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How do Comics Engage with the Vietnam War? Two Photography Case Studies

This article brings together questions of war, photography, and comics. Though these three concepts may seem disparate, they are linked within the context of the Vietnam War thanks to the war's intense photogenicity and the varied corpus of comics that recreate it. The number of photographers and photojournalists who were granted access, coupled with the technology which made quick transmission of images possible, meant that the war was captured in minute detail. This visual access to the conflict for those at home several thousand miles away meant almost immediate images and a play-by-play reporting of the conflict. To be able to see what is happening without censor (or seeming censure to those at fault) meant that the American public could witness the war in a new way. Following the words of Lyndon Johnson, Michael Mandelbaum suggests that 'the United States lost the war because it was televised' (Mandelbaum 157). Mandelbaum writes:

> Regular exposure to the ugly realities of battle is thought to have turned the public against the war, forcing the withdrawal of American troops and leaving the way clear for the eventual Communist victory […] The fact that the war was televised has one shortcoming; it does not stand up to scrutiny (Mandelbaum 157–58).

The public were viewing a war live on television for the first time; they were shocked by the realities of conflict and the many ways in which what they saw did not line up with their preconceptions of the conflict. The reconciliation of the public face of war with the military's rules of engagement is not the topic of discussion here. My focus is on how a war that was broadcast into millions of homes daily created images that became iconic, and how those images then infiltrated American popular culture to create both protest and comics.

This article is divided into two sections. In the first, I consider how comics engage with the photographs that became emblematic of the war. I discuss the issues at play in the reimagination and remediation of photographs into comics panels. I analyze what the inclusion of each image does for both the comic and the photograph itself: How are they used and to what end? How do the two image forms interact to create a new image? To what extent is the original context lost? In the second section, I perform a close analysis of two famous war photographs – one taken in Saigon and one in the USA – to discuss their relationship to both the war itself and the protest movements that rose up against it. For large numbers of Americans – students and civilians – their protest action was spurred on by the images distributed by the media and these photographs are among the most impactful. The first case study is Eddie Adams' "Saigon Execution" (1968), which appears in several comics, including *The 'Nam* by Doug Murray and Mike Golden (1988) and *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui (2017); the second is Derf Backderf's *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio* (2020) and its retelling of the backstory to John Filo's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of the death of Jeffrey Miller during the Kent State protest on May 4th, 1970. I consider the ways in which these two photographs have infiltrated comics, the ways they have been appropriated and remediated. How have they become a part of the iconic visual landscape of the war? And how are they used in comics?

The War in Comics and Photography

In a war in which optics are everything and nothing is off-limits to the camera, atrocity and protest become linked by the image. The war itself is susceptible to the power of the image and, moreover, the image-as-synecdoche: The image *becomes* the war as a capsule of condensed meaning. What is crucial to remember is that in the process of condensation, meaning is elided and simplified. The nuance of an image, its specific contexts, often become lost as the 'official narrative' becomes fixed; captions and the publication location play important roles in this fixing of meaning. The individual actions, choices, and nuance that sit at the core of the image's meaning and context becomes lost in what the viewer (the media, the foreign public, the army, the government) want it to mean. This is not to say that the image begins to represent (or, more crudely, "mean") something else; it does suggest that an overarching monolithic meaning is likely to take hold.

Here we may pause to consider the non-universality of the image. Though we exist in a culture that is saturated by images – something that has been gaining momentum since the advent of print and shows no sign of abating after the birth of the internet – it would be wrong to say that the image is universal. Even at the most basic level, a piece of visual communication is not guaranteed to be internationally understood. Color symbolism is one example: While red is the color of danger and warning signs, it is also related to love and passion; in China, it is the color of luck and good fortune. A more culturally contentious example is the swastika: While nowadays most associate it with far-right political ideology, especially relating to 1930s and 40s German politics, it is a common symbol of prosperity in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain cultures. The appropriation of the swastika from common religious and cultural icon to symbol of hatred plainly shows that image connotations are bound up in culture to the point that they become fixed in mono-meaning: There is little room for nuance, and though for many around the world the swastika retains its original meaning, it has been largely subsumed.

While many of the most famous photographs of the war have come to represent certain events, aspects of warfare, or emotions, their immense iconic power remains in their original contexts. Nick Ut's 1972 "The Terror of War", in which a naked child runs along a road, screaming from napalm burns, is one of these photographs. The official title of the photograph (it is also known as "Napalm Girl") can easily become its entire meaning – a photograph showing that war is terrible. But this is an image showing the life-threatening, intensely traumatizing injuries of a nine-year-old child, Phan Thị Kim Phúc, and her brothers. The napalm that was dropped hit a village full of innocent Vietnamese civilians, not combatants. And the damage that this child experienced to her entire body is something she still lives with – and speaks about – today. The specifics of the image are far more horrific, affective, and emotionally harrowing than the general reading allows: The elision of context is the deadening of emotional response.

Where does comics enter this conversation? There are two points to consider: the overall condensation of the image within the comics panel and the remediation of photography as part of the image and narrative. Art Spiegelman describes the creation of comics as an act of "intense condensation" (Spiegelman and Chute 175). The comics creator, like the photographer, must frame each panel or shot to capture what will tell the story and represent the moment most accurately, affectively, and succinctly. However, as comics are typically designed to be read as images in sequence, we do not tend to consider the individual panel, whereas photographs are commonly viewed as singular entities. However, each individual image is only one small selection of what is likely dozens of images taken in very quick succession, later to be presented on a contact sheet, a collection of negatives from a roll of photographic film displayed on one sheet for ease of editing and selection. In many cases, the contact sheet may capture shots seconds apart. There is a narrative at work between the images; they are part of a larger *fumetti*.[i] Henri Cartier-Bresson states:

> The contact sheet is like the analyst's couch. It's also a kind of seismograph, recording the instant. It's all there, what surprises us is what we catch, what we miss, what disappears (Copans and Neumann).

Each photograph is a single panel from a comic that spans only a few seconds; it is deliberately chosen to be the representative of that time. Though they exist in different artistic spaces and, typically, for different purposes, this similarity in the way that comics and photographs exist in relation to themselves brings the two into closer relationship than initially considered.

There are many examples of comics redrawing and re-presenting famous photographs within the narrative: an example of the relationship between the two forms and the ubiquity of some photographs in discussion of certain events. The super-condensed visual shorthand that is found in, for example, Joe Rosenthal's "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima" (American soldiers in the Pacific theater of the Second World War, 1945) or Kevin Carter's "The Vulture and the Little Girl" (Sudanese famine, 1993) becomes a useful resource in the condensed and condensing form of comics. The photograph is already laden with meaning (or mono-meaning) and so it is ripe for the comic artist's picking.

The photograph's presence within the comic is disruptive. It forces the reader to consider that the narrative they are consuming may be a work of non-fiction (if they were not already aware) or to blur the lines between fiction and truth in the case of a series like *The 'Nam*, which is clearly fictional at the surface level. The inclusion of a photograph that is a part of the historical and verifiable 'truth' of an event roots the narrative within historical events and therefore the full narrative receives a patina of truth, if not a full endorsement. We trust that photographs such as these, taken in the heat of action, are not manipulated. Or, more accurately, that before the widespread availability of editing software, photojournalism was an unedited representation of an event. But, as photographer and scholar Mary Pearson (2022) points out, the manipulation of a photograph can happen at all levels of its creation: in the staging of the image's scene, the framing and positioning of the lens, and the techniques used in the dark room when the image is developed. All of these stages come before the image is given a title and caption that may further manipulate the way it is viewed. There is no guarantee of truth or authenticity in any photograph.

The photograph that is taken at face value as being a "clear window" on a moment in time should, instead, be viewed as a *representation* of the event. Roland Barthes frames this dichotomy between truth and representation in terms of connotation and denotation. He writes:

> Denotation is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the last of the connotations (the one which seems both to establish and close the reading), the superior myth by which the text pretends to return to the nature of language, to language as nature (Barthes 9).

The denotation is, in fact, another level of connotation; it is no more of a "natural" meaning than any other, but it creates the illusion of literality. We assume that the first image that appears to us – the one that is most evident – is also the natural meaning, without ideological tampering. However, the inclusion of photographs in comics does not necessarily consider this and instead uses the photographs to cement the comic's narrative arc into a wider historical event, with little focus on the contexts of the photograph that may be obscured or removed.

There is a further dimension to discuss in the remediation of photographs within comics. Bruno Latour writes that "the more the human hand can be seen as having worked on an image, the weaker is the image's claim to offer truth" (Latour 18). Though the human hand is at work in the creation of a photograph, it is nowhere near as evident; the work of the artist's hand is marked in every line and stroke of a drawn comic. My point here is not to suggest that comics and photography are on an equal footing with regard to the objectivity or artistic manipulation of an image – that both can be seen as either raw truth or only as created fictions. Rather, I wish to highlight that both are mediated through the eye of the creator and the editing of the publication venues, but also remediated by their reproduction in different contexts. The ways in which these photographs are used within the comics narratives are myriad. They include simple cast engagement, where the cast of the comic is engaging with the events of the photograph in some way; non-fictional narrative reproduction, where the photographic images form part of the comic's retelling of the events; non-fictional retrospective reproduction, where the narrator of the comic remembers the image and discusses it directly; and oblique referencing, where the images are used as sources for the artwork in the comic but are not directly mentioned. There is an enduring core of all these different levels of coalescence between the two forms: The iconic weight of the original photographs is such that their inclusion within the comic will bring with it a wealth of meaning. The reader will recognize the photograph on some level and their reading of it will impact on their reading of its inclusion within the comic. I turn now to demonstrate how one specific photograph, Eddie Adams' Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph "Saigon Execution", appears within two markedly different comics, *The 'Nam* and *The Best We Could Do.*

"Saigon Execution"

It is undoubtedly true that very few Vietnam War photographs were posed by the photographer; however, it is possible that many of these shots were staged by non-journalistic participants, aiming to create photogenic tableaux. "Saigon Execution", taken in February 1968, shows the chief of the South Vietnamese national police, Brigadier General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, shooting a Vietcong suspect in a street in Saigon. The photographer's claim that he did not pose this image has been widely accepted. However, Sontag writes:

> It was staged – by General Loan, who had led the prisoner out to the street where journalists had gathered; he would not have carried out the summary execution there had they not been available to witness it (Sontag 53).

Adams' photograph captures the moment of the bullet's impact at point blank range. The prisoner's face is turned to the side in a grimace, but he has not yet begun to fall. The General's arm is still outstretched. Of this, his most famous photograph, Adams says:

> They walked down to the street corner. We were taking pictures. He turned out to be a Viet Cong lieutenant. And out of nowhere came this guy [General Loan] who we didn't know. I was about five feet away and he pulled out his pistol, shot him [the VC prisoner] in the head and walked by us and said, "They killed many of my men and many of our people." I kept making pictures.

This photograph became one of the most important images of the Tet Offensive, adopted by the anti-war movement as a representation of the excesses and injustices of conflict, although Adams disagrees with this, stating that he saw it as a more accurate representation of the unfathomable decisions one is required to make during wartime. The photograph makes several appearances within comics about the Tet Offensive and the rest of the war. In order to demonstrate the ways in which comics and photography come together on the page – and more importantly the ways in which comics re-present and remediate the original images – I analyze two different versions of the photograph in *The 'Nam* #24 "Beginning of the End" (1988) and *The Best We Could Do* (2017).

In *The 'Nam #24*, the story arc involves the Tet Offensive and the moment of Adams' photograph. This is a double-frame image – two images presented one inside the other. The camera lens serves as an inner frame for the restaging of Adams' photograph, reflected in vivid color. This is a major change from the original, which was originally presented in black and white. The bold colors here are typical of the Marvel house style to which *The 'Nam* vigorously subscribes. The outer frame shows the camera itself being held by, we assume, Adams, though we see very little of his face (Murray and Vansant n.p.). The image appears cramped – both hands are visible as they hold the camera tightly. Adams' mouth is open as he speaks, suggesting an expression of shock. The name of the camera brand is clearly displayed, not only for realism's sake (the brand *would* be visible on the camera, of course) but also to remind us that without technology pioneered by this brand, Leica, this type of photojournalism would not be possible; it is only because of technological developments made by this brand that photographers had the equipment to take photographs in a split second without fiddly preparation. The speech bubble in this frame gives rise to questions of terminology.

Adams shouts, “Holy...! Suu, keep shooting! Just keep shooting!” But is it to Suu that Adams aims the command to “keep shooting”?

“Shoot” as a photographic term is first noted in the 1890s. This is the same time that another firearms term, “snapshot”, also entered photographic discourse. The movement of these two terms from one distinct discourse to another may be coincidental, but it does show an awareness of the camera’s ability to take something of its target, as a weapon might. If this is inverted, it suggests that Adams is not talking to Suu but to General Loan, in which the words have a decidedly different meaning. “Shooting a prisoner,” in its double context here, makes for good photographs – award-winning ones in Adams’ case, supporting a popular maxim of the American press that “if it bleeds, it leads.” Neither the image nor the speech gives an indication as to which reading is intended; it is for the reader to decide for themselves.

The use of the double-frame shifts the reader’s focus. We are not only watching the events take place, but we are also watching the watchers. Not only are we given the action, but also the reaction. For a readership who was not present at this event (and has no idea what it must have felt like to be there), the shifting focus allows us to better understand the position of the observers. Adams is evidently shocked and fascinated by this event and the reader is prompted to feel likewise. The reader is reminded, through the frame of the camera’s lens, that what we are seeing is mediated by someone: In the case of this image, by Adams; in the case of the wider text, by Murray and Golden. Not only are we given unique insight to draw us towards the experience captured here, both on film and paper, but we are also reminded of the mediated nature of everything we see. The inclusion of the photograph not only speaks to its ubiquity within the visual memory of the war, but also to the many different images and perspectives that come together to create this memory.

In *The Best We Could Do*, Adams' photograph is brought up in a discussion between the comics creator's avatar, Thi, and her parents, Má and Bố. Her parents disagree on the role of the police in Saigon and Thi asks if these are the same police who were photographed by Adams. Bố replies:

> Yes. You know, the American media broadcast that all over the world and made South Vietnam look bad – but no one talks about how that same Viet Cong, just hours before, had murdered an entire family in their home (Bui 206).

Bố goes on to say that he did not like nor support the actions of General Loan; this exchange highlights the extreme ambivalence that the photograph contains. Nguyễn Văn Lém had murdered a family of nine mere hours before, and General Loan was seeking vengeance for these deaths. His actions, though illegal, sit in a moral gray area; such an execution without trial is a crime, but for many it would be deemed appropriate, based on the context.[ii] Bui writes that "the contradictions in [her] father's stories troubled [her] for a long time" (Bui 207). The photograph itself contains none of these contradictions, and the accompanying title and caption is similarly lacking. This is not to say that this is not an image of the horrors of war – it very much is, but like with Ut's photograph of Kim Phúc, the inclusion of the original context provides depth that bolsters this superficial reading. We know that "war is hell", but the context demonstrates the sheer depths of that hell and the many voices that would otherwise be silenced from the conversation.

There are four renderings of the photograph within *The Best We Could Do*. The first is a simple reproduction and appears next to the panel in which Thi asks her father about the police. It is the clearest rendering of the photograph and is included to spark the reader's memory of the image and to act as a reference point for the later versions that will appear in the comic. The photograph is reproduced in the same style as the rest of the art, with a sepia orange wash and black linework, as shown in Fig. 1. The speech bubble in the adjoining panel where Thi asks her question overlaps slightly with the photograph, creating a visual link between her reference to the title and the image itself. Beyond this, it is without caption.

The second two renderings both relate to the process of the photograph's creation. Bui explains that the photographer, Eddie Adams, knows the context and also "that it was absent from the photograph itself" (Bui 208). Across two contiguous panels, Bui shows Adams making the photograph on location in Saigon and later in his dark room (Figs. 2 and 3). In the first of the two, we see a side view of Adams, camera to his eye, as the General aims his gun. In the lower part of the panel, a soldier dashes out of the way. The positioning of the viewer in relation to both Adams and the general is similar to the panel in *The 'Nam* in that it positions the photographer within the panel, rather than just the photographed frame. The inclusion of the soldier grounds the event within the warscape of the city during the Tet Offensive. His inclusion acts as a reminder of the photograph's cropping, not post-creation but by the scope of the lens itself. The second of the two also speaks to the creation of the image. Here, we see Adams in his dark room, as the image develops on the drying line. The image is shown in very faint, barely developed form. The outline is instantly recognizable – a man on the left with arm outstretched toward a man on the right – and the use of sepia orange wash links this image with the one on the previous page.

The re-presentation of this photograph within the comic has several roles. First, it fits with the discussion and makes sense that Bui would see this image – and those like it – as useful touchstones for her personal development of her war experience. Bui uses this image to help her work through her parents' conflicting understanding of the war. Second, it reinforces the mediated nature of the original photograph and remediation of the image in the press. Though we may recognize the original photograph and its reproductions, the context remains detached.

The final version of this photograph makes the elision of meaning more literal – General Loan is removed, except for his hand holding the gun. His part of the story that the photograph tells is removed, save for the weapon and the hand holding it. His reasons for his actions, which are morally ambiguous, are given no place in this rendering. The focus is on the grimacing face of Nguyễn Văn Lém (see Fig. 4). There is an addition to the original image: A dark blood splatter emits from the man's head, emphasizing the immediacy of the violence in the image. The splatter breaks out of the panel and spreads to the edge of the page. Fittingly, this is called a "bleed" in comics terminology.[iii] The use of panel frames gives the page – and therefore the narrative – a temporal structure. It is through the panel frames that the reader can gauge how to read certain panels and gauge information on their contents. When a part of a panel breaks out of the frame and leaks off the page, it is breaking with the temporal rules of the narrative and ceases to be a part of the story that remains frozen in time. The violent death of Nguyễn Văn Lém is what is most remembered of this image: his summary execution and the expression on his face as he dies.

Bui writes that the photograph “is credited with turning popular opinion in America against the war” (Bui 209). Her intentional cropping of the photograph removes General Loan, save for his arm; the image’s prominent placement at the top of the page in a bandeau panel makes it clear that, for Bui, it is the horror of the execution itself, rather than the acts that led to it, that were of central importance. In her reframing of the photograph through these four variants, she speaks to the American tendency to narrate the Vietnam War as an American tragedy, while ignoring its impacts on the country and its people. Adams’ photograph is an image of not only the war’s complexity and ambiguity, but also the American tendency to erase all nuance and replace it with overtly simplistic narratives, told from and for the American perspective. Everything else became background noise and the mono-meaning is born.

“Kent State Massacre”

The second case study of this article concerns the famous photograph of the death of a student at a university protest and a young woman screaming over his body: This image helped to galvanize negative feeling towards the war at the point where the US army were beginning to consider defeat an option and protesting was at an all-time high. By 1970, the general feeling towards the war was overwhelmingly negative and the threat of expansion into Cambodia prompted many protests, especially on university campuses. In addition, the nature of participation changed in December 1969, when the first draft lottery since the Second World War began, eliminating deferments and leaving many college students unsure of their immediate futures. More than four million students protested. Kent State University, in northern Ohio, had seen many anti-war protests, beginning in 1966 when the Homecoming Parade included marchers in military uniforms and gas masks. In 1969, members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) clashed with police in a university building; the university revoked the charter for the SDS chapter and four SDS leaders spent time in prison as a result.

The weekend of May 2nd and 3rd was marked with similar protests, both on and off campus. The Mayor of Kent declared a state of emergency and the National Guard was deployed. A protest was scheduled to begin at noon on Monday, May 4th, gathering on The Commons, a large grassy area in the center of the campus. Two thousand students assembled. Under poor leadership and following a vague and jumbled series of directions, the National Guard opened fire. Twenty-eight soldiers fired approximately sixty-seven rounds over a period of thirteen seconds, killing four students and wounding nine. None of the students killed were directly involved in protest activity, beyond their presence on the Commons, and all were in good standing at the university.

Photographer and KSU senior John Filo was taking photographs of the events as they happened. He did not realize immediately that the soldiers were using live ammunition and narrowly avoided being hit. After the death of Jeffrey Miller, who was shot through the mouth and died instantly, Filo captured an image of a young woman, fourteen-year-old Mary Ann Vecchio, a runaway from Florida, screaming as she knelt over Miller's body. He later states:

> A girl with long, dark hair ran up and knelt over the body. OK, this is a good picture. But I'm running out of film. I'm trying to focus, and all of a sudden she lets out this scream. I advance the camera, and I shoot another picture, and I advance one more, and I'm out of film (Roe n.p.).

The photograph won a Pulitzer Prize in 1971 and was reprinted internationally, as well as in high-circulation magazines such as *Time* (Nov 6th, 1972), *People* (May 2nd, 1977), and *Life* (May 1995). It is to this photograph that I turn in this final section.[iv]

As with other photograph in this article, the image has gained a high level of iconicity and has taken on a range of connotations, some of which are only tangentially related to the original context. Here, the role of the photograph is markedly different from earlier examples: Filo's image shows 'our dead'. For Sontag:

> To photographic corroboration of the atrocities committed by one's own side, the standard response is that the pictures are a fabrication, that no such atrocity ever took place, those were bodies the other side had brought in trucks from the city morgue and placed about the street, or that, yes, it happened, and it was the other side who did it, to themselves (Sontag 10).

There are no Vietnamese bodies in this image. It was not taken in Vietnam: It is an image of an American killed by an American in the USA. Miller was unarmed; he was not an active protester. He was, to be blunt, in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sontag writes: "With our dead, there has always been a powerful interdiction against showing the naked face" (Sontag 63). Miller's face is turned away and covered in a mop of curly hair that obscures his features. It is difficult to recognize the body as such. This is not the same as looking at the rended body of a Vietnamese soldier or civilian. Those images may not be easy to recognize as bodies either but there is a different kind of dehumanization at play: One is a body literally ripped apart and reduced to meat, while the other is a body that looks like a mannequin, in a posture that jars with the horror of the context. In this sense, too, we see the horror through Vecchio's response.

Derf Backderf's 2020 comic *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio* follows the events of the first few days of May (Friday 1st, 1970 to May 4th, 1970) and the movements of the four young people shot during the massacre.[v] For Backderf, the massacre is far more than the events of the 4th in isolation, but the inevitable culmination of a long weekend of protests and riots, in an era already marred by socio-political instability. The comic is keen to place the (iconic) death of Miller within the wider – and extremely complex – context of the national protest events, the National Student Strike of May 1st, and the atmosphere of unrest and surveillance that pervades this period. In an interview with the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, he states:

> I made it about the four kids. When they are cut down, and I show exactly how they were cut down, it really is a gut punch for the reader. There was no reason for it to happen. It was completely inexplicable. All of these great political forces of the era came crashing together in that one place (Camden and Zullo 283).

Backderf gives much page space to the actions of Terry Norman, a student and FBI informant, who was recruited as part of COINTELPRO to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit or otherwise neutralize" anti-war organizations such as SDS, who were active in Kent that weekend (Cunningham 33). Norman's role in the massacre has been the cause of some debate: He admitted to firing four shots in self-defense and was the only non-Guardsman to do so. It is also strongly suggested that he was the first person to shoot (John Mangels n.p.). Norman was also a photographer and his role in the comic to a degree replaces Filo as the "visual witness and recorder"; Filo does not appear.

For those who know the events of May 4th, 1970, the comic gathers momentum towards the horrible conclusion and Backderf places small moments of foreshadowing into the narrative as it unfolds. One short scene shows Norman practicing at a gun range and telling a fellow marksman, "Something big is brewing at Kent State. But we'll be ready for 'em" (Backderf 62). Norman is clearly positioned with the National Guard and the FBI, rather than his fellow students. In a later scene, Miller and a friend return to their student digs to find a teen girl asleep on their sofa. Miller asks "Who's th' chick?" and his roommate replies, "Oh, some kid who was hanging out on Water Street last night. She freaked out when it got nasty. Said she hitched up from Florida and got stranded. Her name is Mary Ann" (Backderf 66). The easy interaction of two roommates and the sleeping girl is an uncomfortable foreshadowing of their next meeting and the role Mary Ann (Vecchio) will play in the story.

The conclusion to which the narrative of the comic moves is the thirteen seconds of gunfire that resulted in four deaths and nine serious injuries; at the center of this sits the Filo photograph. However, Backderf's reimagining of the photograph is not a direct redrawing. Vecchio and Miller are positioned on the verso of a two-page spread. It is a single bordered panel. The viewer is positioned above Vecchio, looking down on the scene from a raised point. She is in the center of the panel, with Miller's body lying across the lower third. Her scream moves from the lower left to the top right and then across the top of the recto page: The scream breaks out of the border and spreads across both pages. It is the scream that dominates the page. No other living figures are shown on the verso – Vecchio is alone in the panel with Miller. Backderf explains his representational choices in the *JGNC* interview:

> That scene is a tough one, though, because that image is so well known. What I focused on to capture that moment of terror was not the girl, but the sound of her scream, which carries across three pages. Because you don't get the scream in the photo. So that was my thinking there. That was a challenge. The two images that are the most well-known are the scream, and the guard turning and opening fire, and you've got all sorts of sound effects on that page, too. My approach is the same with both images, to try to create a different sensory reaction, if that makes sense. I'm trying to depict the shock and horror, but in a different way (Camden and Zullo 282).

Backderf mobilizes the comics form to heighten the shock of the death. On the previous recto page three bandeau panels show the chaotic events around Miller's body. The final panel shows Vecchio's shaking hand moving towards him with the words "Are… are… y-you…?" (Backderf 235) As the page turns, the image becomes clearer, and the scream erupts. It is in the turning of the page that the realization of Miller's death hits Vecchio; in the action of reading and page turns, the reader is complicit in making this realization happen.

In an interview, John Filo stated that the reason he thinks that Vecchio reacted as she did is because she was fourteen: "I had this child react to this gore and horror in front of her. Had she been a student, would she have screamed? Would she have done that? And would the picture have been different?" (Roe n.p.) Her scream is a childlike reaction, but it is also what we remember from the photo. The image is not necessarily the death, but the reaction to the death. In removing the "photographic" frame from the image, by actively not including the figure of Filo snapping the photograph, as with Bui's rendering of "Saigon Execution", or framing it through the camera itself, as with *The 'Nam*, the comic panel becomes about the reader looking at her reaction rather than thinking about our own reaction. A photograph asks for a viewer; placing the same visual information in a comics panel does not do so, at least not in the same way. A level of remediation – the level of the photographer's lens – is removed. We are viewing her "live" within the narrative.

What do we make of these two photographs and their remediations in three distinct comics? Speaking solely of the photographs, there is an obvious and marked difference between the two: One is the execution of an active participant in the horrors of war, the other a young man, with nothing to do with war or protest, shot and murdered. The two images are similar: Two figures in each, one with a face turned away and one caught in a life-changing moment. The image of the execution is horrific because of the grimacing face of a dying (or dead) man. The image of Miller is horrific because the focus is the screaming, but alive, face of Mary Ann Vecchio. Both are recognizable to the general public without captions (at the very least being recognized as "Vietnam War photographs") and both are regularly referenced in full or in part in popular culture.

Furthermore, the two photographs are speaking to specific and different motivations. The execution of Nguyễn Văn Lém is not just about the war itself, but also the actions that people take when they are in desperate circumstances. It becomes conflated, as I previously explained, with the war and much of the context is lost. The uproar from the Filo photograph comes from the face of a young white woman in the middle of tragedy. But more than that, the photograph is from May 1970; the drawdown of the war had already started; Vietnamization and the withdrawal of troops was happening. It became an iconic image of the home front and a war that was being lost without including the enemies or the war itself at all. It is as if the National Guard is declaring war on the American people. It is in this fear that the war will "come home" that some of the horror sits, at least for American viewers.

And what of the comics? The photographs' inclusion in these comics shows that they have become key visual references for the war on the whole and that their meaning and context has become elided into the mono-meaning of Vietnam as a lost cause, an American tragedy, and a grim defeat. The ways that these photographs are included demonstrate the ways in which photojournalism acts as an anchor for historical events, rooting them in space and time, as well as "reality". It also demonstrates the narrative freedoms allowed to comics creators. This is especially clear in Bui's four reworkings of Adams' photograph, which encompasses not only the image itself, but the creation, the wider frame outside of the lens of the camera, and the eventual "memory" (the deceased man). The comics form allows her to imagine the creation of the image in multiple ways and to speak to this process through the text within the comic. And while my two case studies are by no means the only instances of photography being remediated within Vietnam war comics, they show the available representational techniques of the form and the importance of these photojournalistic images to the overall visual language and history of the war.

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[i] A *fumetti* is a comic made up of photographs, rather than drawn images.

[ii] Article 3(d) of the Geneva Convention explicitly prohibits "the passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court, affording all the

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judicial guarantees which are recognised as indispensable by civilised peoples" (Geneva Convention, August 12th, 1949).

[iii] Typically, a bleed is used to refer to a full page on which the images reach the edge of the page; it is a term from graphic design and printing. However, it can be used to describe smaller sections of an image that reach the page edge.

[iv] In May 2007, US television series *The Simpsons* aired an episode in which TV news anchor Kent Brockman accidentally swears on his late-night chat show and loses his job. The episode is titled "'You Kent Always Say What You Want", in reference to the Rolling Stones' song. But it was originally going to be named "The Kent State Massacre". The producers renamed it because of the Virginia Tech mass shooting, which occurred on April 16th, 2007, a month prior. The name was changed, not because it is potentially offensive to the families of the people who died at Kent State, but because of potential offense to a separate incident. This short example speaks to the way that the events of May 4th, 1970 have entered American popular culture – to the point that it can be used as a joke title on a TV show.

[v] The four students who died are Allison Beth Krause (aged 19), Jeffrey Glenn Miller (aged 20), Sandra Lee Scheuer (aged 20), and William Knox Schroeder (aged 19).