MAKING PHOTOGRAPHS HISTORIC: THE USE OF HISTORICAL BLACK-AND-WHITE STILLS IN NBC’S FICTIONAL MINISERIES *HOLocaust*

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1. INTRODUCTION

“It is only a story. But it really happened,” says the voice-over at the beginning of NBC’s TV miniseries *Holocaust*,¹ which aired in the United States in April 1978. These first sentences are emblematic of the miniseries, which was an attempt to shed light on the entire history of the Holocaust by telling the story of two fictional families from Germany, one Jewish and one non-Jewish. Scholarly literature has tended to describe *Holocaust* as a watershed production that informed a rather uninformed public about the Holocaust thus helping to integrate it within the collective memory of the United States. Nearly 120 million people watched it in the United States alone, making it to one of the biggest TV events ever. At the same time, critics have harshly criticized the miniseries and accused it of trivializing the Holocaust and turning the event into a soap opera.²

One particularity of the miniseries is its constant use of historical black-and-white stills displayed within the narrative of the family saga, which clarify that it is a “story” that “really happened.” In his review of *Holocaust* for *Time* magazine, film critique Lance Morrow focused on the differences between historical photographs and fictional film...
and connected them with the near impossibility of contemplating the Holocaust. He wrote: “But one senses something wrong with the television effort when one realizes that two or three black-and-white concentration-camp still photographs [...] are more powerful and heartbreaking than two or three hours of the dramatization.”

This statement illustrates what is widely accepted: The miniseries benefits from the use of historical photographs that induce authenticity and empathy for the fictionalized story. However, in this article I do not solely ask what the historical photographs do with the miniseries, but rather I attempt more to describe what happens with the displayed photographs. In which ways does the miniseries change the meaning and the context of the photographs? What is the role of the miniseries in turning these historical or factual photographs into historic images of the Holocaust? This article demonstrates that, on the one hand, a television production about an historical event benefits and gains authenticity by implementing historical photographs in its fictionalized narrative. It also emphasizes, on the other hand, how historical photographs obtain their iconic status by becoming contextualized within a major television production, one with millions of viewers and the potential for a high level of public awareness. By employing the terms “iconic status” or “icon,” I follow Vicky Goldberg who argues that the meaning of the word “icon” has extended from sacred paintings or sculptures in Eastern Christianity “to secular images with so strong hold on the emotions or imaginations that they have come to serve as archetypes [...] for an epoch or a system of beliefs.” Secular icons are able to provide an “instant effortless connection to some deeply meaningful moment in history. They seem to summarize such complex phenomena as the powers of the human spirit or of universal destruction.”

The ensuing question here, however, is what shapes the iconic quality of a photograph? Susan Sontag argues that a photograph has no narrative coherence and that the “possibility of being affected morally by photographs is the existence of a relevant political consciousness.” Following Susan Sontag’s considerations, who argues that a photograph is not able to create a moral response without complementing it with a narrative coherence, I focus on the context in which the photographs are presented within the miniseries in order to show that each picture relies on a deliberate ordering scheme. Therefore, the question is not so much why these photographs became secular icons—exempli gratia their awe-inspiring connection to the historical event, their specific compositional elements, or their efficacious evocation of emotions—but to understand the cultural practices of their