

UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL IDENTITY AND VISUAL COMMUNICATION IN THE APPROPRIATION OF ICONIC PHOTOJOURNALISM

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Abstract

Modern society experiences the world predominantly through their eyes and the recognition of vision's unique power has led to the development of many new forms of visual communication. Photojournalism is a relatively 'young' form of visual communication; however, photojournalists appreciate that a single iconic image may convey a common understanding of an entire event. It is the aim of the paper to review how the appropriation of an iconic image may suggest original associations, particularly within a South African context.

*In their book *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*, Hariman and Lucaites (2007) synthesize ideas from visual studies, communication studies, the study of political rhetoric and public culture as well as previous analyses of iconic photojournalism. They use this foundation as a point of departure to build a comprehensive theoretical/interpretive framework for explaining the role of iconic images in American social consciousness, civic identity, and political affiliation. In order to contextualise the reading of the appropriated image this paper reflects on how these authors have reviewed appropriated versions of the iconic photograph *Flag Raisings at Iwo Jima*. Appropriated versions of Sam Nzima's iconic photograph of Hector Pieterse are then reviewed to determine how appropriation of the image reflects on particularly South African society.*

Robert Hariman and John Lucaites (2007:180) state that "the iconic photograph is not concerned with informing the public, but rather that it offers a performance of social relationships that provides a basis for moral comprehension of and response to what is already known". In its appropriated form the iconic image has the ability to transcend the boundaries of the photographic form to be presented for example in advertising, cartooning, as a statue, replayed in film and artistically represented. It therefore becomes a malleable visual communication source. The significance of this paper lies therein that the findings reveal a deeper understanding of the role of the image as a frozen moment with the ability to become a crucial resource for reflecting on society at a particular point in time as well as to link to a common source of identity within the South African perspective.

Key Words: *iconic photojournalism, Hector Pieterse, image appropriation, visual communication*

Introduction

Modern society experiences the world predominantly through their eyes and the recognition of vision's unique power has led to the development of many new forms of visual communication. Photojournalism is a relatively 'young' form of visual communication, the term originally referred to the photographic work undertaken for picture magazines and newspapers during the early nineteen twenties. According to Rick Williams and Julianne Newton (2007:xv), when referring to contemporary photojournalism, "no form of visual communication has a more profound effect on the private minds of individuals or the development of the public mind and culture than the visual imagery of today's media".

Iconic images produced in the tradition of photojournalism demand immediate attention, are culturally significant and represent a common form of identity within a society. A single iconic image has the capacity to convey a common understanding of an entire event. Donald Pease (2007:x) postulates that:

Iconic photographs possess what might be called the power of epic concentration, condensing the tragedy of history into a single arresting image. When iconic photographs freeze history into memory, they make

us feel as if they have done the work of memory for us. They come to us like documents from the other side, last wills and testaments that are drawn up in the service of personal and collective memory.

It is the aim of the paper to review how the appropriation of an iconic image, produced within the tradition of photojournalism, brings original associations to a new context particularly within a South African perspective. In their book titled *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*, Robert Hariman and John Lucaites (2007) synthesize ideas from visual studies, communication studies, the study of political rhetoric and public culture as well as previous analyses of iconic photojournalism. The aforementioned authors use this foundation as a point of departure to build a comprehensive theoretical/interpretive framework for explaining the role of iconic images in American social consciousness, civic identity, and political affiliation. In order to understand the appropriation of an iconic image in terms of societal reflection and cultural identification this paper reviews how Hariman and Lucaites read appropriated versions of the iconic photograph *Flag Raisings at Iwo Jima*. The study then goes on to review whether similar societal reflection and cultural identification can be determined within the South African context by applying similar principles to read appropriated versions of Sam Nzima's iconic photograph of *Hector Pieterson*. These iconic images were selected because of their respective roles in motivating the societies they were produced for towards a common cause as well as their initial use in support of upholding democratic principles.

The iconic photograph is not about informing the public', Hariman and Lucaites (2007) write; 'rather it offers a performance of social relationships that provides a basis for moral comprehension and response to what is already known'. The significance of this paper, therefore, lies therein that it may assist in reflecting on the possibility that South African 'iconic images' reveal a deeper understanding of the role of the image, particularly Sam Nzima's *Hector Pieterson*, as a frozen moment with the ability to become a crucial resource for reflecting on society at a particular point in time as well as to link to a common source of identity within the South African perspective". In its appropriated form the iconic image has the ability to transcend the boundaries of the photographic form to be presented in advertising, cartooning, sculpture, replayed in film and artistically represented. It therefore becomes a malleable visual communication source. The appropriated image feeds directly off the success of the original and therefore to communicate one's message effectively one has to comprehend must know what the potential of that message is. This paper therefore addresses the conference subthemes relevant to design research, design and identity as well as design and culture.

Visual communication and contemporary society

Mitchelle (1994:5) holds the opinion that "... we live in a culture of images, a society of the spectacle, a world of semblances and simulacra". Former American president George W. Bush acknowledged the power of visual communication in his speech to the American people the first evening after the 9/11 disaster: "The pictures of airplanes flying into buildings, fires burning, huge structures collapsing, have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness, and a quiet, unyielding anger" (in Lester, 2006:4).

Barbie Zelizer (2004:162) refers to the "subjunctive voice of images", as a useful way of understanding the role of the image in memory. "Voice" refers to the dimensions of an image that "propel it to link with other events at other times and places" explaining how the image "takes on an already provided meaning upon its initial appearance." In linguistic terms voice complicates and qualifies the word of action in a statement, it shows the "relationship between the subject and word of action in a statement". Within the visual reading voice refers to the "relationship developed between the spectator and the image – involving state of mind, attitude, temporal and sequential positioning – and to those aspects of the image that help the spectator develop that relationship" (Zelizer 2004:162). The 'subjunctive' voice is "concerned with the capacity to couch what is represented in an interpretive scheme of 'what could be'" (Zelizer 2004:163). The subjunctive voice allows the viewer to "remember whole events through condensed images that reduce complex and multidimensional phenomena into memorable scenes" (Zelizer 2004:164).

It is therefore essential to reflect on "modern culture's capacity to freeze, replay, and store visual memories for large numbers of people – facilitated by museums, art galleries, television archives, and other visual databanks". Appropriation of iconic photojournalism has therefore "enhanced our ability to make the past work for present aims" (Zelizer 2004:161).

As society increasingly moves to communicating visually so the need for increased understanding of visual literacy becomes evident. In Williams and Newton's (2007:vi) opinion:

"... navigating contemporary culture with conscious awareness of external perceptual influences requires at least minimal mastery of the basic techniques of image production, distribution and consumption. Most important is appreciation for the profound effects of imagery on individuals and the communities in which they live. Visual and media literacy are as important to the 21st-century mind as verbal and mathematical literacy have been and continue to be".

Flag Raisings at Iwo Jima by Joe Rosenthal



Figure 1: Joe Rosenthal, *Raising The Flag on Mount Suribachi*, photographed on 23 February 1945 for Associated Press (Hariman & Lucaites 2007:110).

The image portrayed in Figure 1 was taken during World War II as America strategically planned to take control of the small island of Iwo Jima in order to block food supplies to Japan and create a base from which to bomb Japan's remaining industrial base. Three divisions of U.S. Marines landed on February 19, 1945; the ensuing battle for the island was intense and both sides suffered major losses. On 23 February, a small patrol of Marines fought their way to the top of Mount Suribachi and, having captured the mountain, raised a small American flag. Tedd Thomey (1996:xv) declares that "This was a historic moment, the first time in WWII that an American flag was raised over Japanese territory." Later that morning a much larger flag from a Navy vessel was raised so troops could see it from the foot of the mountain. This second raising of the flag was the one that Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal captured on film; two days later the image appeared on the front page of Sunday newspapers across the country and continued to be reproduced in many local newspapers and weekly news magazines (Marling & Wetenhall 1991:70). "The very facelessness of the heroes sanctified a common cause" and provided a ray of hope; "an image that smacked of victory, a picture that seemed to herald an end to the dying [and] went straight to the hearts of American readers" (Marling & Wetenhall 1991:73). The island was declared secure on 16 March 1945 and all resistance had ceased by 26 March after more than a month of fighting.

The image was immediately embraced and within a month became the symbol for the Seventh War Loan Drive in America. Hariman and Lucaites (2007:95) give the following account of the role of the image:

Instead of a simple message of patriotic allegiance, the iconic photograph of the Iwo Jima flag raising provides a coordinated visual transcription of three powerful discourses in American

political history: egalitarianism, nationalism and civic republicanism. The successive overlay of these codes in a single image, along with additional dynamics of visual appeal, foster strong emotional identification with the image.

The appropriation of the image takes many varied forms over successive generations reflecting how "... public life is continually redefined in respect to an array of attitudes ... this ongoing negotiation occurs in part because public culture is produced through both imitation and improvisation" (Hariman & Lucaites 2007:95).

Appropriation of Flag Raisings at Iwo Jima

The reception of the image *Flag Raisings at Iwo Jima* by the American public was immediate and resounding and according to Hariman and Lucaites (2007:94) "... the photographic print of the flag raising has been reproduced more than any other photograph ever." In 1955, only ten years after the image was first published Joe Rosenthal (cited in Thomey 1996:2) gave this account on the reproduction of the image:

It has been, it is said, the most widely reproduced photograph of all time. An engraving from it appeared on an issue of three-cent postage stamps. A painting of it was used as a symbol of the Seventh War Loan Drive, and appeared on 3,500,000 postcards, 15,000 outdoor panels and 175,000 car cards. It has been done in oils, water colors, pastels, chalk and matchsticks. A float based on it won a prize in a Rose Bowl parade, and the flag-raising has been re-enacted by children, by gymnasts of the University of Maryland, and as part of an Orange Bowl pageant in Miami. It has been sculptured in ice and in hamburger and, by the Seabees, in sandstone on Iwo Jima ... A Washington, D.C. sculptor devoted nine and a half years to the one hundred-ton bronze statue ... dedicated as a memorial to all Marines.

Three appropriated versions of the image are briefly reviewed in this section in an attempt to reflect on the imitation and intended reading as a reflection on American culture.



Figure 2: Allstate Insurance advertisement, 2002 (Hariman & Lucaites 2007:110).

Hariman and Lucaites (2007:110) make the following reading of the appropriated version of the image as an insurance advertisement:

An Allstate Insurance ad at the time of the 2002 Winter Olympic Games provides a highly inventive appropriation that demonstrates how iconic imagery can function as an ideological relay while also transforming the values that are being celebrated. The flag and flagpole have become a hockey stick (reminiscent of the stunning U.S. victory in ice hockey over the Soviet team during the Cold War), and the marines have been replaced by the bare strong arms of anonymous athletes. As the illusion to past military and Olympic victories portends future success, the caption says 'The Right Hands Make All The Difference'. Hands reaching upward in a continued effort and aspiration were a minor yet distinctive element of the iconic design that is artfully replicated here, while the caption extends the image into the commercial present of the insurance company's well-known slogan 'You're in good hands with Allstate'. As the ad traverses historical time from World War II to the Cold War to the present, the referent for the image shifts from military action to athletic training to financial protection ... national identity is melded with sport, masculinity is highlighted, and nationalism is reduced to the red, white and blue motif of fashion design. The formal allusions and alterations in emphasis all serve a seamless suturing of the discourse of war, sports and commerce – and on behalf of commerce.



Figure 3: Still shot of Homer Simpson, *The Simpsons*, season 4 episode 13 “Selma’s choice”, 1993 (Hariman & Lucaites 2007:122).

Hariman and Lucaites (2007:110) make the following reading of the appropriated version of the image as a molded potato chip in an episode of *The Simpsons* animated cartoon series: Homer Simpson, the paragon of unfettered desire, is bequeathed a collection of potato chips molded in the form of celebrities ... When he comes across a potato chip in the form of the flag being planted on Mount Suribachi, he immediately acknowledges its cultural significance by uttering, ‘Uh-oh!’ Then, after contemplating it for no more than two seconds, he succumbs to temptation, pops it in his mouth and eats it. Instead of the individual sacrificing himself to the community, we have the communal icon being sacrificed to the most banal of individual desires, the impulse to eat junk food. The image, which began as a sacred emblem of the nation’s greatest collective achievement and a model of civic identity, is profaned in potato paste as a symbol of the nation’s love affair with commercial consumption and an unbridled and fragmented individualism. Political history has become popular culture, the selfless, heroic citizen has become the acquisitive and consumptive individual; liberal democracy has been reduced to liberalism.



Figure 4: Advertising campaign for South African newspaper *Die Burger*, 2007 (Drafftcb 2008).

The South African daily newspaper *Die Burger* appropriated the image of the raising of the American flag on Iwo Jima in a media campaign in 2007. The campaign challenges readers to form their own opinion, backed by the insights they have gleaned from *Die Burger’s* quality journalism (Drafftcb 2008). The image addresses the relationship between the United States and Iraq, in particular the drawing up of a new hydrocarbon law by Iraq (assisted by the United States) that would give Western companies a large slice of profits from Iraq’s oil fields in exchange for investing in new oil infrastructure. Headlines such as *Shock and oil: Iraq’s billions and the White House connection*, in *The Independent*, *Rush for ‘easiest oil in the world’*, in *The Sunday Times* and *Whose oil is it anyway?*

reveal that it was a prominent issue in the media at the time. The oil companies who stood to gain from the new law were based in Italy, the United Kingdom as well as the United States. Referents such as the oil pump and oil field setting, military uniform, and the adopted pose of the iconic flag-raising address contentious issues in the relationship between Iraq and the United States. The soldiers are seen as planting the oil pump, the pose indicative of the association of claiming the area for America, although no direct reference is made to America other than the iconic pose adopted by the soldiers, bringing the political and commercial links between the two countries into question. In the appropriated context the original intention of the image, to protect democratic freedom, is contradicted and Americans are instead identified as willing to use military action for financial gain, claiming what is essentially not theirs.

The three examples of appropriation of *Flag Raisings at Iwo Jima* demonstrate how “public identity is an event-driven process of performance and response, a process epitomized by its most prominent visual artifact, the iconic photograph” (Hariman & Lucaites 2007:136). These images vary considerably in their comment on particular aspects of American society – from nationalism for commercial purposes to commenting on popular culture and the acquisitive and consumptive individual and lastly to identifying and commenting on American culture from an international perspective.

Hector Pieteron by Sam Nzima



Figure 5: Sam Nzima, *Hector Pieteron*, photographed on 16 June 1976 for the newspaper publication *The World* (Artnet, 2011).

The 1976 Soweto Uprising that started on 16 June was meant as a protest by students against the forceful introduction of the Afrikaans language as a medium of instruction in Black schools. It took place at a time when liberation movements were banned throughout South Africa and was organized by the students themselves. The protest started off peacefully in Soweto but soon turned chaotic when the police opened fire on protesting but unarmed students. By the third day the unrest had gained momentum and spread not only to the townships around Soweto, but to other parts of the country as well (South African History Online 2011). Sam Nzima is famous for his photograph of Mbuyisa Makhubu carrying Hector Pieteron's body away from the rioting crowd at the student protest on 16 June 1976. Nzima, photographer for *The World* newspaper, gave the following account: "I saw a child fall down. Under a shower of bullets I rushed forward and went for the picture. It had been a peaceful march, the children were told to disperse, they started singing *Nkosi Sikelel'*. The police were ordered to shoot" (in Davie 2006). Fellow schoolboy Mbuyisa Makhubu lifted Hector up and, together with Hector's sister Antoinette, ran towards Nzima's car in which he was taken to a nearby clinic where he was pronounced dead.

According to Hariman and Lucaites (2007:27) photojournalistic icons can be defined as:

Photographic images appearing in print, electronic, or digital media that are widely recognised and remembered, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics.

By interpreting and applying this understanding to Sam Nzima's image *Hector Pieteron* in a previous study titled *What makes Sam Nzima's image of Hector Pieteron iconic?*, it was determined that the photograph: (i) has been used extensively in print and digital media as well as in numerous other forms of artistic expression, (ii) is widely recognized both nationally as well as internationally, (iii) is remembered as an image that championed the anti-apartheid cause in South Africa, (iv) embodies conventions of personal autonomy and human rights, (v) is understood to be a representation of a historically significant event within South Africa, (vi) has the ability to activate strong emotional identification with the struggle against apartheid, (vii) has the ability to shape moral judgment, (viii) reflects a continuing tension within the public memory between historical accountability, and (ix) reflects the continuing trauma of identifying with a particular cause.

The following section reviews possible societal reflection and cultural identification that can be read in the appropriated form of the image.

Appropriation of Hector Pieteron

Sam Nzima's photograph of Hector Pieteron has been used in countless ways, starting off with its publication in the South African newspaper *The World* on 16 June 1976, and then in British newspapers on 17 June 1976 and thereafter on newspaper pages all over the world to tell the story at the time. The image was subsequently printed on T-shirts and posters, not only to honour and celebrate those who died in the uprising, but also to remember them by recalling their image in support of the struggle that continued. In a massive art-installation project, it was cast onto the walls of the Castle of Good Hope in Cape Town, probably the oldest monument to colonialism in South Africa. Using squares of gray and white duct tape, artist Kevin Brand replicated the tonal dots of the newspaper photograph on the outer wall of the Castle for "Fault Lines: Inquiries into Truth and Reconciliation," an exhibition held in Cape Town in July 1996. Organizer Jane Taylor explained that it was the purpose of the exhibition "to explore the relationship between history, memory and representation" (in Pohlandt-McCormick, 2011). In 2002 The Hector Pieteron Museum was opened, situated where Hector Pieteron was shot and killed on 16 June 1976 at the outbreak of the Soweto Uprising. According to Darren Newbury (2005), photography defines the very possibility of this particular memorial to the anti-apartheid struggle.

In July 1985 Mathew Goniwe, a leader in the United Democratic Front (UDF), as well as three other UDF members were found dead and 30 000 people descended on Cradock for the funeral and "for a day Cradock was a liberated zone" (Odendaal 1989:131). Government proclaimed a State of Emergency in 36 districts throughout the country, giving the South African police and Defence Force unrestrained powers and those protesting almost guaranteed prosecution. More than 10 000 people were detained in the first month alone. Figure 6 shows a poster protesting the apartheid Police Act. The foreground of the image shows a typewriter typing the words "Hector Pieteron was the first to die in Soweto on 16 June 1976". Making reference to this politically significant day honours those that lost their lives and promotes the idea that the memory of the occasion should spur on the struggle for democracy. Above the paper looms a rubber stamp with the words "police bill". The background of the image is made up of a seemingly never-ending stream of the trio from the Hector Pieteron image removed from their original context and reproduced countless times reducing in size towards, and completely disappearing on, the horizon. The message reflects that even though Hector Pieteron lost his life, hundreds were prepared to follow his fate, essentially signifying that the movement against Apartheid was unstoppable, any resistance against the movement was futile and ultimately doomed to failure. Hector Pieteron has become a martyr for a particular cause and, used in this appropriated form, the image deliberately calls for conflict. The context of use here was a call to rise up against the law affording police widespread power.

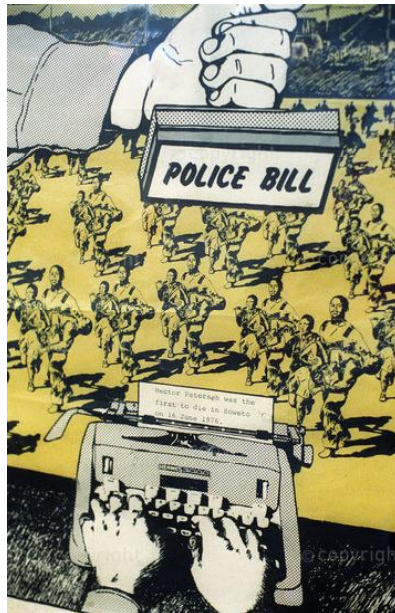


Figure 6: South Africa, June 16, Hector Pieterse, Soweto uprising, Poster protesting apartheid police bill, giving widespread powers, Graeme Williams collection (Africa Media Online, 2011).

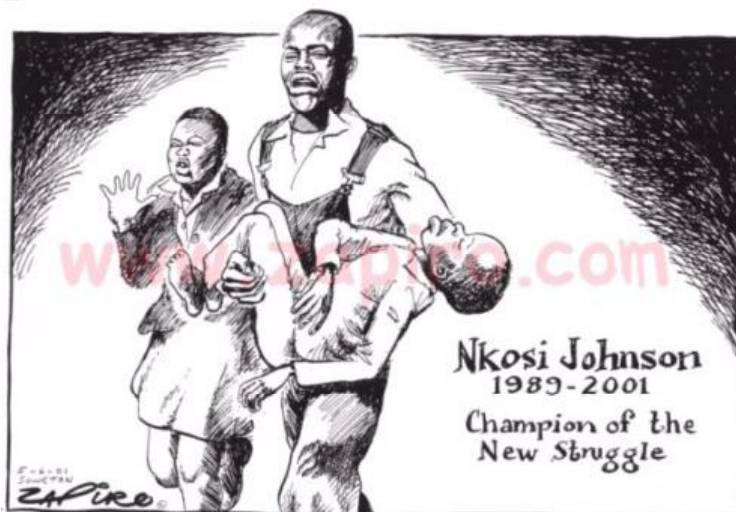


Figure 7: Zapiro, *Obituary Cartoon Nkosi Johnson (1989-2001)* published 5 June 2001 in *Sowetan* newspaper (Zapiro 2010).

Nkosi Johnson born on the 4 February 1989, was a South African child with HIV/AIDS who made a powerful impact on the perceptions of the pandemic and its effects. He died on 1 June 2001 at 12 years of age. Both Nkosi Johnson and Hector Pieterse were thus a mere 12 years old when they died, but their lives nonetheless championed a particular cause. Their deaths at such a tender age have come to represent the courage and strength displayed in varying life-threatening situations by the South African youth.

On 5 June 2001 South African cartoonist Zapiro produced a cartoon of Nkosi Johnson lying in the arms of Mbuyisa Makhubu, taking the place of Hector Pieterse in an appropriated form of Sam Nzima's original photograph. While Hector's sister, Antoinette, still runs alongside the figures the image has been stripped of its original background. Instead the trio of figures is now in a spotlight with the edges of the frame fading into darkness, this visual clue can possibly be read as symbolic of Nkosi Johnson's short life as an aids activist and being a symbol of hope in the fight against this pandemic. The fight against aids, that Nkosi Johnson was an agent for and eventually lost his life to, becomes the

new struggle that Zapiro relates the image to both by appropriating the image of Hector Pieterse as well as using the words “Nkosi Johnson 1989-2001 Champion of the New Struggle.” In this case the context of the image is twofold, the message is to mourn the passing of a young boy but also to rise up and fight the growing death toll of the AIDS pandemic. The appropriation of the Hector Pieterse image allows the implied meaning of struggling against a particular force to become apparent by association of previous significance and appropriation.



Figure 8: Sokwanele, web article illustration, published 15 June 2007 on the website *Sokwanele-Zvakwana* (Sokwanele 2007).

In the appropriated form depicted in Figure 8, the original image of Hector Pieterse has been utilized from a pro-democracy Zimbabwean perspective by Sokwanele-Zvakwana, “a peoples’ movement, embracing supporters of all pro-democratic political parties, civic organizations and institutions” (Sokwanele 2007). The image illustrates an article *Youth Day: Remembering Soweto 1976, and thinking of Zimbabwe’s youth in 2007* and relies directly on the original intension of the Hector Pieterse image as well as previous appropriations situating the image as a voice against oppression. The captions above the two image frames liken the oppression that South Africans struggled against in 1976 to what Zimbabwe was experiencing in 2007. Two frames fill the majority of the image plane: on the left are placed the original Hector Pieterse image, to the right may be seen an identical frame with the words “error: image not found; reason: the Zimbabwe government is murdering news photographers”. In the accompanying article Sokwanele (2007) implores the reader to “look at the picture of Hector, and think about the power it has to tell the truth, and to think of journalists like Edward Chikombe who put their lives at risk trying to capture the truth” when reporting on the oppression in Zimbabwe.

By using the Hector Pieterse image in this way, the importance of photojournalism is emphasized and by commenting on the fate of photojournalists in Zimbabwe the role of the photojournalist is emphasized. Together the image and text become a champion in the cause of the photojournalist and freedom of speech, while at the same time referring to a more universal oppression in Zimbabwe. The success of the image as a vehicle for struggle against the apartheid laws that oppressed Black South Africans has ironically been appropriated to champion the cause of Zimbabweans against the tyranny of their first democratically elected leader Robert Mugabe.

While the three appropriated Hector Pieterse images may not vary as extensively as those of the Iwo Jima appropriations, they do still cover a wide variety of commentary. The first encourages action against oppression spurred on by the sacrifice and example of 16 June 1976, the second encourages unity and action in the struggle against the Aids pandemic while the last appropriation uses the example of Hector Pieterse as a champion against oppression from an international perspective.

Conclusion

Hariman and Lucaites (2007:136) give a simplistic understanding of iconic photojournalism: “What appear to be distinctive images of historical events prove to be markers of a common yet complex way of seeing and acting towards others”. Zelizer’s (2004:164) “subjective voice of images” in visual

communication asserts that the viewer is able to memorise “whole events through condensed images that reduce complex and multidimensional phenomena into memorable scenes“. Considering these two statements and taking into account the appropriations of iconic images discussed in this paper, it can be theorised that visual communication through iconic photojournalism allows culturally specific groups of people a common understanding and memory of an event that they experienced through reading the iconic image. By reflecting on the brief discussion of international appropriation of images it can be proposed that cultures can be internationally identified by the images that they choose to embrace as iconic, as well as the possibility that a certain culture may identify with another culture's iconic images.

This paper therefore concludes that appropriation of iconic photojournalism may be used to affirm the embracing of a common cause, criticize cultural beliefs and practices in both the original and appropriated context of the image, as well as to approve and negotiate diverse forms of identity and affiliation in a democratic society. The Hector Pieterse image, as a documentation of a historical event, provides a continuing tension within the public memory between historical accountability, continuing trauma and identifying with a particular cause. At the same time the image provides contemporary South Africans with a platform to question morals, address inequalities, champion new societal challenges and provide a form of cultural identity within present-day South Africa.

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Short Biography

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