

## Visual communication\*

“The understanding of war among people who have not experienced war is now chiefly a product of the impact of [...] images.”<sup>1</sup> Some images have marked our memories and others shape our opinions by appealing to our emotions. The impact of images can be very far-reaching. “In contrast to a written account — which, depending on its complexity of thought, reference, and vocabulary, is pitched at a larger or smaller readership - a photograph has only one language and is destined potentially for all.”<sup>2</sup>

“Images of the sufferings endured in war are so widely disseminated now that it is easy to forget how recently such images became what is expected from photographers of note. Historically, photographers have offered mostly positive images of the warrior’s trade, and of the satisfactions of starting a war or continuing to fight one.”<sup>3</sup>

“Torment, a canonical subject in art, is often represented in paintings as a spectacle, something being watched (or ignored) by other people. The implication is: no, it cannot be stopped – and the mingling of inattentive with attentive onlookers underscores this.

The practise of representing atrocious suffering as something to be deplored, and, if possible, stopped, enters the history of images with a specific subject: the sufferings endured by a civilian population at the hands of a victorious army on the rampage.”<sup>4</sup>

\* Selection of images and accompanying text by Fiona Le Diraison, editorial assistant at the *International Review of the Red Cross*.

1 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Picador, New York, 2003, p. 21.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 42-43. This subject emerges in the seventeenth century. See, for example, Jacques Callot, *Les Misères et les Malheurs de la Guerre*, which depicted the atrocities committed against civilians by French troops during the invasion and occupation of Lorraine in the early 1630s.

Phan Thi Kim Phuc flees after a misdirected aerial napalm attack on a suspected Viet Cong hiding place. The image shows excruciating pain and death and has become a photographic icon for antiwar advocates as well as a symbol of hope.



© Associated Press / Nick Ut

“In the case of still photographs, we use what we know of the drama of which the picture’s subject is a part.”<sup>5</sup>



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Sarajevo, June 2005. In some streets inhabited buildings still bear the marks of the conflict.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

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Grozny, Russia, February 2002. Destruction in the city centre. Nothing has been rebuilt since the two wars.

“Photography is the only major art in which professional training and years of experience do not confer an insuperable advantage over the untrained and inexperienced.”<sup>6</sup>

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On late September 2001, the organizers of an exhibition entitled “Here is New York” had sent out a call inviting everyone who had taken pictures of the 11 September attacks on the twin towers of the world trade centre, whether professional or amateur, to bring them in. The fact that from everyone who submitted photographs, at least one was accepted for exhibit, suggests that there was work by amateurs as good as the work of professionals.

“Non-stop imagery (television, streaming video, movies) is our surround, but when it comes to remembering, the photograph has the deeper bite. Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image. In an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it. The photograph is like a quotation, or a maxim or proverb. Each of us mentally stocks hundreds of photographs, subject to instant recall.”<sup>7</sup>

6 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

11 November 1989, West and East Berliners climb over the Wall. Images such as this one have become symbols of the new freedom between East and West.



© Raymond Depardon / Magnum Photos

“The familiarity of certain photographs builds our sense of the present and immediate past. Photographs lay down routes of reference, and serve as totems of causes: sentiment is more likely to crystallize around a photograph than around a verbal slogan. And photographs help construct — and revise — our sense of a more distant past, with the posthumous shocks engineered by the circulation of hitherto unknown photographs. Photographs that everyone recognizes are now a constituent part of what a society chooses to think about, or declares that it has chosen to think about.”<sup>8</sup>

Image of Iraqis and U.S. Marines pulling down a Saddam Hussein statue after the arrival of the Americans in Baghdad.



© Ilka Uimonen / Magnum Photos

8 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

© <http://www.scrapbookpages.com>



Children detained in the camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1945. Similarly, pictures of Bosnian detainees during the war in the former Yugoslavia, as well as those of prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison, had a major impact on the way the war was perceived and waged.

“Photographs had the advantage of uniting two contradictory features. Their credentials of objectivity were inbuilt. Yet they always had, necessarily, a point of view. They were a record of the real — incontrovertible, as no verbal account, however impartial, could be — since a machine was doing the recording. And they bore witness to the real — since a person had been there to take them.”<sup>9</sup>

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The images of the 1984 famine in Ethiopia, such as this one, were successful in their intention to mobilize an enormous international response by shocking the international community. But what was effectively portrayed as a natural disaster was also politically fuelled.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

“But the photographic image, even to the extent that it is a trace (not a construction made out of disparate photographic traces) cannot be simply a transparency of something that happened. It is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude.”<sup>10</sup>

“Whether the photograph is understood as a naïve object or the work of an experienced artificer, its meaning — and the viewer’s response — depends on how the picture is identified or misidentified; that is on words.”<sup>11</sup>

Gode, a barren, drought and famine-stricken region of Ethiopia. This picture’s ambiguity emphasizes that images can convey different messages depending on the words that accompany it.



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A strong and coherent visual identity helps secure support for ICRC activities.<sup>12</sup> It gives it credibility in its efforts to influence the attitudes and behaviour of those who control the fate of conflict victims and who are in a position either to facilitate or to obstruct ICRC action (e.g. donors, governments, combatants).

Nairobi. Dissemination to the paramilitary General Service Unit (GSU) of the Kenya Police. Police officer with an ICRC leaflet.



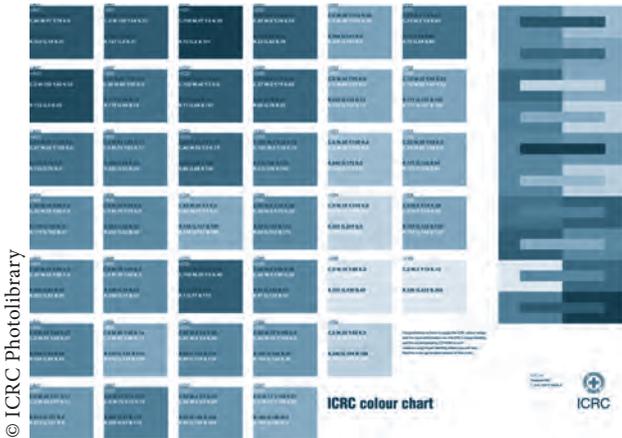
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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> The content of this section is based on the document, *Visual Identity, Corporate Design Guidelines*, International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, 2005.

A colour environment specific to the ICRC, for example, is an important part of its visual identity and helps to differentiate its products from those of others. The range of colours provided in the accompanying colour chart has been selected to convey warmth, proximity to the victims of armed conflicts and discretion, to complement the tone of ICRC communication. It includes more intense and vibrant colours for use in certain regions, for specific target audiences or to send a particular message. The aim is to have strong, dominant colours that are nonetheless appropriate for dealing with the serious topic of war.



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ICRC Colour Chart.

The image the ICRC is seeking to convey stems directly from its position as legitimate, close to the victims of armed conflict and a key reference on international humanitarian law (IHL). Both the content and tone of a communication product and its visual aspects should project the ICRC as humane, action-oriented, professional and credible.



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ICRC food distribution to vulnerable families in the province of Ghor, Afghanistan.

The choice of images is perhaps one of the most powerful elements of a visual identity. Images used should project the ICRC as a competent and efficient organization adhering to certain principles (i.e. neutrality, impartiality and independence), but also, working in close proximity to the victims of armed conflict.

Food distribution in Rwanda.



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Nicaragua. A woman is carrying free food from the ICRC food distribution program.



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Wherever possible, images should illustrate the empowerment of victims of war and show their perspective. They should not be sensationalist, but rather sensitive in their treatment of the subject matter, preserving the dignity of people enduring the realities of conflict and highlighting their rights and needs.



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Kabul, ICRC orthopaedic centre for mine victims.

Detainees must not be identifiable and the wounded and sick should not be portrayed in a manner which violates medical ethics or confidentiality.



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Burundi. Mbimba Prison, hands of a prisoner.

The ICRC uses different communication means to re-establish contact between members of families separated by conflicts or internal violence

Baghdad. Satellite phone line made available by the ICRC in cooperation with the Iraqi Red Crescent to people attempting to contact their relatives. Two sisters give news to their brother living in Germany.



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Yemen, June 2004, transmission of a Red Cross message.



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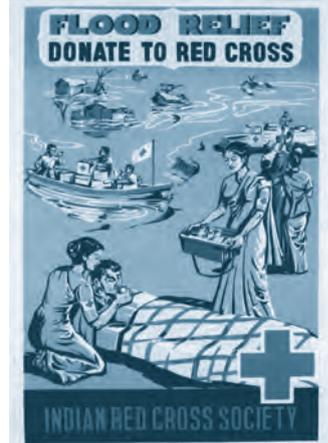
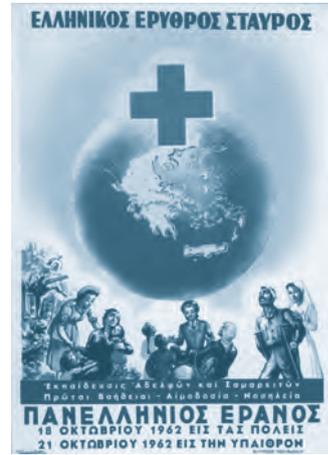
Khartoum, Hajj Yusif camp. Delivering Red Cross messages to displaced people. Lino Mundo, a Sudanese Red Crescent Tracing volunteer, and “postman of the desert” is keeping families in touch across the frontlines. Finding his way across the streets without names and the huts without numbers, Lino usually succeeds in delivering his letters, sometimes the first sign of life in years from loved ones.

The ICRC receives thousands of tracing requests every year. It uses the internet and radio programs, among other means, in cooperation with Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to help families look for their missing relatives.

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Baghdad, in front of the ICRC delegation. People coming to read the lists of persons registered by the ICRC, in the hope of finding the name of a relative from whom they have no news.



Six postcards of National Societies (American, Australian, Colombian, Egyptian, Hellenic, Indian).

