

To See More: A Model for Press Photograph Story Analysis

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Abstract

This article presents and evaluates an interdisciplinary model for press photograph story analysis. The research comprised two stages: (i) familiarizing study participants with the interpretation model and (ii) qualitative content analysis of the participants' interpretations of samples of press photograph stories. The result is that the model could be used in the educational context to develop the skills of visual literacy among students. Although the study opens new directions in visual methodologies, the model requires further development.

Key words: press photograph story, photography analysis, intertextual connotation, visual literacy, World Press Photo

Introduction

The past two decades have experienced increasing interest in studies on visual communication. Although scholars in sociology (e.g., Sztompka, 2005; Bohnsack, 2008), anthropology (e.g., Banks, 2001; Olechnicki, 2003) and ethnography (e.g., Pink, 2001; Chaplin, 2011) emphasize the use of photographs as an additional research material, scant attention has been paid to press photography interpretation. Recent approaches to analysis of journalistic images concentrate on content analysis: quantitative (Bock, Isermann & Knieper, 2011) and rhetorical (Wright, 2011). As press photography plays a central role in communicating news in newspapers and magazines, research focuses on how press photographs affect recipients (Rössler, Bomhoff, Haschke, Kersten & Müller, 2011), rather than moves towards the dynamics of the perception and interpretation of images (Holsanova, 2012). Nevertheless, Barrett (2000) emphasizes the importance of photography analysis in that “all photographs – even simple ones – demand interpretation in order to be fully understood and appreciated. They need to be recognized as pictures about something and for some communicative and expressive purpose” (p. 36).

In accordance with this statement, my aim was to formulate a basic, interdisciplinary model for Press Photograph Story Analysis (hereafter PPSA), which could be used to analyze most press photograph stories, and subsequently to evaluate the model’s validity in a trial assessment. Suggested end users of the PPSA model are teachers of photography classes who would like to develop visual literacy skills among students. Avgerinou and Ericson (1997) suggest that “as teachers we should concentrate and exploit the visual sense through the nurturing and development of visual literacy” (p. 287). Also Brumberger (2007) points out that “the fact that we are surrounded by, and rely on, visual information does not mean that we automatically acquire visual literacy” (p. 397). Therefore, this study introduces the PPSA model and demonstrates how to apply it in the educational context.

In the World Press Photo competition the term *press photograph story* refers to the sequence of images, usually from 8 to 12, by one author, on one topic. As a subgenre in photojournalism, the term *photo story* is applied by Kóbré (2004), whereas as the *picture story* – by Lester (1999). Wolny-Zmorzyński (2007, 2010) uses the term photo reportage as a synonym for a press photograph story. He describes *photo reportage* as at least three photographs, ordered sequentially, of which one indicates the place where the event happened, the second specifies the time, and the third one presents the photographer’s (visual) commentary to the event.

Press photography is a medium in visual communication and, therefore, frames for a model of analysis should be based on a communication model. Jakobson's (1960) model is linear and quite basic, but still sufficient for the purpose of this study, and consists of six elements: sender, message, code, context, contact and receiver. In the context of press photography – a photographer is the sender, the message is an image and the receiver is a person who views or interprets picture. Jakobson's model includes all the necessary elements of communication to be applied to the PPSA model. However, as McQuail (1997) argues, *contact* between sender and receiver does not have to occur at the same time: “unlike the case of face-to-face contact, mediated (and especially mass-mediated) communication always involves a spatial and social distance between the participants” (p. 109). Similarly, the process of reading images may take place long after a particular picture was published. Therefore my PPSA model does not include contact.

Although *context* has a broad variety of meanings, this article uses just one particular comprehension – the page context, i.e. the relation between a photograph and the text (Marsh & White, 2003; Westman & Laine-Hernandez, 2008). The page context is the way in which the photograph is presented to the viewer, either alone or within the text (title/headline, caption, articles) and other images (Zelizer, 2005). For the purpose of the PPSA model the page context is limited to the analysis of the caption as a central element of the page context in photography reception (see for instance studies by Müller, Kappas, & Olk, 2012).

Barthes (1977) claims that the photographic image “is a message without a code” (p. 17) and associates this idea with the statement that “image is not the reality but at least it is its perfect *analogon*” (p. 17). This means that the process of denotation is sufficient to perceive photographs, because “images are thought to provide depictions of the world as ‘it is’, offering a concrete and grounded depiction of the events underlying the news” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 172). However, the process of connotation, which makes a use of code, is indispensable to interpret press photographs. Barthes (1977) calls this division a *photographic paradox* – “the co-existence of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the ‘art’, or the treatment, or the ‘writing’, or the rhetoric, of the photograph)” (p. 19). The code could be defined as “a set of conventionalised ways of making meaning” (Rose, 2012, p. 128). The photographic code, therefore, provides the receiver with intertextual connotations as Barrett (2006) points out in the definition of interpretation: “to interpret is to make meaningful connections between what we see and experience in a photograph and what else we have seen and experienced” (p. 804).

Interpretation of photography is immersed in culture, therefore, factors such as age, sex, cultural competence, familial and social background, and level of education play important roles. These factors mainly concern the receiver, as Durrer (2004) points out: “to read photographs is personal, and inevitably so. Such reading depends on one’s upbringing, culture, interests, preferences as well as dislikes” (para. 1). While asserting the individualistic aspect of each photograph’s interpretation, Durrer does not indicate the need for a method of analysis.

A photograph is not only a message, but also a solitary sign and a collection of signs (objects within the frame of the image). Peirce’s Sign Theory is sufficiently apt for press photograph story analysis. Peirce (as discussed in Mrozowski, 2001, pp. 271-273) divides a sign (*sign relation*) into three connected parts: a sign, an object and an interpretant. A sign is either a single element or a (mass) medium in communication, which in the case of a photograph story, infers that a sign is either a single image or an entire photo story that represents or means something. The object exists either in reality in the image or just in the viewer’s imagination. The interpretant gives a meaning for both the sign and the object. According to Pierce’s Sign Theory, each sign to become *the* sign needs an interpretant, i.e. another sign.

The Press Photograph Story Analysis Model

The PPSA model (see Figure 1) is comprised of three sections: (i) Denotative; (ii) Connotative and (iii) Additional questions. The process of analysis begins with denotative analysis of the key features of the press photograph story (A1), which leads to analysis of the caption (A2) and finally the sociological analysis of the content of images (A3).

The connotative analysis is more complex than the denotative analysis, as viewers of images need interdisciplinary knowledge of cultures, art and contemporary societies to enable them to decode the signs in the image. In order to analyze the sender’s relationship to the story framed in the photographs, first-hand information from the sender is of great value but is rarely available. A possible and viable solution is hermeneutic interpretation, which emphasizes the sender and their intentions (B1). One of the tools of hermeneutic interpretation is empathy, which the Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka (2005) describes as:

Empathize with photographer’s situation, social position and perspective from which he is taking photographs. Unavoidable problem, which we meet at this point, is fact, that each of us is a subjective entity, with own intensions, motivations, knowledge, superstitions, stereotypes, resentments, biographical, experiences. Totally liberate from them, is impossible. (pp. 77-81)

SENDER	MESSAGE & CONTENT/CODE	RECEIVER
DENOTATION		
(A1) Photographer's selection of characters, scenery, black & white/color technique, framing, lighting.	(A2) What kind of information do you receive from the caption? What does it tell you about the topic of this press photo story? ANALOGON (photo/s) → OBJECT ← context influence caption	(A3) Sociological analysis. Description of characters: appearance, sex, age, behavior, activities, political sympathy, nationality/ethnicity.
CONNOTATION		
(B1) Sender's relation to presented story and characters (this information is obtained from the photographer or being a result of hermeneutic interpretation).	(B2) Find and describe the interpretant/s in the photograph/s: visual rhetorical figures, symbols, intertextual connotations to art, contemporary culture, etc. SIGN (photo/s) $\xrightarrow{\text{connotation}}$ OBJECT $\xleftarrow{\text{connotation}}$ INTERPRETANT	(B3) What kind of emotions and feelings are combined with an analyzed photo story; think about single photographs and the whole photo story. Press photo story's punctum.
ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS		
(C) What theme or information does the press photograph story communicate? What can you learn about the world from these photographs? What would be the topic of your research if you intend to use this press photo story as an illustration or source?		

Figure 1. Press Photograph Story Analysis

Empathy relies on sensitivity, which becomes sufficiently stressed if a great many emotionally sensitive images are analyzed, to the point of making the analyst insensitive as Sontag (2008) explains:

To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. ... Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more – and more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize. (p. 20)

Consequently, it might be difficult for PPSA researchers to describe the emotions and feelings inherent to particular images, as well as to the whole photo story (B3).

A photograph story in the denotative part of the model is an analogon (A2), but in the connotative part is a sign that requires an interpretant (B2), such as a visual rhetorical figure, symbol or intertextual connotations to art or contemporary culture. Burgin (1982) argues that “the ‘photographic text’, like any other, is the site of a complex ‘intertextuality’, an overlapping series of previous texts” (p. 144). The term *visual rhetorical figure* is an

analogy for figures of speech in poetry, such as visual metaphor, hyperbole, simile, anaphora, oxymoron, metonymy and personification. Lindekens (as cited in Nöth, 1995) refers to this photographic analogy as “an iconic code whose semiotic structure even justifies its being defined as a language” (p. 462). Eco (1987) classified types of codes of an image, among which he discerned rhetorical codes, which can be divided into visual rhetorical figures, visual rhetorical premises and visual rhetorical arguments. Interpretation of the code of photography (B2) is highly individualized and depends on the viewer’s (receiver) culture, background, knowledge and sensitivity. Kress and Leeuwen (2006) stress this relationship in comparison to language: “Like linguistic structures, visual structures point to particular interpretations of experience and forms of social interaction. ... Meanings belong to culture ... and the way meanings are mapped across different semiotic modes ... is also culturally and historically specific” (p. 2). Photographs, besides containing information, also have symbolical meanings (Zelizer, 2005). As Szarkowski (2007) points out “if photographs could not be read as stories, they could be read as symbols” (p. 8). Therefore, symbols among other intertextual connotations are indeed important in the process of press photography analysis, as they help the viewer to *perceive more* in the picture.

The final stage of the Sender-Receiver section of the model involves the viewer’s choice of punctum, which Barthes (1979/1993) defines in the context of a photograph as:

that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)...In this habitually unary space ... a “detail” attracts me. I feel that its mere presence changes my reading, that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value. This “detail” is the punctum. (p. 27, 42)

Punctum is highly personal. In the context of a press photograph story, punctum might be one significant photograph of the whole photo story, or an element in a particular photograph. The next step for the viewer conducting PPSA is to explain why this photograph (or an element in a particular photograph) is a punctum.

The last part of the model – (C) *additional questions* – was specifically developed for the model’s trial test to enable the participants to reflect on what they have learnt during the analysis. The *additional questions* could also help to provide summary for the analysis, or be formulated according to the specific research topic, such as social exclusion and gender understanding and representation in press photography.

Methodology

In the spring term of 2011, I delivered an English-language course called “Press Photography as a Medium for Intercultural Communication” at the Department of Communication, University of Jyväskylä. The students (n=12) who participated in the validity test of the PPSA model, came from Finland (5), Austria (2), Belgium (1), Hungary (1), the Netherlands (2) and Japan (1). The gender ratio of the group was (7F:5M) and their ages ranged from 20 to 32 years and their fields of study were: speech communication (2), organizational communication (5), intercultural communication (2) and journalism (3). A small sample was chosen because of the aim of this study, i.e. to illustrate the usage of the PPSA model in the educational context, rather than to provide an inclusive evaluation of it. Nevertheless, the sample offers a satisfactory variation in the participants’ cultural and educational backgrounds, age and gender ratio. This variation was important due to the specificity of the PPSA model described in the previous section.

I provided the students with a copy of the PPSA model (Figure 1) and copies of three ‘category award winning’ photo stories at recent World Press Photo contests: Photo Story #1 Photographer: Zizola, F. 2007. Contest category: People in the News (see Figures 2.1-2.4). Photo Story #2 Photographer: Lindqvist, L. 2008. Contest category: General News (see Figures 3.1-3.4). Photo Story #3 Photographer: Herrmann, M. 2009, Contest category: General News (see Figures 4.1-4.4).¹

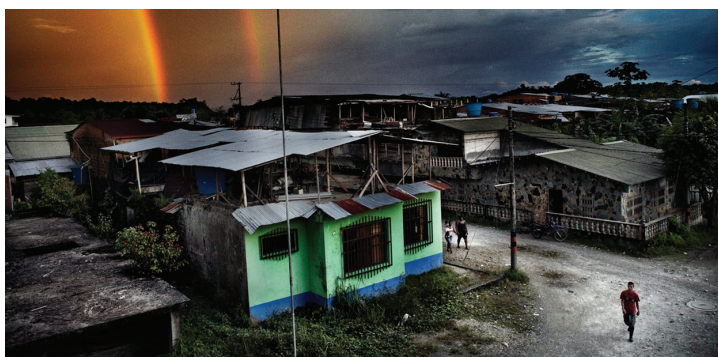


Figure 2.1. Photo Story #1

The village of Istmina, on the San Juan River, is home to many displaced and indigenous peoples. Violence has become endemic in Colombia, a country long ravaged by conflict between national security forces, outlawed armed groups and drug cartels. Women are particularly affected as victims of sexual assault. Marginal groups and aid workers suspected of helping guerillas have also been targeted. Copyright 2007 by Francesco Zizola/NOOR. Reprinted with permission.



Figure 2.2. Photo Story #1

A 13-year-old girl, raped by a neighbor, waits in a hospital for an appointment before having an abortion. Violence has become endemic in Colombia, a country long ravaged by conflict between national security forces, outlawed armed groups and drug cartels. Women are particularly affected as victims of sexual assault. Marginal groups and aid workers suspected of helping guerillas have also been targeted. Copyright 2007 by Francesco Zizola/NOOR. Reprinted with permission.



Figure 2.3. Photo Story #1

An eight-year-old girl undergoes counseling at a Médecins Sans Frontières care center after being raped by her mother's partner. Violence has become endemic in Colombia, a country long ravaged by conflict between national security forces, outlawed armed groups and drug cartels. Women are particularly affected as victims of sexual assault. Marginal groups and aid workers suspected of helping guerillas have also been targeted. Copyright 2007 by Francesco Zizola/NOOR. Reprinted with permission.

¹ Due to the limited amount of space within this article, I could only provide samples of photographs of each press photograph story discussed here. For unabridged versions see the World Press Photo Archive (n.d.). All captions are quoted from the World Press Photo Archive (n.d.).



Figure 2.4. Photo Story #1

Violence has become endemic in Colombia, a country long ravaged by conflict between national security forces, outlawed armed groups and drug cartels. Women are particularly affected as victims of sexual assault. Marginal groups and aid workers suspected of helping guerillas have also been targeted. Copyright 2007 by Francesco Zizola/NOOR. Reprinted with permission.

I asked the students to choose one of the photo stories and to write a 2-3 page analysis based on the PPSA model. During the course I explained all the terms used in the PPSA model, especially the visual rhetorical figure, symbol and punctum, which are important for the deeper connotative analysis. The primary aim of this assignment was to challenge the students' visual sensitivities, and so I selected the photo stories to provide a variety of visual poetics and problems.

I received four essays on each photograph story, which I analyzed by qualitative content analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2000) to evaluate students' visual literacy skills and to observe how they demonstrate visual sensitivity through the usage of intertextual connotations. Data was coding (Patton, 2002) according to the parts of the PPSA model (see Figure 1), and to provide answers on the following questions: (i) Did the students follow the model in the interpretation? Which elements, and which not? (ii) Which parts of the model should be improved for the further development of the model? and (iii) could the PPSA model be used to teach the skills of visual literacy and to develop visual sensitivity?

Results

Evaluation of the Model: Analysis of the Students' Essays

I divided data into thematic sections relating to the PPSA model: (A1)

denotation-sender, (A2) denotation-message and context, (A3) denotation-receiver, (B1) connotation-sender, (B2) connotation-message and code, (B3) connotation-receiver and (C) additional questions.

Denotation–sender. The participants’ understanding of section A1 was well developed, although there was a tendency (discussed for instance by Sekula, 1982) to include connotative analysis in the denotative description of the sender’s influence on the photograph. Despite the PPSA model requesting only the use of either black-and-white or color (i.e. deliberately omitting a description of any colors), the participants not only described but also analyzed color usage:: “the skin color is in a few pictures in contrast with the bright colors, in other pictures you almost cannot separate the skin color from the dark background” (female, 23, Netherlands); “some kind of desperateness is expressed by the use of colors” (male, 23, Belgium); “the impression of photo story is quite dark and cloudy with just few colors” (male, 32, Finland).

Parallel to descriptions of color usage were analyses of light usage, but interestingly, less frequently for either of the color photographs such as referring to #1: “used dark colors, the light focused only on the main characters” (female, 23, Hungary). By contrast, light usage in the black-and-white of #3 attracted a lot of comments: “uses only prevailing light, typical bright and harsh Mediterranean sunlight, which creates steep contrast and hazy views of the background” (male, 26, Finland); “the use of light is magnificent and it captures the feeling of old past life and the idea of the new upcoming era which seems to be far away” (female, 26, Finland); “the usage of light is very special; with the dark edges” (female, 29, Finland).

Participants comprehension of the types of framing was not well developed as the paucity of their descriptions concentrating on the contrast of distance and close-up and a central point of focus indicated: “there are different views – there are close-ups and there are long shots” (male, 24, Austria); “most of the time there are people in the middle of the picture; other times there are things that belong to the people in the middle” (male, 20, Netherlands).

Despite content analysis of this thematic section indicating a tendency to integrate denotative with connotative analysis, the PPSA model did at this stage seem to be useful for interpretation, enable students to develop their visual literacy skills throughout the basic observation of colors, light and framing.

Denotation–message and context. ‘Context’, (A2) in the PPSA model was confined to the interpretation of the caption’s relationship to the photo story theme. The results indicated a high degree of confusion or misunderstanding about the definition of the term, for example: “some pictures caption is close up and personal and some of them feel like they are almost theatrical, setting and people in the pictures seem to tell a story” (female, 29, Finland). There was also the element of confusing the caption with the contest category – “the caption of the photo story is People in the News; it can mean anything, because every day there are people in the news; so in this way the caption is kind of mysterious” (female, 23, Netherlands).

Interestingly, several interpretations suggested that analysis of the caption was either useless or unhelpful, for example: “according to the caption the topic of the press photo story is violence and especially sexual crimes; before I read the caption I immediately had something like this in my mind” (female, 28, Finland); “the captions informs us that the Israeli attack on the Hamas militants ... especially hit the normal people ... the captions also tell what exactly happen, but sometimes this is not that useful because you can already see it” (male, 20, Netherlands).

By contrast there were also a few interpretations, which suggested that analysis of the caption was useful, although the participants did not conduct a correct caption analysis: “the information I receive from the caption is quite useful; it tells me where the conflict/war is situated ... the origin of the conflict is explained as well as the group involved ... also the period of time is mentioned” (male, 23, Belgium).

Denotation–receiver. The most striking observation to emerge from the analysis of section A3 was that students used metaphorical representation to describe characters in the photographs, for instance: “you could say that these people belong to the more poor of this planet, with all kinds of problems around them” (female, 23, Netherlands); “there are not these chaotic photographs, but ‘quiet’ ones in which you can see that the people are thinking” (male, 20, Netherlands); “one girl sitting on a hospital stool, looking straight to the camera; it feels like she is the one who gives a face to the sexual abuse and the rapes” (female, 28, Finland).

Some interpretations contained a description of characters based on visual opposites, for example: “we can clearly see the difference in pictures of warriors and pictures of innocent civilians; these warriors look combative, convinced that they are doing the right thing whereas the civilians look desperate, anxious and afraid of what might happen” (male, 23, Belgium);

“whereas the men look mostly severe and grim the women look very desperate” (male, 24, Austria). This finding may indicate that the PPSA enables students to develop their visual literacy skills. The essays also included some basic sociological descriptions of characters: “the people in the pictures have a dark brown skin, are male or female and are children or adults” (female, 23, Netherlands); “you see around 15 persons praying ... on top of the destroyed mosque ... it shows that they are very religious” (male, 20, Netherlands).

Interestingly, the majority of interpretations of Photo Story #2 contained similar observations about the ages of the characters: “characters in the photos are variable, you just don’t see children” (female, 29, Finland); “all people in photos are adults or older people and there are no children at all” (male, 32, Finland); “in general you can say that there are no young people at all (male, 24, Austria).

Data analysis proved that this part of the model is sufficiently developed. The majority of interpretations consisted of sensitive descriptions of characters using both visual metaphors and visual opposites. However, interpretations of this kind come close to combining denotation and connotation processes.



Figure 3.1. Photo Story #2

Georgian soldiers travel near the city of Gori, close to the South Ossetian boundary. Following the escalation in fighting between Georgian forces and separatist militia in the breakaway region of South Ossetia in August, Russian troops intervened and for a while occupied parts of Georgia outside of South Ossetia. They later pulled back under a ceasefire brokered by President Nicolas Sarkozy of France. Copyright 2008 by Lars Lindqvist. Reprinted with permission.



Figure 3.2. Photo Story #2

Following the escalation in fighting between Georgian forces and separatist militia in the breakaway region of South Ossetia in August, Russian troops intervened and for a while occupied parts of Georgia outside of South Ossetia. They later pulled back under a ceasefire brokered by President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, which held the rotating European Union presidency at the time. Copyright 2008 by Lars Lindqvist. Reprinted with permission.



Figure 3.3. Photo Story #2

Following the escalation in fighting between Georgian forces and separatist militia in the breakaway region of South Ossetia in August, Russian troops intervened and for a while occupied parts of Georgia outside of South Ossetia. They later pulled back under a ceasefire brokered by President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, which held the rotating European Union presidency at the time. Copyright 2008 by Lars Lindqvist. Reprinted with permission.

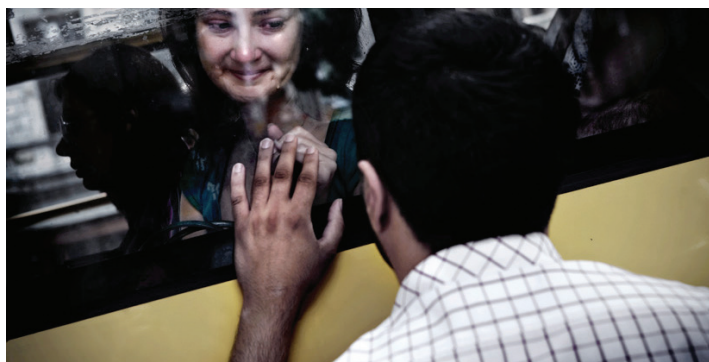


Figure 3.4. Photo Story #2

Following the escalation in fighting between Georgian forces and separatist militia in the breakaway region of South Ossetia in August, Russian troops intervened and for a while occupied parts of Georgia outside of South Ossetia. They later pulled back under a ceasefire brokered by President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, which held the rotating European Union presidency at the time. Copyright 2008 by Lars Lindqvist. Reprinted with permission.

Connotation–sender. The sender’s relations to the photograph story (B1) did not seem to pose any problems to the participants, some of whom included in their interpretations information about the photographer from external sources, such as the Internet. This aspect of external information influenced later stages of the interpretation process, as it opened a wider contextual perspective on the particular photo story, for instance: “when you know he has studied anthropology, then it becomes much more clear why he photographs these people in these situations” (female, 23, Netherlands); “he says that he wants to make people feel something when they look at his pictures” (female, 20, Austria).

Some interpretations were quite simple, with a short explanation of particular statements about the photographer: “the photographer’s relation to the presented characters has obviously been very close; otherwise he wouldn’t be able to take a picture of girls and women who have been raped” (female, 28, Finland); “the photographer’s relation to the presented story is very close, because it was his first war ... and you can also feel it when he speaks about the pictures” (male, 24, Austria). Or even without this explanation, for example: “the photographer has deliberately taken an observers role in the story” (male, 26, Finland); “he is very sensible and because of that people let him in” (female, 20, Austria).

On the other hand, the participants also tried to empathize with the

photographer. They used empathy specific words (i.e. related to feelings and emotions), for instance: “it seems, that the photographer enters into the character’s feelings ... we can imagine that in the next moment he puts his hand on the victim’s shoulder” (female, 23, Hungary); “it feels like the photographer shares emotions with the characters and wants to let the audience experience the very same emotions” (male, 23, Belgium). These two examples indicate that the participants tried to use a basic form of hermeneutic interpretation.



Figure 4.1. Photo Story #3 Gaza - Landscape of Destruction

A boy walks through the entrance of the house where his family once lived in the Hai al-Salam neighborhood of East Jabaliya, Gaza on 25 January. The Israeli military campaign against Hamas militants in Gaza came to an end on 18 January, after 22 days. Israel completed its withdrawal by 21 January, but did not lift its siege on the Gaza Strip. Intense bombardment had left thousands of homes destroyed and tens of thousands of people displaced. Copyright 2009 by Meiko Herrmann. Reprinted with permission.



Figure 4.2. Photo Story #3 Gaza - Landscape of Destruction

A multi-level apartment building destroyed during the Israeli offensive on Gaza. The Israeli military campaign against Hamas militants in Gaza came to an end on 18 January, after 22 days. Israel completed its withdrawal by 21 January, but did not lift its siege on the Gaza Strip. Intense bombardment had left thousands of homes destroyed and tens of thousands of people displaced. Copyright 2009 by Meiko Herrmann. Reprinted with permission. Reprinted with permission.



Figure 4.3. Photo Story #3 Gaza - Landscape of Destruction

The Hai al-Salam neighborhood, just 3 km from the border, was almost completely destroyed during the Israel's attack on Gaza in January. The Israeli military campaign against Hamas militants in Gaza came to an end on 18 January, after 22 days. Israel completed its withdrawal by 21 January, but did not lift its siege on the Gaza Strip. Intense bombardment had left thousands of homes destroyed and tens of thousands of people displaced. Copyright 2009 by Meiko Herrmann. Reprinted with permission.



Figure 4.4. Photo Story #3 Gaza - Landscape of Destruction

Cows killed by heavy bombing lie strewn on the ground in East Jabaliya. The Israeli military campaign against Hamas militants in Gaza came to an end on 18 January, after 22 days. Israel completed its withdrawal by 21 January, but did not lift its siege on the Gaza Strip. Intense bombardment had left thousands of homes destroyed and tens of thousands of people displaced. Copyright 2009 by Meiko Herrmann. Reprinted with permission.

Connotation–message and code. While the majority of students revealed a basic understanding of the concepts of visual rhetorical figures, symbols and intertextual connotations (B2), there were few interpretations that correctly named all these elements. The exceptions were the uses of visual rhetorical figures, such as simile: “the little girl in front of a lighted wall seems like praying in the church, in front of the altar” (female, 23, Hungary) (Figure 2.2); hyperbole: “the colors can be seen as a hyperbole ... the colors are so beautiful and bright that at first sight you may think it is a beautiful world because of the colors” (female, 23,

Netherlands), “the empty and surreal – almost moonlike – landscapes ... emphasize the absurdity of war and destruction” (male, 26, Finland) (Figure 4.3); a personification: “the high wall ... anticipate massive barrier and hurdle that she [girl] is facing and surmounting in her future life” (female, 20, Japan) (Figure 2.2), an anaphora (repetitio): “she [a girl] is wearing white clothes as a lot of others in this photo story: the girl in bikini, little girls, waiting girl and women with candle” (female, 23, Hungary) (Figure 2.2-2.4), a metonymy: “picture ... shows a hand covered with blood touching a car; this refers to death, wounded people and the unnecessary spill of blood” (male, 23, Belgium) (Figure 3.3), or visual metaphors (sometimes mistaken with a symbol), but frequently appeared: “... black cloud that connotes pungent dark force and face of city” (female, 20, Japan) (Figure 2.1), “a heard of dead cows visualize the lost without showing dead people” (female, 26, Finland) (Figure 4.4), “picture of the woman ... she is alone and holding on the glass, something that you can see through, still you can’t see her face; maybe this is a symbol for the situation of which everybody knows, but can’t do anything about” (female, 29, Finland) (Figure 3.2), “as he [a boy] sits – with arms between legs – seems like provocative, that’s why he seems like a scapegoat of every guilty man; he has common outlook, it means that the aggressor can be anybody” (female, 23, Hungary).

Although the interpretation of symbols in photographs depends on their identification, the participants did succeed in stressing common symbolic elements, for example: rainbow, white clothes and urban ruins. This trend suggests that press photography is associated with symbolism. The interpretation of symbols, however, depends on the receiver’s culture and background. “It is commonly believed ... that you can find a treasure at the end of the rainbow ... it makes me feel like the treasure, better life and the hope is somewhere else, far away from the village” (female, 28, Finland) (Figure 2.1); “the last picture shows us hope; it feels like two women are lighting the candle in hope of a better tomorrow, wishing things would get better” (female, 28, Finland) (Figure 2.4); “in the background there is a gun; symbol of authority and some would say manhood, the gun pointing up like a phallus” (female, 29, Finland) (Figure 3.1); “women wear white ... white mostly stands for purity ... most of them [women] are being sexually abused; so there is no purity anymore with these girls and women” (female, 23, Netherlands) (Figure 2.2-2.4); “a man is walking through a door which is everything that is left from his home; the step through a door can be seen as a step to new life” (female, 26, Finland) (Figure 4.1); “On all photographs you see damaged buildings. But every time the foundation of the building is still there ... You can see it as a symbolic message: you can damage everything

you want, but you can never destroy the foundation. And with people the foundation is their beliefs, religions, way of life; just who they are” (male, 20, Netherlands) (e.g., Figure 4.2).

The participants also described some intertextual connotations, for example: “some kind of strong connotations to Italian mafia movies came to my mind ... the dark scenery, blood and gun in the first photo are powerful symbols used in many movies” (male, 32, Finland) (Figure 3.1). Two interpretations included own *cultural perspective* – an interesting approach to the intertextual interpretation, as it gives a different and unique perspective, based on national (cultural) proverbs and sayings: “In my country, we often say ‘the back tells the story a lot’ ... thus, Zizola’s two pictures of young girls are impressing for me because then we can afford to think about what they are shouldering in their lives” (female, 20, Japan) (Figure 2.2 & 2.3), “The photographer also manages to make the pictures a kind of ‘quite’ ... in Dutch we have a saying ‘Silence after the storm’ ... Now they [people] don’t have to be scared all the time and think about how to survive; they finally have the time to realize what actually happened and how it will change their lives” (male, 20, Netherlands) (Figure 4.1-4.4).

The topic of sexual abuse in Photo Story #1 acquired the most advanced interpretations, all composed by female participants. The level of development of analysis of a photograph depends on the picture’s theme and the scale of sensitivity of the viewer. Nevertheless, sensitivity should develop *in*, and be developed *by*, the process of interpretation.

Connotation–receiver. Data analysis of section B3 indicated that the participants had difficulties with identification of their feelings related to the photographs and composed only generalized statements, for example: “there are many different emotions and feelings” (male, 32, Finland); “picture shows negative feelings: sad, disappointed, bereft of hope” (female, 23, Hungary); “it makes me feel sick ... and made me feel horrible” (female, 28, Finland); “photo story is of course very sad” (female, 20, Austria). One of the reasons for this trend is that the interpretations were written in English, which was not the mother tongue of any of the participants and they were unable to fully express their emotions.

Further analysis showed that, as the students had asked rhetorical questions in the context of the punctum, for example: “Punctum for me is the little girl ... After the bad memories what could she do in next year? Can she ever find the way out of this village? Can she ever forget, what happened? Can she ever smile?” (female, 23, Hungary) (Figure 2.3), they had understood the *punctum* concept. Despite the highly personal aspect of the *punctum*,

interpretations of Photo Stories #2 and #3 used the same photographs as the punctum of each photo story; image of man saying farewell to a weeping woman on a bus (Photo Story #2): “picture ... with the man pushing his hand against the window of the bus, saying goodbye to his crying woman ... my imagination starts to fly: I ask myself: ... Who is he? What is she thinking? What does she think about the future?” (male, 23, Belgium) (Figure 3.4); image of boy walking through the entrance of a house (Photo Story #3): “the boy in the opening shot ... he still has his life ahead of him; what kind of life, is another question ... this boy, then, might be the punctum of the photo story” (male, 26, Finland) (Figure 4.1).

Additional questions. Press photography interpretation teaches not only visual sensitivity, but also general sensitivity towards other people and their problems. This attribute of press photography is visible in the participants’ discursive evaluation of the situations captured by the photographers: “We should realize that the world has so many faces, and a lot of them are very negative. And problems are always relative, because when you see the problems these people have, you might think twice about your own so called ‘problems’” (female, 23, Netherlands); “War has so much more consequences ... But for what case? That is often a question difficult to answer” (male, 23, Belgium).

The participants also asked rhetorical questions, for instance: “why this destruction happened and did all the people in the village share the same ideology and were they willing to sacrifice all they had?” (female, 26, Finland) and came to conclusions such as: “it tells you that in wars you often have to say goodbye” (male, 24, Austria).

Discussion

The study was undertaken in order to evaluate the basic model for press photograph story interpretation and to present the usage of this model in the educational context. Data analysis indicated that two parts of the model requires further development: Denotation – Message and Context (A2) and Connotation – Receiver (B3). Instruction in A2 should contain more adequate and detailed questions, but in order to create a satisfactory model for context analysis – separate research on the context is required.

In the Denotative part of the model, in A1 and A3, the participants combined denotation with connotation. This finding supports the idea for a connotative model for press photography interpretation, with just some essential, introductory denotative elements. In order to implement this approach, a new model should be developed that would contain more

questions, which would lead to deeper connotative analysis as well as to rhetorical content analysis (Wright, 2011).

One unanticipated finding is that students had similar observations and conclusions about the characters, symbols and punctum. This result suggests that press photography interpretation is not always an individualistic and unique process, even on the level of connotation. Images in press involve a universal visual language. They are “associated with symbolism, universality and generic meaning, connotation is what allows images to contextualize concrete details and make them understandable” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 172). Furthermore, Sturken and Cartwright (2005) conclude “this combination of subjective and the objective is a central tension in camera-generated images” (p. 16).

Conclusions

As mentioned in the Introduction, the methodology of press photography analysis has attracted little research. Usage of Bock’s et al. (2011) quantitative visual content analysis enables researchers to “answer the questions of who or what is represented by the media and count the number of appearances of actors or themes” (p. 266), but does not enable them to carry out connotative analysis. Despite Rössler et al. (2011, p. 420) proposing a model for the selection and effect of press photos, which concentrates on the process of reception, a comprehensive methodology model has yet to be created. The importance of the results using the basic model for press photograph story interpretation thus lies both in its introductory character and potential contribution to the field of visual studies.

The present study should be considered as an initial inquiry into the methodology of press photography analysis in the educational context. The results of the trial assessment might support the hypothesis that the PPSA model could be used to teach the skills of visual literacy and to develop visual sensitivity among students. However, to unambiguously confirm this assertion, comparative research with a similar group of students completing the same task without the PPSA model is required. Moreover, “equally problematic is obtaining proof of learning: irrefutable evidence that what has happened in a classroom is the result of a particular pedagogical strategy that can be isolated from other factors” (Brumberger, 2007, p. 398). Nevertheless, the PPSA model could be used as an interesting tool for photography interpretation both in the field of visual literacy and press photography methodology.

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