**Factish or Fiction?: Fake Images, Truth Claims, and Memory**

On Monday, April 27, 2009, Air Force One, made a surprise visit to the airspace above downtown Manhattan.  In an attempt to “get some fresh glamour shots of the plane,” The White House secretly ordered Air Force One to fly near the Statue of Liberty (Sataline et al., 2009). To many, this fly-by was startlingly similar to the images of 9/11.  Even the President’s plane (which President Obama was not on at the time) was a little too close for comfort.  What the White House did not consider were the ramifications of a close “reenactment” of the hijacked plane crashes that preceded this photo-op by nearly eight years.  There are several reports of New Yorkers running out of nearby buildings, believing that the fly-over was another terrorist attack.  Instead, it was a misjudged and poorly conceived plan to spruce up the current images of Air Force One.  The most interesting part of this story, however, is not the fact that the plane’s flight so closely resembled the 9/11 attacks, but rather the reactions from the public.  Glancing through any of the reporting of the botched photo-op indicates outrage from the American public, but there is one constantly repeated comment in the online forums that sticks out among the others: “Haven’t they heard of Photoshop?”
    This demand for faked photography is intriguing—while photojournalists are responsible for supplying visual truth to the accompanying text, the public’s desire for a manipulated photo points to an interesting shift in our acceptance of what’s “real” and what’s not.  Rather than invoking a painful memory, the public’s demand for a digitally composed photo also suggests that the integrity of the formation of memory on all levels – prosthetic, historical, and autobiographical – is at stake.  If the public willingly demands forged photographic proof because the pain of the memory is still too raw, then the ethics of visual representation might slip a little further into the sidelines.  When manipulated photographs are designed to falsely represent accurate, eyewitness accounts of events, the possibility exists for those faked photos to become prosthetic memories for anyone who views the images.  Here, I question the moment of manipulation: if the photograph was manipulated with the intention to strengthen the evidentiary chain, then can the prosthetic memory be “real”?  Is the memory, too, manipulated?

To consider this claim, I want to use Latour’s discussion about the concept “factish.” Latour defines factish and festishism as the following: “Fetishism is an accusation made by a denunciaor; it imples that believers have simply projected onto a meaningless object their own beliefs and desires. Factishes, in contrast are types of action that do not fall into the comminatory choice between fact and belief. The neologism is a combination of facts and fetishes and makes it obvious that the two have a common element of fabrication. Instead of opposing facts to fetishes, and instead of denouncing facts as fetishes, it is intended to take seriously the role of actors in all types of activities and thus to do away with the notion of belief” (Pandora’s 306). While questioning what is and is not our construction in nature and society, Latour notes *We Have Never Been Modern* that, “There shall exist a complete separation between the natural world (constructed, nevertheless, by man) and the social world (sustained, nevertheless, by things); secondly, there shall exist a total separation between the work of hybrids and the work of purification” (31). Therefore, I want to suggest that this “total separation between the work of hybrids” speaks to the tension that we see with demand for photo manipulation and the simultaneous resistance it receives. The hybrid nature of both the manipulated photograph (it is part real and part fake) and the publics’ reaction (it is accepting and repulsed) throw the manipulated image onto contested ground.
    The idea of photoshopping, of course, is not a new one. What is different is the side of the aisle from which it is being promoted. There is constant backlash against photoshopped magazine covers, designed to make their models look younger and thinner. As the viewing public, we know this happens, and even though many people willingly endorse it by continuing to purchase the publications, it is still a point of controversy. However, the demand *for* photoshopped photos from the same viewing public which abhors it is new. The problem with fake experiences is not only that they are being created, but also that they are being created on the presumption of a hurtful memory for a select group of people. This leads me to ask: why do we want to see images that are faked when we’re so consumed by manipulated photographs as it is? Additionally, what happens to the possibility of an ‘honest’ memory when visual representations of events are created to soften the blow?

To validate events, visual photographic proof is often the most widely used form evidence. The conflict with which I’m concerned here is the tension between the actual event (as it occurred) and the end product (with even the slightest bit of digital touching up). With photo manipulation, there is a definitive point of departure between fact and fiction.  Unfortunately, the only one who truly knows the difference is the producer or editor of the image, and not the intended audience.  Manipulated photos are not easily spotted, and it often takes a careful eye and magnification power to pinpoint the infraction.  In April 2003, the *Los Angeles Times*’ photojournalist Brian Walski digitally combined some of his photos from Iraq by selecting certain elements from two different photos to create a false composite (Kitalong, 2008: 43).  That photo, which ran in several papers across the U.S. including the *LA Times* and the *Hartford Courant*, ended up becoming a disgrace to the profession, resulting in Walski’s firing (Kitalong, 2008).

Walski’s infraction might seem harmless, but the presentation of the fake ‘passing’ as real is the issue. Walski combined two different photographs, borrowing essential elements from each to create a more widely appealing, and ultimately more persuasive, image.  In the composite image, Walski grafted a British soldier onto the background of a separate photo of seated Iraqi civilians (Ritchin, 2009).  Even though some argue that Walski’s alteration is quite similar to any photojournalist who snaps a series of staged photographs, what is at stake is the creation of a false event.  When photographers alter the coloration and layout of images specifically for the manipulation of emotional appeals, then the intended use of the original photo is altered, too.  The final photo represents an event that never occurred, or at least it did not occur in the way it is presented visually.  By viewing the altered image, the audience is reacting to the manipulated event, and not the actual one.  Following this idea, I am interested in the intersection of the manipulated image and the (newly created) intentional use that the viewer receives from viewing the manipulated image.  When dealing with manipulated images, does creating memories out of altered images distort the intended use?  Should the images, and those who alter them, live up to specific codes of ethics with particular attention to the formation of memory?  Furthermore, if prosthetic memories are likely to become autobiographical memories, what happens when these false memories are internalized?  Do these fake memories become organic even when they are based on false grounds?

 W.J.T. Mitchell (1992: 28) argues that for many, photographic proof is nearly identical to scientific objectivity: “The photographic procedure, like these scientific procedures, seems to provide a guaranteed way of overcoming subjectivity and getting at the real truth.”  The photograph *should* be the end-all, be-all object of supporting evidence; but with the availability of inexpensive and free manipulation software, photographs are becoming less reliable because of the possibility of alterations.  Digital photographs can be altered in order to bolster the claims of an argument; in Brian Walski’s case, neither photograph was provocative enough on its own but the strong composite was widely published across the country.  When news organizations take the liberty to distort the image through manipulation, they are altering the persuasiveness of the text in such a way that brings the readers along on a journey that might not have been intended by the original picture.  That is to say, the manipulated photo stands in for the actual event, creating a new memory – a false memory – of the occasion.   Thus when altered images are used to be persuasive pieces in themselves or along with accompanying text, then their rhetorical boundaries become confused and even unethical.  The images become unethical because they no longer represent the truth, and are encouraging their audience to remember a situation in a way that did not actually occur.  These events are then documented and remembered incorrectly by the masses that trust the images, thus creating a moment of disconnect between the actual event, the manipulated representation, and the formation of prosthetic memories.  Walski’s case, for one, hid the fact that there were two images used to create the final montage, and the end result was a false representation passed along as truth.  When an audience (unknowingly) views a manipulated image, the nature of photojournalism allows the photo to be perceived as truth.  Memory, then, becomes skewed merely by the implication that the photo represents truth.  [This “perception of truth” is where I see the turn to Latour’s ‘factish’ coming into play.]

The audience does not recognize, however, that the truth is actually hidden by manipulation, thus leading to false memory creation.  To prove this, researchers questioned whether manipulated photos of well-known events could alter existing FBMs.  In the article “Changing History: Doctored Photographs Affect Memory for Past Public Events,” Dario L. Sacchi et al. (2007) purposely alter the iconic image of Tiananmen Square.  In the actual photograph, one man is facing down four tanks in the middle of an empty street.  To alter the image, the research team added large crowds on both sides of the tanks, creating a more populated atmosphere than the original event.  The creation of the second image was intended to test the level of memory reconstruction—how do visual alterations affect the way we remember an event incorrectly?  To characterize the photo alteration’s possible affect on memory, the researchers coined the term “post-event misinformation”: the process that “can lead people to recall events differently from the way they actually occurred, or even to recall wholly false events that never occurred” (Sacchi et al., 2007: 1066).  By showing the participants the altered image, the researchers hypothesized that it would result in a “source-monitoring error,” a memory error that links actual events with an incorrect false representation (Sacchi et al., 2007: 1066).  In this situation the subjects remembered viewing iconic images of Tiananmen Square, but wrongly identified the additional crowds as a part of the original photo.

These results point to the complexity of manipulated photographs on the creation of memory.  By selecting an iconic photograph for their experiment, one that is extremely recognizable worldwide, the research team was purposely toying with the likelihood of memory manipulation.  The photograph was edited only slightly, but the entire rhetorical appeal of the image changed by inserting large crowds witnessing the event.  Even though the iconic image was mass-produced, the inserted crowds symbolized that the single-man protest had become a spectacle.  As a result an altered photo “may have a stronger effect than merely influencing our opinion; by tampering with our malleable memory, they may ultimately change the way we recall history” (Sacchi et al., 2007: 1021).

The suggestion that manipulated photos not only change our personal memory but also influence the ways we recall history is a significant shift in how we view prosthetic and autobiographical memory.  Because we have the ability to create memories of events at which we were not present, we make that memory based on the experience from a distance. There is no doubt that many people have viewed the Tiananmen Square photograph, but our attention is usually directed toward the ‘main event’—the lone man in front of the tank.  By focusing on the protester rather than on the periphery details (e.g., whether or not there were crowds lining the streets), the subjects in the study could reasonably endorse the altered photograph.  The idea of a crowd watching an important event is not unusual at all—many important, and memorable, scenes occur in front of a large audience.  Based on similar past experiences, our memories are prone to manipulation because they combine similar or repeated events with built-in expectations. By blending the expectation of a crowd with the actuality of the single-man protest, the brain concluded that the altered photograph was a likely possibility.

With all the studies pointing to the possibilities of making false memories, I wonder what effects these will have on new interpretations of the understanding of memory itself? Through the use of falsified photographs, memory can now be seen as a method of invention in addition to a method of storage as we have believed it to be for millennia.  External photo manipulation and internal cognitive manipulation are just two examples of the creative instincts aroused by research into contemporary memory.  Thus, memory is no longer just a trope of storage capacity, but rather it questions the limits of expert, personal knowledge while simultaneously being a productive structure capable of influencing and creating other memories.