

THE TRUTH BEHIND PHOTOSHOP

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A stark black and white photograph: two fishing boats lay upside down on the sand as their long black shadows stretch out toward you. The boats, seeming to match you in height, appear at first glance like rounded tents or houses, not because they are particularly large, but because you are positioned at eye-level beside them. Off in the distance stands the comparatively small Lindisfarne Castle, overshadowed in size by the two looming boats in the foreground. Darkened clouds hang ominously above the entire landscape, and the monochromatic scheme of the image makes the scene all the more haunting. Titled “Lindisfarne Boats,” this photograph earned David Byrne the 2012 Landscape Photographer of the Year award—along with a \$16,000 prize. But what may be even more haunting than the scene itself is that just four days later, this same photograph caused Byrne to be stripped of his prestigious award. After other competitors had pointed out certain unnatural details in Byrne’s image, Byrne was disqualified for his excessive use of photo manipulation—adding clouds, removing small background boats, and making other small changes to the photo that Byrne believed were minor. He admitted to not having read the competition rules for his section, “Classic View”—which stated that “the integrity of the subject must be maintained and the making of physical changes to the landscape [must not be] permitted” (“Competition”)—and so he accepted his disqualification wholeheartedly (Zhang). Nonetheless, the situation sparked criticism from other landscape photographers, and contributed to an age-old concern that had arguably been renewed by the birth of Photoshop: by threatening the ‘objective truth’ of photos, image manipulation may eventually lead to the distortion—or even the extinction—of photography as a craft.

First released in 1990, Photoshop is a program that allows users to manipulate digitized photographs to do things such as “enhance quality, create original pieces of artwork, add text and shapes, and apply professional-quality special effects” to photos (Broneck).

Although photographic manipulation had been in practice long before the invention of Photoshop, the program was considered revolutionary because it “ushered in a never-before-seen level of sophistication” that made it vastly more difficult for one to distinguish between a real photo and one that has been digitally altered (Broneck).

For those like landscape photographer Declan O’Neill, who believes in the “craft” of being able to capture a scene for what it is, the rise of Photoshop in the field of photography is particularly troubling. What concerns O’Neill specifically is Byrne’s defense of his use of Photoshop: “I treat my photography as art and I try to make the best looking picture” (Byrne qtd. in Brown). In O’Neill’s opinion piece titled “Why Photoshop is Ruining Landscape Photography,” he sharply responds to Byrne that “It is something entirely different when a photographer wants to be an artist. An artist creates images from their imagination. . . . Just leave photography to record what the camera sees” (O’Neill). For O’Neill, photographers are not artists. He implies that the camera—as a non-human object—documents what is objective and “real,” what is untainted by the human imagination. Unlike art, which is based on creativity and imagination, photography, in O’Neill’s eyes, should be considered a craft, based on objectivity and technical skill. He portrays the camera as the device that provides us with this objectivity, and thereby views Photoshop as a ‘subjectifier’ of “what the camera sees.” Thus, the likely reason why Photoshop presents a cause for concern for O’Neill and many other “purist” photographers is that it facilitates the integration of photography with imagination, consequently blurring the “truth” that distinguishes photography as a craft from its status as an art.

This idea that pure, unedited photography is inherently ‘truthful’ has defined photography since its conception. French inventor Joseph-Nicéphore Niépce—commonly credited as the inventor of photography—concluded that the daguerreotype, created by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre in 1839, was a photographic process that “allow[ed] nature to reproduce itself” (Navab). Respectively, American writers Edgar Allan Poe and Oliver Wendell Holmes saw the photograph as being an “absolute truth” and “a perfect mirror that fixes reality” (Navab). In her piece “Photographic Truth,” Aphrodite

Désirée Navab notes that several common themes present in early commentaries surrounding photography were that photography was a “trace . . . of the real,” and had the “superhuman ability to do (spontaneous reproduction) and to know (supreme eyewitness) things beyond human capacities” (Navab). If anything, the sustained belief that the camera is capable of providing a perfect, absolute, and superhuman record of reality reveals humankind’s insecurity regarding our abilities to perceive reality for ourselves. Our perception is indeed limited, and in many ways is flawed, as well. Perhaps this is why O’Neill finds it important that photography remains “what the camera sees,” and not what we humans see. It is almost as if we require the affirmation of truth and reality from a device, because we doubt the authenticity of our own sight.

For Teju Cole, an American writer, photographer, and art historian, however, the primary human limitation that photography patches is not sight, but memory. In his essay “Memories of Things Unseen,” Cole details his fascination with Thomas Demand’s photograph of a model of a forest, titled “Clearing,” that he had seen in the FotoMuseum in Antwerp, Belgium. What intrigued him most about the photo was that Demand had intentionally destroyed the original model, and so its essence now only existed as a photograph, or a “trace of the real,” as Navab would say. But what interests Cole is what happens when the “real” disappears: “when the photograph outlives the body—when people die, scenes change, trees grow or are chopped down—it becomes a memorial” (4). Given the fleeting nature of human memory, photography can be seen as a way of preserving a “trace of the real,” when we ourselves are no longer able to do so. Thus, for Cole, photography is about retention, or the act of saving an image.

But if human life is so finite, why do we feel the need to memorialize or save our memories? Should our memories not die as we do, when we do? Cole hints at an answer to this question from a historical angle, declaring that photography is also used to “ward off . . . oblivion,” citing how photographs of “Courbet’s ‘The Stone Breakers’ and van Gogh’s ‘The Painter of the Road to Tarascon’ accidentally made the lost paintings visible to future generations” (5); essentially, these photos gave us a “memory of something we had never seen” (3). In

this way, photography can indeed be seen as a device that transcends “human capacities” to compensate for our perceptual and mnemonic limitations. As Cole briefly observes, the truthfulness of a photo, when considered through the lens of history as ‘just so,’ becomes rather necessary to us as humans and to our future generations. Therefore, if Photoshop allows photographers to manipulate their imaginations into the truth, as O’Neill implies, the greater threat that Photoshop poses is not the potential transformation of a craft into an art, but the possible destruction of our only means of seeing the world in a way that is uncontaminated by human subjectivity and finitude. Without any other way to view the world besides our own eyes, how can we be sure that anything around us is real?

When viewing photography through the lens of history, it becomes clear why many individuals like Poe and Holmes may have regarded photography as an “absolute truth” and a “perfect mirror” of reality. In history, where there is a demand for truth, photography presents us with the supply that we seek. In a similar way, author Fred Ritchin views photography as having a “stenographic function” as a “recorder of the past,” and thus believes that the value of photography lies in its “truth”: if “documentary photography cannot be trusted at least as a quotation from appearances, then photography will have lost its currency” (qtd. in Amundson 362). If we can no longer trust photography, then there will be nothing that differentiates it as a “recorder” of reality from our own flawed sight or memory. At that point, photography, at least as a documentary, will become useless to us and cease to exist—or at the very least, will no longer exist in the form that it does today. By making the tools of photo-manipulation more massively accessible, and the act of distinguishing between the real and the digitally augmented more difficult, Photoshop seems to have made such a future seem all too probable.

However, this isn’t the first time concerns over the potential “extinction” of a medium have been raised. In “Photographic Truth,” Navab insists that when new technologies are invented, many are “quick to apply Darwinian notions of ‘the survival of the fittest.’” She notes that when photography was first introduced, “Many felt [it] would render painting obsolete, but [painting] continues to thrive.” If we were to adopt a Darwinian perspective regarding this hypothesis,

then the “survival” of painting would suggest that it held, and still holds, value to us, even in the face of a more “evolved species”—the photograph (Navab). It can be said that prior to the invention of photography, painting was more or less the only form of pictorial “documentary”; it served as a “record” of the likenesses of historical figures, places, and events (Navab). While painting indeed still “thrives” today, it is questionable whether it does so in its “original” form (Navab). Today, paintings seem to be more often created as art than as a form of documentary. When viewed from this perspective, it is possible that paintings have, in a sense, become extinct, because they no longer exist in the same form as they did centuries ago. Painting “evolved” from documentary into art to “survive.” Perhaps photographers like O’Neill, who protest the use of Photoshop, are doing so because of an underlying fear that photography will undergo the same fate as painting and will henceforth exist only as an art.

But while our reliance on the photograph as a form of historical documentary demonstrates our need for truth in photography, it does not necessarily confirm the existence of truth in the photograph. To fear that Photoshop will eventually sever the relationship between photography and reality is to assume that the photo, when unedited, is inexplicably truthful. “Just leave photography to record what the camera sees,” demands O’Neill. But is what the camera sees not in some ways what humans see? Does the “craft” of photography, such as decisions regarding “lenses, filters, the position from which the photo is to be taken, the film stock, the shutter speed, etc.,” not involve human creativity, and thus subjectivity (Kessler 173)? Since a camera must be operated by someone, is it even possible for a photo—even if completely unedited—to be absolutely objective and truthful?

Frank Kessler, a professor of media history at Utrecht University, recognizes that when taking photos, “there is no way to fix a standard that could guarantee . . . absolute objectivity” (173). He cites photographer Dona Schwartz in distinguishing three strategies to keep photographs as close to objectivity as possible: “depicting the subject ‘as the camera sees it,’ depicting it ‘as someone present at the scene would have seen it,’ or to ‘authorize the photographers to make decisions regarding image production consistent with the prevailing norms governing journalistic representations across communicative modes’”

(qtd. in Kessler 173). According to Kessler, the first two strategies suggest that objectivity—and by association, truth—is defined by “repeatability.” Thus, it is implied that minor manipulations, so long as they keep the image as similar to the ‘original’ scene as possible, do not destroy the objective quality of a photo (173). The third strategy, however, admits that even the concept of objectivity itself is rather subjective, “relying . . . on a set of more or less unwritten rules that can at any moment be modified or revised” (Kessler 173).

Photography seen through the lens of journalism presents us with another exception in which a photograph may not be *absolutely* truthful but is *conditionally* so. Roger Fenton, known to some as the first war photographer and to others as a pioneer of photojournalism, also happens to have been one of the first ever to fake a photograph. Fenton’s photograph of a road covered in cannonballs during the Crimean War, titled “The Valley of the Shadow of Death,” was concluded by optical engineer Dennis Purcell to have been staged, after Purcell had spent hours comparing the photo to a nearly identical photo taken by Fenton where that same road was clear of cannonballs. Whereas the photo with the bare road showed cannonballs on top of a nearby hill, “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” depicted those cannonballs lower down on that hill. The displacement of a rock from the untitled photo to a lower position on the hill in “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” makes it clear that “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” was taken *after* the photo of the cannonball-less road. Therefore, Purcell concludes that Fenton must have moved the cannonballs onto the road to stage this famous photograph. As to why Fenton may have done so, Purcell believes it was “to make it look the way it felt”; Purcell thereby finds the faked photograph to be more authentic than the real one, because it exemplifies “emotional truth” (qtd. in Abumrad). So although Fenton’s photograph may not be truthful in the literal and absolute sense, in a conditional sense, it is. In their book *The Elements of Journalism*, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel argue that journalism seeks “a practical and functional form of truth” or a “[truth] by which we can operate on a day-to-day basis” (qtd. in “The Elements”). In that case, perhaps the “functional” truth that is necessary in photojournalism and history is not an absolute and objective one, but an emotional one. Fenton was able to manipulate

the scene so that his photograph no longer represented how “someone present at the scene would have seen it,” yet his image was still “truthful” to an extent (Schwartz qtd. in Kessler 173). Perhaps, then, Photoshop is capable of maintaining the ‘truth’ of an edited photo in a similar way—by preserving or accentuating its emotional integrity.

But even if Photoshop allows for a photograph to remain emotionally truthful, it can be argued that such a truth is not a “perfect mirror” of reality, and thus does not provide for us the affirmation of reality that we seek. In his book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger reminds us that even the original, unedited photograph “is not . . . a mechanical record,” because the photographer is selecting from “an infinity of other possible sights” (10). In a way, the photographer is applying his subjective human perspective to capture a portion of reality, and by extension, a portion of the truth, or rather, one truth out of an infinite number of truths. Berger’s statement raises the question of whether a singular truth is even possible, given that we—and thus the cameras that we wield—all see reality from a different perspective. Berger insists that prior to the camera, our conception of reality was rather egocentric: “Every drawing or painting that used perspective proposed to the spectator that he was the unique centre of the world. The camera . . . demonstrated that there was no centre” (18). If, as Berger suggests, there is no singular, “centered” way of viewing reality, then perhaps there is also no singular, objective truth for photography to record. In a way, it can be said that reality and truth are both subjective, in that they depend on the perspective from which they are viewed.

The contexts in which photography holds “currency,” such as history and photojournalism, can be regarded in a similar way. Michael A. Amundson, a professor of history at Northern Arizona University, finds that “history is a cultural construction created by each generation to help it explain the past and its own future” (362). Because of the subjective nature of history, “photographs are never assumed to represent the ‘truth’ of the past,” but instead are “one small snippet of the conversation that helps us understand it” (362). It is in this way that photoshopped photos which hold “emotional truth” can serve as reliable historical documentaries of the past: although they may not portray the past exactly as it looked in that particular moment, photo-

shopped photos can reveal the implicit values and thoughts of that time to potentially provide an even more comprehensive understanding of our past than the original, real scene may have.

Returning to the Darwinian notion that Navab mentioned, painting as a documentary was made “extinct” because a more reliable form of documentary—photography—was introduced. In his essay “Steps Toward a Small Theory of the Visible,” Berger defines painting as “an affirmation of the visible which surrounds us and which continually appears and disappears” (347). Much like Ritchin’s notion that the “currency” of photography is based in its truth, or its ability to mirror reality, Berger asserts that the painting, in more primitive times, was valued for the same reason. If it were not for the finitude of humankind, or the unreliability of our own perceptions, such a “mirror” would not even be needed. Berger goes on to say that “[w]ithout the disappearing, there would perhaps be no impulse to paint,” and thereby, there would be no impulse to photograph either (347). But so long as we are mortal and our minds are imperfect, there will always be this need to affirm reality. Thus, it logically follows that for photography to become obsolete, a more advanced, more truthful form of documentation must be introduced in its place. But even if such a medium emerges, it is still unlikely that photography will become ‘extinct’ in the ways that O’Neill and Ritchin fear that it may, as this did not happen to the photograph’s closely related predecessor, the painting. Although painting has fallen out of favor as a form of pictorial documentation, it continues to exist for the same reason that photography is likely to remain: it is capable of providing us with an emotional truth that will allow us to understand our past.

Berger makes the further claim that “More directly than any other art, painting is an affirmation of the existent” (347). In other words, he implies that the state of being an art, even as subjective as it is, does not render a medium any less an affirmation of the real. So if Photoshop does cause photography to become solely an art as O’Neill fears, it will likely still remain valuable to us as a reflection of our subjective reality, as well as a historical document of our emotional and cultural truths for posterity to examine. Many believe that by distorting the truth in photographs, Photoshop may lead to the extinction of photography. But it is more likely that Photoshop will be what *pre-*

serves photography as a medium, for if a new, more truthful form of documentary emerges, and photography can no longer measure up as a prime affirmation of reality, it will be Photoshop that “revalues” photography as art. If photography and painting as documentary reveal our need for an affirmation of reality, then, as art, they will reveal our need for a sort of “affirmation” of ourselves. We seek to understand the world around us just as much as we do what is within us. If that truly is the case, then Photoshop is not what will extinguish photography, but what will save it.

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