

International Baccalaureate 'Visual Arts' Extended Essay

International School Ho Chi Minh City

## **IB Visual Arts Extended Essay**

**“How has the social and emotional impact of war photography changed since the 1940s?”**

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**“How has the social and emotional impact of war photography changed since the 1940s?”**

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**“How has the social and emotional impact of war photography changed since the 1940s?”**

## **Abstract**

As a lifelong international student, I am able to look at news broadcasts and articles without the bias of having a home country influencing my opinion. This has led me to wonder how my ideas, perceptions, and opinions have been affected by content published in the media.

To an extent, it is easier to explore this through written texts, however, people are exposed to images that portray current events just as much as the written word. I wanted to explore how these images influenced people emotionally and socially, hence the research question of this extended essay: **‘How has the social and emotional impact of war photography changed since the 1940s?’**

To structure my research, I decided to focus on four different time periods to ensure I explore the evolutionary process of broadcasted images of war. I selected four wars that had high media coverage and chose one photo from each that I felt was relevant to the conflict. From here, I analyzed these images in correlation with the current political situation and social reaction. To support my findings, I also interviewed people who were present at the time, to gain relevant stories of how people reacted when these images were published.

From my research, I found that the Internet has democratized war imagery, making it an even more evocative and personal communication that express values, ideas, social and political goals. Over time, the role of the audience has developed from people merely watching and reacting predictably, to people being able to directly involve themselves within conflict. War photography has evolved from being a heavily regulated process designed to control the people as a whole to being a much more direct way of communication that is targeted at an individual without the confinements of photos being approved by authorities before publication.

Abstract Word Count: 300

## **Introduction**

People respond to images in media publications in different ways. These reactions can depend on things such as knowledge, environment, past experiences and personal connections. It is not easy to predict how a person will react; however, it is possible to anticipate how different demographics will react to any given image. Previously and currently, research in this area has been used by governments and political parties to induce reactions from the public that have either improved the image of the country by releasing them or demoted the image of the opponent. Today, however, it can be used to an even greater power by rather than just creating a general public opinion but also affect people on an individual and personal level.

This can be used in positive ways, such as raising awareness of global issues and persuading people to change habits in their daily lives towards such causes. On the other hand, it can also be used to manipulate people into actions - both for the better and for the worse.

This reality of manipulation through media has become an increasing problem as globalization develops. This is mostly associated with issues such as animal cruelty, body image and marketing of products; however, there is a lack of knowledge about how this tool is used in correspondence with issues of global relations and international conflict.

The main break in the news media that inspired the concept for this essay was the three British teenagers who were recruited by ISIS, along with the fact that whenever ISIS is mentioned in Western media, it is associated to a barbaric event in the Middle East. After this intrigue developed, I researched different people around the world who ISIS has been able to recruit and was shocked by the numbers, ages and diversity of its global supporters.

War photography used for the purpose of propaganda has been a tool employed throughout the course of modern wars. It is sometimes difficult to find the true intention of the photographer behind the photograph. Sometimes it is purely journalistic or documentary, whereas at other times, it can be a direct message that biases the opinions of the general public and/or individuals that may change the course of the opponent's action through pressure from civilians.

While words create powerful impacts on people, images can have greater strength and bearing, especially when they depict something as graphic as war. Images can easily be disturbing or moving, causing emotions to generate, thus, in some cases, actions to be taken.

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To further develop this essay, I decided to choose different war photographs published during different major wars that took place in the last century and analyze them to find out what made these photographs so popular and what reactions they sparked from their audiences. I was also interested by how the reactions of people changed over time, from one wartime to another. The changes in the time span of 60 years are a chronicle of how people’s relationships with news media have evolved. Hence the question for this essay: **‘How has the social and emotional impact of war photography changed since the 1940s?’**

I believe that this is a relevant topic because it explores a way that the media affects us in a more serious context. It handles issues that are of global importance and may create awareness for people to avoid being manipulated into doing things that they do not want to do (no matter how large the scale) as well as allowing people to understand how they are influenced into doing what they do, whether it be good or bad actions.

“How has the social and emotional impact of war photography changed since the 1940s?”

## Part 1: The 1940s

Up until World War II, war photography had not been utilized as a way of supporting military force. This changed as Hitler came to power and began visually documenting the social and military transformation of Germany. One year before the Germans invaded Poland, photographers began to be recruited by the Wehrmacht (the German armed forces) to serve as the creators of the propaganda campaign. As word got out that the Wehrmacht were recruiting people for this role, volunteers began to come forward. It was much preferred to photograph the action than be amongst it.

Being a photographer working under the Nazi regime, there were rules that had to be followed. Dead Germans were not to be photographed, as these photos would make their way back to Germany to the families. Also, explicit photos of the Germans killing Jews were not to be photographed. Inevitably, such photos that were forbidden were taken anyway, although, not released until after the war had ceased<sup>1</sup>.

This is a strong example of the power that photography holds. It was ensured that there were no freelance photographers who might disrupt the order that the Nazis created. Anything that was being published was being filtered through several different levels<sup>2</sup>.

The photos that did make it to publication were very biased towards the German armed forces. One of Hitler's personal photographers was a man named Hugo Jaeger, who captured the famous shot of Hitler saluting the German troops<sup>3</sup>.



Hugo Jaeger - Time & Life Pictures

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<sup>1</sup> *The structures of control in the Nazi state* BBC Bitesize

<sup>2</sup> *Unseen photographs reveal the private life of Adolf Hitler* The Telegraph

<sup>3</sup> Ben Cosgrove *World War II: Photos We Remember* The Times

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Jaeger was one of the few photographers at this time that was using colour. This meant that the impact of these photos was even greater, they caught people's' attention in an instant.

At first glance, this is simple a photo of Hitler saluting a large crowd while protected by several of his men. However, many qualities in this photo have very subtle ways of ensuring that it is a purely Nazi approved photograph.

First, Hitler is the focal point of the image. He is positioned slightly to the left of the Reichsadler or Imperial Eagle (a symbol of Nazi Germany), which is the center of the image. The placement of these two subjects seems close to the person viewing the photo, whereas, in reality they are extremely far apart. It creates a competitive aspect between Hitler and the Reichsadler where Hitler wins because he is in the foreground.

Hitler is the largest and tallest person in the photograph and he takes up the most space. On the other hand, people in the crowd are very small and impossible to make out as individuals. It seems as if they have been slightly blurred before the final print. However, as a crowd, they cover almost an entire third of the image. This shows the insignificance of the people as individuals while emphasizing the power that they hold as a crowd, this could give the German people a sense of importance. There is also a lot of recurring white in the crowd. This gives a very subtle hint of innocence and purity to the people, possibly implying that the Nazis wanted to portray respect for the people.

Apart from Hitler, who is the very literal subject point, the eye is also drawn to the flags in the background. The harshness of this colour against the somewhat soft and cool toned colours is very capturing to the eye. Red has a history of being known for its representation of danger and violence<sup>4</sup>. It is also quite a seductive colour that appeals to people in an emotional way, thus, creating another powerful note to the image.

These elements add to the themes of the photograph such as, patriotism, leadership and power. The strength in this photo of Hitler and the confederate flags that carry the swastika symbol is a powerful example of what a propaganda image can be.

The man in charge of the Nazi's propaganda campaign was Joseph Goebbels<sup>5</sup>. His goal for the campaign was to ensure that the art and culture of Germany fell within the borderlines of Nazi beliefs. This approach meant that the main role that this campaign had in the outcome of the war, was inflicting fear in people of voicing opinions that were considered unacceptable. The media was not constructed in a way that invited people to fight for change; instead, it was a tool to keep people obedient.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Meanings of Red Colour Matters*

<sup>5</sup> *Joseph Goebbels History.com*



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## Part 2: The 1960s & 1970s

The Vietnam War, which took place from 1955-1975, was labeled as the first TV War. It is quickly apparent that the media took a large part in the war. It is even argued that the media took a role in determining the outcome of the war. In 1968 over 60% of Americans looked to television for news on the Vietnam War<sup>6</sup>.

A famous example of the media having a large influence on the war was in 1971 when the New York Times released a document from the office of Robert McNamara, who was the Secretary of Defense at the time. The document revealed several key pieces of information including the fact that the American and Vietnamese numbers of casualties were not true.

Not only did the American media release news to the public that criticized the foundations of the war, they also released photos that served as an accurate retelling of the news from Vietnam that was being changed to diminish the true situation in Vietnam.

A photo that took the world by surprise was Nick Ut's shot of a naked nine-year-old girl, Kim Phuc Phan Thi, fleeing from a napalm strike<sup>7</sup>. The photo later won a Pulitzer Prize and is famous for its genuine retelling of the war and its effect on the citizens of Vietnam.

While this image is powerful and stands as an iconic photo from the war, I have found that there are other, less famous photos that are just as, if not more, powerful.



Malcolm Brown - TIME

<sup>6</sup> Liam Kennedy *Photojournalism and the Vietnam War* UCD Dublin

<sup>7</sup> Andrews, O *Vietnam: Images from Combat Photographers* Starwood Publishing.

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The photo I have selected was a very memorable photo for people who were alive during the time of the Vietnam War. It is Malcolm Brown's photo of a Buddhist monk sacrificing his life by self-immolation in the middle of a street in Saigon.

Its formal artistic qualities, although not obvious, are very effective. Firstly, it makes strong use of balance, one of the principles of art. Balance is achieved by the empty space in the foreground and how the car is facing the left, whereas the smoke is being blown to the right. This creates a strong sense of opposing ideas or arguments. In addition to this, the recurrence of robes creates a very strong element of peace. Not only are the bystanders wearing robes, but the man who is at the center of the photo is wearing a garment that is universally viewed as representing peace.

This portion of the photograph is by far the most powerful. The act of burning oneself alive is such a horrendous idea. However, if you look closely at the posture of the man, he does not look panicked or afraid.

The use of black and white demonstrates that the majority of war photographers and photojournalists worked in black and white because that is how newspapers and magazines mostly published their photos. Coloured printing was saved for the covers, as this was cheaper. Despite this, the use of black and white imagery reflects the event of the photograph, seeing as black and white is often a universal representation of the alternatives of hope and despair<sup>8</sup>. It may also have been used as a tool to minimize distractions. For example, if the photographer found that there was a colour in the photograph that captured the eye but carried no real significance to the message or scene of the image, he may have chosen black and white to eliminate that. Its simplicity in extracting the colour allows the audience to focus on the content of the scene.

This image strongly embodied the increasingly popular concept that the Vietnam War effort was becoming less justified and losing its original purpose. Innocent civilians were dying and it was difficult for people to pinpoint the justification behind the Americans entering a war that had no real connection to them, other than wanting to prevent the spread of communism<sup>9</sup>.

Photojournalists in this war most commonly took on the underlying message that the United States was an unnecessary presence that brought a 'disruptive military and cultural presence'<sup>10</sup>. "It was a shock that the Western photojournalists were focusing their lenses on the Vietnamese citizen rather than the American soldier"<sup>11</sup>. The

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<sup>8</sup> Darren Rowse *Why Black and White Photography?*

<sup>9</sup> Kallie Szczepanski *Why Did the US Enter the Vietnam War?*

<sup>10</sup> Liam Kennedy *Photojournalism and the Vietnam War*

<sup>11</sup> Appendices 1

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photos that were released carried the aura of a bystander, rather than an instigator of propaganda. This created a connection between the Vietnamese victims and the American public. Neither party had any true decision-making power or influence during this war.

### Part 3: 1990-1991

The Gulf War began when Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein ordered the invasion of Kuwait in August of 1990. Angered by this action, other countries in the region including Saudi Arabia and Egypt called on The United States to intervene. Shortly after, the United Nations Security Council demanded that Hussein retreat from Kuwait by the middle of January in 1991. Hussein blatantly defied this request and the United States led an air offensive attack commonly known as Operation Desert Storm. Forty-two days later, on February 28, 1991 President George H.W. Bush declared a cease-fire<sup>12</sup>.

With new technology, comes millions of viewers and in this case, the audience of this war was the general public. At this point in history, the main methods of broadcast were newspapers and television and among the spectators, there were skeptics who believed that the events being depicted on screens were not accurate representations. The leading voice of this theory was the philosopher Jean Baudrillard who wrote three essays released before, during and after the war. These essays were titled *The Gulf War Will Not Take Place*, *The Gulf War Is Not Taking Place* and *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. The essays depict his belief of how the conflict between the Iraqi and American soldiers was not a ‘war’, but rather the Americans attacking with brute force and suffering no losses.

From the perspective of the media companies, The Gulf War was a massive opportunity to grow their businesses. The opportunities were endless: documentaries, articles, radio broadcasts, interviews. This war was something that all journalists and reporters wanted to write about and the entire world wanted to know about. Thus, it became one of the most organized approaches to news coverage during a war. For example, accompanying one unit in Kuwait was, a crew from CBS, a writer, two military affairs officers and a photographer. The photographer, Kenneth Jarecke, was the man who posted the most controversial and memorable photos from the war. Ironically, it was taken on the same day that the ceasefire was declared, but it perfectly embodied the relentlessness of the lives that were taken in those months<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> *Persian Gulf War History.com*

<sup>13</sup> Eugene Reznik *The Story Behind Ken Jarecke's Horrific and Controversial Gulf War Photo*

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Kenneth Jarecke - American Photo Mag

It is rare that photographs that depict war are taken at such close proximity. More often photographers take photos from far away. However, this may not always be an artistic choice on the part of the photographer. It may be a limitation, as in the past photographers have had limits on areas that they can be in during battles.

This reasons that this photo was so controversial mirror the reasons that this photo is so emotionally impacting. We see an Iraqi soldier who had been incinerated by flames, who in his final moments had attempted to pull himself over the dashboard of a truck<sup>14</sup>. We can tell this by the way he is standing. His hands are both on the dashboard and we can see that his muscles were tense as they tried to carry the weight of his body. However, after he was burned, all that was left was his corpse which is recognizable as a man but his exterior is black and entirely burnt off.

It is almost impossible to make out the setting and objects behind the man, which almost makes it look like the man is running away from something that we cannot see. This could correspond to how we, as an audience are only shown what is chosen to be shown and we are blind to the reality of war, which is people dying horrible deaths as this man has.

The most impactful aspect of this photo is the subject. It is an almost unrecognizable human body from a very close range. The photo was taken in such a way that makes

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<sup>14</sup> Torie Rose DeGhett *The War Photo No One Would Publish*

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the audience feel physically close to the corpse. Not only is this due to the angle that the photo was taken, but also the fact that we can see some fight and emotion left on the man's face. This creates an eerie and gruesome mood which adds to the feeling of loss and grief.

This photo was published in black and white. Whether or not it was for added artistic effect, or if it was done to mask some of the more gruesome details of the man's body, the colouring adds to the composition of the piece<sup>15</sup>.

This photo was taken from a level angle, however, with the truck and the posture of the man, it makes it seem like the angle of the camera is lower. This creates the impression that the corpse is slightly elevated, making it appear that the man in the photo is raised above us, thus creating a very respectful mood towards the deceased man. Not only are we viewing this corpse in a very direct way, we are also forced to look at him from quite a close range, giving us an extremely clear view of the front of his shoulders, arms and head.

The fact that this image was not published until after the war supports Baudrillard's theory that the focus of published content was solely on the heroism of the American soldiers. As it is gruesomely portraying the death of an Iraqi soldier, it would not have complied with the criteria of content to reach the public.

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<sup>15</sup> *Black-and-White Photography Artsy*

## Part 4: 2012-Present

In recent years, globalization has reached an entirely different level of meaning. The reliance on television, radio and printed journalism has decreased as all can be found in one place: the Internet. These platforms have their original form, but have developed ‘online versions’ to retain their previous audiences and attract new ones.

Currently, the most famous war on the Internet is the Islamic State conflict, the first war campaign where a group has used the internet and social media to recruit members and spread its ethos. The internet is useful at spreading the written word, but images can be much more effective at attracting people.

The Islamic State has recruited people out of modern day western society through the Internet. This has commonly been done through group chats that have proven to be very successful. Examples of people who were recruited by chat rooms and blogs are a 23-year-old schoolteacher from Washington State as well as various teenage girls from around the world<sup>16</sup>.

Typically initial contact with recruits happens via chat however the Islamic State is very careful about how they present themselves online to potential recruits. The most common way that people are convinced to convert is they are promised a ‘Muslim Utopia’<sup>17</sup>.

People can assume photography is purely objective and cannot be altered to create bias. This can be true. Although, it is possible for elements to be highlighted or altered to create a subconscious reaction to the images, as explained earlier in the analysis of Nazi imagery.

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<sup>16</sup> Rukmini Callimachi *ISIS and the Lonely American Woman* The New York Times

<sup>17</sup> Rowan Scarborough *Islamic State recruits Westerners with promise of Muslim utopia* The Washington Times

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Unknown - The Butcher

The image I chose to analyze depicts a series of trucks driving in a single file line. The trucks have their headlights on and there are fighters bearing the flag of the Islamic state. In the background we can see a coastline along with a large area of sand and vegetation. The colour of this area is similar to that of the trucks. This creates the impression of the trucks blending into their natural surroundings, becoming a force of nature' which emphasizes the power of the group. The camera is positioned as if the trucks are driving towards you. This gives them a sense of infinite power. Not to mention, the fact that the train of trucks goes beyond the borders of the image. This makes the audience wonder how many there are, giving the group power by embodying mystery and wonder.

The bright lights from the front trucks are not giving off a glare; however, the trucks at the back are almost too bright to look at. This represents the drive from the back of the cause, the beginning and its initial force, showing that the roots of the cause are what drives it forward because it is so strong. The lights also look somewhat angelic or 'holy'.

These formal qualities highlight the power and strong vision that the Islamic State carries. Many people are targets for recruitment. People who feel lost without a cause or are thirsty for adventure. Images such as these allow people to feel empowered and that they are given the chance to create change and fight for a cause they are convinced is worth fighting for.



## Conclusion

After reviewing these different war images and analyzing **how the emotional and social impact of war photography has changed since the 1940s**, it is clear that the internet has democratized war imagery, making it a more evocative and personal communication and expression of values and ideas as well as social and political goals.

The viewer can now become a participant and can take responsive action to become involved in conflicts in a way that has not existed in the past. The public had virtually no impact on the outcomes of armed conflict before the creation of the Internet.

Governments and media outlets see the broadcasts of information on the Internet as being a positive and negative asset. From one perspective, Internet news can be used to spread information quickly and lead to movements that begin with things as simple as petitions or trending hash tags. On the other hand, it can be weaponised by certain groups to manipulate us and deeply embed ideas into our minds.

In conclusion, war photography in World War II was a tool utilized by those in power in order to maintain their authority. In the Vietnam and Gulf Wars it was a journalist's tool. Images were taken to use for broadcasting information. The link between photo and audience was very broad as the photos were designed to incite a specific reaction from the audience as a group.

Now the relationship between image and person is very personal and individual. The concept of speaking (literally or artistically) to people and producing an individual reaction from them is common. From this connection and access to other 'realities' we see there is more freedom in what you can say, believe or do. In today's society, there are many things that are still considered wrong, however with the Internet, anyone can be an artist of war photography and express their viewpoints, goals or passions. Anyone can also be a viewer of photography and connect to it based on their viewpoints, goals and views.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Interview with Keri Anderson

*Q: What were the first images of the war that you were exposed to?*

A: Photos in Life and Time magazines. I remember they were black and white and very serious. I was in primary school when I remember seeing them.

*Q: What was your initial reaction to these images?*

A: It made me think the US was doing a bad thing - that the war in Vietnam was wrong. These images were important in laying the foundation of my values about war and how the US has intervened over many decades. It was the beginning of my hatred of US imperialism. I lived in an extremely conservative part of the US - and most people around me were affected differently - it made them pro war.