Book Reviews

Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites. ***No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*****.** Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. 419 Pages.

In Susan Sontag's final book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), the literary critic, political activist, and controversial theorist of photography argues that, whether photographs are understood as "naïve object[s]" or "the work of an experienced artificer," their meaning and the viewer's response to them depends on how pictures are identified or misidentified—that is, on how textual discourses are constructed through the act of individual viewing. Sontag concludes that whatever excess of understanding is suggested in a given image, a caption will eventually "be needed" to help *read* the image.[1] It is to this bold claim that Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites appear to respond with their collaborative work *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*. This book is at once a study of iconic photographs as public art in American culture, and an unabashed rebuttal of what the authors term the "hermeneutics of suspicion" around visual culture.[2] It provides a dynamic and much-needed contribution to debates concerning the value of visual representation and its relationship to implicit tensions within liberal democracy. The book arrives on the heels of current efforts within an expanding field of visual studies to push for a full understanding of the technological and cultural (and not strictly textual) processes through which meanings are made for images.[3]

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[1] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 29.

[2] This is characterized, as the authors suggest, by "the general inattention in Anglo-American political theory to popular media" (39). Incidentally, the authors name Sontag as one of the "contemporary moralists" in order to strongly emphasize literacy in the public sphere, but no direct reference is made to the quote from *Regarding the Pain of Others* that I suggest may have inspired the title of Hariman and Lucaites's book.

[3] For an overview of recent debates within the expanding field of visual studies, see Margaret Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual After the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge,

At its core, the study builds upon existing histories and theories of photography's emergence as a ready, duly subversive, highly mobile, and technologically superior medium, concurrent with the rise of the nation state. The authors emphasize how photography has been increasingly identified as an alternative mode of conflated artistic and documentary representation, freely disseminated to a broad, public audience. More specific to the thesis of this book, the authors isolate photojournalism as "an important technology of liberal-democratic citizenship," defined by its "intersection of liberal and democratic sensibilities" and its service to very real social and political action (18). In my estimation, this is the strongest argument of the book, and the discussion in the introductory and concluding chapters on public visual media as a repository of democratic knowledge is both compelling and at times very convincing. Such an examination reveals how photojournalism's preoccupation with personal experience can powerfully direct public reactions to large-scale and sometimes difficult-to-process historic events.

In terms of specific imagery, the authors confine their research to the American cultural context and designate the term "icon" to identify a selection of widely recognized photographs. Each of these images fit the authors' established criteria for an iconic image in that they represent historically significant events, activate a strong emotional identification or response, and have been reproduced across a wide range of media and contexts (27). The book consists of an analysis of Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936) and Alfred Eisenstaedt's *Times Square Kiss* (1945) in chapter three; a comparative analysis of Joe Rosenthal's *Flag Raisings at Iwo Jima* (1945) and Thomas E. Franklin's *Three Firefighters Raising the American Flag At Ground Zero* (2001) in chapter four; a discussion of John Filo's *Kent State Massacre* (1971) in chapter five; Nick Ut's *Accidental Napalm* (1972) in chapter six; Stuart Franklin's *Tiananmen Square* (1989) in chapter seven; and Sam Shere's *Explosion of the Hindenburg* (1936) considered alongside the unknown NASA photographer's *Explosion of the Challenger* (1986) in chapter eight.

The term "icon" is arguably problematic for those traditionally trained in the study of images, yet it does work remarkably well as a loaded rhetorical device when juxtaposed with those whom Hariman and Lucaites (both professors who teach in communication departments) characterize as failing to take popular media images

MA: MIT Press, 2005) and James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

seriously—the "iconoclasts." Here, the authors' claim of iconoclasm is understood within the context of a deeply rooted Western tradition that emphasizes textual literacy and appears disdainful of popular media.[4] In this respect, it is difficult not to admire the broader political project of *No Caption Needed,* which aims to shake up debates about visual culture and engage with photographs as dynamic sites of negotiated ideology (see http://www.nocaptionneeded.com, a blog related to the book and maintained by the authors to generate discussion about the role that photojournalism and public visual media play in democratic societies). Still, the study successfully mitigates its sometimes polemical tone with sound analysis and a clear grasp of the debates surrounding the "visual turn" in the humanities.

Within individual chapters, the chosen photographs are subjected to an exhaustive interpretive method worked out by the authors and carefully outlined in the second chapter. This careful approach locates public media images at the nexus of aesthetic, technological, and material concerns. In other words, the photographs are not just "read" within familiar social classifications such as race, gender, or national identity—categories that rely more heavily on themes of social control and privilege readings underscoring the manipulative or illusionary aspects of the photographic medium. Instead, the authors take into account the technological and communicative means of public media representation in its own right and demonstrate how photographs can slip between powers of social manipulation and public communication. Here, the authors include but also move beyond the familiar critical tool box to engage with five key assumptions about the appeal of public media photographs: aesthetic familiarity, civic performance, semiotic transcriptions, emotional scenarios, and contradiction/crises, all of which make up what is classified as the image's "visual rhetoric" (28–29). To Hariman and Lucaites's credit, they highlight the role that the viewer's virtual embodiment in, and interaction with, visual representation plays in creating the crucial sense of shared experience that is often overlooked by scholars or, in the authors' words, "deformed by an ideology of print" (41). To buttress this point, they strategically draw on Jürgen Habermas's

[4] The authors claim that the deep-rooted nature of iconoclasm in Western history, religion, and culture traces back to Plato, the "father" of the attack on mimesis. They also cite the work of Barbara Stafford on the strong influence of logocentrism in Western philosophy, defined in part as the devaluation of sensory, affective, and kinetic forms of communication (39).

theory of the public sphere, (a spatial conception of publicity where individuals constitute a social body within and against the constraints of public authority), preferring this model since "the positive content of *who* is reading *what* remains tacit" (43). Within Habermas's methodological framework, it is therefore possible to explore how photography addresses the more abstract crisis of individual and collective representation—a crisis that often visually effaces key historical actors and events from the consciousness of fractured nations. The authors also work to unpack (dare I say, perform close "readings") of the photographs in terms of both form and content. In my opinion, this serves as another invaluable contribution of the book to visual culture studies and lends a great deal of credibility to a project focused on the value of visual imagery. This approach also supports Hariman and Lucaites's keen observation that "some accounts of visual culture produce social theory at the expense of what the images are actually doing" (46).

The shortcomings of this ambitious study—and there are a few—include the absence of a sustained discussion on the impact of photo-based modern and conceptual art practices on the production and reception of commercial advertisements and news photographs (case in point: the cover artwork for the book is something of an unacknowledged homage to Andy Warhol), the problematic use of the term "artistic" to describe a wide and divergent range of image-making practices, and the admission by the authors at the outset of the book that their study may already be more historical than they like, due to the impact of digital media on the circulation and reception of photographs (23). However, the book does succeed in raising the stakes around the continued dominance of textual literacy and the limitations of current critical methodologies in the close study of images—the ramifications of which include the examination of public media images as mere spectacle or easily fixed propaganda. In this sense, the strength of the book resides with exposing a clear shortsightedness in the analysis of visual imagery today, making a strong case for the study of landmark photographs in relation to public culture as a focus of concern.

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