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Visual Communication 2008 7: 143
DOI: 10.1177/1470357208088756
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The spectacle of suffering and death: the photographic representation of war in Greek newspapers

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the visual construction of human suffering in war, with special reference to the signifying practices of the photographs published in Greek newspapers during the Second Iraq War. The author carries out a socio-semiotic analysis, arguing that the overall construction of the Second Iraq War in the Greek press – illustrated by two case studies which are examined in detail – combines contradictory elements and assumptions. Representations of the war are ‘framed’ by the ‘overpoliticization’ of the Greek public sphere and the dominant political culture synthesizing themes of ‘anti-Americanism’, ‘anti-globalization’ and ‘pro-Third Worldism’, but also a particular version of what Said called ‘Orientalism’. More specifically, the insistence on spectacular images of suffering, and the combination of a humanitarian discourse of compassion for the ‘innocent distant victims of war’ with populist and Greek Christian Orthodox conceptualizations of the self are constitutive elements of the newspapers’ signifying practices, which aid the Greek press to be critical of the hegemonic western discourse regarding the Second Iraq War without, however, slipping to the other side of ‘Orientalist binary oppositions’. On the contrary, this persistence on the humanitarian discourse of compassion towards victims is pivotal in identifying with the western moral virtues of ‘civilized’ humanity.

KEY WORDS

Greek press • humanitarian discourse • media • photography • representation • Second Iraq War • suffering • visual culture • war

INTRODUCTION

According to the literature, the Crimean War, the American Civil War, the First World War and the Spanish Civil War initiated a long and complex relationship between photographic representation, realism and warfare, establishing the specific visual vocabulary of modern war photography...
(Brothers, 1997; Huppauf, 1995; Sontag, 1979, 2004). The Spanish Civil War, according to Brothers (1997), was also the first modern confrontation in which press photographs of soldiers, armies, ruined buildings and especially the genre of ‘human casualties’ could be understood as mediated political weapons rather than simple segments of objective reality, with important consequences for public opinion and government policies. Several years/decades later, when modern humanitarianism became a mass phenomenon, charity and relief organizations began to depend on the media, photographs of ‘human casualties’ and motion pictures to get their messages across.

Thus, contemporary persistence on the photographic representation of suffering, although predominantly originating from market demand for sensational human stories, is also grounded in the European ideal of moral universalism, and legitimized by the assumption that the photographic image has the moral capacity to arouse compassion and build bonds of mutual responsibility and solidarity that unite all people, regardless of their social characteristics and attributes. In fact, as long as the conventional assumptions of moral philosophy continue to be taken very much for granted, ‘[t]reating] ethics as a matter of sentiment, sentiment as a matter of sympathy, and sympathy as a matter of spectatorship’ (Halltunen, 1995: 307), the war and other spectacular images of the pain and death of distant people are used not only to emphasize the truth claim of any text as ‘unmediated depictions of objective reality’, but also as ‘a rhetorical device with a sharp political edge’ (Brothers, 1997: 193). This motivates citizens’ compassion and political and moral action in the context of the contemporary humanitarian rhetoric of neutrality and global community.

In this article, I investigate which of the many possible meanings of war photographs were given priority by the Greek press and how these were inscribed by relations of power – especially the relations of power which prevailed between the people or social groups (re)presented, the Greek media doing the (re)presenting and the implied audience involved in the process of meaning construction. This perspective requires hard work ‘not to see pictures as rigid and fixed things – beginning and ending at their frames’ (Lister and Wells, 2001: 64), but to explore, instead, the relation between war photographs and their social and linguistic context – that is, ‘the hidden or implicit text that lurks behind any given icon and photography’ (Sekula, 1982: 85), as well as their implied viewers, in order to account for the complex articulations between meaning, discourse, representation, power and the social construction of reality pertaining to the war. More specifically, through my analysis, I aim to demonstrate that these visual and linguistic representations constructed subject positions, on the one hand, for the Iraqis as speechless, helpless, vulnerable, innocent victims (objectification/infantilization) and, on the other hand, for readers (as a metonym of the Greek people, western civil society and the international community) as morally indignant about US/UK policy, helpful, mobilized against the war, politically active and therefore ‘socially powerful’.
Dominant representations of the Second Iraq War and local appropriations

Huppauf (1995: 101, 117) argued that the 'propaganda for peace' of anti-war photography introduced into public discourse shortly after the end of the First World War and mainly associated with the Spanish Civil War, was 'related with archaic images of individual suffering and heroism', and 'based on a more or less explicit opposition between the human face and the menace of war, peaceful production and martial destruction.' In this way, anti-war propaganda created a visual code that emphasized the closeness and concreteness of the experience of individuals and groups, whereas technological progress and modernity were associated with the enemy or, in broader terms, with inhumanity.

However, as he and many other writers have suggested, the visualization of the Gulf War of 1990–1 reversed these moral terms, being the first example of an uncompromising presentation of the technological character of modern warfare in the media. In these new terms, the technological supremacy of the west – 'an imagery orchestrated to convey a sense of triumph' (Mowlana et al., 1992: xi) – was related to the ideals of humanity and moral superiority in opposition to those of a dark, inhumane, and morally inferior enemy. Moreover, since 2001, as the USA and Britain engaged in a 'global just war against terrorism', the Second World War analogy and the demonization of the opponents' leaderships, which often involved associating the opposing leader with Hitler as folk-devil (Lewis, 2002), was fundamental to the creation of a rhetorical framework portraying the conflict as a war between good and evil, in which the USA and its allies would 'eradicate evil from the world'. In this fundamentally Manichaean allegorical narrative discourse, as Douglas Kellner (2002: 145–6) argues, the binary opposition between us and them, civilization and barbarism, goodness and forces of darkness, though consistently absolutist and apocalyptic and 'evoking a cataclysmic war with cosmic stakes', was simultaneously combined with the representation of war events as bloodless as possible. Indeed, as Pinsdorf (1994: 49) noted, the Gulf War and the Afghanistan Wars were portrayed 'as a low risk Nintendo game... with a minimum of groans, blood, and deaths' (cited in Louw, 2003: 220, original emphasis). This type of representation, reporting the conflict 'from the point of view of the weapons' (Brothers, 1997: 211), excludes images of pain and death of soldiers or civilians and adopts a new technical military language. Therefore, as Louw (2003: 221) suggests, the representational strategy developed during the Gulf War (unlike that of the Vietnam War), made it possible to construct images of aerial warfare as a clean and bloodless video game with minimal human casualties.

Nevertheless, studies of the coverage of the Kosovo conflict (1999), the Gulf War (1991), the Afghanistan War (2001) and the Second Iraq War
(2003) in different countries and media (television, press, the web), have shown that even in the age of globalization and, in spite of the fact that the majority of the information and visual elements (photo, maps, diagrams, etc.) are provided by western news agencies around the world (Fahmy, 2005), national media exhibit a range of differences in their signifying practices, their narrative strategies and in their overall recontextualization of events (see Dimitrova et al., 2005: 26, for a selected bibliography). Indeed, many studies suggest that there are differences, especially in the press coverage or construction of foreign news, as the press tends to localize or ‘domesticate’ incoming ‘information’ making out of every war a ‘national’ story (p. 26).

Thus, despite the existence of a certain degree of transnational discourse and common visual codes, the European (and moreover the global) public sphere still remain fragmented (Grundmann et al., 2000) and ‘the transnational flow of media products is associated with local appropriations of meaning’ (Nohrstedt et al., 2000). These local meanings vary in accordance with national politics, the cultural context and the controversies regarding the specific conflict (Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2005; Dimitrova et. al., 2005; Fahmy, 2005; Mowlana et.al, 1992; Nohrstedt and Ottosen, 2004; Tomanic, 2004).

**The case of the Greek press**

When the war against Iraq began on the night of 19–20 March 2003, the Greek media, all major political parties, the trade union federations and public opinion, in the context of a strong politics of anti-Americanism, were overwhelmingly against the war and expressed their strong opposition through mass rallies and nationwide strikes. In addition, the official government position was that Greece was opposed to the war. Greek Prime minister Costas Simitis declared: ‘Our policy is a policy of peace.’ Later he also stated that: ‘Our position is that violence is the last resort and this last resort needs to be sanctioned by the United Nations.’

Thus, the representations of the Second Iraq War which prevailed in the Greek press, according to the literature, differed in many respects from the dominant framing and distribution of right and wrong found in most western mainstream newspapers or television news. In fact, the signifying practices (linguistic and visual) of the Greek press constructed a strong anti-war discourse, which combined contradictory elements and assumptions. More specifically, the Second Iraq War representations were ‘framed’ by the ‘overpoliticization’ of the Greek public sphere and the dominant political culture which synthesized, amongst other elements and to a different extent, themes of ‘anti-Americanism’, ‘anti-globalization’ and ‘pro-Third Worldism’, but also a particular version of what Said called ‘Orientalism’ that differed from its global version.

In addition, media rhetoric concerning the ‘watchdog’ role of the press, especially in ‘denouncing injustice’, ‘revealing the truth’, ‘questioning the legitimacy of the state and the political system and authorities’, and based on a profound suspicion towards any institutional ‘power’, expands the
populist sensationalist discourses which are founded on processes of personalization and name giving (e.g. ‘Bush & Blair = Serial Killers’, ‘Bush = the Butcher/the Thief of Baghdad’) and of simplification and dichotomization (e.g. ‘friend/enemy’, ‘victim/murderer’).

Within this framework, the Greek press attempted to counterbalance the high-tech image of a bloodless war of precision and to reverse the dominant distribution of evil and good prevailing in US/UK official discourse and most mainstream western media. The insistence on spectacular images of suffering and the combination of a humanitarian discourse of compassion to ‘innocent distant victims of war’ with populist and Greek Christian Orthodox conceptualizations of the self, became the constitutive elements of the newspapers’ signifying practices. Following Huppaul’s (1995) terminology, the effort in the Greek press to denounce the ‘sanitized’ version of the war, was shaped by the juxtaposition of ‘archaic premodern’ images of individual suffering and death with images of the technological supremacy of the western superpowers. Indeed, on the one hand, the daily news construction provided numerous visual examples of the technological supremacy of the US/UK armies and the imagery of sophisticated military equipment as an object of explicit or implicit admiration of western civilization and modernization, due in part to the news agencies’ supply of images, maps, graphs and information (Figure 1). On the other hand, however, the Greek press published and recontextualized images of dead, injured or mourning people, especially women and children as ideal victims (Figure 2), ‘deliberately maintaining an anachronistic image of a space filled with the cries and groans and the flesh of the dying’ (p. 121).

Figure 1 ‘Massacres of civilians under the fear of “Jihad”’. ELEFTHEROS TYPOS, 2 April 2003, pp. 24–5. © ELEFTHEROS TYPOS & Reuters. Reprinted with permission.
Doctors are working without fees, medicines, medical equipment or beds, with little water and food. The despair is felt in Baghdad’s hospitals where no humanitarian aid arrives.” © Elettherotypia, 30 April 2003, p. 13. Reprinted with permission.

However, the specificity of the political situation at the time of the Iraq War and the mechanisms of Greek national identity construction established a visual code of political and humanist anti-war discourse without slipping to the other side of Orientalist binary oppositions – that is, without constructing an imaginary community and a self image which could identify with the ‘non-occidental’, or ‘non-European’. On the contrary, this persistence on the humanist discourse of compassion towards victims was pivotal in identifying with the western moral virtues of ‘civilized’ humanity. 6

In addition, during the period under analysis, there seemed to be no place for the concept of justified, courageous, honourable war heroes who were generous towards the people whose lives and land they were defending. This kind of representation was totally missing from the Greek press narrative pertaining to the Second Iraq War. On the contrary, through the storytelling techniques of stereotyping and simplification, the US and their allies’ administrations, politicians and military bureaucrats became
incarnations of evil, the ‘masters of modern destructiveness’ (Huppauf, 1995: 115), while western soldiers were faceless, emotionless fighting machines. In contrast, Iraqis are represented either as innocent victims and unarmed civilians, or as potential threats through negative stereotypical images of Islam (angry faces of turbaned armed crowds, presence of ‘mujahideen kamikazes’, ‘jihad’ as metonyms of Arab fighters, etc.), reducing the Iraqi resistance to irrational, uncontrolled Arab violent acts attributed to ‘anger’ or ‘frustration’ and systematically detaching them from their political motives (see Sandikciglu, 1999; Madmoni-Gerber, 2003; and Tomanic, 2004). In my view, the fact that in media discourse ‘Iraqis’ were almost automatically identified as ‘insurgent/rebel fighters’ (or ‘dangerous terrorists’ in another context) and not as the legal government or the army of a country that had been invaded by US/UK seems to be a major consequence of an Orientalist positioning of the Iraqi people in hegemonic occidental discourse.

Thus, the only ‘heroes’ present in the newspaper’s narratives were the ‘brave’, not ‘embedded’, western journalists or photographers and the humanitarian agencies who were both portrayed as having ‘entered a situation of physical danger, social restrictedness, human decay or combinations of these and saved us the trouble’ (Rosler, 1992: 308). Indeed, during the whole period, the demonstration of the journalists’ and photographers’ courage and sacrifice in transmitting the news and pictures of the conflict and the commitment of humanitarian organizations in supporting civilians in Iraq were central elements in the construction of narratives relevant to the readers’ political and sentimental involvement in the war.

THE ANALYSIS

It is beyond the scope of this analysis to examine the whole visual and linguistic content of Greek newspapers pertaining to the Second Iraq War. Rather, in what follows, I now consider in some detail two particular cases. Although, in socio-semiotics, the choice of any case for analysis can be said to ‘suffer’ from a degree of ‘arbitrariness’, I chose these cases out of the weekday and Sunday editions of the largest daily morning and evening papers in Athens from 20 March to 1 May 2003 because, in my view, they stand out as archetypal symbols of anti-war photography and serve as a means of constructing compassion for the victims, denouncing the ‘enemy’ and mobilizing against the war. The first photograph, titled after its caption ‘the soundless cry of a child’, was published in one of the largest daily evening papers in Athens, *Eleftherotypia*, but was also used by Greek demonstrators in rallies against the war, becoming a sign of ‘summing up the situation’ and ‘standing for the crime of war’. The second case is a set of photographs distributed by Reuters and published in all major newspapers in Athens: the ‘Ali Abbas story’. I chose it because this case gained international notoriety and, according to the media, the humanitarian agencies, politicians, etc. it became the symbol of Iraqi suffering, comparable very often to the ‘secular’ image of the napalmed girl in the Vietnam War.
‘The soundless cry of a child’
As already mentioned, contrary to what happened in many western countries and above all in the USA during the Second Iraq War, Greek newspapers repeatedly focused on images of human casualties that visually represented the suffering of Iraqi civilians in order to create, following Boltanski’s (1999) terminology, a ‘denunciation mode of emotional commitment in relation to distant suffering’ (p. 91). In this context, their pages were saturated with photographs of injured or dying children standing as a metonymic representation of Iraqi war victims. Let us consider in detail one of the many examples (Figure 3).

Figure 3 ‘Human Bombs’. Elefterotypia, 31 March 2003, front page. © Elefterotypia and Reuters. Reprinted with permission.
On 31 March 2003, under a large bold headline ‘Human Bombs’, a close-up colour photograph of the bleeding face of an injured child was published on the centre of the front page of the newspaper Elettherotypia.

As Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) argue, photographs can serve different communicative functions according to a number of factors. The photograph analysed here takes up most of the page and apparently stands on its own merit. Its ‘evidential force’ lies in its simplicity and in its high visual modality – that is, the unquestionable power of ‘photo-realism’: the child has a face covered with blood, a swollen and closed-up eye, messy hair and bloodstained clothing. The presence of the child reminds us of the ‘realism’ of the picture: we can hardly deny ‘that the thing has been there’, ‘that it has posed in front of the camera’ and ‘remained there forever’ (Barthes, 1981: 76, 78). The photograph therefore is intended, first of all, to be read as a piece of objective, factual information, and in this way to set in motion the actual process of being an eyewitness of the distant war.

The composition of the image is a powerful one. Following Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (1996) visual social semiotics, the wounded child confronts the camera directly from the centre of the frame, even if it has one eye badly swollen and practically shut. Moreover, the close-up shot seeks above all to bring about an imaginary relation between the represented child and the readers of the newspaper (p. 130). Thus, the ‘demand’ image of the bleeding face and eyes of the wounded child, ‘which in common-sense parlance are the seat of soul, personality and character’ (Lutz and Collins, 2003: 360), represent a basic violation of the person, which serves to create an imaginary ‘we’, appealing directly to the emotions of the audience. Indeed, the image of a child as the ‘cultural conceptualization of a worthy victim’ is ‘the most ideal victim in the perspective of compassion’, ‘either because we may feel pity through our own memory of being open and vulnerable to the treachery of adulthood . . . [or] in terms of our adult identity and our desire to protect the child’ (Hoijer, 2004: 521–2). Hence, the colour photograph works to fully exploit the dramatic potential of the presumed natural instincts of protection and providing security and safety for children, thus reaching the emotions of the audience.

If we now turn to the context of the densely printed front page of the tabloid paper, almost entirely referring to the Iraq War and practically functioning like a poster dominated by the photograph of the child and the huge headline, we can discern a secondary level of meaning. The caption anchors the image with an emotional meaning marking a dramatization of what is already an extremely powerful image of violence and suffering: ‘What could Bush possibly say to this innocent creature whose gaze is wounded and bleeding?’ Furthermore, the centrality of the child’s photograph holds all the other elements (photographs, captions, headlines) of the front page together in a coherent whole, enhancing the explanatory force of this central picture. Specifically, on the left-hand side of the page are four colour photos of ‘antiwar demonstrations from different parts of the [western] world’,

Konstantinidou: The spectacle of suffering and death

151
according to their captions, under the heading: ‘World uprising against the war’. On the top, there is one small photo of ‘Baghdad in flames’ framed by two main headings: ‘Jihadi: arrival of 4,000 mujahideen kamikazes in Baghdad’ and ‘Whinging against Rumsfeld for the 10 day fiasco’. At the bottom on the right, there is a photo of victims dragged out from demolished buildings by civilians. The caption reads: ‘Thunderstorm of bombs: whoever moves unarmed is bombarded without mercy.’ Thus, the layout of the front page counters in a systematic way the dominant US/UK version of the Iraq War, giving real ‘proof’ that allied ‘smart weaponry’ targets civilians, that ‘collateral damages’ are real human beings, children in flesh and blood. Furthermore, the newspaper’s discourse declares that the ‘World’ is against the Iraq war.

I would argue, then, that, according to the newspaper’s narrative, this photograph (and representations of human casualties in general) submitted as a piece of objective, factual information, in the context of the front-page layout, based upon an overall visual code centred on simple moral humanitarian values and clear demarcations between flesh and steel, good and evil, life and death, war and peace, helped Greek people to realize the cruelty of the Iraq war and to mobilize against it. Hence, following Boltanski’s (1999) terminology, the newspaper, through the centrality given to the image of the injured child, constructs a ‘denunciation mode of emotional commitment in relation to distant suffering’. This creates a perspective in which the suffering is considered unjust and compassion is combined with indignation and anger, and turned into an accusation of the perpetrator (Hojer, 2004: 522).

Furthermore, it is important to pay attention to a small detail: although (as mentioned before) the child is looking directly at the camera, it is also being grasped by the shoulder and held in front of the camera by the gloved hand of an out-of-frame person (perhaps a doctor), generating a fundamental ambivalence. Even though we cannot answer the question of who is the (implied or real) producer of this picture and who introduced it in the circuit of the global media system, this detail, in relation to the whole composition, can be read in two interrelated ways: as a visual reminder of the vulnerability and innocence of the child, but also of its objectification for humanitarian or political purposes. Therefore, the photographic composition, as a metonym of the Iraqi people looking directly towards the (western) readers, carries a double message. First, through its directness and its photo-realism it functions as an ‘I dare you’ (to care, to respond), backed up with the ‘Shame on you’ (for refusing), performative speech act. At the same time, the whole front-page composition, that is, the photograph of the wounded child held by an out-of-frame unknown person, factually framed by the photographs of the western-world rallies against the war (on the left), of Baghdad in flames (on the top) and of human casualties carried out of ruined buildings (on the right), metonymically connotes the ‘demand’ of a group of powerless people to another group addressed as ‘socially powerful’ (Rosler, 1992: 307).
In addition, the close-up, blurring the background and the linguistic context – which does not offer any information about the identity of the child or the precise location of the photograph – constructs a generalizing image out of the precise picture. In fact, the picture became a sign of a sign ‘summing up the situation’ and ‘standing for the crime of war’ (Taylor, 1998: 91). A few days later, in a mass anti-war demonstration in Athens, protestors removed the photograph from its daily news context and placed it in the context of their own public discourse. The photograph, now visually representing the paradigmatic symbol of human casualties in (the Iraq) war, was printed above the word ‘Why?’ in bold black letters and reproduced hundreds of times as a banner. The photograph of the young demonstrators under their photo-banners appeared on the front page of Eleftherotypia on 4 April 2003 under the headline ‘Baghdad’s Turn’ (Figure 4). To the left of the photograph we read: ‘Why? The soundless cry of a child’, while on the right we read: ‘Greeks: 94% against the war’. The caption reads: ‘The front-page photograph of “E”; with the infant injured by American bombs, became a banner in the hands of protestors.’ Actually, the use of the photograph by the protestors enabled the newspaper to engage in dialogue with its implied readers, establishing an imaginary community of readers and a familiar environment into which political and moral values circulate between the newspaper and its readership. At the same time, it provided the integrity and legitimacy of the self-image as an activist political newspaper and also the readers’ loyalty to the paper’s identity as manifested in its discourse.

Figure 4 ‘Baghdad’s Turn’. Eleftherotypia, 4 April 2003, front page. © Eleftherotypia. Reprinted with permission.
Second, and perhaps more importantly, the whole front-page composition relies upon binary oppositions between ‘the soundless cry versus public rallies and public opinion,’ ‘the innocent child versus 94% of Greeks [the civilized world],’ ‘victimization/infantilization versus political action’ and so on, ultimately connoting that war (pain) destroys language and all that is associated with it: subjectivity, civilization, meaning (Scarry, 1985) and implicitly asking for ‘external’ intervention. Through these taken-for-granted binary oppositions, used to intensify the explicit political message of the newspaper, the front-page layout could serve to conceal the implicit power of any claims to speak for and on behalf of the victims or of the unity of human beings, and to also conceal that the claims of moral universalism are all made by particular social and cultural groups (Tester, 1999); that is, it serves to conceal the relations of power constructed through discourse.

‘Eye-witnessing of the humanity and inhumanity of mankind: the Ali Abbas [photo]story’

While in the case of tragedy we feel for the suffering of the protagonist precisely because it is universal and beyond help, in humanitarian narrative a particular suffering is described which offers a model for precise moral action (Laqueur, 1989: 178). The ‘Ali Abbas [photo]story’ puts humanitarian discourse at the very centre of the representational strategies of ‘eye-witnessing of the humanity and inhumanity of mankind’ of the Greek press (Gernshein, 1979[1962]: 192). The entire strategy can be summed up by three photographs out of the many images taken by photojournalists since the Ali Abbas story broke in the global media system.13

The first – the key picture of ‘Ali’s photo-story’ – was shot by Falah Kheiber, transmitted through Reuters and widely published in Greek newspapers during April 2003 (Figure 5). Shown repeatedly across newspapers on different days in positions of high visibility, such as front pages, and with full supporting linguistic documentation, this photograph became, in a sense, one of the memorable images of the war in Iraq, pushing aside other photographs of the same boy or other victims.

The photograph, taken from an oblique higher angle in Baghdad’s hospital, is a medium close-up of the upper body of the wounded child, focusing on his face and his residual limbs. The boy with both arms maimed and a bandaged stump, and with a large piece of damp gauze on his forehead, is lying on red and white patterned sheets, under an old rusty metallic cage preventing bedclothes from getting in touch with his burned flesh. In the picture’s frame we can also see the hand of a woman dressed in black, gently sweeping his face and a radio tuner placed on the bed next to the boy. The whole setting visualizes the drastic shortage of basic medical equipment and supplies and the absence of the necessary medical facilities (intensive care unit, sterilized environment, highly qualified personnel, and so on), as stated by the United Nations Children’s Fund (Unicef), the press releases of the World Health Organization and other humanitarian organizations, describing
the situation in Baghdad's hospitals as 'critical' (see Eleftherotypia, 7 April 2003). Since the injured child had already received elementary medical care and his body is not exposed and bloody, we can assume that the published picture follows the old photography ethics, where injury is never explicit or bloody and fresh wounding is almost never recorded (Brothers, 1997: 164, 166). Nevertheless, the photographer's position and the captured moment give the viewer the opportunity to contemplate every vivid detail of the mutilated child and his voiceless agony and pain.

Locating precisely the time, place, the boy's name and his story of orphanage and mutilation, the headlines, the articles and the captions stressed the claim to truth of the picture. At the same time, although the photograph was already tinged with concrete meaning at the time it was taken and transmitted around the world, the Greek press, making – once again – an ironic visual statement on the euphemism of 'collateral damage',
used the photograph as a political means against the foreign policy of the USA and the Second Iraq War. Hence, the static image of the child, depicted at the very moment of greatest pain, in the precise linguistic context of the Greek press functioned as a metonym of the Iraqi people's tragic fate,
explicitly insisting on the fact that the event was repeated countless times since the US invaded Iraq, and as concrete proof of the destruction of any social relations capable of saving a person (family, the country’s economy, infrastructures, etc.). Moreover, the picture, through the ‘domestication’ of its meaning for the Greek audience, is nearly perfectly composed and organized to also communicate a powerful symbolic message, especially in relation to the time at which it occurred, namely a few weeks before the Greek Orthodox Easter. In this photograph, Ali Abbas, a Muslim boy, ironically appeared in a posture of deep significance in Christian cultures (Wright, 2002), connoting the Crucifix and the voiceless agony of Christ-who-endures (Figures 6a and 6b).

Two drawings by cartoonist Stathis in Eletherotypia, based on essential features of Ali’s first photograph and activating an explicit moral judgement within an ostensibly referential context, made explicit this analogy. In the first drawing (Figure 7), published on the same day as the publication of Ali Abbas’ photo by the Greek media (7 April 2003), two frowning, fully armed US soldiers were followed at a distance by a third soldier on alert, patrolling in a quasi desert area, the sky covered with black clouds. In the background, we can see what is probably the remains of an air raid with a corpse lying on the ground. The soldier on the right of the drawing is lifting in the air, grasped in his left hand, a wrecked Christ-like civilian with no arms and no legs. The second soldier looking towards him says: ‘Throw him away, he can’t be crucified.’

Figure 7 Cartoon by Stathis. ‘Throw him away. He can’t be crucified’. Eletherotypia, 7 April 2003, p. 6. © Eletherotypia. Reprinted with permission.
In the second drawing (Figure 8), published on Good Friday (25 April 2003), three US soldiers standing in line are lifting above their heads three children with their arms and legs amputated and bandaged. The soldiers, representing the three Crosses on the hill of Calvary, remind us how the Christian iconography ‘re-presents’ the famous theme of the Crucifix upon the Cross between the two thieves – and especially the so-called ‘Gothic Christ’ version. Printed above the three soldiers, the cartoon carries a heading in Byzantine-like script: ‘The Crucified of Baghdad . . . They will be dying for many years of cancers, grief, humiliation and other incurable diseases. We will never forget.’

Figure 8 Cartoon by Statitis. ‘The Crucified of Baghdad . . . They will be dying for many years of cancers, grief, humiliation and other incurable diseases. We will never forget.’ 

The second photograph of Ali Abbas (Figure 9) was placed on the inside pages of most newspapers in the 17 April edition, in articles reporting Ali’s transfer to an intensive care unit in a hospital in Kuwait City. The picture, taken high above the child, from a similar medium-shot position as the first photograph, focuses on his facial expression of pain, his burned torso covered with surgical gauze and the number ‘343’ written on his right shoulder. The caption reads: ‘Little hope for Ali’, while the articles give details of the ‘international community’s mobilization’.

This picture of Ali – being ‘attentively’ taken care of, lying on clean white sheets with a surgical bonnet on his head, can be seen as a metonym of the boy’s transitional trajectory, from the helplessly dying victim of war in a poor foreign country to his recovery towards a new life, thanks to the mobilization of the international community and the intervention of humanitarian organizations.

158 Visual Communication 7(2)
Ali’s new life is made visually explicit in the third photograph (Figure 10), appearing in *Eleftherotypia* on 18 December 2004. In this picture, Ali, vaguely smiling, is for the first time captured in an upright position, with his limblessness and scars covered. His image is lifted away from the background and he is dressed in a conventional western manner in a white shirt, bow tie and black suit with his short hair carefully combed and parted.

The portrait is a medium-distance shot and the boy seems to be walking diagonally towards the photographer, while his gaze angles off to the side of the camera in an oblique manner. The headline reads: ‘Soul Touching’ and the caption:

Today, little Ali, the Iraqi boy who lost both arms and his family in an air raid in Baghdad, stirring the whole global community, goes to school and paints pictures with his feet intending to help his wounded compatriots by selling them.

Although the mutilation and the orphanage of Ali Abbas is an undeniable tragedy, the victim of the war being photographed and captured by/for the global infotainment media system becomes now the ‘victim’ of the cold mechanical eye of the camera (Rosler, 1992: 306) and, via the camera, the
object of the western gaze. And it is through this new kind of victimization/objectification that the boy entered into the cultural imaginary of western societies and became the paradigmatic face of Iraqi civilian suffering, framing anti-war discourse and mobilizing humanitarian organizations in close collaboration with media industries.

Thus, it is interesting to note that, even if other images taken by photographers of major press agencies existed and were transmitted worldwide through the internet, the selection and editing of the previously mentioned three pictures by the Greek press strengthen the photographers’
‘decisive moment’ in two interrelated ways. First, ‘syntagmatically’ speaking, the three photographs function metonymically, representing the entire progress of Ali’s story – from Iraq, where he was dying helpless, to his airlift to Kuwait and from there to his travelling to the UK for expert care and full recovery, thanks to humanitarian intervention. Second, all three photographs are broadly recognizable as the type of pictures used by aid agencies and charities for fund-raising, where fundamental within their rhetoric is the reassurance of Otherness and of our safer social and political location (Lister and Wells, 2001: 86). From this perspective, the most interesting element in the three photographs published in the Greek press is the relation between the angle of the photographer, i.e. the viewer, and the angle and gaze of the photographed child.

It is remarkable that the two first photographs share an almost identical framing and photographer position. They are both taken from an oblique higher angle, they are medium close-ups of the upper body of the wounded child, focusing on his face and his residual limbs. Although photographs of the child looking directly at the viewer from an eye-level position were also available from the news agencies’ websites, in the images published in the Greek press the frontal plane of the boy makes an angle with the frontal plane of the photographer/viewer: that is, the photographer has not situated herself or himself in front of the boy but taken the photograph from the side. In addition, the boy, isolated in space by the medium close-up, is looking at something or someone out of the frame and invisible to us. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that the photograph constitutes an ‘offer’ image where the boy is clearly depicted as ‘Other’/‘stranger’, hence as an object of contemplation and not as a subject for the reader to enter into any kind of imaginary social relation with. However, in the given linguistic context, a number of factors which have already been considered in this article (facial expression, physical infirmity, resemblance to Christian iconography and orphanage), work jointly with its gaze and position in such a way that I would suggest that the ‘offer’ form of address interacts with an implying ‘demand’ form in an ‘I beg you’ image-aspect, asking for a moral response of some kind from the viewer. In the third picture, the standing boy is positioned at eye-level with the camera, and the frontal plane of the boy runs parallel to that of the photographer, connoting a new kind of involvement with viewers that did not exist in the first two photographs. Nevertheless, his eyes do not engage with the viewers and he does not invite the viewers to identify with him: the boy, timidly smiling, looks forward and out of the frame towards the space occupied by the camera, but in a blank, unfocused way which does not directly answer the viewers’ gaze. The result is a double message where an ‘offer’ image interacts with the ‘involvement between viewers and subject’ connotation, strengthened by the boy’s commitment to the ‘respectable’, western, male dress code.

Examining now the chronological sequence of Ali’s photographs, we can assert that it conveys a significant shift from an oblique to a frontal point
of view, which, following Kress and Van Leeuwen’s approach (1996: 140–3),
encodes the difference between detachment and involvement concerning the
relationship between the subject and the viewer. In other words, the three
photographs combined form a meaningful ‘chain’ or ‘syntagm’ connoting, on
the one hand, the withdrawal of the barrier between the represented boy and
the viewers or, rather, the boy’s shift towards ‘us’ (involvement) and, on the
other hand, that this involvement is realized in an ambivalent way (‘although I
am part of your world now, I nevertheless remain Other/stranger’).
The redefinition of Ali as one of our own, albeit a stranger, accomplishes a
powerful ideological closure. In fact, I would argue, it presents striking
similarities with the decisive shift pertaining to the iconic image of
the napalmed girl in Vietnam and her ‘grown-up’ sequel, creatively analysed
by Hariman and Lucaites (2003). As they argue:

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 . . .
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. (p. 48)

Similarly, this sequence of photographs does not provide the newspaper’s
readers either with much evidence of wartime wounding or a political
framework for action. What is interesting, overall, in the case of the
representation of Ali Abbas is the fact that the Greek press in the context of a
humanitarian worldview aligns itself with the western gaze of news agencies
and the ‘liberal narratives of compensation and healing, used in the main-
stream media to neutralize the iconic photograph’s sense of guilt’ (Hariman
and Lucaites, 2003: 49, 51), supporting ‘the amnesia about the responsibility
of the West’ (Ignatieff, 1998: 16) even though these narratives are apparently
in direct opposition to the over-politicized, anti-American, anti-war disc-
ourse dominant in the Greek public sphere.

CONCLUSION
As I have tried to make clear, the signifying practices (linguistic and visual) of
the Greek press constructed a highly ambiguous anti-war discourse, which
combined contradictory elements and assumptions. In fact, the Greek press
attempted to counterbalance the high tech images of a ‘surgical conflict that
simply produced no casualties’ (Brothers, 1997: 211) of most mainstream
western media and to reverse the dominant distribution of evil and good
prevailing in US/UK official discourse, without challenging the Orientalist
binary oppositions. In this attempt, the insistence on spectacular images of
suffering and the combination of the ‘premodern moral framework’ (Huppauf, 1995) of humanitarian discourse of compassion to distant innocent victims of war with populist and Greek Christian Orthodox conceptualizations of the self is the key constituent of newspapers’ signifying practices. In other words, manipulating the slippage between the ‘evidential force’, ‘political stance’ and ‘humanitarianism’ of the photographic images, on the one hand allowed the Greek newspapers’ visual representations of war to recycle the western gaze documented in images of the Other as perpetually objectified and victimized; on the other hand, this manipulation helped to construct an imaginary community and self-image of denunciation of US/UK foreign policies and the ‘war against terrorism’, compassion for the suffering of civilians, and moral or material support for the victims.

Thus, the same ‘anti-war’ discursive practices, and especially the ‘slippery’ quality of photographs, with respect to both their internal organization and their relation to the text, appear to re-establish the cultural, spatial and temporal distances between victims of war and readers, and therefore to prioritize the ‘humanitarian’ function over the political meaning of suffering. In addition, ‘the celebration of abstract humanity becomes, in any given political situation, the celebration of the dignity of the passive victim . . . the oppressed are granted a bogus Subjecthood’ (Sekula, 1982: 109), which gives back to the imaginary community ‘a sense of power, well-being and, essentially, an ability [To speak for and on behalf of the unity of human beings and] to look down upon others – even though narratives like imperialism or moral universalism itself have been cast into fundamental doubt’ (Tester, 1999: 479). In this way, according to Baudrillard (1994), we become ‘the consumers of the ever delightful spectacle of poverty and catastrophe, and of the moving spectacle of our own efforts to alleviate it’ (p. 67, quoted in Tester, 1999: 477). To sum up, even though the central framework employed was not explicitly ‘Orientalist’, at least not to the same extent as in most mainstream western media discourses, implicitly the ‘eternal virtues of western civilization’ continue to organize the Greek newspapers’ worldview and the construction of an imaginary community of readers. Moreover, the use of an iconography based on an opposition between the human face of traditional non-occidental society and the inhuman technology of superpowers, as Huppauf (1995) argues, ‘is inevitably in danger of oversimplifying complex structures, and consequently films [and photography] based upon these opposed elements suffer from an anachronistic attempt to ignore basic constitutive elements of modernity [and postmodernity, I add]’ (p.96).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Martha Michailidou for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this paper and for providing translating advice and assistance. I also want to thank the reviewers for their fruitful comments.
NOTES

1. There is a vast literature suggesting that the new ‘war representation’ is the output of controlled military communication or what was called ‘the Pentagon’s PR-ization of warfare’ (Louw, 2003) rather than of traditional news reporting. From the Vietnam War onwards, according to Louw (2001: 174), each war involving Anglo-Americans (e.g. the Falklands, Persian Gulf, Somalia, Kosovo, Afghanistan) was substantively ‘media-ized and PR-ized’. For further details, see Calabrese (2005), Kumar (2006), Ottosen (1992) and Rampton and Stauber (2004) on the processes of ‘information or perception management’ of contemporary war, as well as Brothers’ (1997: 202) argument that this ‘perception management’ is the result of changing institutional and technological circumstances and of a complex interplay between political, military and increasingly corporate interests which determine what we are able to see.

2. The condemnation by the overwhelming majority of Greeks of the US decision to initiate a programme of long-term global war ‘against terrorism’ and to invade Iraq occurs in the political and historical context of strong anti-American feelings of the majority of Greek people. Greek anti-Americanism is motivated by the decades-long US involvement in Greek domestic and foreign affairs and the USA’s responsibility for the maintenance of the military junta in Greece from 1967 to 1974, as well as the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974.

3. The official anti-war position was primarily rhetorical. The Greek government, holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Union at the time, engaged in a delicate balancing act: opposition to any unilateral use of force, trying to keep the EU united, and at the same time allowing the US army to use its military bases in Greece. The Greek press did not have a single stance towards the Greek government. The pro-government newspapers usually avoided commenting on the Greek government allowing the USA to use the military bases, or justified the action in terms of ‘rational’ politics or ‘contractual obligations’ of Greece’s membership of NATO. In contrast, the oppositional press (especially left-wing newspapers) were constantly campaigning against Greek foreign policy and the so-called ‘hypocrisy’ of the Greek Prime Minister.

4. This does not imply that the Greek press and its anti-war representations were exceptional in ‘the west’. Although, according to the literature, since at least the first Gulf War, most of the occidental media, especially western mainstream newspapers and television channels (like CNN), constructed a hegemonic framing and distribution of right (good) and wrong (evil), this does not
mean that there were no other newspapers in the occidental world that did not support the official discourse of UK/US administrations in the case of the Second Iraq War. For instance, the British tabloid the Daily Mirror consistently published pictures of suffering Iraqi children and condemned the war.

5. The concept of ‘Orientalism’ as developed by Said (2003[1978]) has been pivotal to contemporary analyses of western representations of the Other in academic discourses, based on epistemological distinctions between east and west and accepted as common ground for literature, art, popular culture and the media (see also Said, 1997). According to his theoretical approach, the concepts of ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’ (‘western’) worked not only as oppositional terms, but also so that the ‘Orient’ was constructed as an object for investigation and control, as a negative inversion of western culture and civilization. Said’s writings have had far-reaching implications beyond area studies to studies of the dominant ways in which the relations between western and non-western and their worlds are viewed. The most pertinent representations of the ‘Other’ to this article seem to be an articulation between the stereotypical ‘cluster’: ‘inferior/vulnerable/passive/childlike/requiring the protection of the international community’ yet strangely dangerous because it poses a threat to western civilization (Arab/Islam/not civilized/violent/angry/irrational/terrorist, etc.).

6. To understand how the Greek press constructs an ambivalent public discourse, it is important to consider the constant tension derived from the complexity in which ‘western’, ‘Orthodox’, ‘Balkan’, but also ‘left ideology’ elements construct modern Greek identity. The ancient Greek cultural legacy of Greece as the cradle of western civilization and the birthplace of democracy perceived of as Greek society’s natural superiority, the power of the Greek Christian Orthodox Church and a relatively high level of religiosity among the population, the traditional national hostility towards Turkey, with the corresponding hegemonic denial of the country’s ‘Oriental’ past as part of the Ottoman empire, as well as its contemporary economic and socio-cultural situation which positions Greece in the ‘First World’ of the ‘developed’ nations, help dominant discourses to align Greece with the west. On the other hand, its geopolitical position on the southeastern end of the Balkan peninsula, the country’s long history of western superpowers’ intervention in domestic affairs, especially regarding the Greek post-Second World War civil war and the military junta in 1967, as well as the long-standing tradition of a strong left-wing political movement in the country created a somewhat more complex structure of east–west relations than those which existed between colonial states (France, Britain, the USA) and their (ex) colonies in the east.

Konstantinidou: The spectacle of suffering and death
7. As already mentioned, in its denunciation of US/UK foreign policies and in its attempt to reverse the dominant representations of the Iraq War, the Greek press was always careful not to identify with the ‘Other’ of Orientalist binary oppositions. Therefore, the Iraqi fighters were usually depicted as small extremist groups locked into ‘jihad’, and were very often portrayed or visually represented as ‘low-tech’ troops, anti-modern and menacing.

8. This is a translation from Greek implying the juxtaposition of tears with blood.

9. In the Greek press’s discourse ‘world’, terms such as ‘civilized people’, ‘people’, ‘civil society’ and ‘western civilization’ are all used as synonyms. This is due, first of all, to the western ‘bias’ of major global news agencies’ supply of news. Indeed, the character of the world news system favours western definitions of the important and significant, and provides the international media market with textual and visual information dominated by news of western developed countries. Therefore, the Greek newspapers’ news regarding the anti-war rallies in the ‘world’ usually refer to demonstrations in Europe and the USA. Second, given the linguistic context of the specific article, the ‘world’ against the ‘inhumanity of war’, implicitly connotes the legacy of humanism which in Greek hegemonic discourse is bequeathed to the western civilization by Ancient Greek culture.

10. In an analysis of Barnardo’s UK 1999 advertising campaign ‘Heroin Baby’, Ash (2005) investigated the ways in which images of children produced for fund-raising function as performative speech acts. She argues that:

    photographs such as ‘Heroin Baby’ direct an implied message to a donating audience/public which deploy the implicit challenge: ‘I dare you’ (to care, to respond), backed up with the contingent ‘Shame on you’ (for refusing) . . . operating as ‘explicit’ or potential Austian ‘performative’ speech acts. (p. 512)

She also notes that, although other performative challenges are potentially available, such as ‘I beg you’ (to help), humanitarian dare is a familiar strategy in campaigns to raise funds.

11. In this particular case, the Greek press representations construct subject positions, on the one hand, for the Iraqis as speechless, helpless, innocent victims, objectified and infantilized and, on the other hand, for adult readers – as a metonym of the Greek people, western civil society and the international community – as morally indignant with US/UK, helpful, mobilized against the war, politically active and therefore ‘socially powerful’.

12. ‘External intervention’ is not exclusively a military action. In the particular cases considered here, the call of the Greek press for
'external intervention' refers to the mobilization of western civil society and humanitarian aid against the war.

13. Ali Abbas was a 12-year-old boy who on 30 March 2003 suffered severe burns, lost both his arms and most members of his family when a US missile crashed into his house in the south of Baghdad. The Faleh Kheibers' series of shots were beamed around the world by Reuters to picture editors, who turned him into the face of Iraqi civilian suffering (see http://www.alertNet.org, accessed 17 Sept. 2005).

14. Actually, there were other images, far from 'ethical', circulating through news agencies. Indeed Ali Abbas, according to The Guardian reporter, asked the journalists to leave but they did not. An Australian journalist referred to the highly unethical practices – particularly of the US press – in relation to Ali Abbas, all justified by the humanitarian intervention that the media attention would apparently mobilize some action (I thank one of the article reviewers for this information).

15. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996: 135, 141–6), producing an image involves the selection of a particular 'point of view', and this implies the possibility of expressing distinct subjective attitudes towards represented participants.

REFERENCES


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