



Free us from the photo icons  
in our visual database.

# Kill our Icons!

Photo curator Frank van der Stok pleads for a rethinking of the iconic photos that are part of our collective memory. We must dare to reconsider them in par with the fluid image and network culture which marks our age.

**By Frank van der Stok**

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**The Kiss of Death**  
*Credits: Mikhail Gorbachev and Erich Honecker at the celebrations marking the 40th anniversary of the GDR (East Berlin, 7 October 1989). Reporters / Associated Press / Boris Yurchenko*



**The other face of Apartheid**

This snapshot by photojournalist Ken Oosterbroek, made in South Africa during the latter days of the Apartheid regime, does for a moment obliterate the eternal image of Nelson Mandela. But what is less known is that the transitory phase went hand in hand with extreme violations, committed by rival factions. In the picture, we see Oosterbroek's friend and colleague Kevin Carter of the Bang Bang Club (1990-1994); an association of four white photo-reporters active in the townships. During the 1994 elections, Oosterbroek was killed by friendly fire of the UN peacekeeping force. Kevin Carter followed him three months later, committing suicide.

*Credits: A shooting in Soweto, 1993. PictureNET Africa / Ken Oosterbroek*

**14Kb**

This 14Kb cell phone photograph, showing the still uncovered body of Theo van Gogh, shortly after he was assassinated on 2 November 2004, marks a double turning point in the Netherlands; the beginning of user generated content in media culture, as well as the beginning of widespread fear of terror attacks.

*Credits: De Telegraaf*

**Is this for my wife?**

On 21 July 1995 lieutenant-colonel Thomas Karremans, then commander of the Dutch peacekeeping force *Dutchbat* in Srebrenica, was presented a table lamp by the Bosnian-Serbian general Ratko Mladic. Karremans, in thankful appreciation, was thought to have said to Mladic: "Is this for my wife?". It was the day after Mladic had accused him of being a worthless piano player, and almost immediately after the Dutch battalion assisted with separating 8,000 muslim men from their wives. The informal chat is completely out of tune, considering the drama which happened shortly after. Almost none of the men survived the deportation.

*Credits: Film still from video recordings made by Bosnian Serbs.*

**Afterimage**

The 1968 execution of a Vietcong prisoner by Nguyễn Ngọc Loan is considered one of the most iconic photos of all time. Eddie Adams's famous photo is of an incredible timing, too, as revealed by film images, shot by the NBC camera man witnessing the execution. It all happened as quick as lightning, so it might be called a miracle that Adams even managed to turn this moment into a monumental tableau. The executioner's role comes to stand in a different light, if we study the photos at Adams's contact sheet immediately following the fatal shot. The apparent carelessness with which Loan proceeded with the summary execution is dazzling. A photo like this throws an interesting light on the deceptive relativity of the instant exposure.

*Credits: Saigon, 1 February 1968. Reporters / Associated Press / Eddie Adams*

**The first Tank Man**

1968 was an important year for counterculture; Parisian student protests, The Prague Spring, the assassination of human rights activist Martin Luther King, the Vietnam War Protests, and the rise of Flower Power. This photograph shows a historical precedent of the Tank Man. Everyone knows the photo of the student uprising in Beijing in 1989, but hardly anyone knows the one of Bratislava, 1968. Both express a similarly universal self-sacrifice; the readiness to die for the good cause.

*Credits: On 21 August 1968 Russian tanks entered Czechoslovakia, entering Prague as well as Bratislava. The plumber Emil Gallo posted himself before a T-55 tank and shouted: "Shoot!". Picture-alliance / United-archives / Ladislav Bielik*

Thinking of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the photos that were taken in the evening hours of 9 November 1989 immediately come to mind. Masses of excited people climbing the wall. Hands in the air to help each other upwards. Some people are armed with a pickaxe, to crush holes in the wall. Each of these iconic photos is touching, because they form the symbol of a nonviolent revolution, the reunion of a people, and the end of the repressive

GDR. This image, however, does not correspond to the true course of history.

In our perception, a historic event not only has an explanation and a cause, but also a reason and a purpose. This line of reasoning answers completely to the deterministic model; the idea of cause and effect forever being inextricably bound up with each other. This belief in causality is inherent to our thinking, looking and acting.

It fits the ways in which we tend to simplify the multitude of events, before we are able to consume them in the form of succinct headlines. A schematic representation enables us to interpret events. And it subsequently gets, in a neutralized format, a place in the canon of our historical consciousness. But is the image thus created in line with reality?

What marks the true key moment related to the fall of the GDR and its then leader Erich Honecker? In unraveling

this history, one arrives at an alternative reading of the received view.

People could climb the Berlin Wall, because Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had decided to deny the GDR any use of military force to crush the rebellion. No images exist of that historic decision of nonintervention. But there is a substitute: one month prior to the definitive fall of the Wall, Gorbachev kissed Honecker (at the mouth as communist

leaders had a habit of doing) during the large-scale celebrations marking the 40th anniversary of the GDR, perhaps already knowing that Honecker's days were counted. But even when this is not the case, in retrospect the kiss throws a revealing light on the course of this loaded history.

There is nothing wrong with our inclination to logically reduce history to its essence. It all comes down to appraisal and choice, which, in all fairness, is

necessary to canalize all the information - in words, images and sounds. After all, we cannot give each event in history equal thought. Moreover, plenty of opportunities remain available to those who wish to inform themselves in a more nuanced way.

The downside of our classifying impulse is that we have come to believe in a hyperreality, filled with dramatic turning points and spectacular fault lines. Photography adds a little extra; ➤





Coincidence does not exist

Popular historiography is marked by a great deal of projected interpretation. For example, by retrospectively ascribing a relatively minor incident with a decisive meaning for the course of history. Thus, the murder of Franz Ferdinand, Crown Prince of Austria-Hungary, by the Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip would have been the spark that started World War I. Although the killing by Princip and his accomplices seemed to have been carefully planned, several earlier attempts had failed. Only after Princip abandoned his plan, he suddenly came face to face with the Archduke's car that had taken a wrong turn. Without second thought, Princip fired his gun. In more than one respect, the only action photo of his arrest is a messy snapshot avant la lettre. It doesn't seem to have any kind of relation to the monumental importance ascribed to this event. Is it thinkable that World War I would not have happend, had chance played a different tune?

Credits: Wikimedia Commons / Photographer unknown



The ultimate review

In our world changing at warp speed, photographers more than ever understand that by following a subject over a long period of time does yield more insights than snapshots do. Photographer Dorothea Lange immortalized a migrant mother in 1936, the year in which she documented rural poverty in the United States, commissioned by the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Forty years later, journalist/photographer Bill Ganzel traced the woman in Lange's photograph, a year before her passing. This is the portrait of Florence Owens Thompson, labor migrant from Oklahoma. Thompson was quoted in 1978 as saying: "I wish she [Lange] hadn't taken my picture. I can't get a penny out of it. She didn't ask my name. She said she wouldn't sell the pictures. She said she'd send me a copy. She never did." Though the biggest revelation, perhaps, is that Thompson was not a white American, but a Cherokee. Would this powerful portrait of the migrant mother have been equally celebrated if her ancestry was known at the time?

Credits: Florence Thompson with her daughters Norma Rydlweski (foreground), Katherine McIntosh and Ruby Sprague, Modesto, Californië, June 1979. Photo: Bill Ganzel



No escape

Artist Jon Rafman collects surreal images that can be found using Google Street View. What makes these so fascinating, is that nobody ever had any intention with them, though the images appear very meaningful, like this one of a South-African escapee. No deterministic frame of mind can hold its own against the all-seeing Eye.

Credits: 9-eyes, a Google Street View-project by Jon Rafman.  
Image: Google Street View / Jon Rafman. All rights reserved.



A crack in history

A nearly forgotten figure with a curious course of life; Marinus van der Lubbe, the Dutch communist who in 1933 was sentenced to death by the Germans, as the alleged arsonist of the Reichstag in Berlin. When the Nazis used the arson to violently deal with a range of political opponents, it unleashed the irreversible advance of Hitler's party, the NSDAP. Van der Lubbe died of decapitation on 10 January 1934. Does this photo, showing a cracked Van der Lubbe moments before the mock trial, not say a thousand times more than the spectacular view of the burning Reichstag?

Credits: The main suspect of the Reichstag fire, Marinus van der Lubbe, at the start of the process in Leipzig, September 1933. Reporters / Associated Press / Photographer unknown



The other 9/11

There are no images depicting the bomb attack on the World Trade Center in New York City on 26 February 1993, other than a few images showing the havoc. The suspects, muslim terrorists opposing U.S. support of Israel, planned to blow up the North Tower by placing a bomb in its garage, reckoning that it would take the South Tower with it in its downfall. The plan failed, but the havoc was enormous; six people died and nearly a thousand were injured. The woman in the photo seems to have a visionary look at the events to happen eight years later. As if she felt that history would soon repeat itself with an overwhelming blow.

Credits: Getty Images / Ken Murray

the more spectacular the appearance of a newsworthy event becomes, the more photogenic the photographer's momentum will be. It is almost a law of nature: only aesthetic images, with a potential to represent the news in intensified form, will end up in newspapers and websites.

Nothing in these iconic photos reminds us of the fact that they are only visual clots of the comprehensive developments, processes and events

that preceded them. Because of this, the underlying coherence threatens to escape us. Additionally, we are deprived of a view of less photogenic events in world history. These other images bite the dust in the representation of news, hence we more often than not are being presented with the highlights alone.

But our icons - these highlights - start to become worn out. If only because

of their endless circulation. Although it seems hard to dismiss their clenched eloquence, their supposed inviolability has been put under pressure. They seem to become less and less stable in the hyper-changing news culture of today. Even before a newsworthy event is ready to be broadcasted, other breaking news will have overwritten it.

This symptom does have a disrupting effect on our power of judgment.

Perception, place and time become increasingly intermingled. Therefore, news service will - in the worst-case scenario - slip into a quagmire of simultaneous, equalized image-driven information.

The liquidity of the digital image culture causes new images with iconic potential, or of monumental power of expression, to not take root anymore. We rather play a movie clip, in which

a tsunami's destructive power occurs, than look at a hundred photographic still lifes showing its devastating results. Whereas previously news service presented itself with some sort of authority - through official media such as the newspaper, the magazine, radio or television -, nowadays it comes down to a globalized, internet-based, do-it-yourself menu. Herein, all forms of hierarchic cohesion have disappeared. In turn, the broadening

of our horizon paradoxically offers increasing room for a flexible world view.

Considering the above, we must ask ourselves how tenable the static and archaic icons in our collective memory still are. It is about time that we free the visual beacons of the past, once acting as monopolists in giving guidance to the way history could be understood, from their iconic hold on us. ➤





## Hoax

At a meeting of the U.N. security council on 5 February 2003, the United States Secretary of State Colin Powell presented the 'indisputable' evidence for the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. His story formed the legitimate reason for the invasion of Saddam Hussain's country, six weeks later, by a coalition led by the United States. Eleven months later, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace published a crushing report, exposing that high-ranking U.S. officials deliberately fooled the world about the threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and long-range missiles. If we had known earlier about Powell's story to be a hoax, would Hussain still have been deposed?

*Credits: Luc Delahaye (Courtesy: Luc Delahaye & Gallery Nathalie Obadia)*

We only need to wind back to the lesser known moments surrounding the well-known facts (including the accompanying icons), and we will be presented with new and stimulating sightlines. Non-iconic photos can stretch the received view on a subject to that extent, so to form a counterbalance to the one-sided representation with which it was illustrated before.

Let us give priority to those images that, in spite of their apparent triviality

and inferior aesthetics, know how to divert the committed spectator away from the hard news and take him to a meaningful vista on different aspects of the underlying story.

We have a staggering amount of alternative images at our disposal. Even the images of a speculative nature could smoothly function as present-day counterparts to the eroding image canon. It would fit our times if they may

contribute, in retrospect, to a critical reconfiguring of our visual memory. ■

Frank van der Stok (1967) is an independent curator, editor and critic. He is the co-founder of the art program The Past in the Present, that exists of exhibitions, publications, commissions, lectures and debates.