

Photography and Creation

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In extension of her PhD thesis, entitled *L'instance photographique : Pour une requalification de la création en photographie*. She is continuing theoretical, poïétique art-making research in digital images, in the era of manipulation of the real. As an artist-photographer, she develops a suspended photographic form that tends to provoke apprehension (www.helenevirion.fr). She questions its source, as she does the experience that emanates from it, and pushes the subject to the point of the encounter between photographic and cinematographic suspense. She also is a lecturer at Pantheon-Sorbonne University.

Keywords:

Photography, creation, manipulation, indice, editing, retouch, ambiguity, experience, punctum, perturb, instability.

Table of contents:

| | |
|---|------|
| 1. Manipulation as a Photographic Act | p.3 |
| 2. New Issues of the Indicial | p.5 |
| 3. Between Indice and Icon, an Uncertain Presence | p.6 |
| 4. Footnotes | p.9 |
| 5. Bibliography | p.10 |

Abstract:

By juxtaposing and exploring the relationship between the terms art photography and manipulation, this article proposes to address a certain visual ambiguity. After revisiting the importance of indiciality, put forth by Charles Sanders Peirce and Rosalind Krauss, relative to new image practices, it aims to reconfirm the place of the creative act in indicial photography. This place has been replaced by the idea of trace or imprint. We will rehabilitate the former, before examining photographic creation. This article endeavors, through the indice and the icon, to deal with how art photographers have been using the indiciality of images over the past five years. It seeks to identify the increasingly imperceptible editing practices that have given the photographic image a visual instability, source of a new experience of the visible.

I. Manipulation as a Photographic Act

Improvements and enhancements of techniques and uses of the photographic image have never been as widespread and tolerated. At the same time, the debate over photographic manipulation has become more important than ever. The January 2014 dismissal of Breaking News Photography Pulitzer Prize winning Associated Press photographer Narciso Contreras, for excessive editing on war coverage pictures, is an obvious example. His dismissal, accompanied by strong reactions from the professional world, offer a picture of the controversies that still exist in the photography field [1].

Of course the debate around documentary photography is different from that in other areas of photography, but the same question about the photographer's creative freedom and the image authenticity arises. The juxtaposition of the terms creation and manipulation seeks to shed light on such issues. It offers an opportunity to clarify the position of the creator, through an exploration of the indicial image; and also to clarify the term manipulation, that we favor in this article to the term retouching, which is more limited or less pernicious. Above all, it is an opportunity to address key issues relative to the perceptual ambiguity associated with new photographic practices, which require reconsideration of the fundamental theoretical notions of the photograph as an analogical transmission of the subject.

By the late 1970s, photography historians and theorists had seized on the semiotic work of philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. Rosalind Krauss, and then Jean-Marie Schaeffer and Philippe Dubois² drew on the index or the indice to shed light on photographic technique. They undertook to study the analogical relation as it is linked to the imprint or mark. Notably, they drew from an enlightening perspective on photographic technique in the 1895 article *The Art of Reasoning*.

"Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection." (Peirce, *The Art of Reasoning in Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, edited by Buchler p. 106).

The indicial, unlike the physical link associated with the index, establishes an analogous relationship between subject and photographic mark or imprint. Photography bears witness to a present state. According to Walter Benjamin, the snapshot determines a form of existence, or fixes the state "That-has-been" according to Roland Barthes (Barthes, Howard, 1980, p. 115). It guarantees a certificate of existence at the moment of shot. The subject is fixed onto photographic paper. But what about the presence of the photographer, seemingly removed from the relationship of transmission between the subject and its imprint? The image-indice is reduced to an authorless proof of the photographed subject. Yet how can one, from the outset, exclude any creative gesture from the idea of imprint, when framing in itself lays down the intention of manipulating the visible? [2]

To address the snapshot is to think, beyond indiciality, about what place is left for the photographer. The question must be resolved before continuing on, as it determines the encounter between creative photography and manipulation.

Photographic indiciality, as a certificate of existence, cannot occur without a creator. For example, according to Peirce, a track in the snow is proof of a presence, an index. For the photographic image, this indiciality intervenes by pushing the shutter button. The instant chosen by the photographer is decisive, in regards to the resulting photo. The same goes for framing or composition choices. This is why the expression “manipulated photography” must be considered as a tautology [3]. Whether amateur, professional or artist, each creator is governed by the decisions of the person behind the viewfinder. How the subject is photographed depends on who is taking the picture. Even if the shot is unsuccessful, it is initiated by a person. It thus offers an oriented vision of the subject. Remarks by photographer and theorist Joan Fontcuberta, who plays with the image and its indiciality in his photographic practice, confirms this viewpoint.

“All photographs are manipulated. Framing is manipulation, aiming is manipulation, choosing when to press the shutter button is manipulation. To create is to accept this encounter.” (Fontcuberta, 1996, p. 159-160).

To create is to compose, with the necessity to give an intention to the image. To be behind the camera is to make shooting choices, thus to shape perception of the subject. Yet not all types manipulations have the same impact. They are not all equal. Interventions on the picture, before or after taking the picture will not have the same effect. The choices made by the photographer will or will not alter the radically indicial nature of the image. If the photographer makes decisions prior to the shot, he or she will offer nothing other than framing and composition, specific to the subject. However, if the photographer makes decisions afterwards, this means intervening directly on the image as an index, retouching or even transforming it, as was already customary through picking and coloring, since the invention of daguerreotype.

Without denigrating the photographer’s act when taking a picture, the juxtaposition of the terms photographic creation and manipulation explores this second dimension, that of image editing. It questions its indicial nature, when the creative act transforms the perception of visible or the source image, through reorganization of the photo, by means of lab development or digital editing. Paul Nougé’s approach, especially the photographs Marcel Marien published in 1968, under the title *La Subversion des images* (The Subversion of Images), particularly sheds light on this subject. Nougé demanded “not photography but [...] photographic realization” (Nougé, 1968, p. 13-14). The link between manipulation and creation becomes especially relevant. It takes a decisive direction and acts as part of a new level of production, revealer of a process giving images a new form of existence. To create is indeed to engender, to produce, if we refer to its etymology. The encounter between terms creation and manipulation intervenes in this way. It offers an enlightening exploration of the conception of the photographic image as a practice linked to conception and development.

2. New Issues in the Indicial

Transfiguration of the photographic image, common since the invention of the medium, has tended to become more and more radical, with new digital photography practices. Of course the goals are very different, but both are based on a need to transfigure the photographic rendition. Whether the manipulation takes place before or after the photo shot, the objective is the same: to offer a distinctive vision of the subject. Yet do they offer the indicial nature the same effects or alterations? Both benefiting from this implied certificate that tends to legitimize all photos as reflections of reality, they disturb the veracity of their imprints or marks. However, they make use of this indicial form and leave us very little doubt about the “power of credibility” (Bazin, 1974, p. 15), that Andre Bazin outlined in his *Ontology of the Photographic Image* (Bazin, 1958, translated by Gray). The usages that we might consider as deviant, in comparison to modes of transmission without manipulation, don't fundamentally change the nature of the image. They do not call the mark or the imprint of reality into question, but rather make use of them, in order to mislead perceptions. That is why it is necessary to examine the nature of the image captured, when it no longer aims to capture a frozen reality, but aims to reconsider reality through creative intention.

When manipulation begins while taking the shot, this orients the relationship to the photographic image. Yet it does not fundamentally change it's nature, as it merely offers a previously unseen view of the subject. However, when the creative act takes place afterwards, directly on the surface of the image during editing or touch ups, questions arise. The subject was controversial when Paul Hansen was named winner of the World Press Photo award in 2013 for his picture of a Gaza funeral. The mere development of his raw image on editing software was met with strong disapproval from the professional photography world. Certainly, this case is particular, in that it involves press photography, but the problem of the vacillating limit between the radically indicial image and creation has been introduced. This why it is necessary to dissociate two types of intervention in the photographer's work; that which aims to retouch imperfections in the source image, as opposed to that which changes structure. Indeed, the former is generally accepted, unlike the latter which intervenes on the certificate of presence and is almost inevitably debated in the reporting field. The controversy is even more present when the image is manipulated, and that manipulation is then denied.

Indeed, new photo usages aim to make touch up processes, already customary upon invention of the medium, even more imperceptible. The first coloring practices began in 1840, only one year after the invention of the daguerreotype. Then, very soon after the invention of the negative, image juxtaposition appeared, with veritable photomontages, such as the hybridization of Abraham Lincoln's face with the body of John Calhoun, in 1865, attributed to Thomas Hicks. From that point on, photography had fully entered into falsification of the photographed visible. It was used by Hitler, Stalin and Mao as a propaganda tool, offering the ability to remove hitherto undesirable figures from official photographs. It was also an opportunity to give the illusion of having photographed supernatural phenomena, as it left an increasingly large place for artifice and embellishment, by disturbing perception of the visible. As image processing software has become more and more advanced, the fusion between manipulation and pure indiciality has become ever more sophisticated and undetectable. The limit between a purely indicial image and a retouched photograph is diminishing. There is even a tendency to bring imprint and manipulation together in order to disturb perceptions. In keeping with these manipulation

practices, young artists have been seizing opportunities offered by new technologies and making use of the credit allowed to the image in order to confuse our perceptions.

In this vein, some photographers such as Yang Yongliang, Noemie Goudal or Alain Delorme, create and modify visual arrangements, reorganized by means of an indicial appearance, through subtle editing methods. Yang Yongliang recomposes urban imagery that looks like Japanese prints. Goudal composes sorts of heterotopias, with deliberately ambiguous, pared-down, aquatic universes. Delorme creates flights of bird-like flocks of plastic bags, in his Murmurations series. In these three very different worlds, all still within the field of indiciality, the artists create scenes that are both familiar and disconcerting. They visually disturb the subject, manipulating it without invalidating the idea of an indicial image.

In prolongation of the essay on photography, *Habiter l'image* (Inhabit the Image) by Régis Durand (1994), a shot by a photographer is no longer a simple the indice of Philippe Dubois' "coup de la coupe" [4] (1990). It goes beyond the simple imprint of a subject to become a "sign" (Durand, 1994, p. 49).

"photography [...] modified by several acts of transfer, is a sign, not of something that has been, but of something yet to come. It is no longer a trace or an imprint, but an artifact that takes its place in a new sort of visual dramaturgy" (Durand, 1994, p. 49).

Photography as artifact works with the nature of the image-indice, to introduce a rift. But exactly what perceptible or observable phenomenon is Régis Durand describing? As opposed to the artistic approach commonly used in documentary photography in the 70s, the photo as artifact deals with photographic creation, caught between creating "an impression of reality and an allegorical reading" (Durand, 1994, p. 49). He expands upon discussion of photography practices of the 90s, by positioning the image in an indeterminate state between icon and index. He thus subjects photography to a fluctuating nature, between two concepts of the trichotomy of the sign (icon, indice and symbol) of Charles Sanders Peirce.

3. Between Indice and Icon, an Uncertain Presence

The juxtaposition of the terms creation and manipulation sheds light on an area of photography that deals with the indicial relation to the medium. From this comes a state of ambiguity, likely to perturb the experience of digital images, in keeping with montage or photomontage practices already long-used in analogue photography. Art photography draws on the certificate of presence, the possibility to truncate reality, that allows the viewer to experience a visual that is both tangible and ambiguous. Without promising an authentic photo taken in the midst of a conflict, as does the aforementioned reporter Narciso Contreras, the photographer introduces a doubt as to the truth of the facts captured, thus bringing the viewer to a new experience of the indice, like that proposed by Nicolas Dhervillers, who disturbs image perception, by almost imperceptibly integrating fragments of archive or internet images into his own photographic works. The photographer thus fills digitally reworked landscapes with dramatic intensity, in an approach that is at once plausible and disarming.

The viewer is no longer in the position of subject looking at something, but in that of subject scrutinizing the visible, in search of signs: details that can help to judge the veracity or lack thereof in the picture. Above all, the viewer cannot help but be struck by the shot, becoming captive of an image that is between indice and icon, which, however, at first sight, seems to be but an imprint of reality. In reading and perceiving the photo, the viewer is struck by what Roland Barthes refers to as “sensitive points” (Barthes, 1980, p. 49), these elements likely to disturb the senses, that might be, according to Nicolas Dhervillers, likened to those silhouettes, those extracts collected from other shots and integrated into new landscapes. Certainly the “sensitive points” evoked by Barthes, predate Régis Durand’s reflexions and do not refer to digital photography, and even less to retouched photographs. Yet his thoughts clarify the subject.

In his essay on *Camera Lucida* (Barthes, 1980, Howard, 1981), Roland Barthes proposes a clarification on the nature of photography. Uninitiated to the medium, his basic position is that of the subject looked at and looking at. From this latter position, he opens up perception of the image to an element that escapes us, that disturbs perceptions and clarifies how contemporary creation plays with the certificate of presence, in connection to the photographic image. The idea of punctum [5], that Roland Barthes describes in these terms, offers an enlightening vision on this ambiguity.

“There is a Latin word which denotes this wound, this prick, this imprint made by a pointed instrument; that word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the idea of punctuation, because the pictures that I’m speaking of are indeed punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points (...) I will thus call punctum; for punctum is also: sting, small hole, little stain, little cut - and also a throw of the dice” (Barthes, 1980, p. 48-49).

Photography and, even more so, the photographic act, in this case, makes “this wound, this prick, this imprint made by a pointed instrument” (Barthes, 1980, p. 49). It thus influences perception of the image of a poignant experience, going beyond the strict form of Barthian punctum. For this, it is necessary to think beyond chance occurrences, because there is no roll of the dice in edited pictures, but rather the meticulous creation of each work. The manipulation of the visible, understood as intervention on the structure of the photographed subject and employed with various artistic aims, develops a common attempt to disturb authenticity, and still more, perceptions.

In this context, the strength of expansion of Barthes’ punctum, takes on a new meaning. It extends the artwork by a sort of unsettling emanation which stems from the creative act. Through manipulation, understood as intervention on image pixels, the photographer obliges the viewer to contend with a sort of visual ambiguity, by intervening directly on the picture’s indicial nature. The photographer imposes a new relation to the sign, confronting the viewer with a photograph that is both plausible and disconcerting. Through a transfer of experience, the photographer arouses apprehension or anxiety in a viewer in search of certainties. The photographer thus pushes the viewer to take leave from a contemplative state, and compels him or her to experience the disturbance of the visible captured. Instability approached through photographic manipulations would not be complete without mentioning the essay entitled *L’Image précaire. Du dispositif photographique* (Precarious image: From the Photographic Device) by Jean-Marie Schaeffer (Schaeffer, 1987). Nevertheless,

dealing with matter other than manipulation, this would require followed up with an introduction to new image practices, going much further than the end of the 80s. The indiciality of the photographic image taps into artistic opportunity and a new depth of photographic image offered by this perceptual disturbance, blending index, icon and symbol, from Peirce's semiotic theory.

4. Footnotes:

[1] Translator's note: In the original French text the term presented, *empreinte digital* is an Anglicism of 'digital'. *Empreinte digital* also means 'fingerprint'.

[2] Philippe Dubois' theory is debatable. It is treated by Bernard Darras in his article "Sémiotique pragmatique et photographie numérique. Le cas de la retouche photographique" (Pragmatic Semiotics and Digital Photography: Photo editing) in Baetens. J. Pezzini. I., Van Gelder. H. (Dir). (2008). *Photographie / Photography*. Montreal: Canadian Semiotics Association, p. 153-175.

[3] With the exception of random or automatic shots, which require a more pointed study of the arbitrary shooting programmed.

[4] Translator's note: *coup de la coupe* indicates a temporal and spatial break or rupture.

[5] Roland Barthes structured his thought in *Camera Lucida* around the terms *studium* and *punctum*. The former is to be understood as an interest in what is being photographed. The latter intervenes as a troubling element. It is defined as that in the photographic image which "pricks" or "grips" the viewer (Barthes, 1980, p. 49). It's an element or a detail of a co-presence that attracts the eye and captures attention, by introducing a dissonance into *studium*. For this, unlike the history of painting, it must be linked to the chance of shot because, as the author points out, "Some details could 'prick' me. If they don't, it's doubtlessly because the photographer has put them there intentionally," (Barthes, 1982, p. 79).

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To quote this article:

Hélène Virion, *Photography and Creation*, published on June 20, 2016
URL: <https://www.wikicreation.fr/photography-and-creation>