

Diplomatics and Institutional Photos

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Abstract: Concerned about the potential of new technologies for the alteration of photographs, the author argues for the need to establish a new diplomatic for images. She explores the institutional and artistic origins of photographic images, and argues that the same principles used in source criticism by historians to evaluate documents should now also be applied to photographic images.

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New Images, New Problems?

OVER THE LAST FOUR YEARS, an increasing number of books and articles have been published in the United States warning of the danger represented by the arrival *en masse* of synthetic images, especially in the press. Today, this concern has reached France. The philosophical observations made by intellectuals such as Alain Finkielkraut or Régis Debray¹ on the role of the image in our societies were followed by the work of many researchers such as Philippe Quéau,² all of whom sought to alert a general public understandably misled by the wonders of synthetic imaging.³

On both sides of the Atlantic, it was the realization that rapidly decreasing costs were going to render the sophisticated techniques used in creating virtual images accessible to a large number of users which gave rise to fear. As long as these techniques were exclusively used in research laboratories or in a very limited number of large, easily trackable photography firms, admiration prevailed. When it became apparent, however, that their use was going to become so widespread as to make verification impossible, people began to become concerned about two processes that are technically very different – the manipulation of photographic images and the creation of synthetic ones. Both of these techniques are subject to reproach because each is used to produce images which, though presented as reflections of reality, are merely modified or distorted reflections. In fact, they may not mirror any reality at all. This is the essence of the concept of the virtual image, easily confused with that of the falsified image. Given these conditions, it is easy to see why the press is particularly concerned by the appearance of these images. Some European press organizations, following the example of their American counterparts, have already come together to try to define ethical guidelines to prevent the misrepresentation of reality. It is, however, surprising that the manipulation of images—which has existed almost from the time photography was invented—should suddenly be seen as dangerous just because it has been made so much easier by new equipment. Photos have long been altered through the use of glue, scissors and retouching paint, and in such vast quantities that it is easy to qualify image manipulation as not just another new toy. Most of the time, these alterations were not done with propaganda in mind, but were executed in order to make photographs clearer and more striking.⁴ Many examples of this can be found in nineteenth century photography. There is absolutely no doubt that in the very near future the new techniques available will open up endless possibilities to all of us in terms of falsifying images, but it is not completely clear whether these new possibilities will profoundly change the very nature of the rapport between image and reality. Further proof is still needed.

There are many reasons why archivists should take an interest in these innovations and in the controversy which they inspire. Besides the practical problems of conservation posed by any new materials, synthetic images bring with them the problem of forgeries—

¹Régis Debray, *Le Pouvoir de l'image* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993); Alain Finkielkraut, *La Défaite de la pensée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987).

²Philippe Quéau, *Le virtuel, vertus et vertiges* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1993).

³In conjunction with its discussion seminars, the Institut National de l'Audio-visuel has produced some public exhibitions such as the one given on the restoration of the Abbaye de Cluny, destroyed during the French Revolution.

⁴Two books written by Alain Jaubert, *Le Commissariat aux archives* (Paris: Barrault, 1986) and Gérard Le Marec, *Les Photos truquées. Un siècle de propagande par l'image* (Paris: Editions Atlas, 1985) did an excellent job of clarifying the practices of totalitarian regimes, but these works should not cause us to forget that all over the world photographers use image manipulation on a daily basis. Their goals, of course, are different.

fakes which technical advancement has made virtually undetectable. However, since contemporary diplomatics defines the goal of the archivist as the designation of both the historical sources of scientific research and the rules for critical study of those same sources, he is forced to deal with all images on an equal basis, whether they be computer generated or not. In fact, since neither the materials and processes used, nor the date a picture was taken can help us distinguish clearly the rapport between image and reality, it is hard to see which criteria would allow the elimination a priori of certain images, unless all future images were rejected en bloc and all past images were considered suspect. The problem faced in diplomatics is not the same as the one faced by journalists or philosophers, for the issue is not one of ethics but of scientific reliability (and of everyday management, as far as archivists are concerned). It is not so much a matter of condemning a certain type of image, but rather of knowing what place to assign it among other documents and what each unique image can tell researchers. With this in mind, current diplomatics should establish rules that apply to all photos regardless of their method of fabrication and the problems that method might create. These rules still need to be defined, for although both our funding and our knowledge of imagery have increased considerably, we have made little progress in this definition process since Michel Quéting stated the need to establish a diplomatic for images at the Twenty-Eighth National Congress of French Archivists held in 1986.⁵ This is why I will make some personal observations which could be useful in forming such a diplomatic.

Which Diplomatics for Images?

I am going to examine the extent to which the methods developed for other types of archives can be applied to photographic archives in order to deal with the principal questions raised by these images. I will be looking primarily at the use of the concept of institutional archives. Institutional photographic archives will be treated here as a subset of photographic production in its entirety. Using the definitions proposed by Bruno Delmas in his article entitled "*Les nouvelles archives. Problèmes de définitions*"⁶ we will consider all works produced by the photographic process, that is to say, all lasting fixed images obtained through the action of light. I don't believe we need to take into consideration either the materials used or the method of capturing that light. The fact that the images brought back by the *Mission héliographique* in 1852 were, depending on the photographers, done either on paper or on glass plates makes no difference at all in their status. By the same token, new cameras which print a number onto each shot do not create a particular category of photo, even if at a later date these photos are easier to handle, nor do postcards, posters, or other items created with photographs.

To be qualified as "institutional," photographic archives must consist of photos taken systematically by an institution during its official activities. The three basic elements of this definition are not unique to photographic archives but rather define all institutional archives, whatever their form, and I have based my observations on all three elements.

We are all aware that a photo bears the mark of its photographer. However, institutions often rely on photographers from different backgrounds to take pictures for their photographic archives. Some are affiliated with the institution for which they work, while others

⁵*Les Nouvelles archives, formation et collecte: Actes du XXVIII^e Congrès national des Archives français* (Paris: Archives nationales, 1987), 22.

⁶*Les Nouvelles archives, formation et collecte*, 179.

are independent, hired as the need arises. There is also a third category—that of the countless photographers whose work is most often done anonymously. For example, police identification photos are either taken by unknown photographers or more often by the implacable Photomaton [an automatic photo machine], and there is no trace of subjectivity in these shots because they are restricted by the rules of the requesting institution. Thus, I.D. photos requested by authorities for their records must conform to certain specifications as to format, background color, and degree of contrast in order to be accepted and entered into the archives. Examples of acceptable photographs are on display to avoid any possibility of official rejection at a later date. We are also familiar with the facilities used since the 1880s by the *services de l'Identité judiciaire* to take I.D. photos according to Bertillon's specifications—a swiveling armchair with headrest placed facing the camera in the garish light coming from the window above. With these stipulations, the department defined a genre, the I.D. photo, which is not just a small-sized photo. One could even say that it is the institution itself which takes the photo, rather than the photographer, because whatever his status, the latter has no more latitude than an administrative employee writing a report.

However, this standardization of photographic production is not an end in and of itself, but a consequence of the role of the institution and of the photo. The role of the latter is largely to document a situation, a state. Photos which are part of a file enable one to quickly visualize a situation in a way that is not possible with a written description. Photos of condemned buildings taken before demolition, photos used to inventory a historical patrimony, photos of public officials, unveilings, commemorations, or photos taken as part of a police or criminal record should all record a past state of being. Since these photos could be called visual recordings, they require both precision and objectivity, and should be taken according to rules (whether explicit or not) to meet these goals. The first rule is that the photographer must have mastered the techniques of this craft in order to avoid photos which are unfocused, taken from too far away, or taken in inadequate lighting. The second rule, objectivity, turns out to be much more difficult to respect, for the lack thereof is the most frequent criticism of photography—and with good reason.

Take the case of administrative photographs, for which a frontal view is preferred. If a shot is taken from a different angle, it is usually because there is a need to record a maximum of information. The subject is tightly framed in order to eliminate anything distracting in the background, but if it is necessary to recreate a specific environment, a provision for a wider view is arranged ahead of time. In fact, one of the characteristics of institutional photography is that both the subject of the photo and the specifications for taking it have already been dictated to the photographer. Photos are taken to meet very precise needs, and equal treatment is required for all persons or things photographed. By using its armchair and its stationary equipment, the *services de l'Identité judiciaire* has been able to meet this goal since the end of the nineteenth century. All shots are taken under the same conditions, however unflattering those conditions might be. Any subjectivity on the part of the photographer is completely suppressed, and one could even go so far as to say that his presence is no longer necessary, just as it isn't needed when the shutters of strategically placed cameras are triggered by a machine in order to trap motorists in the act of committing moving violations. The apparatus in question has to be positioned ahead of time so that both the vehicles and their drivers can be easily identified.

Though the example of administrative photography just given is a very limited one, there are many ways in which an administrative photo resembles a written administrative document. Administrative photos have their rules and administrative language has its conventions, formulas, and impersonality. Photos are taken by order of an administrative authority

and are documents in the same way as administrative texts are. Furthermore, since the risk of falsification or error is no greater than that for a written document, a photo's value as proof is the same. In fact, the photos in *l'inventaire des monuments historiques* could never be replaced by descriptions because a photo is more complete and provides more information than a verbal description. Mérimée was aware of this when, in 1850, he urged the *Commission des Monuments historiques* to provide illustrations in the form of engravings of the French monuments most at risk. After first considering engravings, the commission opted for photographs. Here the French government showed its modernism by recruiting five of the best photographers available, defining their objectives and providing them with a project outline covering visits to 120 sites. The photographers came through, and the *Mission héliographique* brought back documents providing an irreplaceable testimony of the riches of France, especially from the Medieval Era. While today such photos would be treated as either documents or as works of art, the government as a matter of routine did not at that time consider them to be either, and neither published nor appropriately preserved the collection.

Photography which is done systematically guarantees that subjects are photographed with a very small margin of error. More importantly, the very act of systematization causes guidelines for picture taking to fall into place, even if they are not set at the beginning of a project. As an example of this process, the municipal archivist of Montbéliard reported at the above-mentioned Congress of Archivists that the photographer hired by the municipality had, by taking three identical views, fulfilled his assigned task of recording the city's official political gatherings.⁷

Sometimes documentary photos which are part of a strictly determined ensemble have undeniable aesthetic value as well. This is the case of the photos of Paris taken in the nineteenth century by Marville or Atget. They figure prominently in the documentary series housed in the *Bibliothèque historique* of the city of Paris. Many of them were acquired at a time when their documentary value was their only attractive quality. The two photographers had volunteered to record architectural changes in Paris. Marville planned to personally pursue a project for which he had been hired previously by the administration, and Atget intended to live off of the proceeds of the sale of his photographs to interested museums. One sees in their photos the wish to record a reality threatened both by time and by man. The two men worked using standards provided to them by the administration, but incorporated their own sensitivity as well. This personal touch slips into their images like an added bonus.

Lastly, the fact that a photo is of institutional origin does not necessarily guarantee its objectivity. One only needs to observe the evolution of the official photo portraits done of French generals over the course of World War I to note, as did Denis Maréchal,⁸ that the administration abandoned its objectivity. It is true that these photos were destined for the press rather than for official files, so the goal was not just to accurately record the physical features of the superior officer, but to show the public reassuring and imposing images of the High Command. The fact that they contain an element of official propaganda makes them no less interesting to the historian, who can use that propaganda to analyze the mechanisms and themes in the photos. Consider as well the photographs taken by totalitarian regimes for propaganda purposes, which are well-known examples of the ma-

⁷Les Nouvelles archives, formation et collecte, 37.

⁸Denis Maréchal, "La Photographie: quelle source pour l'histoire?" *Thèse de 3^e cycle, Institut d'Etudes politiques de Paris* (1986).

nipulation of images by zealous governmental bureaus. Photos used to defend or to illustrate a thesis, while more ordinary, are also likely to be highly subjective, something which any knowledgeable researcher will take into consideration.

All of the above-mentioned examples show clearly that a photo is whatever an institution wants it to be. That is why any analysis of written archives should consider the goal of the institution providing the documents. The same is true for photographic archives. The example of the World War I generals shows that a single administration can pursue two objectives and produced photos to be interpreted differently. Some are for internal use and some are for the general public. When analyzing institutional photographic archives, it seems essential to take into consideration both the producer or issuer of photos and the viewer or receiver of the same.

The Case for a Division of Tasks

One might object to the way in which the archivist dumps the sticky problem of image manipulation onto the shoulders of, for example, historians, but actually this division of tasks is the same as that which is used for written documents. No historian has ever questioned the fiercely defended principle put out by the Positivist school of the nineteenth century which states that source criticism is an absolute necessity before constructing any historical discourse. Thus the historian is used to comparing texts, verifying the assertions contained therein, and evaluating their degree of reliability and subjectivity. He knows that the text of a law cannot be evaluated in the same way as a contradictory report or a piece of private correspondence. It is curious that this type of critical analysis is rarely done on photographic documents. There are many reasons for this, which I will not go into here. However, the fact that critical methods are so well-developed and so customary for written texts while being nearly nonexistent for images does not mean in any way that historians do not have to apply those methods.

The job of the archivist is to authenticate for the historian the origin and the purpose of photographs and to confirm information on their target audience. I refer to problems mentioned in my introduction when I say that it is true that in doing his job the archivist will not have had to take into account any possible image manipulation which would alter the representation of reality. However, he will have singled out any deceptive photos—not because of their content but because of the methods used to create them. In medieval diplomatics, a similar step was taken.

Conclusion

In my opinion, the criteria applicable to institutional archives are perfectly operative for photographic archives. Among the “new” archives, they do not require a methodology that is basically any different. Accepted criteria allow for the singling out of photographic ensembles useful to those doing research, ensembles for which possible publication would go beyond simple identification to supply the basis of a true critique of the image. A photo would be singled out if its institution of origin (not just its author), its purpose, or the rules under which it was produced were unknown.

Lastly, it seems to me that this diplomatic could influence some simple rules for critique which would apply even to photos outside of its domain, and that by systematically taking into consideration both the designated purpose of a photo and its target audience we might more easily estimate the degree of subjectivity involved, not to mention the degree of photographs as documentary sources, whatever their origin.