

What you get is what you see

Digital images and the claim on the real

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In 1898 Boleslas Matuszewski, a photographer and former court cinematographer of Tsar Nikolas II, published a booklet in France entitled *Une nouvelle source de l'histoire* in which he pleads for the creation of a repository for actuality films so that they can serve as historical documents for future generations. Animated photography, he argues, is unrivalled in its capacity to faithfully record historical events and thus should be collected and stored in an official archive. Matuszewski claims that cinematographic images in particular can resist attempts to manipulate them and thus are the most valuable witnesses of the past:

Perhaps the cinematograph does not give history in its entirety, but at least what it does deliver is incontestable and of an absolute truth. Ordinary photography admits of *retouching*, to the point of transformation. But try to retouch, in an identical way for each figure, these thousand or twelve hundred, almost microscopic negatives...! One could say that animated photography has a character of authenticity, accuracy and precision that belongs to it alone. It is the ocular evidence that is truthful and infallible *par excellence* (Matuszewski 1995, 323).

Matuszewski thus offers a quite early formulation of a claim on the real, or in fact even a truth claim, that has haunted documentary film but also, for instance, news photography throughout the 20th century. Often challenged, time and again criticized and critiqued by practitioners and scholars alike, it has a tendency of popping up like a Jack-in-the-box whenever our trust in such images appears to have been abused. However, about a century after Matuszewski's optimistic assessment of the cinematograph's powers, media historian Brian Winston proclaimed the definitive end of such naïve hopes:

Digitalization destroys the photographic image as evidence of anything except the process of digitalization. The physicality of the plastic material represented in any photographic image can no longer be guaranteed. For documentary to

survive the widespread diffusion of such technology depends on removing its claim on the real. There is no alternative (Winston 1995, 259).

According to Winston, the emergence of digital technology opens up almost unlimited possibilities to manipulate, reshape, fake and forge photographic and cinematic images which puts an end to a long tradition of endowing documentary photography and film with what has often been seen, in reference to a famous essay by film critic André Bazin, as an ontological claim on the real.¹ This claim, the privileged relationship of the photographic image to the real, is actually based upon the fact that photography can be regarded as a result of a trace of light reflected from an object that has caused a chemical reaction in the photosensitive emulsion of a filmstrip. Following a remark by Charles Sanders Peirce on the complex semiotic nature of photographs, being both *icon*, as they are ‘in certain aspects exactly like the objects they represent’, and *index*, as a result of their having a ‘physical connection’ to the referent, Peter Wollen (1998, 86) points towards the similarity between Bazin’s thoughts on the ontology of the photographic image and Peirce’s concept of the indexical sign.² In this way, indexicality has come to be considered an essential quality of conventional photo and film, and by the same token the guarantee of the ‘authenticity, accuracy and precision’, and thus truthfulness, which Matuszewski celebrated in 1898.³ Interestingly, looking at that question from the point of view of new media, for Lev Manovich, cinema as such is ‘an art of the index’ (2001, 293), and he argues that ‘as a media technology, its role was to capture and store visible reality’ (307). This, however, is altered radically by the advent of digital media, and so Manovich arrives at a conclusion that is quite similar to Brian Winston’s account quoted above: ‘The mutability of digital data impairs the value of cinema recordings as documents of reality’ (307).

Thus, the question arises of whether digital technology indeed weakens, impairs, or maybe even destroys the privileged (ontological, indexical) link between analogical photographic or cinematic images and the real. This is a vexed question, indeed, most of all because several aspects appear to be inextricably intertwined here. So in order to assess the scope of the problem, it may be useful to try and provisionally separate the different issues that are tied together in this argumentative knot, by designating them with a somewhat global character by using the following three tags: technology, indexicality and practices.

Technology: what you get

Looking at the claims put forward with regard to the specific powers of the new image technologies concerning their relationship to the real, it is interesting to note that Matuszewski as well as Winston and Manovich rely on quantitative rather than qualitative arguments. While Matuszewski emphasises the quasi-im-

possibility to retouch the sheer number of individual photographs contained on a filmstrip, Winston and Manovich insist on how extraordinarily easy it is to modify digital images or, as Philip Rosen phrases it, their 'practically infinite manipulability' (2001, 319). However, inverting these characterisations of the new technologies, one could riposte to Matuszewski that this relative difficulty of retouching a view taken by a cinematograph by no means guarantees truthfulness. With historical hindsight, it becomes clear such manipulations are not even that exceptional (tricks, special effects, but also the sometimes rather blunt attempts in Soviet films to conceal certain individuals who had fallen into disgrace). One could counter Winston and Manovich with the argument that manipulability is nothing new in this domain, and that the traditional claim on the real, in that respect, could only be accepted by wilfully disregarding such potentials for manipulation. The change brought about by the new image technologies, in other words, could be seen as rather less radical than the above-quoted statements suggest.

On the other hand, the possibilities to digitally manipulate images have, somewhat paradoxically, caused news photographers to scrutinize the various techniques they habitually used, in order to find out to what extent these are prone to objectionable alterations. As Dona Schwartz (2003) shows, interventions of one kind or the other are unavoidable: the photographer does have to make choices with regard to lenses, filters, the position from which the photo is to be taken, the film stock, the shutter speed, etc. Furthermore, also in the darkroom, even the most standard methods are in fact acts of interference (see also Gunning 2004, 40).

So what are the limits? What can a photographer justifiably eliminate from a picture? A reflection from a flash? The red-eye effect? Reducing a colour photo to black and white? Is a motion blur inappropriate? From the discussions reproduced by Schwartz (2003, 40-45), it is obvious that professional photojournalists are afraid of getting on a 'slippery slope' here and thus tend to ban even minor manipulations. On the other hand, however, there is no way to fix a standard that could guarantee the absolute objectivity that functions here tacitly as an ideal.

Schwartz distinguishes three strategies to establish such a norm: 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' (2003, 45-46). The first two strategies seem to be oriented towards a conception of objectivity in accordance with the scientific criterion of repeatability, namely that, given identical circumstances, a certain procedure will always have the same result, when a normative framework exists that photographers can refer back to in case of doubt. However, as Schwartz rightly states, taking 'camera vision' as a rationale would presuppose the use of standardised equipment, whereas the alignment with a human observer's visual experience raises numerous questions, in particular regarding the en-

ormous differences between human perception and 'camera vision'. According to which parameters can a photograph be said to correspond to the way an onlooker would have perceived a situation? In a way, the third strategy admits the impossibility of unambiguous guidelines, relying instead on a set of more or less unwritten rules that can at any moment be modified or revised.

Nevertheless, these discussions show that the problem of manipulability did not arise with the advent of digital technologies, but has been an issue in photography all along. Rather, the debates generated by new media about the possibilities of intervention have led to a self-critical questioning of traditional media practices. In this respect, one may conclude that photography's claim on the real has always been rather fragile. Digitalization, in other words, not so much caused an obliteration of the privileged link between the photographic image and the real, but rather provoked a return of the repressed, namely a renewed awareness of the numerous forms of manipulation and intervention that constitute the very activity of producing and presenting (moving) pictures. This, I would argue, is actually the point Winston is trying to make as well. Given his detailed critique of documentary's claim on the real, preceding the remark quoted above, digitalization may in fact be nothing but the straw that breaks the camel's back.⁴

Indexicality: what you see

But even if, with regard to both traditional and digital photo and film, there are numerous factors that influence the way a picture is taken and how it appears on screen or as print, the question remains of whether the indexicality of the photographic image is somehow reduced or even abolished through the advent of digital technologies. In an article in which he interrogates the status of the concept of the index in recent debates on the subject, Tom Gunning (2004, 40) states that the difference, again, is certainly not absolute:

Clearly a digital camera records through its numerical data the same intensities of light that a non-digital camera records: hence the similarity of their images. The difference between the digital and the film based camera has to do with the way information is captured – which does have strong implications for the way the images can be stored, transferred and indeed manipulated. But storage in terms of numerical data does not eliminate indexicality (which is why digital images can serve as passport photographs and the other sorts of legal evidence or documents which ordinary photographs supply).

Engaging in a discussion with Tom Gunning, David Rodowick insists on what he describes as an 'ontological distinctiveness of analogical and digital processes' (2007, 113). Rodowick refers here to the two fundamentally different ways in which they relate to the object that is represented:

If analog media record traces of events and digital media produce tokens of numbers, the following may also be asserted: *digital acquisition quantifies the world as manipulable series of numbers*. This is the primary automatism and the source of the creative powers of digital computing. Alternatively, photographic automatisms yield spatial segments of duration in a uniform substance. Both kinds of photography produce convincing representations as a result of their quality of counterfactual dependence, wherein any change in the referent is reflected as a corresponding change in the image, and in both cases this quality relies on the logic of indexicality. But they may also be qualitatively distinguished according to the types of causation involved in the acquisition of images and by ascertaining whether the causal relations between inputs and outputs are continuous or discontinuous. Here (analogical) *transcription* should be distinguished from (digital) *conversion* or *calculation* (Rodowick 2007, 116; author's emphasis).

So on the one hand, both Gunning and Rodowick agree that the 'logic of indexicality' is at work in both digital and analogue photography and film. They differ, however, in their assessment of the impact that results from the qualitative difference between the two processes. Here, for Rodowick, the ontological distinctiveness of the digital ultimately leads to an 'unbecoming of photography' (2007, 124). Using the terminology coined by Sol Worth (1981, 52-53) in the 1960s, one could say that both Gunning and Rodowick conceive the *videme*, the image-event, in similar terms, while they differ in their views on the status of the specificity that distinguishes the digital *cademe* (that which is recorded during one uninterrupted take) from its analogue counterpart.

As my concern is rather with the 'claim on the real' that is habitually based on the indexical quality of photography and film, I shall not discuss the issue of the ontological difference postulated by Rodowick further, even though I am sceptical about some of the conclusions he draws from this premise (more on this below). What needs further interrogation here is the scope of the 'claim on the real' that indexicality can actually support. What exactly is it that is truthfully rendered by a photograph or a cinematic take? Strictly speaking, of course, the indexical link between a filmic take or a photo and the real cannot go beyond the spatio-temporal segment that was recorded. And this in fact only concerns what Worth calls the *cademe*, as what is to be seen is in fact already the result of various forms of intervention. Yet, as Roland Barthes (1964, 47; 1980, 120) puts it, a photo is always the trace of something that has been in front of the camera. While this corresponds exactly to the idea of photographic and cinematic indexicality, one should be careful not to glide from stating the object's 'having been there' to the more global assertion that the image depicts 'how it was'. This in fact is what Barthes himself does in the earlier text, when he declares that a photograph appears as the evidence of how things happened ('*cela c'est passé ainsi*', 1964, 47).

Such a view indeed overstates the case that an indexical image can reasonably make⁵, and, as a matter of fact, in his 1980 book *La chambre claire* Barthes limits photography's evidential power once more to its confirming of the object's 'having been': 'ça a été' or, in Latin: *interfuit* (1980, 120-121).

As I have argued elsewhere (Kessler 1998), the concepts of the *profilmic* and of the *afilmic* that were coined by the French *École de filmologie* in the early 1950s can help to clarify the complex relationship between indexical images and 'the real'. Etienne Souriau (1953, 8) defines the *profilmic* as everything that has been in front of the camera and was recorded by it, whereas the *afilmic* refers to what exists in our world 'independent of the art of film or without any specific and original destiny in relation with this art' (1953, 7; author's translation). This distinction can be read as follows: while the *profilmic* is either photochemically transcribed or digitally coded, the *afilmic* remains irreducible to such a recording.⁶ The indexical 'claim on the real', in other words, can never go beyond the *profilmic*. The *afilmic*, on the other hand, should not be seen as simply the spatial and temporal continuation of the *profilmic* but rather as a construction against, and in reference to, how the represented is understood, evaluated, judged, accepted or rejected, etc. by the viewer. The indexical image can hardly state anything else than that the *profilmic* 'has been'; even for it to say 'it has been there and then' requires, in most cases, additional information of some kind (think of the many infamous examples of abducted persons holding a newspaper in their hands in order to identify the date the picture was taken). Thus, I would argue that the problem in most of the debates about non-fictional photography or film lies in their conceiving them as *documentations* of the *afilmic* real rather than approaching them as *discourses* on it.

Through such a shift in perspective, the 'claim on the real' no longer depends on the indexical image but on the status a viewer ascribes to that discourse. Taking up John Searle's reflections on the logical status of fictional discourse (Searle 1979, 58-75) and using them in a pragmatic perspective, one can say that, in the first instance, what makes a photo or a film function as a non-fictional or 'serious' utterance is the fact that the viewer can interrogate it in terms of truthness. This makes it possible to deflate the idea of documentary's 'truth claim', as this does not mean that the utterance has to be true – it just is possible to ask the question of whether it is, or whether it could be a lie (whereas such questions would not make any sense with regard to a fictional utterance). The viewer, in other words, constructs an 'enunciator supposed to be real' (Odin 1984), an instance, thus, that is committed to the truth of the expressed proposition according to the rules underlying such a speech act (Searle 1979, 62). As this commitment concerns the discourse as a whole and not necessarily all of its elements, the indexical image need not carry the claim on the real all by itself. Quite to the contrary, as Roger Odin (2000, 127-150) shows, the functioning of a 'documen-

tarisational' mode (*mode documentarisant*) will be upheld in spite of a vast heterogeneity of image material (animation, simulation, CGI, staged scenes, poetic images, etc.), as long as the spectator does construct an enunciator that is supposed to be real. And indeed, there are countless examples of documentaries as well as educational, scientific, or even news films that incorporate diverse forms of non-photographic imagery without their 'claim on the real' being impaired in any way.⁷ Even recreations such as the *actualités reconstituées* in early cinema, but also more recent examples such as *United 93* (Paul Greengrass, USA 2006) can be read as serious utterances that do not present indexical recordings of the 'there and then' that their discourse refers to.

In the context of such a discourse on the afilmic real, indexical and other types of images can be used in many different ways. Being contextualised, arranged, oriented, discursively framed, no picture 'speaks for itself'. Viewers have to judge for themselves whether to go along with the discourse proposed by the images or read it differently: they can either trust or reject it, and the meanings that are explicitly or implicitly presented can be assessed, negotiated, evaluated and interpreted. The indexical has to be taken into account here, certainly, but it does not guarantee anything. Or, as a text title in Jean-Luc Godard's *Vent d'Est* (1969) proclaims: 'Ce n'est pas une image juste, mais juste une image.'

Practices: what you get to see

Paradoxically, one might assert that new media have brought forth a proliferation of practices that foreground the indexical properties of digitally recorded images. From *JenniCam* to pet portraits on personal websites, from image-sharing sites such as *Flickr* or *YouTube* (not to mention their pornographic versions), from celebrity pictures to rather infamous examples like the execution of Saddam Hussein or the Abu Ghraib photos, from the most scandalous revelations to the most mundane documents of people's everyday lives, the uses of digital photography and video in innumerable cases rely on the indexical qualities they undoubtedly have.⁸ And indeed, one would rather hope that the x-ray photos taken by one's dentist, even though they are produced and viewed as digital images, do have a justified 'claim on the real' – even though, as many may have found out in a painful way, there is no guarantee that the dentist reads them properly.

Furthermore, digital media – CD-ROM, DVD, the Internet – provide new channels of distribution, either for historical non-fiction films or for new productions, but also enable filmmakers (the term seems a bit out of place here) to experiment with new documentary forms, making use of hypertext structures, non-linear presentation, interactive elements, etc. Online archives and platforms make a large amount of documentary images accessible, and nothing indicates that people treat them any differently than conventional photochemical images.

For David Rodowick, however, these new forms of distribution and circulation are not so much a continuation of earlier practices but rather part of the ‘ontological distinctiveness’ of the digital image:

In worrying about the capacity of computers to transform images, we nearly forget their more powerful and prosaic will to copy and transmit. Digital-capture documents and digital documentation express new powers – not only deep and superior copies, but also an increasing ease and velocity of dissemination. (...) One key difference, though, is that digital images may no longer be capable of producing the existential or ontological perplexity of which both Barthes and Cavell were so keenly and philosophically aware. Digital photographs have become more social than personal, and more attuned to the present itself than to the present’s relation to the past and future. Symbolic and notational at their core, they provoke discussion of images as information. In this they solicit often-healthy debates (would that all images did) about provenance, reliability, accuracy, and context (Rodowick 2007, 148-149; author’s emphasis).

But here, I would argue, Rodowick’s focus actually shifts from the ontology of photographic images to the level of uses and practices. Observing a move from the personal to the social, from the photograph as ‘remembrance of things past’ celebrated by Barthes and Cavell (1979) to their informational function, Rodowick takes this as a consequence of the ‘ontological distinctiveness’ of digital photography. But then again, there always have been an enormous variety of ways in which the photographic image has been used, and not for all of them a phenomenological functioning as a trace of the past saying that *ça a été* is equally relevant.⁹ Here Rodowick does not quite escape the problem of identifying a medium with but one specific type of practice.

This does not mean, however, that the emergence of digital technology has hardly affected photography as a medium. The argument I am making here is a different one: by looking first and foremost at technological change alone, discussions tend to either overrate or underrate its impact. Similarities and continuities are overlooked or, conversely, overemphasised. The new is seen as either radically disruptive or as just a variant of what exists. Media change, I would argue, manifests itself rather in the way new media *dispositifs* emerge. Considering media as the interrelation between the different affordances of a material technology, the positions it provides for the viewer or the user, and the textual forms it produces may help to understand media change differently, to be precise as re-configurations of such *dispositifs*, keeping intact some of its aspects and modifying or even completely reshaping others (Kessler 2002, 2006). It is quite evident that an initially photochemical image that is remediating in a digital medium functions within a *dispositif* that is different from its traditional manifestation as a

printed picture. So we need to analyse the *dispositif* in order to understand the functioning of the image.

As for the potential threat that digital manipulability poses to the documentary value of photography and film, the problem is addressed in a too one-sided way by just looking at the technology instead of taking into account the practices it is embedded in. As Dai Vaughan so convincingly put it, there is indeed a chance that digitally manipulated imagery will eventually have become so omnipresent that our trust in the photographic image gets lost in something like a ‘catastrophe model, where a seemingly innocuous curve takes a sudden nosedive, an irreversible switch into another state’ (1999, 189). But this would then be the result of the discursive practices in which these images are used, not of the technology as such. In the end, what is needed, and will become increasingly important, is a general level of media literacy that enables viewers and users to interrogate and critically assess in what way a digital image may have a claim on the real.

Notes

1. The reference here is of course to André Bazin’s ‘*Ontologie de l’image photographique*’ (Bazin 1958, 11-19).
2. For a discussion about the relation between Peirce’s and Bazin’s ideas, see Rosen (2001, 18-23 et passim) and Gunning (2007, 29-33).
3. Furthermore, from very early on photography has been considered a potential scientific instrument as well. Already in his 1839 report on the daguerreotype the French scientist Dominique-François Arago (1995) stresses its usefulness for that domain. See also Winston (1993).
4. Elsewhere Winston’s critique concerns in particular observational documentary films and their ‘inflated claim on the real’, and he quite favourably discusses classic documentaries and their strategy of ‘honest, straightforward re-enactment’, as Joris Ivens called it (Winston 1999).
5. This became painfully clear when the Rodney King videotape was presented as evidence in court. Bill Nichols (1994, 17-42) gives a brilliant analysis of this event.
6. Souriau’s definitions are not without ambiguities. They also allow a different reading according to which everything that is destined to be filmed belongs to the realm of the profilmic, in particular studio sets, costumes, etc., while everything that has an existence outside the institution of cinema is considered afilmic. In this perspective the profilmic is sometimes even exclusively linked to fiction film, whereas documentary is associated with the afilmic. Jean-Luc Liout (2004, 41-51) calls everything in its actual existence afilmic, regardless of whether it is being filmed (such as the silhouette of a mountain, for instance), and everything profilmic that is intentionally linked to the act of filming (not only the abovementioned studio elements such as sets and costumes, but also, for example, the staging of an interview for a non-fiction film). While Souriau’s formulations do authorise such readings, I would argue that on the basis of what one sees in the image, it is not always possible to determine whether or not it has been arranged intentionally to be filmed, and thus the difference between both concepts becomes relative and also artificial, as all the aspects of the profilmic that Liout lists do obviously exist in the afilmic world as well.

7. A case in point might be the documentary mode that Bill Nichols (1994, 92-106) describes as 'performative'. See also Plantinga (2005) who defines documentary as 'asserted veridical representation', referring also to its overall discursive status in an attempt to account for the complex interaction of different types of representational strategies, imagery, sound, and speech.
8. Rubinstein and Sluis (2008) describe the current developments in what they call 'the networked image' even in terms of 'a life more photographic'.
9. Including some in which the indexical quality is of lesser importance, such as in certain artistic practices, but also, at the other end of the spectrum, in stock photography used for illustration and advertisement. For the latter, see Frosh (2003).

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