Visual Icons of War and Terror in the Era of Mass Production and Circulation of Images

Mette Mortensen, associate professor, University of Copenhagen.

This subproject develops a theoretical framework and conducts empirical case studies on the on-going transformation of visual icons of war and terror, i.e., particularly influential, symbolical images summing up prevalent views and emotions and holding the power to sway public opinion, change policies etc. As a countermove to the great quantity of conflict-related pictures disseminated in today’s connective media, selected photographs are declared to be “iconic” and grasp the attention of a broad, transnational public. Icons used to be constructed in the interplay between press and political elites (e.g., Hariman & Lucaites 2007, Mortensen 2011, 2013, 2015, Tulloch & Warwick 2012). Today, citizens, grassroots, activists etc. contribute to the production, distribution, and political mobilization of icons across regions and media platforms. This subproject focuses on visual icons from current war and terror attacks and pays particular attention to new distributive patterns emerging from convergence between social media and mainstream news media as well as to icons representing the following, prevalent motifs: a) humanitarian crisis (especially refugees); b) victims of war and terror; and c) violence (force, destruction, perpetrators). Social network analysis along with tools for image reverse search are used to chart transnational, distributive routes and actors involved in mobilizing icons. This is combined with qualitative analyses of debates/discourses surrounding visual icons as well as their aesthetic characteristics. Within the four years of research, this subprojects uncovers why and how some images are iconized, the consequences hereof, and the underlying power structures and -negotiations.