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6 Memory, Iconicity, and Virality in Action: Exploring Protest Photos Online

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Abstract
Using a photo from 1985 of a woman swinging her handbag at a neo-Nazi in Sweden as an entry point, this chapter explores the formation of collective memory through iconicity and virality with respect to digital protest imagery. It studies the visual assemblages and constellations that have formed online around this photo and then reflects on their mnemonic and activist impact. It shows how the algorithms behind search engines like Google Images place the photo in visual assemblages characterized by colliding and colluding mnemonic contexts. It also reveals how the vulnerability and violence inferred by the photo are variously emphasized in the visual constellations of different protest-related image-compilation webpages, influencing the sorts of collective action the image promotes.

Keywords: viral photos, iconic photos, collective memory, assemblages, constellations, Google

Introduction

On an overcast April day in 1985 photojournalist Hans Runesson took a photo that had a lasting impact on the visual representation and collective memory of protest in Sweden and, in relation to anti-fascist and feminist activism, arguably across the world. The photo, taken in the Swedish town of Växjo, shows a woman swinging her handbag towards the head of a neo-Nazi demonstrator. Known as *The Woman with the Handbag*, it initially spread internationally via the printed press and was soon considered iconic in Sweden. Then, around 30 years later, with the emergence of a proposal to install a statue inspired by it in the town's main square and after the identity

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of the woman had been publicly revealed as Danuta Danielsson, the photo started to appear more widely online. Its increased digital spread became most evident in 2016 when it twice 'went viral.' The first time involved its comparison with a new Swedish protest photo taken by David Lagerlöf of Tess Asplund in May 2016 as she peacefully defied a rally of around 300 neo-Nazi activists. The second involved its memeification in the USA after Donald Trump's presidential election in November 2016.[1]

Inspired by these events, this chapter uses the photo to explore the formation of collective memory through iconicity and virality within the context of digital protest imagery. Empirically, it considers how some of the online visual assemblages and constellations surrounding *The Woman with the Handbag* have been formed through the combined forces of human and non-human actors, and, in turn, their mnemonic and activist impact. Such an analysis of the visual company that the photo keeps—including other older photos lauded as iconic and more recent protest photos known for their virality—acknowledges that images are rarely viewed online in isolation and is operationalized here through the examination of different sets of images algorithmically returned by specific search engine queries as well as those from user-curated image-compilation webpages.

The chapter first distinguishes between iconic and viral photos and their role in collective memory formation by emphasizing their differing temporalities of public exposure and attention. The methods and material that underpin the chapter are then discussed. Thereafter, the chapter's analysis shows how search engines like Google Images place the photo in visual assemblages characterized by the collision and collusion of different mnemonic contexts. It also reveals how the vulnerability and violence inferred by *The Woman with the Handbag* are variously emphasized in the visual constellations of different protest-related image-compilation webpages, influencing the sorts of collective action it promotes. The chapter concludes by discussing the implications of its analysis for the continued study of memories of protest in digital settings.

Iconic and Viral Photos: Mnemonic Temporalities, Assemblages, and Constellations

Most definitions of *iconic photos* stress their capacity to: summarize historical events; invite widespread reproduction; generate emotional responses;

1 For a detailed account of the photo's history and these events, see Merrill (2020).

shape collective memory; and support political action (see Boudana et al., 2017; Dahmen et al., 2018; Hariman & Lucaites, 2007), with the latter conferring their activist potential (see Merrill, 2020). These capacities are suggested also by Cohen, Boudana, and Frosh's (2018) definition:

> (a) as a symbolically dense image that is widely replicated and circulated, attracts public attention, gives rise to public discussion and helps shape the collective mood at the time that it is first circulated, (b) as a widely recognized collective mnemonic device, representing an event, an era or an historical theme for subsequent generations, and (c) as a formal blueprint for other images made in later periods which echo or deliberately imitate it. (pp. 454–455)

While such definitions are commonly applied regardless of whether a photo was taken before or after the so-called 'digital revolution', it is widely acknowledged that the rise of digital media and technology has heavily influenced the formation of iconic photos and also led to them being integrated within the "digital memory work practices" of social movements and activists (Merrill et al., 2020). This is exemplified by the digital sharing practices that can lead to the viral spread of protest photos. Nahon and Hemsley (2013) define *virality* as:

> a social information flow process where many people simultaneously forward a specific information item, over a short period of time, within their social networks, and where the message spreads beyond their own [social] networks to different, often distant networks, resulting in a sharp acceleration in the number of people who are exposed to the message. (p. 16)

Viral photos share many of the characteristics of iconic photos, and indeed have been made sense of as *hypericons*—those photos that are "rapidly consumed online by a networked global audience" (Dahmen et al., 2018, p. 279). Unlike their predecessors, however, hypericons are usually regarded as transient rather than enduring like iconic images (Dahmen et al., 2018; Mortensen, 2017). Iconic and viral photos can thus be distinguished from one another with respect to their differing temporalities of public attention and exposure. Definitions of iconic photos suggest their longevity, but only a few emphasize that iconicity is a capacity that is reaffirmed over longer temporal durations and among various audiences that span broad chronologies and diverse geographies. In this chapter, iconic photos are explicitly conceived

as having commanded recurring public recognition over the longer term, while viral photos are conceived, at least for the time being, as only having been subjected to specific, shorter-term periods of rapid repetition. To emphasize these temporal distinctions does not mean to deny that viral protest photos can achieve iconic status or disregard scenarios where older iconic protest photos can later achieve virality. Older iconic protest photos like *The Woman with the Handbag* can 'go viral' when being (re)discovered by new audiences in light of later, resonant cycles of contention (Merrill, 2020; Smits & Ros, 2020). Instead, distinguishing between iconic and viral photos in this way means to better highlight how iconicity and virality interrelate and the consequences of their interrelation for the formation of collective memories including those related to protest.

The relationship between iconic photos and *collective memory* has come to be regarded as conventionalized (see Hariman & Lucaites, 2003). Cohen et al. (2018) for example, suggest that iconic photos are ostensibly part of *cultural memory* even if they can also contribute to *communicative memory* when circulated digitally. The corresponding relationship between viral photos and collective memory has received less scrutiny even though virality now plays a significant role in memory's new digital ecologies (see Hoskins, 2018). Ibrahim (2018) has, however, highlighted how the "pledging of memory through the viral is … about its reframing through the popular and the ephemeral where new content and exchanges are constantly vying for our attention" (p. 458). In other words, virality binds collective memory to the extenuated economies of attention created by digital media including, most exaggeratedly, those on which corporate social media platforms rely. Through virality, collective memory thus becomes influenced by a rapid turnover of content (including photos) that temporarily reaches the forefront of public attention. While few viral photos will gain the mnemonic longevity customarily attributed to earlier iconic photos the formation of new iconic photos with similar degrees of longevity to their predecessors is not precluded altogether. However, the attention economies of digital media and specifically social media platforms, which activists and social movements amongst other actors often seek to harness, displace the power to determine iconicity and collective memory that previously was mostly vested in the broadcast and printed press. These formerly controlled the public exposure of photos through editorial selection processes and their top-down, few-to-many modes of communication, but have now been supplemented, if not superseded, by the horizontal, many-to-many communication practices of digital media users (Mortensen et al., 2017). While the formation of iconic photos has always been determined by the circulatory speed and reach

enabled by the media ecologies of their time, the rapid pace of sharing made possible by digital and social media is generally considered to have led to new degrees and rates of content, and thus mnemonic substitutability.

If iconic photos can be closely identified with more deeply rooted cultural memory then viral photos might be best associated with the shorter timeframes of communicative memory. Yet, distinguishing between iconic and viral photos based on the time frames that were originally used to separate cultural and communicative memory seems inappropriate given that these sought to account for meta-historical processes (see Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995). While few today would uncritically apply these time frames to contemporary processes of collective memory formation, if the assertion that communicative memory fades after 80–100 years unless it becomes cultural memory were accepted, then many more decades would need to pass before it could be claimed that *The Woman with the Handbag* had definitively entered into cultural memory. While the mnemonic status of this photo already exceeds communicative memory and the transition to cultural memory can occur before the vanishing point of communicative memory, it is important to also remain aware of cultural memory's presentism and therefore acknowledge that iconicity too can be bestowed and 're-invested,' but also withdrawn, at any point in time (see Erll & Rigney, 2009). Judgements regarding how and when viral protest photos (that might initially be conceived as contributing primarily to communicative memory) crystallize as iconic protest photos (and come to contribute to a cultural memory of protest) should thus proceed on a case-by-case basis and rely on more indeterminate temporal arbitrations. Temporally specifying when accepted iconic protest photos later gain digital virality is arguably more straightforward—as their rapid and wide digital spread speaks for itself (see Merrill, 2020).

With both these transitions in mind, it is persuasive to think of virality as serving as a route to, or reconfirmation of, iconicity, with repetition leading to or reflecting recognition. This relational approach resonates with calls to study iconic photos more as a genre (Hariman & Lucaites, 2018). In turn, deprioritizing individual iconic photos in light of the current digital "age of image abundance" resonates with the recent reconceptualization of both collective memory and action in a more connective and multitudinous manner (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Mortensen et al., 2017, p. 74; Hoskins, 2018). In the spirit of exploring more multitudinal and connective forms of protest memory, iconic and viral photos are approached in this chapter as contributing to complex mnemonic *assemblages* and *constellations* as they are shared online and appropriated and reproduced in new digital

and digitized contexts. Assemblages are dynamic entities that "keep very heterogeneous elements together" via discursive, material, embodied and affective trajectories (Deleuze, 2007, p. 177; Chidgey, 2018). Conceptually, they are also commonly understood to emphasize the more-than-human composition of our socio-material world in ways that resonate with emerging efforts to understand the mnemonic agency of the algorithms that underpin digital platforms (Müller & Schurr, 2016; Smit, 2020). Constellations are also arrangements of heterogenous elements, but conceptually they reserve mnemonic agency only for human actors by referring to an instable interpretative procedure (Krauß, 2011). Considered both as arrangements and those arrangements made sense of by the human mind, constellations are contingent and each is just "one permutation among an infinite number of possible configurations, conjunctions and correspondences" (Gilloch, 2002, p. 25). Overall, thinking in assemblages and constellations helps highlight how photos come to be variously arranged and interpreted in different interconnecting digital groupings that involve the "collapsing" or merging of mnemonic, historical, and biographical contexts (besides others) via unintentional collisions and intentional collusions (Merrill, 2020; Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). Their distinction in terms of the degrees of non-human agency that they acknowledge is also important. Mnemonic assemblages and constellations often link digital and non-digital elements (see Merrill, 2020) but, for pragmatic reasons, this chapter's use of these concepts is limited to the analysis of different sets of images collected from digital settings via the methods detailed below.

Method: Googling "Danuta Danielsson"

The Google Images search engine was used from a computer in Sweden to generate a set of images connected to *The Woman with the Handbag* suitable for further analysis. Results returned by search engines are influenced by national censorship laws and personalization algorithms. While the impact of the latter was reduced by the use of a new internet protocol (IP) address, overall, the aspiration to explore how Google Images shapes everyday users' encounters with visual content meant that no attempt was made to evade the search engine's personalization of results for Swedish IPs or Sweden's relatively modest internet censorship laws (see Trevisan, 2014). Google Images retrieves images from webpages featuring a search query or by analysing an uploaded image and conducting a reverse image search. Here, "Danuta Danielsson"—the name of the woman in the photo—was used

as a search query. This also influenced the returned results because, as mentioned, Danielsson's name only became more widely known from 2015 onwards, meaning that earlier digital reproductions of the photo were missed. However, earlier studies of the photo using Google's reverse image search showed that the increase in its digital appearance was contemporaneous with widening knowledge of Danielsson and that while it may have previously been more associated with its creator's name, Hans Runesson, since 2015 it has been increasingly associated with its main protagonist (see Merrill, 2020). These factors legitimized the search query used in this study, while an interest in the other sorts of images associated with the photo precluded the use of a reverse image search because, although this would reveal where the photo appeared online, it would then require excessive effort to survey or collect the images that it appeared alongside.

Carried out on 17 November 2020, the search returned 377 images from 187 unique web addresses. The algorithm behind Google Images ranked and selected these results according to criteria including the quality of the image, the placement of the image on the website, and the authority of the website that featured the image. The Google Images algorithm also prioritizes more recent digital content, and while it picks up particularly impactful social media content, it is generally inefficient at returning results from social media platforms (Åkerlund, 2020). Overall, these images formed a digital visual assemblage surrounding *The Woman with the Handbag* that was specific to the user's (in this case the author's) history of digital activity at the moment the search was carried out and the location from where it was requested. In this sense, the returned images are only indicative rather than comprehensively representative of the broader digital mnemonic assemblages to which the photo contributes. While the creation of this assemblage of images was highly influenced by the Google Images' algorithm, overall it is more appropriately approached as the output of a hybrid process involving combinations of human, user and non-human, computational agency (see Merrill, forthcoming). The algorithm was after all designed by humans, trained on human digital activity and applied to content created by humans (see Gillespie, 2014).

Each of the returned 377 images was downloaded, had its web address recorded and was given a unique identifier corresponding to its Google rank. A total of 41 images turned out to be collages, adding 51 images to the sample, meaning that 428 images were analysed in total. All were categorized with respect to their primary content and how they connected to *The Woman with the Handbag*. As a human interpretative process in itself, this procedure identified constellations within the assemblage of images returned by Google Images. Four categories emerged inductively after multiple viewings of

the images. These were: the photo and its derivatives; other protest images (excluding the photo); statue images (excluding those based on the photo); other historical photographs (excluding the photo and other protest images); and other images.[2] A second analytical step involved the closer reading of 13 image-compilation webpages that contributed images to the Google Images results. These webpages accounted for 57 of the original 377 search results (circa 15%). Combined, these actively curated webpages included 233 images and were also treated as mnemonic constellations.

Since this volume is published in Amsterdam, the images that are reproduced in collages as part of this chapter's analysis are done so according to the Dutch Copyright Law's 'citation right,' which is similar, yet more restrictive, to the 'fair use' provision common in anglophone legal contexts. While acknowledging that copyright law itself influences processes of iconization and, following the digitalization of society, has increasingly shaped collective memory processes (see Merrill, 2013), in practical terms this means all images have been reproduced in monochrome and different dimensions to their originals in collages that are directly discussed in the text. What were originally colour images are indicated in these collages by black borders.

Predicted by the chapter's empirical starting point—*The Woman with the Handbag*—and in light of this volume's specific focus, the analysis of these different assemblages and constellations leans towards issues and examples that connect most directly to the interfaces between collective memory and social movements, activism, and protest. While the analysis of the Google Images assemblage speaks most directly to questions and issues regarding how protest is publicly remembered that of the image-compilation webpages touches also on the mobilizing capacity of visual memories of protest.

The Algorithmic Assemblage: Google Images' Colliding and Colluding Memories

The visual results returned by Google Images created a mnemonic assemblage characterized by a multitude of meanings and associations and an array of contextual collisions and collusions. Still, 134 of the 428 images did relate directly to *The Woman with the Handbag*, reflecting and reconfirming its iconic status. These included: the photo itself (50); the statue based on the photo designed by Susanna Arwin around its 30th anniversary (50);

2 Seven images were categorized as both protest and statue images.

other representations of Danielsson based on the photo including graphics and gestures (33); and a still of Danielsson from a Swedish television film crew's footage of the exact moment the photo was taken from a different angle (1). These images were generally the highest ranked results (including 18 of the top 20 results) indicating the effectiveness of the Google Images search algorithm.

But the algorithm did not always return the sorts of results that users might expect. A total of 143 images did not convey any clear visual relation to *The Woman with the Handbag* or the search query. These 'other' images were returned because they appeared online in the vicinity of the search query and additional image- and text-based markers associated with it. Many Google Images users might consider these to be irrelevant results, but they also illustrate the algorithmic agency of search engines and their ability to influence the visual assemblages that users encounter in unexpected ways. Although somewhat arbitrary, these results have the potential to trigger more random or creative interpretive associations with *The Woman with the Handbag*. The images, few if any of which could be classified as iconic or viral, in other words, exemplified the sorts of non-intentional contextual collisions that can occur within algorithmically generated assemblages of images: *The Woman with the Handbag* next to a photo of doctors in personal protective equipment; an electoral map of the USA; a tattoo of a tree on a woman's back; a logo declaring "save our steel."

The remaining 148 images reflected clearer associations with the search query via three different lines of connection: historical photos (35), statuary (62), and protest (61). These photos indicate how the Google Images algorithm creates assemblages of results that at least partially reflect the deliberate interpretative and curatorial efforts of human internet users. This is borne out by the 13 image-compilation webpages from which some of the search results originated. Four of these webpages positioned the photo within groups of other historical photos; four positioned the photo and the statue it inspired within collections of other statues; and five featured the photo within arrangements of protest images. These three constellations, discernable within the larger assemblage, are each discussed below before the protest image-compilation webpages are analysed in more detail in the next section.

Historical Photos

Most of the images categorized as historical photos (Figure 6.1) were connected through aesthetic similarity rather than common content. All but two

rely on the monochrome aesthetic that is widely perceived to authentically convey "a basic quality of pastness" (Grainge, 1999, p. 385). Their constellation contains iconic photos including a colourized version of Juan Guzmán's 1936 Spanish Civil War photo of Marina Ginestà that has gained mnemonic significance within contemporary anti-fascist and feminist activist circles. It also contains Charles C. Ebbets' 1932 *Lunch atop a Skyscraper* and Richard Drew's *The Falling Man*. Via the Google Images algorithm, these photos, as with those that originate from image-compilation webpages with titles like *25 Interesting Historical Photos*, create striking contextual collisions and a multitude of mnemonic associations. In this case, an image of a group of construction workers enjoying a break during the building of the Rockefeller Centre in 1932 is refracted by that of a lone trader falling to their death shortly before the collapse of the World Trade Centre on 9/11.[3]

Threads of more self-evident mnemonic continuity can also be found in the constellation, with many of the photos relating to Germany's Nazi past. Specifically, multidirectional memories of the Holocaust (see Rothberg, 2006) are discernible that foreground elements of Polish-born Danuta Danielsson's biography, given that it is widely accepted that her mother spent time in a Nazi concentration camp. A number of these photos originate from the so-called 'Solahütte album' that shows SS personnel from Auschwitz enjoying themselves at a holiday resort. The Solahütte photos first gained public attention and exposure when they were donated to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2007, highlighting the temporal complexities inherent within photography's relationship with collective memory. They exemplify how a new genre of 'forgotten' or 'rare historical' photos is gaining prominence online alongside those of iconic and viral photos. *The Woman with the Handbag* is also occasionally framed in this way—that it can be considered iconic by some and forgotten by others highlights again the impact of different audiences on the mnemonic significance of photos more generally.

Statuary

The statuary constellation (Figure 6.2) first and foremost indexes the activist response to the Växjo municipal government's 2015 decision not to install a statue based on *The Woman with the Handbag* for fear that it might promote violence. Across Sweden, people placed handbags on military statues and shared photos of them on social media in order to reveal the hypocrisy

3 This juxtaposition may gain greater impact for those who know that Danielsson took her own life in 1988 by jumping from Vaxjo's water tower.

of this decision. Such photos appear regularly in the constellation, often alongside those of the proposed statue itself and other statues by the same artist. Relatedly, one of the statuary image-compilation webpages listed nine Swedish statues that its creator considered more problematic than the one proposed. These photos foreground how Google Images not only algorithmically triggers memory of the original event captured in *The Woman with the Handbag*, but also of secondary events related to the renewed public attention that the photo gained around its 30th anniversary.

As already mentioned, the Google Images algorithm prioritizes more recent content leading to chronologically specific visual assemblages. Reflecting this, the statuary constellation also foregrounds the protests of summer 2020 that led to the toppling of statues like that of Edward Colston in Bristol, UK (which features in two photos) within a broader cycle of decolonization and Black Lives Matter activism. Against the public debate about how to best memorialize contentious pasts that these protests triggered, *The Woman with the Handbag* and its statue (eventually installed elsewhere in Sweden), started to become visually connected to images of toppling statues including that of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad (removed in 2003) and Christopher Columbus in Chicago (removed in 2020). Within this new "collusionary" collapsed interpretative context (see Davis & Jurgenson, 2014) the photo went viral for a third time when the founder of a UK-based anti-racism group tweeted an image of it alongside its statue.[4] Remediating social media content from this period and including this tweet, three statuary-related image-compilation webpages displayed photos of statues "better than the ones being toppled," "that will restore your faith in humanity," and "that might leave you completely indifferent until we reveal their stories."[5] While some of the photos on these webpages reflected some degree of activist sentiment, they also accounted for many of the more eclectic images in the constellation.

Protest

The protest constellation (Figure 6.3) includes other photos of the protest during which *The Woman with the Handbag* was taken, but also those that

4 https://twitter.com/jdpoc/status/1270391835047976961

5 https://frontpagelive.com/2020/06/20/statues-better-than-ones-being-brought-down/; https://www.popsugar.co.uk/news/positive-historical-statues-around-the-world-47548267; https://brightside.me/creativity-art/10-sculptures-that-might-leave-you-completely-indifferent-until-we-reveal-their-stories-759110/

visually connect the photo to an array of historical and more recent protests from across the world. Some of these show recent protests involving the toppling and defacing of statuary linking to the statuary constellation. Others feature recent far-right protests and anti-fascist counter-protests illustrating again the significance of *The Woman with the Handbag* within the cultural identities and memories of contemporary anti-fascist groups (Merrill, 2020). This significance is supported by mnemonic visual reference points in the form of historical photos of protest and defiance towards Nazi Germany including of a prisoner of war confronting Heinrich Himmler and another of a man refusing to give the Nazi salute during the public launch of a ship in Hamburg in 1936. Beyond this, women protestors feature prominently in the constellation, indexing the photo's growing influence within the broader feminist movement. While many of the photos of women protestors are more recent and arguably known for their shorter-term virality rather than longer-term iconicity, a number of deeper visual historical references to women protestors are also present. These include photos of the death of suffragette Emily Wilding Davison at the Epsom Derby in 1913, American female civil rights activists Gloria Richardson and Elizabeth Eckford from the 1950s and 1960s, and the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in the 1980s.

The feminist and anti-fascist mnemonic constellations that *The Woman with the Handbag* contributes to and connects are further indicated by at least four of the five protest image-compilation webpages.[6] These four webpages contributed 13 photos to the Google Images results but contained 110 images in total. Three of them, collectively containing 103 photos, specifically feature women protestors under the feminist action frames conveyed by their titles: *53 of the Most Powerful Images of Women Protesters of All Time; A Woman's Place is in the Revolution: These Powerful Images from around the World & throughout History Prove It; International Women's Day: Iconic Images of Women Protesters.*[7] The fourth, which is entitled *There's a Tumblr Full of Nazis Getting Punched Because that Will Always be Awesome* foregrounds the photo's anti-fascist significance.[8] All are discussed more in the next section.

6 The fifth protest image-compilation webpage, entitled *10 Incredible Photos of Defiance from History*, is more eclectic with only some references to feminist and anti-fascist activism. https://www.indy100.com/viral/ten-incredible-photos-defiance-history-past-present-edl-7392886

7 https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20180308-international-womens-day-iconic-images-of-women-protesters; https://www.boredpanda.com/powerful-women-protesters/; https://www.girltalkhq.com/womans-place-revolution-powerful-images-around-world-throughout-history-prove/

8 https://dangerousminds.net/comments/theres_a_tumblr_full_of_nazis_getting_punched

Figure 6.1: Constellation of historical photos. Collage based on a Google Image search (September 2021). Produced by Samuel Merrill.

Figure 6.2: Constellation of statuary photos. Collage based on a Google Image search (September 2021). Produced by Samuel Merrill.

Figure 6.3: Constellation of protest photos. Collage based on a Google Image search (September 2021). Produced by Samuel Merrill.

The Curated Protest Constellations: Image-Compilation Webpages, Visual Templates, and the Mobilization of Vulnerable and Violent Activism

The three image-compilation webpages dedicated specifically to women protestors create mnemonic constellations that through visual aggregation amplify each individual photo's mobilizing potential. Across them, one particular visual template dominates. This template involves close-up profile shots of women protestors facing-up to and standing-off against male adversaries usually in the form of military and police personnel (clad in body armour and wielding weapons) or far-right activists (Figure 6.4). One example is Lagerlöf's May 2016 photo of Asplund, which appears in three of the five image-compilation constellations. Appearing equally often is a photo of an unknown woman protestor staring at a riot policeman in Santiago, Chile, from September 2016 and that of Saffiyah Khan smiling down a far-right English Defence League protestor in Birmingham, UK, from April 2017. These photos are only out-represented across the protest image-compilation webpages by *The Woman with the Handbag*, which, for sampling reasons, obviously appears in all, and by Jonathan Bachman's photo of Ieshia Evans at a Baton Rouge Black Lives Matter protest from July 2016, which appears in four of the five constellations.

These four particular *standoff* photos are known for their virality and at least Bachman's photo has been academically scrutinized as an iconic photo (see Dahmen et al., 2018) but none has yet displayed the sorts of longevity that have traditionally characterized iconic photos. Furthermore, these and many other similar examples do not so much establish a 'blueprint' for future imitations—to recall Cohen, Boudana, and Frosh's definition of iconic photos (2018)—as follow one. The blueprint that they follow is at least as old as Marc Riboud's 1967 iconic protest photo entitled *The Ultimate Confrontation: The Flower and the Bayonet*, which captured pacifist Jane Rose Kasmir placing a flower in the bayonet of a Pentagon guard during an anti-Vietnam War protest.[9] Viral protest photos like Lagerlöf's and Bachman's in essence capture reenactments of Kasmir whether or not their subjects (in this case Asplund and Evans) are aware of their gestural remembrances. In other words, they indicate the existence of compositional, chorographical, and performative repertoires through which past protests come to shape those in the present even as the origins of these repertoires become obscured.

9 A similar iconic photo known as *Flower Power* and showing a male protestor called George Harris was taken at the same event by Bernie Boston.

Figure 6.4: The Standoff Template. Collage based on the five protest image-compilation webpages (September 2021). Produced by Samuel Merrill.

Different iterations of Riboud's photo, for example, only feature in two of the five protest image compilations suggesting that this icon is becoming mnemonically overshadowed by its later viral visual echoes.

Visual echoes of Lagerlöf's photo can additionally be traced in Bachman's, adding resonance to Asplund's words when she was interviewed about the photo: "I hope something positive will come out of the picture. Maybe what I did can be a symbol that we can do something—if one person can do it, anyone can" (cited in Crouch, 2016). In this sense, standoff protest photos are collectively powerful in suggesting that anyone can resist threats to the ideas and causes that they believe in, but their increasing prevalence can also flatten and equate the individual specificity of these same ideas and causes. Their near routine recreation and, in turn, saturation suggests that photojournalists and civilian journalists mimic the content and conditions of those photos that have previously 'gone viral' or have been deemed iconic in order to maximize their circulation. In short, they know what sort of photographic compositions or in Cartier-Bresson's word's "decisive moments" (1952) they are looking for based on previous precedents of iconicity and virality. These moments are arguably easier to 'hunt' with digital cameras given that these provide greater opportunities to capture a large batch of fleeting scenes without wasting film, which can then be scoured for qualifying photos later (Suler, 2012). Likewise, in an era when protests are increasingly choreographed and success is as dependent on documenting activism in order to gain visibility for activist causes as on the activism itself, protestors

are themselves aware of what types of photos will gain the greatest public exposure and publicity for their cause. They are thus prone to reenacting certain symbolic physical gestures and stances knowingly or otherwise.

In the longer term, the risk is that the predictability of standoff protest photos may actually render them banal, undermining their mobilizing power and activist potential. In their choregraphed, repetitive, and interchangeable composition, these standoff photos already appear as qualitatively different from those individually exceptional protest photos like *The Woman with the Handbag*. The exceptionality of this photo lies in the violence of its "decisive moment." Few images in the Google assemblage match its inferred violence, potentially because of Swedish and EU internet censorship laws against violent content. Likewise, only one photo in the three image-compilations of women protestors suggests similar degrees of physical violence. It shows an unidentified woman swinging a metal bar at a riot police officer during the 1990 London Poll Tax protests. These constellations thus reinforce the idea that women protestors are, if not exclusively then at least typically, non-violent. Furthermore, they reiterate the idea that women protestors can gain greatest visibility for their causes by deliberately exposing themselves to power. Indeed, standoff protest photos illustrate what Butler (2016) discusses as embodied acts of vulnerability and their capacity to be "an incipient and enduring moment of resistance" (p. 25). Some of the featured protestors like Asplund identify as pacifists but Evans has rejected this label and claimed that Bachman's photo misrepresents her stance on violent political action: "I'm not against protesting peacefully, and I'm not pro-violence, but I'm definitely in favor of defending yourself" (cited in Jones, 2018). With violent political action rarely advocated within feminist movements, the violence displayed in these photos of women protestors is usually directed *towards* them rather than *enacted by* them. In this way, women protestors are generally mnemonically mobilized to place themselves in harm's way rather than do harm themselves.

Thus, within these constellations the violence suggested by *The Woman with the Handbag* is tempered and the photo is recontextualized, to some degree at least, as non-violent. Its rereading in this way is borne out by some of the arguments mobilized after the statue based on the photo was rejected by Växjö's council because of its perceived promotion of violence. For example, Arwin, the statue's designer, was quoted as saying that the photo "is more like a symbol of anti-violence and a feeling of 'enough is enough'" (cited in "Swedes Rally in Bizarre Handbag Protest," 2015). These comments, like those of Evans, actually resonate more with militant anti-fascist understandings of the place of violence within activism, namely as a legitimate form of self-defence that can prevent the exceptional violence of fascism and thus

reduce overall harm (see Copsey & Merrill, 2020). Overall, then, *The Woman with the Handbag* arguably sits more comfortably with visual expressions of anti-fascist violence than feminist vulnerability. This is illustrated by its appearance on an image-compilation webpage, which borrows images from a Tumblr called *Nazis Getting Punched* that was created after a video showing neo-Nazi Richard Spencer getting punched by a militant anti-fascist during the inauguration of Donald Trump went viral in January 2017.[10] Similar to other widely used contemporary visual signifiers of anti-fascist violence like the so-called anti-fascist kick (see Lundberg, 2020), the earliest images of 'Nazi punches' were graphic renderings dating to the 1930s and 1940s including the one on the cover of the 1941 debut issue of the Captain America comic, which showed the superhero knocking out Adolf Hitler. This cover is one of the seven images featured in the Nazi punching image-compilation webpage.[11] With the exception of *The Woman with the Handbag*, all of these images show male characters throwing punches. Like the "anti-fascist kick," the "Nazi punch" thus also indicates militant anti-fascist activism's common reliance on a predominantly "masculine capacity to use violence if necessary" (Lundberg, 2020, p. 285). All the images besides *The Woman with the Handbag* on this webpage are also fictional and, besides a film still showing Indiana Jones punching a Nazi (see Merrill, 2017), they are all comic book renderings. This suggests the rarity of Nazi punch photos but also perhaps the legal, ethical, and moral judgements made when considering whether to remediate photos of explicit violence. It is harder to closely recreate or photographically capture rapid, and often spontaneous, violent actions like punches and kicks as compared to those more slowly unfolding and, in many instances, premeditated actions captured in standoff protest photos. This may limit the extent to which violent iconic images can become blueprints that are later imitated in protest settings, at least in the case of photographic imitations. Still, the Tumblr on which this particular image-compilation webpage was based contains a number of photos, videos, and video stills from recent anti-fascist protests that, in showing actual Nazi punches, exceed the inferred violence of *The Woman with the Handbag.* These suggest that the increasingly common rallying cry to "punch a Nazi" is being accompanied by the emergence of corresponding visual templates. Regardless of whether *The Woman with the Handbag* serves as a blueprint for these photos or indeed comes to serve as one for even more accurate future reenactments, these developments foreground the role of violence in determining iconicity.

10 https://punchingnazis.tumblr.com/

11 This website's activist framing justified its consideration as a "protest image-compilation."

Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated how, in different digital settings, older, iconic protest photos and younger, viral protest photos come into contact with each other within mnemonic assemblages and constellations that influence not only the formation of collective memory, but also ideas about collective action. In the case of *The Woman with the Handbag*, its appearance in assemblages of images that have been algorithmically generated by search engines like Google Images brings it into dialogue with a multitude of mnemonic visual reference points that shape its public remembrance and ability to mobilize activism. Some of these visual reference points are relatively banal and arbitrary, creating contextual collisions that foreground the search engine's algorithmic agency. While these can encourage the search engine's users to explore and fashion more speculative mnemonic connections they could also potentially erode the photo's activist impact. Others reveal more substantive mnemonic collusions whether in terms of the photo's contribution to a general canon of historical photos, its enrollment in debates regarding public statuary, or its status within the visual repertoires of activists. In the latter instance, *The Woman with the Handbag* and the collective memory it conveys have been drawn into visual exchange with a host of other protest events and memories in ways that mutually enhance its and the other protest photos' mobilizing power via processes of visual accumulation. At the same time, this accumulation risks undermining the historical and political specificity of the activist causes and efforts enshrined in each photo.

While it might be tempting to suggest that the algorithm behind Google Images is primarily responsible for this, any complete rethink of mnemonic agency along these lines needs to be tempered by the acknowledgement that many of the results algorithmically returned by the search engine still reflected human interpretative procedures including those behind the visual constellations of protest evident on the different image-compilation webpages. In other words, the outputs of search engines are agentically hybrid (see Merrill, forthcoming) insofar as although they may have been algorithmically determined their inputs are still largely curated by humans. This is made clear by the protest photo image-compilation webpages discussed in this chapter. Created by various internet users, they illustrate how *The Woman with the Handbag* has been refracted via its inclusion in different mnemonic constellations to promote both non-violent feminist activism that relies on visibility garnered through vulnerability and militant anti-fascist activism that, to a greater extent, consents to the use of symbolic and

physical violence. Within these constellations, older iconic protest photos like *The Woman with the Handbag* are accompanied and outnumbered by newer viral protest photos, many of which rely on the standoff template. The abundance of this type of protest photo actually shows signs of mnemonically obscuring their predecessors (as the underrepresentation of Riboud's photos of Kasmir across the studied image-compilation webpages suggests) even as they serve as records of their reenactment.

Highly sought by activists, virality remains difficult to predict and perhaps even harder to intentionally bring about (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). Earlier iconic and viral protest photos can contain the choreographical and gestural clues and cues that might enable activists to gain widespread visibility for their causes via their digital memory work practices (see Merrill et al., 2020). In this sense, it might be productive to begin thinking about how iconicity and visual memories of protest spread by association. Has *The Woman with the Handbag* somehow lent iconicity and with it visibility to Lagerlöf's photo of Asplund? Has that photo, in turn, done something similar for Bachman's photo of Evans? Might the plethora of compositionally similar viral standoff protest photos be collectively approached as iconic insofar as they summarize and visually remember an extended period of heightened global protest roughly spanning the years between 2015 and 2020? Besides exploring such questions there is need for more research into how digital visual assemblages and constellations of protest are consumed by internet users. For instance, how do they and the memories they foreground more directly influence the collective action repertoires and remembrances practices of activists and social movements? It is hoped that, however modestly, this chapter will support such efforts by stressing how the visual company that a protest photo comes to keep online, due to a hybrid of human and non-human agencies, can influence how it is remembered and, in turn, the sorts of activism it might mobilize.

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