

Re-Imaging War: Internet Memes based on War Photography as an Act of Resistance against Visual Manipulation

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Abstract

Starting from the assumption that the visual construction of pictures depends on the emotional impact they are supposed to elicit, historic examples will be used to develop three categories of war photography - images of avoidance, horror and triumph. Against this backdrop, Internet memes based on war photography will be discussed as a way of commenting the intended emotional manipulation – fending, ridiculing or transforming it. Using the three-dimensional model proposed by Shifman to analyze the meme based on the so-called “situation room photo”, it is shown that meme items strive to expose and subvert the original visual strategy in order to deflect its manipulative intentions. In conclusion it is proposed that critical meme contributions can be regarded as a technically advanced derivative of political caricature, sharing the same basic technique (visual depiction), means (exaggeration) and ends (satire).

Keywords: political iconography; visual sociology; war photography; internet meme.

Political iconography and some positions on war photography

Since their very beginnings, the production and use of public pictures have been influenced by the political intentions of their creators. As Susan Sontag writes about photographs of war: "They are themselves a kind of rhetoric. They insist. Simplify. They agitate. They create the illusion of consensus." (Sontag, 2003, p. 12) Traditional positions tend to pose all war photography into one of two categories. Either they state that images of war are always horrendous – a view which is widely held. It was certainly held by Virginia Woolf when, in her essay *Women must weep*, she claimed that photographs of war were bound to elicit the same emotions in all viewers: „You .., call them horror and disgust. We also call them horror and disgust. ... War is an abomination, a barbarity; war must be stopped.” (Woolf, 1938/2011, p. 138) Other authors: e.g. German historian Gerhard Paul - set out to prove that, in fact, most war photographs go to great lengths to avoid presenting the full horror of war.

Of whatever kind the emotional impact, the effectiveness of any picture draws on the misapprehension that photographs are authentic images of reality, an illusion that accompanies the medium from its beginnings. The French philosopher Roland Barthes stated in his famous work on photography, *Camera lucida*: "The essential message of each photograph is: It has been so." (Barthes, 1981, p. 89) Photographs seem to depict reality - this impression might be even stronger when they confront us with the reality of war. But, writes historian Gerhard Paul, "... the prospects for war were never without presuppositions, but predetermined by technical structures, by the conventions of the genre and the visual languages, through plots and program structures, and finally by political requirements - forced into a frame, as it were." (Paul, 2009, p. 41)

Avoidance

Gerhard Paul's position can be illustrated with one of the oldest war photographs ever, a picture that at first glance would hardly be recognized as war photograph at all - Roger Fenton's view of the battlefield of Balaclava. When taking this picture in 1855, its photographer was greatly restricted by the technical possibilities of his time: Cameras were still large and heavy and exposure times were long. Photographs could only be taken of mostly static scenes or objects. Snapshots of battle scenes would have been blurred beyond recognition. Even more than by these technical parameters Fenton's images were influenced by an instruction that had been given to him along the way by – supposedly – Prince Albert himself: "No bodies!" (Fabian & Adam, 1983, p. 79).

Since 1854 England took part in the Crimean war. 30,000 British soldiers had been dispatched there, under-equipped and badly prepared. Typhoid and cholera killed ten times as much British as the Russian enemy. Poor provisioning and insufficient medical supplies made this war much more gruesome than anyone suspected at home - or rather would have suspected, would not William Howard Russell, the war correspondent of the TIMES, have tirelessly described the horrors of the battlefields in his articles. His critical reports angered the British government as well as the royal family. The palace commissioned Fenton to document that the situation on the Crimean peninsula was not as terrible as alleged by Russell's reports. And – as instructed – Fenton avoided showing dead bodies or other unpleasant realities of war.

He pictured officers in a relaxed posture "after the day's work" (so the title of one of his images) or battlefields without bodies, as the field in Balaclava, immortalized in Alfred Lord Tennyson's famous poem *The Charge of the Light Brigade* as the *Valley of Death*. Shortly before Fenton took his photograph of the battlefield, hundreds had been killed there. The only photographic hint to this fact are the round objects along the way, which to the first glance might appear like stones but are actually cannon balls. Even Fenton, intent on avoiding shocking visual elements, seems to have come to the conclusion that the original picture did not speak clearly enough. So he produced a second version (which has become much better known) for which he collected cannonballs from the wayside and scattered them, clearly visible, in the middle of the road.

Thus, war photography, from its very beginnings, did not stop short of manipulating images. This practice was not only widespread but also defended argumentatively. The German newspaper *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, which in 1915 had presented photographs of military manoeuvres claiming to document scenes of World War I, argued – when confronted with the fraud - that staged photographs would provide a much more "realistic view, thus fulfilling their task to convey the right impression." (*Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, July 25, 1915, cited by Paul, 2009, p. 41) Which kind of impression was considered "right" by the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* is not explained in the text - presumably one that depicts war as a necessary and feasible task, as a clean and aseptic matter that can be handled efficiently with minimal loss. German historian Gerhard Paul describes this kind of trivializing pictures as the "strongest pattern" (Paul, 2009, p. 44) of war representation for the last 150 years.

Triumph

Another category of war images can be referred to as 'images of triumph'. Early examples can be found in the marble reliefs of the Greeks and Romans, depicting victorious fighters returning from battle with no visual signs of fatigue, let alone serious physical damage, like in two panel reliefs lining the Arch of Titus in Rome, created in the 1st century AD. This kind of triumphant image is simultaneously evasive. As German publicist Rainer Fabian states in his comprehensive collection of 130 years of war photography: "Famous depictions of war rarely show the bloody reality, no combat, no wounds, no death. They symbolize mostly emotions: triumph and victory, and only sometimes sadness". (Fabian & Adam, 1983, p. 263) One of the most iconic war photographs entirely dedicated to triumph is Joe Rosenthal's *raising the Flag of Iwo Jima*. Recently further immortalized by the biographical novel by James Bradley and Ron Powers (Bradley & Powers, 2000) and the following feature film by Clint Eastwood, both called *Flags of Our Fathers*, the black-and-white snapshot had already become deeply scripted into the cultural memory over decades. It was printed in newspapers around the globe, turned into an oil painting which was used on placards advertising a war loan and spread even further on a US-stamp – all in the first year following its creation in February 1945.

In the following decades the motive was used whenever 'victory' was the given theme and creative expressions were being asked for: It was re-created in cake form, in stone, sand, Lego bricks and a number of other improbable materials as well as appearing several times in the animated TV-show *The Simpsons (US Naval Institute, 2015)*. This kind of repetitive re-imaging plays an important role in the process of symbolization: Every time a specific visual scene is set into yet another material frame it has to be reduced to a basic outline with a few recognizable details, thus getting gradually more and more detached from its original context and slowly turning into an abstract symbol. Rosenthal's photograph of a triumphant gesture after a partial victory in one battle during a world-wide war turned into a symbol of victory itself and as such found yet another form of re-usage: Groups that want themselves depicted as fighting for a just cause pose like the soldiers did in Rosenthal's photograph – be it the gay pride movement¹ or cartoonists taking a stance for freedom of speech after the Charlie-Hebdo-attacks².

¹ s. <http://tinyurl.com/ootmng>

² s. <http://rackjite.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/11115jk.jpg>

For the purpose of this article, two properties of Rosenthal's picture are especially important. Firstly, it was staged. Rosenthal did not take the photograph during the actual conquest of Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima, but afterwards, having been sent there with a squad of soldiers ordered to raise a second, larger flag. Secondly, the picture was not taken at the end of World War II, but during an on-going battle that took in itself another six weeks and was fought months before World War II was over. In spite of this fact, the photograph became not only a wide-spread symbol of the end of World War II - German art historian Martin Hellmold calls images like this "historical reference images", defined by the fact that they are" established as symbols of a particular historical event" (Hellmold, 1999, p. 36) -, but of victory itself.

From an analytical perspective this prompts the question: Why did a photograph re-staging an event gain the status of a generalized symbol rather than the existing picture taken during the event itself? What had to be re-imagined to attain the necessary visual effect to become an icon? The picture of the original flag-raising³ on Iwo Jima was taken by photographer Lou Lowery. In its background we see a nearly upright flagpole which is upheld more than erected by two soldiers who are surrounded by a group of comrades looking on passively – a scene much less dynamic than the one in Rosenthal's picture. An even more important difference in the picture's visual impact might be caused by another element, though: In the foreground of Lowery's picture, a soldier is looking out for approaching enemies, gun pointed, tense and alert. The guard's watchful stance creates the impression that a victory has been gained, but the danger is not over yet. Rosenthal's picture provides an opposite effect: His flag-raisers stage victory without showing the viewer any signs of the danger or tension, thus evoking only associations of heady relief: The battle is won, the killing has ended and all fear can be released. It might well be this concentration on triumph, this offering of release that has gained Rosenthal picture its iconic status.

Terror

War images are rarely as purely focused on victory and triumph as in this case. More often they convey the counterpart of victory, too: the defeat of the opponent. To emphasize the inferiority of the enemy, some triumphant pictures include indications of horror, usually destroyed habitats or political symbols. Often they present the beaten enemies themselves, weakened and humiliated, captured and – often – killed. Examples for this kind pictures can be found easily – from Mussolini over Pol Pot and Nicolai Ceausescu to Saddam Hussein; some of the more famous ones get even re-imagined in artistic form, like Freddy Alborta's photograph of the dead Che Guevara in 1967. The message this kind of picture conveys can be easily decoded: They are proof that the enemy has actually been destroyed on the one hand, threat that the same kind of death and degradation will come to anyone offering further resistance on the other hand.

Terrifying pictures without any triumphant subtext are often put forward by pacifists aiming to bias the viewer against war itself. This tradition of confronting the viewers with unsparingly brutal views of war's realities was established even before the invention of photography – one famous example being Francisco de Goya's series of etchings called *Desastres de la Guerra* (Disasters of War) which depicts the violent ramifications on all sides of the uprising of the Spanish people against the French occupiers in 1808. A complete volume full of photographic atrocities was published in 1924 by pacifist Ernst Friedrich. His book *Krieg dem Kriege!* (Friedrich, 1924) assembles photographs of dead and disfigured survivors of all sides and commentates them in four languages, making a passionate case against war as a means of solving international conflicts. During the following decades the publication of confrontational pictures of war increased dramatically. As technological development provided smaller, lighter cameras with faster shutter speeds that were able to shoot sharp pictures even under poor conditions, magazines like LIFE and TIME furthered a documentary style of photography that brought war photographers ever closer to the actual combatants. Robert Capa, who has produced several iconic images of war such as *Death of a loyalist militia man* (1936) asserted: „If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough." (Fabian & Adam, 1983, p. 253) When the Vietnam War reached its peak, this statement had long been firmly established as the acting principle of every war photographer. By then, not only professed anti-war activists but also mainstream media presented horrendous pictures of war. The dominant themes of war photography in those days – prominently represented by photographer Larry Burrows - were soldiers preparing for, during or immediately after battle, often wounded heavily. Art historian Martin Hellmold described this phenomenon as "victim orientation of modern war photography" (Hellmold, 1999, p. 43).

³ s. <http://tinyurl.com/jx2atfw>

Images of victims are especially likely to turn into historical reference images in the sense of Hellmold. One of the most iconic victim images is Nick (Huynh Cong) Ut's 1972 photography of Kim Phuc (titled *Trang Bang* by the photographer, called *Napalm Girl* by the agency holding the copyright). The facts are not hard to research⁴: On June 8 1972 the South-Vietnamese military received reports that North-Vietnamese troops were hiding close to the village of Trang Bang. The South-Vietnamese troops searched Trang Bang for hidden enemies, prompting the villagers to leave their dwellings. Since combat activities had become scarce, many photo reporters were keen to catch some action. But no enemies could be tracked down. The Southern-Vietnamese commander asked for support by the flying forces, requesting that several bombs should be dropped on a marked field near the village. But something went wrong and the bombs went down too close to the living quarters, splashing napalm all over the buildings and inhabitants that had not yet left. Nine-year-old Kim Phuc tore her burning clothes off while she ran – together with her siblings and grandmother – towards the watching reporters, who hurriedly began to take photographs of the horrific scene. There were several children and grown-ups wounded and/or dying, but the photographers focussed mainly on the naked running child, screaming out loud from pain and shock.

The photograph that became famous was taken by Photographer Nick Ut and published the next day on the title page of the New York Times⁵. It had been picked out by the editor of AP office in Saigon immediately. But it was not used in its original form: Photographers that lined the roadside taking photographs of the victims were cut off, ensuring that any visual impact emanating from the picture was based on the desperate little girl. It can be assumed that not many of the millions of people who grew accustomed to this picture as THE symbol of the horrors of war realized Kim Phuc was fleeing from 'friendly fire', not from an enemy attack.

Even the choice of exactly this photograph out of the dozens that Nick Ut took during those minutes can be regarded as a re-imaging the original scene: There were photographs, taken only seconds later, on which Kim Phuc appears much less panicked, even composed, depicting her less as a helpless victim than a human being, badly wounded but dignified. But those pictures would not have created the same effect, would not have been "event pictures" in the sense of art historian Hellmold by "showing human beings in moments of existential threat, thus creating shock or at least strong emotions in the viewers." (Hellmold, 1999, p. 36) As the examples in this segment show, war photography has been much less documentary than it has claimed through the greater part of the twentieth century. It seems as if photographers do not trust their viewers to fully apprehend the reality of what they see in the picture unless they are instructed by some additional visual hints. Re-imaging by manipulating the original scene and/or picture seems to be motivated (at least as far as war photography is concerned) by the aim to maximize the emotional effect, usually one that – in moral terms - 'should' be created by the actual scene itself.

From war pictures to picture wars

The arrival of the internet and social media triggered a new development: Small, affordable camera phones enable every person with an internet connection to spread pictures of themselves and their everyday lives but also of catastrophes and violence in their surroundings to a worldwide public. Amateur photographs of natural disasters or conflict areas, initially posted on social media platforms, are frequently re-used by professional media (Isermann, 2015, p. 339ff.). The easily accessible distribution channel internet was soon discovered by attention-seeking terrorists as a new way to confront the rest of the world with their atrocities. Following that line of thought it was but a short way to the idea of committing violent acts for the sole (or at least main) purpose of documenting and spreading them through a picture (or video). Pictures are no longer taken to document incidents; incidents are being staged to be able to take pictures of them – a reversal of the previous principles of documentary photography. Writer Martin Walser described this phenomenon as a movement from war photography to photography war. In 2004, he wrote:

"The war of pictures has been declared. On both sides pictures are being used to instigate the ones who are supposed to kill. The photographic medium – arousing our deepest sympathies – motivates to act ever worse. The more refined photographic technique, the more atavistic the atrocities. Vengeance is being taken with pictures for pictures." (Walser, 2004, p. 191)

⁴ for this and the following account s. Paul, 2005, pp. 226ff.

⁵ accompanying an article by Fox Butterfield under the headline „South Vietnamese Drop Napalm on Own Troops“, s. Butterfield, 1972

The “picture war” Walser refers to began with a video showing the decapitation of journalist Daniel Pearl in 2002 and did not end with the killings of journalists James Foley and Stephen Sotloff in 2014. They all might not have had to die, had the terrorists not intended to horrify all humankind with pictures of their deaths.

Not only professional media have to position themselves on how to handle this kind of “war photography”. Governments, too, have to decide on a strategy how to present their own military operations and victories without running the risk of provoking defeated and humiliated enemies into further retaliation in the war of pictures.

Maybe in a reaction to this development, the Obama administration decided to visualize the capture and killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011 with a series of nine photographs⁶, none of which showed bin Laden and all were taken thousands of miles away. The series was created on May 1st 2011 at the White House in Washington, where president Obama was photographed during the raid of bin Laden’s hiding place in Pakistan. One of these pictures, taken by White House photographer Pete Souza, shows Obama and his security advisors during the live video stream from Abbottabad in one of the so-called „situation rooms“ at the White House. The picture – known as “the situation room photo” – shows a crowd of people sitting or standing around a big conference table, all looking in one direction. Whatever they are looking at is not shown in the picture – it is placed just outside of the left margin. Apart from some pixelated documents on the table, the picture does not hold any direct evidence that it was actually taken during the military action in Pakistan. Yet, within two days after its publication on the White House Flickr stream, the photograph had been downloaded millions of times and was reproduced in print and online media around the world as THE representation of bin Laden’s death.

As early as May 4th – three days after it was taken – the picture was labelled by journalist Alan Silverleib on CNN as a “photo for the ages”, very “likely to join other iconic presidential images” (Silverleib, 2011). In the following days and months the photograph was analysed in every detail, resulting in an abundance of popular as well as academic articles. Conventions were held; books were published⁷, all exclusively dealing with the subject “situation room photo”.

Most of the interest centred on the question why a picture that shows nothing of the violent military operation it represents, could become a symbol for victory so fast and so unanimously. Although there are differing views on the situation room photo, there seems to be consent among viewers as regards the reason for its strong impact: The visual intensity springs from Hillary Clinton’s posture. In the picture the then Secretary of State covers her mouth with her hand, her eyes widened by an emotion that – depending on the commentator – ranges somewhere between “being startled” and “being horrified”. The gesture stands out not only because Clinton holds (approximately) the centre of the photograph but also because she is the only person in the picture showing an emotion beyond concentrated seriousness.

Some headlines summarize concisely what the viewers believe to see in this picture. “The eyewitness” (Seibel, 2011) writes the German newspaper *DIE WELT*. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)* uses the header “Public Viewing” (FAZ, 2011) to hint at the picture’s ambiguousness: In Germany the phrase is used mostly in connection with football matches that are televised publicly on gigantic screens, whereas the original American meaning of paying respects to the deceased in a funeral home implies the presence of a dead body – thus allowing speculations on what is actually being viewed.

It is Clinton’s gesture alone which suggests that the picture was taken at the exact moment that Osama bin Laden was killed in front the helmet cameras of the navy seals. The fact that, only days later, Clinton claimed that her gesture was not at all emotional but due to her suppressing a sneeze, did not convince anyone. Commentators went on to interpret the hand before her mouth as an emotional “flood out” in the sense of Erving Goffman (Goffman, 1979) Their connotations varied, however, according to their individual psychological or political values. Clinton’s sympathizers took the gesture as an expression of humaneness, empathy and compassion (Horowitz, 2011). Her political opponents declared it to be a sign of weakness and lack of self-control (ORF, 2011), inferring that a person showing emotional vulnerability could not be a strong secretary of state. If then the photograph was likely to raise doubts in at least part of the public about the Secretary of State and thus the Obama administration as a whole – why was it used by this same administration for its official documentation of the incident?

⁶ s. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/whitehouse/5680724572>

⁷ in Germany alone there were two: Przyborski & Haller, 2014; Kauppert & Leser, 2014

To approach this question it is crucial to remember that it is only Clinton's gesture that turns the picture into a "substitute picture" – a term coined by German art historian Michael Diers – which represents the killing of Osama bin Laden without showing it. A conclusion which in turn is prerequisite for accepting the photograph as proof that the terrorist leader has actually been eliminated. The acceptance of the situation room photo as such proof was important to the Obama administration because it refused to show pictures of bin Laden's dead body. The body itself – thus the claim of Washington – had been buried at sea immediately after bin Laden's death according to Muslim rites.

These visual politics, as you may call them, were criticized harshly. Part of the American people wanted to see this partial victory over terrorism pictured triumphantly. But the US government had several reasons to abstain from triumphant gestures. One of the most important reasons might have been the fact that their self-declared "war against terrorism" was – according to international law - not a war at all, because legally wars can only be declared on countries, not on abstract ideas. Therefore the killing of a man upon the territory of a foreign state with which the US was actually not at war could be seen as illegal, even if it seemed morally justified to many. One publicly declared reason for withholding pictures of the dead body was the intention to spare the feelings of viewers, especially those in the Muslim parts of the world. Implied, although not voiced, was the fear of provoking retributive actions by publishing photographic material degrading a dead person. So it was for good reasons that the Obama administration decided upon visualizing the incident with a series of photographs that showed only the decision makers in the White House, presenting them as thoughtful, serious practitioners of their political trade who did not take this lethal decision lightly.

Re-imaging War

Very soon after its publication, an internet meme based on the photograph sprang up that can be regarded as an active appropriation of interpretational sovereignty by the public. This appropriation is enabled by the same medium that makes the spreading of terror pictures so easy: the internet. For decades, there has been a widespread consensus in communication studies and media sociology that media recipients are by no means passive "victims" of an all-dominating cultural industry, as critical theorists had us believe earlier. Readers, listeners and viewers create their own view. They do not just believe what they are told by the media. For a long time personal interpretations of the news could only be shared in the small circle of family and personal acquaintances. The internet provides the option to share one's own view on news stories and press releases with the whole world. Pictures like the situation room photo are downloaded, edited, mixed with other pictures, subtitled or mashed-up in other forms. The outcome is uploaded again and shared via social media. When masses of internet users tinker with the same picture (or video) and the results are shared by many, the series becomes an internet meme⁸ which – by its separate parts and as a whole – assigns a new meaning to the original item.

It might be argued that there is not one, but two internet memes based on the situation room photo – one that concentrates on decoding and explaining several not quite obvious hints that "operation Neptune spear" was the actual reason for the depicted gathering, and one that consists of edited versions of the photograph itself.

The decipherment-meme adds explanatory comments about persons, objects, even furniture⁹ to the original situation room photo. It centers around the pixelated aerial image of the Bin Laden premises, which had one contributor snidely comment: "Some people should learn how to handle secrets ..."¹⁰ The commentator seems to have missed the express reference on the official White House Flickr, reading: "Please note: a classified document seen in this photograph has been obscured."¹¹ Considering these facts, it is obvious that the Obama administration did not publish the situation room photo "by accident", but chose it consciously and even put some work into it before presenting it to the public. And yet, the commentator is right on one aspect: Why present an obscured document when it must have been clear that the internet community would not take long to de-pixel ate it? In the opinion of media sociologist Ruth Ayass, pointing out the obscured document practically amounts to a "sporty challenge" to decode the pixelated document as fast as possible so that the internet community finally would prove what the Obama administration refused to prove: that the situation room photo was really taken during the raid of bin Laden's lodgings (and not during a totally different event).

⁸ Here I am following Shifman's definition of the term "meme": "a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users." Shifman, 2014, p. 41

⁹ s. <http://xenophilus.wordpress.com/2011/05/06/situation-room-up-close/>, <http://tinyurl.com/zz467ca>

¹⁰ orig.: „Wenn manche doch nur lernten, mit Geheimnissen umzugehen“, s. Krauel, 2011

¹¹ s. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/whitehouse/5680724572>

Intended or not, the invitation to participate worked, although it did not (only) result in decipherments of the picture's existing visual elements, but also (and much more so) in augmented versions of the original picture, some critical, all of them ironic, most of them dealing with the – literal and figurative – gaps in the scene. Using the three-dimensional meme model proposed by Limor Shifman – the dimensions being form, content and stance – it can be stated that most items of this second meme maintained the original photographic form, merely editing the original situation room photo by adding or deleting specific visual elements, digitally repainting some parts, cutting out and editing details etc.¹²

As to content, four thematic clusters can be identified: Firstly there are numerous pictures adding on to existing internet memes (like the “Tourist Guy Meme”, the “Squirrel Meme”, the “Flower Girl Meme”¹³, or the “Lego Meme” which recreates famous photographs using Lego figurines¹⁴). This cluster has little more to do with the situation room photo itself than the fact that it was called an icon very soon after its publication and all the memes that these situation room variations add on to, use iconic images as a basis. The second cluster concentrates on populating the empty spaces in the picture with celebrities or well-known figures of popculture¹⁵, until the whole scene is as crowded as the right side of the original image. The third thematic cluster simulates „reverse shots“, often including the original and juxtaposing it with their own version of what the persons in the situation room might see on the screen they are looking at. This cluster construes an imagined “missing left side” of the picture which would include the centre of attention that the original picture visually excludes (and implies only by the congruent lines of gaze).

A fourth, smaller cluster edits persons already in the picture in a way that is meant to change the pictorial statement (e.g. by showing the assembly in superhero costumes¹⁶ or with Rambo paraphernalia¹⁷). Another part of this cluster consists of variations which include one specific person that was not present in the original. There are different politicians included respectively, but one person is worked into several variations, namely Osama bin Laden himself¹⁸. In contrast to the items in the other clusters, the variations in this group are less inspired by visual properties of the original picture but concentrate more on the political content – this point will be discussed further in the following segment discussing Shifman's dimension “stance”.

The term “stance” is used by Shifman “to depict the ways in which addressers position themselves in relation to the text” (Shifman, 2014, p. 41), “text” being defined as any cultural product that a meme is based on. Two different kinds of stance can be identified in the situation room meme. The first group contains items that mainly stultify the original, ridiculing it without explicit critical intent. This stance manifests itself in the variations adding on to existing memes, the over-crowding theme and most of the reverse shot simulations, e.g. those showing pop singers, sports events, video games or simple system crash messages¹⁹.

Another, more critical stance is typical for the fourth, individual-centred thematic group, but can be also seen in some reverse shot variations. When the assembly in the situation room is being looked at by an on-screen Osama bin Laden himself, this may well be interpreted as an act of breaking through a hierarchical view relation in the sense of Foucault: To confront a group of decision makers watching the death of an unsuspecting human thousands of miles away with that human himself watching them doing so, means replacing an encounter on very different power levels by an (imagined) encounter on an equal footing.

A less subtle way of critique is applied by variations that place Rambo paraphernalia into the picture's background and put a Rambo bandeau on president Obama's head, or by those showing Obama's team as comic super heroes. Those can easily be understood as comments accusing the US of a heroically staged, yet basically aggressive foreign policy. One item shows only the detail of the original picture where Barack Obama crouches on a low seat, his gaze firmly attached to the outside-of-view screen on the left. Added to this original detail is a play station remote control in Obama's hands²⁰ – suggesting that the physical distance from the consequences of a killing order enables an emotional detachment that might make leading a war feel like a war game.

¹² Sometimes text was added as header, caption or speech bubble but this kind of variation was excluded from the study this article is based on.

¹³ s. <http://www.wired.com/2011/05/situation-room-lol-pics/>, <http://tinyurl.com/hfzcyeu>

¹⁴ s. <http://tinyurl.com/j8xeh8>

¹⁵ s. <http://tinyurl.com/hqnqzaj>; <http://tinyurl.com/h6vnlho>

¹⁶ s. <http://tinyurl.com/z2krq2c>

¹⁷ s. <http://tinyurl.com/hzpqc36>

¹⁸ s. <http://tinyurl.com/je6mmf9>, <http://tinyurl.com/hf4eg36>

¹⁹ s. <http://tinyurl.com/gpuqyre>

²⁰ s. <http://tinyurl.com/hj5dg23>

After interpreting the meme items as reactions to certain visual elements in the original picture, sociological analysis has to ask whether they could also be reacting to certain functions of the picture as a whole. As stated earlier, the Obama administration's decision to not publish any photographs of the actual raid or bin Laden's dead body can be viewed as consciously considerate, non-confrontative attitude, making an effort to spare the (religious) feelings of the public, especially the Muslim public. It can also be interpreted as an attempt at reification of public discourse: The renunciation of any triumphant gesture may have been meant as a signal of de-escalation towards bin Laden followers as well as towards those US citizens that were celebrating the "victory" overly enthusiastic (Jurgensen, 2011).

Some viewers may conceive this very controlled approach as (too) distant and manipulative. Maybe the strategy merely consists of having the Obama administration appear as calm and sober executives of a governmental task (as Obama's first words to the press suggested: „Tonight, I can report to the American people ...“²¹), whereas the viewers have to extrapolate what is not shown in the picture and - by being forced to activate their imagination to do so - automatically charge the image with just the emotions and drama that the Obama administration avoids to express. Thus, responsibility is shifted in several ways: Firstly the public is held responsible for assigning the task of killing bin Laden to the government (the government being only the executor of the assignment given to them by "the people"). Secondly, the viewers are responsible for the emotional impact that they charge the situation room photo with, and thirdly, they are responsible for any wrong conclusions they draw from what cannot be seen in the picture.

Whether the photograph was actually taken during the raid and killing of bin Laden or, after all, during another point in time during the day-long Operation Neptune Spear (as Hillary Clinton claimed on different occasions, s. JOK, 2011; LoGiurato, 2012), remains unresolved and thus ultimately subjugated to the viewer's subjective interpretation. Based on the assumption that some meme contributors took this utilization of the viewer's imagination to be a manipulative act, serving to shift the responsibility for any emotions and errors, their meme attributions can be viewed as purposely trivializing and thereby de-dramatizing parodies, created as defence reaction against being visually manipulated.

Conclusion

Using the example of the internet meme based on the situation room photo it could be shown, that editing war-related photographs and sharing the edited versions on the internet can be regarded as attempt to react to emotional visual messages in a similar visual (and emotional) way. The manipulative intention of the original creator(s) is not exposed by wordy analysis but by ironic exaggeration or transmutation of the emotive characteristics of the original picture.

In this sense, internet memes based on any political picture can be regarded as an advanced version of political caricature, which always used satirical hyperbole to criticize political actors or their actions (Achterberg, 1998; Heinisch, 1988; Plum, 1998). What used to be limited to people who had a talent for drawing and connections to the press was expanded by technical innovations (software tools for drawing, image editing etc.) to everyone with internet access who wants to express political views by visual means. Thus technical and visually transformed, the form stays the same regarding basic technique (visual depiction), means (exaggeration) and ends (satire). As to content and attitude, as a way of satirically commenting political actions and intentions, meme items based on war photography are a modernized version of political caricature, only digital instead of hand-drawn.

Within the limited space of an article only one meme based on only one category of war photograph could be analysed in depth, the situation room photo representing the category of avoidance pictures. It is probable that memes based on the categories "terror" and "triumph" exist and can be equally proven to use editing techniques to point out and deflect manipulative intentions inherent in the original pictures. This task could be combined with an examination whether the suggestion that memes based on political pictures can be viewed as an advanced form of political caricature is backed up by further evidence or if they rather should be regarded as a distinct new form of political communication that should be discussed within the concept of "produser" studies (as described by Bruns, 2010 or Knobel & Lankshear, 2010).

²¹ s. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNYmK19-d0U>

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