

CHAPTER EIGHT

WAR DIALLING:
IMAGE TRANSMISSIONS FROM SAIGON

SUSAN SCHUPPLI



Fig. 8-1: Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger using the telephone in Deputy National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft's office to get the latest information on the situation in South Vietnam, 29 April 1975. (Photo courtesy Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library)

On 8 June 1972, the mechanical drum of a Muirhead K220 Picture Transmitter slowly rotated, scouring the surface of a 5 x 7-inch black-and-white photograph that had just been placed onto its scanning drum. The machine's photoelectric cell was charged with the task of converting

variations in the amount of light reflected by the print into a series of electronic pulses that could be transmitted, line by line, over a standard telephone relay system. As the photograph revolved around the drum of the machine, the trace of another incandescent emerged: the residual glow of a napalm fireball that had just scorched the South Vietnamese village of Trang Bang, 30 miles north-west of Saigon. An air strike by two South Vietnamese Skyraiders from the South Vietnamese Army 25th Division had erroneously levelled the village in an attempt to dislodge a recent North Vietnamese roadblock on Route 1 near Trang Bang. The anguish of Phan Thi Kim Phuc as she runs naked towards the camera of press corps photographer Nick Ut (Huynh Cong Ut), along with other members of her family and villagers, has been permanently seared into our collective cultural memory.

The girl was running, with her arms out. She was crying, “Nong qua! Nong qua!” (Too hot! Too hot!) She had torn off all her clothes. When I saw she was burned, I dropped my camera beside the road. I knew I had a good picture. I got her into our van and took her and the family to the Cu Chi hospital.¹

In recalling this scene, Ut makes the comment, “I knew I had a good picture.” Yet, as this essay will attempt to argue, such photo transmissions – through a sequence of technical translations that permitted extraneous information to enter at each juncture in the image’s conversion from captured sunlight to photographic print and eventually into a series of acoustic signals – resulted in the production of what might be considered “impure” images or “bad” pictures.

By 1972, the year of Ut’s acclaimed photograph, almost all remaining American ground troops had been evacuated from Vietnam as peace talks resumed in Paris. However, the American-led Air Force continued its bombing of Hanoi and various North Vietnamese targets even while Henry Kissinger (President Richard Nixon’s then Secretary of State) was secretly meeting with the North Vietnamese to negotiate a ceasefire. On the day of the napalm attack, Ut shot several rolls of film using a German Leica camera manufactured in 1965 and fitted with a Leitz wide-angle f/2 35mm Summicron lens. While Ut was not the only photographer or journalist on the scene, it was decided that he would take the wounded girl to hospital prior to dropping off his film for development at the lab of the Saigon

¹ Richard Pyle, “Epilogue: Trang Bang Revisited”. Excerpts from an Associated Press story, 26 April 2000. Accessed 27 January 2014. <http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0008/ng7.htm>.

Associated Press Office. Network coverage of the war had substantially diminished by this time, owing in part to the closing of eleven Saigon-based newspapers in 1972 by the South Vietnamese police. However, competition between the remaining Saigon press bureaux (Associated Press and United Press International) was fierce, and it was apparently not without some reservations that Ut took time out of his filing deadline to find medical treatment for the girl in the city.²



Fig. 8-2: *Accidental Napalm* by the AP photographer Nick Ut, 8 June 1972. (© AP/Press Association Images)

The technical processing and transmission of what has become one of the most compelling images of the Vietnam War is detailed in the lengthy excerpt that follows. I think it is important to emphasize the extensive technical history that underlies this photograph, as images tend to appear in public seemingly unencumbered by the complex procedures out of

² Napalm burns at ferocious temperatures of between 800 and 1,200 °Celsius. With third-degree burns to 35 per cent of her body's surface, Kim Phuc spent thirteen months in a Saigon burn unit run by the Barsky Foundation, a children's medical relief agency.

which they emerged – a view now heightened by the immediacy of digital image production. However, what interests me is not so much the political dimensions of the war in Vietnam at the level of state and non-state actors, which implicitly brackets my discussion, but the micro-political dimensions of image production conditioned by an aggregate field of causal relations. Breaking the perceived chain of causal symmetry between the information captured at the scene of an event and the processes that convert such eventful data into images, whether analogue or digital, troubles not only the indexical discourse that has been so central to photography, but also the evidential capacity of images with respect to maintaining the integrity of metadata. Close examination of these processes forces us to think about the “event of photography” as an expanded field of entangled relations between multiple human and non-human actors, all of which help to shape the emergence of the image. The following excerpt begins to make explicit many of the technical variables and vagaries that already came into play prior to the photograph ever being placed on the scanning drum of the Muirhead:

Nick Ut’s eight rolls of Kodak 400 ASA black and white films were developed in the lab of the Saigon AP office by the Japanese photographer Ishizaki Jackson, a known AP Tokyo news photographer at this time. The development solutions (Ilford Microfen developer and self-mixed fixative) were stored in large food jars. Since the temperatures of the chemicals were rarely below 30 degrees centigrade the processing time was relatively short and the film had to be slowly moved at all times, by hand, like slow-motion laundering. The films were then dried in a special cabinet with hairdryers rigged up and switched in a way as not to damage the swelling emulsion.

Nick and Ishizaki prepared a selection of eight 5 x 7 inch prints for the next “radio photo cast” at 5 PM – but an editor at the AP rejected the photo of Kim Phuc running down the road without clothing because it showed frontal nudity. Pictures of nudes of all ages and sexes, and especially frontal views were an absolute no-no at the Associated Press in 1972. While the argument went on in the AP bureau, writer Peter Arnett and Horst Faas, then head of the Saigon photo department, came back from an assignment. Horst argued by telex with the New York head-office that an exception must be made, with the compromise that no close-up of the girl Kim Phuc alone would be transmitted.

AP had this equipment stationed next to the switchboard at the Saigon PTT’s (Post and Telegraph) telephone exchange in Saigon. The radio conditions were favorable that day and the picture, along with three other photographs of the incident, reached the Tokyo photo bureau of the Associated Press. From Tokyo the radio signal coming from Saigon was auto-relayed on AP controlled land and submarine wire communications

circuits to New York and London, and from there to AP offices and newspapers around the world.³

Of the more than 240 negatives that Ut shot that day, only one was selected for its fateful transmission. In fact only twelve of these historic negatives still exist today, and these are conserved within the vaults of the AP archives, including Ut's prize-winning shot, which now circulates only as a digital file; the materiality of the original is consigned to the vault in the hope that its careful preservation will stave off the incursions of time that might do violence to the historic violence preserved within the image.⁴ During the Vietnam War critical news photos including that of Kim Phuc (the girl in the picture), were usually sent by shortwave radio-transmitters such as the Muirhead, a process that was relatively expedient, taking on average only twelve minutes to scan and send an image. In translating an analogue visual representation (the photographic paper print) into quantitative acoustic data (electrical impulses), the Muirhead K220 Picture Transmitter performed some of the fundamental operations that also govern the regime of the digital. It measured the tonal variations of the photograph by calculating the relative intensity of each grain's luminescence, and then calibrated the machine to send out a sequence of discrete audio signals that

³ Horst Fass and Marianne Fulton, "How the Picture Reached the World". The Digital Journalist. Accessed 27 January 2014. <http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0008/ng4.htm>.

⁴ "Most of the original film has disappeared. Some was discarded already in Saigon or returned to Nick Ut. In line with AP's policy at the time all possibly useful negatives were forwarded to New York headquarters: This included material selected in the first and second editing process in Saigon and most of the negatives not used. In New York the photo desk passed the material to the Photo Library—to be eventually discarded there, most likely in a big clean-out after the end of the Vietnam war. Negatives of pictures that were used for the wires were archived. Today twelve negatives of the 'Kim Phuc incident' remain with AP. They are locked in a safe and rarely touched. The Pulitzer winning negative (1973 award) shows a major scratch across the sky in the upper part of the negative. The original image has been digitally reconstructed and full-size and cropped print versions of the picture are now produced from this digital information. The pictures used and transmitted from the original film in June 1972 are preserved in the AP's digital archive. After the war Huynh Cong 'Nick' Ut began a search for the remaining material. Working temporarily in the Tokyo AP office from 1975–1977 he found a small selection of prints and nineteen original negatives—material that somehow ended up in Tokyo. He now has both in his private collection. The negatives and prints show some of the military operations on the same day, before the 'Kim Phuc incident' and add important information to the basic material in the AP Photo Library." Pyle, "Epilogue: Trang Bang Revisited".

could map out the exact distribution, location and gradient levels of the image's original data, thus transforming the materiality of the object into a set of mathematically derived calculations – an analogue computation that converted image information into signals rather than into code.

The radio waves emitted by these transmitting devices were subject to many variables, including the consistency of their fluctuating electric current and, perhaps even more importantly, the stability of weather systems. While the Muirhead Picture Transmitter was designed to reassemble its image data according to predetermined patterning sequences, signal-relay complications due to interference from inclement weather or overloaded telephone transmission lines were not infrequent. Consequently, the information sent was not necessarily contiguous with the information received. The term “war dialling” used in the title of this chapter, aside from its literal reference to Kissinger's escalation of the war in Vietnam, is also a technical term for an older form of sonic interference in which telephone modems were used to assault computers through continuous dialling. Likewise, when meteorological events feed physical phenomena such as electrical surges from storms back into the image-making process, they too disrupt the integrity of transmission. Such tampering in signal relay is arguably a form of picture-hacking that interferes with data at the microscale of its technical assembly.

Although an airborne assault of a different order, atmospheric damage inflicted upon a picture file in transit was a reality. In *War and Cinema* (1989), Paul Virilio quotes a US fighter pilot, Colonel Broughton, who experienced similar transmission difficulties in Vietnam as radio chatter and rough weather cluttered the airwaves, making communication highly unreliable and increasing the risk of payload miscalculations, with often tragic consequences:

The radio chatter was really picking up about this time—in fact, it was so dense with all the Mig and Sam warnings and everyone shouting directions and commands that it was almost impossible to interpret what was going on. This is a real problem and once it starts, it just keeps getting worse and worse and is almost impossible to stop ... you see something that you know you have to tell other people about in a desperate hurry to protect them and to protect yourself, and the temptation is to blurt out as quickly as possible without using the proper call sign. The result is that everyone in the air immediately gets a shot of confusion and wonders who is talking about whom ... you have no idea where you are.⁵

⁵ Colonel Jack Broughton, cited in Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1989).

If the weather had been inclement on 8 June 1972, might I be writing about an altogether different photograph? (Each day of warfare in Vietnam produced thousands of negatives, from which a photo editor might select one or two to print and scan.) Although the sonic transmissions from Saigon to Tokyo met with little atmospheric interference that day, when the radio signals arrived in New York, were reassembled into a photographic image and printed on the 9 June cover of the *New York Times*, things immediately started to go awry.

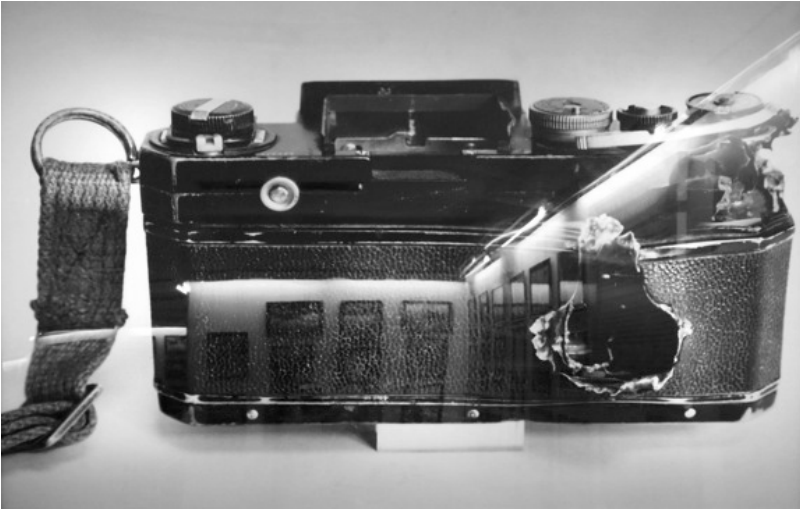


Fig. 8-3: A 35mm camera perforated by a bullet, used by a journalist during the Vietnam War. Images from a photography exhibition in the War Remnants Museum, Ho Chi Minh City, are reflected in the glass. (Photo by Susan Schuppli)

The picture of the “Accidental Napalm Attack” was received as a kind of collective body-blow: an impact upon the retina of a viewing populace that immediately rewired its carnal receptors. Eyes turned into angered speech and public protest, and ears into vision haunted by the silent screams of the fleeing villagers and the sounds of dropping bombs. It was as if the eardrum of the machine itself both saw and felt the horror of the attack and channelled these reverberations through the perceptual apparatus of the transmitter into the body public. In *No Caption Needed*, authors Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites have argued that “[t]his iconic photo was capable of activating public conscience at the time because it provided an embodied transcription of important features of

moral life, including pain, fragmentation, nodal relationships amongst strangers, betrayal, and trauma”.⁶ Sound and image did not simply converge, but became the constitutive force for each other’s emergence. While the relationship between image and sound directs my specific analysis, other mediating conditions need to be kept in mind as they provide the broader conceptual frame. For example, unlike the distilled emotive scene that figured in Ut’s Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph, broadcast news footage of the same event provides us with an altogether different vantage point of the attack, as do Ut’s remaining negatives in the AP archives. These images tell a story of soldiers and journalists lying in wait for an aerial attack with their cameras poised for action. News of a possible air strike had been made known in advance and reporters were dutifully dispatched from Saigon to cover the unfolding events.



Fig. 8-4: *Accidental Napalm* (II) by the AP photographer Nick Ut, 8 June 1972. (© AP/Press Association Images)

⁶ Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2007).



Fig. 8-5: *Accidental Napalm* (III) by the AP photographer Nick Ut, 8 June 1972. (© AP/Press Association Images)

As the first napalm flares ricochet off the ground, creating billowing clouds of dense black smoke, a soldier with his camera turned towards the bombing is seen standing somewhat languidly in the middle of the road in observation. Out of this smouldering inferno a group of Vietnamese villagers comes running; one young girl is entirely naked and, as she passes the cameraman, we can see ragged sections of her charred skin flaking off. Her eyes and those of the other fleeing children flicker briefly towards this photographer, indicating that they are aware of his curious presence, but then they quickly turn away to continue running. Eventually the girl comes to a stop and two watching soldiers empty their canteens of water across her back to douse the chemical burns.

This film footage makes explicit the various roles that the theatre of operations known as war assigns to each of its actors in its diegetic unfolding. Even the victim, it suggests, has an a priori role to play. As if on cue, Phuc and the villagers emerge out of the exploding backdrop to run towards the waiting soldiers and a photographer, who is able to shoot a remarkable number of 240 frames. The maximal impact of the singular black-and-white image as one of horror and despair is diffused throughout this sequence of moving images for two primary reasons. First, because we are given access to the moments that both preceded and followed the

iconic image-event, none of which seems to equal the fierce intensity available in the still photograph; and second, because we are made aware of the pre-emptive aspect of photojournalism as, at times, a stage-managed assignment. Photographer and film-maker having been alerted to the date, time and location of a military sortie, the resulting footage gestures towards the phenomenon of embedded journalism that will substantially come to dictate the photographic point of view of subsequent American (image) wars. The predatory sight of fourteen photographers, waiting with their cameras directed towards an impending attack, is somewhat chilling and made all the more so because of its perfunctory nature.



Fig. 8-6: Film stills from the television broadcast of Kim Phuc and the accidental napalm bombing of 8 June 1972. From *Hearts and Minds*, directed by Peter Davis (1974).

In the still image, sound is represented by the gaping, open mouth of the little girl as she tries to flee the firestorm that has ignited around her. The image is silent but expressive in its visual capacity to generate the acoustic effect of terror. Her “missing voice” is ultimately repatriated by the Muirhead as the generative force by which the photograph was to achieve its public coherency – namely through its telephonic relay – whereas in the documentary film footage it is the amplified sounds of the falling bombs that dominate the image track. In the latter, the voice of Phuc is not so much silent as rendered inaudible because of the massive impact of exploding napalm. In both cases, however, we are returned to a certain politics of the image in which the subject, to a large degree, is

“spoken for” by various recording and sound-producing machines: cameras, transmitters and warplanes. What becomes relevant in trying to locate the space of sound in this famous scene as it was both captured and transmitted by the Muirhead is that the affective residue of Phuc’s voice still manages, in its photographic muteness, to register across different domains. Somehow newspaper readers around the world were able to access the sonic virtualities latent in the image and actualize them as felt sounds within their own receptor bodies upon which they, in turn, began to act. Even President Nixon acknowledged the power of the photograph to incite public anger and fuel domestic opposition to the war. In an illicit tape recording made on 12 June 1972 but released publically only on 14 February 2002, Nixon can be heard callously questioning the authenticity of a photograph of fleeing Vietnamese children burnt by napalm: “I’m wondering if that was fixed?” His White House chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, replies: “Could have been.”⁷



Fig. 8-7: Muirhead Picture Transmitter in operation. (Images courtesy Michael Ebert)

To appreciate fully the material transubstantiations induced by the Muirhead, from a paper print into a sonic relay, it is useful to understand how such picture transmitters functioned. Proceeding haptically, the machine’s scanning mechanism must creep across the surface of a print –

⁷ In February 2002 the US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) made public a further 500 hours from the 3,700 hours of “Nixon White House Tapes” recorded illegally between 1971 and 1973. This particular tape release documents conversations recorded primarily during 1972 between then President Richard Nixon and his staff, in which they discuss methods for escalating the conflict in Vietnam as well as for responding to the mounting domestic opposition to the war. See the US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), press release of 14 February 2002: “National Archives Releases 500 Hours of Additional Nixon White House Tape Recorded Conversations”. Accessed 27 January 2014. <http://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2002/nr02-35.html>.

grain by grain, as the syncopated firing of its photoelectric cells, it assesses individual luminal variations in the photo to create an overall image map.

Cryptographers of World War II spoke in similarly haptic terms when describing their meticulous attempts at decoding aerial reconnaissance photography, a process now largely assumed by adaptive image-analysis software. These early crypto-analysts had to plunge into the micro-depths of the photographic image, probing each variable grain that was suspended in the print's emulsion in order to bring particularities and patterns to the surface that could then be compared with earlier imagery of the same site. As Manuel DeLanda writes, "after 'resurfacing' from extracting data from an image, the photo-analyst must then organize that data into patterns from which further inferences and extrapolations can be made".⁸ Although the print that entered the circuits of the Muirhead Picture Phone was, in photographic terminology, a continuous-tone image that indexed a real event, its transit through the mediating apparatuses of the camera, darkroom, transmitter and printing press repeatedly undid and reworked each previous version of the image at the microscale of its technical assembly. This was a form of recoding and decoding of technical perception that John Johnston, taking leave from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, has called "machinic vision": "Machinic vision presupposes not only an environment of interacting machines and human-machine systems but a field of decoded perceptions that, whether or not produced by or issuing from these machines, assume their full intelligibility only in relation to them ... machinic vision is not so much a simple seeing with or by machines—although it does presuppose this—as it is a decoded seeing, a becoming of perception in relation to machines that necessarily also involves a recoding."⁹

The Muirhead Picture Transmitter is an interesting machine to consider in light of these discussions, because its operational procedures complicate the visual as the privileged ground of representation, although the artefacts it produced eventually returned the textured sonic event to the flatland of the photograph. Nonetheless, I contend that the image that rotated on the scanning regime of the Muirhead K220 was not the same image that exited via telephonic AP transmission, but an over-encoded image that carried additional signifying traces – machinic residue – within its photonic substrate, rendering it a supplement to the originary event that it historically indexed. At each point in the translation from the living body – through the framing device of the camera lens, to the activation of the

⁸ Manuel DeLanda, *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines* (New York: Zone Books, 2003), 192.

⁹ John Johnston, "Machinic Vision", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 26, no. 1 (1999), 27–29.

film's chemical emulsion, to the developing and printing of the photograph in the darkroom, and finally to its scanning, transmission and reassembly by the Muirhead – minute variations and extraneous information entered into the process of selection and conversion: a surfeit that modified each stage of transmission and translation in its turn. The unwitting acquiescence of the image to this form of technical subterfuge sullies its iconic image track and literally opens it up to material entanglement with the many other image-events that also transited through the Muirhead Picture Phone at one time or another. Given that the movement of each photographic print through the transmitter resulted in the deposition of minute paper and chemical traces within its mechanics, surely these abandoned micro-particles must have partially rebonded and remolecularized themselves with each new image? How might this process of sedimentation mutate or modify each subsequent image- and sound-event produced by the machine? What new meanings might be formed or activated by this alchemical exchange? Through a sort of conceptual *détournement*, the Muirhead is, in effect, transformed into a virtual transmitting device in which all of the images that have already moved through its scanning drum, as well as those that are still yet to arrive, aggregate to vibrate our perceptive centres. As Henri Bergson writes in *Matter and Memory*:

Here is my body with its “perceptive centers.” These centers vibrate, and I have the representation of things. On the other hand, I have supposed that these vibrations can neither produce nor translate my perception. It is, then, outside them. Where is it? I cannot hesitate to answer: positing my body, I posit a certain image, but with it also the aggregate of the other images, since there is no material image which does not owe its qualities, its determinations, in short, its existence, to the place which it occupies in the totality of the universe.¹⁰

Throughout the process of working with my research materials I have continually tried to confront the question of relevance: specifically, why these now well-rehearsed photographic artefacts should still matter and what their significance might be for thinking media operations and their related socio-political contexts today. An anachronistic and cumbersome machine like the Muirhead K220 Picture Transmitter may seem to be of mere historical interest rather than something that is prescient for our times. Indeed, what contemporary conjunction is opened in the larger field of photographic and media studies through careful consideration of such a

¹⁰ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Weber (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 228.

machine? With this text I have tried, in part, to begin to answer this question. The present, marked by the digital era, has entered into a feedback loop with its analogue precursors at the constitutive moment when the Muirhead converted Phuc's image data mathematically into a series of electrical impulses: a technical sleight of hand that not only anticipated contemporary digital systems but also gestured towards the immediacy with which such crisis-born images would be created and transmitted in the future. However, owing to the extreme velocity and intensive computation of our contemporary digital devices, in which convergence creates the appearance that relations are temporally synchronous and spatially contiguous, an important understanding of machinic processes as a sequencing of translations between unlike kinds of data appears to have been lost or covered over. Information seemingly performs itself as a closed circuit between transmission and event. Near-instantaneous feedback between the photographer and image-event, coupled with possibilities for easy file-sharing, truncate the time that may be needed for critical reflection. The immediacy of the digital can induce a reactive mode in which the procedures of "click and send" sometimes fire all too quickly, even though I am well aware of the key role that citizen journalism has played in the events of the Arab Spring and, more recently, in Syria, where mainstream media access is extremely limited. The Muirhead Picture Phone, on the other hand, is a machine for delaying time, as each photographic object that entered its scanning operations to exit as a sound-event was transmitted "over time": this interval is crucial for understanding how the elongated temporality of the analogue might open up a necessary space of reflection that seems inaccessible to the regimen of the digital instant.

Moreover, when I first discovered that the iconic photograph of Phuc, which had catapulted directly into our collective conscious in June of 1972, was actually transmitted as an audio file by standard telephone relay, the image was reanimated for me in an entirely new way. Perhaps the mute acoustics of the photograph, with its pictured cries of anguish, should already have alerted me to its genesis in sound. Yet over the years the affective dimensions of the photograph, which had initially ignited moral outrage, had dissipated as the continuous transit of the image within media circuits slowly wrung out its emotive capacities, transforming it into a lifeless technical object – a historical artefact. Female icons in cinema have to be able to hold a pose, to perform themselves as a kind of living death that allows the viewer's gaze to linger upon them in a protracted state of idolatry. Film theorist Laura Mulvey has characterized this pause in the flow of movement as "delayed cinema" – one that overlays the

star's vital screen presence with the controlled stillness of a filmic death mask.¹¹ To become an icon is to transform oneself into a dead object for others, into a pure matter of fact. As “the girl in the picture”, Kim Phuc seems forever archived by her chemical exposures to the past, which include the toxic traces of napalm still visible as burn marks on her scarred skin as well as the photographic embalment that fixes her permanently within the image-event. However, to reconceptualize her photograph as a sonic event that cannot entirely be reduced to a static historical representation is to both radically reinvent the image and reactivate its aura as well as to enable Phuc to step out of the picture frame in which she has been contained for these past forty years.

¹¹ Citing the untimely deaths of Marilyn Monroe, James Dean and Grace Kelly, Mulvey argues that the stars' “extra-diegetic iconicity” was further amplified because their deaths had already been cinematically prefigured in the immobility demanded by holding a pose. See Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 172–73.