Andrew King is Hopkins Professor of Communication and Chair of the Department of Speech Communication at Louisiana State University. He is past editor of SCJ (1993–1996) and is present editor of QJS. He is the author of several books and articles, is the past President of the Kenneth Burke Society (1996–1999), and received his doctorate under Robert L. Scott.

John Louis Lucaites and Robert Hariman
Indiana University

Visual Rhetoric, Photojournalism, and Democratic Public Culture

Rhetoricians have traditionally focused their attention on the power of the word as it is enacted in public contexts. More recently, increasing attention has been devoted to the rhetoric of the image (Barthes; Mitchell), or what is being dubbed "visual rhetoric." Visual rhetoric refers to a large body of visual and material practices, from architecture to cartography and from interior design to public memorials (e.g., see Blair; Foss; Twigg; MacDonald; Mirzeoff; Stafford). The focus of our own work in visual rhetoric is twentieth-century American photojournalism and, more particularly still, those photographs that have achieved the status of iconicity. "Iconic photographs" are photographic images produced in print, electronic, or digital media that are (1) recognized by everyone within a public culture, (2) understood to be representations of historically significant events, (3) objects of strong emotional identification or response, and (4) regularly reproduced or copied across a range of media, genres, and topics (Hariman and Lucaites). Examples abound and should come readily to mind: the "Migrant Mother" with her children staring into the camera amidst the Great Depression, six marines raising an American flag on Iwo Jima, the napalm-scorched body of a naked Vietnamese girl running from the blast, the aerial display of plumes of smoke as the Challenger explodes, and so on.

We hope to explain the role that iconic photographs play in American, liberal-democratic public culture. We begin by assuming that such photographs reflect social knowledge and dominant ideologies, shape and mediate understanding of specific events and periods (both at the time of their initial enactment and subsequently as they are recollected within a tableau of public memory), influence political behavior and identity, and provide inventional (figurative) re-
sources for subsequent communicative action. Additionally, we believe that they mark fundamental relationships between the practice of photojournalism and twentieth-century American democratic public culture. It is this last theme that we will sketch out here as a way of suggesting one avenue of current work in visual rhetoric and its implication for contemporary rhetorical studies.

The key point we wish to advance is that in general, photojournalism underwrites liberal-democratic public culture. From Plato to Neal Postman (Plato; Jay; Postman), Western philosophers and social critics alike have expressed a deep and abiding fear of the threat that visual practices pose to the public’s deliberative capacity for rational decision-making. By contrast, we argue that the practice of photojournalism operates as a political aesthetic (Hariman, cf. Hartley) that provides crucial social, emotional, and mnemonic resources for animating the collective identity and action necessary to a liberal-democratic politics (Zelizer).

One possible response to this problem, which emerges in a number of twentieth-century iconic photographs, is the “individuated aggregate” (Lucaites 278–80; Hariman and Lucaites). The individuated aggregate is a trope whereby the population as a whole is represented solely by specific individuals. This is the contrary tendency of democracies to aggregate individual actions, such as votes or public opinion polls; instead, the impetus for action comes from acting as if an aggregate were an individual. Think here in particular of Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother,” a photograph shot in 1936 at the height of the Great Depression in which a migrant pea picker sits holding her scared children while staring back at the viewer in a display of both victimage and strength. The photograph activates the tension between individual worth and collective identity at a moment of severe economic crisis by representing a common fear that transcends class and gender and by defining the viewer as one who can marshal collective resources to combat fear localized by class, gender, and family relations. It allows one to acknowledge paralyzing fear at the same time that it triggers an impulse to do something about it. This formal design reveals an implicit movement from the aestheticization of poverty to a rhetorical engagement with the audience, from a compelling portrait to compelling action by the audience on behalf of the class of subjects depicted. The problem of poverty will not be solved by helping only the migrant mother, but any state action is unlikely to gain support if it cannot be assented to by citizens habituated to see themselves as individuals first and last.

Iconic photographs are especially revealing in this regard, for among other things, they contribute to the representation and constitution of specific conceptions of civic identity that have developed as key features of liberal-democratic polity. The articulation of liberal-democracy in American public culture operates in an apparently irresolvable tension between individual sovereignty and collec-
tive agency. The individual is the locus of value, but the collective is the locus of power. Models of civic identity are thus caught at any given moment between affirming the self but catering to class interests, or heralding individual autonomy but legitimizing public authority, or celebrating competition but reassuring those who lose. These tensions are especially pronounced during moments of crisis and disaster such as war or economic depression, where any political response has to be oriented toward large-scale measures designed to meet needs defined in the aggregate, while still maintaining the ideological commitment to the primacy of the individual.

In a liberal-democratic public culture increasingly dominated by collective enterprises, the continual reproduction of such iconic photographs maintain the form of individual agency while habituating the public to institutional management of collective behavior. For those who initially encountered the “Migrant Mother” in the 1930s, it captured a profound, generalized sense of vulnerability while simultaneously providing a localized means for breaking its spell through state action. With the passage of time, the photograph has become an icon for the Great Depression and the New Deal policies instituted to deal with it, an aide-memoire for activating a “structure of feeling” (Williams) that helps to collapse past and present so as to legitimate a particular response to the tension between the individual and the collective at moments of crisis and despair. In one such example drawn from the 1970s, the “Migrant Mother” was appropriated by a Black Panther artist who rendered the photograph as a drawing that racialized the mother and her children, thus drawing from the original photograph’s characterization of unwarranted victimage and its moral appeal for state action to the relationship between race and economic oppression (Heyman 61). Explicit reproductions of the photograph are numerous, appearing in everything from popular histories and textbooks invoking the Great Depression to advertisements for an A&E television documentary, titled “California and the Dream Seekers.” A particularly interesting reproduction occurred in President Clinton’s 1996 campaign film “A Place Called America” (Bloodworth-Thomason), where the photograph appears in the very middle of what is represented as the American family photo album amidst shots of military service, a clear attempt to level the hierarchy in forms of national service that had been used against Clinton due to his lack of a military record. More recently, it was imitated on a 1999 Time magazine cover that displays an ethnic Albanian woman suckling her baby while being expelled from Kosovo (“Are Ground Troops The Answer?”). In each instance the rationale remains essentially the same. Guided by an emotional rather than a programmatic logic, the photographs work primarily to activate and manage feelings of both vulnerability and obligation that are endemic to liberal-democratic culture. These conventions then become standard means of persuasion.
that illustrate how people must be portrayed to be deemed worthy of redemption from practices of destruction accompanying the social order.

The individuated aggregate is not unique to photography, of course, but it seems to fit comfortably within the conventions of photojournalistic practice that rely on realist assumptions of representation, even as they situate the viewer in an emotional register that activates the tension between private and public life. Put somewhat differently, we conclude by suggesting that iconic photographs and the photojournalistic practices that they animate may well function as a performative ritual of civic identity in literate, liberal-democratic societies. It is important that we emphasize the word literate in the previous sentence, for in such a world the assumption is that the logos is sovereign. And yet there is no easy economy of words for invoking the grandeur and sublimity of nature (or technology), the horrors of war, or the despair of victimage, let alone the structures of feeling that manage the paradoxical tension between individual autonomy and collective authority. In illiterate societies performance is the primary medium through which the “unsayable” (typically the sacred) is enacted and given presence. By “performance” we mean to focus attention on aesthetically marked and intensified communicative behavior put on display for an audience toward the general goal of maintaining collective life (Bauman). Photojournalism (and especially the iconic photograph) seems to meet the terms of performance quite naturally. It is aesthetically marked, both by the conventions of realist photography and photojournalistic practices (e.g., perspective, placement, captions, etc.). Its freezing of a critical moment in time intensifies the journalistic experience, focusing the viewer’s attention on a particular enactment of the tensions that define the public culture. But more than this, it does so ritualistically, as it repetitively conjures images of what is unsayable (e.g., because emotional) in print discourses otherwise defining the public culture. This repetition, in newspapers, magazines, coffee table books, textbooks, political advertisements, and so forth, provides the public audience with the important assurances and other resources necessary for participation in modern democratic polity.

Works Cited

“Are Ground Troops the Answer?” Time April 12, 1999.


---

John Louis Lucaites is an associate professor in the Department of Communication and Culture, Indiana University. His work focuses on the relationship between rhetoric and social theory and the critique of liberal-democratic public culture. His work includes *Crafting Equality: America’s Anglo-African Word* (1993, with Celeste Condit).