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Visualizing the Rhetorical Situation of Hurricane Katrina: Photography, Popular Culture, and Meaning in Images

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In his influential and oft-cited article, Lloyd Bitzer formulated "The Rhetorical Situation" as an exigency that demands a particular form of rhetoric. A few years later, Richard Vatz countered this argument, claiming instead that rhetoric shapes the situation in which it is presented. Both arguments describe how exigency and rhetoric function together, and there have been attempts to reconcile the two viewpoints, most notably by Scott Consigny. But few articles have dealt with the visual aspect of the rhetorical situation. Work in the study of popular media has shed some new light on this topic, and warrants revisiting this debate. We live in an image-saturated society, where our lives are mediated by photographic (and televisual) representations. The persuasive power of images, this visual rhetoric, bridges the divide between Bitzer and Vatz by encompassing both viewpoints. In this paper we argue that visual rhetoric rises out of and creates the situation, making visual media both the exigent situation and the rhetoric surrounding it. In popular culture, images are becoming the standard way means of presenting the news. Using an example of a journalistic photograph from Hurricane Katrina, we show that images can work persuasively on an audience as an exigent situation, but also can create exigent situations that call for a particular style of rhetoric. We conclude that visual rhetoric is one way to describe the combination of the exigent situation and the rhetoric surrounding it.

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In 1968 Lloyd Bitzer formulated his famous exigent situation as a situation that called for rhetoric. For example, a media event like the Writer's Strike of 2007/2008 could be considered a "situation" in which the parties involved would call for some sort of public statement. A few years after Bitzer's article, Richard Vatz argued with his assessment, claiming that rhetoric, as a method for social change, shaped and defined the situation from which it arose. The Writer's Strike gives us an example of this as well: if no one publicly announced the strike, it wouldn't be a situation at all. Both these scholars make interesting and valid claims about the role of verbal and written rhetorical works in shaping our day-to-day realties. In this paper, we argue a new tangent to these two positions by placing an emphasis on the way *visual* rhetoric works to mold our understanding of the world. Our popular culture is saturated with images, from a variety of mediums. Whether one is considering MSNBC.com or a supermarket tabloid, it is important to understand that photographs do not just *illustrate* the news, they often *create* the news. As a result, news photos merge the two sides of the exigency discussion: they simultaneously respond to our need for rhetoric and create a situation that requires rhetoric. By placing news photography at the center of the exigency debate, we not only show the importance of Bitzer and Vatz's rhetorical arguments in popular culture, but also demonstrate the importance of studying the rhetorical function of visual images.

Exigency and news photography have an interesting relationship because these images simultaneously record and create events. On the one hand, images in the news *report* what has already happened: the events of our life recorded in high contrast. On the other hand, however, the news can also *make* the news through a reliance on images. As pointed out by Daniel Boorstin in his classic *The Image*, "like no generation before us … we can fabricate our experience" by resorting to images as news-makers (Boorstin 1961, 181). These pseudo-events, as Boorstin calls them, are produced, packaged, and labeled as "news."

W. J. T. Mitchell has noted this polarity of photography in his description of text and image. He writes

> The relationship of photography and language admits of two basic descriptions, fundamentally antithetical. The first stresses photography's difference from language, characterizing it as a "message without a code," a purely objective transcript of visual reality. The second turns photography into a language, or stresses its absorption by language in actual usage (Mitchell 1994, 281).

The dual nature of news photography mirrors a similar duality in exigency: whether rhetoric is caused by or causes the reality of a situation. Most news takes place at a distance, and it is difficult to identify it with our immediate reality. We call upon news photographs to replicate our bodily experience in the world: if we cannot be there, then we want our photographs to have been there.

Photographs stand-in for experiences we have not had personally, or as Sontag explains: "the credence that [can] no longer be given to realities understood *in the form of* images [is] now being given to realities understood *to be* images, illusions" (Sontag 1978, 80, her emphasis). As the photographic images gain credence, they become the building blocks we use to form our

reality. Photography is internalized and the images interpreted by the viewer; and, in this process, the photographic image *replaces* the reality for the viewer. However, it is important to understand, this "new reality" is not an objective reality. The photograph is an argument about both the nature and the interpretation of a given situation.

The Exigency and the Rhetoric of the News Photograph

First, news photographs can act as a *visual rhetoric*, arguing for an action by *displacing* the reality and illustrating the written word of the article. To do this, visual rhetoric necessarily involves identification. Kenneth Burke situates the term identification as the focus of rhetoric to describe how speakers and audiences connect. Burke posits that people identify with each other when their common interests are made explicit. He specifies that when a speaker is able to demonstrate shared substance, the result is a collaboration or an "acting-together" (Burke, 1969, 21). The process of identifying shared substance, or consubstantiality, is defined as follows:

> A is not identical to his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so. (Burke 1969, 20).

Finding elements in someone that match yours creates meaning for you, and allows consubstantiality to be achieved. The process at work here also works in images: through *identification*, we see aspects of ourselves in photographic images. Through consubstantiality we move towards an embodiment.

At the same time, as a viewer moves towards consubstantiality with the photo there must be some reciprocal act of movement away from something. Thomas Crusius writes that identification forms "out of oppositions [and] ... every 'us' requires a 'them'; otherwise we cannot define ourselves" (Crusius 1986, 29). Total identification unavoidably needs some measure of division. After all, we cannot know who we are unless we know who we are not. In the world of visual rhetoric the movement into the photo marks the move away from reality. Consubstantiality with the image is what makes the displacement of reality possible. Reality is able to exist in two places at once.

This is best illustrated in the celebrity news photo. Photos of celebrities (themselves human pseudo-events who are "known for [their] well-knownness" [Boorstin 1961, 57]) displace the celebrity and allow them to have multiple lives all at once. Each media depiction of the celebrities "real-life" allows the viewer a new opportunity to understand and identity with the individual. Viewers often accept conflicting versions of same individual, simply moving the personalities around and identifying with each one separately. In this way, each new reality is not a replacement of the old one, but simply another option that may displace the original.

Second, a news photograph can act as the *exigent situation*, *replacing* reality by calling for the news article as rhetoric. Bitzer stresses the role of rhetoric as a tool for enacting change. Saying it is necessarily called into being as "a response to a situation of a certain kind" (Bitzer 1968, 3). A work of rhetoric, he writes, "is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of

something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task" (Bitzer 1968, 3-4). Furthermore:

> His [Bitzer's] view, then, is that a true exigence is a genuine objective defect in the world, and that it is truly rhetorical only if it can in fact be positively modified, objectively improved, and that an act is rhetorical only if it has reference to such a defect and aims at its modification (Brinton 1981, 242).

Thus, one would expect rhetoric to emerge out of a situation that called for rhetoric[i]. What this conception of rhetoric does not take into account, is the way rhetoric attempts to solve a problem, defines the parameters of that problem and, in a way, "creates" that problem.

What all this tells us is that photos as rhetorical agents are doing a lot of work, all at once. Unlike a typical act of oratory, where a scholar might chart the places that a rhetor is attempting to *do* different things, visual rhetoric attempts to *do* everything simultaneously:

1. As rhetoric, photographs create situations, and as situations, photographs create the need for rhetoric.
2. The photograph illustrates what is said in the article, and at the same time, the news article fits what the photograph illustrates.
3. We understand an article based on what its corresponding photograph illustrates, and we cannot read the image without first understanding the article.
4. Photographs must be planned and purposeful, and photographic meaning must also be spontaneous and outside of context.
5. Photographs have frames and are understood through form, and photographs illustrate an unknowable world that cannot be contained.
6. The reality in which the photographs are taken can change. At the same time, the photograph makes permanent the reality that has once existed.

Examining Exigency and Rhetoric in News Photographs

Let's consider each of these tenets individually:

1. As rhetoric, photographs create situations, and as situations, photographs create the need for rhetoric.

If an image replaces reality, it becomes the exigent situation. The viewer of a journalistic image does not see reality (he/she sees the replacement of reality), but rather sees the situation created in the space between the photograph and reality. A photographer took that photograph, and in that taking, created the situation that emerged (Figure 1). According to Donna Gorrell, in both Bitzer and Vatz's reading one thing is constant: exigence depends on the audience granting the rhetor's interpretation of the situation.

Before the photograph was taken, there was only reality, and now there is a new situation which the viewer must accept for the article surrounding to function. Once the image was recorded and printed, a situation arose from that reality. That situation demands a rhetorical explanation.

Figure 1
Description: President Bush participates in a briefing on the progress of the ground war with Iraq in his residence office. General Powell points out areas on two maps of the Middle East. Also present are: Secretary Cheney, Robert Gates, Secretary Baker, Governor

Credit: George Bush Presidential Library and Museum[ii]

2. The photograph must illustrate what is said in the article, and at the same time, the news article must fit what the photograph illustrates.

An article defines how we read a photograph. A photograph is necessarily limited by its link to reality. Next to an image of a starving child – a situation that demands a rhetorical response – one cannot place an article that describes cosmetic testing on animals. The rhetorical response there would not fit the situation.At the same time, though, the article that describes cosmetic testing on animals cannot have an image placed near it that illustrates women beautifully made up. Gloria Steinem illustrates this when she describes the limitations of producing *Ms.* in the 1980s. Her articles constrained the type of images in the magazine, as a contradiction might arise between the image advertised and the article positioned next to the image. As she writes, "placing food ads only next to recipes associates food with work. For many women, it is a negative that works against the [images]" (Steinem 1995, 116, Figure 2). As Mitchell describes, the "photograph is 'read' *as if it were* the trace of an event" (Mitchell 1994, 4). Images must coincide with an article in order for an argument to be coherent.

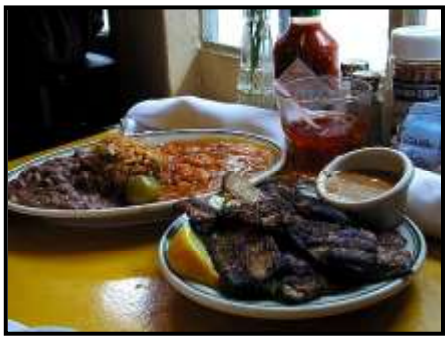

Figure 2
Title: New Orleans

3. We understand an article based on what its corresponding photograph illustrates, and we cannot read the image without first understanding the article.

Through *displacement*, Baudrillard conceives of the photograph as a "reflection" of a "profound reality" (Baudrillard 1994, 6). There exists in photography a representation of reality, for there is a tangible difference between what we hold in our hands and what is in front of us in the world. How can we hope to understand the photograph, even if it is internalized, if we cannot understand the reality that it reflects? In photo journalism the texts placed around the image is the reality in which the image is defined.

Simultaneously, through *replacement*, the photograph becomes the situation. In doing so, it arouses in us the reality that is mirrored in the photography. When seen in relation to photo, the article will always reflect what is seen in the image. There can be an article with no photograph, but in our image-saturated society these articles will always comment on the mental image that has replaced reality.

Figure 3 Title: 04/17/08
Credit: Department of Defense

4. Photographs must be planned and purposeful, and photographic meaning must also be spontaneous and outside of the photo's context.

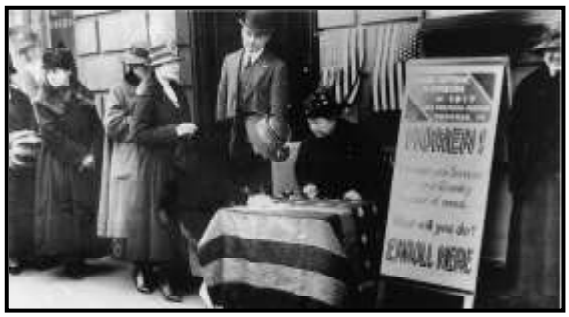

Figure 4 Title: Suffragette War Volunteers

Credit: National Archives and Records Administration.

On the one hand, we understand that the photograph is rhetorical. The photo is framed, indicating that there is an "outside" that harkens inward. Each photograph that we view must necessarily take place in a *time* and a *place*. It exists as a separate, discrete entity from reality. To interpret this image, contextual information provided by the accompanying news article succeeds in creating a determinate "reality" upon which the photograph can be based. This determinate reality is key to understanding the exigence of a situation. Arthur Miller argues that exigence, as it conceived by Bitzer, has a temporal nature to it; the rhetor must respond to the situation while it is at its peak point.

On the other hand, we understand journalistic photographs as records of the truth (Figure 4). The situation of the photograph is related through the focus of the lens. Unique to every photograph, is a situation unique to that photograph's reality. This unique element "is that accident which pricks" the viewer of the image: an accident that makes reality real (Barthes 1980, 27). It allows the photograph to be spontaneous.

5. Photographs have frames and are understood through form, and photographs illustrate an unknowable world that cannot be contained.

As rhetoric, a photograph is always, by definition, seen inside a frame, and this frame ontologically demonstrates that a reality outside of the frame exists[iii] (Figure 5). As John Szarkowski notes, a photographer can only "isolate" the fragment of nature he or she captures on film (Szarkowski 1980, 4). He holds that photography is an element in a larger, static world, a small part of a larger whole. It can be demonstrated from his analyses, therefore, that photography exists through form. It is understood by its construction inside a reality.

Figure 5

Title: Young Woman Making Finger Frame
Credit: Ron Chappele, <http://pro.corbis.com>

As exigency, the photograph becomes more than an illustration of one aspect of the world. Cognitively, the viewer knows that photographs are part of a larger reality, but phenomenologically, these photographs *become* the reality of the situation. Mitchell states, "Everyone knows a picture

of their mother is not alive, but they will still be reluctant to deface or destroy it" (Mitchell 2006, 31). Exigency grants these mediated images the status of reality. Because the viewer cannot see the entire world, the photograph does more than mirror reality; it replaces it.

6. The reality in which the photographs are taken can change, and changes the photographic meaning. At the same time, the photograph makes permanent the reality that has once existed.

If, as we have seen, a photograph exists inside a reality, then a change in that reality means a change in the rhetorical quality of the photograph. Images that used to be pertinent to a cultural ideology may seem quaint or simply historical remnants when viewed through a different historical context. For example, imagine a photograph of bootleggers making illegal liquor in the prohibition era. Such an image may read very differently by contemporary audiences, because the historical situation has changed.

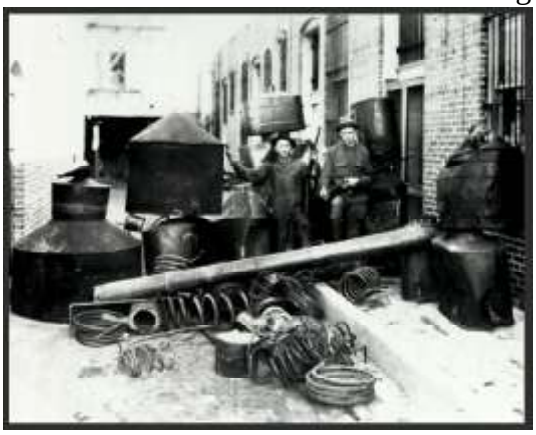

Figure 6
Title: Bootleggers of the 1920's
Credit: <http://www.hcso.tampa.fl.us>

Another power of photography, alternatively, is to lock in temporal status the situation of the subject. Szarkowski describes how time plays an integral role in the construction of photographic meaning, writing, "the time [of the photograph] is always the present" (Szarkowski 1980, 5). The situation stays permanent, which makes static the exigent call for rhetoric. The same image of prohibition may be read as a reminder of the danger of restrictive laws (Figure 6). Thus, even if the reality of the outside world changes, the meaning of the photographic situation is frozen in time.

News Photographs as Exigent, News Photographs as Rhetorical

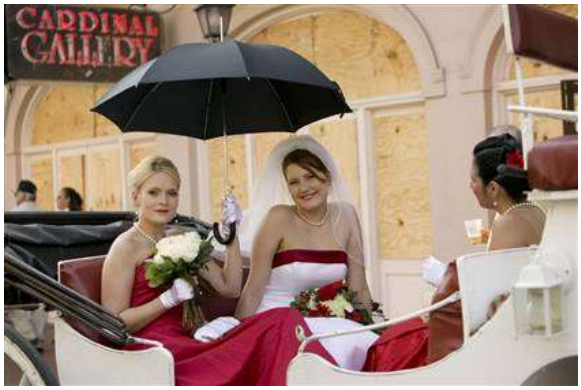

Figure 7

The exemplar photograph (Figure 7) analyzed here provides an illustration of how rhetoric and exigency work in conjunction with each other in popular culture. We choose here a

photographs that, to quote Sontag, "illustrate[s] the determining influence … in shaping what catastrophes and crises we pay attention to, what we care about, and ultimately what evaluations are attached to these conflicts" (Sontag 2004, 105). This photograph illustrates the work that visual rhetoric does: it both calls for rhetoric (is exigent) and calls for action (is rhetorical).

We take each side of these arguments in turn to illustrate the complex layering of messages within a visual illustration. First, this photo displaces and illustrates the mediation of reality through a photographic lens. In this way, it becomes rhetorical. Second, this photo replaces the reality of the situation and, because of its verisimilitude, takes on the reality's exigency.

Photographs Displace Reality: Photographs as Rhetorical

The photo, an image taken by a resident of New Orleans and posted to CNN.com, depicts three women, two dressed in maroon bridesmaids' dresses and the third in a white and maroon wedding dress, riding in a carriage. One bridesmaid clutches a bouquet of flowers and an umbrella and stares intimately at the camera. The other bridesmaid looks away from the camera, while the bride grins happily at it, drawing the viewer in. Behind the carriage a building stands, the windows boarded with plywood, as if bandaged. The photograph, in effect, freezes the time of the incident to depict the magnitude of destruction caused by the hurricane, while the tight angle of the camera lens creates a distorted depth to the image.

One formal element that highlights the photograph's rhetorical nature is the number of *frames* that illustrate the displacement of reality. By creating an image that highlights the frame, it calls attention to itself as a frame. As in tenet 5, above, frames illustrate the rhetorical nature of photography. In other words, the formal elements of the photograph establish its status as separate from reality, and enhance its rhetoric. Rhetorically, the photograph displaces the reality of the situation in order to move us inward towards the photo's reality.

The framing in the photograph happens on different levels. Central in this photograph, the bride's head is framed by the edges of the middle boarded window. Also close to the center of the photo, a window frames the head of the flower-clutching bridesmaid. Both women are framed by the open umbrella, the edges of which create the top half of a sphere that, with continued expansion, would encircle them both. The three women, further, sit inside a carriage, which creates another frame around them. Finally, the photographic image itself lies within the frame of the picture, effectively cutting off the rest of the reality from the viewer. The continual expansion of frames makes the viewer acutely aware of the photograph's place inside of a specific reality. There is an immediate visceral reaction to the photograph, caused by its form, which demonstrates that the image is but a slice of reality. If this is the case, therefore, then it is a displacement. We read the photograph as a rhetorical device that specifies that a situation that has occurred and represents it. Yet, at the same time, the forced realization that this *happened*, that this disaster *occurred*, remains firmly mired in a reality outside the photo.

By situating the photo as a displacement of reality, the photographer has illuminated one side of the message received from news photography. Figure 7 is a slice of reality, not reality itself. When viewed in this manner, the rhetoric becomes clear. The rhetoric of the women's

image in conjunction with the building implies a call to action for the viewer: the normality of the wedding situation contrasts with the work required to fix the building. There is a contrasting duality that rhetorically calls for continued action in New Orleans.

Photograph Replaces Reality: Photograph as Exigency

Specific elements in this photograph also show an exigency at work that articulates a need for rhetoric. We as audience members place ourselves within the frame of the photograph: not only do we imagine that we are *in* the photograph, but also that we are *in* that reality. The photo replaces reality for us. If photographs are seen in the context of the newspaper story, they are also seen "as being intrinsic to our understanding of reality" (Tormey 2007, 29). Photography is a literal index of reality, and can therefore be interpreted by viewers as real. The photograph is, therefore, the exigent moment, and, as Bitzer suggests, its exigent moment calls for rhetoric. A re-examination of this photograph reveals this exigency.

We can see in Figure 7 a suggestion of an exigency. Remembering tenet 6, above, we read this photograph is a specific way: currently, the flooding has ceased in New Orleans and clean up has been underway for over a year. Even though the "reality" of New Orleans has changed, the reality *of the photograph* remains constant, and we are reminded of this exigency.

The situation described in Figure 7 demands a rhetorical answer. By placing ourselves inside the photograph, and embodying our presence within the photographic reality, viewers realize what Tom Rohrer refers to as "the role of our bodies in shaping … [the] deliberate reflection on the lived structures of our experience" (Rohrer 2006, 9, paraphrase of Brandt). The reality of the situation is made salient because the photograph makes real the experience of the women. The viewer sees this image and, as Rohrer states, "the mind, brain and body interact to construct our experience" of the situation (Rohrer 2006, 2). Cognitively, we understand the situation because *we put ourselves there*. We become part of the exigent situation.

As critic Damian Sutton writes, "any useable or valuable definitions of photograph rely on … the observable embodiment of [form] in any chosen photographic image" (Sutton 2007, 163). Figure 7, with its unique use of framing, illustrates Sutton's quotation and extends his meaning. The equivalence of form in this case is illustrated by the framing. The separation of the bridal party into frames allows viewers to frame *themselves* within the same image.

The women in the photograph are isolated in their own spaces. When viewers examine this photograph, they are aware of their own physical presence as isolated as well. The cognitive realization that the viewer is apart from the others of the photograph is made salient by the women's separation from each other. Because of the woman on the far right, however, the viewer is also invited into the photograph with the others. She, unlike the two women under the umbrella, does not stare at the camera: instead, she looks away from the camera and towards her friends. In this, she mirrors the viewer's action. The layers of voyeurism here are circular, as the viewer looks at the women, one of whom is also looking at two who look back at the viewer. The circle of looking is complete, and the viewer is included in this process.

The effect of this looking is to include the viewer within the reality of the photograph. The eyes and wide grin of the bride transfix the viewer of the photograph. They lock us in her gaze and situate us in the photograph. We are locked in a circular rhythm, transferring our identity back and forth between image and viewer. The exigent situation of the photograph, in this way, is created. The situation – three members of a wedding experiencing the destruction of New Orleans – demands rhetoric. How are we to shape our understanding of this situation? To do this, we turn to the article that accompanies the photograph. In the article, we learn that the women are on their way to a wedding, passing a distressed building, a year after Katrina hit. The rhetoric of the article is appropriate to the situation of the image: it is a factual and informative illustration of the appearance of the photograph. Had the rhetoric been elaborate or personal, it would have been inappropriate for the situation, which necessarily must include the viewer. By including personal detail (for instance, the names of the women), it would have been exclusionary. Through their anonymity, the women invite the viewer into their situation.

Yet, at the same time, the image of the bridge transfixes us. She becomes the subject of the photograph, not only because of her placement central in the image, but also because, as Jane Tormey states, "photography cannot help but elevate the subject into an object of display, elevate the insignificant into the 'significant', and … to transcend what is commonplace" (Tormey 2007, 34-35). The subject's reality becomes our reality, for she creates an intimacy that invites us into the photograph. There is a certain element to her, what Barthes would call a "disturbance" (Barthes 1980, 51). We cannot know what that disturbance is, however, without a rhetorical answer. Her exigency calls for a rhetorical response. If one is not provided, we are as lost as she is.

The Photo Makes the News

In conclusion, we can see that photography both *displaces* as well as *replaces* reality. The fact that photography layers these messages in such a complex way, may explain why it is so difficult to control the messages audience members receive from any given image. In the event that we view photography as a displacement of reality, then it becomes rhetorical. As we have seen in Kenney and Scott, the twentieth century has seen the field of "rhetoric …broadened to become a major theory informing not only the study of literature and speech, but of culture [and] art," then photography becomes a classic case of "visual persuasion" (Kenney and Scott 2003, 18). Photographs persuade us by allowing us to identify with the image in front of us. The result of this is that the displacement of reality photography enacts helps to persuade individuals to act in some manner.

The interpretation of photograph, alternately, replaces reality and becomes the focus of an audience's view of the situation. This makes the photograph a representation of what Bitzer termed exigency, or the rhetorical situation. In his formulation, every exigent situation calls for rhetoric. Photography illustrates the situation that defines the rhetoric. In this way, a photograph is not rhetoric, but rather calls for rhetoric.

Images in the news create a lens for viewers. Photographs are both an explanation of events as well as an answer to a situation. As Sutton establishes, "one might argue that a photograph 'just is,' and the 'real' is in the object recorded by it, whilst one might also argue that

the photograph was taken for a reason, and that it is with the photograph as a representation that we have a 'real' relationship" (Sutton 2007, 163). In other words, the relationship viewers have with a photograph can either be as a viewer to a *screen* to reality or as a viewer *of* reality. Photography is both a situation and a rhetorical response to a situation; is a demand for rhetoric and a demand for action. This layering of messages is what makes news photography powerful.

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i The tautology of this argument does not go unnoticed by Bitzer. A exigent situation might call for rhetoric, but does not demand it; as he writes, "each reader probably can recall a specific time and place when there was opportunity to speak on some urgent matter, and after the opportunity was gone he created in private though the speech he should have uttered earlier in the situation" (Bitzer 1968, 2).

ii All photos are public domain and can be found through Wikipedia's Public Domain site at
:<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Public_domain_image_resources>

iii Framing necessitates a reality into which the frame is situated.