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A semiotic and visual framing study of the photograph: the Crying Honduran Girl



*John Moore, Getty Images, 2018*

**Question**

What made the photograph of the Crying Honduran Girl go viral? How did the social and political climate and actions of the media impact the virality?

**Introduction**

On June 12, 2018, John Moore, a Getty Images photographer, captured a sobbing toddler standing in the harsh beams from the headlights of a Border Patrol car. Her mother, who stands

just a few feet away, is being searched by a border patrol agent at the U.S.-Mexico border. In that moment, John Moore, a Getty Images photographer, captures a mother and child being separated in the time of President Donald Trump's zero-tolerance border policy.

Trump's zero-tolerance policy required that all individuals who entered the U.S. illegally to be prosecuted for their crimes, according to a press release from the Department of Justice on April 6, 2018. In turn, it led to children being separated from their parents for extended periods of time because the parents were sent to detention centers and the children to shelters. Trump's policy was a part of his effort to secure the border and reduce illegal immigration into the United States (The United States Department of Justice, 2018)

This photograph went viral shortly after it was first released by Getty Images and on Moore's Instagram. Every major news organization published it; everyone tweeted it; few did not see it. Yanela, the child in the photo, became the poster child for the horrors of family separation as a result of the new policy. It raised further outrage in the American people across party lines, as this photo was physical evidence of the trauma that children experience during separation. After intense pressure socially and politically, on June 20, 2018, the Trump administration reversed the policy, just eight days after the photo of Yanela was taken (Shear, Goodnough & Haberman, 2018)

On June 22, 2018, the father confirmed that Yanela and her mother stayed together with *the Washington Post* (Selk, 2018). They were not separated from one another like hundreds of other families who crossed the border between April and June 2018. After the photo was taken, Yanela was picked up by her mother, and they remained together thereon. Many media outlets released the updated information in an attempt to correct the message of the photograph that had

been widely spread, but it was too late. The message remained with the photograph; Yanela was the face of family separation. It's hard to make a correction go viral.

## **Literature Review**

A photograph is a slice of life, and the story that continues beyond the image is determined by the people. It's important to analyze how this message is attached and how it is then used.

To create the message, there must be a significant amount of communication from the visual to the viewer. To understand it, it's imperative to analyze the visual language and to look out how the audience pulls and reads different aspects of an image. The audience will determine the mass message based off of their cultural and societal understandings that form meanings out aspects of the photograph which, in turn, determines how the media distributes the image and its attached message. (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011).

The second the viewer looks at a visual, it communicates with the viewer through the signs and symbols, also known as the semiotics. "Semiotic theory constructs a comprehensive, comparative perspective of the artifacts of mental life" (Lidov, 1999, pg. 3) Semiosis is the act of a symbol or sign representing another meaning or another thing that is understood by the viewer (Lidov, 1999).

Social semiotics is the extension of basic semiotics that focuses on the way the message is interpreted based on the society and the norms of the viewer. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) define it as a process that the viewer goes through to represent an entity in a specific context that aligns with their social, psychological and cultural history. Through prior experiences, connections are unconsciously made, and a connotation, or message, is drawn in a photograph

based on what they already know. Every photograph can have multiple meanings, depending on the person looking at it and how they interpret it. The viewer, in a sense, is a “sign-maker” as they give meaning to an aspect of a visual based on their thought process and already formed connotations. Connotations help fill in the gaps of the message (Barthes, 1964). In total, the social semiotics are often “the products of cultural histories and the cognitive resources” that are used to create a message of a visual (Cheregi and Adi, 2015, 15).

The social semiotics efficiently creates the narrative representations that are later used in the media. A narrative representation is simply the message collectively created by the viewers based off of the participants and the circumstances of the image and results from the psychological need to complete a storyline (Kress and Leeuwen, 1996). There is a need to connect the possible with the probable by using emotion and imagination, especially in times of trauma and distress (Zeiler, 2010).

A narrative structure is created by how the action unfolds, changes, or transitions (Stoian, 2015). These events can be formed by a vector, a direct line created by an aspect in the image that causes the eye to follow a course of action or to identify a narrative. Narrative structures are formed through action, reactional, speech, and thought processes. The action processes occur when a vector extends straight from the actor through a clear action. The actor, who is usually the main subject, acts upon the goal, to whom receives the action, effectively connecting them. (Kress and Leeuwen, 1996). There are reactional processes which involve the reactor looking to the cause of the intense emotion. The vector, in this case, is an eyeline. The viewer looks from the reactor to the phenomenon who caused the emotion, building a narrative that is easy for the viewer to comprehend (Kress and Leeuwen, 1996, pg. 64). Thirdly, there are speech and mental processes created by quote or speech bubbles, usually found in comics and other drawings. They

explicitly show what the visual is saying or thinking and connect the humanlike subject with someone or something within or outside the visual. The message is explicitly stated to the viewer (Kress and Leeuwen, 1996, pg. 67).

Outside of the narrative structures, the secondary participants create the circumstances of the photo and add further context (Stoian, 2015). These circumstances can be left out and the message can stay relatively the same, but context will be lost. They include location or setting, means which includes the tools in the processes, and the accompaniment of other participants, not connected by vectors (Kress and Leeuwen, 1996).

The accompanying text, or the linguistic message, shapes the overarching message for the viewer by adding details that either bolster or refute the ideas formed in the initial photo (Barthes, 1964). This ties into how an image is framed visually with the media.

Frames can be considered “as mental maps people form to cope with the flood of information to which they are subjected every day” (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011, pg. 49). Based on the social semiotics of the photograph and an individual’s own experience, they will interpret a piece of information, or a visual in this case, to fit into a specific frame. “Framing refers to the selection of one view, scene, or angle” of an image when the distributor releases it to the public (Cheregi & Adi, 2015, 14).

In the past, the elite media has had the most control over the message attached to a photograph and the frame used by deciding how and when to distribute it and with what accompanying linguistic message. However, with the introduction of social media, the elite media is no longer the only gatekeeper to information and have a more difficult time controlling the message attached and understood by the masses (Dahmen, Mielczarek & Perlmutter, 2018). Lulu Rodriguez and Daniela V. Dimitrova adequately outline a four-tiered model for analyzing a

photo and how it is being visually framed. They are used as denotative systems, stylistic-semiotic systems, connotative systems and ideological representations (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011).

The denotative systems of a photograph involve the immediate information that the viewer understands. These are the basic messages, or semiotics, understood by the viewer in their initial interpretation (Barthes, 1964). When a frame is based off the denotation, the photograph is immediately slotted into a common theme, and the message is likely to take on the characteristics of the initial category (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011).

The stylistic-semiotic approach to framing studies looks at how the design decisions of the presentation of the photograph affects the message. This involves cropping, lighting adjustments, color change, physical manipulation and more (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). How the designer displays the photo can alter the connotation attached and, therefore, the message.

The connotative system of a visual focuses on the more specific messages attached to them or outside what is expressly presented in the photograph. This is typical for news images that are often attached to stories (Schapiro, 1996). “Frames evolve by critically examining the perceived signs for their more complex, often culture-bound interpretations” (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011, pg. 56). This is the form of visual framing that deals mostly with the signs and symbols of a photograph, or the social semiotics.

The final level deals with the ideological representations of visuals in media—the “why” that explains the representation. “This level tackles how news images are employed as instruments of power in the shaping of public consciousness and historical imagination” (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011, pg. 57). The ideological representation also entails the package

of the photo and other included information such as: a story, headline, caption, etc. (Cheregi & Adi, 2015).

The final important concept to analyze the process for a photograph to become iconic. Photographs that survive history are usually “widely disseminated and immediately recognizable” (Brink, 2000). The message of the image must reflect a major issue occurring at the time of the event captured, which promotes virality and mass distribution. The Influence-Network Model of the Photojournalistic Icon defines the circumstances for an image to go viral and become a photojournalistic icon—creation, distribution, acceleration, and formation (Dahmen, Mielczarek & Perlmutter, 2018).

The creation stage occurs when the photographer snaps the photo and in the initial stages of dissemination. The photographer, the context, and the purpose affect how the image is consumed and used. There are two main process that create the iconic image: the “news creates images that come to be iconic [or] images create news that leads to the image being regarded as iconic” (Dahmen, Mielczarek & Perlmutter, 2018, pg. 281). Essentially, the creator, a journalist or a citizen with an iPhone, determines how the photo will have a news impact, if it reflects news or makes news.

The stage of distribution entails the publication of the image in elite media or the spread on social media. In a more traditional sense, professional media outlets are the gatekeepers to the virality of an image. If every newspaper runs the same powerful image on the front page, everyone will know that photo and the story behind it—effectively making it iconic. However, social media has become a new gatekeeper. A photographer can post an image online and the viewers decide if it will be iconic and widespread; it doesn't have to be on every newspaper's front page to be iconic (Dahmen, Mielczarek & Perlmutter, 2018).

For an image to accelerate across the media, it must be newsworthy, timely, historical or prominent. It helps if the subjects are famous, if the photograph has celebrity value or secular authority, or if the photo is aesthetically pleasing and has economic value. The biggest trigger is if the photo has shocking or graphic content (Dahmen, Mielczarek & Perlmutter, 2018).

The formation stage encompasses the first three stages. There must be value in the creation, adequate distribution and a lot of triggers. “The more triggers an image has, the more likely the image is to experience mass sharing and become an enduring icon” (Dahmen, Mielczarek & Perlmutter, 2018, pg. 290). The conglomeration of all the stage is necessary for virality.

How a photo’s message is constructed based on the signs of the photograph is bolstered through the visual frame extracted by the media, which determines if a photo becomes an icon. Social semiotics feeds the visual frame.

## **Methods**

To study why this photograph of the Crying Honduran girl was deemed “iconic” and how it was then used by the media with a misinterpreted message, it’s important to analyze how different aspects of the photograph triggered the message by looking at the semiotic theory. It’s also necessary to analyze the widespread use by the media through the singular frame that bolsters the belief that Yanela and her mother were separated, prior to the clarification that she and her mother were never separated.

The journal article by Stoian outlines how to visually analyze the semiotic aspects of a photograph, based off the book by Kress and Leewen, *Reading Images The Grammar of Visual*



*Design.* The photograph will be analyzed based off of the vectors and circumstances to see how the narrative structure was created for the photo of the Crying Honduran Girl. Everything from the position to the child's point of view have a direction impact on the story created.

It is also imperative to look at the current cultural and social opinion toward the issue of control of the U.S.-Mexico border during Trump's zero-tolerance policy and how that impacted the meaning of the signs of the photograph. The already-hot-button issue helped to cultivate the virality of the photograph and what it represented.

It'll be helpful to analyze the usage of the photograph by a wide variety of popular publications that have significant reach in the United States to see what other information was included to alter the message or frame. The content from about a dozen publications will be coded to see how the photo was published and what with content, at what point the zero-tolerance policy was introduced in the story, if the originally published content explicitly states that they were separated, where the information clarifies that they were not separated, and more. This data will be used to define how the photograph was consumed by the public and look at the impact it had on political policy and raised awareness on the issue.

## **Findings**

### *Semiotics*

In this photograph, the first place the eye goes is to the crying child, dead center in the photograph. She has a darker complexion and wears a bright pink sweater and matching tennis shoes with no laces. She looks up, mouth wide open in the midst of a wail, toward two adults.

The eye travels to a spot of bright purple. They're latex gloves that touch the hip of the other adult who is wearing a bright teal shirt. Your eye travels down the leg of the adult who is wearing jeans and tennis shoes, also without laces. Next, the eye notices the shapeless, khaki pants with large utility pockets. Then the background is taken in: a large white car of some kind. The three subjects are standing on dusty, rocky ground with no plants, just dirt and are lit by some form of unnatural lighting.

Each of these components of the photos, from the child to the lighting, help to tell a story and build a message that will be attached to the photograph and determine its use. The above-mentioned aspects are what is denoted in the photograph. The connotation, or message attached to the photo due to its visual representation, is determined through the narrative processes.

In this particular photograph, there is a clear reactional process. The child's eyeline, the main vector of the photograph, travels to the Border Patrol Agent who is the cause of her distress, or the phenomenon (Kress and Leeuwen, 1996, pg. 64). The vector makes this interaction clear, creating an emotional power to the photograph. The viewer immediately understands that something has happened to the little girl because of something the agent has done. It's a story that the viewer can piece together with more information.

The low angle of the photo also puts the viewer in the shoes of Yanela in this reactional process. John Moore was either squatting or kneeling on the earth which allowed him to copy the view of Yanela, making the viewer feel smaller and less powerful in the situation.

Outside the reactional process that tells a story within itself, it's imperative to look at the circumstances from the secondary participants of the photo that give important context to the narrative. The mother can be viewed as a secondary participant because she is not directly connected by a clear vector but is part of an action. The desert setting with a white vehicle and

unnatural lighting helps build the story as well. Stories of illegal border crossings in the United States usually focus on the U.S.-Mexico border, a region that receives little rain and has little vegetation as opposed to the U.S.-Canada Border in the north. The dry, rocky earth denotes that the subjects are in the desert. The lighting, probably coming from another vehicle, shows that the photo was taken at night, a time when immigrants typically try to cross the border if they do not have legal documentation. At the top of the photograph, the purple latex gloves of the Border Patrol agent can be seen. They are a typical tool used to create a barrier between two people. It's a common tool used by TSA, police officers, and medical professionals when searching someone. Neither Yanela nor her mother have shoelaces in their sneakers, another clear sign of the situation. When someone is detained at the border, Border Patrol immediately removes their shoelaces and belts before searching them or putting them on the bus. All of these signs are clear to the American people as there have been copious amounts of media released in past years, depicting detainees at the border who seek asylum.

The final piece that created the message of the photograph was the original caption that John Moore wrote with the photo and published on his Instagram. The first two sentences state, "A Honduran asylum seeker, 2, and her mother are taken into custody by federal agents near the US-Mexico border. They had just crossed the Rio Grande from Mexico and were to be transported to a US Customs and Border Protection processing center." The third sentence, on the other hand, states, "The Trump administration's "zero tolerance" policy for undocumented immigrants calls for the separation of parents and children while their cases for political asylum are adjudicated, a process that can take months – or years." He then goes on to talk about how emotional he felt, further altering the linguistic message (Moore, 2018).

To any American or general Westerner, the signs of the photograph clearly depict that Yanela and her are illegal immigrants who have been detained. At the time of the zero-tolerance policy, family separation was a hot-button issue and a lot of similar content was being produced. This photograph shows a woman and her child being detained, and in that moment, they are separated. It makes the viewer wonder what is to come for the two, and with all the other information floating around the media at the time and the societal sentiment, it is only natural for the viewer to assert that Yanela and her mother are separated from one another. It was the common theme at the type, and the photograph fit in nicely to the message.

### ***Framing and Photo Usage***

Based off the mass, initial interpretation of the photograph, media outlets used the frame that Yanela and her mother had been separated.

The immediate information presented, or the denotative aspects of the publications, largely include information on the zero-tolerance policy which further bolstered the narrative representation of the photograph. Of the 12 publications polled, ten used the photograph with a story or opinion piece about the family separation due to the zero-tolerance policy. Seven ran the photo with a series of other photographs by Moore, and three ran it on the cover or front page. A total of 41.7 percent mention the zero-tolerance policy in the headline, 25 percent in the photos caption at the top of the page, 25 percent in the lede or first paragraph, and 8.3 percent in the second paragraph. Twenty-three percent of the articles used an emotional quote from John Moore in the headline. The other headlines use words such as heartbreaking,” “immoral” and “crying.” Seventy-seven percent of the articles included language in the ledes such as “screaming,” “girl crying,” and “hardship.” There was a tendency to use emotional language to

mirror the emotion of the child. It's easy to look at this photograph in different publications and assume that the mother and child had been separated.

The second level, involving the stylistic-semiotic systems, is apparent in the different uses of the photograph. Twenty-five percent of the publications used the photograph on the front page of the publication. *Time* magazine, in particular, weighed heavily on this level of framing. On their July 2 cover (released on June 22), they cropped out Yanela, leaving her against a stark, red background with President Donald Trump standing tall and looking down at her as she screams in distress. "This is America" is written in a small, white serif font. With this photo illustration, they made the message loud and clear. Trump is the reason that children, Yanela specifically, are being ripped from their parents when they seek asylum at the border. This is all Trump's fault is the message attached to the photo illustration. This depiction received significant criticism from conservatives and liberals alike for exploiting the photograph. The photo was also published on A1 *the New York Times*, which immediately makes the photograph important to the rest of the world because *the Times* is one of the newspapers with the farthest reach and most influence. Their decision to put it on the front page made the photo even more meaningful.

The connotative framing in the photograph involves the explicit statements that Yanela and her mother were separated at the border from the moment John Moore took the photo. Twenty-five percent of the articles explicitly say, or did when the article was initially published, that Yanela and her mother were separated. Another 33.3 percent do not say they were separated, while 41.7 percent include an ambiguous quote from the photographer where he says that he does not know what happened to them. Fifty-eight percent of the articles do not clarify that Yanela and her mother were never separated, as a correction or otherwise. Only 8.3 percent

clarify it at the very beginning of the story and 16.7 percent clarify it in the middle of the article. Another 16.7 percent do not clarify it until the very end of the article. In this area is where the bridge was officially made, and the fact of the message was that they were separated.

The last stage of ideological representation, or the reason why this photo was widely used in the way it was. This photograph adequately captures the moment of separation between Yanela and her mother in a time when there was already widespread outrage across the United States in response to the Trump administration's policy that resulted in many children being ripped from their parents who were destined to be prosecuted for illegal entry. However, until this photograph was taken, there was not one photo that adequately represented this issue in one snapshot. Fifty-one percent of the articles call Yanela the "face of family separation" or discussed how this photo was the representation of the anti-family separation movement. The full package from the stories to the societal sentiment toward this issue allowed for the photograph's message to be used as an ideological representation and to go viral.

When this photo went viral, it was born into the perfect environment. The photograph was taken during a time when there was significant media attention and energy put towards the issue of family separation. This photo was a high-quality capture of a mother and daughter being separated and was shot by a professional photojournalist backed by a renowned media agency. In this specific instance, the photograph matched the news and was used as visual evidence for stories. It was then quickly distributed by Getty Images, an internationally recognized visual media distribution company that provides many editorial photos for newspapers across the United States. It allowed newspapers to be the gatekeepers and decide how to run the photo, but it was also a gatekeeper when it released the media online allowing it to go viral across social media.

This photo was truly newsworthy, timely, historical, and prominent in the social and political climate of the time. The high-quality image also allowed it to be fully embraced by elite media and social media. This photo accelerated quickly because it fulfilled so many boxes that create a viral image. All the aspects of the photo perfectly formed it to be deemed an “iconic” photograph and go viral.

## **Discussion**

While the true story behind the photo complicates and almost illegitimizes the usage, it was the piece of the puzzle for change to be made, to stop family separation at the border. The near exploitation of this photo before the truth came out might have been the final straw, the final piece of pressure for the Trump administration to change political policy. The policy changed a week after the photograph was taken, allowing for families to stay together and not be separated. Most will agree that this is a positive change.

The truth behind the photo was hazy from the start due to the media’s failure to confirm or deny the truth behind the photo because everyone was so focused on what the photograph represented. The initial caption by John Moore made the true story ambiguous from the start. The inclusion of information on the zero-tolerance policy caused the audience to jump and tie the circumstances of the policy to Yanela. It was the natural progression of thought and understanding for the mass audience who were largely in an already-emotional state. The photo appeared on *the New York Times*, was spread across social media, and was used by Refugee and Immigration Center for Education and Legal Services (RAISES) to raise \$17 million to provide legal services (Amaria, 2018). All of this tapped into the emotional response of shock that the American people felt. “I believe this image has raised awareness to the zero-tolerance policy of

this administration. Having covered immigration for Getty Images for 10 years, this photograph for me is part of a much larger story...The image showed a moment in time at the border, but the emotion in the little girl's distress has ignited a response," Moore said in an email to *the Washington Post* (Schmidt & Phillips, 2018). This photo had power, even if the story was misrepresented.

The initially usage of the photo, prior to the announcement that Yanela and her mother were not separated, served a greater purpose and was more acceptable; however, some usage pushed the boundary of what was actually acceptable in these special circumstances.

When *Time magazine* published the photo illustration on their cover, ten days after it was revealed that Yanela and her mother were not separated, the boundary was pushed too far. This cover came too late and ripped Yanela from the context of the image, of the narrative story. All that was left was Trump and a crying child. The illustration seems to rely on the shock-value of a screaming child and a grumpy-looking Trump. The cover for July 2 was released on June 22, the same day news broke that she and her mother had been separated. The cover was exploitive, and the bad timing gave the photograph a negative connotation and many deemed it "fake news." *Time's* usage of the photograph pushed the boundary beyond what was acceptable for this photograph with the misinterpreted message, causing it to lose traction and power among the American people and politicians. Many also questioned *TIME* magazine, if the photo was so powerful, why did they have to alter it?

*TIME* stood by their decision to use the photo in a statement to CNN, and said they highlighted Yanela because she was "the most visible symbol of the ongoing immigration debate." They said, "our cover and our reporting capture the stakes of this moment" (Hadas\_Gold, 2018).



Their reasoning is valid because it was similar to the reasoning for prior usage, but it differed because it was released after the news that the two remained together and the cover was a major statement. The bigger the statement is, the bigger the lash back. It caused the photograph to be deemed “fake news” and “liberal propaganda,” overall having a negative impact on the photograph and leaving a negative, confused connotation.

Sarah Sanders, the White House Press Secretary, tweeted on June 22, “It’s shameful that Dems and the media exploited this photo of a little girl to push their agenda.” Many who supported Trump were angered by the repeal of the policy and took their frustration out on the media’s widespread misuse of this photograph. The expansive issues with the use led to it losing significant traction and power; however, it had already served its purpose.

Despite all this, this photo will likely last through history due to its initial power and the original attached message. It is difficult to make the correction go viral in the same way as the photo did after it was originally shot. In the end, the photo will be known for in history. It will forever be associated with the zero-tolerance policy due to its timing, impact, and expansiveness.

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