

James Kanka

HU 2633: Fundamentals of Digital Imaging

Stefka Hristova

Final paper

Due: 12/18/2012

Picture this: A man with one arm, a gun in his hand, and an explosion going off in the background. Now is this a real picture? What if you saw it as a poster, or in the newspaper, or on TV? When would you trust it to be a real picture and not something someone just made up? With modern digital manipulation it can be impossible to tell what pictures are real and which ones were thrown together in a computer lab. But digital manipulation is just what recent technology has done to the truth in photography, manipulated it.

When discussing truth in photographs, there are two different categories: artful photographs and documentary photographs. With pictures that are meant to be artful, the element of truth can be ignored. This is because an artfully created photograph isn't necessarily meant to portray the truth in something, as it usually portrays the beauty. Documentary photographs on the other hand have to be completely truthful, as they are meant to show reality.

There are things that are possible when creating photographs of art that one cannot do with photographs meant for documentation. The photographer behind the camera can do anything to form a better picture when creating art. Things such as, staging a scene, combining different pictures on the computer, or photo-editing, are all examples of changing the truth. The element of truth is ignored if the photograph is meant to be a piece of art because this is pleasing to the eye. The element of truth doesn't have a controlling grasp because it isn't something that matters for this category of photographs.

The other end of the spectrum is documentary photographs, where truth is everything. These pictures are meant to document what is in front of the camera and happening at that moment in time. Documentary photographs must be completely unbiased and just a photograph. These pictures are the

ones found in newspapers, non-fiction readings, or scientific journals. This type of photograph is meant to capture a moment in time, a place and a feeling, that appears to be as true as it is. Although what would the consequences be if documentary photographs were altered?

In the news article, “Manipulating Truth, Losing Credibility” by Frank Van Riper, he discusses Brian Walski, a photographer from the Los Angeles Times. Brian Walski was in Iraq on assignment for the LA times when he shot a photograph and later submitted it to the newspaper after he had digitally manipulated it. The picture ran on the front page of the LA Times and was widely thought of as one of the best photographs portraying the war. When LA Times discovered his manipulation he was immediately fired and it created a catastrophic landslide marring the truth in all photographs. In the article Riper states, “What makes Walski's action so tragic has very little to do with what he did to his picture, but a hell of a lot to do with the fragile currency in which all reputable journalists trade: their credibility.” This is what can happen to photographers that can't see the difference in these two similar categories of photographs.

In a few cases there is some overlap between the two categories, for instance artful photographs can be completely truthful and documentary photographs can be visually pleasing. The issue at hand is when photographs are passed off as truthful when that isn't completely the case; such was the case with Brian Walski. A photograph can either be looked at as a documentary where the photograph is completely truthful or it is art.

Where is the line of truth in Photography? Recently all the talk has been about digital manipulation and photo-shopping, but “photo-shopping” has been around since the beginning of photography. When the scene is adjusted by the photographer in any way, they compromise the truth of the photograph. This can be something as simple as talking to the people in the scene, or moving an object to make the photograph different from what it originally was. Since nobody can say where the line is, any and all manipulation is over the line. Within documentary photographs, the photographer should be a fly on the wall, have no interactions with his/her surroundings and only document with his/her trusty camera.

Now that digital manipulation has become more prevalent and more user-friendly, the photograph can be altered at a computer to show or not show anything, leaving the audience wondering whether any picture they see is real. Photo-shopping is just the most advanced form of manipulation, so it also creates the most doubt of truth because it can be done so skillfully that it can't even be noticed. This is the issue with today's society and the need for perfection.

Photographers rely on the public trusting their photographs to be truthful so once that trust is broken doubt creeps into view. As one of the Poynter Institute's website respondents called it, "the 'cockroach theory of news,' if you see one, there are a hundred." This means, where there is one photo-shopped picture, there could be many. The credibility of a photographer is so very delicate; the smallest change in a photograph can be the biggest difference of all. Once a photographer is known for editing his/her photographs then it has opened all of his/her work to persecution. It makes it impossible to know which of their photographs are truthful and which have been changed for any given reason.

With digital manipulation, and photo-editing it can be extremely difficult to tell what pictures are exact and which ones were thrown together on a computer. This sort of manipulation is the downfall of truth in photography. If anything is taken from this article let it be this, always remember the mistakes of Brian Walski, a 20 year veteran of the news business, whose career was completely tarnished for one manipulated photograph he submitted, it only took one. In the end it doesn't matter if you have been truthful your entire career, once you open the door of lies with manipulating a documentary photograph, you have put an asterisk on every piece of work you have and will create because you can no longer be trusted. At the Washington Times office on the computers there is a note that reads, "If you can't do it in the darkroom, don't do it here." This is something every photographer of documentary photographs should stand by.