (Barthes, 1981, p. 97), corresponds perfectly to the phenomenological structure of trauma: one simultaneously feels stopped in time (or thrown outside of time, temporal movement, history, change) while constantly repeating the actions within that isolated moment (Herman, 1992; for a selected bibliography on post-traumatic stress disorder with special reference to Vietnam see “Vietnam Yesterday,” 2001). The normal flow of time has been fragmented into shards of isolated events, while the traumatized subject remains trapped in the continually recurring scene, unable to break out of the ever-recurring pain. Although this phenomenological state is commonly thought to result from
exposure to carnage, Jonathan Shay has pointed out how the deeper cause is a sense of betrayal (Shay, 1994, pp. 3–22). Likewise, an iconic photo that is said to capture the horror of war is not gruesome, but it does freeze the spectator in a tableau of moral failure. Betrayal short-circuits the power of institutional narratives to sublimate disturbing incidents, and the photograph perpetuates this sense of rupture. One is helpless, unable to change a thing about what happened and yet is still before one’s eyes. This sense of powerlessness extends to control of the memory itself, as the image circulates through the media, reoccurring again and again unbidden.

Thus, the photograph came to provide symbolic representation of the U.S. public’s experience of the Vietnam War. Somehow, it seems, the United States got caught in a situation not of its own making, a morally incoherent situation in which we knew we did terrible things to other people--things we still can’t face and can never set right. Against processes of denial, the photograph provides at least an image of our condition: having already done the wrong thing, wanting to do the right thing, yet frozen, incapable of acting in that place at all. Nor will history oblige by allowing us to start over or restore a sense of innocence. The basic conditions of modern U.S. warfare are all there: imperial action in a distant, third world country far from the public’s direct control; massive, technologically intensive firepower being used to spare our soldiers’ lives at enormous rates of “collateral damage”; mass media coverage sure to confront us with our guilt while apparently providing no means for action. The moral danger of this world is captured tonally in the picture’s composition of light and darkness: as the dark smoke blots out the sky and while the girl bathed in light has in fact been scared with liquid fire, the elements of the sublime are present but out of order, gone demonic. Light hurts, darkness towers over all, awe is induced by destruction, terror is not sublimated to a transcendent order. The image calls a public to moral awareness, but its rhetorical power is traumatic.

The Liberal Antidote

The photograph’s activation of the structure of trauma is evident as well in its subsequent history of interpretation. According to Shay, the crucial step towards healing from a traumatic experience is to construct a narrative of one’s life that can contextualize the traumatic moment (1994, pp. 181–193). The narrative does more than soothe, for it addresses the crucial characteristic of trauma, which is being bracketed from any sense of temporal continuity. The traumatic moment is stopped in time, and narrative gets time moving again so that the moment may eventually recede, dissipate, or become complicated by other elements of larger stories.

This photo has produced several narratives. The most frequently told of these is the story of the relationship between the girl in the photo and the photographer (see, e.g., Buell, 1999, pp. 102–103). Both of Vietnamese ethnicity, they became lifelong friends as he helped her relocate to Canada. The story functions as a convenient displacement of responsibilities while breaking out of the traumatic moment: both Vietnamese-American and Canadian identities provide an easy surrogate that allows a happy ending without either involving the U.S. pub-
lic directly or leaving them completely out of the story. This easy resolution validates a significant change, however, for the anonymous girl has become an individual person. She has a name (Kim Phuc), and the story is now her story, a unique personal history that may or may not be publicized.

A recent variant of this story is Denise Chong’s *The Girl in the Picture*, which chronicles Kim Phuc’s personal odyssey of recovery while trying to free herself from the publicity generated by the photo. “She felt as though the journalistic hounds would make her into a victim all over again. ‘The action of those two women [journalists, one with a camera] on the sidewalk,’ she lamented to Toan, ‘was like a bomb falling out of the sky’ ” (1999, p. 6). Note how this narrative replays the performance of the iconic photograph: allied technology continues to harm an innocent Vietnamese civilian, while the public again is drawn into an act of inflicting pain it did not authorize, an act that can only be redeemed through empathetic identification with her suffering. The traumatic “scars [that] war leaves on all of us” (Chong, 1999, book jacket flap) are then ameliorated by a narrative of her life after the war.

This relationship between the physical wound and a rhetoric of healing that can displace concerns about justice is most evident in the picture of Kim with her infant child (Figure 2) taken by photographer Joe McNally in 1995 (“Portrait,” 1995; Sixtieth Anniversary, 1996, p. 102; Chong, 1999, p. 191). This picture may also be an attempt at something like a visual sequel to the iconic photo, and one that supplies a Hollywood ending for the story. The continuities and discontinuities between this photo and the icon establish the key differences in effect. Her nakedness is still there, but it has been carefully controlled by changes in posture and camera angle to maintain the modesty expected of a grown woman and a tranquil public culture. Her injury is still there, of course, but now the effects of the war are to be dealt with on an individual basis, and those who created them are no longer in the picture, no longer capable of being interrogated or condemned.

Perhaps the soldiers have been replaced by the scars on her skin. The display of the scars also reveals the relationship between the physical and symbolic dimensions of the two images. In the iconic photo, her physical wounds were not visible; they were communicated by her expression and the other child’s cry of terror. Thus, the physical harm that was the most basic consequence and moral fault of American military actions was depicted indirectly. In the sequel, the physical harm is revealed, but given its relationship to the other features of the picture, it acquires a different significance. Now the wounds are superficial, for they appear to have no effect on the woman’s internal health. Inside, she is capable of bearing a “normal,” healthy baby. And what a baby it is: unblemished, its new, smooth skin a striking contrast to her mature scars. Now the physical damage to Kim is merely the background for a tableau of regeneration. Although she is not doing that well in one sense, for she is still scarred, she obviously has achieved one of the great milestones of personal happiness by giving birth to a beautiful child. While the past is still present, it is inert—no more than ugly tissue that has no power to prevent a new beginning and personal happiness. In the United States, history lasts only one generation.
The sunny optimism of this story of war’s aftermath is validated by the rest of the composition. Her beatific expression and the figural enactment of Madonna and child portraiture suggest a serenity in which traumatic memory or persistent conflict has no place. Likewise, in place of the dark smoke from the napalm blast, the background of this photo is a darkened blank wall. This gentle décor and her carefully draped clothing invoke the conventions of retail studio photography, which in turn anchor her happiness within a familiar scene of private life: the framed portrait that is displayed proudly by the child’s grandparents.

All of these changes occur within a thoroughly traditional transcription of gender roles. The muted sexuality of her late girlhood has been channeled into the conventional role of motherhood. Men clearly maintain their monopoly on violence (Ehrenreich, 1997, p. 125), while a woman embodies the virtues of nurturing; Vietnam and peace itself remain feminized while war and the American military establishment retain their masculine identity. The scene defines private life as a place centered on women and
children, where mothers are devoted to and fulfilled by caring for their families.

The shift from public to private virtues has been encoded by taking a second photo for public dissemination in a manner similar to taking a photo for distribution within one’s family. The substitution of photos provides a double compensation: Kim has been given a beautiful child to replace her own damaged childhood, and the second image is given to the public in recompense for its past discomfort. The baby also replaces the other children in the original scene – those running down the road and those who didn’t make it. The war is over, and children who could be running in terror for their small, vulnerable lives are now sleeping quietly in their mothers’ arms. Moreover, where the earlier children were Kim’s siblings, and so the sign of collective identity, this child is her child, her most dear possession and a sign of the proprietary relationships essential to liberal individualism. The transformation is complete: from past trauma to present joy, and from the terrors of collective history to the quiet individualism of private life.

Thus, this sequel to the iconic photo inculcates a way of seeing the original image and the history to which it bore witness. A record of immoral state action has become a history of private lives. Questions of collective responsibility – and of justice – have been displaced by questions of individual healing. The wisdom that recognizes the likelihood of war’s eternal recurrence has been displaced by a narrative of personal happiness and of a new, unblemished, innocent generation.

What is important to note here is that the reinscription of the iconic photograph by the second image is neither unique nor inappropriate. Indeed, it invokes a therapeutic discourse that has become a symptomatic and powerful form of social control in liberal-democratic, capitalist societies (see Cloud, 1998; Ehrenhaus, 1993). Two dimensions of such discourse are directly relevant to the case at hand. First, as Ehrenhaus observes, the therapeutic motif “voyeuristically dwells on intimacy and poignancy while never violating the illusion of privacy” (pp. 93–94). And second, as the emphasis shifts attention from public to private trauma, it invokes a discourse of “individual and family responsibility” that contains dissent directed towards the social and political order (Cloud, 1998, p. xv; Ehrenhaus, 1993). In the second photograph, then, Kim Phuc’s “private” recovery and maternity substitute for the napalm girl’s “public” cry of pain; the effect is to foreclose on acts of dissent that would question state accountability.

This narrative containment of the original image is not a wholly unwarranted imposition, however, for that image draws upon conceptions of personal autonomy and human rights that are foundational in a liberal-individualist society, it features a wounded individual crying out for help, and it produces a traumatic effect. The second photo’s visual reinterpretation of the war is achieved not by distorting the iconic photo but rather by extending designs in the original that were essential for its moral significance and rhetorical appeal. In short, as the second photograph imitates aesthetic elements of the iconic image, it enhances an ideological transcription that was already available within the scene. Indeed, the “second” inflection helps to define the original image, as when the icon is celebrated in an exhibition because it is “a sym-
bol that has helped lead toward reconcilia-
tion” (Exhibit Recalls German Destruction, 2000).

So it is that this iconic photo can be both unusually striking and unavoid-
ably ambivalent. On the one hand, a partial record of a supposedly inciden-
tal moment became a defining event of the war, one capable of negating the moral certainty and aesthetic unity of the U.S. culture that had coalesced during World War II. On the other hand, the photograph is not only a transgression, but also the enactment of another model of political identity always available within U.S. public life and ascendant amidst the prosperity and contradictions of the post-war era. Rather than simply tear down one set of ideals, it also advances the habits of another way of life.

In this liberal sensibility, actions are meaningful because they are symp-
tomatic of internal conditions rather than because they adhere to proven models of character. The individual’s experience is the primary locus of meaning, and conflict resolution may be as much psychological as political. The individual’s autonomy and human rights supersede any political identity, and obligations are encountered along the road rather than due to any sense of tradition or collective enterprise. Collective action is essentially moral and humanitarian rather than defined by national interests, but it also is ad hoc, not directed by long-
term objectives and analysis. The fundamental tension in political life is between the individual and society; once the individual is protected, other political possibilities are likely to be deferred to the more immediate en-
gagements of private life. And when private life is synonymous with na-
tional healing, public life becomes a dead zone: a place, as we shall see,

that is inhabited by ghosts and where images become specters of reanima-
tion.

Dissent and the Haunting of Public Culture

Barthes asks, “Mad or tame? Photo-
tography can be one or the other” (1981, p.119). The photograph of “accidental napalm” is repeatedly tamed and in a multiplicity of ways: by the banality of its circulation, by personalizing the girl in the picture, by drawing out a liberal narrative of healing, by the segue into the celebrity photo of Kim’s regeneration, and more. But it also remains mad: an indelible image of terror that obsessively repeats itself, that keeps the public audience interned in the real time of fatality rather than fantasies of renewal, staring at screams that cannot be heard and haunted by ghosts that will not speak. This madness is something that need not be far from the anger fueling political dissent, and, although grounded in the image, it does not happen by itself; rather, like tam-
ing, it is something that results from continued use of the image. Thus, the history of the iconic photograph demonstrates how a visual practice can be a site of struggle.

As images become disseminated they also become resources for public argument, particularly as advocates themselves are skilled in using visual materials. A strong example of artistic accomplishment in grass-roots public discourse is provided on a web page titled “Veritatis Vietnam,” designed by Ed Chilton, a Vietnam veteran and anti-Vietnam War advocate (Chilton, 2000). The first image we find on that web page digitally superimposes the napalm photograph over the U.S. flag
and the face of Cardinal Spellman (Figure 3). The explicit intention is to ex- corate Spellman for his support of the war in Vietnam. Although the verbal text following the image may seem too much of a harangue, the visual collage is hard to get out of one's mind. It achieves this effect by reproducing key features of the original photograph's rhetorical power, but now through a seemingly supernatural projection of that image into the present. The composition is haunting, and for good reason: the girl is now a ghost, a fragment of the past that will not be assimilated into the amnesia of the present.

Once again, the photograph breaks into official representations of U.S. institutional legitimacy. Once again, it is aesthetically and morally disruptive: it should not be inserted into the image of the flag, just as the naked, terrified girl should not have been on everyone's breakfast table, and it tells the audience that things that should not happen did happen. In the composite image, the photograph's role in a struggle over the meaning of the war is heightened: by intruding into images of the flag and the two crosses on the Cardinal's shoulders, the scene becomes a battle between the icons themselves. The war is brought home, as actions over there are shown in direct clash with symbols of legitimacy here, and the dominant symbols of collective organization (religion and the state) are confronted with their complicity in the war's destruction of innocent children.

As before, the napalm image is a fragmentary scene, one obviously located in the specific historical event of the war, yet not enfolded into any sense of a progressive historical narrative or sound military strategy. Indeed,
the children’s screams of terror tear
apart the official narratives of Ameri-
can political and moral superiority. 
This attack on institutional authority is
strengthened by the image of Cardinal
Spellman. His position at the front of
the composition parallels the position
of the soldiers in the rear as they are
roughly equidistant from the children.
His crosses are placed as if they were
military insignia (Cardinal or General,
did it matter?), and his expression can
be read as either implicitly predatory
(the large round head, raised ey-
brows, and intently focused eyes are
owl-like) or morally hardened (the fa-
cial mask is uniformly controlled and
blank while his mouth is pursed as if to
make a dismissive remark). Once
again, the public sees its representa-
tives—now those who promoted the
war along with the soldiers who fought
it—acting as if they were habituated to
the suffering they imposed on others.

The fact that it is *once again* is no
accident. As before, the image cap-
tures the trauma victim’s sense of be-
ing stuck in time. In direct contrast to
the narratives of compensation and
healing used in the mainstream media
to neutralize the iconic photograph’s
sense of guilt, this image reinserts the
past into the present to immobilize
those attempting to “move beyond”
past conflicts and historical responsi-
bility. The superimposition of images
does not just compare the past with
the present, it fuses them: the image of
terror and guilt now is always within
the flag, an ineradicable part of the
United States’s legacy. Likewise, the
flag and institutional religion are ex-
posed as covering devices, symbols and
discourses (such as the Cardinal’s pub-
lic speeches on the war) that are used
to hide moral truth and public guilt.
Like the icon within it, the composi-
tion evokes a psychology of eternal
recurrence and denial. Although this
structure of feeling can be dismissed as
yet another example of Vietnam syn-
drome, it also is another instance of
the tragic dimension of war’s pathos:
Why will more continue to be
sacrificed? Because the knowledge
gained of suffering will be lost, or de-
nied, to those who remain.

All the advocate wants to do is blast
Cardinal Spellman, and he does a
pretty good job of that, at least visu-
ally. His most important accomplish-
ment, however, is restoring the iconic
photograph to its rightful place in pub-
lic discourse. As any icon floats
through media space across sub-
sequent generations, and particularly
as it gets rewritten into liberal narra-
tives of individual healing, it can lose
too much of the political history and
emotional intensity that are essential
for participation in democratic debate.
By placing the icon against the sym-
bols of the flag and the cross, this
appropriation restores the conflict,
hypocrisy, complicity, confusion, and
intensity that fuels debate about the
war. Above all, it restores a sense of
public life. The girl is no longer a
single individual, and the question is
not whether she is happy today. Once
again it is a picture of the victims of
American military action and those
who marshaled their destruction, of
the public’s lack of control over a war
fought in its name, of the questionable
moral and political legitimacy of U.S.
institutions. By restoring the public
context that in turn allows the iconic
photo to challenge authority, the com-
posite image demonstrates that per-
haps not everything is lost after all.

This call to public conscience is evi-
dent in another remediation of the
photo, this time by transposing the girl
into an illustration that accompanies a
*Boston Globe* review of a book on the
Vietnam Veterans’ Movement. The story is entitled “Soldiers of Misfortune,” and the visual composition (Figure 4) is a stunning depiction of the multiple layers of suffering that characterized the Vietnam War (DeCoster, 2001, D3). The girl is running forward, her arms stretched out, as she always is running, but now she is passing through a sprinkler on a suburban lawn. She still is screaming, but now she is wearing a bright polka-dot bikini. Behind her smoke still billows upward, although now it comes from the chimney of a suburban house, over which a military helicopter hovers against a pastel blue sky. Beside the girl, a U.S. veteran sits in a wheelchair. It is as if he had been parked there to watch her, but his dark glasses, blank face, and slack limbs suggest some awful combination of social isolation and internal preoccupation. He and the girl form the two rear points of a triangle; at the third point equidistant between them and at the front of the picture, there is a child’s plastic ball. It is red, white, and blue.

We doubt anyone could draw a more disturbing image of the war at home, or one that better confronts the liberal-individualist narrative with democratic responsibility, or one that so vividly captures the traumatic sense of continued suffering and unresolved guilt evoked by the original photograph. The girl’s magical appearance in the most characteristic contemporary U.S. setting is profoundly unsettling. She won’t go away, she has even turned up here. But that is only half of it: her transposition into the suburban scene doesn’t just bring the war home,
it erases the ethnic difference undergirding the moral indifference to Vietnamese suffering. As with any strong appropriation, the later image amplifies key features of the original design: in this case, by (re)clothing the girl the illustrator has completed the work begun by her originally being naked. While the first image made her less Vietnamese, because universally human, this image takes the next step by placing her in the United States's most familiar sense of humanity -- our own culture. To spell it out even further, it becomes easier to recognize that it was wrong to inflict pain on girls in Vietnam, because it would be just like bombing our kids while they were playing in our backyards. Perhaps this act of imagination is made easier as immigrant Vietnamese have become ever more assimilated into U.S. public culture, but the illustration makes it clear enough: she could have been one of ours.

If left there, the picture would have been a dated and heavy-handed condemnation of Vietnam veterans. The juxtaposition of the disabled veteran changes all that. Someone incapable of walking is not going to harm civilians now, and even if he did before he has paid for it. The picture's balanced positioning of the two representative figures makes it clear that both were harmed by the war, both scarred for life. They both are victims, but that victimage is no longer the liberal pathos of individuated harm and therapeutic recovery. Instead, the picture restores the iconic photograph's depiction of types -- Vietnamese civilians, not Kim Phuc -- and it positions the seemingly different figures (young, female, Vietnamese civilian; adult, male, U.S. soldier) in equivalent categories of continued trauma. It is the visual equivalent of President Clinton's verbal evocation of two nations united by "shared suffering" (2000).

The two figures share another similarity. The girl's emergence in the suburban scene many years after the end of the war is supernatural -- a haunting of the American imagination. This return might be indicative of society's continued traumatization by the war, or it might symbolize the failure to confront historical responsibility, but it is a haunting nonetheless. The veteran has a similar nature, for he is a ghostly figure, so transparent that you can see the outline of a tricycle behind him showing through his body. The difference between them is that she is vivid and active while he barely has strength of presence, much less a capacity to act. The contrast could be (and probably is) an argument that the public has been more fixated on one set of victims than another for which it has equal or greater responsibility. But it seems more complicated than that. She shouldn't be there but is there; he should be there but is disappearing. Neither one belongs in the scene, because both are aesthetic disruptions of the Happyville template that provides the background for the picture. The key to understanding their mutual estrangement is the two small details of the smoke and the ball. The smoke is the thick, oily product of bombing taken from the original napalm drop, but now it is coming from the furnace of the house. (Why the heat is on in the summer appears to be artistic license.) The dirty pollution of war is also the byproduct of U.S. affluence, because both imperial power and domestic tranquility are fueled by the same dark processes. The moral buffering produced by the United States's distance and wealth, and the dirty truth that we waste lives needlessly, are shown to be deeply linked
and largely hidden. The picture exposes eloquently the complicity between the good life at home and criminal behavior in the third world. But who then is responsible? The ball provides part of the answer. Both a perfect prop within the scene and a reference to the nation-state, it is positioned to mediate the relationship between the two figures. Together the three form a closed, harmonious form. But the red, white, and blue ball is not “Old Glory.” Instead, it signifies ersatz patriotism, the broad dissemination of national symbols that characterizes mainstream popular culture. There is only the barest trace of any sense of collective responsibility, while the object typifies the easy activities of kids’ games and backyard leisure, or at most the fireworks on the fourth of July. This reduction of political identity and collective responsibility to a small, soft plastic toy is what is necessary to represent its place within the suburban scene. It is there, but ironically so and easily kicked aside.

This projection of responsibility to the front of the pictorial frame follows directly from the composition of the iconic photo. Both victims are still in need of help, and both are not likely to be helped by what little sense of collective responsibility is available in the contemporary U.S. scene. As before, the picture hails the viewer. As before, the viewer is positioned aside from the state that is the agency of harm (it has harmed the girl, brought the soldiers to harm, and is not caring adequately for those soldiers today). As before, the picture can be a sweeping denunciation of moral indifference, although now the accusation is given an additional, sharper edge: the problem is not a runaway state or uninformed public, but a nation lulled to irresponsibility by its pursuit of domestic happiness. This irresponsibility includes not listening to the Vietnamese civilians and U.S. soldiers who have had direct experience of the war, but who have been silenced subsequently. As before, the picture fragments consensus through embarrassing depictions of suffering; by placing that suffering within a context of unthinking routine it both identifies a collective responsibility and locks the experience of guilt into a haunting, eternal recurrence of traumatic memory.

The Icon, the Stranger, and American Collective Memory

The multiple transcriptions and deep ambivalences of visual eloquence allow skilled advocates a rich repertoire for democratic deliberation. Iconic photographs are calls to civic action, sites of controversy, vehicles for ideological control, and sources of rhetorical invention. Although the appropriation of such icons has to be consistent with the original photograph’s basic designs, and although they typically extend its strongest tendencies, they are also a source of new and at times remarkably sophisticated appeals. Most important, perhaps, they can articulate patterns of moral intelligence that run deeper than pragmatic deliberation about matters of policy and that disrupt conventional discourses of institutional legitimacy. That is not the end of the story, however.

Vietnam veteran William Adams has remarked, “What ‘really’ happened is now so thoroughly mixed up in my mind with what has been said about what happened that the pure experience is no longer there . . . . The Vietnam War is no longer a definite
event so much as it is a collective and mobile script in which we continue to scrawl, erase, rewrite our conflicting and changing view of ourselves” (quoted in Sturken, 1997, p. 86). The situation is even more fluid for the public audience that never experienced the war directly. Amidst a “torrent” of books, movies, articles, memorials, web sites, and more, U.S. public life continues to be defined by its conduct and loss of the war in Vietnam (Perlmutt, 1998, p. 52). Explanations for this lack of closure range from the critique of the mass media’s overexposure of the war, to the war’s “resistance to standard narratives of technology, masculinity, and U.S. nationalism” (Sturken, 1997, p. 87). We believe that iconic photographs emerge and acquire considerable influence because of their capacity for dealing with the dual problems of overexposure and ideological rupture.

The Vietnam War has the distinction of being a rich lode of iconic photographs. Four in particular receive the widest circulation: the burning monk, the execution of a bound prisoner of war, the napalm girl, and the girl screaming over the dead student at Kent State. By explicating several relationships within this set of images, the additional functions of the napalm photograph, its genre, and photojournalism generally can be highlighted. As Marita Sturken has noted, the common features of this set of images include their depictions of horror, their challenge to ideological narratives, and the fact that they have acquired far greater currency than any video images of the war, including identical footage of two of the events (the execution and the napalm attack). Sturken’s account of this last difference is telling: the photographs highlight facial expressions, connote a sufficient sense of the past, circulate more easily, and are “emblems of rupture” demanding narration; in addition, the filmed events are actually more chaotic or horrific (1997, p. 87).

These observations are accurate, although also at odds with the general assessment that the iconic image is the best representation of the horror of war. Our close reading of the napalm photograph suggests how that idea needs to be refined. The iconic image of the Vietnam era becomes the telling representation because of its fragmentary character. It represents not so much physical harm as the loss of meaning, the futility of representation itself in a condition “when words lose their meaning” (White, 1984). A visual medium becomes the better vehicle for representing this slippage or incapacity. The image implies that another medium (words) has already proved incapable of full representation of the war, and, because the image can show but not tell, it automatically represents both the event and the gap between the event and any pattern of interpretation. The still image performs this dual sense of representation and absence most effectively: it frames the event for close, careful examination, while also providing nothing outside the frame and interrupting any sense of continuity. The result is not blankness, however, but an “optical unconscious” (Benjamin, 1980, p. 203) that can supply both exact knowledge of the morally decisive moment and the “lacerating emphasis” of fatality as it incorporates past and future alike in the eternal present of the image (Barthes, 1981, p. 96). As we have also noted, this epistemological condition is deeply resonant with the psychological structure of trauma.

There is a three-way relationship
between loss of meaning, traumatic injury, and moral response that characterizes the deep lack of resolution regarding the Vietnam War, and that also is a key feature of the iconic photographs. The photos are indeed less horrific than they could be; they show little physical damage, while pictures taken seconds later in every case show more blood or burned flesh. The performative key is not physical damage, however, but the expression or conspicuous absence of an expression of pain. This distinction between physical gore and pain is crucial, for several reasons (see also Robins, 1996; Taylor, 1998; Zelizer, in press). Bodily disruption does not automatically call for a moral response, as it always is subject to interpretation (think of surgery). Pain, however, by its very nature cuts through and destroys patterns of meaningfulness, while its expression is evidence of an internal world—the world within the body that Elaine Scarry (1985, p. 63) defines as the “interior content of war”—and so a basis for connection with others without regard to external circumstances. Moral response requires not evidence of harm, but a sympathetic connection that is most directly evoked by pain. For the same reason, justifications of violence always have to minimize the pain it produces.

The four icons of the Vietnam War exemplify the dialectic between displays of pain and indifference to pain. The napalm and Kent State photos are the most powerful registers of moral outrage precisely because they are performances of the pain experienced by an innocent victim of U.S. military action. “The image of the burned girl made Americans see the pain the war inflicted,” and it also used that pain to bond the girl and the public emotionally (Kinney, 2000, p. 187). The girl at Kent State acts as a ventriloquist for the murdered body on the pavement in front of her, while also directly venting the pain experienced sympathetically (and, therefore, modeling sympathetic response to the dead and wounded as the appropriate form of citizenship in respect to that event) (Hariman and Lucaites, 2001). Each performance also is gendered, as a girl crying represents the “victimized, feminized” country of Vietnam and the peace movement at home (Sturken, 1997, p. 93).

The logic of conventional gender typing also structures the other two icons, each of which is notable for its repression of emotion. The expression of the man being shot is sometimes described as a searing expression, but not often; it could double as an expression one might see in a dentist’s office. What is most significant is the executioner’s lack of emotion. The photo’s moral punch comes from its documentation of how the state can kill with such complete lack of regard for the pain it is causing. As with the laconic soldiers in the napalm photo, the officer’s businesslike manner is a cue to the fact that this situation is routine, something that those in the picture see every day. The lack of empathy becomes the sign of immoral conduct, a sign that can’t be erased by circumstantial knowledge about the soldiers involved. The burning monk follows a similar logic that operates in the reverse direction. The salient fact in the photo is that someone’s resolve to resist the government could be so great that he would not only commit self-immolation, but be able to do so without showing pain. The Saigon government was shown to be not only illegitimate, but so powerless that it could not conquer the body as it burned. Male suppression of pain thus
becomes the vector for projecting a power that can be used either to ex-
tend or resist state control, while fe-
male expression of pain becomes the
vehicle for public response to the
abuse of power by the state that,
un-
like the male acts, can be imitated by
anyone who is looking at the picture.

One conclusion to be drawn at this
point is that the iconic images from the
Vietnam War – along with the sub-
sequent images of Kim Phuc that are
used to put the war to rest – also
create a fragmented regendering of the
public sphere. The public is feminized
in a manner that has both positive and
negative consequences. On one hand,
set against a masculine monopoly on
violence and state action that is in-
creasingly irrational, the feminized
public reinstates the essential features
of the classical model. In addition, this
gendering corrects for various faults in
that model, not least its inattention to
emotion, norms of reciprocity and
care, divisions between public and pri-
ivate life, and the need for openness in
actual practice. On the other hand,
such gendering hardens a number of
dangerous alignments among power,
violence, and masculinity, and against
discourse, deliberation, and social re-
ciprocity. Worse yet, as women only
cry out and scream while remaining
helpless, public speech becomes hys-
terical and without agency, and as
their meaning is transferred to the vis-
ual medium that is featuring a
woman’s body, the public becomes
subject to the male gaze while being
reduced to the politics of spectacle.
Such logics produce both more war
and further constriction of public cul-
ture.

These transcriptions of gender are
as important as they are obvious, but
they are not the only means by which
iconic photos can embody essential
features of the public sphere. Michael
Warner (2002) has identified, among
others, two features of public culture
that are especially pertinent to the case
at hand: “the public is a social space
created by the reflexive circulation of
discourse” (p. 90), and it is a “relation
among strangers” (p. 74). The still
photo acquires greater mnemonic ca-
pacity due to its ease of wide and
continuous circulation. Even in digital
environments, video clips are more
time and skill intensive, whereas still
photos circulate easily and also can be
reproduced across posters, editorial
cartoons, book covers, t-shirts, and an
astonishing range of other items (e.g.,
see Franklin, 2000, pp. 1–24; Hariman
and Lucaites, 2002). As the public is
constituted in the dissemination and
circulation of texts that compete for
attentiveness (and verbal “uptake”)
within audiences, the images that cir-
culate best have a natural tendency to
come the carriers of public con-
sciousness (Warner, 2002, p. 87). The
iconic images then stand out further
because their conjunction of aesthetic
form and political function allows for a
reflexive representation of not only the
particular event, but also the condi-
tions of public representation most
crucial to understanding the event. No
one text or image can do this, but
those that can capture the tensions
within the discursive field will be more
likely to become the markers of the
field.

Because a public is always, by
definition, a group whose membership
cannot be known in advance, public
discourse is addressed to strangers. A
public “might be said to be stranger-
relationality in a pure form, because
other ways of organizing strangers –
nations, religions, races, guilds, etc. –
have manifest positive content.” Per-
haps most important, “We’ve become
capable of recognizing ourselves as strangers even when we know each other” (Warner, 2002, p. 74). If the public audience is to be capable of response and action, however, those within it cannot be operating in a realm of pure relationality, not least because there is no such language available. The discourses of public address must be inflected, embodied, and otherwise provide real bases for identification through aesthetic performance, and they have to do this in a manner that also maintains the reflexive openness of public identity. Warner’s own language seems to be a description of the iconic photograph:

The development of forms that mediate the intimate theater of stranger relationality must surely be one of the most significant dimensions of modern history, though the story of this transformation in the meaning for strangers has been told only in fragments. It is hard to imagine such abstract modes of being as rights-bearing personhood, species being, and sexuality, for example, without forms that give concrete shape to the interactivity of those who have no idea with whom they interact. (2002, p. 76)

The iconic photograph is one such form for mediating stranger relationality. A relationship that is hard to imagine is in need of images, and the iconic image acquires public appeal and normative power as it provides embodied depictions of important abstractions (such as “human rights”) operative within the public discourse of an historical period. In addition, the photograph becomes a condensation of public consciousness to the extent that, while it provides figural embodiment of abstractions, it also keeps the lines of response and action directed through relationships among strangers rather than specific individuals or groups. Thus, the photo of the napalmed little girl provides figural embodiment of the concepts of political innocence, human rights, third world vulnerability and victimage, mechanism destructiveness, criminal state action, and moral callousness. As it does so, it also puts the girl in the place of the stranger within the public. Her relationship with the viewer is an embodied case of stranger relationality. Set amidst characteristic features of public life (e.g., civil infrastructure, state action, press coverage) and appealing directly to the public audience (e.g., created through circulation, contrasted to the family and state in the picture, identified by no ethnic or other localized identity, not known in advance) the girl and the audience alike are anonymous, essentially strangers to each other.

Because the girl is distinguished by her pain, her strongest positive content is the internal content of the war; because the war also is conducted among strangers, it becomes a perverse form of stranger relationality. Because the girl’s pain is presented directly to the viewer, she embodies the stranger we can recognize within ourselves, and so her world and ours are drawn together into a single public realm. It is at precisely this point that her Vietnamese identity is significant. As Warner notes, the stranger of modern public life is not exotic or inherently disturbing (2002, p. 75); we would add that it is different from the Other that is articulated through every form of social exclusion (i.e., all forms of non-public identity). One consequence is that, by coupling the two forms together, an image can bestow public identity. The girl’s appeal for help would be subverted by her being perceived as one of the Other, a small, marginal figure within a minor, distant, marginalized group. Her moral
force comes from being perceived as a stranger in pain, which not only activates the transcription of Biblically directed compassion, but also makes her someone who is numbered among the public and so has the right to hold the state accountable.

The iconic photograph's fragmentary framing of the girl's combination of naked expressiveness and personal anonymity also keys subsequent narratives about "the girl in the picture." As Kim Phuc becomes clothed, and then partially, modestly unclothed to reveal her scars while holding her baby, she becomes a symbol for the restoration of domestic tranquility. As she forgives those who bombed her, she becomes a symbol of political reconciliation and also a means for forgetting the obligations of political history ("Pilot Finds Forgiveness," 1997). As she becomes a celebrity promoting universal human rights, she personalizes the stranger identity that is an essential element of moral judgment in public discourse.

The other Vietnam photos offer similar mediations of public life, just as they also are subject to a range of appropriations that comprise a continuing negotiation of American political identity. Franklin's study of how the execution photo was reworked in popular films and comics to become a conservative icon provides the most dramatic example of how icons figure prominently in the continuing struggle over the meaning of the Vietnam War (2000, pp. 1–24), but all four of the images are at issue (see Hariman and Lucaites, 2001; Skow and Dionisopoulos, 1997). The napalm girl's reappearances within the mainstream public media provide a varied range of examples. Such appropriations are inevitable in public discourse due to a corollary of stranger relationality: the condition of topical openness (see Habermas, 1989, p. 36). Thus, the napalm icon has been taken beyond the Vietnam War to condemn other forms of betrayal or injustice. In a cartoon protesting the Disney theme park that would have been located near the Manassas battlefield, Goofy is running down the road beside the crying girl (Toles, 1994). In a more recent cartoon protesting Nike labor practices, the girl reappears, wraith-like, as a poster on the wall of a factory in Vietnam (Danziger, 1997, A–10). As Vietnamese girls (or women) work at the assembly line, the cry of pain speaks for them, its anguish amplified further by the Nike slogan at the top of the poster: Just Do It. Their only choice is to keep working at "starvation wages," while U.S. mechanization operated by Vietnamese proxies continues to harm the Vietnamese people. The photo can operate as a rhetorical figure within the picture and as a linking device that activates historical memory and obligation (Vietnam then and now; U.S. immorality then and now; public indifference then and now) to motivate public intervention. The device works because the cartoonist has drawn on essential features of the icon in order to recreate its original effect of activating moral judgment within a supposedly amoral scene (war then and the free-market economy now). The transfer of moral response is possible because Vietnam continues to be feminized while the girl has been restored to her original anonymity and pain. These devices combine to constitute a public culture known to itself by the continued circulation of iconic images.

As appropriations of the napalm photo accumulate, and as the photo slides back and forth along a continuum from public anonymity to personal celebrity, an additional
dimension of public culture emerges. Stranger relationality is constituted in a field of visual representation defined by the presence of celebrities and ghosts. Both are exceptional forms of individual presence, known through their circulation, and simultaneously familiar and strange. (Icons have the same features as well.) No reader of this essay is likely to have ever met Kim Phuc in person, much less spent any time with her, but most will have known who she is. Like any icon, the celebrity is self-constitutive of public culture: created by dissemination and evidence of a broad field of attention. So it is that celebrity developed in conjunction with the ascendancy of the mass media, and the category has been a commonplace in photojournalism at least since *Life* magazine in the 1940s. The celebrity is the widely recognized stranger, that is, a stranger whose image is in wide circulation. More to the point, celebrity is a compensatory mechanism within the media to mask its strangeness. The celebrity image dresses the impersonal process of circulation in signs of private, personal expressiveness. Thus, the redefinition of the napalm girl as Kim Phuc accomplishes a powerful shift in public consciousness. The direct engagement with the stranger on the road is attenuated into a much more familiar world of everyday sociality where one lives among specific individuals who have more or less intimate relationships with one another.

The circulation of images doesn’t stop there, however. Despite the many iterations of Kim Phuc and her message of forgiveness, her past life as the napalm girl won’t go away. That image of trauma continues to appear, ghost-like, in tableaus of the American flag, suburban lawns, economic expansion, and so forth. A ghost is an after-

image, a specter that should disappear but refuses to go away, and whose very presence troubles the modern present and its logic of linear time. Photojournalism disseminates images, mechanically reproducing them by the millions and spreading them without control over their destination or use. Dissemination always has been accompanied by mythologies of haunting, including photography’s early association with spirit worlds, and death remains a preoccupation in photography theory (Barthes, 1981; Peters, 1999). Ghosts are, like signs, bodies without material agency, and re-animation is itself a metaphor for the circulation and uptake constituting public culture. The ghost also embodies stranger relationality, an unbidden presence who functions as a witness to other relationships and who makes the familiar strange. More significantly, ghosts also are a reminder of unfinished business. Thus, the ghost of the napalm girl triggers another strong shift in public consciousness: the familiar social world becomes unsettled, the ghostly figure presents a call for justice, for redress, and time begins flowing backward. This powerful undertow can pull one into a world of signs, swirling images, and the eternal recurrence of traumatic memory, but it also may provide an escape from the amnesia of the present. A sense of strangeness is necessary for reflection on the limits of one’s moral awareness, not least as that is produced by the mass media, and it also may be necessary for deliberation.

The celebrity is one extreme of the field of stranger relationality, and its covering device; the ghost is the other extreme, and perhaps an essential means for re-animating public consciousness amidst other forms of social reality. Both the celebrity and the
ghost exemplify essential features of the modern stranger: they are within but not fully of the social group, they are in intermediate positions between the viewer and larger sources of power, they are related to the viewer abstractly rather than through more organic ties, and they are at once both far and near (Simmel, 1950). This last characteristic is especially important, as it is perfectly coordinate with the phenomenology of photographic experience: the content of the photograph is always both far and near, whether a distant scene brought into one’s reading space, or a loved one placed within an impersonal medium of paper and ink. This may be why emotional response is so crucial to whether a photograph is appealing. The emotional identification temporarily overcomes any sense of artificiality or awkwardness that comes from seeing the image as an image. Likewise, in a world lived among strangers, emotional resonance becomes an important measure of connection. So it is that both incarnations of the napalm girl succeed, as both the celebrity Kim Phuc and the traumatized little girl on the road activate strong emotional responses. More generally, this iconic image, like all iconic images, marks out a particular kind of public culture. In this culture, a strong form of stranger relationality underwrites heightened moral awareness, rational-critical deliberation about state action, and continued accountability. Even so, historical events are constituted as moments of emotional intensity rather than as decisive actions, and there may remain a permanent lack of connection between moral sentiment and any specific model of action. Neither ghosts nor celebrities do much other than circulate and watch the rest of the world. That, of course, is essentially what publics do, but they are valued because of the belief in a sense of agency. The test of that belief may lie in how the public image can influence political cognition and collective memory.

A common feature of deliberation and memory is a sense of time. We will close by considering how the iconic photo can delay or stop time. The traumatic structure of the napalm photo freezes an action that is happening quickly and would be quickly forgotten. This strong temporal delay is the visual equivalent of the extended duration of verbal deliberation, and it is a contribution to restoring meaningfulness. In addition, extended attention to the image in the present can activate a stronger connection between past and future, and one that is directed by the image and not just by larger narratives: one can see the past moment still recorded in the photograph beheld in the present, while the image projects a future which also has been fulfilled in time before the present and may be still unfolding. The iconic photo can operate in a post-literate society as a democratic moment, one that slows down the public audience to ponder both what has been lost in the rush of visual images and what is still unrealized in what has been seen. As Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer have observed, “Democracy, consultation, the basis of politics, requires time,” while the fundamental dynamic of modern society is the acceleration of all modes of exchange (1983, p. 28). This acceleration is driven by the combination of technological development and logistical mobilization that occurred as the economy was oriented toward a permanent condition of military preparedness. It has produced a war culture that permeates modern life while disabling democratic
practices. Visual media are highly complicit in this process of social reorganization. The cinema is Virilio and Lotringer's primary example, although video and digital technologies have become the primary media and employ stronger techniques for both fragmenting and accelerating representation (Der Derian, 1992, 2000; Gray, 1997).

In respect to the mediation of public life, we might say that the problem is not the presence of a political spectacle, but the kinetic quality of that spectacle. Amidst this torrent of sights and sounds, the iconic photograph can induce a consciousness that is almost a form of slow motion. As Lester has remarked of iconic images, "Interestingly, moving films shown to television audiences were made at the same time ... but it is the powerful stillness of the frozen, decisive moment that lives in the consciousness of all who have seen the photographs. The pictures are testaments to the power and the sanctity of the still, visual image" (1991, p. 120). This is a common sentiment in the print media (see, e.g., Eicher, 2001), but it should not be seen as mere special pleading. "The electronic image flickers and is gone. Not so with the frozen moment. It remains. It can haunt. It can hurt and hurt again. It can also leave an indelible message about the betterment of society, the end of war, the elimination of hunger, the alleviation of human misery" (Mallette, 1978, 120).

If a still photo can slow down the viewer, it might nurture a more reflective, more deliberative mentality. That deliberative moment is not a pure space, however, but one already inflected by the photo's embodiment of public discourse and its performance of public identity as stranger relationality. Photojournalism provides such resources on a daily basis that are necessary for maintaining public life, while the iconic photo then becomes a condensation of events and public culture alike that has the artistic richness necessary for continued circulation. The icon is a lieu de mémoire: a site where collective memory crystallizes once organic sociality has been swept away amidst the "acceleration of history" produced by modern civilization (Nora, 1989, p. 7). "Simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration," iconic photographs operate in a dialectic of loss and recovery, official codification and vernacular disruption, verbal context and visual immediacy (Nora, 1989, p. 18). "In this sense the lieu de mémoire is double: a site of excess closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name, but also forever open to the full range of its possible significations" (Nora, 1989, p. 24). The photo of the napalm girl is not a figure of nostalgia amidst modernity's inevitable sense of alienation, however, but rather a symbolic form suited to the stranger relationality that constitutes, extends, and empowers public life. Thus, it provides the means through which moral capability can be retained by a public that has no common place, social structure, or agency. Both as a singular composition and as a figure in circulation, the icon provides a rhetorical structure for remembering and judging what otherwise would be consigned to the past.

The image of the little girl running from her pain became a moment when the Vietnam War crystallized in U.S. public consciousness. The photo could become such a "flashbulb memory" of the era not only because it represented the moral error at the heart of the U.S. war effort, but also because it embodied a process of cul-
ultural fragmentation that was accelerated by the war and its coverage. The features of that composition then became a template for remaking the public world through its continued circulation in the public media. Or worlds: the audience can choose one world where resilient individuals get on with their lives, where history has the inert presence of a scar, and moral response to others culminates in personal reconciliation. Or the audience can choose another world in which the past haunts the present as a traumatic memory, one that continues to demand public accountability for those who would betray the public by harming fellow strangers exposed to the relentless operations of imperial power. So it is that a democratic public will work out its capacity for thought and action in a discursive field where striking images can shape both moral judgment and collective memory.

Notes

1On the other side, some soldiers feel as though they have been betrayed by the picture (Timberlake, 1997). Their argument is strengthened when one sees how the photograph typically has been cropped: left out are soldiers whose stance suggests that all could be in danger and a photographer who is at least as professionally preoccupied as the soldiers on the road. The last omission is the most significant: it erases any sense of journalistic complicity in the war, while it also reduces the photo's reflectivity. We are to reflect on the war, but not on how it is photographed. Another photo that was taken a few moments later as the kids ran past a gaggle of video cameramen and still photographers is even more damning in this regard (Lehuesen, 2000).

2Another, almost identical photo is also in circulation. Taken by Anne Bayin, it, too, looks over Kim's bare, scared shoulder as she holds her smooth-skinned baby. As reported in a "Ms. Moment" sidebar, the photograph "is part of a nationwide exhibit entitled 'Moments of Intimacy, Laughter, and Kinship.'" Its placement in Ms. magazine is equally clear: "If there is a picture that captures the madness of war, it is the one of nine-year-old Kim Phuc running naked, burned by the napalm that U.S. troops dropped on her Vietnamese village on June 8, 1972. And if there is a picture that captures the power of hope and the joys of renewal, it is the one above . . . ." ("From Hell to Hope," 2001).

3The photo's prominent place in public memory of the Vietnam War is likely to continue. It is continually reproduced in volumes on famous and noteworthy photographs (e.g., Buell, 1999, pp. 102-103; Goldberg, 1991, p. 244; Robin, 1999, p. 59; Stepans, 2000, pp. 134-135) and it is one of two photos (the other is the execution shot) on the war in an award winning historical text for "young people" (Harkin, 2001, p. 132). Additionally, it continues to be used to join private recollection and public memory in short stories (Lam, 1998, pp. 111-121) and poetry (Durazzi, 2001a, 2001b; Vo, 2001). Other appropriations appear in Milos Forman's The People vs. Larry Flynt (1996) and Jon Haddock's Screenshots (Haddock, 2000). The photo also is used as a means for photojournalistic contextualization across the political spectrum. For example, it has been paired by an Israeli newspaper with the photo of a Palestinian father and son in the midst of a gunfight, in order to highlight the "excessive" emotional impact of the latter photo (Burger, 2000, p. 2b). More appreciatively, it was the one photograph selected for a commemorative art exhibit at the Guernica Culture House in Guernica, Spain to commemorate the 63rd anniversary of the German bombing of that town during the Spanish Civil War (Exhibit Recalls German Destruction, 2000). In addition, we are indebted to Nancy Miller for bringing to our attention a number of important appropriations of the napalm image by contemporary artists; her work on artistic remediation of the image as a form of personal testimony is an important complement to our analysis (in press).

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