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Interpretation of Newspaper Photography: A Case Study of *NIN* Magazine

Abstract: The power of visual communication is undeniable for media theorists. Newspaper photography is an important and often dominant content in the media. One of its characteristics is polysemy, the possibility of having different interpretations based on one's knowledge and experience, but also social and historical context. A photo on the front page of *NIN* magazine published on November 27, 2019, showing a weapon – a rifle – aimed at Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić during his visit to a weapons fair caused severe public criticism, and was removed from the front page by decision of publisher Ringier Axel Springer. The research question is whether the editor's choice of this specific front-page photo complies with the provisions of the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics, and whether the decision to remove it was justified.

Keywords: newspaper photography; interpretation; polysemy; manipulation; Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics.

Introduction

The foundation of the mass media is visual content.¹ “People are far better at remembering what they see, than what they feel or hear.”² According to Veselinović, a newspaper photograph can attract readers' attention, who firstly notice the photo and then move on to the text:

Research of the communication phenomena indicate the following: the observer does not decipher the message word for word, he or she only casts a quick glance at the entire graphic image and focuses only on an element that grasps his or her attention. This is the path that the reader's

¹ Miško Šuvaković, Ješa Denegri, Mirjana Veselinović Hofman and Nevena Daković, *Pojmovnik teorije umetnosti* (Beograd: Orion art, 2011), 775. – determinant Visual communications.

² Danica Aćimović, *TV dokumentarac* (Novi Sad: Media Art Service International, 2004), 9.

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eye follows: photograph → header → graph (if there is one) → text. Therefore, the photograph is supposed to attract the reader, and then provoke a reaction in the recipient of the message, that is, the reader.³

Photographs can also provoke emotions and trigger a certain action. As suggested by Vujović and Mitrović: “We live in a time of the dominance of the visual and tend to base our trust on what we can see.”⁴ However, newspaper photographs can be interpreted differently due to their polysemous nature. The meaning of a photograph depends on the context, the culture, social relations, historical moment, but also on the personal experience of the observer.

Due to its power, the newspaper photograph deserves special attention from editors. However, editors-in-chief are not only responsible for published content, they have also become managers, as noted by Russ-Mohl:

They are the link between the publisher and the editorial board, and seek to meet the publicity and economic needs under the same roof [...] They also stay focused on the audience and, on the one hand, need to be aware of the business decision-making processes of the company, and on the other hand, to defend the editorial board autonomy. At the top of the hierarchical structure of the editorial board is the publisher.⁵

The ethics of the newspaper photograph, its polysemous nature, and interpretation, are the subject of research in this paper. Visual content to be published in the Serbian press is governed by the Serbian Journalists’ Code of Ethics, whose provisions were used for the purposes of this analysis. The case study is *NIN* magazine and its front-page photo published on November 27, 2019, showing a weapon – a rifle – aimed at Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić during his visit to a weapons fair. The research method used was media content analysis, which aimed to describe and explain the content and context.

Newspaper photography and interpretation

A newspaper photograph, as an important part of the contents of the press, “is a photograph made by the photojournalist of the newspaper in which the photo was published, or other national or foreign editorial board or agency or a freelance photojournalist. Its aim is to clarify, illustrate newspaper articles or to independently provide certain information.”⁶

³ Milan Veselinović, *Fotografija u štampanim sredstvima propagande* (Novi Sad: Fakultet tehničkih nauka, 2005), 50.

⁴ Marija Vujović and Marta Mitrović, “Vizuelizacija savremenih medija,” in *Nauka i stvarnost*, ed. Mišo Kulić and Marija Letić (Pale: Filozofski fakultet Univerziteta u Istočnom Sarajevu, 2017), 295.

⁵ Štefan Rus-Mol, *Novinarstvo* (Beograd: Clio, 2005), 169.

⁶ Marija Vujović and Ivana Stojanović Prelević, “Ethics of newspaper photography,” *Facta Universitatis, Series: Philosophy, Sociology and History* 13, 3 (2014): 125, acc. January 5, 2020,

A newspaper photograph never speaks for itself. It has to be interpreted, qualitatively studied, and this process involves assigning certain meaning to it. This is actually interpretation. “Interpretation involves finding meaning in something. It requires that we engage with something (e.g., a text or an image) in a way that allows us to make some kind of sense of it.”⁷ Willig defines interpretation as “a generalized human endeavor”, which happens every time we try to understand a verbal or visual text. The goal of the researcher is to “better understand the ways in which people construct ‘reality’ through language (and other cultural resources) within a social context.”⁸ Achieving such goals is a daily struggle.

Interpretation can be viewed through the perspective of the theory of social constructionism.

Social constructionism draws attention to the fact that human experience, including perception, is mediated historically, culturally and linguistically. That is, what we perceive and experience is never a direct reflection of environmental conditions but must be understood as a specific reading of these conditions.⁹

One and the same media text can be read in different ways and not one of them is necessarily wrong.

Barthes states that all images are polysemous and open to various interpretations. By their very nature, photographs have multiple meanings, and they are open to a range of possible interpretations. Barthes sees the photograph as an ambiguous text to be read: “The readers assign to the photograph a certain matrix of their own memories, inclinations, prejudice, and experiences and when their emotions are strong, they can see in the photographs the exact opposite of what they were expected to see.”¹⁰

There are two different methods of describing the meaning: denotation – the literal, obvious meaning, and connotation – secondary, associative, suggested meaning, which includes cultural, social, and personal associations and depends on the coding system, social rules, and conventions that are learned throughout life in a particular culture and which are socially and historically conditioned. With regard to photographs, this is what observers assign to the text based on their prior knowledge, history, culture, ideology.¹¹

A newspaper photograph is not a literal image of reality; it is always a

⁷ Carla Willig, *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology* (England: Open University Press, 2013), 136–37.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁰ Harold Evans, *Pictures on a Page: Photo-Journalism, Graphics and Picture Editing* (London: Heinemann, 1978), ii.

¹¹ Stuart Hol, “Kodiranje, dekodiranje,” in *Studije kulture: zbornik*, ed. Jelena Đorđević (Beograd: Službeni Glasnik, 2008), 280–1.

construct, and truth can be sought on the denotative and connotative level:

On the one hand, the press photograph is an object that has been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional, aesthetic or ideological norms which are so many factors of connotation; while on the other, this same photograph is not only perceived, received, it is read, connected more or less consciously by the public that consumes it to a traditional stock of signs.¹²

The connotation is conditioned by cultural and historical context, but also by the culture and knowledge of the individuals observing the photograph, which makes different readings of the same photograph possible.

Victor Burgin also talks about the role of the observer in reading a photograph and producing its meaning. This author sees the photograph as the “place of work”:

The intelligibility of the photograph is no simple thing; photographs are texts inscribed in terms of what we may call ‘photographic discourse’, but this discourse, like any other, engages discourses beyond itself, the ‘photographic text’, like any other, is the site of a complex intertextuality, an overlapping series of previous texts ‘taken for granted’ at a particular cultural and historical juncture. These prior texts, those presupposed by the photograph, are autonomous; they serve a role in the actual text but do not appear in it, they are latent to the manifest text and may only be read across it ‘symptomatically’.¹³

By applying semiology to the interpretation of media texts, Barthes suggests that meaning is never “innocent” but always ideological. Also, the meaning is determined by the context and manner of interpretation. By using the example of a 1955 front cover of the *Paris Match* magazine, Barthes explains the literal message or ‘denotation’ of the picture he views as speech, such as a newspaper text. On the cover, a young African in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted probably fixed on a fold of the tricolor (French flag). This is a semiological system, which the author calls mythical speech:

But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this

¹² Bart Roland, “Fotografska poruka,” *Prelom – časopis Škole za istoriju i teoriju umetnosti* 1, (2001): 221.

¹³ Victor Burgin, “Kako gledamo fotografije?” *Život umjetnosti-časopis za suvremena likovna zbivanja* 89, (2011): 105.

African in serving his so called oppressors.¹⁴

This African soldier saluting a French military salute signifies a mixture of Frenchness and militariness, French empire, French imperialism. It refers to the history of France, colonialism, the present moment. Mythical speech is the ideological meta-language, a language whose meaning is always conditioned by culture and social relations, and can be interpreted differently. Barthes further states that there are three different types of reading: 1) to the producer of myths, the meaning is literal – the African is a symbol for French imperialism; 2) to the mythologists, those who want to decipher the myth – the African is the alibi of French imperialism; 3) to the readers of myths – the African is no longer an example or a symbol, still less an alibi: he is the very presence of French imperialism.¹⁵

For the purposes of explaining the polysemy of media messages, it is important to mention the observations of Stuart Hall, who stopped the practice of believing that media messages reflect the real and that the audience is passive. He distinguished the process of encoding, that is, the meaning that the message sender wishes to pass on, and the process of decoding, that is, the ability of the audience to read the message differently. The message can be read in three ways: dominant reading that coincides with the intent of the message sender, whose goal is to limit the meaning to the dominant one; negotiated reading which partially matches the intent of the message sender; and the oppositional reading where the reader rejects the messages conveyed.¹⁶ Stuart Hall believes that media messages are always ideological and coded in a way that suits the dominant groups in society, and the active audience decodes them.

A newspaper photograph is often accompanied by a linguistic message, which affects the formation of meaning. Radanovic Felberg claims that “visual, that is, semi-otic tools contribute to meaning creation as much as verbal, that is, linguistic tools, as well as that meaning, is the result of their combination.”¹⁷ Barthes also discusses the anchoring of linguistic messages. Since all images are polysemous, causing a ‘floating chain of signifieds’, the goal of the linguistic message is to anchor the meaning, to provide a denotative description of the image.

According to Barthes, this anchorage can be ideological: “Anchorage is a control, bearing a responsibility in the face of the projective power of pictures, for the use of the message; the text thus has a repressive value and we can see that it is at this level that the morality and ideology of a society are above all invested.”¹⁸

In journalism, there is a demand for photographs to be as informative as possible, and that such photographs need little text.

¹⁴ Roland Bart, “Mit je govori,” in *Studije kulture: zbornik*, ed. Jelena Đorđević (Beograd: Službeni Glasnik, 2008), 255.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 262–3.

¹⁶ Hol, “Kodiranje, dekodiranje,” 283–5.

¹⁷ Tatjana Radanović Felberg, “Socio-semiotička konstrukcija Mila Đukanovića i Slobodana Miloševića na naslovnim stranicama Politike i Pobjede u toku NATO bombardovanja 1999.godine,” in *Diskurs i diskursi* (Novi Sad: Filozofski fakultet, 2010), 284.

¹⁸ Bart, “Retorika slike,” 470.

Newspaper photograph and ethics

The objectivity of a newspaper photograph is difficult to achieve because “the objectivity of the photograph is merely an illusion.”¹⁹ Possible manipulations of newspaper photographs are carried out in the preparation phase when choosing the context that the photo will be used in and during the photo-editing step. Throughout history, there has been unethical photo editing in renowned magazines, such as *Time* magazine and *National Geographic*. Namely, during the 1994 trial of O.J. Simpson, the American football player accused of murder, *Time* published a cover photo of him showing him darker than he really was, which could be read as a stereotypical portrayal of African people as more prone to crime.²⁰ In 1982, *National Geographic* published a cover photo showing the Pyramids at Giza, but “zoomed in” to fit the original, horizontal photo to the vertical cover.²¹ Cropping photography could also be seen as a photo manipulation process if the meaning of the photograph is substantially altered, that is, if certain parts of the photograph are removed or kept that change the originally intended meaning of the photograph.

According to the regulations of the Serbian Journalists’ Code of Ethics, parts of which also apply to newspaper photography, the sections Authenticity of Reporting and Independence from Pressure state the following:

Changes to the content of photography are impermissible without the consent of the author; The difference between documentary photography and photomontage must be clearly emphasized. The readers / viewers must not be misled; A drastic intervention in the digital processing of documentary photography is impermissible. Only minimal adjustments (in the domain of colour, contrast, sharpness, etc.) that do not affect its contents are permitted; Any involvement (of an editor, a graphic editor, a designer, and others), in terms of image content, is impermissible without the consent of the author.²²

Case study *NIN* Magazine

For the purposes of this paper, the case study research approach was used which is “based on the intensive monitoring of one or more cases in the natural environment, that is, their original flow and in the actual combination of internal and external circumstances in which it exists or takes place.”²³ The research question is

¹⁹ Gisele Freund, *Fotografija i društvo* (Zagreb: Grafički zavod Hrvatske, 1981), 155.

²⁰ Billy Hawkins, “The Dominant Images of Black Men in America: The Representation of OJ Simpson,” in *African Americans in Sports*, ed. Gary Sailes (New York: Routledge, 2017), 39–52.

²¹ Martin Edwin, “On photographic manipulation,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 6, 3 (1991): 162.

²² Serbian Journalists’ Code of Ethics, available at: http://www.savetzastampu.rs/doc/Serbian_Journalists_Code_of_Ethics.pdf. Acc. January 6, 2020.

²³ Srbobran Branković, *Metodi iskustvenog istraživanja društvenih pojava* (Beograd: Megatrend univerzitet, 2009), 143.

whether the editor's choice of this specific front-page photo in *NIN* magazine and the decision to crop it complies with the regulations of the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics, and whether the decision of the publisher Ringier Axel Springer to remove it was justified. The unit of analysis is the photo on the front page of the magazine published on November 27, 2019, showing a rifle pointed at Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić during his visit to a weapons fair. The method used is case study. In addition to case study of the *NIN* magazine cover, the context as well as the circumstances before and after the photograph in question was published were investigated.

NIN magazine is one of the oldest print media in Serbia. Since its first issue, published on January 26, 1935, *NIN* (Weekly Informative Newsletter) has been characterized by professional, independent, analytical and narrative journalism, as stated by the journalist Slobodan Ikonić in the text "The 80th anniversary of the *NIN* magazine", which was published for the magazine's anniversary in 2015.²⁴ This weekly was founded by a group of left-wing journalists and intellectuals from Belgrade. According to the court's decision, *NIN* was shut down the same year, after 26 issues, due to the "dangerous" content it published. In January 1951 the weekly publishing was reinitiated by Belgrade's liberal journalists and intellectuals, with Najdan Pašić as the first editor-in-chief. In his book *Naslednici bez testamenta* [*The Successors Without Testament*], Miloš Misović points out that the crucial novelty introduced by *NIN* magazine in Serbian journalism was the freedom to write about sensitive political and social issues. *NIN* "is referred to as 'something else', which means that it has delved deeper into political, cultural, and social issues ..."²⁵ Milošević adds that:

After going through the rich archive of our magazine history, which includes thousands of volumes of *NIN*, he easily found that *NIN* was changing as the circumstances of our environment changed, and yet it always stayed one and the same *NIN*, curious and open-minded, sometimes too confident and ambitious but always honest in their intentions.²⁶

One day before publication of the the *NIN* issue this paper is concerned with, the *NIN* editorial board announced the new issue on social media and provoked negative reactions from one part of the public and representatives of the ruling coalition²⁷ who interpreted the photo as subversive and advocating violence, due to the weapon pointed at the president, and demanded action from the Republic Public Prosecutor's Office. Therefore, the cover image was soon changed. Publisher Ringier Axel Springer issued a statement saying that "the previously announced front page was inappropriate in the country where the prime minister was killed." The *NIN* editorial board

²⁴ Available at: <http://www.nin.co.rs/pages/warticle.php?id=94358>, acc. December 27, 2019.

²⁵ Miloš Milošević, *Naslednici bez testamenta. Razgovori sa glavnim urednicima NIN-a* (Beograd: S. Mašić, 1999), 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁷ Available at: http://rtv.rs/sr_lat/politika/naslovnicu-nin-a-osudili-premierka-ministarka-pravde-dacic..._1071109.html, acc. December 27, 2019.

accepted the publisher's decision, removed the cover photo, and left a blank white background (Figure 1) in its place.²⁸



Figure 1: Left: Front page of NIN magazine, published on November 27, 2019, which appeared on social media and in a certain number of print editions and was later withdrawn by publisher Ringier Axel Springer; Right: the cover after the controversial photograph was removed.²⁹

Although the front page was changed, the content of the article announced by the photograph, “The Weapons Affair: Who is Destroying Krusik”, remained unchanged. Therefore, *NIN* magazine appeared on newsstands on November 28, 2019, with a blank front page, and the editorial board announced that the subsequent *NIN* issues would also be released without a cover photo. Despite the decision to remove the cover photo, *NIN* Editor-in-Chief Milan Ćulibrk denied the magazine had bad intentions or meant to send a tendentious message via the photo. The announcement by *NIN*'s editor was posted on Facebook on November 28, 2019:

Only the darkest minds could think of the abominations attributed to the *NIN* newsroom because of the front page of the new issue, which will appear on newsstands tomorrow. It is amazing that nobody was bothered by this photo originally taken by *Tanjug*, and initially published in

²⁸ Available at: <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/16228/Povu%C4%8Dena-naslovna-strana-NIN-a.htm>, acc. November 28, 2019.

²⁹ The photograph taken from: <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/16228/> on January 10, 2020.

other media on June 27, 2017, when the then Prime Minister, Aleksandar Vučić, with the President of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, officially opened The 8th “Partner 2017” International Weapons and Military Equipment Fair in Belgrade. However, now it bothers everyone and *NIN* is accused ‘targeting’ the president. Neither was it our intention nor was it our goal and everyone who knows how we work knows that this is not true. The fact that the cover story was attributed the wrong meaning speaks more to those who accuse us of such a thing than of us.

However, *Tanjug* news agency denied Čulibrk’s claims, stating that *NIN* had cropped the photo originally taken by this news agency, and thus altered both the content and the message. On Twitter, they attached the original photo and the cover of *NIN*, for comparison purposes (Figure 2).



Figure 2: The original photo taken by the Tanjug news agency published on June 27, 2017, and the *NIN* cover photo, later withdrawn by the magazine’s publisher.³⁰

Tanjug said the following:

The photograph that *NIN* magazine posted on their front page is not a photo taken by *Tanjug* and such photo has never been published in either *Tanjug*’s service or any other media agency. What *NIN* posted is only one section of the original, *Tanjug*’s photo, and *NIN* magazine cropped it, focusing on the part of the photo where the rifle was ‘pointed’ at President Vučić ... Therefore, around two-thirds of the original photograph were

³⁰ The photograph taken from: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/tanjug-kaze-da-fotografija-u-nin-u-nije-njihova-vec-kropovana-njihova-foto/> on January 10, 2020.

removed, that is, the original *Tanjug* photograph was forged, which, no doubt, altered the content of the photograph and thus its message.³¹

The original photo was taken at the International Weapons and Military Equipment Fair in Belgrade, on June 27, 2017.

After analyzing the case study, the authors conclude that there was no drastic intervention in the cover photo of *NIN* prohibited by the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics. However, it could be said that the content was changed due to the cropping process and that the author's consent was missing, as stated in the official press release by the *Tanjug* news agency. The above-mentioned content change did not alter the meaning of the photograph. President Vučić was photographed during the visit to the weapons fair, and the photo shows that specific event. The person who was at the front in the original photograph was removed from the photo, but he was not relevant to the general public. This change could be labeled as minimal adjustment, which is not a violation of Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics.

Given that the controversial cover photograph was first posted on social media, it is also possible to apply the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics in the online environment, which states in the Authenticity of Reporting section that "the primary role of the media is to convey editorially shaped information through media texts, ideas and opinions, with full respect for the right of citizens to be truthfully, fully and timely informed about issues of public importance."³² The controversial *NIN* cover photo complies with this regulation since it can be seen as the editorially shaped information, whose aim was for the people to be informed, without explicit intention to manipulate or deceive them.

Conclusion

A newspaper photograph is a polysemous media message, and there is no "right" meaning that can be attributed to it. Reading, that is, *interpretation* depends on the personal characteristics of the reader, but also on the social and historical context. Putting the controversial *NIN* cover photograph in the historical context of the assassination of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić is legitimate, however it is no reason to overthrow editorial decisions and remove the photograph from the cover. Since *NIN* is the magazine that has fostered freedom of thought and speech throughout its history, it should have seen this publisher's recommendation as an act of censorship and fought for its editorial freedom.

Literally speaking, the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics was violated because there was no permission from the author of the photo to edit the content. However, essentially, the photograph was cropped in such a way that the content was not

³¹ Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/tanjug-kaze-da-fotografija-u-nin-u-nije-njihova-vec-kropovana-njihova-foto/>, published November 27, 2019, and acc. November 28, 2019.

³² Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics in a digital environment, available at: <http://www.savetzastampu.rs/doc/smernice-za-primenu-kodeksa-novinara-srbije-u-onlajn-okruzenju.pdf>, acc. January 6, 2020.

substantially altered since the parts that were not important for understanding the meaning of the photo were removed. Therefore, the publisher's recommendation and the editorial board's decision to remove the cover photo was the result of censorship and the attack on the magazine's long-standing professionalism, independence, self-confidence and desire to be "different". In view of this fact, the journalist associations should be addressed with the recommendation to change these regulations from the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics, in order to avoid any future concerns and events with such consequences that impair the autonomy of the media.

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