

## Does “Iconic” Mean Anything Anymore

Stuart Franklin. London. Oct 12 2016



A ripped Che Guevara poster in fluorescent pink and turquoise was my first contact with a so-called “iconic image”. Later came Tiananmen Square: the picture of a man blocking the path of a column of tanks in China, in 1989.

I’ve mulled over both images, recently in connection with the label “iconic”. Of course, growing up in another time or place might prompt other “iconic” pictures. In Hollywood there were the crafted photographs of Greta Garbo; in China, Mao. But isn’t “iconic image” a tautology? After all, icon and image mean the same thing.

Remember the Byzantine church-image conflict. Those who sided with Pope Gregory thought that images could help the illiterate understand Bible stories. Those opposed, from the Greek-speaking Eastern Church, went for a more tradition-based option of filling churches with pictures of saints - icons (the Greek work for image). For over twelve hundred years saints, venerated in prayer via their icons, have been asked to intercede in all sorts of ways.

Reportedly, St Ernesto (Che Guevara) has joined the throng, at least in Bolivia where he was executed in 1967. Alive he looked like a primary school picture of Jesus. Dead, in one memorable photograph, he resembled the prone figure in Andrea Mantegna's *The Lamentation of Christ*. Uniquely, he's become both a secular and religious icon.

But is it Alberto Korda's famous 1960 photograph of Che – reproduced millions of times – that's iconic or Che himself? René Burri's 1963 picture of Che smoking a cigar has also been crowned "iconic" by – among others - the German author of *Photo Icons*, Hans-Michael Koetzle. Are they both "iconic", or just Che? After all, nobody talks about an iconic picture of Adolf Hitler, despite there being a number of memorable photographs.

Turning to Tiananmen Square, four photographers (I was one of them) took pictures of the man standing in front of the tanks from the Beijing Hotel. Each version has – in different contexts – been labeled "iconic". So is it an event within an event or the pictures themselves that are "iconic"? Or is the word meaningless, overused, politically loaded, or just a marketing term? To answer

these questions let's examine the rise of the secular icon from semiotics to hyperbole.

A century before pop culture the icon turned up in the literature of semiotics where words, and then images, were parsed and picked over. Actual "indexical" proof of presence, as in a photograph, was separated from painting and the Twitter icon (as an example) on your phone (Charles Peirce's theory of signs); content disjoined from form (Erwin Panofsky's "iconology").

Where photography and the icon regrouped was in a 1979 Ansel Adams cover story published in *Time* magazine. That was the same year they spoke of the "photo-boom", when auction-house prices for photographs began to soar. Robert Hughes, the Australian art critic famous for his iconoclastic take on Damien Hirst's tiger shark suspended in formaldehyde, wrote very differently on Adams: "his photographs of lakes, boulders, aspens and beetling crags have come to look like icons, the cult images of America's vestigial pantheism".

The icon was back out of the box as a marketing term, as former *New York Times* photography critic A.D. Coleman recalls: "Cultural journalists were bandying that term around in regard to all sorts of things: rock stars, fashion models, consumer goods, you name it. Everything from a Campbell's soup can to the Empire State Building was becoming "iconic", everyone from Muhammad Ali to Phil Spector was becoming an "icon" of pop culture".

In 1983, alongside David Bowie, whom *Newsweek* dubbed "a distinctly icy icon", the photojournalistic icon came of age, or at least that's when people

started referring to famous war pictures as icons. “The whole history of the Vietnam War”, a *New Yorker* editorial expounded, “is bound up with certain images, which assumed iconic importance: the Buddhist monk setting fire to himself in the street in Saigon; the American soldiers burning down peasants’ huts with their cigarette lighters; a young girl at Kent State kneeling with her arms outstretched next to a slain protester”.

The odd thing is, thirty years on, other Vietnam War images come more readily to mind, such as the girl fleeing from napalm. One problem with the idea of the photojournalistic “iconic image”, as it started to gather momentum, is that it tended to overwrite other, more telling stories. Take Joe Rosenthal’s picture of the American flag-raising at Iwo Jima *Old Glory Goes Up on Mt. Suribachi*.

First, the Japanese would never describe that picture as iconic. Second, it totally elides the horror of war: the thousands of dead and dying bodies entrenched in black volcanic sand, images that stunned the writer James Agee when he reviewed the newsreels in 1945. Through the “iconic image” of the flag the battle has gone. The pattern repeats itself in Tiananmen Square where the images of the massacre, published widely at the time, have slipped from view.

Then there’s this other problem. “Iconic” as a meaningful term has been zapped by ubiquity. What was already excessive in the 80s has redoubled today. As one American essayist noted recently, “few words are as overused in our time as “icon” and its variant “iconic””. Today we read of Giacometti’s

“iconic skinny statues”; Leon Russell’s “iconic white beard”; “iconic banana-leaf wallpaper”; “iconic animals heading for extinction”; “iconic V-tapers” – earned spending too much time in the gym; “iconic” false eyelashes, “iconic” Tommy Hilfiger trousers. Car lovers look to the astronaut’s favourite - the “iconic” 1963 Corvette Sting Ray “Split-Window” Coupe. Then there’s the heritage crusade: “visit the Queen at Buckingham Palace, or take the perfect picture with Big Ben; just some of the many iconic places to go in London”. Or not.

Let’s face it. The word “iconic”, like many, has fallen off the peak. It now roams injured in the valley below as a confusing modern-day synonym for legendary, or well-known, or just well-known to locals. What does this mean for describing images, such as Tiananmen Square? Nothing. Often, it was the events or people in photographs (such as Che Guevara) that were being described as iconic. And the post-iconic image? So far I’ve only read of the post-iconic skyscraper.