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War through Visual Rhetoric



Fig. 1. Nicole Tung, *Photo of a man sitting in his car amid the destruction of a school.* (Tung)

The study of visual rhetoric traditionally has been dismissed due to its perceived lack of sophistication compared to the field of verbal rhetoric. It would seem impossible to have the tradition notion of a “thesis” within in image after all, unless you want to plaster it in text. However, in today’s modern world, this view is changing. In her introduction “Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric,” Sonja K. Foss introduces her developing view on visual rhetoric. She argues that while it is different from verbal rhetoric, it is still a useful tool in persuasion that

deserves to be studied like any other field. Visual rhetoric has become more important than ever as the primary form of media that people consume increasingly shifts to visuals. One such usage of visual rhetoric is in the topic of war. Throughout human history, conflict has come time and time again to rip apart people. Increasingly, war has become grander and more destructive, relegating it to a drastic means to an end that was reserved for only the most egregious situations, lest the full destructive force of humanity is unleashed on Mother Nature, and we must reap those consequences. In this essay, I will analyze a digital image through Koss' lens of visual rhetoric in order to make the case that war is an unnecessary cruelty. The image "Man sitting in his car amid the destruction of a school" presents multiple interrelationships that illustrate a common societal assumption that human suffering should be avoided.

First, some background about the image that I will write about in this essay. Historically, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization between the U.S. and its European allies has been seen as a threat to Russia as it encroaches on the territories surrounding it. Ukraine, once being a part of the Soviet Union, therefore has a special place in the heart of the Russian leader as what was "formerly theirs." Putin declared war on Ukraine in support of separatist groups that favored Russia, leading to the conflict that goes on today. Nicole Tung, who is a photojournalist, has covered conflicts like this going back to the Syrian Civil War, refugee crisis, and more. She was born in Hong Kong and graduated from New York University. Her photo she took of the destroyed school is one of her attempts to capture her views on war into a visual form. The photo, published in the New York Times, is aimed at the NYT's audience of mostly English-speaking Americans. She hopes to display the reality of war, and how it affects people's own communities.

Beginning with the target image, I will analyze one interrelationship between the man and the school. In Tung's photograph, the man that is sitting in the car at the front of the frame is looking away from the destroyed school present a small distance in the background, slightly blurred. It seems like he doesn't want to see it any longer; that the war has created destruction he hoped to never see come to his home. The focus on the man, rather than the destruction in the background, reflects an intentional choice that Tung made during the photo's composition (Tung). Tung displays and focuses on this man's emotional face in her photograph in order to conceptualize the effect that war has on individuals, which is easier captured visually than described in verbal rhetoric. The American target audience has a special place for those who are fighting for their own liberty, so by connecting the audience to this man's plight and emotion, it works to create a powerful appeal that would have been more difficult through writing. Tung hopes that by connecting the audience to the feeling of losing your community, that her audience will see how war creates human suffering, even for those you may not know. The destruction was caused by humans at humans; therefore, it could have been completely avoided. Americans with their deep roots in communities, family, and education would be able to immediately connect with this loss. All of this helps illustrate the assumption that suffering should be avoided due to the emotional connection we have as humans.

Next, I will analyze the second interrelationship between the woman taking a photo of the destruction and the man in the car. Not everyone is strong enough to face the destruction of their own community. Because of the man's expression, one can infer that the man has some connection to the place of the bombing. The man, looking away while the woman can face the destruction and photograph it says something about the timing that Tung chose to take the photo at (Tung). The photo was taken as a part of a media tour funded by the Ukrainian government,

meaning that the woman taking the photo is probably foreign. She doesn't have a personal connection to any of the locations here. Just like to her audience, the school is nothing more than a building to her. Perhaps this makes it easier for her to take it in and capture a photograph; while the man in the car, who seems to have a connection, is having a hard time facing it. Through this juxtaposition of the emotional reactions, Tung hopes to use visual rhetoric to display to her audience that same feeling that the photographer in the background is feeling. This disconnection helps to ground her audience as a part of the image and consider the contrast in feelings that deepens a connection between the audience and the man. War, as it affects people, causes immense suffering. Tung is only displaying this suffering in a form that is visually presentable. The two subject's differing experience highlights that, in the man's inability to face it and the woman's necessity to document it. This all connects to a crucial societal assumption that Tung is attempting to support.

An axiom of many arguments is that human suffering should be avoided at all costs. The target's visual argument also has this underlying assumption that suffering is unnecessary and cruel and attempts to use it to hold its argument up. By illustrating the suffering to his community that the man must face, this basic human principle is supported through an emotional response. Tung captures this emotional response that the man has to create a connection between her target audience and the man. Of course, everyone processes this differently based on their connection and personality; hence why the woman can take the photograph without the same reaction that the man has. The woman who is seen taking the photograph is also providing a service to the man—she is capturing the evidence and supporting the man through her actions. This critical connection between the man and the woman, observed by Tung's audience, creates a strong support for this assumption; anyone who has experienced loss, which amounts to most

of humanity, can connect and realize that war created this suffering, and we have the power to stop it. These are the means that Tung uses to support the argument that war is an atrocity.

To avoid human suffering would require pushing war out of the reach of ourselves. War has broad, wide-reaching effects on not just the immediate area but the entire global sphere of influence. We all, as humans, have a basic obligation to treat each other with dignity and respect. War is an affront to all that it means to provide this dignity. Therefore, war should sooner rather than later be seen as a vestige of an uncivilized global society.

Works Cited

- Tung, Nicole. Photo of a man sitting in his car amid the destruction of a school. The New York Times, 14 September 2022, [nytimes.com/article/russia-invades-ukraine-photos.html](https://www.nytimes.com/article/russia-invades-ukraine-photos.html).
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