

WAR AS IMAGE: VISUAL RHETORIC AND IMAGE ETHICS IN PHOTOJOURNALISTIC COVERAGE OF CONFLICTS

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ABSTRACT

Journalistic coverage of armed conflicts is one of the most sensitive and controversial areas of public communication, especially because images play a central role in perception, mediation, persuasion, and the construction of reality. In a media ecosystem characterised by accelerating information, the rise of generative artificial intelligence, visual competition, and the proliferation of disinformation, the journalistic image ceases to be a mere factual record of reality. It becomes an event in its own right, with profound ethical, political, and social implications. Building on this premise, this article examines how journalistic ethics and social responsibility are challenged by the rhetorical strategies of images in armed-conflict coverage, and how this rhetoric affects the intelligibility of events and the formation of public opinion. The study's guiding research question is: how can the media reconcile the persuasive power of journalistic images with ethical principles of truth, social responsibility, and respect for human dignity in conflict coverage? The aims of the article are to: (a) problematise the journalistic image of war as a media event and rhetorical device; (b) critically analyse the ethical implications of the production, circulation and reception/perception of these images; and (c) argue that visual literacy is a central dimension of the media's social responsibility in combating disinformation and the symbolic violence of images. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, theoretical-conceptual, and critical approach, grounded in an interdisciplinary literature review across communication ethics, visual rhetoric, media studies, and visual cultures. Within this framework, it proposes a philosophical and semiotic reading of journalistic images of conflicts, understood not merely as representations, but as discursive practices with concrete moral and social effects.

KEYWORDS

communication ethics, war photojournalism, visual literacy, media social responsibility, image rhetoric

A GUERRA COMO IMAGEM: RETÓRICA VISUAL E ÉTICA DA IMAGEM NA COBERTURA FOTOJORNALÍSTICA DE CONFLITOS

RESUMO

A cobertura jornalística de conflitos armados constitui hoje um dos terrenos mais sensíveis e controversos da comunicação pública, em particular devido à centralidade assumida pela imagem enquanto dispositivo de perceção, mediação, persuasão e construção do real. Num ecossistema mediático marcado pela aceleração informativa e o desenvolvimento da inteligência artificial generativa, pela concorrência visual e pela proliferação da desinformação, a imagem jornalística deixa de ser mero registo factual do real para se afirmar como acontecimento em si mesma, com implicações éticas, políticas e sociais profundas. Partindo desta premissa, este artigo interroga de que modo a ética e a responsabilidade social do jornalismo são tensionadas pelas estratégias retóricas da imagem na cobertura de conflitos bélicos e quais os efeitos dessa retórica na inteligibilidade dos acontecimentos e na formação da opinião pública. A pergunta de investigação que orienta o estudo é: como podem os média conciliar a força persuasiva da

imagem jornalística com princípios éticos de verdade, responsabilidade social e respeito pela dignidade humana na cobertura de conflitos? Os objetivos do artigo são: (a) problematizar a imagem jornalística de guerra enquanto acontecimento mediático e dispositivo retórico; (b) analisar criticamente as implicações éticas da produção, circulação e receção/perceção dessas imagens; e (c) sustentar a literacia visual como dimensão central da responsabilidade social dos média no combate à desinformação e à violência simbólica da imagem. Do ponto de vista metodológico, o estudo adota uma abordagem qualitativa, de natureza teórico-concetual e crítica, assente na revisão de literatura interdisciplinar nos domínios da ética da comunicação, retórica visual, estudos dos média e das culturas visuais. Propõe-se, neste enquadramento, uma leitura filosófica e semiótica da imagem jornalística de conflitos, entendida não apenas como representação, mas como prática discursiva com efeitos morais e sociais concretos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

ética da comunicação, fotojornalismo de guerra, literacia visual, responsabilidade social dos média, retórica da imagem

Today, we are imprisoned in a *digital cave*, imagining ourselves free. We are chained to the digital screen. The prisoners in Plato's cave are intoxicated by mythic and narrative images. The digital cave, by contrast, holds us *captive in information*. (...) *Truth makes no noise*. (Han, 2022, p. 64)

1. INTRODUCTION

This passage from *Infocracia* (Infocracy; Han, 2022) works well as an epigraph because it frames the contemporary epistemological regime of informational images. By reinscribing Plato's allegory of the cave in the context of digitalisation, the author shows that the current problem is not illusion or falsehood, but an excess of information that presents itself as self-evident and precludes the critical distance required by the idea of "truth".

Applied to the visual coverage of war, the metaphor of the "digital cave" helps us understand how journalistic images circulate in a saturated environment in which informational noise neutralises their testimonial force. The image stops pointing to the reality of the conflict and closes into a self-referential circuit of accelerated circulation, where shock and emotion prevail. In this sense, Han's (2022) statement, "truth makes no noise" (p. 64), gains critical depth: truth does not disappear, but loses effectiveness in a media ecosystem that privileges what is visible, fast, and noisy.

As an epigraph, this excerpt emphasises that the central problem of war as image concerns not merely visual content, but the regime of visibility and intelligibility within which images operate. The dilemma thus becomes ethical and political: how can we inform without anaesthetising, and how can we uphold journalistic responsibility when truth is not denied but drowned out by an excess of information? In *Infocracia*, Han (2022) shifts the question of truth from correspondence to mediation, showing that the greatest contemporary danger is not explicit falsehood but the inaudibility of truth in a world saturated with images.

Media communication about armed conflicts is one of the most complex and ethically sensitive challenges facing contemporary journalism, not only because of the violent nature of the events reported, but, above all, because the image has become the primary mediator of reality. Given the mediation involved, reality is not transmitted objectively, nor can it be understood in a pure, unblemished form. Media mediation alters what is transmitted. Reality is conveyed through images and received as a construction. Images carry marginal, submerged connotations that surface, allowing different interpretations (Hall, 2003).

Documentary images are produced and interpreted within frameworks that make them meaningful. These are specific to journalistic culture. Thus, what makes sense to one newspaper and its readers may not make sense to another newspaper and its readership (Langton, 2009). The framing of journalistic images does not presuppose a passive or uncritical audience that simply accepts what news media make visible. On the contrary, it contributes to the social construction of reality, including what the public considers important about the events reported. The media reaffirm the values and beliefs of the culture in which they are embedded and, as social institutions, contribute to the social construction of reality (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Langton, 2009). Beyond representing the world, media images also mediate and socially construct it through cultural frameworks and interpretation (Langton, 2009).

Cultural processes and mediatisation are intrinsically linked, as are culture and the media, since culture is defined as the symbolic communication of meaning and depends on mediation to exist (Fornäs, 2017). The media act as cultural tools of mediation, making communication the fundamental link connecting culture, media, and the production of meaning in social life.

In the digital, global and hyperconnected era, the journalistic image of conflict has ceased to function as a mere visual record of facts and has instead become a genuine media event, endowed with its own rhetorical force and concrete effects on the social construction of meaning, memory and public emotion (Debord, 1967; Mitchell, 2005).

This shift in the status of the image — from document to event — introduces a structural tension between, on the one hand, the journalistic need to make conflict visible and, on the other, the ethical responsibility to avoid the instrumentalisation of suffering, the sensationalisation of violence and the erosion of the principles of truth, dignity and social responsibility. Media coverage of armed conflicts is therefore characterised by an inherent ambiguity: the image is simultaneously a condition for making the event intelligible and a potential source of disinformation, symbolic manipulation and moral violence (Butler, 2009; Sontag, 2003).

In this context, journalistic ethics can no longer be considered solely in normative or deontological terms, focused on the intention of the message producer, but must be extended to encompass an analysis of the rhetorical practices of images, their modes of circulation and the interpretative processes they elicit among audiences. By operating through emotion, framing and the selection of what is visible and invisible, visual rhetoric plays a decisive role in persuasion and in directing the gaze; it influences how

conflicts are understood, prioritised and morally evaluated (Barthes, 1980/2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

This article lies at the intersection of image ethics, visual rhetoric and the social responsibility of the media. Taking journalistic images of conflicts as both events and discursive practices, it proposes a critical reflection on the ethical limits of visual persuasion in journalism and on the role of visual literacy as a response to the risks of disinformation and the trivialisation of violence in the public media sphere (Azoulay, 2008; Silverstone, 2007).

A tension remains that must not be softened: journalism needs the power of images to make conflict visible, but that same power threatens the ethics that legitimises it. This article's central argument is to acknowledge this ambiguity explicitly, without becoming prescriptive or moralistic. Its value lies in the possibility of thinking about ethics through the image, rather than despite it, by recognising its rhetorical power, moral limits, and centrality to contemporary media culture.

2. THE JOURNALISTIC IMAGE AS EVENT

Traditionally, the journalistic image has been understood within the epistemological framework of representation: a visual trace of reality, endowed with testimonial value and subject to the logic of evidence (Wheeler, 2002; Williams, 2020). In conflict coverage, this conception sustained the belief that photography or video would guarantee truth, legitimising informative discourse through the evidence of the visible and its supposed indexical connection to the event (Barthes, 1980/2010; Peirce, 1998). However, this understanding is now insufficient to account for the contemporary status of images in the media, which is characterised by technological mediation, accelerated circulation and the constant reconfiguration of the contexts in which they are read.

In the digital media ecology, the journalistic image does not merely represent the event: it produces the event. Its incessant circulation, repetition across multiple media, algorithmic recontextualisation and capacity to generate emotional, political and moral reactions transform it into a performative element of the conflict itself. The image ceases to be a mere means of accessing reality and becomes a communicative act that actively shapes the media agenda, prioritising events and determining what deserves to be seen, remembered, or forgotten (Debord, 1967; Mitchell, 2005).

Journalism is an interpretative practice, not an exact science, and its power lies in defining what counts as newsworthy. In reality, the image as news and news as image do not exist in a pure state; rather, they are constructed products derived from factual raw material, yet inevitably mediated and represented (M. Fontcuberta, 1993/2010).

This conceptual shift entails recognising that the journalistic image possesses its own symbolic agency. By selecting a moment, a frame, and a point of view, the image does not merely show; it establishes meaning, conditions the intelligibility of the conflict, and guides the moral interpretation of events. Reading a photographic image is immediate and inseparable from verbalisation, since the photograph can be apprehended only

through processes of signification (Barthes, 1970/2009). Connotations — perceptual, cognitive, ideological and ethical — guide the interpretation of the image, revealing that it is never neutral or objective, but always results from a socially and symbolically situated production of meaning (Barthes, 1970/2009). In this sense, the image of war is not external to the conflict it reports; it forms part of the very field of symbolic forces in which that conflict unfolds, participating in its legitimisation, contestation or naturalisation (Butler, 2009; Rancière, 2008/2014).

It is therefore pertinent to examine the media's role in revealing or constructing truth, particularly how images and media create representations, simulations, and reproduced versions of reality (Foss et al., 2002). The odyssey of images in the media is the “contemporary twilight of a reality devoured by the media image” (Rancière, 2003, p. 9). If media images of war are overlays of simulacra, on the assumption that appearances in images replace reality, J. Fontcuberta (2010/2014) acknowledges that photography can function as an “orthopaedic mechanism of modern consciousness” (p. 12), since photography has historically been a technology in the service of truth and a form of evidence — an “ethics of seeing”, in Sontag's (2003) terms — which questions the ability of war photography to communicate anything substantial.

The historical association between image and truth — underpinned by the belief in photographic transparency and indexicality — is profoundly challenged in the context of media coverage of conflict. The image continues to operate within an imaginary of evidence, but in an environment characterised by technical manipulation, selective editing, decontextualisation, and the strategic instrumentalisation of the visible. In this scenario, the image's truth can no longer be understood as a direct correspondence with reality, but as a discursive effect produced at the intersection of production practices, regimes of circulation, and processes of interpretation (Azoulay, 2008; Frosh, 2011).

In armed conflicts, this problem takes on particularly serious ethical dimensions. The repeated exposure to images of violence, suffering and death can generate both empathy and desensitisation, both moral mobilisation and the trivialisation of horror. Images construct reality not only through what they show, but also through what they omit, what they silence, and how they frame the experience of conflict, transforming it into a visually intelligible, emotionally oriented, and socially consumable narrative (Chouliaraki, 2006; Sontag, 2003).

Photographic archives are not neutral spaces for preserving memory, but active instruments of power in which images are decontextualised, classified and reinscribed within narratives that shape collective memory. When photographs are organised according to thematic categories, their meaning risks being transformed, obscuring the historical and political conditions of their production (Azoulay, 2015).

According to Azoulay (2019), photography has always been a field of forces shaped by choices, framing, and exclusions that determine what is shown and what remains outside the frame. In *Potential History* (Azoulay, 2019), this critique goes further, showing that archives do not merely collect documents but produce history and identities, often operating through imperial epistemologies that naturalise power relations. Reading

archives critically therefore entails studying images in relation to what the photographic act has separated and refusing to accept them as transparent repositories of the past. In this sense, the archive can function simultaneously as an instrument of decontextualisation and manipulation and as a critical site of resistance, requiring ethical and political responsibility in how images are interpreted and reinscribed in collective memory.

Thus, journalistic truth ceases to be an intrinsic property of the image and becomes a distributed ethical responsibility. The media must recognise that the image of conflict is neither neutral nor transparent, but a powerful rhetorical device capable of producing symbolic realities with concrete social impacts. Understanding the journalistic image as event therefore requires critically acknowledging its role in constructing reality and reconfiguring the ethical criteria governing its production and dissemination in the public media sphere, shifting the debate from technical veracity to the moral and political intelligibility of the visible (Silverstone, 2007).

This conceptual radicalism avoids falling into visual moralism or an ingenuous defence of the “good journalistic image”. The strength of the opposing perspective lies in showing that the central problem is not the excess of images, but the epistemological, rhetorical, and ethical status we assign them within contemporary media culture.

3. VISUAL RHETORIC AND PERSUASION IN CONFLICT COVERAGE

No journalistic image of conflict exists without rhetoric, and denying this dimension is a subtle form of ethical irresponsibility. Every image results from discursive choices that organise the visible and guide the interpretation of reality; visual rhetoric is not a deviation from the informative function, but a structural condition of journalistic discourse (Barthes, 1970/2009; Mitchell, 2005).

Media images are not neutral documents, but persuasive visual arguments constructed through strategies such as framing, composition, distance from the bodies represented, and the selection of the “decisive moment” (Cartier-Bresson, 1952/2015). These choices produce narratives that propose implicit moral readings of conflicts, defining who suffers, who acts and who is held responsible, even under the banner of informational neutrality (Entman, 1993; Hariman & Lucaites, 2007).

Visual rhetoric becomes particularly problematic when it is tied to repetition and sensationalisation. The mass circulation of images of violence tends to crystallise meanings, simplify the historical complexity of conflicts, and turn shock and empathy into mechanisms of rapid emotional consumption (Debord, 1967; Sontag, 2003). Although emotional engagement is central to images’ persuasive effectiveness, shock can suspend critical reflection, while empathy can produce moral hierarchies of suffering, rendering some victims visible while silencing others (Azoulay, 2008; Butler, 2009; Chouliaraki, 2006).

The ethical problem does not lie in the presence of emotion, but in the absence of an explicit ethics of visual rhetoric. Recognising the journalistic image as a discursive act entails taking responsibility for the rhetorical choices that shape public perception and

rethinking the ethical limits of visual persuasion in a context marked by the normalisation of violence and disinformation.

4. THE ARGUMENTATIVE NATURE OF THE DOCUMENTARY IMAGE

Visual rhetoric is particularly evident in the coverage of armed conflicts, where the struggle over meaning is inseparable from the struggle over what is made visible. Far from being limited to illustration, the image operates as a persuasive device that selects, organises, and prioritises aspects of reality, mobilising rhetorical strategies that shape how events are interpreted and how audiences respond emotionally. In this context, the image does not merely show the conflict; it argues visually, becoming part of a symbolic economy of power, emotion, and legitimation (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Rancière, 2008/2014).

The image has a rhetorical structure; it is not a simple reflection of reality, but something constructed. This construction involves selection, framing, lighting, angle, composition and the internal relationships between visual elements; all these factors guide interpretation. This guidance functions as an argumentative appeal, leading the recipient towards an implicit conclusion. This idea is grounded in visual rhetoric, which shows that images contain rhetorical structures (metaphors, metonymies, amplification, ellipses, etc.) that function as arguments, even in still images, though this is more evident in moving images (Champagne & Pietarinen, 2020).

Fleming (1996) acknowledges that a photograph independent of words can influence others' thoughts and actions, but questions whether it can argue. Maintaining that an image can argue may lead us to lose something essential in the traditional notion of "argument" (Fleming, 1996), such as the explicit inferential structure that distinguishes premises from conclusions. Most images persuade, but they do not organise reasoning in a clear and verifiable manner. Thus, there is a risk of confusing persuasive impact with argumentation proper, diluting the concept and weakening the criteria for critical analysis.

Argumentation is not exclusively a verbal activity; if it were, images would necessarily be excluded from this domain. Images do not structure premises and conclusions sequentially, as verbal language does. However, they can be "read" in any language and without the need for a specific decoding code, unlike texts. Moreover, they benefit from emotional symbolic condensation, because they evoke feelings immediately, and from rational symbolic condensation, because they let viewers reconstruct premises and conclusions through an enthymematic process. This capacity to condense a dense set of ideas, emotions, and inferences into a single visual stimulus underpins visual argumentation (Kjeldsen, 2018).

Just as Kjeldsen (2018) refutes positions that deny images' argumentative power and emphasises that argumentation is a communicative and cognitive act that does not depend on any specific verbal form, we maintain that images can embody intention, fully perform the act of arguing, and thereby persuade. This potential is realised through a visual rhetoric that may rely on tropes and figures, but also on communicative contexts, visual aesthetics, and the role of values and *topoi* (Kjeldsen, 2018).

Topoi are commonplaces of reasoning, schemas, principles or general lines of inference that make it possible to construct arguments. In Aristotelian rhetoric, *topoi* function as sources or structural clues for identifying plausible premises and constructing persuasive arguments. They are not specific contents, but recurring ways of thinking that can be applied to multiple situations. They are patterns of argumentation recognised by a community; starting points for developing convincing ideas; shared cultural reference points that facilitate inference. For example, in a visual context, an image may draw on shared cultural and cognitive *topoi*, associating “darkness” with death or danger. Viewers intuitively recognise these schemas and complete the meaning of the visual argument.

Flusser (2006) considers images surfaces that seek to represent something that, in most cases, lies outside them in space and time. Images owe their origin to imagination and to capacities for abstraction, encoding phenomena, and decoding encoded messages. Thus, defining an image and assigning it conceptual boundaries means separating it from the observer, “the one who actually operates in its production” (Ferreira, 2010, p. 68): “it is not only the image’s producer who makes it exist; its existence also bears the touch of the observing gaze, the one that gives it meaning” (Ferreira, 2010, p. 68). For this reason, the image “is not the property of the person who produces it, but also of the person who receives it and ‘scans’ it in their mind” (Ferreira, 2010, p. 72). Visual arguments are less processual than verbal arguments, but images are not merely static pictures; thought itself flows and changes as we observe them (Champagne & Pietarinen, 2020). Nevertheless, these authors argue that when an image’s interpretation is not constrained by its visual properties, it should not be considered a visual argument (or, at least, a good visual argument).

According to Rancière (2008/2014), classical rhetoric has already taught us that images also exist in verbal language and that figures of rhetoric and poetics can be found in the visible. This helps explain the growing field of rhetoric, which explores the communicative and persuasive power of the verbal and visual artefacts that surround us (García, 2019).

Visual rhetoric is pervasive, in part because it is powerful. Visual messages are volatile, eliciting positive and negative responses simultaneously. The familiar expressions “seeing is believing” and “a picture is worth a thousand words” capture their high ethos appeal. (Campbell & Huxman, 2008, p. 262)

Images invite us to draw conclusions; they do not argue explicitly. Applying visual rhetoric to images creates possibilities for interpretation.

Nevertheless, we argue that an image argues when it seeks the recipient’s adherence, since every argumentative act does precisely this (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958). An image, particularly in a media context, is produced to persuade, seduce, naturalise, or legitimise positions, meaning it clearly aims to produce persuasive effects and is therefore an event in its own right. If all argumentation begins when a discourse seeks to influence, images in the media generally do precisely that.

An image argues because it is rhetorically constructed, guides interpretative pathways, produces effects of self-evidence, models possible worlds, and seeks adherence, functioning as a communicative act with a persuasive purpose. Visual argumentation is not a metaphor; it is a specific mode of reasoning, a “way of seeing”, that operates through non-verbal resources but shares the same central aim as verbal argumentation: to lead the recipient to a conclusion, that is, to persuade them.

The image does not merely represent reality; it produces meaning, guides inferences, and actively shapes judgements. Its argumentative force rests, first and foremost, on its visual materiality, which selects, frames and structures what it shows, directing the observer’s gaze and emphasising certain elements at the expense of others. Framing is already a position taken, a way of predisposing the audience towards a conclusion. Added to this is the principle of evidence, traditionally associated with the image’s demonstrative power: by creating an appearance of direct presence, the image becomes evidence that can reinforce adherence to a thesis through the force of what is seen.

However, visual argumentativeness does not depend solely on the perceptual dimension; it also operates through interpretative mechanisms. The image functions as a system of signs that draws on the observer’s cultural repertoire, activating inferences, analogies and intertextual networks that expand its meaning. This is why it communicates indirectly, suggesting more than it states and leading the observer to complete meanings based on their own horizon of expectations. This capacity to connote, suggest or insinuate, rather than declare, is one of its most effective rhetorical strategies.

The affective dimension is another central component of the image’s argumentative force. Emotions shape interpretation and influence judgement; by appealing to *pathos*, the image enhances its persuasive capacity. This emotional effectiveness intensifies when the image tells a story: many visual representations articulate events through an implicit temporal sequence, organising the gaze according to a logic similar to that of verbal narrative. This narrativity guides reasoning, suggests causal relationships and stabilises possible interpretations.

The image also participates in processes through which authority and credibility are constructed. Its testimonial status, particularly in documentary photography, brings it close to the index, which points directly to a prior physical presence. This indexical connection creates an effect of authenticity that reinforces adherence to the image’s conclusions. Similarly, the contexts in which images circulate and the media devices through which they are presented shape how they are understood, functioning as argumentative frames that condition public interpretation.

Finally, the image argues by intervening in social deliberation. Visual representations circulating in the public sphere influence perceptions, positions and collective decisions; they are rhetorical artefacts that contest meanings, legitimise interpretations and shape attitudes. Their force derives not only from what they show, but also from what they silence, what they make visible and what they relegate beyond the frame. This economy of the visible produces cognitive and political effects, making the image a fully fledged agent in contemporary argumentative dynamics.

In semiotics and visual communication studies, conceptions of visual rhetoric and argumentation have often been shaped by two approaches: on the one hand, the analysis of tropes and figures; on the other, the interpretation of images as texts that are read and decoded in a manner analogous to verbal language (Kjeldsen, 2018). Both perspectives understand images as a form of polysemic non-verbal language and contribute valuable insights into how images can be used to argue. However, contemporary studies of visual argumentation recognise that images should be understood simultaneously as language and as aesthetic-material events (Kjeldsen, 2018).

As noted above, argumentation is not exclusively verbal, and images can fulfil this role even without structuring premises and conclusions sequentially. Their strength lies in symbolic condensation, which can be emotional or rational and lets viewers complete the meaning through an enthymematic process.

In rhetorical tradition, an enthymeme is an incomplete argument whose force depends on what the audience mentally supplies. Unlike the formal syllogism, which sets out all the premises explicitly, the enthymeme leaves something unsaid because it presupposes shared knowledge, social beliefs, cultural values or cause-and-effect relationships that the recipient recognises without the need for verbal formulation. For this reason, Aristotle (350 BCE/1998) described it as the “body of proof” in rhetoric, the most effective form of argumentation for persuading someone in a real communicative context. This logic of the “not fully said” does not belong exclusively to the verbal domain. It can also manifest in the visual domain, as Smith (2007) extends the rhetorical concept of the “enthymeme” to images.

This capacity to bring together ideas, emotions and inferences within a single visual stimulus underpins visual argumentation (Kjeldsen, 2018). We therefore maintain that images can be intentional, arguing and persuading through tropes and figures, as well as through the contexts of visual communication, image aesthetics, and the values and *topoi* they invoke.

The viewer’s role also contributes to the image’s argumentative force. Visual argumentation operates enthymematically, since some information is not expressed and must be supplied by the audience. Images function as enthymemes in certain respects, particularly in attempts at identification and in interactions between sender and receiver (Smith, 2007). Context and the viewer’s knowledge are therefore decisive. For this reason, the analysis of visual arguments includes reception studies alongside the formal analysis of images.

By condensing symbolic, cultural or emotional elements, the image suggests premises that the viewer infers. For example, Kenneth Jarecke’s photograph (Trueheart, 1991), taken during the first gulf War and published in *American Photo* (1991), challenges the dominant narrative of a “clean” war. Kevin Carter’s photograph, taken in Sudan (1993) and published in *The New York Times* (The Pulitzer Prizes, 1994), argues against the extreme famine caused by war. These images do not present their arguments sequentially; instead, they offer cues that the audience completes by interpreting relationships of cause, consequence, or value. Media-disseminated war images stimulate moral impulses

through archetypes and become memorable. They are records of pivotal moments transformed into a medium that preserves the gaze, such as the photograph taken by Nick Ut during the Vietnam war on 8 June 1972 (The Associated Press, 2025) and published on the front page of *The New York Times*, whose visual force contributed to public opposition to the war.

Another example is Eddie Adams's photograph "General Nguyen Ngoc Loan Executing a Viet Cong Prisoner", also known as "The Saigon Execution" (Goldberg, 1991), taken in Saigon on 1 February 1968 (National Gallery of Art, 1968). The photograph affected perceptions of the South Vietnamese officer by representing him as a symbol of the cruelty and violence of war. Although it captured only a single moment in a complex, prolonged conflict, it enabled the public to make a rapid, simplified judgement, reinforcing negative stereotypes and reductive representations of the war (Mirzoeff, 2023). Its visual impact also raises questions about photojournalistic ethics and the power of images to shape perceptions and narratives. The photograph captures a striking moment during the Vietnam war and significantly influenced public perceptions of the conflict (Benson, 2015; Johnson et al., 2011). Its importance lies in its power to convey the raw reality of violence and war visually.

The visual enthymeme occurs when an image triggers inferences that are not explicit but are reconstructed by the viewer through their cultural, emotional and cognitive repertoire. The argument lies neither entirely in the image nor entirely in the viewer; it emerges from their interaction. This cooperative process characterises visual rhetoric and argumentation, and it allows us to argue that the enthymeme can indeed be visual.

The image argues, and becomes an event in doing so, because it operates through evidence, which is a specific argumentative mode. Photography, in particular, argues through a distinctive form of proof: visual evidence. The image presents itself as what was or what happened, functioning as a guarantee of reality. This appearance of authenticity constitutes a form of rhetorical proof that leads the recipient to accept a point of view. The "photographic referent" creates an effect of truth; this effect is argumentative because it supports conclusions.

Press photographs can persuade and argue. A photograph of a public demonstration against war does more than inform us about the event: it argues. One example is Marc Riboud's 1967 photograph entitled "The Flower Girl", which depicts a demonstration against the Vietnam war in Washington, where a young woman holds a flower in front of soldiers pointing their weapons at her (Zorthian, 2017). The photograph argues that "peace is worth more than war" (Joly, 1995/2005, p. 211), expressing a position also reflected in public opinion. This argument is not neutral; it takes a position and uses antithesis as a rhetorical figure.

These photographs inform and argue through their own visual rhetoric, presenting devastation as visible evidence and asserting that war always has disastrous consequences, particularly for civilians. Press photography argues rather than merely informs, because it has its own rhetoric and "what governs the choice is the richness of the argument rather than the raw information found in almost all the shots" (Joly, 1995/2005,

p. 229). “The means of this argumentation are diverse: narrativisation, dramatisation, symbolisation, and the exploitation of the resources of plastic or aesthetic forms” (Joly, 1995/2005, p. 229).

In rhetoric, argumentation differs from demonstration. Argumentation involves confronting viewpoints, positions, and opinions, resulting in controversy and persuasion through dialectical reasoning. Demonstration, by contrast, presents axioms that lead to incontrovertible conclusions, since the process follows as a logical and necessary consequence of deductive reasoning. Consequently, argumentation is more readily situated in the realm of words, within the textual structure through which journalistic messages are encoded. In contrast, demonstration is more readily conceived in the realm of images, within the visual structure that also forms part of news coverage of events. Nevertheless, either of these two structures for encoding journalistic messages can violate ethical principles and, for example, fail to tell the truth.

5. CASE STUDY: REGIMES OF MEDIA VISIBILITY AND THE VISUAL RHETORIC OF POWER

Contemporary propaganda operates less and less through the explicit imposition of ideological discourse and increasingly through the mass circulation of emotionally intense images, whose effectiveness lies in their ability to generate affective adherence before rational mediation takes place. In this context, political photography plays a central role in the symbolic construction of power, not merely because it represents political figures, but because it shapes how the public emotionally perceives and interprets them.

Although it focuses on photojournalistic coverage of armed conflicts, this article starts from the premise that contemporary regimes of visibility, which structure the representation of war, are not confined to strictly military contexts. The same logics of emotional intensification, media hypervisibility, visual dramatisation, and affective circulation that permeate journalistic representations of war also appear in other contemporary forms of political communication and propaganda. In this respect, analysing contemporary political photography helps us understand the broader rhetorical and emotional mechanisms that shape public perceptions of armed conflict within the digital media ecosystem.

A CNN Portugal news report, based on a *Vanity Fair* feature on Christopher Anderson’s close-up portraits of key Trump administration figures, offers a particularly revealing example of this phenomenon (Palumbo, 2025). Although presented as images that expose vulnerability, tension, or authenticity through close-ups and visible physical imperfections, these photographs do not escape the propagandistic logic of contemporary hypervisibility. Instead, they turn the political face into an object of intense emotional and symbolic focus, reinforcing these figures’ media centrality through the very act of critical exposure.

The close-up is not a neutral device. By isolating the face and magnifying bodily details, it imposes a regime of visibility that shifts attention from discursive content to the image’s emotional expressiveness. As Barthes (1980/2010) observes, “seeing” does

not necessarily correspond to understanding; visual evidence often produces the illusion of immediate access to the truth of reality, concealing the symbolic mechanisms through which meaning is constructed. Contemporary political photography exploits precisely this illusion of transparency: it presents itself as spontaneous revelation when, in fact, it results from carefully produced framing, selection and strategies of visual intensification.

Sontag (1977, 2003) adds that photography never simply records reality: it constructs it by framing, selecting and normalising what deserves to be seen. In the contemporary media environment, characterised by image saturation and digital acceleration, the incessant repetition of intense images tends to stimulate less critical reflection than emotional familiarity and symbolic habituation. Propaganda no longer needs to conceal structures of power; it only needs to make them omnipresent, emotionally appealing and continuously shareable.

Here, the central paradox of these images emerges. By seeking to “unmask” power through visual proximity and the exposure of human imperfection, they often end up reinforcing its visibility and symbolic magnetism. As Debord (1967) argued, in the society of the spectacle, power does not disappear under criticism; it transforms criticism itself into a mechanism for spectacularly reproducing its presence. Media hypervisibility thus becomes a subtle form of symbolic legitimization.

This case therefore illustrates a significant transformation in contemporary forms of propaganda. Rather than the authoritarian, unidirectional and explicitly ideological communication characteristic of 20th-century classical models, we are witnessing diffuse forms of visual persuasion that operate through emotion, digital circulation and the apparent spontaneity of images. The power of political photography lies in the device’s invisibility: choosing what to show, how to show it, and the emotional frame within which to show it already constitutes a form of ideological editing of reality.

In this sense, the image does not directly impose thought, but pre-emptively shapes ways of feeling and interpreting, producing what Bourdieu (1987/2004, 1997/2007) describes as “thought that has already been thought” at the expense of “thinking thought”. This perspective converges with Barthes’s (1957) critique of myth as a form of language that erases its own mechanisms of construction, and with Han (2022), for whom contemporary communication regimes favour immediate, emotional and accelerated adherence, weakening the critical distance required for reflection.

The mechanisms of hypervisibility, emotional intensification, and affective adherence observable in contemporary political photography thus help explain similar processes in the media circulation of war images, particularly within a digital ecosystem in which emotion, speed, and visual impact increasingly take precedence over the critical intelligibility of events.

6. IMAGE ETHICS AND VISUAL LITERACY

In a normative-critical reflection on image ethics in journalism and audiovisual media, a moralistic or deontological approach is rejected. Ethics is not an external code that

regulates journalistic practice, but a dimension inherent in the logic of the image and visual mediation, inseparable from the discursive, rhetorical and cultural conditions under which communication takes place (Azoulay, 2008; Silverstone, 2007). Reflecting on journalistic ethics means reflecting on the ethics of the documentary image as a situated social practice, shaped by power relations, regimes of visibility, and editorial choices.

One central concern of this argument is the ethical dilemma of exposing suffering and extreme violence in conflict coverage. Making pain visible can denounce injustice and mobilise moral responses, but repeating and intensifying such images raises fundamental issues of dignity, consent, and the instrumentalisation of suffering. As Sontag (2003) and Chouliaraki (2006) emphasise, there is a structural limit beyond which showing too much ceases to inform and begins instead to inflict symbolic violence on those who have already suffered material violence. The ethical dilemma cannot be reduced to a binary decision about whether to show or conceal; it lies in the tension between the duty to inform, the risk of traumatising audiences, and the illusion that images provide direct, transparent access to war.

This illusion of direct access to reality ignores how images are constructed. Even in wartime contexts, the legitimacy of showing the human body, whether injured or dead, is often justified by public interest and the imperative to “show reality as it is”, but it depends on framing choices, contexts of circulation, and the symbolic effects produced (Butler, 2009; Frosh, 2011). The central ethical question shifts from visible content to the rhetoric of visibility: how does the image organise the gaze, prioritise aspects of reality and produce political and moral meanings?

Within this framework, the case of the televised college football playoff final is introduced. During the event, ESPN cameras repeatedly focused on Abella Danger, a former adult film actress, shifting attention away from the game towards a spectator who was turned into a visual event. Although this was not journalistic coverage of conflict, the episode reveals an ethical dilemma analogous to photojournalism: the editorial choice to include an image transforms an individual into an object of media attention and circulation, without explicit consent, exposing them to stigma and moral judgement (Bilicki, 2026). The problem lies not in the spectator’s presence, but in the decision to make her a central element of the narrative, driven by the logic of attention and virality rather than informational value.

This case highlights three fundamental deontological issues: (a) responsibility for the selection and hierarchisation of images, since television does not merely show but actively constructs what deserves to be seen; (b) the involuntary instrumentalisation of the person filmed, who is exposed to symbolic framings beyond their control; and (c) the confusion between public interest and what interests the public, typical of a media culture oriented towards spectacle (Barthes, 1957; Debord, 1967; Sontag, 2003). As in war photojournalism, the dilemma concerns not only visibility but also the image’s symbolic function as a mechanism of power.

The analysis thus extends to the notion of “symbolic violence” exercised by journalistic mediation itself. Beyond the physical violence represented, there is violence

produced through the sensationalisation and decontextualisation of images and the transformation of suffering into an object of visual consumption. This logic normalises horror and reduces complex conflicts to simplistic, dichotomous narratives (Debord, 1967; Rancière, 2008/2014). In a media ecosystem marked by disinformation, the uncritical circulation of emotionally powerful images undermines journalistic credibility and compromises journalism's social function (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

This leads to a conception of "ethics" that cannot be reduced to a set of external prohibitions. Ethics is embedded in the image's rhetoric and in the questions asked about its consequences: not "is it permissible to show this?", but "what does this image do in the world?". This shift frames visual literacy as a critical, ethical, and political practice essential to contemporary journalistic mediation (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Mitchell, 2005; Rose, 2016).

Responsibility is shared between the media and audiences. Socially responsible journalism does not merely display images; it contextualises and problematises them, rejecting the logic of sensationalisation, while visual literacy enables audiences to question the framing, interests and emotional effects of images (Chouliaraki, 2006; Silverstone, 2007). In the context of war, critically reading images of conflict becomes an act of citizenship, enabling viewers to recognise both the suffering represented and the mechanisms that shape their gaze, thereby dismantling the illusion of an innocent and neutral vision (Azoulay, 2008; Butler, 2009; Sontag, 2003).

7. SYNTHETIC IMAGES, WAR AND THE CONTEMPORARY CRISIS OF VISUAL EVIDENCE

The contemporary transformation of war's regimes of visibility becomes evident in the mass circulation of artificial intelligence-generated synthetic images in the context of the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza. In several recent cases, social media has widely disseminated photographs of injured children, destroyed cities, or non-existent military operations as authentic visual documents, exploiting the emotional and indexical authority historically associated with photojournalism. The speed of digital circulation and the affective intensity of these images often precede verification, favouring immediate emotional engagement over critical reflection.

This phenomenon reveals a significant transformation in the contemporary image of war. Although photography has always involved framing, selection and the symbolic construction of reality, generative artificial intelligence radicalises this condition by producing images that may be indistinguishable from documentary records despite having no actual empirical referent. The image is progressively ceasing to function as a trace of an event and instead asserting itself as an autonomous visual construction, capable of producing political, emotional and moral effects regardless of its factual authenticity. As Baudrillard (1991/1995) suggested, contemporary media warfare increasingly replaces the event with the spectacular circulation of signs and visual simulations, in a context in which media visibility itself becomes a constitutive part of the conflict.

In this context, the question of visual truth can no longer be reduced to the opposition between true and manipulated images. The central problem shifts towards the mechanisms of affective credibility that make certain images immediately plausible and shareable within a media ecosystem characterised by acceleration, visual saturation and competition for attention. As Brighenti (2007) observes, regimes of visibility socially organise what can be recognised, legitimised or made perceptible in the public sphere. Visibility therefore is not mere informational transparency, but a form of power that structures modes of perception, recognition, and symbolic exclusion.

Virilio (1984/1989) had already demonstrated that technological modernity profoundly transforms the relationship between war, perception and speed. Contemporary warfare unfolds not only on the military field but also in the optical and media domains, where instantaneous circulation, visual impact and the strategic management of visibility become central dimensions of conflict. Within this framework, the image increasingly becomes autonomous from the empirical event, approaching a logic of continuous spectacle in which visual effect takes precedence over critical intelligibility.

Mondzain's (2002/2009) thought is equally crucial to understanding this scenario. For the author, the image is never politically innocent: it can expose, mobilise, and inflict symbolic violence, and it may contribute to dehumanisation and the legitimisation of suffering. The incessant circulation of images of war, whether authentic or synthetic, consequently risks turning human pain into visual consumption, transforming suffering into an object of media contemplation and diminishing the capacity for critical engagement with violence.

In *Homo Spectator: Ver, Fazer Ver* (Homo Spectator: Seeing, Making See), Mondzain (2007/2015) further develops the idea that human beings are, above all else, spectators. Seeing is neither neutral nor passive; it underpins human experience by organising our relationship with the world and with others. Throughout history, the spectator has never been merely someone who contemplates; looking also involves interpretation, decision and action. Images do not simply show; they can make us see, mobilise the realm of the sensible, and induce behaviours and beliefs: "making see is making believe" (Mondzain, 2007/2015, p. 175). This performative dimension brings the image into the political sphere: whoever controls the visible can influence ways of thinking and acting. The spectator's status is therefore not merely aesthetic; it is also ethical and political.

The expansion of generative artificial intelligence does not merely introduce a new technological problem; it intensifies a deeper epistemological crisis affecting contemporary visual evidence itself. Faced with images that can generate emotional credibility without an empirical referent, journalism's social responsibility requires not only factual verification but also critical reflection on the technical, rhetorical, and affective mechanisms that shape public perceptions of war.

Within this framework, the ethical dilemmas of contemporary journalism, particularly in coverage of armed conflicts, cannot be separated from the image's centrality as a discursive and rhetorical practice. The journalistic image has ceased to be a mere record

of reality and has instead asserted itself as a media event with symbolic agency, capable of shaping public emotions, moral hierarchies of suffering and collective memory (Zelizer, 2010). The sensationalisation of violence and the uncritical circulation of images trivialise horror, sustain symbolic violence, undermine public trust in the media, and turn war into a visual spectacle of suffering (Didi-Huberman, 2003a, 1982/2003b; Sontag, 1977).

Framing, the selection of what is visible and invisible, and the use of emotional shock are not occasional deviations, but structural elements of the persuasive efficacy of images, with central epistemological and ethical implications, particularly in an ecosystem marked by disinformation (McNair, 2017, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In this context, visual literacy emerges not merely as an interpretative skill, but as a fundamental civic condition for resisting the symbolic opacity of contemporary image bombardment and restoring critical intelligibility to a media space characterised by acceleration, visual saturation and the growing fragility of evidence.

8. CONCLUSION

This article has sought to demonstrate that the ethical dilemmas of contemporary journalism, particularly in the coverage of armed conflicts, cannot be considered separately from the centrality of the image as a discursive, rhetorical and performative practice. The journalistic image has ceased to function as a mere visual record of an external event and has instead asserted itself as a media event in its own right, endowed with symbolic agency and concrete effects on the construction of meaning, public emotion and collective memory (Zelizer, 2010). This conceptual shift calls for a radical rethinking of journalism's ethics and social responsibility. Familiarity with images diminishes their impact and emotional charge. Widely known photographs familiarise us with atrocity, "making the horrible seem more ordinary (...) familiar, remote" (Sontag, 1977, p. 18). In this regard, Sontag refers to the fragile ethical content of photographs (Sliwinski, 2004), most of which do not retain their emotional charge, with the possible exception of photographs depicting the horrors of war.

Thinking of the image as an event means recognising that the ethical question can no longer be reduced to the image's technical veracity or referential fidelity; it must also address how visual rhetoric structures the intelligibility of conflicts, guides the gaze, and produces moral hierarchies of suffering. In news media, manipulation often takes the form of false information, often falling under the concept of disinformation, that is, false information deliberately created to manipulate (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Such manipulation distorts, conceals, or fabricates data to shape public perceptions, often driven by political actors and amplified by the media (McNair, 2018). Journalistic manipulation thus goes beyond mere bias, constituting a central epistemological and ethical problem for contemporary journalism (McNair, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Framing, the selection of what is visible and invisible, and the use of shock and empathy are not occasional deviations from journalistic practice, but structural components of its persuasive

effectiveness. Ignoring this discursive dimension conceals a decisive part of the image's power and, consequently, its ethical responsibility.

An analysis of the moral limits of exposing violence and suffering shows that turning conflict into a visual spectacle and uncritically circulating images contribute to persistent forms of symbolic violence, the trivialisation of horror, and the erosion of public trust in the media. The news image of war constitutes a media event arising from the war itself, insofar as the media transform it into a spectacle of symbolic violence and the aestheticisation of suffering, or a "spectacle of pain" (Didi-Huberman, 1982/2003b, p. 23). This process privileges shock and visual emotion, often detached from empathy and ethical action (Didi-Huberman, 1982/2003b). The social responsibility of journalism therefore requires an ethics of the image that goes beyond normative professional codes and abstract prohibitions against "excess". It explicitly acknowledges the political, emotional and moral effects of what becomes visible in the public media sphere.

Within this framework, visual literacy emerges as a necessary, though non-redemptive, ethical response. Far from an isolated technical or pedagogical solution, visual literacy is a civic and critical practice that can restore interpretative agency to journalists, the media, and audiences. Learning to look critically means recognising that no image is neutral, that all visibility is constructed and that, for emotion to be ethically productive, it must be accompanied by reflection, contextualisation and moral judgement. Visual literacy does not eliminate the dilemmas of the journalistic image, but exposes the illusion that the gaze is innocent.

This framework becomes even more demanding as generative artificial intelligence emerges, deepfakes proliferate, and image production, editing, and circulation become increasingly automated. These technologies do not inaugurate the crisis of visual truth, but intensify and radicalise an existing fragility in the relationship between image, reality and credibility. When an image no longer depends on an identifiable empirical referent and is instead produced by algorithmic systems capable of simulating plausibility, visual rhetoric becomes definitively detached from the factual event, making the ethics of the image an even more central and urgent concern.

In this context, journalism's social responsibility cannot be limited to adopting technical verification mechanisms or drawing a formal distinction between "real" and "synthetic" images. The challenge is deeper: it requires reaffirming a critical commitment to making the world intelligible in a media environment where seeing no longer amounts to knowing. Visual literacy, combined with an emerging form of algorithmic literacy, becomes essential to addressing new regimes of visibility, disinformation, and moral indifference, where the risk lies not only in image manipulation but also in the erosion of the very notion of truth.

Ultimately, considering the ethics and social responsibility of journalism in conflict coverage in an era shaped by artificial intelligence means recognising that the fundamental problem is not technological but epistemological and moral. The image will remain a decisive arena of symbolic contestation; the challenge is to ensure this contestation does not come at the expense of human dignity, civic responsibility, and the possibility of

a critical gaze. The ethics of the image, far from becoming obsolete, is thus more necessary than ever in a world where visual evidence no longer guarantees truth and where the responsibility to see is inseparable from the responsibility to understand.

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