



Open College of the Arts

# Critical review

## The convincing power of the photograph



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Cover photo:

*Joan Fontcuberta: Sirena del Tormes, 2000*

**Remarks by the author:**

This critical review (assignment four) was written parallel with the execution of assignment three. In both assignments I investigate the perceived authenticity of the photograph. In assignment three I do this in a practical way by executing a photo project. In assignment four I do this in an academic, theoretical way.

Please note that MS Word does not count words in textboxes automatically!

Word count:

- 2012 words counted by MS Word (total word count, excluding textboxes);
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# 1. The convincing power of the photograph

## Introduction

This critical review looks at the authenticity or truthfulness of the photograph. In the first section we try to answer the question how it can be that in the first instance photographs are perceived to be authentic although people rationally know photographs may be manipulated. André Bazin speaks of “the irrational power of the photograph to bear away our faith” (Bazin, 1960: 4-9). In the second section we will look at visual artists challenging the truthfulness of photography. Then we will show that due to trends in technology and visual culture the convincing power of the photograph is diminishing. As a reaction to these developments measures are taken to safeguard the credibility of the photograph. We will discuss how this is done and look more into detail of how photojournalism is safeguarding its credibility. We will conclude this review by answering its key question: Will the convincing power of the photograph be diminished in such a way that in the future photographs can only be used as illustrations and not as documents?

## The truth claim of photography

Photographs seem to have a special ability to show things as they are. Tom Gunning uses the term ‘truth claim’ to describe the prevalent belief that photographs accurately depict reality. He states that the truth claim is validated by both the indexicality and the iconicity of photographs (Gunning, 2004: 39-49). These two concepts stem from semiotics (the study of signs and symbols). Indexicality depends on the physical relation between the object photographed and the image finally created: the light reflected off the object photographed is filtered through lens and diaphragm and falls on a light sensitive surface. In this way the photographic image is formed automatically. Iconicity is the resemblance between the photograph and what was in front of the lens at the time of the exposure: the sense that a photographic image possesses a visual richness and an overwhelming detail.

### Example image 1



*X-ray image of a normal chest, source: [www.chestx-ray.com](http://www.chestx-ray.com)*

When we look at scientific, forensic or medical photographs we almost always believe these photographs to be true. If presented with this image in a medical setting we would assume this image to be authentic. The image is indexical, we know it is produced using an x-ray machine. The image is not iconic, it does not resemble a chest like we have ever seen. Although most x-ray images nowadays are digital and we know digital images can easily be manipulated, we still trust this image to be authentic because of its context (medical) and we know there are rigorous working methods, procedures and measures for data protection in place. The “R” in the image is a sign showing there is a procedure in place preventing the swap of left and right. In other words: there is a strong social contract stating that the image is trustworthy and is to be considered as a document.

After viewing the above example we understand Derrick Price’s argument that the truth claim is not only validated by the nature of the photograph (indexicality and iconicity) but also and maybe more “through the structure of discursive, social and professional practices which constitute photography” (Price, 2009: 74). Tom Gunning also points out that the truth claim is a claim that is made for photography and is therefore a social construct, the product of social discourse: “The truth claim must always be supported by rules of discourse, whether rigorously defined (as in scientific or legal evidence) or inherent in general practice (as in the belief that news reporting generally tells the truth).” (Gunning, 2004: 43).

## Example image 2



*Burhan Ozbilici: Mevlüt Mert Altıntaş shouts after shooting Andrey Karlov, the Russian ambassador to Turkey, at an art gallery in Ankara, Turkey on December 16<sup>th</sup> 2016 (winner 2017 World Press Photo competition)*

When we look at a news photograph we generally believe it tells the truth unless the source of the photograph is not trustworthy. This image looks like a photograph and photographs are indexical because they are made using photo cameras. The image is iconic because it closely resembles a scene like we can see with our own eyes. However we need more to conclude whether this photograph is true or not. The photograph could be staged or manipulated. It does not look like an assassination has just taken place (there is no blood for example). In fact, when we would look at the image not having any context at all, maybe we would assume this is a photograph of an actor in a play. The captions say the photograph is made in Turkey of the Russian ambassador. Turkey and Russia are two countries known for limited press freedom and for sometimes manipulating news reports. Still we trust this photograph to be true because the media which have presented us this photograph are trustworthy and authoritative to us. Furthermore the captions state detailed facts which can be cross-checked. In other words: we accept the social contract stating this photograph is to be considered true.

### Challenging the truth claim

Although since photography's invention photographs have been known to be manipulated, in the first instance people perceive photographs to be authentic. Many artists have played with this and have challenged the credibility of the photograph. An example is conceptual artist Joan Fontcuberta (Spain, 1955) whose work is mostly about examining the truthfulness of photography. The photograph on the cover page of this review is from the series *Sirens* which consists of photographs of the installation of fake fossils of mermaids in the Réserve Géologique de Haute-Provence in Digne-les-Bains in southern France.

*Sirens* resulted in a hoax, but Fontcuberta hopes to do more than submit his audience to practical jokes. He states: "My work – I wouldn't want to be pretentious – is pedagogic. It's a pedagogy of doubt, protecting us from the disease of manipulation. We want to believe. Believing is more comfortable because unbelieving implies effort, confrontation. We passively receive a lot of information from TV, the media and the internet because we are reluctant to expend the energy needed to be sceptical." (Jeffries, 2014).

**Example image 3**



*Ellie Davis: Another Green World 8, 2013*

This image shows strange pods growing under a tree. This photograph can be assumed to be true, until it is presented in the context of a museum or art gallery and we learn that Ellie Davis (UK, 1976) is a photographer known for making alterations in the landscape and then photographing it. Then we understand the photograph is staged.

#### Example image 4



*Erik Johansson: Impact (2016)*

With modern software the manipulation of digital photographs can be done easier and easier and these manipulations are very difficult to spot. Although this image by photographer and retoucher Erik Johansson (Sweden, 1985) is photo realistic, we know it has been manipulated, because it depicts a world which cannot exist. Johansson is known for seamlessly combining photographs with the same perspective and the same type of light into one realistic but impossible surreal scene (Johansson, 2011).

#### **Diminishing credibility of the photograph**

As the examples before have shown, the perceived authenticity of the photograph largely depends on the context in which it is shown and on the trustworthiness of its source. At least partially we judge the trustworthiness of a source by our experience. We have learned that advertising cleverly uses the convincing power of the photograph to depict worlds that are tempting but untrue (Williamson, 2010). We also have learned that a photograph in the media showing a celebrity with perfect skin and a thin body probably will have been manipulated. Until recently vernacular photographs were almost always perceived as authentic. But nowadays with the rise of social media like Facebook and the availability of free image editing software, we have grown accustomed to users posting vernacular photographs which are staged or manipulated in order to build a positive image of their lives and their physical appearance (Nobel, 2015).

With the above it becomes clear that what people perceive as credible changes over time. In *Photography* (Bull, 2010: 121) it is argued that amateur photographs are perceived as more convincing than photographs in the mass media made by professional photojournalists. Photographs which show poor technical quality and lack of 'good' aesthetics would be considered "too bad to be false". In the light of the latest developments in social media mentioned before this statement may already be outdated.

This section and the section before show that the credibility of the photograph is diminishing. On the one hand this is a good thing. Viewers have become more visually literate and do not unquestioningly take every photograph for real. On the other hand this could be a threat to industries where credibility of the photograph is essential to the business aspect, for example forensics and photojournalism. The reaction of these industries is to safeguard the credibility of the photographs they use. This is done by adhering to ethical codes and protocols and by implementing strict working methods and (quality) control measures. Just one example of a control measure in the field of forensics is the use of cryptography based technology (software) to confirm whether a digital image is modified (Che-Yen Wen and Kun-Ta Yang, 2006).

In the next paragraph we will explore further how photojournalism is safeguarding the credibility of the photograph.

### **Safeguarding the credibility of photojournalism**

The trust of the public is essential for the existence of photojournalism as a profession (Long, 1999). This is the reason many (if not all) media have codes of ethics and protocols to safeguard that nonfiction photographs fulfil their implied authenticity or in other words that they mean what they say. An example of an ethical code can be found on the website of the NPPA (the National Press Photographers Association, USA). It is important to note that the biggest part of this code is about the circumstances in which the photograph is made and the context that is provided. Only a very small part of the code is about editing and manipulating images (NPPA, s.d.). The World Press Photo Foundation has a similar code of ethics and has strict, specific and detailed rules about captions (these should be very extensive and factual) and about what is considered to be manipulation (World Press Photo, s.d.). With manipulation World Press Photo means staging or re-enacting (portraits are an exception) and adding or removing content when processing the image. World Press Photo states on its website that "processing by itself is not manipulation", but only adjustments of colour or conversion to grayscale that do not alter content are permitted.

After studying the codes of ethics and the rules mentioned above it becomes clear that these codes and rules are not static but will need to be changed or updated when



photographic processes and the way photographs are used and viewed change. A framework for this is given in (Wheeler, 2002: 131): “visual journalists and their viewers share a set of assumptions that provides the foundation for photography’s long-lived credibility”. Wheeler calls this the Qualified Expectation of Reality which derives from “professional codes of ethics, the traditions of photographic grammar, some presumed public awareness of photographic processes and a public faith founded on decades of experience”. According to Wheeler the essence of ethics in photojournalism should be to fulfil the viewer’s expectation of reality.

### **Conclusions**

Must we because of the diminishing credibility of the photograph conclude that photography is dead in the sense that in the future photographs can only be used as illustrations and not as documents? This does not seem likely. In many areas we experience the credibility of the photograph to be still strong, for example in medical, forensic, scientific and military/intelligence photography. Furthermore it is to be expected that photojournalism will stay successful in safeguarding its credibility due to the fact that this is essential to its survival as a business.

The convincing power of the photograph will remain strong as long as the social contract stating that the specific photograph is trustworthy is adhered by the makers as well as the distributors of the photograph and is accepted by the public. I believe this will stay the case in many areas of photography.

Because the photograph has great convincing power it can be argued that every photographer has a great responsibility to use this power well. Fulfilling the viewer’s expectation of reality should not only apply to photojournalists but to all photographers and imagemakers.

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