Visual Representations of the Events of the Cold War as Depicted in LIFE Magazine

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Introduction

Photographs are considered as reference of events. Photographs can serve both for referentiality and reflexivity. They can also serve both factual and fictional narratives in which they are shown. This shows that photographs are only a medium to convey a message. Besides photography’s capacity to give an account of events, what kind of factor is thus decisive to give direction to the narrative in press magazines?

This paper will examine the news in the press as a form of narrative discourse as exemplified by Life magazine. In the 1950s, illustrating the major subject of the Cold War with images and texts, Life magazine contributed to making Cold War discourses: the question of East Germany, the Korean War, the exploitation of the nuclear arms, McCarthyism and others.1 Life followed these subjects in a certain number of its issues. Inside of a series of stories on a given topic, there were different episodes. The story attracted readers who wanted to follow the consequences of the event.

At the end of this article, we will see how the press can represent the social vision through photographs taken in other countries. Before addressing the questions of how the events of the Cold War were presented through photographs and of how LIFE magazine selected the photographs, we look at the representations of the events

1 Schwartz 2001, 39-75.
in the press more generally through photographs and their perception by the reader.

1. The communication in the press

Let us start from a reflection on the communication system through press photography. Roland Barthes says: “The press photograph is a message.”

Considered overall this message is formed by a source of emission, a channel of transmission and a point of reception. The source of emission is the staff of the newspaper, the group of technicians certain of whom take the photo, some of whom choose, compose and treat it, while others, finally, give it a title, a caption and a commentary. The point of reception is the public which reads the paper. As for the channel of transmission, this is the newspaper itself, or, more precisely, a complex concurrent messages with the photograph as centre and surrounds constituted by the text, the title, the caption, the lay-out and, in a more abstract but no less 'informative' way, by the very name of the paper (this name represents a knowledge that can heavily orientate the reading of the message strictly speaking: a photograph can change its meaning as it passes from the very conservative L'Aurore to the communist L'Humanité).

The meaning of photographs is thus oriented by the intention of the editing. Originally, the photographs are taken by the photojournalists who were sent to the place of the event. The images are then chosen by the press editor for publication. In spite of the distance, the reader can visually know the event through a photograph. Gisèle Freund explained the importance of the introduction of photography into the press as “a window on the world”:

The introduction of newspaper photography was a phenomenon of immense importance, one that changed the outlook of the masses. Before the first press pictures, the ordinary man could visualize only those events that took place near him, on his street or in his village. Photography opened a window, as it were. The faces of public personalities became familiar and things that happened all over the globe were his to share. As the reader’s outlook expanded, the world began to shrink.

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3 Ibid., 15.
4 Freund 1980, 103.
As Barthes says, the photographic image is “a message without code”\textsuperscript{5}; a photograph itself is not a piece of news. According to Kendall Walton, “Photographs are transparent. We see the world through them”.\textsuperscript{6} Photography can mediate between the event and the viewer. Then, photography serves as the reference to the event in the article. In order to provide images as news, these should be shown in context together with the narrative created through the process of editing. However, in mass communication, the identity of the narrator is not really visible. At least, we can analyse the mode of editing to detect the message of the editor.

The analysis of the technical conditions of the appearance of photography in the press and the study of layout and of the images published mainly reveal the professional intention of realising an object: the illustrated journal, attractive and economically viable.\textsuperscript{7}

In the editing process, the presence of a story in the layout is important for a reading of the images.

The layout accompanies the discourse: the photographs, with captions and of varied formats, animate the page and follow each other without overlapping. The chain of the images imposes a meaning of reading, and the text is useful for the value added to the photographs. The cover plays the role of advertisement while full page pictures aim for impact and emotion.\textsuperscript{8}

The event itself is also a reference of a narrative discourse.\textsuperscript{9} Hayden White says that “narrative becomes a problem only when we wish to give to real events the form of a story.”\textsuperscript{10} In the press, the event is each time interpreted and represented as news. The news is not only information, but is always accompanied by discourse. Furthermore, “the news” is sometimes represented by storytelling. Here, photography is no more an illustration nor a pure account of the event, but one of the elements which constitute discourse on the event.

\textsuperscript{5} Barthes 1977, 17.
\textsuperscript{6} Walton 1984, 251.
\textsuperscript{7} Gervais – Morel 2007, 304 (translation by the author).
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 338.
\textsuperscript{9} White 1981, 4.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
The press icon

In the press editing process, the de-contextualisation of the photographs followed by the presentation of the images in a narrative is unavoidable. Besides, the photograph that shows a human emotion in gesture and facial expression is sometimes chosen in the press. Because gestures and facial expressions constitute a body language, they contribute to the visual communication developed in culture.

The photograph clearly only signifies because of the existence of a store of stereotyped attitudes which form ready-made elements of signification (eyes raised heavenwards, hands clasped). A ‘historical grammar’ of iconographic connotation ought thus to look for its material in painting, theatre, associations of ideas, stock metaphors, etc., that is to say, precisely in culture.¹¹

Thanks to that, the spectators can recognize the image without complementary explanation such as a caption.

The cultural icons can function without narration, by reason of the presence of an implicit social code known to the reader. For Pierce’s definition, “A photo is seized upon as icon when the statement puts it into perspective as a resource for heteronomous identification or for exemplification of a product to construct.”¹²

Certain celebrated people are identified in the culture by media: Einstein (1879–1955), Oppenheimer (1904–1967), Elizabeth II (*1926) to name just a few. Elizabeth II was crowned in June 1953 after the death of the King. The ceremony was visualized in Life magazine. In the press, the Royal family is often shown as an ideal model for the nation and a very popular subject as international news. Einstein and Oppenheimer are known as scientists. Time magazine chose Einstein as person of the 20th century in 1999. His appearance was also reprised as a stereotype for scientists in films. Furthermore, the image of the atomic cloud also became a photographic icon during the Cold War period.

¹¹ Barthes 1977, 22.
2. The culture of the press magazine

Now, let us consider a question of the press editing with an example from *Life* magazine. In Germany, the first issue of the magazine *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (BIZ) was published in 1892 by the editor Ullstein. In the 1928, *Vu* magazine was founded in France. In 1936, *Life* magazine was brought in the US by an editor Henry Luce (1898–1967). When Hitler rose to power in Germany, *Life* employed many journalists who had emigrated from Europe. *Life*’s style of editing profited both from German photographic narration technique and from the early stages of the American documentary. The latter was established as the American way of photographic documentation which contained the interpretation and the narrative on the subject through the process of its visualization as documentary photography. This technique was employed in *Life* magazine.\(^{13}\) *Life*’s view represented the American culture at that time.

Although it was not the first to use the form, *Life* was surely an important agent in establishing the visual essay as a universally understood language. The magazine produced some of the finest examples of the genre from 1936 through the early fifties.\(^{14}\)

During the Second World War, the battles were an object of reports in the press. In *Life*, world events were simultaneously related in the same issue: tragic accidents, the lives of Royal families, of film stars… The war was described amidst the ordinary articles such as fashion, cooking, lifestyle… The selection of the contents and the order of the articles are organized by the editor according to the direction of the magazine. In the same issue, the whole balance of the several stories is also considered.\(^{15}\)

At the beginning of the 1950s, when not every family had a television set, the press’s pages functioned as a screen, having a visually strong impact on the public, and the contents shaped its interpretation of world events. Thanks to the effect of photography, we can

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13 Inoue 2009, 151.
14 Brown 1972, 64.
15 According to the editor of *Paris Match* magazine in his communication at the symposium in Paris in 2015.
see the events occurring in distant locations. The images of the press magazine are not only shown as information of the event, but they are selected to draw the attention of the readers with the beauty of the framing and the clarity of the message and instant efficiency of communication. They are also chosen for the sake of arousing the emotions of the reader:

*Life*’s editors clearly recognized the emotional appeal of pictures. Perhaps more important, they understood that a primary characteristic of modernity was its emphasis on immediacy and felt experience.\(^\text{16}\)

The magazine is, on the one hand, planned to accelerate a consumption of the information and it becomes a type of entertainment and of spectacle for the reader. On the other hand, the violence and the consequences of the war are not intended to disturb the readers, but rather they are shown to provide immediate information on important events without stressing readers. For this reason, the representation is not equal to the reality, but it comports a fictional aspect.

Luce set out to excite interest in what it would be like "to see life" through the pages of *Life*. What would the reader/viewer come to know through such acts of seeing? First, "the world", understood in the next phrase as a fictive presence at events apparently shaping contemporary history (soon, with increasing presence of camera and journalist recorders, such events would come to be staged as if they were indeed making history).\(^\text{17}\)

The storytelling from the real events portrayed in *Life*’s narrative style was called “photo-essay”.

### 3. Focalization in the news story

Now, let us see the example with the question of the selection of the scene and the story. “Focalization”, the term developed in the theory of literature, designates:

the perspectival restriction and orientation of narrative information relative to somebody's perception, imagination, knowledge, or point of view. Hence, focaliza-

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\(^{16}\) Doss 2001, 14.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 28.
In this sense, the photojournalist reports an event seen from his point of view by combining text with photographs. However, the focus by the finder of the camera does not give a decisive perspective on the vision of the article. It is rather through the editing process, such as the selection of the subject of the story, the layout with the text and the photographs and giving a title to the article, that the discourse on the event is constructed. For that, an effect of focalization appears visually and textually during the reading of the article.

As it is known, the Cold War was the conflict between the Western and Eastern blocks in the world. After the Second World War, Germany was divided into the East and West sectors. News from East Germany was reported by the Western press. In the corner of “the week’s events” of Life magazine, the world events represented from the point of view of the Western sector were shown.

For example, the civil insurrection in Berlin occurred after the death of Joseph Stalin in March 1953. There is a photograph of young Germans throwing stones against a Soviet tank. This photograph was taken from the point of view of the backs of the young Germans. Then, it was distributed by the Associated Press agency, edited in the context of the Western culture with a discourse and published in Life on the 29th June 1953 under the title “East Germans Face the Red Cannon’s Mouth”.19

In the same way, the photograph “The police of West Berlin keeping public come from East Berlin for the foods and clothes”, taken by photojournalist Ralph Crane20 in July 1953, is seen also from the Western viewpoint (Fig. 1). As a consequence of the insurrection of June 1953, the US distributed foods at the Berlin border, between West and East from the 25th July until mid-August. This campaign

20 Ralph Crane is born in Halberstadt in Germany and emigrated to New York in 1941.
was held thanks to the collaboration of President Eisenhower and Konrad Adenauer, leader of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG):

On July 27 the Berlin Senate and the Federal German Government, inspired by President Eisenhower’s offer of food for East Germany, initiated in West Berlin a program for distributing food free of charge to residents of the Soviet Sector of Berlin and the Soviet Zone of Germany. Anyone from those areas was eligible to receive one food package for himself and additional food packages for members of his family and for his friends providing he brought with him their personal identity cards. Each package contained flour, lard, condensed or powdered milk and dried vegetables and was worth about 5 West Marks or 30 East Marks (figured at HO prices).21

In Life July 1953, this event was related in an article titled “East Germans Get Food as Propaganda”.22 Life magazine of the 10th August 1953 also signaled that German people came for the food.23 Life said that the campaign of foods supply then became a good propaganda against the communists. In fact, there was no equality concerning the economy and the work conditions. The foods supply program incited a large number of people from the East to rally the Western sector of Berlin.24 However, when Eastern authorities controlled the distribution of the train tickets for the access to Berlin, the populations who lived in distant areas could not arrive in time to obtain food. This event was dramatically shown with the photographs of Crane. Here, the facial expressions of the people appeal to the viewer’s mind. The point of view of the photograph helps the viewer to be on the side of East German people.

21 Ostermann 2001, 376.
23 “Hungry Germans Scramble For West’s Food”, Life, 10th August 1953, 33–35.
24 Ostermann, ibid.
The relations in conflict continued until the construction of the Berlin wall by the DRG in August 1961. In the article “The Wall That Divides the World”, photographed by Paul Schutzer (1930–1967) of the 8th September 1961, the photographs were realized only from the West side of the Wall.25 The editing technique was useful for the creation of a Western vision. The readers of the magazine came to know the event from a distance, through mediated information. However, they could not see the vision from the other side of the border. Concerning the Cold War in Asia, the communist government of China was founded in 1949.

The Cold War became increasingly heated on the rhetorical front as anti-Red hysteria mounted with the victories of Mao Tse-Tung’s forces in China and the Soviet Union’s explosion of an atom bomb in September 1949.26

In Korea, at the end of the Second World War, the Korean peninsula was divided at 38 degree North parallel by the military boundary between the Soviet and the US armies. “From June 1950 until August

1953 the United States was involved in the Korean police action, bringing both soldiers and photographers back into the battlefield after only a five-years hiatus” 27 after the Second World War. The Korean War, which continued from 1951 to 1953, was a civil war but was considered as a fight between the US and the USSR. The Chinese Red Army intervened in the Korean War. This war had been suspended by an armistice after the death of Stalin in 1953. From that time, the country was divided into North Korea (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) and South Korea (Republic of Korea). This war has not finished yet today.

The Korean War was also a subject reported regularly by the press. In *Life* magazine, it was illustrated by photojournalists such as David Douglas Duncan (*1916), Michael Rougier, Margaret Bourke-White (1904–1971) among others. As an example, we will have a look at the article “This is War” of *Life*, which showed the Korean War to the American middle class reader. The war was followed by the press each week and observed from the US.

For the continuity of reading of reports, the role of the story in the news is important. In *Life* magazine, each event was represented as one of the episodes of the long story, in which the reader was kept in a distance. The reporter and the photojournalist sought news material in the event. The news was brought to the reader in the form of storytelling. In the case of East Germany as well as in that of the Korean War: in the major stories of the Cold war a short episode focalized on a part of the event or on the people was presented. For example, a series of articles about a Korean orphan by *Life*’s photographer Michael Rougier focused on the life of the Korean boy: “The poor boy who did not smile at the beginning has grown up thanks to the care of the American army and now he shows a big smile.” In this episode, the photojournalist showed the Korean boy as a protagonist of the story. In the same way—as one of the episodes during the Korean War—the several humanistic reports were shown: for example, the Korean female students who protested against the Red

27 Sandeen 1994, 32.
Army in the article “Korean Truce: The Children Weep, Cry for More War”, and the American captain Fenton in “This is War”. The insertion of this type of pathetic story has the effect of drawing the attention of the reader, who cannot have direct experience nor understand the violence of the war. Thanks to this, the reader can follow the news on the war.

The article “This is War” published in September 1950 during the Korean War was illustrated by the photographs of David Douglas Duncan, a photojournalist of Life. Later, in 1951, Duncan published his photo-book on the Korean War, “This is War: A Photo-Narrative in Three Parts”.

The article “This is War” starts from the appearance of the face of the photographer Duncan (Fig. 2). The narration presents Duncan as a reporter and his words are quoted:

> Even going back this time trying give you story which is timeless nameless dateless wordless story which says very simply quietly "This is War".

And the narrative goes on to say that Duncan’s photographs can tell what the war is by themselves, only with the supplemental information in the caption.

On the second page of the article, a portrait of Captain Francis (‘Ike’) Fenton of the US army is shown (Fig. 3). Fenton was disarmed during the battle and he showed his face tired as a result of the battle. This photograph represents the vanity of the war. On the third page, the face of the suffering soldier is shown in the full layout (Fig. 4). It gives an emotional impact on the reader.

The photographs are shown from the point of view of the photographer. However, the narration at the beginning draws the frame outside of the picture story. This makes the reader able to easily get out of the story after reading the report of the war.

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28 “This is War”, *Life*, 18th September 1950, 45–47.
29 Duncan 1990 (1951).
Fig. 2: “This is War”, Life, September 1950, with the portrait of the photographer Duncan (top left).
Fig. 3: The face of Captain Fenton on the top right.

Fig. 4: "A wounded marine is about to be taken away in a jeep".
It is interesting to read the following episode about the publication of this article in *Life* magazine. According to the photo book of Duncan, captain Fenton enjoyed reading the show about him depicted in the article of *Life*, delivered to the battlefield where there was no radio.

Captain Ike Fenton enjoyed *Life* like at the drugstore back home, with a picture story about us way back on the Naktong River (*Life* had broken records sending it) with James Michener’s “South Pacific” on its cover. Wow! ... *What a show!* Over Ike’s head another show was already their life.\(^{30}\)

The publication in the press magazine helped soldiers to survive and to feel that they were not alone. It was an encouragement thanks to the fact that the readers of *Life* magazine in the world knew about soldiers’ suffering during the Korean War.

Here, we can see captain Fenton from both sides, as an actor inside the magazine and as a reader of the magazine. He could take a step back from his reality in the war during the reading of the picture story, and he could be objective in regard to the war in front of soldiers, even for a moment. Then, the story can help the reader to understand and imagine the reality with the intermediation of fiction and photographic representation. And at the same time, the immersion into the story can help the reader to forget the reality around him or her.

In fact, the Korean War was an unfortunate story and a battle without end. The records in a series of photographs of Duncan show the hardship of the war, even now.\(^{31}\) It was not like the story of the victory of the US army in Europe during the Second World War.

This state of mind changes only when a war becomes openly unpopular. John Morris asserts that the change was first noticeable toward the end of the war in Korea where photographers witnessed a double tragedy: the first was that of American GIs who had to fight in a war they did not understand; the second that of a people

\(^{30}\) Text by Duncan. Duncan 2007, 190.

\(^{31}\) Duncan 1990 (1951).
torn asunder by war in their homeland. The conflict reached its height with the Vietnam War, which caused such serious divisions in American public opinion.\footnote{Freund 1980, 172–173. John Morris was a Life photographic editor. Freund refers to the following text: J. Morris, “This we remember. Have photographers brought home the reality?” Harper’s Magazine, September 1972.}

Behind certain episodes, there were more victims. However, certain facts were veiled by a humanistic episode to avoid giving a shock to the reader. For this reason, even though each documentary episode had shown the reality of the battlefield, the reality of the war was not represented very well because of the selection of the scenes and the episodes. Moreover, the framing was limited to the position of the Allies and does not represent the side of their adversary.\footnote{After the end of the Korean War, Chris Marker conducted research in North Korea in 1958, published in the book Coréennes in 1959. This report shows another view on the country.} In this sense, the events of the war are always interpreted and shown in the determined frame.

\section*{4. The reflection of society in the press}

The elements such as the identity of photographer or a place photographed are not decisive factors in creating cultural vision. Even though the photographs are taken in foreign countries, they represent a social vision in the press through the editing. The media continue to represent wars: from the Vietnam War, the Gulf War in 1991, the terrorism of 11 September 2001, to the Iraq War . . . The technical evolution of the media changed the perception of each war and the speed of the circulation of information, which—at the same time—is more and more controlled. Sontag says that:

\begin{quote}
the first idea is that public attention is steered by the media which means, most decisively, images. When there are photographs, a war becomes “real.” Thus, the protest against the Vietnam War was mobilized by images.\footnote{Sontag 2003, 104.}
\end{quote}

It was said that press photography opened a window on the world. However, the role of the press became not only to inform about the event, but at the same time, to reflect a social vision. The fact is chosen and edited by the press according to the social vision which is
prevailing. In the economical system, the press gives priority to the theme that will attract their readers. The reader also contributes to creating the significance of the collective images.\textsuperscript{35} According to Marshall McLuhan, after the diffusion of television, the role of the press evolved in relation to the precedent epoch, and the spectator also contributed to them:

These news magazines (Time and Newsweeks) are preeminently mosaic in form, offering not windows on the world like the old picture magazines, but presenting corporate images of society in action. Whereas the spectator of a picture magazine is passive, the reader of a news magazine becomes much involved in the making of meanings for the corporate image. Thus the TV habit of involvement in mosaic image has greatly strengthened the appeal of these news magazines, but at the same time has diminished the appeal of the older pictorial feature magazines.\textsuperscript{36}

The press provides news in function of each topic’s importance in society and of the interest of their readers. It can reflect society itself by editing from its viewpoint and give influence to the readers’ opinion.

In this sense, photography is not a window on the world. Although photojournalists bring back images from distant societies, they cannot represent the outside of a given society. The symbolic photograph of the event represents also the society in which it is understood and consumed. The social vision represented through the visual rhetoric is shared within a society. There, a symbolic meaning in the press photography would be understandable. The code of reading the images exists in culture and society.\textsuperscript{37}

But the image should also be “symbolic”: each object of the photography should send back to a background, to a memory and summarize by its sense connoted the subject which is being reported.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{35} McLuhan 1994, 204.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} However, in the social codification, the intention of the editor does not always correspond to the understanding of the public.
\textsuperscript{38} Boltanski 1965, 179–180 (translation by the author). Boltanski referred to the definition of connotation by Barthes in his article “Le message photographique”.

For that the symbol conveys a message immediately without the aid of a long commentary, it is necessary that the reader can refer it to a symbolic system of which they have a memory. 

On the contrary, other societies can reveal this reflective relation between media and culture in a society. For example, democratic society press reflects itself and doesn’t reflect the totalitarian vision. Asian society cannot be wholly represented in the European society press, and vice versa. Some iconic photographs, such as the American pictures of the Korean War, are not represented from their opponents’ point of view. Nowadays, the internet enables us to access international varieties of the social vision represented in the press, but it is also limited by cultural borders.

**Conclusion**

The story is effective in explaining the news to the reader and drawing him or her into the story. In the press magazine, the visual and textual rhetoric is used to create a discourse. With photographs, there are factual references in the news. However, in the composition, there are fictional elements. In absorbing the readers into the story, it works on their minds. Narrativising the events is instrumental in facilitating reading comprehension and plays a decisive role in influencing the reader’s psychology.

The press provides on the one hand factual information, but on the other hand it shows selectively a social vision from its point of view. That is, the factual representation is framed by the reflective system of the society. This factual representation can be reframed by a more global world vision.

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