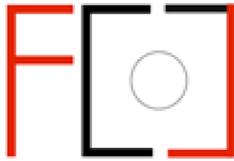


Review: Libby Saxton, *No Power Without an Image: Icons Between Photography and Film*

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No Power Without an Image. Icons Between Photography and Film

By Libby Saxton

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With *No Power Without an Image*, Libby Saxton offers a concise new approach to illustrate the double life of icons in film and photography. Saxton argues for a reconsideration of the role of cinema for iconic images which have become representative for historic events of the 20th century and asks how film has either captured historic events in contrast to photography, incorporated iconic images, or opens up theoretical frameworks to analyse the meaning assigned to icons. By bringing together several perspectives from scholars such as Susan Sontag, Georges Didi-Huberman, Gilles Deleuze, or Laura Mulvey, as well as by combining the formal analysis of images and sequences with archival and biographical research, Saxton provides a detailed analyses of the changing historic contexts that have shaped how these images have been interpreted and have been assigned political or cultural meaning to. The scope of case studies is limited to a selection of photographs and film sequences shot between 1936 and 1968 in Spain, France, Germany, Vietnam, and Cuba, all connected to important names of photojournalism such as Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, or Alberto Korda. The selection however allows for a closer analysis of the images and illustrates the different aspects of the relationship between film and photography, which shape our understanding of icons.

While the notion and close reading of iconic images, as well as research into the implications of secular photographic icons is nothing new and has been extensively analysed for example by Vicki Goldberg in her important study *The Power of Photography: How photographs changed our lives*, Saxton here finally bridges the gap from photojournalism to film history. In analysing the production and initial publication and exhibition of the photographs and films, Saxton then traces the afterlife of iconic images as summaries or

symbols of a historic moment, drawing on the historic religious origins of icons and their implications for our understanding of secular photographic and filmic icons, and providing extensive historical context around both the objects themselves and the theoretical discussions surrounding them.

In Chapter 1, Saxton analyses Robert Capa's "Falling Soldier", an image which has come to glorify the fight for democracy during the Spanish Civil War, and how Chris Marker's *La Jetée* picks up the motif of death on the battlefield, transforming it into a portrayal of victimhood of the violence of armed conflict. Drawing on Susan Sontag's argument that fixed images are more memorable and can more easily capture a historic moment than moving images (19), the author also illustrates how the contrast between movement and stillness between Capa's iconic photo and Marker's slow-motion sequence defines our reading of both pieces. The different capacities of photography and film in capturing a seemingly historically meaningful moment and depicting motion and gesture become more important in the detailed analysis in Chapter 2 where Saxton highlights the iconic potential of still images by noting how particular films draws the viewer's attention to certain areas of the frame, whereas photography allows for closer attention to detail. Chapter 3 sheds light on the afterlife of iconic photographs, here of the Buddhist monk and self-immolator Thich Quang Duc in the West, drawing attention to the different meanings assigned to images, as well as the risk of trivialisation of the original event through the use or interpretation of icons through Christian iconography. The problematic composition and reading of images and literary descriptions through Christian symbolism is an issue that has been illustrated for example by James E. Young in the context of visual representation of the Holocaust.¹ In this context, Saxton has also previously published on the ethical questions surrounding the representation of atrocities in the 2008 monograph *Haunted Images*. Chapter 4 draws on the significance of the masses in still and moving images for the discussion of icons, an aspect touched upon in Chapter 2, and argues for the importance of the

crowd in constructing Che Guevara, a figure central to the discussion of photographic icons, as a quasi-religious figure in Alberto Korda's 1960 photograph from a rally in Havana. Chapter 5 finally contrasts this discussion by analysing the transformation of Caroline de Bendern into an icon of the Parisian protests in May 1968, showcasing how icons become bearers of political ideas. The analysis of de Bendern's intentional pose for the camera also highlights the role of women as icons. Here, Saxton approaches the analysis of the iconic afterlife of photographs through perspectives of stardom and the male gaze, which highlight an important dynamic in the production of images: the male photojournalist and the posing woman as bearer of political ideas and ideals.

Despite the different case studies in which photographic images are informed by their film counterparts or vice versa, the selection of these icons highlights the historic connections between the violent conflicts of the mid-20th century. Moreover, the detailed overview over the history of publication elucidates the inherently eurocentric history of production and distribution in photojournalism and documentary film and illustrates the dynamics of (mostly white and male) photographers and filmmakers producing images of conflict- they are later assigned political or cultural meaning and a function of representation of the past for the whole world.

An interesting aspect which Saxton touches upon repeatedly in the analysis of films is sound. While the importance of sound is acknowledged as an additional difference between film and photography and, particularly in Chapter 3 in the analysis of Emile de Antonioni's *In the Year of the Pig* and Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, a discrepancy between image as well as different effects of realist sound and music is noted, the implications of the sonic qualities of film for the discussion of icons remain marginal (92). This raises the question if the icon remains entirely grounded in the visual foundations of photography and film and thus separate from sound, or, if sound or the absence of sound does indeed render our understanding and the

meaning assigned to iconic images depicted or reworked in film. Following the argument made in Chapter 5, in which silence is noted as an image's liberation from a fixed movement in time (142), it should be at least suggested, that, although sound does not necessarily impact the intratextual construction of iconic images in film, it does shape their meaning and effect on the audience.

Nonetheless, Saxton provides an interesting argument for the overlooked intermedial quality of iconic images in broadening our understanding of the historic connection between photography and film and encourages us to think critically about images that have come to define our perspective of the 20th century.

¹ Examples can be found in Primo Levi's rendering of his autobiographical accounts of Auschwitz through Dante's *Inferno*, or Claude Lanzmann's use of the term "resurrection" for letting witnesses of the Holocaust give testimony in *Shoah*. An important argument brought forward by James Edward Young, which further problematises the use of Christian iconography and symbols, and could be considered in the context of Saxton's analysis of the iconic depiction of self-immolators, is the characterisation of victims of the Holocaust into archetypes which limits the representation and understanding by omitting or simplifying complex developments that do not fit into the framework of ancient imagery. James Edward Young, *Writing and rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the consequences of interpretation*. Vol. 613 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 106.

