

Isabella King

American University of Paris

Media and War

Professor Oxley

24 October 2025

Media & War Midterm Critical Analysis

War, protest, and bravery can be demonstrated in the media in numerous ways. One picture or video may speak more than a thousand words. One of my most impactful moments, which this essay discusses, is the video of the Tank Man, filmed in June 1989 in Beijing, China. In the video, one man can be seen standing heroically against a queue of army tanks during the protests in Tiananmen Square. It was filmed by numerous news channels in various parts of the world and soon became one of the most renowned symbols of peaceful protest. I will also refer to the concepts in Barbie Zelizer's book, "About to Die" (2010), which discusses how news photographs can influence individuals to experience strong emotions and recall events in a specific manner. As will be demonstrated in this essay, the Tank Man video transforms a mere protest video into a powerful image of human resistance against the power of the government. Through the lens of concepts of representation and belief, it details how this image continues to influence the cultural memory of courage and freedom worldwide.

Description and Context

The video, titled *Tank Man* depicts a single man standing at the front of a long queue of tanks, and he is not willing to give way even when they attempt to go over his head. The tanks are big, hefty, and composed of metal, yet the man is small, wearing a white shirt, and carrying two shopping bags. The photograph is plain, but compelling. It takes a silent scene of courage

and demonstration. Even when the tanks come to a standstill before him, the man does not withdraw. The picture is relatively quiet, serene, and tense (CNN). There is fear and courage that you can almost experience simultaneously. The video was taken from a far angle, visually, using a long shot. The camera displays the broad street, the tanks that are lined up in a row, and the small figure of the man. The tanks are aimed at the sign of control, violence, and a man is a symbol of ordinary people who desire freedom. There is minimal camera zooming, which helps us focus on the size difference between them. The video is almost silent with only the city backdrop sound, which contributes to the image even further (CNN). The motion is slow and painful. When the man gets in front of the tanks, the tanks attempt to avoid hitting him, but he again goes in their path. It is a game of daring and war force.

This is the event that occurred on the following day, as the Chinese army killed many protesters who had been insisting on democracy in Tiananmen Square. Students and workers had been demanding more rights and an end to corruption for weeks. In 1989, the demonstrations were suppressed by the army with force, and hundreds or even thousands of individuals were killed. On the following day, the Tank Man took his position in the street, which could be interpreted as a message to them: 'You can stop us, but you cannot silence us.' International news reporters of CNN and BBC captured the act when they were in nearby hotels. The video became a global phenomenon via television because it was a courageous deed that was perceived by people all across, as they were unaware of the man's identity.

The video turned out to be a symbol of protest and boldness. It has appeared on news broadcasts, in newspapers, and eventually on the internet. Although the Chinese government attempted to censor this video and delete it from the Chinese media, the image remained. It is one of the most recognizable pictures of the 20th century. According to Zelizer (1), a news image

is what she refers to as “the voice of the visual.” She gives an example that pictures can answer not only our rational or factual needs but also our imagination and emotions. People did not just consider politics when they watched the video of the Tank Man; they felt something profound within themselves: empathy, sadness, and admiration. The video showed the world what it means to be brave when confronting opposition to authority.

It is not only a historical fragment in the video, but also a story presented through visual symbols. Not only are the man and the tanks not real objects, but they are ideas. The man symbolizes the person, liberty, and human power. The tanks are associated with government control and fear. With the help of this picture, people may observe a vivid contrast between strength and weakness, silence and bravery, authority and freedom. That is what makes the video so memorable and heart-touching.

Interpretation and Analysis

Representation and Symbolism

The *Tank Man* video is more than a protest; it embodies the concept of defending one's rights, even in cases when it appears impossible. Zelizer refers to the pregnant moment in her book. According to her, there are pictures that not only paint a single time frame but also imply what has occurred and what is going to occur (p. 2). The Tank Man video is just such an image. By watching it, we visualize the pain and the violence that happened before, during the protest, and we also wonder what will come of the man after he stands before the tanks. This is never shown, and this is the greater mystery in the picture. This image lasts forever. It was filmed in 1989, yet it remains shared today. It is an iconic image, according to the media scholars. According to Zelizer (p. 1), news pictures can travel across both time and space, implying that they may be out of context and used to represent significant human concepts. Nowadays, the

Tank Man video is taught in schools, shown in films, and demonstrated at demonstrations all over the world to illustrate how peaceful resistance should be practiced.

Symbolism is rather plain, yet strong. The tiny form of the man demonstrates the feebleness of an individual, whereas his gesture demonstrates giant moral strength. Physical strength and moral emptiness are evident in the tanks. The immobility of the man and the motion of the tanks depict two opposing worlds: the worst of human bravery and the most brutal aspects of military force. This picture represents the human desire to fight against oppression. Representation is a concept discussed in the course, referring to how reality is presented or portrayed by the media. The Tank Man video is not just a pointer to what has happened, but is also significant. It demonstrates to viewers that a change is possible in someone. It is a metaphorical illustration which delivers an eternal message of liberation.

Ideology and Power

The media, power, and ideology are also intertwined in the video "*Tank Man*." The Chinese government attempted to conceal the video and avoid further mention of it. This means that a visual actuality can pose a danger to political authority. Such images may be harmful in authoritarian regimes since they expose what the government does not want people to know: the bravery of people and the violence of the state. According to Hariman (p. 363), iconic images such as the one depicted by Tank Man are not merely depictions of political events, but they build civic identity through the arousal of democratic values. It implies that these images will remind citizens of democracy and freedom, even in the countries where these rights are not being observed. The Tank Man picture has become a representation of democratic principles worldwide, particularly in the Western world, where the media depicted it as an example of personal integrity in the face of dictatorship.

Here, the concept of ideology taught in our course proves helpful. Ideology refers to the set of ideas that shape the way people perceive the world. Governments use media to advance their ideology, but in some instances, images do not follow the directives and tell a different story. The Tank Man video in this instance informed the world that Chinese people were not passive, weak, but courageous and ready to risk their lives to attain freedom. Visual images, as revealed by Zelizer (p. 2), can shatter the official narrative. Although the Chinese government censored the video, it was unable to counter its emotional force. People continue to spread it, recollect it, and use it as a sign of hope. The image is a long-lasting protest that continues even after the incident.

Emotional and Ethical Dimensions

The next important aspect of the video about the Tank Man is its emotional impact. People tend to be shocked, sad, and admiring it at the same time when they see it. The question they pose is what they would have done had they been in his position. It is this kind of reaction that Barbie Zelizer identifies as the subjunctive voice in images. She explains that news images may cause one to imagine, as though, that they were there or that things would have been different (Zelizer, p. 14). The Tank Man video enables us to envision a more peaceful and just world, where an individual can achieve peace without resorting to violence.

Feeling matters in relation to war images. During our course, we learned that the media often appeals to the heart to generate empathy or create change. This is evident in the Tank Man video, as it evokes a sense of care. It is not an image of blood or demise, and still, it demonstrates the danger of death. According to Zelizer (p.2), the pictures of imminent danger or death are called images of death, and leave the viewers with a sense of overwhelming pity. We do not witness the death of the man, but we are aware that he might have died, and it is the combination of fear and bravery that makes the picture memorable.

This video raises ethical responsibility questions. Those journalists who filmed it had to decide whether to share it without putting more people at risk. There is also a moral response from the viewers. According to Ptaszek (41), Frames of war suggest that some lives are visible through media frames, while others are obscured. The Tank Man video highlights one life and shows the world what courage looks like in comparison to violence. The picture continues to stir people even decades later, on an emotional level. The video explains how people recall and admire his courage (CNN). His picture remains a beacon of hope as the story says that nobody knows what has happened to him. Youngsters who were not present during the 1989 protests continue to post the picture on the internet. It continues to encourage activists and ordinary citizens to rise and speak out against injustice. It is also a question of witnessing, which is an ethical consideration. We are spectators of his action when we look at this picture. According to Zelizer (p. 2), news pictures enable individuals to be eyewitnesses to events they did not experience firsthand. Through watching, we are made to share in remembering. The video of the Tank Man tells us that the media can create a shared memory and preserve moral values.

Conclusion

As shown in this paper, the Tank Man video is not just news, but news with a deeper meaning. It is a powerful image that has become the symbol of courage and hope. According to the ideas presented in the book "About to Die" by Barbie Zelizer, I was able to demonstrate how visual media can evoke emotions and enable individuals to make history notable in a significant sense. The video prompts the audience to consider the potential consequences and demonstrates that one person can rise against authority. This paper also shows that news images not only inform, but also influence. It indicates that visual journalism is highly political and emotional, and can leave lasting memories, destroy control, and remind us that we are all alike.

Works Cited

CNN. Man vs. tank in Tiananmen square (1989). (2013), Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YeFzeNAHEhU> [Accessed October 13, 2025].

Hariman, R., & Lucaites, J. L. (2002). Performing civic identity: The iconic photograph of the flag raising on Iwo Jima. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 88(4), 363–392.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248927346_Performing_civic_identity_The_iconic_photograph_of_the_flag_raising_on_Iwo_Jima

Ptaszek, Grzegorz, Bohdan Yuskiv, and Sergii Khomych. "War on frames: Text mining of conflict in Russian and Ukrainian news agency coverage on Telegram during the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022." *Media, War & Conflict* 17.1 (2024): 41-61.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/17506352231166327>

Zelizer. *About to Die. How News Images Move the Public*. Oxford & New-York: Oxford University Press, 2010. (Disponibile on the BB.)