

VISUAL ANALYSIS
By Walter Balane/Waltzib

PHOTO ESSAY: A DEADLY MASSACRE IN THE PHILIPPINES (Excerpt)

Source: TIME (www.time.com)

Accompanying Report:

Behind the Philippines' Maguindanao Massacre

By [Alastair McIndoe](#) Friday, Nov. 27, 2009

(<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1943191,00.html>)

Summary:

On November 23, 2009, the Philippines caught the attention of the world with shocking election-related violence, the massacre of 57 people including 32 from the news media.

Ismael Mangudadatu, Buluan town vice mayor and gubernatorial candidate in Maguindanao province in Mindanao, southern Philippines sent his wife and two sisters to file his certificate of candidacy. They were accompanied by lawyers and the media.

But about a hundred armed men waylaid them to what seems to be an area prepared for the crime.

They were all killed and their bullet riddled bodies were found buried with their vehicles in what seems to be an attempt to hide the crime. Among the equipment left in the crime scene was a back hoe owned by the provincial government.

Police arrested the primary suspect, Andal Ampatuan Jr, a town mayor in the province where his father is the governor and his brother the regional director.

The Ampatuans, a powerful clan in the province and a close ally of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, are rivals of the Mangudadatus. They turned erstwhile allies when the latter decided to challenge the provincial leadership a year earlier.

The Mangudadatus charged the Ampatuans. It resulted in the arrests of a number of the latter's family members. President Arroyo placed Maguindanao and another province under Martial Law.

This gave way for authorities to dismantle the Ampatuan's private army, raid and search their mansions, and replace the government leadership in the province.

The Committee to Protect Journalists then declared the Philippines the most dangerous place for journalist to work in.

The following is my visual analysis of six of the 16 frames in the TIME.com photo essay (number assignment correspond to their order of appearance in the slide show).

PHOTO A



Ted Aljibe / AFP / Getty Images (No. 7)

DIGGING FOR CLUES

A backhoe lifts a mangled vehicle unearthed from the shallow grave as investigators try to find more bodies.

http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1943189_2006162,00.html

Here is an informational photo that shows the rule of thirds in a vertical orientation: the back hoe fork, the damaged car, and the investigators standing on the ground. The triad of elements makes it look like a triangle with the back hoe fork as “summit” and the investigators standing at the bottom as the base. Based on the Gestalt laws, we tend to organize a triangle from the figures. The distribution of light also shows us a horizontal orientation of rule of thirds with the first part at the left more stable side of the frame, the back hoe-vehicle hanger in the middle and the dark clouds in the right side.

The diagonal contours as suggested by the “two legs” of the “triangular” shape suggest conflict as this is very much an image of conflict. The tone also of the sky, gloomy reinforces the sadness in this photo.

Emphasis is at the lifting of the vehicle at the upper part of the frame. Usually, however, the bottom is more important than the top so there seems to be asymmetrical balance in this photo.

The dark color of the machines, the black shirts of the investigators, the distant mountains also provided “dark vs. bright” contrast. Here the lighter background emphasizes the serious activity in the foreground.

The image denotes that searchers use a back hoe to uncover what another back hoe covered. It tells us that another car was recovered from the “hiding hole” of the crime. The image shows how horrible the force was exerted to kill the victims and to hide the crime. Everybody looks up to the new find. But the “machines over man” composition (back hoe and destroyed car over the investigators) connotes the inhuman condition the victims went through in the massacre. The composition draws the viewer upward, as if we the viewers and the investigators are of lower value and at the mercy of the machine. This could connote a rage against the machine effect. At the very least, this could symbolize the daunting task of investigation ahead. *END*

PHOTO B



Erik de Castro / Reuters (No. 8)

EXAMINING THE WRECKAGE

Police investigators sift through a local television network's vehicle that was unearthed at the massacre site.

http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1943189_2006166,00.html

To viewers, the mood of this photo is that of shock and disbelief at the amount of force applied to machine and pain to humans (assuming they survived the bullets).

The mangled vehicle being placed at the center of the frame surrounded by investigators shows it is the emphasis of this photo.

Another informational photo of how a wreck looks like. It could be the vehicle lifted in the first photo. This time it is a close shot to show more details of the vehicle's identity. In second look we could see the word "PRESS" beside the car number plate and the letter "...TV" at the part of the car in the lower portion of the frame. This suggests/denote that the UNTV car, badly mangled, was unearthed and it is proven that the UNTV crew was indeed among those killed.

The six police investigators and the security personnel above indicate that the authorities are serious in finding clues that lead to culprits.

It could also have connotative meaning. Somehow it is a symbol of the fallen members of the media; they are crushed, destroyed to the end, reduced. This is such a sad photo as the "PRESS" sign in our I.D. is a passport to the expression of our freedom in our work. But here, "PRESS" meant something but freedom.

The unexpected/unidentifiable shape of the vehicle evokes tension and even rage. *END.*

PHOTO C



Jes Aznar / CHINE NOUVELLE / SIPA (No. 9)

A GRIM SCENE

Health workers prepare the bodies of recovered massacre victims.

(http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1943189_2006168,00.html)

This photo employs layering. There are at least three layers of images here. First is the point of entry. The two health staff working on a body covered with red plastic easily catches the eyes because of the lighter and cool color “blue” of their uniform. The second layer is the placement of the back hoe digging on the ground. The last is the farthest layer, those of investigators, security, photographers and others. Take note that the color blue is in the three layers of the photo as if it’s a hook. We have three planes of the visual field, foreground, middle ground, and back ground.

As we move from bottom left to top right in a diagonal manner from the two health workers to the multitude in the back ground we sense conflict and it evokes tension.

The information in the foreground demonstrates some surprise. The health workers know the bodies should be in “body bags” yet their agency could only afford banana leaves. And why they used a red plastic to only one body? Whose body was it?

This photo strikes a contrast, too, between work of machine and work of man. But somehow they complement. Like we don’t really see what the back hoe is taking. But we have a sense of it by the bodies arranged in the foreground. Somehow the work of the workers on the bodies in the lower part of the frame strikes an asymmetrical balance with the value of those in the upper frame. As we move from bottom left to the top right, we see a move from stability to instability.

The image denotes the information provided such as how the victims were killed, how health workers did their work with the bodies among other things. It also connotes the prevailing unpreparedness of the government to violence of such scale (without body bags and forensics control). If police and health conditions were imposed, the photographer may have not taken this photo. But at least, it connotes that in whatever lack of preparedness, the dignity of the victims were respected, even if they were covered only by banana leaves. *END*

PHOTO D



Aaron Favila / AP (No. 11)

A FAMILY GRIEVES

Gubernatorial candidate and vice-mayor Esmael Mangudadatu cries during the burial of his wife and two sisters. Despite the tragedy, Mangudadatu has officially filed his candidacy, telling the press "only death can stop me from running."

http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1943189_2006172,00.html

This is a photo that evokes so much emotion even if we can't see faces, especially that of Mangudadatu's in grief.

Anyone could relate to burials. This photo is important to alter the images of the inhuman, indecent, and grisly "dumping" of the bodies in the crime scene.

The point of entry easily becomes the drapery in the cloth, which do not bear just ordinary markings/print. The print bears Islamic messages in Arabic showing perhaps buildings in the Mecca, a pilgrimage, holy site of Muslims. At this point, all rage, anger, and thoughts of revenge play second only to homage and respect of human origins, back to Allah, God the almighty.

The ordinary get up of the other people in the photo, including Mangudadatu, is juxtaposed with the special drapery wrapping the dead. It is this contrast that demonstrates the drama being shown.

The faceless hands of the pallbearers are somehow juxtaposed, too, with the faces of the other people in the upper left portion of the photo.

Somehow the strength of the hands in the cloth holding the body is carrying the weight of Mangudadatu's wife. It shows "what you see what you get" information such as they are bringing her to her resting place, that her body was wrapped in fine linen when she was buried, that her husband was emotional, etc.

But it also connotes that as they carry the body, they also do it with love and support, and the hands' hold maybe fists that resemble a "fighting position" in the search for justice. *END*

PHOTO E



Romeo Ranoco / Reuters (No. 15)

UNDER ARREST

Agents escort Andal Ampatuan Jr., a local mayor, after he surrendered to police. Witnesses say Ampatuan Jr. ordered his militia to fire on the group of people; Ampatuan denies any involvement and blames Muslim rebels for the killings.

http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1943189_2006180,00.html

When images of the primary suspect's "surrender" came out, it created an immediate response from the audience who were shocked by the crime. Anger, disgust, fury, etc. The impact lingered up to the present. Outside of Maguindanao, Andal Jr. is not so visible or recognizable. He wasn't well photographed as well. But the charges of masterminding the massacre changed all that.

The informational value drawn from this image somehow provides a sense of balance, after the grief on the victims; they turn to their feelings towards the suspect. Since he surrendered, there seems to be no need to handcuff him. But even if in this moment, the scene was well guarded, no handcuffs still surprised many viewers since they heard he was the primary suspect. A suspect accused/caught stabbing a neighbor will immediately wear this iron band, but not Andal Jr., suspect of killing at least 57 people. There may be legal technicalities on this but the surprise holds.

The photo, however, has rich connotations. For a President who has been tagged as a "close ally of the Ampatuans," the turn over by presidential assistant Jesus Dureza (in gray jacket) of Andal Jr. may show the President is serious in implementing the law by favoring no one and submitting allies to the judicial process. No handcuffs may show that Andal Jr. volunteered to turn himself in and therefore reinforces his claim that he wasn't guilty as shown by his volunteering arrest. This also entails possible propaganda that the wheels of justice are turning.

The photo has no breathing space and sense of place. *END*

PHOTO F



Xinhua / ZUMApres.com (No. 16)

A JOURNALISTIC TOLL

The National Union of Journalists of the Philippines condemns the killing of journalists during a candle lighting ceremony. At least 27 journalists were killed in the massacre, prompting the U.S.-based Committee to Protect Journalists to call the Philippines the most dangerous place in the world to be a journalist.

(http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1943189_2006182,00.html)

The quality of light worked in this photo. There is also a sharp contrast between light and darkness. There are at least two layers, the foreground and the background. The foreground lets us see a handful of journalists praying for the victims of the massacre. Part of the background (upper part) is a replica of a man praying at the foot of the cross.

The left hand area of the photo is dominant as illustrated by the direction through which the people were facing in the lower half and the image of a praying man at the foot of a replica of Jesus on the Cross. This means we have a leveled composition with minimal stress or no tension at all.

There is, however, juxtaposition in between the upper and lower parts of the frame. In the foreground are journalists standing, praying or reading a statement. In the upper part is a replica of Jesus Christ in the cross while a statue of a faithful kneels before the feet of the sculpture.

The denotative meanings include that the journalists gathered at night, it was raining, there were only a handful of them who made it, that they held it near a religious site, etc.

But the connotative meaning is that it speaks of the spirit of solidarity of Philippine journalists, even with difficulty and bad weather (by bringing umbrella to the candle lighting event) they still stand up for their colleagues. The candle too signifies light in the midst of darkness or uncertainty. It connotes the continued search for justice *END*