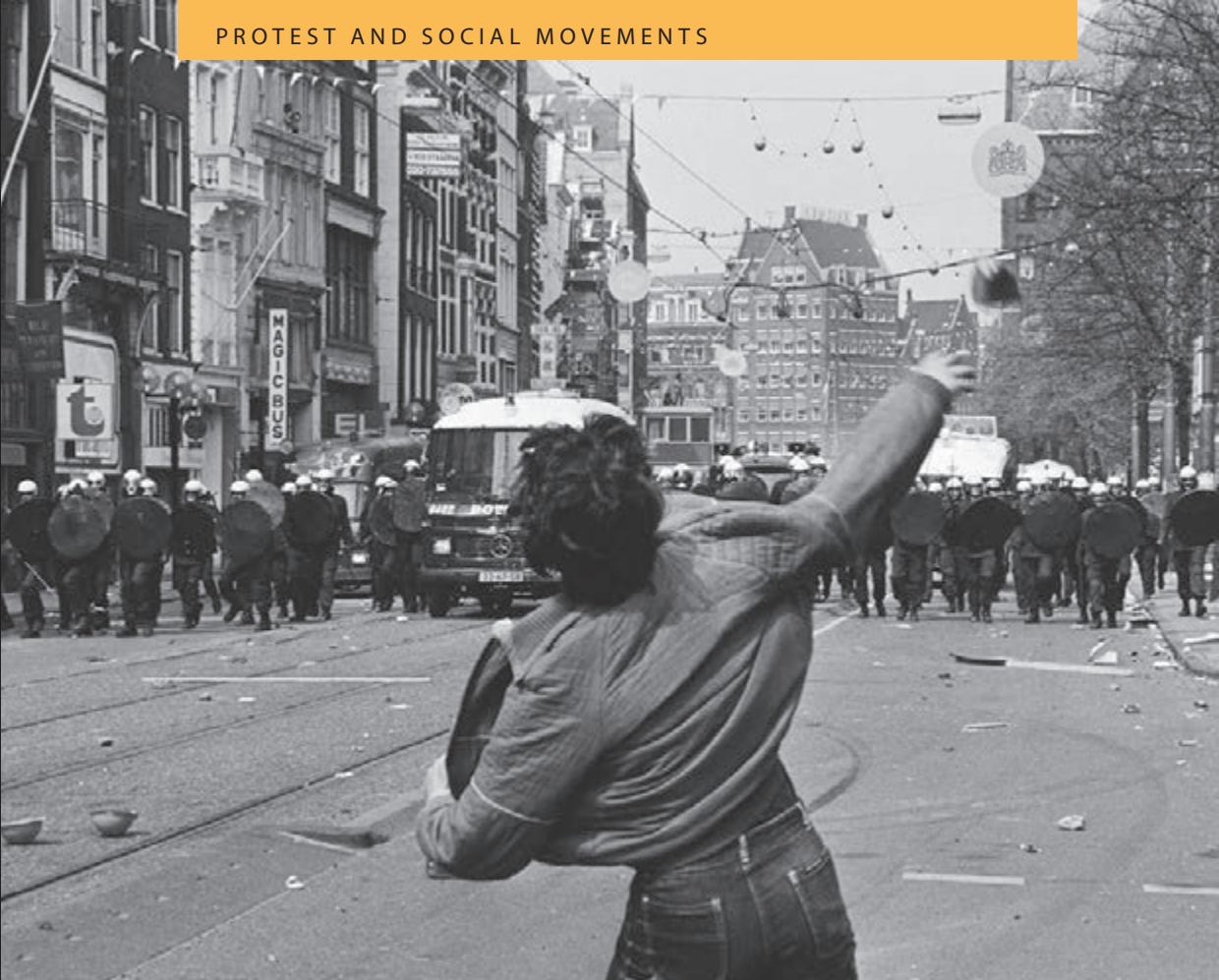


PROTEST AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS



Edited by Ann Rigney and Thomas Smits

The Visual Memory of Protest

Amsterdam
University
Press

The Visual Memory of Protest

Protest and Social Movements

Recent years have seen an explosion of protest movements around the world, and academic theories are racing to catch up with them. This series aims to further our understanding of the origins, dealings, decisions, and outcomes of social movements by fostering dialogue among many traditions of thought, across European nations and across continents. All theoretical perspectives are welcome. Books in the series typically combine theory with empirical research, dealing with various types of mobilisation, from neighborhood groups to revolutions. We especially welcome work that synthesizes or compares different approaches to social movements, such as cultural and structural traditions, micro- and macro-social, economic and ideal, or qualitative and quantitative.

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The Visual Memory of Protest

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This publication was financially supported by the European Research Council (ERC) under grant agreement 788572: *Remembering Activism: The Cultural Memory of Protest in Europe*.

Cover illustration: A man throwing an object at the riot police during the Amsterdam coronation riots. Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 30 April 1980. Photo: Hans van Dijk for Anefo.

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Typesetting: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6372 327 5

E-ISBN 978 90 4855 547 5 (pdf)

DOI 10.5117/ 9789463723275

NUR 906



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Acknowledgements

This publication was financially supported by the European Research Council (ERC) under grant agreement 788572: *Remembering Activism: The Cultural Memory of Protest in Europe*. The editors are very grateful to Marit van de Warenburg for her expert editorial support throughout the making of this collection.

1 Photojournalism, the World Press Photo Awards, and the Visual Memory of Protest

Marco Solaroli

Abstract

This chapter investigates the relationship between photojournalistic prizes, protest movements, and visual memory, focusing on the institutional work of the World Press Photo (WPP) awards in shaping the visual memory of protest over the last two decades. It offers an analysis of the WPP archive, complemented by interviews with photographers and jurors. Through exemplary cases, it highlights (dis)continuities in the content and style of protest imagery. It focuses on persistent visual motifs (e.g. shield-bearing riot police vs. protesters) and innovative authorial practices developed by award-winning photojournalists. The chapter concludes that the tensions between reiteration and innovation in the WPP's performance of value and its institutionalization of memory have repercussions for the shaping of protest imagery and its public visual memory.

Keywords: awards, memory, photography, protest, World Press Photo

Introduction

The World Press Photo (WPP) is an independent, non-profit foundation based in Amsterdam, which has organized one of the largest press photo competitions in the world since 1955. Out of tens of thousands of photos submitted annually, the WPP awards around 50 prizes (first, second, and third prize in various thematic categories, both for single photographs and visual stories)—plus the World Press Photo of the Year, arguably the most relevant prize, given to a single image that is supposed to represent the best

photojournalistic product of the previous year. All winning photographs are included in a yearbook published in different languages and in a world-wide travelling exhibition, which is said to be seen—often within photo festivals—by over three million people in some 45 countries.¹

The mission of the competition has been meaningfully reframed over the last decades. For many years, the purpose was synthesized in the slogan “to develop and promote quality visual journalism,” while more recently the organization presents itself online as a global platform that aims at “connecting the world to the stories that matter,” being founded on the officially stated core values of “accuracy, diversity, and transparency.”² Beyond the competition, it develops master classes for emerging photojournalists, publishes an online magazine and various research reports, and organizes special thematic exhibitions.

During the autumn of 2020, the World Press Photo Foundation in collaboration with UNESCO and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands organized the photo exhibition entitled *People, Power: Documenting Protest Since 1957*. Displayed between September and December in public spaces across Rotterdam, Amsterdam, The Hague, and Tunis, as part of the World Press Freedom Conference 2020—then travelling in the following months to Paris, Valletta, and other cities—the exhibition “presents images that have become global symbols of people power and celebrates the work of professional photographers who are showing us the stories that matter.”³ Showcasing protest images that have won prizes at the prestigious WPP contests over the last decades, the exhibition can be interpreted both as a strategic public valorization of the WPP’s vast archive and the outcome of a process of institutional self-reflexivity on an issue that has recently acquired increased relevance and attention within the professional news media field (as well as in scholarly research): the visual representation and memory of protests. The exhibition thus offered the opportunity to deepen the process of constructing the professional and public visual memory of protest events, by shedding light on the ways in which the work of “professional photographers who are showing us the stories that matter” comes to be carried out in practice, then prized, valued, celebrated and reproduced over a longer period of time, and, in parallel, on the ways in which certain photographs of protest become “global symbols of people power.”

1 <https://www.worldpressphoto.org> (all the links in these chapter footnotes were accessed on 1 July 2021).

2 <https://www.worldpressphoto.org>

3 <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/exhibitions/highlights/2020/people-power>

This chapter investigates the institutional work of the WPP awards in shaping the visual memory of protest. In the first section, it outlines a conceptual framework with which to analyse the WPP organization and its evaluation process. Competitions and awards can provide an occasion to all parties (juries, participants, observers) for a fundamental reflection on value and judgements. While such competitions do not usually reflect the wide diversity existing within the profession, they nevertheless shed light on shifts in taste and priorities, and in the models of excellence that contribute to defining what counts as quality news photography and thus orient professional practice. In particular, this first section outlines the institutional role of the WPP in establishing visual trends and standards that aim to strike a balance between the appreciation of realism and the appreciation of expressiveness—both values traditionally associated with photography—and in contributing to the social construction and discursive justification of the iconic status of specific photographs.

In the second section, the chapter explores the multiple ways in which protest imagery is produced, articulated, valorized, and remembered through the WPP awards. Focusing on a number of exemplary photographs, it highlights several discernible trends and (dis)continuities in the professional practices of photojournalism and in the aesthetic composition of protest imagery. In addition, it reconstructs some effects of the awards in terms of professional standards and styles, focusing on the potential iconic power of award-winning photographs and their role in the tension between reiteration and innovation in the visual representation of protest within the photojournalistic field. As Rigney and Smits write in the introduction to this volume, “in the contested space of appearance between the *déjà vu* and the strikingly new” (above; p. 14), visibility is shaped, inspired, but perhaps also constrained by the memory of earlier events as transmitted through images. On this basis, by focusing on the World Press Photo’s performance of value and its institutionalization of memory, the chapter aims to shed light on the visual production and afterlives of protests by analysing the cultural legitimacy and role of press photo awards in shaping protest imagery and its public memory.

Methodologically, the paper draws on a wider research project based on an archival analysis of the last 20 years (2001–2020) of the World Press Photo awards; 30 in-depth interviews with WPP jurors and winning photojournalists, combined with discourse analysis of juries’ official statements; and ethnographic sessions during award ceremonies and discussion panels at major photo festivals and World Press Photo exhibitions in the United States, France, and Italy.

Performance of Value and Institutionalization of Memory at Press Photo Awards

Through international awards, such as the World Press Photo, photographs can become *valuable* as well as *memorable*, within both the professional photojournalistic field and the wider public visual culture. However, the performance of value and the institutionalization of memory carried out in the awarding process—and the consequent exhibitions and editorial projects—can take a variety of meaningful and impactful forms. This variety reflects the multiplicity of values constitutive of photography as a medium as well as the dynamic relations between photography, journalism, and memory.

Since its inception, photography has generated debates about whether it most represents a mechanized and objective form of reproduction or, alternatively, a subjective, aesthetic interpretation of social and material life. The perceived “double nature” of photography has also shaped discussions within the professional field of photojournalism. As is well known, “objective” reporting became a foundational “professional ideal” and a “strategic ritual” in the genesis and development of professional journalism (Tuchman, 1972). Between the 1930s and 1940s, reporters “reacted” to the burgeoning presence of photographers by eschewing “the photograph’s interpretative function” and defining

the photographer’s mission in hard news as a primarily denotative one ... By upholding one function of photography—denotation—over another—connotation—reporters persuaded photographers to adopt one of the professional goals by which the journalistic community had long defined its own boundaries of practice. (Zelizer, 1995, p. 137)

However, in the following decades, photojournalists increasingly struggled to strike a balance between strategic respect for the ideal of objectivity and the drive to refine their visual aesthetics; they had to “insist on the objectivity of their pictures at the same time that they attempt[ed] to demonstrate their mastery of the craft” (Schwartz, 1992, p. 96). Photojournalists increasingly realized how “photography as a medium is characterized by two powerful and potentially contradictory qualities: its apparent ability to capture a particular moment and its tendency to transcend the moment” (Griffin, 1999, p. 139). This realization was also related to the increasingly perceived public “power” of photography, particularly the social and political impact of certain shots that could stir debates, condense complex events, and last long in public memory as iconic photographs.

In the course of the last decades, digitalization and the loss of salaried jobs with newspapers has dealt a severe blow to traditional photojournalism. In parallel, however, the work of news and documentary photographers has gradually entered art galleries and museums, with top-tier photojournalists increasingly laying claim to being recognized as authors and even as artists (Solaroli, 2016). In this context, a significant role is played by press photo competitions and awards, which work as institutional devices of professional consecration, circulating cultural value and shaping visual memory. Their relevance is evident and debated within the relatively institutionalized professional field of photojournalism, where they can raise fundamental questions of value definition for juries, participants, and other observers. According to a key figure in the global photojournalistic field, who was also Secretary of the World Press Photo contest multiple times:

The World Press Photo doesn't have to *set* the standards, it has to *reflect* the standards ... as a reflection of the media industry, more than a driver ... Nowadays the competition is reflecting a very confused set of standards, because the world of photojournalism is going through a very confused but challenging moment ... It's also amazing how resistant the competition is to force change: there is *a consistency of styles over the years* [emphasis added].⁴

Lacking formally established criteria of evaluation, what appears as a “consistency of styles over the years” in the WPP competition can be traced back to the influence of the history of the competition itself (in terms of previously winning ideas, themes, and styles) in combination with deeply rooted visual-cultural repertoires of iconographic representations. This is consistent with what Bourdieu (1996) claimed about competitions that tend to attract professionals “who bow to the canons of a tested aesthetic (‘prize-winning’ ... successful ... etc.)” and thus, thematically and stylistically, tend to circularly re-produce prize-winning photographs (p. 144). In other words, emerging photojournalists sometimes act more or less consciously as followers rather than as path-breaking innovators. In the tension between imitation and innovation, prizes like the WPP produce winners “by establishing the rules and conditions that define the *type* of winner” (Street, 2005, p. 833). In the process, they also fulfil an agenda-setting function, by drawing public attention to specific topics.

Moreover, as consecrating agencies, awards can highlight specific photographs as being particularly outstanding cultural products, constituting

4 Interview with the author, New York, January 2014.

a crucial vehicle for the performative attribution of an iconic status to specific images. In other words, awards can spark the wider circulation and visibility of the winning images, making them the focus of critical discussion and helping them to stand out in public memory. In this way, icons come to work as “symbolic condensations” that root social meanings in specific material forms (Alexander, Bartmanski, & Giesen, 2012), and their ability to reinforce or disrupt dominant national-political narratives is enhanced (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007; Solaroli, 2015).

On this basis, the next section presents the results of research into the visual trends in protest photographs that were awarded prizes at the WPP in the first two decades of the 21st century. In particular, it focuses on the ambivalent role of the dominant motifs of winning photographs and on their “potential for institutionalization” (Armstrong & Crage, 2006), a major condition facilitating the commemoration of social movements and contributing to a protest’s commemorative success.

The Visual Memory of Protest at the World Press Photo Awards, 2001–2020

The first clear result of the archival analysis of the WPP awards relates to the fluctuating weight of protest as a central theme in the overall number of award-winning photographs over the years. In the two decades under analysis, two major protest phases can be identified, while in other years there were markedly fewer recurrences of the theme. The first phase occurred between 2007 and 2012, with a significant role played by the Arab Spring; the second one covers the period 2018 to 2020 with a highpoint in 2020 when the two most important awards—the WPP Photo of the Year and the WPP Story of the Year—were given to photographs of protests, from Sudan and Algeria, respectively. Moreover, four out of six prizes in the General News category were awarded to protest photographs shot in Sudan, Iraq, Chile, and Hong Kong. In 2020, protest clearly represented the most salient theme in the award-winning photojournalism at the WPP.

In order to understand the role of the award-winning protest photographs in shaping the visual memory of protest movements, a distinction needs to be made for the purpose of analysis between their symbolic content and their expressive style. In what follows, some selected cases from the archive will be analysed in order to explain the forms and effects of the visual trends and the journalistic standards they exemplify. Particular attention will be paid to the photos that were awarded the top prize—the

World Press Photo of the Year—and their potential role as icons in shaping and institutionalizing the visual memory of protest.

Symbolic Content

Archival research has shown that the symbolic content of the award-winning protest imagery was articulated through a number of recurrent visual motifs and themes. This finding is consistent with the few existing scholarly works that have investigated the photojournalistic representations of protests with reference to the period 2007–2011, during the first phase of appreciation for protest photography at the WPP awards in the 21st century (e.g. Becker, 2019; Veneti, 2017; Zarzycka & Kleppe, 2013).

Focusing on protests in Greece, Iran, and Egypt between 2008 and 2011, Becker (2019) compared how they had been represented on a select number of global television channels with how they had been covered in international award-winning press photographs, arguing that “WPP photographs contrast sharply with the TV coverage of the tumultuous protests in the streets and ... portray different protesters from those seen on television news” (p. 132). Moreover, Becker (2019) showed that although

no “icons” in the conventional sense of the term were found, several motifs and themes are identified that cut across this coverage in different ways ... none of the journalistic images ... are repeated across newscasts, channels or media platforms in ways that suggest that they can stand for these specific protests ... [but] when we look beyond the specific image and its iconic potential, several visual themes emerge from this coverage that can stand for contemporary protest. (p. 135)

According to this perspective, such recurrent visual motifs and themes can be conceived as potential or actual icons, moving from picture to picture, and functioning “as visual materials, references, and exemplars for the actions that people engage in during demonstrations” (Faulkner, 2013, pp. 1–2) as well as for photojournalists and media producers.

Deepening the professional specificities of the photojournalistic practices relating to protests in Greece, Veneti (2017) resolved the tension between journalistic objectivity and artistic interpretation by analyzing practices and photographs that in different timeframes focused on the causes, symbols, and vibe or mood (the “general feeling”) of the protest. The photojournalists interviewed for that research confirmed the existence of two temporally consecutive working phases, the first one more descriptive and stylistically

oriented toward the principle of realism, the second one more symbolic. In the second phase, photojournalists

are seeking to take captivating photos moving beyond the use of standard photojournalistic techniques that serve to embody the narrative story of the protest. It is during this phase that most photographers tend to employ hybridized strategies ... as it is basically art photography that allows them to achieve more nuanced and multilevel depictions of the protests. It is the affective qualities that such images possess ... that provide their importance, in the context of protest and demonstrations. (Veneti, 2017, pp. 288–289)

Photojournalists can be interested in producing (also) such symbolic photographs, too, offering an aesthetic and cognitive interpretation of the event, in the expectation that their value can be recognized by professional peers, including the juries of awards. A case in point is the photograph by Yannis Kolesidis (Reuters), which was awarded the second prize in the People in the News (Singles) category in 2009, arguably thanks to the difficulty involved in its making and the richness of its symbolism (Veneti, 2017). The photo shows a man's hand dripping with blood as he stands in front of shield-bearing riot police at a demonstration outside the Greek parliament, which had been triggered when a boy was killed by a police bullet in the city a few days earlier and had then widened to include broader expressions of political grievances in what became Greece's worst rioting in decades.⁵ As Becker (2019) noted: "Through its juxtaposition of an injured civilian, presumably a protester, and the police insignias, the photograph becomes a symbol of political violence" (p. 130).

In line with studies by Becker (2019) and Veneti (2017), my analysis of the protest imagery in the WPP archive revealed the persistence of a major visual motif: the opposition between police and protesters, which, with the help of symbolic elements such as riot shields, morally structures the visual dichotomy between opposing factions. Among recent examples, the first prize for single photographs in the Spot News category was given in 2020 to a photograph taken by Farouk Batiche (Deutsche Presse-Agentur) showing students scuffling with shielded riot police during an anti-government demonstration in Algiers.⁶ In 2021, the second prize for the stories in the Spot News category was given to a set of photographs entitled *Presidential Vacancy*, taken by Ernesto Benavides

5 <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/2009/30520/1/2009-Yannis-Kolesidis-PN2>

6 <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/2020/39660/1/Farouk-Batiche>

(AFP) in November 2020, showing demonstrators in Lima confronting riot police who had formed a blockade with shields to prevent them from reaching the Peruvian Congress building during a period of great political instability when three presidents came to power over the course of little more than a week and massive protests took place throughout the country.⁷ In 2012, the third prize for the stories in the Spot News category was given to a set of photographs entitled *Dawn of a Revolution*, taken by Eduardo Castaldo in Cairo in the first two months of 2011, also showing demonstrators facing shield-bearing riot police at the entrance of Tahir Square.⁸ As Hariman and Lucaites (2016) noted:

Riot police in particular are often clothed in body armor and full-collared, visored helmets, carrying shields and macelike clubs, advancing en masse or on horseback to battle with ragged civilians. These images capture a dark tendency that is spreading across the globe: what might be called a new feudalism. (p. 194)

It is worth highlighting that, in the protest photographs prized at the WPP, such a visually dichotomous motif often comes to be structured in gender terms, where the collective anonymous body of armed, shielded, dark-uniformed, and helmeted male policemen (often with visors and anti-tear gas masks) is placed in a visually highlighted unequal power opposition to the single body and face of one protesting woman. In recent years, such a motif has emerged often in public visual culture, for example within the Black Lives Matter protest movement: a notable example is the photograph of a lone woman in a flowing dress protesting the shooting dead of Alton Sterling and facing police in Baton Rouge in July 2016—a shot that has since gone viral.⁹ Against this background, the analysis of the WPP offers insights into the possible genesis and trajectories of such a motif. The many examples to emerge from the archive include the photograph by Oded Balilty (AP) that was awarded the first prize for single photographs in the People in the News category in 2007: it shows a female Jewish settler resisting Israeli shielded riot police enforcing a Supreme Court order to demolish homes in an outpost of the Amona settlement in the central West Bank.¹⁰

7 <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/2021/41393/1/Ernesto-Benavides>

8 <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo-contest/2012/eduardo-castaldo/2>

9 <https://time.com/4400563/baton-rouge-protests-alton-sterling-woman-arrest-photo-iconic-reuters-jonathan-bachman>; see also the introduction to this volume for further examples.

10 <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/2007/30894/1/2007-Oded-Balilty-PN1>; in an empirical analysis of iconic news photographs and collective memory in Israel, Cohen, Boudana, and Frosh (2018) underlined the apparent contrast between the professional

In 2009, the first prize for single photographs in the General News category was awarded to a photo by Luiz Vasconcelos, showing a woman carrying a child in her arms while resisting police eviction of squatters on private land, protesting against the lack of housing in Manaus, Brazil. In 2019, the third prize for stories in the Long-Term Project category was awarded to a set of 29 photographs entitled *State of Decay*, taken by Alejandro Cegarra in Venezuela between 2013 and 2018, from Chavez's through Maduro's presidency: the story included a photograph taken in 2017 and showing a woman trying to halt National Guard anti-riot officers during protests against the Venezuelan government in Caracas.¹¹

Going back in time, it is relevant to recall that, in 1988, the WPP of the Year was awarded to a photograph taken in South Korea by Anthony Suau, showing a mother clinging to a policeman's shield at a polling station after her son had been arrested with thousands of demonstrators trying to prove that the presidential election had been rigged. Thanks to the visibility acquired through the most important and most influential prize of the competition, this photograph arguably become a professional model for the following cases.¹²

What conclusion can be drawn from the persistence of this visual motif? The consecrating process of the WPP awards increases the symbolic capital and professional prestige of the award-winning photographers in the professional field along with the public visibility and potential iconic power of their photographs. But in so doing, it also tends to institutionally produce visual models and canons to be followed and reproduced by professionals in later years. At the same time, the persistence of the above-described motif can help in shaping and visually dramatizing "a moral configuration where innocence is pitted against culpability, right against might, citizenry against the state, hope against its destruction" (Rigney, 2016, p. 90), a form of visual memory that tends to detach specific protests from their immediate political context and to frame them as generic visual tropes within wider moral codes.

In a similar vein, in a content analysis of the award-winning photographs at the WPP in 2009–2011, Zarzycka and Kleppe (2013) argued that WPP can influence the generic understanding of conflicts, disasters, and protests,

consecration and media visibility of this news photo—which won both a World Press Photo award and a Pulitzer—and the fact that it was among the least recognized by their research respondents.

11 [https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/2019/37697/11/Alejandro-Cegarra-LTP-AAC-\(10\)](https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/2019/37697/11/Alejandro-Cegarra-LTP-AAC-(10))

12 <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/1988/34086/1/1988-Anthony-Suau-WY>



Figure 1.1: Fatima al-Qaws cradles her son Zayed (18), who is suffering from the effects of tear gas after participating in a street demonstration. Sanaa, Yemen, 15 October 2011. Photo: Samuel Aranda for *The New York Times*/Panos Pictures.

based on a restricted number of persistent visual tropes or morally and gender-coded thematic conventions, which gain professional and public recognition through the winning photographs. In particular, they highlighted how in recent years these tropes were present on some occasions in almost 50% of the cases. Among the most widely present visual tropes, the “mourning woman,” the “helpless child,” and the protesting “civilian facing soldiers” stand out—thanks to the cultural status of women and children as “ideal victims” for the representation of global crises and protests (Hoijer, 2004), but also to their associability to culturally hegemonic iconographic repertoires of artistic and religious conventions (Solaroli, 2015).

Some of the WPP award-winning photographs very evidently resonate with such a logic. For example, in 1998, the World Press Photo of the Year was awarded to a photograph that was taken in Algeria and soon renamed “Madonna of Bentalha,” showing a woman crying for the loss of family members after the massacre of villagers by armed guerrillas—and described as reminiscent of the *Laocoon* sculpture (Zarzycka, 2013).¹³ Similarly, in 2012, the WPP of the Year was awarded to a photograph taken in Yemen and showing a veiled woman holding her son suffering from the effects of tear gas after a street protest (Figure 1.1).

13 <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/1998/32504/1/1998-Hocine-WY>

Among the first official comments, a juror declared that the photo spoke for the entire region, standing for all that happened in the Arab Spring. The vice president of Getty Images and president of the jury of the WPP contest at that time, Aidan Sullivan, stated that the photo evoked compassion and poignancy, showing the consequence of an enormous event, and representing the timeless image of maternal love—with its implicit likeness to Christian images of Mary cradling a dead Jesus. Similarly, among the first press reactions, the photo was described by *The New York Times* as a “painterly World Press Photo winner,” that “has the mood of a Renaissance painting”—insofar as it echoed artistic masterpieces such as Michelangelo’s *Pietà* (MacDonald & Furst, 2012).

In a seminal empirical investigation of the photographic field, Bourdieu (1990) already noted that, in part due to the middle-brow artistic status of photography vis-à-vis sculpture and painting, photographers often acted according to a visual logic based on artistic categories and canons from earlier times. Reflecting the central place occupied by the intersecting fields of religion and fine arts in the dominant visual cultural traditions, well-known photographs sometimes draw their power from their references to religious icons—as also shown by the impact of the Abu Ghraib scandal images, particularly the one evoking the figure of the (hooded) Christ (Mitchell, 2011).

The role of tradition casts new light on the praise heaped in 2012 on the winner of the WPP of the Year for being a “timeless” image. While the winning photo was offered as a news document capturing the social and emotional effects of a specific protest event, critical reflection points also to its generic status clearly resonant with Western artistic and religious imagery. Press photo awards have sometimes been criticized for institutionalizing generic symbolic tropes and reinforcing Western dominant iconographic traditions. For example, an historical analysis of the Picture of the Year prizes awarded in the mid-20th century showed how they were oriented towards “the romantic artistic ideals of modernism, emphasizing emotion, symbolic power and eternal values”; in the views of both jurors and photographers, the ideal prized press photo “may require (historical) topicality, but it is also supposed to be above history, society, and even language. It is supposed to speak for itself ... to represent something greater ... to be at once typical of the times and timeless, concrete and abstract, documentary and symbolic,” translating “political and social devils into emotional mood poetry” (Anden-Papadopoulos, 2000, pp. 199–204). In the case of the WPP, critics have complained that the selection mechanisms and exhibitions are designed to “put selected photographs in a specific context for perception and evaluation, foregrounding iconographic conventions

rather than journalistic criteria of impact or accuracy” (Zarzycka & Kleppe, 2013, p. 991). Similarly, according to Saussier (2001), the activities of the WPP can contribute to the diffusion of “international norms of industrial photo-reportage” (p. 329), which, in turn, can reiterate the standardized production of news photographs that, “like Chinese boxes, claim to be a condensation of an event, while they are condensations of ... the iconographic tradition of Western mass media and its planetary hegemony” (p. 309).

Expressive style

In contrast to the persistence of visual motifs and tropes, it is relevant to note that, over the last two decades, a relatively restricted number of increasingly influential international photojournalists have won World Press Photo awards on multiple occasions with photographs that often do not fall within the dominant thematic and stylistic trends. In a productive tension between reiteration and innovation, these WPP winners have adapted to a rapidly shifting scenario by renewing traditional practices of production and representational forms in order to highlight their distinctive professional and authorial status by developing new subjectively articulated aesthetic styles as a strategy of field position-taking (Solaroli, 2016).

The archival analysis of the WPP awards has revealed relevant examples of photojournalists who questioned accepted conventions of practice and technique—such as the frontal and detailed shoot—in favour of a relatively unusual set of styles that comes to define a “dark fuzzy” aesthetics, full of darkness and opaqueness, and characterized also by the choice of tilting the camera, the use of portable flash, and the adoption of a decentred composition, even slightly out of focus. It could be claimed that, rather than exclusively providing the observer with visual news, their photojournalistic styles (e.g. the enigmatic presence of shadows, or the blurred texture of the photographs) aim at generating an emotional space for imaginative speculation.

Such an interpretation emerges also from a number of interviews with WPP jurors. For example, according to a member of the 2004 jury, one of these photojournalists, Paolo Pellegrin, member of the prestigious Magnum Photos agency and, with more than 10 WPP awards to his name, one of the most celebrated, can be defined as “a very *poetic photojournalist* [emphasis added]” that is,

a great reporter, producing meaningful information ... as well as his way of looking at something and interpreting it, adding to what our readers might already know about the story ... This kind of rich chiaroscuro, this kind of very artful ... soulful, a more existential quality ... I like that

kind of risk taking, the picture is black ... so out of focus, so mysterious, it gives the anxiety.¹⁴

According to a member of the 2012 WPP jury, “the ability to render *more abstractedly* places and feelings in Paolo [Pellegrin]’s hands can be very, very effective ... if you talk about a world in turmoil, where he is able to convey an emotion, a feeling ... a sense of anxiety.”¹⁵

In the 2005 WPP contest, Pellegrin won the second prize in the General News category for a story on thousands of Palestinians converging in November 2004 on a compound in Ramallah for the burial of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. The photographs show mourners climbing on high structures in the compound to get a first glimpse of the helicopter that arrived bearing Arafat’s body, crowds swarming on the landing pad, then chanting and firing guns in the air in tribute after the burial. Interesting to note from a compositional and aesthetic viewpoint, the tilted, decentred, dark and fuzzy images showed silhouetted characters rather than specific individual mourners, thus speaking of the general affective mood of the event as much as of the authorial style of the author¹⁶—who has often declared himself to be more interested in “open” photographs that are able to combine hic-et-nunc coverage with a more universal and metaphoric echo of the existential condition of the photographed subjects—e.g. migrants, war victims, or protesters (Solaroli, 2016; 2020).

The significance of this kind of innovation was particularly evident at the turn of the first decade of the 2000s. In 2010, the generic tropes widely present in the previous years of the WPP awards were recognizable in only 5.5% of the photographs (Zarzycka & Kleppe, 2013); at the same time, as the archival analysis showed, at least 10 prizes (almost one fifth of the total, including the prestigious WPP of the Year) were won by photographs that did not call on established conventions or familiar tropes. In particular, the 2010 WPP of the Year was awarded to a photograph taken by Pietro Masturzo in Iran in June 2009 (Figure 1.2). That month, when President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad defeated opposition candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi during disputed presidential elections, allegations of vote-rigging were immediately raised, and violent demonstrations took place throughout the capital. The photograph shows a few women shouting their dissent from a Tehran rooftop at night. At night, supporters of Mousavi climbed onto their rooftops, shouting expressions

14 Interview with the author, New York, January 2014.

15 Interview with the author, New York, January 2014.

16 <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/2005/31267/11/2005-Paolo-Pellegrin-GNS2-KL>



Figure 1.2: People shouting protests against the Iranian regime from a rooftop, after the disputed presidential elections. Tehran, Iran, 24 June 2009. Photo: Pietro Masturzo.

of their discontent. As the streets emptied and went quiet after daytime demonstrations, cries of “Allahu akbar!” and “Death to the dictator!” filled the night air. These protests were an echo of the ones that took place during the 1979 Islamic Revolution. For expressive and technical reasons, which also allowed the faces of the photographed protestors to remain unidentifiable, the photographer chose to adopt a long exposure, which aesthetically resulted in a very blurred image that lacks an immediate reference. Such a photograph quite manifestly breaks with the historically established informal repertoire of photo-journalistic conventions, such as the close-ups and frontal shoots of recognizable physical actions, expressive faces, and detailed contexts. In contrast, the 2010 WPP of the Year—dark and slightly out of focus, with a softly meditative tone and evocatively lyrical character—does not indeed appear easily recognizable and explicitly informational, at first sight.

In the official words of the jury, Masturzo’s photo of the year invites the viewer to discover an important news story in a different way, with a powerful sense of atmosphere, with tension and fear, but also quietness; moreover, the photo’s beauty gives it added value, touching the viewer both visually and emotionally while also offering access to the news story. As one jury member put it: “A lot of the images of the WPP do look the same and it begins to look like a system. We thought that we would open up doors: for me it’s a picture that is ... not frontal, frontal as in a picture of a demonstration” (cited in Zarzycka & Kleppe, 2013, p. 988).



Figure 1.3: Protesters in Tahrir Square, crying, chanting, and screaming after listening to the speech in which President Hosni Mubarak said he would not give up power. Cairo, Egypt, 10 February 2011. Photo: Alex Majoli for *Newsweek*/Magnum Photos.

Within a gradual shift from traditional to more emotional and conceptual photojournalism, and through a strategy of field position-taking and of constructing an authorial status, some of the winning photojournalists over the last two decades have rejected the historical orthodoxy of the field in order to articulate a recognizably distinctive and emotionally orientated poetics with subjective implication, making their work more symbolically and aesthetically powerful (and thus also more likely to win competitions) (Solaroli, 2016).

A major yet very different example of this process can be found in the 2012 edition of the WPP. The first prize in the General News (Singles) category was awarded to a photograph taken during a square protest in Cairo in February 2011 by Alex Majoli (Figure 1.3).

A few expert jurors interviewed for this research described this particular photograph as a paradigmatic example of what a valuable authorial news photograph of protest ideally could be. According to a juror involved in the WPP prizing process in 2012:

This photo by Alex Majoli is extremely theatrical and “constructed.” But what does “constructed” mean? This photographer has chosen an extremely strong point of view, very close, he has illuminated the scene

in front of his eyes, and he has offered a particularly dramatic fragment of the protest, of the Arab revolt. It has been defined as a theatrical photograph. It has been particularly discussed, it has been discussed a lot, a lot, within the World Press Photo, it has been deeply debated. In this debate, I'd like to say that this photograph touches, opens up a scenario, raises questions, obliges you to look. It stands out from the mass of photos produced during the Arab Spring. This photograph raises questions and, at the same time, it touches you affectively, that does not mean that it shocks you, it means that you stop and look ... it is powerful and innovative. It mixes up different languages, such as staged portrait photography and spot news photography. Here the darkness is the result of a choice, a very explicit choice, and not necessarily the result of manipulation. It is the choice of illuminating, somehow dramatizing. Here is a very true, sincere, declaration. He took a position, "I bring some lights with me, and I enter the protest." I was really impressed by the photographer's position, his physical closeness to the protesters, to the anger, he was almost physically touching them. There is both the proximity and the choice of how to tell the story. He is not merely covering, he is covering in the way in which he decided to cover. He chose a viewpoint, he brought the lights, and he constructed the image. Formally, this photograph is very geometric, rigorous ... Physical proximity and authorial choice: that is, giving a fragment of reality, as an eyewitness, and, strongly, as an interpreter.¹⁷

This extract from an interview with a jury member makes clear that the value judgement passed on this award-winning protest photograph conceives it as an innovative response to the underlying tension between realism and expressiveness in photojournalism (in the expert's words: "giving a fragment of reality, as an eyewitness, and, strongly, as an interpreter")—eventually enhancing the photographer's distinctive authorial status. In this case, the photojournalistic practice generates a very dark and indefinite visual background where the emerging, aesthetically dramatized, almost plastic faces of the protesters move beyond their specific identities and individual features to work more as typified characters, thus helping to evoke the general emotional mood of the event.

As the archival analysis reveals, Majoli's photographic work during the Arab Spring arguably inspired other photographers. Its WPP award contributed to consolidating a visual path that has been continued—in a variety of aesthetic styles—by a number of photojournalists covering global crises and protests. Among recent cases, the WPP of the Year was awarded in 2020 to a photograph

17 Interview with the author, Milan, June 2013.

entitled *Straight Voice* and taken in June 2019 by Yasuyoshi Chiba (AFP) in the context of protests in Khartoum, Sudan. Enriched by brief videos made available by the photojournalist, the winning photo shows a young man, emerging from a black background, illuminated by mobile phones, reciting protest poetry while demonstrators chant slogans calling for civilian rule, during a blackout imposed by the authorities searching to defuse the protests.¹⁸

Conclusions

By reconstructing major visual motifs and constitutive tensions between reiteration and innovation in the World Press Photo's performance of value and institutionalization of protest memory, this chapter aimed at raising critical reflections on the relationship between photojournalistic prizes, protest movements, and visual memory. Three main observations—on the *aesthetic forms*, *visual voice*, and *public mnemonic role* of award-winning protest photography—can be offered in the end as particularly relevant and in need of further research.

Firstly, as the examples analysed in this chapter suggest, the search for aesthetic innovation, authorial distinction, and iconic power can, paradoxically, turn out to detract from the urgency of the causes depicted. In other words, the valuable creative practices developed to visually render specific protest events more abstractedly and conceptually—and thus more generic and potentially universal—can run the risk of dismissing the actual and situated dimensions of the personal and the political. In newer forms, this is partly consistent with existing literature on photographic icons and photo awards, showing that

certain types of photograph, especially those that emphasize dramatic aesthetic form but lack specific historical detail, most readily lend themselves to this abstraction process. Such metaphoric pictures are precisely the images that become most widely celebrated and are most likely to receive Pulitzer Prizes or World Press Photo awards and become the models that elite photojournalists strive to emulate (Griffin, 1999, pp. 139–140);

and that the ideal winning photo “may be supposed to reflect the times—but in a timeless way, via eternal emotions and symbols ... the winning pictures tend to sentimentalise and mythologise, to exhibit powerful emotions as such without reference to the identities of those pictured” (Anden-Papadopoulos, 2000, pp. 209–210).

18 <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/2020/39852/1/Yasuyoshi-Chiba-POY>

Secondly, the cases analysed reveal the relevance of both the voice of photography and the photography of voice in protest memory. Zelizer (2004) defined the “voice of the visual” in memory as a heuristic tool to refer to the relationship between the spectator and the image, “to situate visual memory on the boundaries of the familiar, ensuring not only that new images build on a visual tradition in both form and content but on a series of related expectations for how we are willing to connect with the past and where our resistance for doing so can be found ... voice helps introduce the more amorphous aspects of visual depiction that are associated with what might be loosely called an image’s mood, tense, and aspect” (p. 162). On partly similar lines, Mitchell (2002) claimed that “visual culture encourages reflection on ... the ratios between different sensory and semiotic modes ... the tactile, the auditory, the haptic, and the phenomenon of synesthesia” (p. 170). On this basis, it is worth noting that most photographs analysed in this chapter—from Masturzo’s *Teheran Echoes* (2009) to Chiba’s *Straight Voice* (2019), as well as many other photographs of protests that won awards at the WPP over the years¹⁹—actually embed a potential audio sensibility. In other words, they address—or at least raise questions on the implications of—the role of chanting, singing, shouting, and praying during protests. Such implications relate to the emotional dimensions of social movements and protests (e.g. Jasper, 2011), and thus to the performatively affective enactment of collective effervescence and ritualized entrainment during protests, but also, more widely and symbolically, to the political “voice” (Couldry, 2010) of the protesters. At the same time, they suggest meaningful relations between the (lack of) sound and the contingent engagement with—and thus power of—protest photographs. Such a potentially fertile analytical dimension has received only scarce attention (e.g. Zarzycka, 2013). Further research paths might therefore focus on the multiple relationships between different needs, forms, and memories of voice, and on the role of photography in what could be called the process of “visually voicing” protest memory—and, eventually, in the cultural transmission of hope (Rigney, 2018).

Finally, the research on the WPP presented in this chapter showed that the awards play a role in shaping the memory of protest by institutionalizing the professional memory of the winning—symbolically powerful and visually recognizable—photojournalistic models and motifs of the protests. These visual models and motifs can, in turn, influence future practices in

19 Including, among the most recent examples, the photo story entitled “Chile: The Rebellion Against Neoliberalism”, by Italian photojournalist Fabio Bucciarelli, which was awarded the second prize in the General News (Stories) category in the 2020 WPP contest: <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo-contest/2020/fabio-bucciarelli/1>

the production and evaluation of news photographs, but also the visual (social) media practices of protesters themselves, and of other mnemonic actors involved in capturing and transmitting the memory of the events.

On this basis, the official re-branding of the mission of the World Press Photo organization quoted at the beginning of this chapter—from “developing and promoting quality visual journalism” to “connecting the world to the stories that matter”—seems to be conceivable as a variable balance of focus on internal professional dynamics and external public issues, most recently confirmed by the case of the photo exhibition *People, Power: Documenting Protest Since 1957*. In other words, the principles of scarcity and selectivity in visual memory require constant institutional self-reflexivity on the part of the WPP regarding its public role and cultural strategy as a global organization. The award-winning protest photographs analysed in this chapter reveal a process of consecration converging towards an authorial poetics of “expressive realism,” through which more easily intelligible journalistic images can co-exist with more abstract, evocative, and conceptual photographs—building, as a whole, a more heterogeneous and diversified repertoire for visual memory. In this trajectory, the social authority of the professional field of news and documentary photography (and its contract of trust with the spectators) turns out to be grounded in the double role of witnessing and interpreting. If award-winning photojournalism can be conceived as “public art” (Hariman & Lucaites, 2016) potentially enabling forms of civic spectatorship and visual citizenship, then the crux of the relationship between photojournalistic prizes, protest movements, and visual memory should be looked for in the creative developments within the photographic field aimed at striking a balance between, on the one hand, the search for aesthetic innovation, authorial distinction and symbolic recognition and, on the other hand, the foundational professional goal of voice-giving and memory-building in relation to the ongoing protests and global crises that have been defining the first two decades of the 21st century.

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