Everything is Relevant
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From Analog to Digital
A Consideration of Photographic Truth

Lecture at the Banff Centre for the Arts
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Calhoun (1772–1850) held a number of elected and appointed political offices, including United States senator for South Carolina, secretary of war, secretary of state, and vice president of the United States. He was also a strong advocate for slavery in the American South, arguing on the floor of the Senate that it was a “positive good.”

I want to start by describing three images as a way to start thinking about the intersection of photography, facticity, and politics. What you will see is that they present us with a revelation in excess of what they depict. This is the case with any photograph. Meaning will always be in surplus. It is just the *noumena,* or the “thing itself.”

A famous photo portrait of Abraham Lincoln has his head placed upon the photo of another politician, John C. Calhoun.1 The trickery is attributed to Thomas Hicks, although no one knows for certain—a portrait painter from that era who had painted Lincoln before and who was thought to have created this composite in the early to mid-1860s. Many historians believed that the photo was created after Lincoln’s assassination because there were hardly any heroic, presidential-looking portraits of Lincoln at that time. Calhoun’s image is a woodcut while the image of Lincoln is more detailed, because it was taken from Matthew Brady’s portrait of Lincoln, the same one later used for five-dollar bills. Lincoln’s head is actually flipped such that his familiar facial mole appears on the wrong side of his face. In the Calhoun image, the papers on the table say “strict constitution,” “free trade,” and “the sovereignty of the states.” In the Brady image, these words have been changed to read, “constitution,” “union,” and “proclamation of freedom.” Despite the oddness of this chimera, it continues to be widely cited as one of the most important Lincoln presidential images. What is revealed here is that a dignified, full-bodied image of Lincoln in presidential pose was needed when there was in fact an absence. When an image is needed, it does not matter the means. In this case it presents Lincoln in the manner everyone expects Lincoln to be presented. The image fulfills a collective desire. Or it reflects the power of the state to conjure a collective desire to be fulfilled.

A Pulitzer Prize–winning photo by John Filo, who at the time was a photojournalism student at Kent State University, shows Mary Ann Vecchio screaming as she kneels over the body of student Jeffrey Miller at Kent State, where National Guardsmen had fired into a crowd of demonstrators on 4 May 1970, killing four and wounding nine. The original photograph included a fencepost directly behind Vecchio’s head. This was how it first appeared in public but an anonymous editor would soon have the fencepost removed. It is this altered version that has been used almost exclusively since then by the media and it is this version which
continues to be widely circulated today. What is revealed here is the need for an iconic photograph of a traumatic event, one that required no distraction. There has not been, from what I can tell, any criticism or charge of manipulation in respect to the removal of the post. But what the removal of the post does is that it brings attention to the body on the ground, moving the photograph into the realm of the symbolic, rendering the photograph less fixed in terms of the specificities of place and time. The woman is no longer pinned down like a butterfly by a post.

A 2007 study published in the journal *Applied Cognitive Psychology* shows that people’s memories of events can be altered by viewing doctored images. For example, when presented with doctored images of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, participants recalled the event as larger and more violent. In other words, doctored photos of past public events can influence what people think they remember of the incident. One of the co-authors, E.F. Loftus, has expressed alarm at the spread of photo manipulation, calling it “a form of human engineering that could be applied to us against our knowledge and against our wishes.” “It shows the power of anyone to tamper with people’s recollection, and it gives the media another reason to regulate such doctoring, besides ethical reasons.”

It is not entirely certain the derivation of the phrase “spitting image.” Some think the word “spitting” evolves from “splitting,” referring to the splitting of wood such that one half is identical in pattern to the other half. Others believe “spitting” to have more literal origins, as in someone looking so much like someone other that he or she must have been spat out by the latter. This use of the phrase was in popular circulation by the late seventeenth century as evidenced by the example of Irish dramatist George Farquhar’s use of it in *Love and a Bottle*, his comic play of 1689: “Poor child! He’s as like his own dadda as if he were spit out of his mouth.”

Whatever the derivation, when the term “spitting image” is evoked, it is meant to convey verisimilitude. A hand-drawn portrait can be said to convey the spitting image of its subject, for instance, suggesting an alignment between a high level of manual command and the capturing of likeness. A photographic portrait, on the other hand, is never said to be the spitting image of its subject. It is simply assumed to be that subject. Hence, the power of the photograph is deferred in respect to the matter of truth to likeness. This deference is an acknowledgement of the indexicality of photography and its ability to reveal more to the eye than the eye can apprehend.

The German cultural critic Walter Benjamin referred to this ability as the “optical unconscious.” He defined the optical unconscious

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3 Ibid.
as the visual unconscious that is normally invisible to people’s social
consciousnesses but which can be rendered visible through photo-
graphic technique. He claimed that “it is a different nature which speaks
to the camera than speaks to the eye: so different that in place of a
space consciously woven together by a man on the spot there enters a
space held together unconsciously.”

Benjamin saw the photograph as being able to captivate us through its proximity to a seemingly objective
truth. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind, as W.J.T. Mitchell
has stated, that any picture is at least potentially a kind of vortex or
“black hole” that can “suck in” the consciousness of a beholder, and at
the same time (and for the same reason) “spew out” an infinite series
of reflections.

I would like to consider what is meant by the “power” of photog-
raphy to “capture” reality in a way that satisfies the desire for the “truth.”
This “truth” is aligned with the discourses of power and knowledge in
ways that often ignore the processes of manipulation or place undue
emphasis upon speculating on authorial intention. This is evident if we
consider the use of photography shortly after its invention to illustrate
the calamitous effects of war.

One of the first wars to be documented by a camera was the Crimean
War, which took place from 1853 to 1856. The British photographer
Roger Fenton was sent to the Crimean Peninsula by Prince Albert in
an attempt to alter public opposition to the war. Before he departed for
the frontline he was told: “No dead bodies.” The over three hundred wet
plate negatives that he would go on to produce depicted highly posed
soldiers in their camps as well as the barren plains upon which they
pitched their tents. We see his documentation of the cannonball-strewn
aftermath of the Valley of Death. The site was so named by British sol-
diers who came under constant shelling there.

Fenton made two exposures from the same tripod position. Some,
including Susan Sontag, believed that Fenton moved the cannonballs
from the side to the centre of the road. It would certainly make the pic-
ture more graphic with the dark balls strewn against the light surface of
the road. Such an opinion would order the photograph with cannonballs
entirely on the side of the road as the first exposure. But the fact is that
it remains uncertain which exposure came first. Any forensic attempt to
determine the correct order in which the two photographs were taken is
hindered by the absence of original plates. In arguing similarly to Jean
Baudrillard’s concept of the hyperreal, in which the representations of
things come to replace the things being represented or the representa-
tions become more important than the actual thing, the documentary
filmmaker Errol Morris posed several questions about Fenton’s prints:
The prints are distributed in public and private photography collections around the globe. There is something deeply unsettling about the thought that all the evidence might depend on a print. Why one print over another? Which print? If all the prints are different, where is reality? How can the real world be recovered from the simulacrum?

Spurred by this uncertainty and critical of the demagogic certainty of some in terms of manipulative intent on the part of Fenton, Morris added:

Much of the problem comes from our collective need to endow photographs with intentions—even though there are no people in the frame, including Fenton himself, who is conspicuously absent. The minute we start to conjecture about Fenton’s reasons, his intent, we are walking on unhallowed ground. Can we read Fenton’s intentions off of a photographic plate?

In contrast to Fenton’s documentation of the Crimean War, photographers during the American Civil War of 1861 to 1865 did not shy away from depicting dead bodies. In Timothy O’Sullivan’s “A Harvest of Death,” we are presented with the aftermath of a violent episode from the Battle of Gettysburg. Especially painful is the marked anonymity of the dead men: it is difficult to make out their faces. The scattering of their bodies across the visual field evokes even more bodies out of frame and thus out of view. Death, even if by war, is presented as horrific yet natural, akin to the agrarian laws of sowing and reaping. The photograph was taken in 1863 but not published until 1865 by Alexander Gardner in a book titled Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War, along with ninety-nine other photographs. Only a small number of copies of this book was produced and sold for an exorbitant $150 per copy. Notable is the title of the book: sketch book suggests something preliminary as well as a repository for both documentation based on observation and the play of artistic ideas. The cover presents the war like a picturesque theatre set complete with a curtain pulled back to reveal the title, hinting at the organizing principle within the book, which would guide viewers in their interpretation of the images. The book’s text serves as a thematic umbrella to the solitarily presented pictures, frequently to the point of deliberate misrepresentation. In his book The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880–1940, Miles Orvell points out that Gardner had good reason to misrepresent his images, given that he could only expose
a limited number of negatives on the battlefield; and yet Gardner had so many compelling stories to tell, so “he paired a plausible image with a convincingly written narrative, and the viewer could never tell the difference.” Orvell goes on: “[Gardner] played on his audience’s belief in the veracity of the medium while taking for himself a much more flexible view of photographic practice,” one in which “the manipulations of the photographer were permissible in the interest of achieving a rhetorically convincing effect.”

The text that Gardner wrote to accompany O’Sullivan’s photograph reads as follows:

> Slowly, over the misty fields of Gettysburg—as all reluctant to expose their ghastly horrors to the light—came the sunless morn, after the retreat by [General Robert E.] Lee’s broken army. Through the shadowy vapours, it was, indeed, a “harvest of death” that was presented; hundreds and thousands of torn Union and rebel soldiers—although many of the former were already interred—strewed the now quiet fighting ground, soaked by the rain, which for two days had drenched the country with its fitful showers.

While Gardner employed photographers such as O’Sullivan to produce images for his book, he also took photographs during the war himself. His photograph “The Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter” (1863) features another dead soldier, even as O’Sullivan’s “Black Canyon, Colorado River, Looking Below, near Camp 7” (1871–73) features a landscape devoid of human bodies. In spite of the different contexts in which these photographs were made, formal affinities exist between them. From 1867 to 1869, O’Sullivan was official photographer on the United States Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel. This meant that he was responsible for taking photographs that could be used to entice settlers to the “virgin land” between Cheyenne, Wyoming, and California.

While his image of Black Canyon presents a landscape of pristine nature it was in fact a highly contested space. The land that settlers would eventually claim as their own was not virginal land at all but the land of Native Americans. Death as a necessary precondition for rebirth is the unspoken narrative that haunts “Black Canyon” and “Slaughter Pen, Foot of Round Top, Gettysburg” as well as the aforementioned “A Harvest of Death.”

According to Benjamin, photography and cinematography contributed to a crisis of representation by creating what he called a “shattering of tradition,” which undermined the existing function of art. Similarly, digital simulation has heralded a world in which paper photography was displaced by a dematerialized image that can be manipulated by a viewer
interactively through software commands. This crisis of representation has all but annihilated any claims of correspondence between material reality and its cultural representation. Today, an imperative question is: In what ways are the means of producing an image integral to its understanding? Historically, the discourse that has circulated about photography has foregrounded its denotative capacity, even at the expense of connotation. Semiotically, the photographic signifier is often seen to be virtually identical with its signified: that is, what is depicted is seen as nearly equal to what was there before the camera’s capture. This equivalence between an original and a depicted thing is itself a socially constructed narrative and one that frequently evokes the idea of human beings as autonomous fortunates or unfortunates in an existential totality. Such a narrative is so forceful that the photograph becomes regarded as a “natural” sign produced in nature without social or cultural intervention.

Just as the language of painting was widely available to viewers of photography at its advent, the language of photography today is widely available to digital media viewers and is shaping new approaches to what can be imagined. As such, the emergence of digital technology has done much to throw the claims of analog photography into question, claims that have to do with the waning status of the documentary photographer in the age of iPhone eyewitness pictures. And yet there continue to be debates that pit the two different forms against one another. What interests me is why such debates have occurred, how they continue to be activated even today, and how we might begin to speak about photography in more productive ways.

A general view that I want to touch upon is that digitally generated imagery is more disposed to manipulation than that produced by its analog counterpart, despite that digital imaging is used widely today to verify authenticity in everything from the presence of cancerous tumours in a body to anthropological artifacts. The perceived proximity of analog photographs to the floating signifiers of authenticity and truth is a perception full of irony and one rooted in the mis-recognition of the vividness of photography as a substitute for a clear, shared understanding of some “larger” reality. Many adherents of analog photography believe that a “true” photograph is one that presents an unadulterated “reality.”

Consider the irony of photographing a landscape using both analog and digital technology. Now let us just say that the analog picture is in black-and-white and appears “minimally” altered while the digital picture is in colour and greatly enhanced so as to approximate how the scene was experienced at the time the picture was made. Which
of the two images would you say is “closer” to the aims of capturing the “reality”? Such a question must take into account the many paradoxes that haunt a term like “straight” photography. As we have already seen with the examples from the Crimean War and the American Civil War, a recording of “reality” is anything but “straightforward.” The term itself first came into use in the late nineteenth century by those opposed to pictorialism in photography, with its reliance on a painterly approach. By 1904, the critic Sadakichi Hartmann called on photographers to produce pictures that looked like photographs. By this he meant that photographers must reject excessive manipulation and instead concentrate on the basic properties inherent to the camera and the darkroom.

The principles touched on by Hartmann that objected to the manipulated “creation” of a photographic image would go on to be manifest in the categories of landscape photography, street photography, and photojournalism. Ansel Adams’s “Clearing Winter Storm, Yosemite Valley” (1944) is an image where signifiers of objectivity, clear delineation, and the “natural” run rampant.

With the formation of Group f/64 in the 1930s under Ansel Adams and its theory of landscape photography, the term “straight” was sometimes used interchangeably with the word “pure.” So-called “pure photography” was a modernist movement that restricted treatment of photographs to those techniques deemed wholly peculiar or specific to photography. Pure photography emphasized recursiveness by eschewing artistic conventions outside of the strictures of the camera. Deep focus technique that emphasized a sharply delineated and wide depth of field was also favoured, a technique that would extend to cinematography such as in Citizen Kane (1941). A section from Group f/64’s manifesto of 1932 that accompanied its inaugural museum exhibition at the De Young Museum in San Francisco reads as follows:

Group f/64 limits its members and invitational names to those workers who are striving to define photography as an art form by simple and direct presentation through purely photographic methods. The Group will show no work at any time that does not conform to its standards of pure photography. Pure photography is defined as possessing no qualities of technique, composition or idea, derivative of any other art form.11

Similarly, the category of street photography as emblematized by the American photographer Garry Winogrand in “American Legion
Convention, Dallas, Texas” (1964) implied the straightforward photographing of scenarios without complicated setups.

I would argue that a belief in straight photography and its purity is a belief in the power of the perspicacity of the photographer whereby the photograph and the author of the photograph are identified interchangeably. What I am suggesting is that the language of straight photography has often been a language of communion between an individual (overwhelmingly male) photographer and either unfettered nature (à la Adams) or a fettered streetscape (à la Winogrand) to which a photographer could extract not simply meaning but the “truth.”

As I tried to demonstrate with the photographs of early American Civil War and Crimean War photographers, the analog photograph is subject to manipulation as much as the digital photograph. Were we to closely examine the works of Adams and Winogrand we would soon find that both photographers were active manipulators of their images for the purpose of getting at the “truth” of whatever subject they were capturing (whether it be Yosemite or life in America). This is the eternal Yosemite. This is essential America. And yet there is a looming paradox present in all of their photographs. The paradox is that so much subjective decision making went into the final image (from framing to printing) and yet this final image is considered to be the most objective element of all.

When one breaks down photography’s stance of authority to understand how the medium has worked, what is revealed is an alignment with notions of eternality, fixity, and constancy. And often, the imbuing of authority in the photograph is based on claims of nature where history is constructed or represented as an unquestionable truth when, in fact, photography is contingent, a condition of all socially developed practices. Even vision itself is assumed to be “natural” when it is anything but. We learn to “see” in particular ways that are dependent upon our place and time in the world. An example of this is what we see as qualifying as “beautiful” or “horrific.”

In 2006, the news agency Reuters found itself in hot water over the publishing of “blatantly manipulated” photographs taken and then digitally altered by Lebanese photographer Adnan Hajj of the aerial bombardment of Beirut by an Israeli Defence Forces attack. The manipulation made the bombardment more photographically visual. An ideologically motivated right-wing blogger who exposed what he called a “fraud” wrote:

A Reuters photograph shows blatant evidence of manipulation. Notice the repeating patterns in the smoke; this is almost certainly
caused by using the Photoshop “clone” tool to add more smoke to the image.¹²

There are several significant points to consider here. The first is that the scandal represented an unsettling of the authority of Reuters, a powerful and highly influential news agency. The second is that such a scandal is not an isolated event but relatively common. In recent years, distinguished publications such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Harper’s*, *USA Today*, the *New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, to name a few news sources, have each been widely criticized when it was revealed that they published doctored photographs, often on their covers or front pages. Regarding the Reuters controversy, what is noteworthy is that the indignant blogger pairs the word “fraud” with the sentiment of outrage. Without condoning the actions of the photographer who submitted the doctored pictures, the deeper problem is the insistence on the possibility that a picture can be read as natural and innocent, uninflected by ideology and relying on an available and shared consensus about the nature of reality. As Teresa Ebert has argued: “Reading is a process through which a historically situated subject makes sense of the way her culture represents itself and produces pictures of [acceptable] reality.”

Less than a year after the Hajj controversy, Reuters published an article titled “The Use of Photoshop” for its staff photographers and freelancers. Cropping, minor colour correction, subtle use of the burn tool, and adjustment of highlights and shadows were listed as allowed while additions or deletions to the image, airbrushing, selective area sharpening, excessive lightening and darkening or colour tone change, and the eraser tool were listed among the not allowed. What “The Use of Photoshop” reveals is an absurd desire to argue for the “truth” implicit in a photograph. This desire is absurd because Photoshop is a software tool used precisely to manipulate the photographic image.

In 1990, the first commercial digital camera was marketed. That same year, the United States National Press Photographers Association approved a code of ethics. Under the oxymoronic header of “Digital Manipulation Code of Ethics,” the statement of principle reads as follows:

As journalists, we believe the guiding principle of our profession is accuracy; therefore, we believe it is wrong to alter the content of a photograph in any way that deceives the public.

As photojournalists, we have the responsibility to document society and to preserve its images as a matter of historical record. It is clear that the emerging electronic technologies provide new
challenges to the integrity of photographic images ... in light of this, we the National Press Photographers Association, reaffirm the basis of our ethics: Accurate representation is the benchmark of our profession. We believe photojournalistic guidelines for fair and accurate reporting should be the criteria for judging what may be done electronically to a photograph. Altering the editorial content ... is a breach of the ethical standards recognized by the NPPA.13

In 1999, John Long, the ethics co-chair and a past president of the NPPA, wrote:

One of the major problems we face as photojournalists is the fact that the public is losing faith in us. Our readers and viewers no longer believe everything they see. All images are called into question because the computer has proved that images are malleable, changeable, fluid.14

Three points are problematic with reference to Long’s lament. First, he blames the computer for the public’s loss of faith in photojournalists. Presumably, he is referring shorthand to the unofficial photojournalists and their computers who now maintain such presence on the Internet. His lament is undoubtedly connected to his own status as a member of the official media feeling vulnerable to the question of who gets to control representation in respect to the public. Second, photographs have always been malleable, changeable, and fluid. Third, there is something decidedly Orwellian in the revealing sentence that reads: “Our readers and viewers no longer believe everything they see.” After all, is it not a positive thing that viewers of photographs (both analog and digital) no longer believe everything they see and are called upon to become actively engaged in questioning what they see?

I would argue that the entire meaning of photography is encapsulated in Long’s complaint, which acknowledges the difficulties of deriving authentic meaning in an image-saturated and hyper-mediated world. I have tried to argue that photography is vexing precisely because it calls up so many questions about ontology, photographic intervention, about authorship and intentionality, about the verity and nature of photographic evidence—about the relationship between photographs and reality. As consumers of pictures, we have little choice but to work hard at reading photographs in the context of criticality and history. It is only when we start to ask such questions of photography that we are able to see photography for what it is and for what it is not.