

'The Silent Witness'

Course:	Cultural and Visual Analysis
Assignment:	Analytical Essay
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*in memory of the 182.000 birds and butterflies
that were not allowed to resonate,
from the East to the West
and the North to the South,
through the mountains and valleys,
of Kurdistan*

Foreword

My parents being Anfal-survivors, and having multiple family members who lost their lives during the genocidal campaigns of Saddam Hussein in the 80's and 90's, this photograph of the 'Silent Witness' is particularly important to me on a personal and emotional level. The Kurdish peoples have faced uncountable injustices throughout the last century, and unfortunately, have never seen justice prevail over their pains inflicted by the regimes surrounding them.

Injustices have been crystalized in various forms over the year, one of which I would like to share through a personal account. My grandmother was forced to pay one-hundred-and-one Iraqi dinars for the 100 bullets that penetrated the hearts of her two sons – one of which a minor – for the reason that they were Kurdish human beings in the artificially created "Republic of Iraq". This is not an exception, nor a special story, for almost all Kurdish families bear such scars and losses.

Therefore, well aware I am, that because of my personal involvement in the Kurdish movement, as well as the history of my family and people, I am emotionally marked in my judgements on affairs which involve the Kurdish cause, and that happen to be the case in many cases – although often not acknowledged.

Enfin, to my best knowledge on the historical context and the current dynamics of the ground, I will attempt to provide an insightful reflection on the photograph of the 'silent witness', according to a cultural and visual analytical framework.

Moreover, I find it of utmost importance that a short introduction regarding the Anfal campaign will be provided, in order to place this photograph into the contextual framework that it is intrinsically part of, and in fact, embodies by itself. Therefore I will include an report written by Middle East Watch as part of Human Rights Watch, prior to proceeding with the book review. ¹

¹ GENOCIDE IN IRAQ: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds, A Middle East Watch Report: Human Rights Watch - New York · Washington · Los Angeles · London, 1993.
<https://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/ANFALINT.htm>

GENOCIDE IN IRAQ: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds



“Like Nazi Germany, the Iraqi regime concealed its actions in euphemisms. Where Nazi officials spoke of "executive measures," "special actions" and "resettlement in the east," Ba'athist bureaucrats spoke of "collective measures," "return to the national ranks" and "resettlement in the south." But beneath the euphemisms, Iraq's crimes against the Kurds amount to genocide, the "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such.

This report is a narrative account of a campaign of extermination against the Kurds of northern Iraq. It is the product of over a year and a half of research, during which a team of Middle East Watch researchers has analysed several tons of captured Iraqi government documents and carried out field interviews with more than 350 witnesses, most of them survivors of the 1988 campaign known as Anfal. It concludes that in that year the Iraqi regime committed the crime of genocide.

Anfal--"the Spoils"--is the name of the eighth sura of the Koran. It is also the name given by the Iraqis to a series of military actions which lasted from February 23 until September 6, 1988. While it is impossible to understand the Anfal campaign without reference to the final phase of the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, Anfal was not merely a function of that war. Rather, the winding-up of the conflict on Iraq's terms was the immediate historical circumstance that gave Baghdad the opportunity to bring to a climax its longstanding efforts to bring the Kurds to heel. For the Iraqi regime's anti-Kurdish drive dated back some fifteen years or more, well before the outbreak of hostilities between Iran and Iraq.

The campaigns of 1987-1989 were characterized by the following gross violations of human rights:

- mass summary executions and mass disappearance of many tens of thousands of non-combatants, including large numbers of women and children, and sometimes the entire population of villages; **(check)**
- the widespread use of chemical weapons, including mustard gas and the nerve agent GB, or Sarin, against the town of Halabja as well as dozens of Kurdish villages, killing many thousands of people, mainly women and children; **(No)**
- the wholesale destruction of some 2,000 villages, which are described in government documents as having been "burned," "destroyed," "demolished" and "purified," as well as at least a dozen larger towns and administrative centers (nahyas and qadhas); **(Check)**

· the wholesale destruction of civilian objects by Army engineers, including all schools, mosques, wells and other non-residential structures in the targeted villages, and a number of electricity substations; **(Check)**

· looting of civilian property and farm animals on a vast scale by army troops and pro-government militia;

(Check)

· arbitrary arrest of all villagers captured in designated "prohibited areas" (manateq al-mahdoureh), despite the fact that these were their own homes and lands; **(Check)**

· arbitrary jailing and warehousing for months, in conditions of extreme deprivation, of tens of thousands of women, children and elderly people, without judicial order or any cause other than their presumed sympathies for the Kurdish opposition. Many hundreds of them were allowed to die of malnutrition and disease; **(Check)**

· forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of villagers upon the demolition of their homes, their release from jail or return from exile; these civilians were trucked into areas of Kurdistan far from their homes and dumped there by the army with only minimal governmental compensation or none at all for their destroyed property, or any provision for relief, housing, clothing or food, and forbidden to return to their villages of origin on pain of death. In these conditions, many died within a year of their forced displacement; **(Check)**

· destruction of the rural Kurdish economy and infrastructure.”² **(Check)**

Note: It is of particular importance here that the historical as well as the current developments in **Northern Kurdistan in South-East Turkey** very much run parallel to the gross violations of human rights above³. In fact, as one can see, the brutal acts of the regimes in Turkey encompass **8 out of the 9** points above (Check), with here and there some slight variations in scope and degree. In partial degree, same goes for the treatment of Kurds in Iran and Syria.

² GENOCIDE IN IRAQ: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds, A Middle East Watch Report: Human Rights Watch - New York · Washington · Los Angeles · London, 1993.

<https://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/ANFALINT.htm>

³ UN report details massive destruction and serious rights violations since July 2015 in southeast Turkey: <http://www.institutkurde.org/en/human-rights/>

the silent witness

'The Silent Witness' – is the primary photograph that represents the 1988 chemical weapons attack on the city of Halabja in Southern-Kurdistan, i.e. Northern Iraq, conducted by the Ba'ath regime of Saddam Hussein and resulted in more than 5000 civilian casualties and years of suffering to come.

More generally, for many Kurds, this photograph embodies the decades long persecution, oppression and suffering of Kurds across Kurdistan. Therefore, it is interesting to delve deeper into the various (layered) meanings of this photograph. In other words, how can it be that this specific photograph is so impactful in showing the horrors of the crimes that were committed, both on 16 March 1988, but also as part of the larger genocidal Anfal campaign conducted in the 80's and 90's by the Baathist regime.

Does the 'impact' of this photo depend on the personal attachment of the viewer (affect theory for Kurds and non-Kurds) and how can it's 'affect' be shaped by the reference framework and experiences of the viewer? Moreover, how can this photograph be better understood through the semiotics framework of Ferdinand de Saussure?

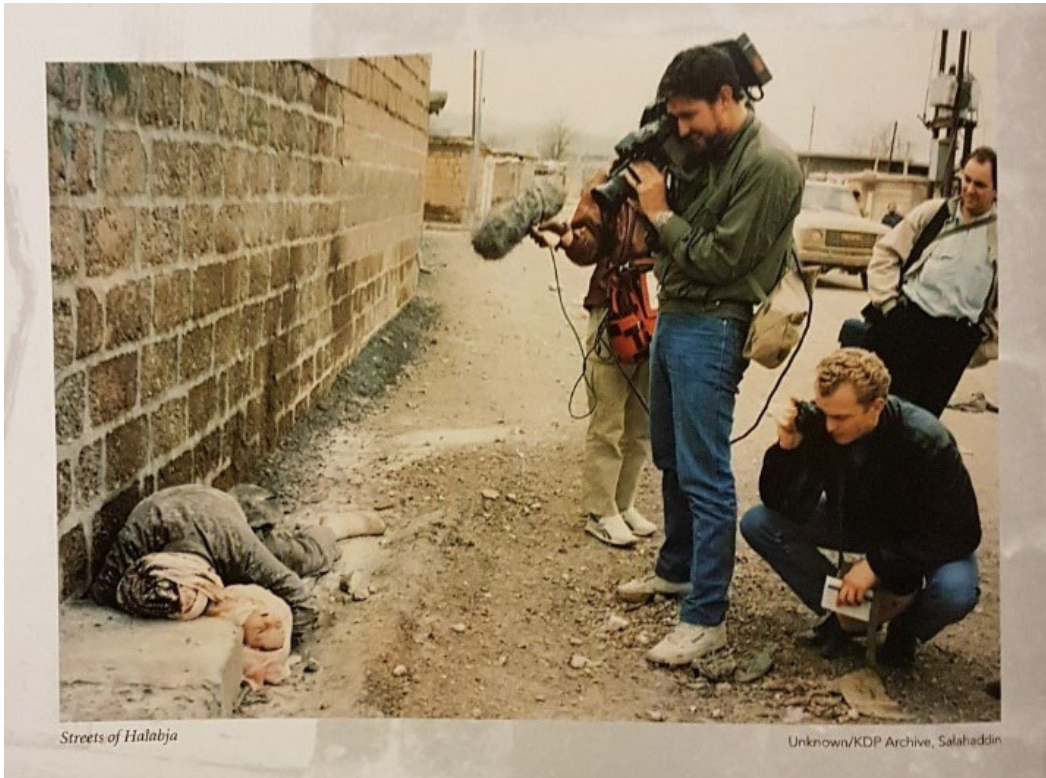
These are some critical questions which this reflection will seek to elaborate upon. Before proceeding with the analysis, several different photo's of the *Silent Witness* will be displayed hereunder, from which one primary photograph will be selected for further reflection.

1:



⁴ <http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/license/154211839>

2:



5

3:



6

⁵ Meiselas, Susan. *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History*.

⁶ https://preemptivelove.org/blog/chemical_attacks_kurds_iraq_halabja_isis/

4:



"The silent witness. That most horrible of fates: an adult clutches a child, both of them literally stopped dead in their tracks on a Halabja street." —Ramazan Öztürk

Ramazan Öztürk/Sipa Press

7

5:



8

⁷ Meiselas, Susan. *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History*, 173.

⁸ <http://humanrightshouse.org/Articles/5765.html>

6:



9

7:



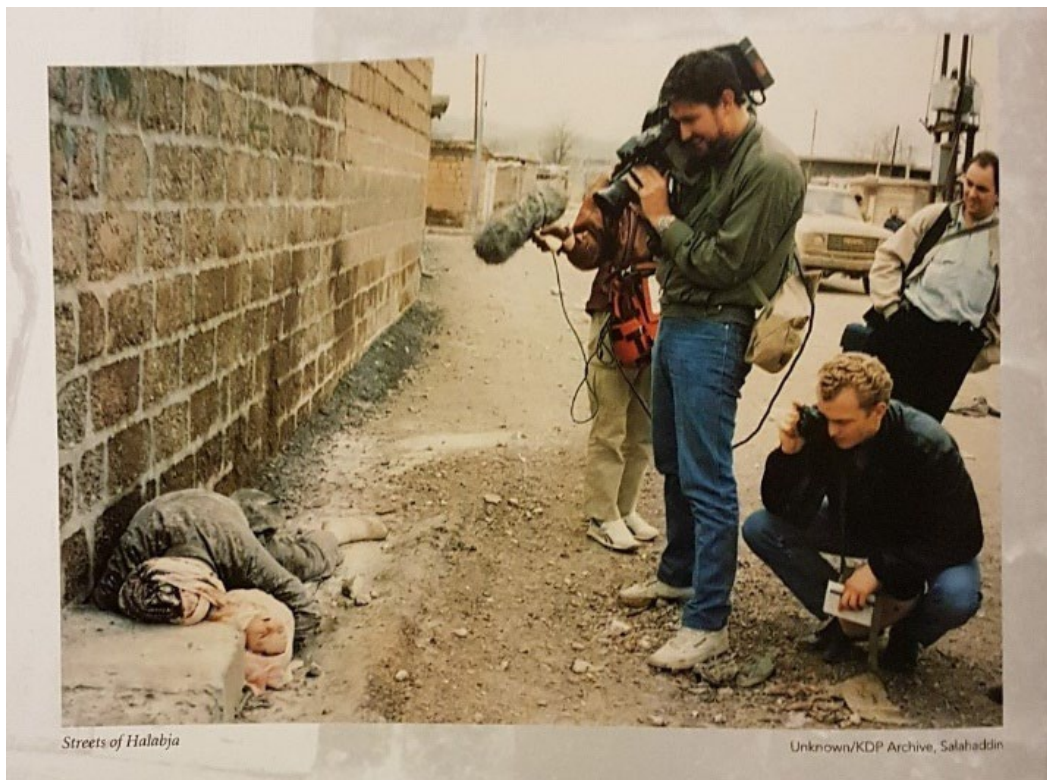
10

⁹ <http://www.4law.co.il/sadsad1.html>

¹⁰ <https://mikesamerica.blogspot.nl/2006/12/>

Reflecting upon the aforementioned photographs, it can be argued that each photograph has its own certain 'affect' and meaning, based upon its own unique characteristics, composition and visual elements. According to me, picture number two would be most viable for this analysis, because of the very fact that it also captures some contextual surroundings (with recognizable characteristics for many Kurds and other peoples in the region), and also because there seems to be some dynamic between the lifeless bodies on the left corner and the people who are 'capturing' this moment through means of photography. In fact, this may also be an intriguing dimension in itself and can serve for further research, in the sense that **three levels** or narratives can be perceived.

- **Organic layer 1:** two lifeless bodies, one of an adult male and the other a small and vulnerable infant.
- **Organic layer 2:** multiple living bodies, each with its own characteristic body language and position, which subsequently also comprises an interplay between these living bodies and lifeless-bodies, as well as their surroundings, i.e. car and 2 persons on the background.
- **Volatile layer 3:** the photographer that captured the 'interplay' between both organic layers one and two. What makes this layer unique and insightful is that it not only provides a rare insight into a situation as such where 'living and dead' bodies 'interact', but even more how this interplay creates another level of meaning upon which countless questions can be asked, e.g. what do these people think while seeing these bodies and capturing the moment with their electronic devices, e.g. does one think about the large compensation that it may receive for capturing such 'unique' material for its employer, or is it rather traumatized as by shock of the horrors that one perceives?



The Halabja chemical attack (in Kurdish: Kîmyabarane Helebce) is also known as 'Bloody Friday'. Halabja used to be a thriving little town with trading potential, as it also hosted many displaced peoples that were caused by the Iran-Iraq war that lasted from 1980 until 1988.¹¹ That morning, on 16 March 1988, Iraqi aircrafts flew over the town, first utilizing conventional airstrikes and shelling, after which chemical bombs were thrown over the city. This strategy was employed on purpose, so that the chemical gasses that were dropped afterwards would penetrate the broken window's and openings of the houses and reach the shelters and 'lower' parts of the homes, where the gasses would sink to the people that were hiding for the conventional bombings.¹²

Chris Kutschera, a long-time friend of the Kurds who has captured many photographs over the last years, wrote the following text that accompanies the Silent Witness photograph in the book *Kurdistan: in the Shadow of History*, by Susan Meiselas.

*"Uncle Omar had eight daughters and only one son, an infant, the last born. When the Iraqis began bombing Halabja with chemical bombs, Uncle Omar took his most precious child – the little boy – and ran away from his house to a neighbour's shelter; but he couldn't make it and died on the doorstep of the neighbour's house, holding his baby in his arms. What Uncle Omar never knew was that he had no chance anyway. All the members of the family who had gone to the shelter also died. The primitive shelter dug in their courtyard did not stop the deadly gases."*¹³

Here, the element of two persons, of which one attempted to save the other (in this case, the infant may not have been able to save the adult, while tragically, may have indirectly caused the adult to die as well because he attempted to save the infant and could therefore not reach a safe destination on time). This dynamic which can also be perceived in the photograph is important in the later analysis section, for it may 'signify' to many Kurds, the older generations of Kurds (namely the resistance fighters known as the Peshmerga – 'those who face death' – that have attempted to save the Kurdish cause in Iraq, and thereby lost their lives. Like uncle Omar. However, it should also be noted that this perceived element may only be strongly visible and sensed by Kurdish peoples only, for most of them carry the scars of the Anfal campaign.

Firstly, taking the aforementioned into account, an extensive description may be helpful to deconstruct the photograph and subsequently, to determine what elements – both subjects and objects – play a role in the crystallization processes that give this photograph a particular albeit volatile, meaning. Here, the relevant analytical framework of Ferdinand de Saussure's theory on semiotics will be utilized to deconstruct the meanings of the signs, the signifiers and signified dynamics in this photograph, upon which further questions will be raised.¹⁴

The 'Silent Witness' photograph is characterized by the following compositional and visual elements:

The photograph itself may be divided between the left flank and the right flank.

Left flank: two lifeless bodies that are positioned on the ground in a certain manner, i.e. the adult male holds the little infant in a 'protective' position under its arms, while the infant itself, particularly its face, is directed towards the heavens. The adult person wears a grey-ish Kurdish traditional clothing with alike traditional head dress. The infant is wrapped around with a pink-ish coloured baby suit, while its head is also covered in a certain soft material. (important to note here that these

¹¹ Simpson, BBC, 2012.

¹² GENOCIDE IN IRAQ: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds, A Middle East Watch Report, p. 99-105.

¹³ Meiselas, Susan. *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History*, 173.

¹⁴ Gillian, *Visual Methodologies*, chapter 4.

characteristics are recognizable for most Kurds, which is also important in the semiological analysis, i.e. Kurds recognize these clothes as worn by their own fathers and children.

Moreover, these bodies are contrasted to the wall of a house, of which, the composition and the material used to build such walls, are typical of homes in that particular region. (this element of detail can already affect the feeling of viewer in the sense that this type of wall material and building style reminds a person to his own house or houses in it's homeland. Thus, already in this section, it becomes clear that the reference framework of a person who sees this picture, determines what elements are recognized, and subsequently, are infused with more personal and emotional meaning.

In the background of the left-flank one can see some alike houses and trees, the deepest horizon of the photo seems to show some mountains.

Right flank: here you see four people standing closely to the lifeless bodies on the left flank. Two of them are looking partly through a lens of a photo- and video camera, while the two other persons seem to watch the bodies with their full eyes. The man who stands further away than the other three persons has a certain body posture, while having his hands in his pockets, which could almost be described as 'relaxed', while the other three are seemingly more focussed on their work, i.e. capturing the moment through 'visual means'. However, here it must also be noted that the true moment of that day may never be fully grasped by such visual means, because the crime scene consists of many more other elements that may not be graspable or consciously perceivable.

Behind the four persons which stand close to the lifeless bodies, you can see a car and two other people, who seem to look from a distance and talk to each other. Moreover, you can see an electricity pole, which is also common in such neighbourhoods in the Kurdish areas.

The dynamics between the left flank and the right flank, within the photograph itself are in itself interesting and provide a foundation for further research regarding meaning-making elements which are intrinsic to a photograph.

Now, as Caroline Brothers asserts in her book *War and Photography: A Cultural History*, such photos should be understood in the cultural, social and historical context which is intrinsic to the photo itself, and also to the people that feel a sense of connection or belonging to these contextual elements, as will later be illustrated by the semiological framework of de Saussure.

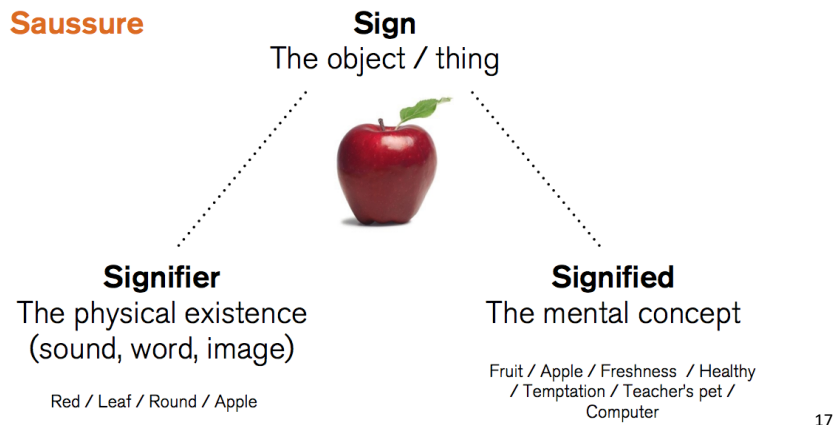
Brothers affirms: "*Acting as witnesses despite themselves, photographs convey a wealth of information not about any objective reality, but about the collective attitudes and beliefs particular to the culture in which they operate.*"¹⁵

Now, taking the aforementioned into account, it would be helpful to briefly introduce the semiological theory of Ferdinand de Saussure. The framework hereunder may provide the illustrated interplay between the three key notions of sign, signifier and signified.

¹⁵ Brothers, Caroline. *War and Photography: A Cultural History*. Routledge: London, 1997.

“I will kill them all with chemical weapons. Who is going to say anything? The international community? Fuck them! The international community and those who listen to them”, said Ali Hassan al-Majid, also known as Ali Chemicali, who was the driving force behind the Halabja attack.¹⁶

How can it be that this statement by Ali Chemicali can be invoked by a certain group of people by looking at this photograph or perhaps even an apple, while others would not (consciously) make this link? Here, the following analytical framework of de Saussure may be helpful to understand.



Based upon my own interpretation, Rose also explains in her chapter on semiotics that:

- The ‘sign’ is of fundamental importance within the framework of analysis
- The ‘sign’ can and should also be placed within broader time & space contingencies, i.e contextual elements and relevant social, cultural, political, historical, reference-frameworks.
- The construction and further social ‘crystallization’ of an image (i.e. continuous modified and revised interpretations and judgements) can have substantial social implications (i.e. impact)

Moreover, as one can see in the illustration above the **sign** itself is the actual ‘organic’ object or thing in the world, which Rose describes as the **referent**.

In relation to this sign, the **signifier** can be described as the ‘intrinsic’ reflection of this sign, i.e. the ‘organic/physical’ existence of the object, subject or x-material thing. Now, in interplay, the **signified** is the perceived (denotative) ‘mental’ concept, i.e. the interpretation and assigned meaning that the receiver assigns/labels to the sign/signifier.

An insightful example here may be the following. For an ordinary individual, (as far as the term ‘ordinary’ is not questioned) can indeed perceive and assign mental concepts to the apple, which are

¹⁶ Mlodoch, Karin. *The Indelible Smell of Apples: Poison Gas Survivors in Halabja, Kurdistan-Iraq, and Their Struggle for Recognition*, p. 8.

¹⁷ The Role of Semiotics in Marketing: <http://coolerinsights.com/2012/05/the-role-of-semiotics-in-marketing/>

also influenced based upon his experiences and reference-framework, i.e. someone may have lost his teeth by biting in an apple which was too hard, or may think of the 'poisoned' apple from the fairy-tale of Roodkapje (Little Red Riding Hood).

However, what these 'ordinary' individuals may not do, is to relate this signifier of the apple, to the signified idea of poisonous gas or a chemical attack, something which the survivors of the 1988 Halabja attack can do based upon their experiences and stories shared by their fellows about the smell and feeling of the chemical weapons.¹⁸

Here, the generations of Kurds thereafter (based upon the experiences and stories of the survivors) may still link the apple through a mental processes (based on that very reference framework) to the smell of poison gas in general, and particularly, to the 1988 chemical attack on Halabja.

Here, it is exactly this relationship between signifier and signified that proves this example to be of utmost relevance to semiology as a meaning-making process, because this has illustrated how the personal experiences and the reference-framework of the viewer (a specific group, i.e. in this case the Kurds) can shape the very interpretation and meaning of an object or subject (as part of a photograph), which is something which 'ordinary' people may not perceive.

Now, a research question that can be posed in parallel with the discussed above is:

How can Ferdinand de Saussure's theory on semiotics contribute to a more holistic understanding of the 'Silent Witness' photograph as part of the Anfal campaign in general and of the 1988 Halabja chemical attack in particular?

As the illustration with the apple and its dynamics between the sign, signifiers and signified shows in a simplified structure on semiotics above, the interplay and subsequent "meaning-making" process between the signifier and the signified can be very volatile and 'ungraspable', simply because the 'mental concepts' and denotative connections that people make vary from case to case according to their own unique reference framework.

As Karin Mlodoch also elaborates upon the 'meaning' of the apple for Halabja-survivors and Kurdish peoples in general: "*Visitors of today's Kurdistan-Iraq stumble over references to the apple as a memory symbol on many occasions. Apples decorated with cloves were traditionally used as a symbol of love and friendship in Kurdish communities; today, there is an additional tragic meaning to the symbol: the association with the lethal scent of chemical weapons. Visitors to the Ministry of Martyrs and Anfal Affairs in Erbil are given an apple studded with cloves with the inscription "a message of love and peace" as a gift.*"¹⁹

In the case of the silent witness, it becomes clear that for non-Kurds, this picture may 'simply' illustrate a scene in which two humans lost their lives through a chemical attack. While on the other hand, the sign (as the two lifeless bodies) in that very context, may produce a signified meaning for Kurds who can see the suffering and injustices of a nation in this very photograph.

¹⁸ Mlodoch, Karin. *The Indelible Smell of Apples: Poison Gas Survivors in Halabja, Kurdistan-Iraq, and Their Struggle for Recognition*

¹⁹ Mlodoch, Karin. *The Indelible Smell of Apples: Poison Gas Survivors in Halabja, Kurdistan-Iraq, and Their Struggle for Recognition*, p. 3.

More generally, this claim could be made for all visual perceptions and interpretations, for every human eye can detect a certain dynamic in a picture which she or he subsequently co-relates and shapes to it's own reference framework. This also proves that a meaning-making process in such photographs is volatile and difficult to fully comprehend or document, for most of it's essence, i.e. meaning, lingers through the abstract thoughts of the viewer.

Joshua Sarinana from Harvard Medical School also provides an interesting angle regarding this issue:

*“Our ability to identify with and imagine someone else’s point of view is deeply ingrained into the architecture of our brain. Photography plays a unique role in triggering the network of brain regions that underlie empathy.”*²⁰

Thus, seeing such an impactful picture may also have a certain effect on people who are not directly related to the tragedy itself, though, arguably, on a more foundational layer because they may not be coloured and affected by a feeling that the picture truly ensembles a part of their own body or family.

Furthermore, there may even be a more volatile and abstract layer to such a picture, which can be explained according to the following overview and quote by Roland Barthes:

Signifier #1 Different colors and shades of ink on paper in some specific order	Signified #1 Young black male, hand near face, hat, etc.
Sign #1 → Signifier #2 Young black male salutes French flag	
Signified #2 French and military connotations	
Sign #2 → Myth French imperialism (African people are okay with being colonized by us good French guys! You can tell because they salute our military and our flag.)	

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“myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no ‘substantial’ ones”.

In other words, the level of myths builds upon an interplay of denotative signs, which are already highly fluid in the first place. This fluidity and abstractness also very much embodies the difficulty to fully comprehend these dynamics from case to case, because its interpretations (based upon individual reference frameworks) may be very different, and even contradictory at times.

This provides valuable insights and a foundation for further research and development of analytical frameworks for the analysis on meaning-making processes of such photography as part of visual representations.

²⁰ Sarinana, Photography and the Feelings of Others: From Mirroring Emotions to the Theory of Mind.

²¹ Semiology and Myth <https://undergradlitcrit.weebly.com/barthes.html>

It is the **layer of myth** here which is particularly interesting, because the photograph of the Silent Witness, for many Kurds, may reinforce a collective feeling, which is often expressed as: “The Kurds have no friends but the mountains.”

This though also fits into Rose’s affirmation: “visual images have social conditions and social effects”, which can here be understood in the way that there are intrinsic and extrinsic dynamics of meaning-making in regard to its social/cultural contexts, i.e. reinforcement and consolidation of the feelings and justification of ‘myth’ in interplay. In other words, the social conditions of the Kurds throughout the last century affect how a visual images can be processed towards a notion of meaning and value.

However, on the other hand, an insightful critical remark is made by Brown & Phu in *Feeling Photography*, for at some point they argue that a “camera’s indiscriminate recording of all detail” in fact makes the photograph often fall beyond the boundary of arts. In their book, they invoke a quote of Hamerton, who argues: “photography is a purely scientific and unfeeling art” – in other words, not art at all.²²

Though, for both viewpoints arguments can be made, perhaps the most important outcome of this analysis regarding de Saussure’s semiotics is that giving meaning to a picture or photograph is often an ‘individual’ process (or collective when sharing a certain common feature or experience), in which the dynamics of the photo are cross-analysed with a person’s or groups reference framework or experiences. However, it doesn’t stop over here. Since this meaning making process is so volatile, it can also be question whether this ‘true meaning’ of a picture can ever be attained, because so many intrinsic elements of the photo are just not in place when an ordinary person views such a photograph in a magazine or newspaper. Of course, a photograph can come close to resemble a certain truth, statement or happening, though, always dependent on further meaning-making processes that others can assign to it.

This has learned us that it is of great importance to always critically reflect upon a photo, as to deconstruct it, and therefore better understand for who the picture may be most impact-full, and how other dynamics, such as perhaps hidden motives or questions, can be further crystalized through such a photograph.

‘*No Friends But The Mountains*’, may seemingly be a myth to many who do not stand in Kurdish shoes and do not bear the scars that affect the interpretation and meaning-making process on interpretation of photo’s, although the photograph of the Silent Witness testifies to this claim that the mountains proved to be the most loyal friends of the Kurds. In doing so, we can see how this picture can sustain and consolidate a signified notion or say a myth, especially when processed trough a Kurdish mind, precisely for the fact that it’s layers of meaning are flexible and affected by the ‘mental concept’ to which it is guided or rooted.

²² Brown, H. Elspeth., Thy, Pu. *Feeling Photography*, p. 10.

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