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THE
IMMARGE
OF NEWS
PHOTOGRAPHY

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Roskilde
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THE BLURRED IMAGE OF NEWS PHOTOGRAPHY

© 1996 Bruno Ingemann, associate professor, Ph.D.,
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THE IMMURGE OF NEWS PHOTOGRAPHY

A Turner painting is hanging on the wall in front of me at the Tate Gallery. The motif is the rough sea, and in the middle of the picture there is a steamer under pressure of the huge waves and the stormy weather. The painting is very expressive and gives me as a viewer an impression of how tough it is to be at sea and of the disaster which occurs when nature conquers ship and man.

What surprises me was the label attached to the painting. It says "Ariel 1842" – and then it says that William Turner had stressed being true to nature and had painted what he saw: "I wished to show what such a scene was like". When we go to an art gallery we don't expect the paintings or the photographs to represent reality. We don't look for truth in the pictures. We expect the

"I wished to show what such a scene was like".

images at the gallery to be subjective and expressive and the conventions in the gallery to be more open and different from the conventions of photographs in newspapers.

But in this case Turner himself insisted on realism in the picture, and on truth. He has depicted the situation as close to reality as possible and not as an interpretation. But when I look at the painting it is far from the realism of photographs. Turner has rendered his own interpretation of the event, and I see it more as the interpretation of the artist than as a neutral and objective depiction of reality.

I went outside the Tate Gallery, and in a street nearby I saw a photographer taking a real picture of reality. The motif was a man and a woman. They were sitting on the street leaning against a black wall.

Around them there were many cardboard boxes filled with clothes and plastic bags. They were just sitting there staring out into the air. The photographer wanted to take a picture of the homeless people who live in the streets. That was my impression at first glance. But then I looked once again and became curious.

Was it really a newspaper photographer taking a picture and trying to document how the homeless live? Something was wrong. On the left of the photographer there were more cardboard boxes and a pile of clothes. This was not part of the situation being photographed. The photographer had an assistant who stood to the right by the flash. The photographer was using a Hasselblad on a tripod which is very unusual for a newspaper photographer. All these tokens indicate that the situation was staged and that the photographer probably was an advertising photographer. That the purpose of the picture was to create a picture to be used in an ad.

But was my reading of the tokens correct? Or was it really a newspaper photographer at work? The myth of the press photographer as someone running around with his Nikon or Leica taking pictures with the available light; shooting pictures by chance and trying to find the decisive moment; finding the real people in the real situations and shooting them when they were unaware of being photographed. This myth was being questioned.

What I happened to see this day in March in London, was it the real picture of the working conditions of the newspaper photographer? If this was true, I was sad, like you always are when one of your myths is questioned.

If this was the production of a news photograph, with all this staging and set up, could it be that other or maybe even all news photographs were made the same way?

Then I remembered a videotape I once saw. A CIA agent was talking about misin-

formation. He had been placed in an African country where the US wanted to disrupt the situation in the country using all means. It was his job to tell horrible stories about how the government treated the population in the country. He made up stories about how the government terrorized and killed innocent people and arranged photographs that could show what had happened. In the videotape they showed articles that had been published in the western media. The press agencies had accepted the stories and given them their stamp of approval, and the well established newspapers had used the stories.

The attitude of the CIA agent frightened me. From his point of view it was all right, and he was proud of his job. He could see no problem in creating reality. The purpose was good because it served the US government interest in that African country, and he thought that he was very successful in doing his job. He thought that it was very easy to make reality and to get it accepted because there were no other western »journalists« in the region and there were no other sources of information for the western media.

When you realize that some information and photos are created, or arranged or staged, you may get worried. You may be aware of the possibility that pictures and information from areas you can't control yourself may be providing misinformation. What can you then believe in? If you look at your daily newspaper, you must realize that very little of the information and pictures presented are close enough to your daily life for you to have any concrete experience and knowledge about them. You can't check on the information and photos, and you must rely on what you are told.

On the first of April you can say April Fool when you have deceived someone. You tell them something that could be true and make them believe that you are telling the truth. But at the same time we all know that

*On the first of
April you can
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someone.*

on this day people are doing just that, so you expect to be fooled.

On April 1st the Danish TV news has a tradition of making up one story that is fake. The effect on the viewer is that you are very aware that the producers will try to cheat you, so you will question all the stories told. When you do so, you will find that there is more than one story that could be the joke. You can find 3 or 4 stories that make you ask the question: is this really true?

On the second of April you are back again: you don't ask questions, and you accept the stories told. One could wish that all 365 days in the year were like April Fool's Day; that every day we would be critical and question the news.

COMPUTER MANIPULATION OF IMAGES

The problem of truth in photography has increased in recent years. The computer is the problem, or the problem has become important because of the introduction of the computer.

One can scan in a photo, and when the image is digitalized all the elements in the picture have been transformed to pixels that can be manipulated. You can take away a person you don't want to have in the picture and this transformation of the picture can be done so elegantly that no one can see what has been done. Of course this could also be done by a professional and skillful retoucher by hand, but the computer has made it easier to do and more people can get the skills to do it. The democratization of this process has put a powerful tool in the hands of everyone that has an ordinary computer and a couple of cheap programs. A few years ago it meant a million dollar investment in Scitex equipment, but today you only have to spend a few thousand dollars and you are ready to roll.

You can paint away disturbing elements:

trees, telephone wires, cars, persons, houses. Or you can add elements to the picture. You can take a person from one picture and place this person in another situation with other people that he has never been in touch with in places he has never been. The man on the sunny beach may never have been on that beach. The final picture has been constructed from two different pictures.

As long as the constructor keeps the traditional photographic space and tries to hide the composite elements in the picture, the final result will look like a photo that has been taken – but all the elements are composed and integrated in the computer.

The photographer can be reduced to a professional who delivers the raw material for the **making** of photos.

Up till now the photographer still makes his negative which can be seen as the original for the final print. But the electronic camera has been introduced. The image will then only exist in electronic form and will be transmitted to the computer for viewing and adaptation. There will no longer exist any original negative, only copies. The shots can be erased when the pictures have been used, and no one can ever say what the »right« picture was.

This is reality. Manipulation of photography has already been used in the media. The famous example is from 1982 where the cover photo of National Geographic showed two pyramids in Egypt. In the photo the two pyramids were moved closer to each other. It was a very simple thing to do technically, but the reaction when it became public was immense.

This was a step away from the traditional understanding of photographs as telling the truth. This physical interference with the original photo was much more than that. It was an interruption of the conventions of photography. If one accepted this rearranged image it would be like opening a Pandora's box of ethical dilemmas for

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magazines, newspapers and their readers. No longer would pictures be taken as a »proof« of anything. Every picture used would be scrutinized by an already cynical public.

The overwhelming reaction to this ethical dilemma has been that journalists, photographers and editors deny any form of manipulation. "We never do it". But if we do manipulate a picture, then the picture must be labelled very clearly. The label could be "composite picture", "Cluttering details have been removed from the photograph", "Details of the child's clothing have been changed"... And finally the editors and the photographer should discuss the ethical problems when they want to manipulate a picture. And here respect for the actual event and the people involved has special significance.

But we already know hundreds of manipulated pictures that have been used in magazines and newspapers. Can human beings restrict themselves to rules like these and observe them? When the possibilities are easily accessible, can one resist using them? Has Pandora's box already been opened, and is it impossible to close it again?

While a spot survey in the US of editors, art directors and picture editors at major newspapers nationwide found no one who supported the notion of using digital technology to tamper with the integrity of a documentary news photograph, there was a far greater acceptance of using

it to create conceptual or illustrative photos.

The distinction is far from academic. Documentary photographs aim to portray real events in true-to-life settings. Conceptual photos are meant to symbolize an idea or evoke a mood. Because a studio shot of say, a truffle is more akin to a still life than to the hard-edge realism of photojournalism – indeed, because the shot is staged in the first place – art directors and page designers are given a wide latitude in altering its content.

What is happening, many photographers and picture editors fear, is that the distinction between the two styles gets blurred, partly due to the new technology. This means a quiet shift towards pictures as ornamentation or entertainment rather than reportage.

George Wedding of the *Bee* sees a trend towards increased reliance on conceptual photos, caused in part by the recent influence into newsrooms of art directors and designers who take their visual cues from art schools and the advertising field, where manipulation is the name of the game. Wedding says that "these people have not been taught the traditional, classic values and goals of documentary photojournalism."¹

The professionals insist: The photograph never lies. It is a fingerprint of reality. It is trustworthy and this must never be changed.

How does the ordinary reader react?

Has Pandora's box already been opened, and is it impossible to close it again?

¹ Lasica, J.D.: "Photographs that lie. The ethical dilemma of Digital Retouching", *Washington Journalism Review*, June 1989.



Interview on ethics

One of the wellknown faked pictures is the one with Lenin and Trotsky, 1917. In the original picture Trotsky stands on the stairs with another man. In the manipulated picture Trotsky has been removed. The picture has been retouched by hand and Trotsky is out of history. What is your opinion of that kind of manipulation of photographs?

Alice: – When I see the two pictures together I can see what has been done, but if I had only

seen the manipulated picture, I would believe that in this situation Lenin was delivering a speech in a town with a big building in the back of the picture. A lot of people were standing very close to the platform and one man at the stairs. I would believe that photo, certainly I would.

– But when you show me both pictures I can see what has happened. I can see that Trotsky has been removed and I think it is wrong to do so. What has been in front of the camera must never be changed. I think that the photograph is a proof of what the photographer has seen. He is a neutral and objective witness and his job is to reflect reality as well as he can.

– I expect to be able to trust the photographer and I expect that the photograph is telling

the truth. It is of course a picture from the totalitarian communist regime and they have always decided what the truth is.

Barney: – A picture itself can never manipulate reality. This manipulation is a part of the fake of history. Trotsky was removed from this picture, but he was removed from the history book too. Trotsky was made a non-existing person.

– I would say that at a higher level the faked picture tells one truth; the one that supports the notion that there has never been a man named Trotsky. And from that point of view the original picture was not the truth about the history in Soviet in the 20's and 30's.

– It is not a question about the picture itself but about the context; the situation in which it has been used. I think it is

The classical manipulation: Lenin are talking to people at the Sverdlov Squar 1920. In the Stalin aera two of Lenin's close collaborators Kamenev and Trotskij are removed.

unethical to remove a man and make him invisible in the history books. But if someone physically changes this picture is not very important.

– If the photographer had taken the picture 30 seconds before or after the actual moment, Trotsky could have stepped down the stairs and the original picture would then show only Lenin at the platform.

Cindy: – How do we know that this is Lenin and Trotsky? We can't see it in the picture? What is possible to see is that there are different objects on the plane surface: persons, buildings, a platform...

– For me these objects have no relations to reality; or I might say that I can't see this picture as a proof of that situation.

Alice: – Do you really mean

that there is no difference between the original picture and the faked picture? The original one is a true representation of an event that has happened in reality!

Cindy: – It's a picture! The only thing it can represent is itself. One of the objects in the picture looks like a man, one of the objects looks like a platform and so on. At this level the photograph can be seen as a realistic depiction of the objects. But to say that this is Lenin and this is Trotsky is to go too far. It can't be them, it can only be a visual depiction in black, white and gray that looks like the two men or that look like other pictures about which we say looks like them.

Alice: – Is it really your opinion that even the original picture is not real?

Cindy: – I think that the

picture is real; but the so called »original« picture is as much a fake or a true picture as the manipulated picture. But this discussion is difficult because I disagree on your fundamental presumptions. I think that pictures are pictures and the whole idea of the discussion about this one-to-one reference to reality is without any interest. Pictures can only refer to other pictures.

I will show you two more pictures from this series of Lenin&Trotsky. The third one in this series shows the platform, but now Lenin has been removed, and on the fourth one George Bush has taken the place of Lenin.

Barney: – The whole series of four pictures shows the de-

The new manipulation: Lenin are removed to. And Predicent George Bush has taken his place. Manipulations by Bruno Ingemann 1992.



velopment in reality: The men of the communist revolution, the change in history and the invisible Trotsky, the recent rejection of communism and of Lenin as the hero of the revolution and then the influence of capitalism represented by George Bush.

– The last three pictures are obviously manipulated when we see them all together, and as far as I can see they all together represent and point out a trustworthy image of the factual events in the Soviet Union.

– I agree with Cindy that whether the picture is false or true in itself is not important. But I disagree somewhat with her rejection of the relation to reality. I think that how the pictures are used is very important. When the picture of the missing Trotsky is used by the Soviet historian to make him invisible, then I think the factual content has been transformed into something that in this context can be said to be a lie.

– When the four pictures are used in an article in a newspaper where the intention is to tell about the development in Soviet I would say that the pictures are here used to tell a history that is trustworthy and based on facts.

Cindy: – Can anyone say what the facts are? I would say that every article in the newspaper is fiction based on the perception of one or more people and that all perception is unconscious interpretations of reality. All the articles in newspapers are stories, and the photos that are used are part of

these fictional stories.

Alice: – There must be a difference between stories that are totally invented as in a novel and stories that are based on what has really happened as in journalism?

– When I see the four pictures together, I get confused. They all look like real photographs, but which of them can I believe in? I can see that it is impossible for George Bush to really be there in an old photo. The only way I can give meaning to the pictures is to say that they are caricatures, which means that I don't believe them as real photographs but as pictures that are made to point out a certain view of the events.

– My confusion? If I only see one of the pictures I would believe in it as a reflection of reality but when I see them all I get into trouble. What am I supposed to believe? Someone is trying to persuade me to look at the events in a specific way, and I have no concrete experiences about the Soviet Union.

Cindy: – The four pictures can be seen as a joke or an allegory. What is important for me is that I get stimulated by the picture. They make me recall other images in my memory.

That sounds interesting. When you say that the pictures recall other images, can you elaborate a little more on that?

Cindy: – The strategy in the four pictures is political. 85 years of Soviet history are present in the pictures. And in my mind there is the question: "What's next?". I recall a story told by Ong in his book about

oral cultures.

– Some British anthropologist in Ghana recorded a story they were told about the history of the country. The King had seven sons, and the kingdom was divided into seven parts when he died. Thirteen years later the anthropologist visited the country again and the same story was told. But there was one difference: The king had only five sons and the country was divided into five parts. What had happened was that the story being told now reflected the actual situation: the country was no longer divided into seven parts but into five, and the story had been changed to agree with the actual situation.

Here is another photograph. It shows a woman and a child falling, and the caption is: "The 19 year old girl and her 2 years old niece fall down from a fire escape stair from the fifth floor in Boston. The niece lived."

Alice: – It's a terrible picture to look at. You know that she is falling into death and that makes me sad. I can identify with her and her situation, and I think about the fact that we all can be hit by a tile or something. The picture is more startling because she has been recorded in the air before she hits the ground. I would like to stop her in her fall.

Cindy: – I look at the flow-erpot. It's the only reconciling element in the whole picture. It is the point that can take

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The Fall. Photo by Sanley J. Forman 1975.

away the tension of the situation.

Barney: – Yes, and the child. How did she survive this terrible fall?

Cindy: – This is a very expressive photograph. We are all asking ourselves what has happened before. Why did they jump out into the air? What was so terrifying that they had chosen to do something that was dangerous? And we all think about what is going to happen when they hit the ground. How is the child falling and why did she survive and the woman not?

If we suppose that the picture is constructed, because the photographer didn't get the picture when the real accident took place, would it make any difference in your understanding of the picture? We could say that the building is from one photograph. The fall of the two persons is staged and accomplished by a stuntwoman and a stuntchild and shot in two separate situations and the flowerpot is the fourth separate shot. All these shots are combined by the help of a computer.

Barney: – It would be so expensive to make a picture like this, and I don't think it would be done that way, but still. For me it won't change my impression of the picture. It is still a terrible picture. But what I will expect is that the story is precise. That there has been an accident where a woman and a child have fallen five stories and that she died and the child lived. I will also expect that the building is or looks like the building in the real situation.

– You could say that the picture is a lie because it does not refer directly to the real persons and the real situation, but for me this picture is used to tell about what actually happened, and I will believe in the picture in that context.

Alice: – If it is indeed possible to construct a picture that looks so realistic, I get scared. If I find out that it was constructed, all the impact of the picture will disappear. Then it is all fiction, and I don't believe in fiction in the same manner as in facts. It would be a reconstruction of what has happened, and I would never believe in a reconstruction.

– I think it is very dangerous. When I get suspicious of the truth in photographs I lose my trust in words too. I know that words can be manipulated and that an article in a newspaper is told and interpreted by the journalist. But the photograph has its own truth. As long as it records the actual people in the actual events at the right place, then I see it as a true picture of reality. This is the convention I have learned from the newspaper, and I expect that the photographer and editors live up to my expectations and do their job.

Do you have any comments to the view presented by Barney where he accepts the manipulation as long as it is rooted in the event.

Alice: – I think you are too open, Barney. How is it possible for me as an ordinary reader to decide whether or not the factual events are depicted in the picture? I can't know if

the event has indeed happened? The journalist can say so, and if the picture is constructed then there are no fixed points to stick to. The real documentary photographs proves that the event has happened as I can see it in the picture. If the relation between picture and reality is broken – what's left?

Cindy: – The relation between picture and reality is broken. What is left is that you have to look at all texts and pictures as symbolic modes of expression. What counts is the expression of the photograph and its ability to engage a viewer in the picture. And I get involved. I lend the picture a past and a present, and in that sense the picture involves me as it involves you, as you said Alice, when you saw it the first time.

– A part of this involvement is all the other pictures we have seen. All the falling people we have seen in the so-called fiction film. But it also evokes images we have from dreams of ourselves falling into empty space or to the ground. This floating and gliding in the air and then the fall like in the myth of Ikaros who waxed feathers to his arms and could fly. He got too close to the sun and fell down to his death in the sea.

Barney: – I think that is going too far. This photograph is a depiction of something that has happened, and it involves me because it has these persons involved in an actual event that has really happened. It is not pure fiction but has its basis in

a real situation. For me it is anchored in reality and this anchorage is important. I can't accept the fact that a photograph that is said to be a picture of reality has no relation to this reality. The picture can be made, but nevertheless it has to tell the right story as far as possible to give information about this event.

When you look at all the editorial photographs in a newspaper do you see any difference in them? There are of course different motives and different events and persons – but do you believe in all the photographs in the same way?

Barney: – I know that the editors divide the editorial pictures in documentary news photos and feature photos, but for me there is no difference. I mean I don't believe more or less in the one kind of photographs than in the other.

– But of course there is a difference. The most important one is that the feature photos are more conceptual and are used with the intention of symbolizing an idea or evoking a mood. Which means that I as a reader have to make an interpretation of the picture and that the picture is no longer seen as a one-to-one representation of reality. One could say that more realities become visible in the feature photos.

Cindy: – They are all pictures. I don't think the one is more true or false than the other or refers more or less to reality. When I see my daily newspaper I find that many of the so-called documentary photos are boring. They can't

live up to the standard of the pictures in the advertising which surrounds the editorial material. The feature photos are more evocative of feelings, emotions and ideas.

Alice: – Surprise, surprise! I agree with Barney. I can't see the difference between documentary and feature photographs. For me they are all photographs of the same kind. I see them all as reflections of reality and I want to trust them all. What has been in front of the photographer is what he records.

– You take away all my ideas and my beliefs about the use of photography in newspapers by arguing that it is all the same no matter whether the photograph is staged, arranged, constructed or manipulated. But I don't want you to. I want to stay in my trust that what I see is what I believe, even if it's a bit naive. And I will fight against every attempt to undermine the meaning of photography. If all these manipulations are allowed, if someone just uses such a manipulation one time in a newspaper, I am afraid of the consequences.

If someone does use a computer-manipulated photograph in a newspaper, would it be a good idea to give it a label like: "Composite Photo" or "This picture has been manipulated by a computer"?

– All: "No!"

Alice: – First of all the editors must avoid such manipulation. If they make the manipulation and use the picture then I think there is a problem. If I see a picture that looks like

a photograph then I read the picture first as a photograph and believe in the picture. I may not read the caption, and then I would miss this important information that would have made me more critical. But if manipulations become a daily practice, then I would be more aware of it and try to remember to read the label. But I hope I never will get into that situation.

If you had the opportunity to use a computer and you yourself could try to manipulate a photograph: move around some part of the picture or remove another completely – would this practice appeal to you?

Barney: – I would love it. It could really be fun to make your own manipulations.

Cindy: – Me too.

Alice: – I would like to try. But as I have said I would be a little afraid. I think it could be fun to practice, but then? I don't want to lose my innocence and I am afraid that could happen. But I could un-

derstand the possibilities and problems in making manipulations, and then I maybe would be more aware of what the professionals could do.

Cindy: – I think it is important for all people to understand and try these possibilities, and if this practice changes people's attitude to photography I can't see it as a problem but more as a challenge.

Barney: – One could call it computer literacy. I am not so sure that the young generation has a trust in photography. They have tried to produce video tapes, and they already know that it is impossible to capture reality on tape. They know that they have to tell stories and that the information about an event is seen through glasses and that this filter limits the information that is told.

A REAL INTERVIEW

Alice, Barney and Cindy are not living persons you will find in real life. This interview is a



Alice, Barney and Cindy – the three interviewees

construction. It has been constructed by me – the author – and they represent attitudes, views and arguments that can be found in reality.

They are all three a part of me. There are three different views represented in me and this discussion is not invented, but it is a real discussion where different parts of me get a voice.

In a broader perspective I will say that we all have different voices in our minds, and when we argue, we take up opinions and arguments that are conflicting and which don't consist of coherent thoughts.
