Diplomatics for Photographic Images: Academic Exoticism?

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Abstract: The author considers the basic building blocks of diplomatics as they might pertain to a more nuanced analysis of visual images. She argues that diplomatics offers archivists an orientation by which to consider the photographic process through its refined notions of what constitutes authority, authenticity, purpose, and extrinsic and intrinsic elements. By creating and applying a typology for institutionally based photographic media according to these notions, archivists could better appraise, preserve, and represent these images.

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Introduction

RELATING DIPLOMATICS TO PHOTOGRAPHIC MEDIA is more than simply an exercise in academic exoticism. The association of this medievalist discipline with pictures can offer a useful analytical approach to historical photographs, which might provide elasticity as well as rigor to both professional research and application by archivists. It is appropriate to relate the methodology of diplomatics to *archivistique* as one means to confront issues associated with highly sophisticated technology which creates, transmits, alters, and ultimately saves or destroys both new and old images of a photographic nature. Just as we as archivists need to develop for ourselves, and ultimately others, a fuller informational structure of analysis and description for how textual media with an archival value have evolved and perform today, so too do we need a much more nuanced methodology for analyzing and describing photographic media.

Hugh Taylor had recognized the neglect of photographic media already in 1979 when he reasoned that "non-textual material showed little evidence of a time series and obstinately resisted an original order between inclusive dates" and that therefore "photographs were long ignored as records in the archival sense."[1] The "immunity" of photographs to the conventional notions of archival time series and order is, if anything, stronger today. (This is also the case, as Terry Cook has recognized, for textual documents[2]). The traditional, multi-faceted scrutiny of diplomatics at the item level affords us a useful framework of questions with which to enhance our archival analysis of photographs at a time when we need it more than ever. Given that visual media have to date received so little archival analysis, the limitations of diplomatics in serving a current, rather than medieval, information system with the present characteristics of a dynamic technology and authority might be set aside in the interest of advancing an admittedly preliminary examination.

Current Appeal of Diplomatics

The photographic image has always represented a complicated range of choices in its original creation. Now, all the more, photographic creation is linked to an ongoing process of refinement and manipulation which can be without any obvious or direct lineage from one generation of an image to its descendant(s); without any necessary linkage to a world physically witnessed; without any original whole as an image; and without any "act of closure."[3] This manipulation alters the previously fixed roles of the creator and subsequent consumer(s) of photographic images. It means that now, as Fred Ritchin has suggested, the "'decisive moment' may refer not to when the photographer took the picture, but when the image was modified."[4] This may also come to mean that images too have a certain "conceptual orality" akin to that identified by Taylor as belonging to words or documents which gain meaning only as they are "closely related to their context and

[1]Hugh Taylor, "Documentary Art and the Role of the Archivist," *American Archivist* 42 (October 1979): 419.

[2]Terry Cook, "The Concept of the Archival Fonds in the Post-Custodial Era: Theory, Problems and Solutions," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993): 24–37.

[3]William Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 51.

[4]Fred Ritchin, *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography: How Computer Technology is Changing Our View of the World* (New York: Aperture, 1990), 17. Ritchin is referring to the notion of photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson that a "decisive moment" is a certain most opportune moment for great photographic spontaneity.

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to actions arising from that context."[5] The traditional notion of fixed series with one organic provenance is even more marginal a concept for photographic media today than when Taylor made his observations of neglect seventeen years ago.

Diplomatics offers archivists an orientation by which to reconsider the photographic process through its refined notions of what constitutes authority, authenticity, purpose, and the extrinsic and intrinsic elements of the original document (visual or textual) under study. By creating and applying a typology for institutionally-based photographic media according to these elements, archivists could better appraise, preserve, and represent these images, either visually or through surrogate descriptive text.

There is a heightened fascination in the ability to manipulate and "customize" a picture to satisfy an individual's curiosity, needs, or persuasion, or an organization's requirements and objectives. The resulting image illustrates what any *diplomatiste* would already know firsthand: that the relative associations of what constitutes the original, the duplicate, the authentic, and the fraudulent fluctuate and are important. The current motivation to test the limitations of what is perceived of as authentic, authoritative, and original should both inform and inspire an archivist's new interest in diplomatics.

It would be naive to assume that either the mechanics or the social, commercial, and legal discourse over this fluidity are entirely new. Photographs have always entailed selections, although those of the past have seemed somehow more static, measurable, and relatively easy to detect. Rather than simply invalidate photographic media as now archivally suspect, we should instead attempt to assess all photographic media, past and present, with a greater sensitivity to their inherently transitory and multiple qualities.

Ongoing Institutional Status of Images

Furthermore, we as archivists have an obligation to consider photographs archivally since we inherit them from institutions which have, since shortly after Daguerre, deliberately and within prescribed conditions created and used photographs in their own sense as evidence. The police in Belgium, Switzerland, and even California created photographic files of fugitive criminals already in the 1840s. Vicki Goldberg, in her book *The Power of Photography: How Photographs Changed Our Lives*, added other institutional cases and noted that by the turn of the century "the police, the patent office, military intelligence, art historians, anthropologists, medical researchers, and other branches of work and knowledge made photographic files central to their operation."[6] Specific features of diplomatics can help us look at the entire process of photography more carefully, including a consideration of contextual authenticity which would further substantiate the legitimacy of the above-mentioned types of institutional photographic archives as well as others.

Authority and Authenticity of Images

The distinctions within diplomatics of varying types of authenticity are particularly useful in considering photographic media. Luciana Duranti has reviewed these distinctions

[5]As cited in Terry Cook, "Mind over Matter: Towards a New Theory of Archival Appraisal," in *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor*, edited by Barbara L. Craig (Ottawa: The Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992), 39.

[6]Vicky Goldberg, *The Power of Photography: How Photographs Changed Our Lives* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991), 59. She also chronicled the first legal use of a photograph by stating on page 59 that "in 1859, in California, the photograph of a signature proved that a disputed document had been forged, in the first American court case to admit photographs as evidence."

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in her series of articles which have served as a very thorough and useful introduction to diplomatics for a North American readership. There are three types of authenticity: legal, historical, and diplomatic. As she explains, ''legally authentic documents are those which bear witness on their own because of the intervention, during or after their creation, of a representative of a public authority guaranteeing their genuineness. By this definition, diplomatically authentic documents are those which were written according to the practice of the time and place indicated on the text, and signed with the name(s) of the person(s) competent to create them. Historically authentic documents are those which attest to events that actually took place or to information that is true.''[7] Diplomatically authentic documents are by definition not required to be legitimized by a public authority, nor are they obliged to attest to events that actually took place. They are, however, required to be self-referential in their authenticity by complying with a system of rules for creation agreed upon by the agency of origin.

It is promising that diplomatics seems to fully accept and in fact allow for an image with an authentic purpose and valid authority which may or may not be historically ''real.'' Authors who are probably unfamiliar with diplomatics argue along similar lines for other analytical criteria by agreeing that ''once the idea that the photo is only a transcription from reality is discarded, a new appreciation can emerge.''[8] Even virtual reality, removed as it is from a camera-based provenance, has a legitimate home in authenticity as defined by diplomatics, since the authorized creators of simulated images are deliberately composing them, following accepted procedures, for the intent of simulation to further the activities of the parent institution.

Diplomatic authenticity is based partly on authorship and partly on procedure: an authorized photographer has created a photographic image according to a certain institutionally-sanctioned procedure to fulfill a specific institutional objective. Elisabeth Parinet has postulated that the diplomatically authentic photograph ''doit toujours répondre à une question précise'' (should always respond to a precise question).[9] In the parlance of diplomatics the study of these institutional conditions is known as ''la genèse.'' Discussion of this type of institutional authenticity, albeit without reference to diplomatics, is in William Mitchell's book *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era.* He points out that ''courts, passport authorities, and the users of clinical photographs often specify particularly detailed algorithms (leaving very little discretion to the photographer in choice of lens, lighting, framing, and so on) for production of photographs that will be acceptable as reliable evidence.''[10] His specific example is the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization photo requirements specifying size, paper, focus, and exposure.

Images may very well be created by authorized agents following prescribed procedures with the deliberate and legitimate intent of manipulation. Propaganda, for example, is an act of distortion within the authorized mission of a government's intelligence agency. Less covert manipulation, for edification rather than misinformation, can take place in the classroom, where a professor of architecture might reconstruct via digital technology the

[7]Luciana Duranti, ''Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part I),'' *Archivaria* 28 (Summer 1989): 17.

[8]Ritchin, *In Our Own Image*, 88.

[9]Elisabeth Parinet, ''Diplomatique et Photos Institutionelles,'' *La Gazette des Archives* n.s. no. 172 (1996): 91.

[10]Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye*, 30.

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photographic appearance of the original form of a roof on a famous Palladian villa.[11] The authority of the creator and the formulae followed in manipulation *together* determine the authenticity of that act. Authenticity is therefore contextual and may be one premise for distinguishing institutional types of photographic images.

Extrinsic Characteristics of Authenticity

A diplomatic study of authenticity of procedures used to create an image would include the traditional category of *les caractères externes*, or extrinsic elements, as Duranti has translated the term. For visual images, extrinsic elements would include the physical medium of the original image as a negative or paper print, for example, or the technological characteristics which, together, make an image visible on a computer screen. It would also include the ink and other chemicals used to develop and fix the image of a photographic print. The means for arriving at these extrinsic characteristics are mechanical and electronic processes which are "neutral" in and of themselves. It is their pre-determined, sanctioned use by an authorized agent that legitimizes them.

What further substantiates or disqualifies an image as authentic in an archival sense is identification through elements such as text, an institutional or commercial stamp, and other visual markers. These have been forms of additive identification of an image, which, if supplied according to authorized procedures, may reinforce an image's authenticity. New technology is addressing authenticity as well: the Kodak Pro Photo CD Master has several features built into its format for protecting a photographer's rights, which archivists can translate as a photographer's authority and an image's authenticity. These features include a special identifier to indicate ownership and copyright; the ability to add a watermark; and encryption to lock high-resolution files.[12] Furthermore, these new systems are developing highly controlled means of transferring authority from one individual to another through a combination of digital signatures and public key encryption. This type of authority is thereby technologically obtained. Private companies are developing encryptions through a combination of algorithms. Their formula for doing this is patented, which means that while an individual obtains, through purchase, exclusive rights to a certain encryption (otherwise known as a digital signature) this customer does not obtain information on how the encryption was created in the first place. Therefore, while he or she has purchased a certain authority and authenticity, another agent has determined its "form."

Just as a scribe could use an earlier writing instrument to falsify a manuscript in the High Middle Ages, so too could a skilled photographer use a camera and imaging technology to "fake" an image in a diplomatic sense. There are many ways to manipulate an image, to either diplomatically legitimate or fraudulent ends. These include deletion, insertion, distortion, displacement, and even "reverse cropping." All of these categories are processes of change which do not necessarily leave in place an earlier rendition of the image, such as a photographic negative. There is no "proximity of cause and effect"[13] in a non-physical, technological environment, making any sort of fixed provenance or sequential processes based on legitimate or illegitimate means all the more difficult to re-

[11]See Mitchell's example of just such an alteration on page 186 of his *The Reconfigured Eye*.

[12]Kurt Foss, "Photo CD Turns Pro," *Photo Electronic Imaging* (September 1992): 43.

[13]"The Machine That Changed the World," [videorecording] (Princeton, N.J.: Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 1992).

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capture. An a priori understanding of these processes, and the extrinsic characteristics which they evidence, is therefore all the more important.

Intrinsic Characteristics

It is also necessary to consider the intellectual substance of the picture itself. In diplomatics, this would be considered the study of *les caractères internes*, or intrinsic characteristics. These would include the informational content of the image, the role of the content, and the appearance of that content. For visual images, the least germane aspect of the traditional notion of intrinsic features would be those sequential elements of a documentary formula—so important to traditional diplomatics—which would proceed from protocol through text to an eschatocol, according to Duranti.[14] The information of a picture is obviously not presented according to a linear sequence of verbal language. The absence of this characteristic is not irrelevant. It means that there is, in a sense, an organized but semi-autonomous set of individual cells, or pixels, which work together to create a "legible" image. These can be disassembled—through digital technology—and either constitute a second, reassembled image or a supply of pixels "at rest." While the *diplomatiste* has made studies of the composition of text, and the medieval seal, there has been no such scrutiny of photographic images, especially of the level of sophistication which considers multiple provenances, multiple states of authenticity, or varying degrees of legibility within any one image that might be electronically presented.

If the concept of an intrinsic formula may be less relevant for photographic images, the role of the content of the image is, on the other hand, of fundamental importance. Yet this remains without analysis by archivists. Helen Samuels, in her recent functional analysis of the documentary records of the modern university, briefly mentions visual materials but then proceeds to focus primarily on the textual record, not surprisingly.[15] Nevertheless, a study of the role of an image officially created by an authorized agent within a university setting could, in fact, follow the categories of university functions enumerated in Samuels' study: confer credentials; convey knowledge; foster socialization; conduct research; sustain the institution; provide public service; and promote culture. For each of these categories, one can locate photographic images created by an institution such as the University of Michigan for its official functions. Further analysis of these photographic categories within the specific institution of the university would ultimately lead to a much more refined *corpus de connaissances* (body of knowledge) for photographs in academia.

Beyond Initial Analysis to Description

Archivists should assume the responsibility of developing such a *méthode et un corpus de connaissances* for images, just as *diplomatistes* have done for earlier branches of diplomatics.[16] They would thereby begin to respond to Michel Quétin's call in 1986 for precisely this new direction for diplomatics, and they would thereby afford themselves the basis for a much more meaningful structure and content for photographic analysis and

[14]Luciana Duranti, "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part V)," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991): 15.

[15]See Helen Samuels, *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1992).

[16]Olivier Guyotjeannin, "La Diplomatique Médiévale et l'Elargissement de Son Champ," *La Gazette des Archives* n.s. no. 172 (1996).

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description.[17] This methodology would provide a structure for how we could describe an image's *caractères externes* and *caractères internes*. The *caractères internes* in particular would go hand-in-hand with a *corpus de connaissances* about the typologies of various institutions creating and using visual images as a part of their administration. This linkage is where diplomatics would meet with the concerns of archivists in the United States who argue for appraisal and description from the context of process, or function, just as much as provenance. Profession-specific applications of photography and imaging technologies would thereby be examined with more informed familiarity. Having established the functional role of photographic images, the archivist would be better able to recognize and describe how an authorized cardiologist creates, transmits, and even distorts an image of the heart differently than an architect depicting a building for a client, a photojournalist submitting news pictures, or a policeman compiling photographic evidence of criminals or missing persons. Hackers and quacks, dilettantes, saboteurs, and spies have their own profession-specific ambitions and imitative practices too, which are not without significance since fraud was proclaimed the growth industry of the 1980s.[18] (This current phenomenon has antecedents in the early modern era which inspired diplomatics in the first place and which has helped to insure its longevity as "l'art de discerner le vrai du faux").[19] Fraudulence, too, could warrant a functional analysis and description rather than a blanket dismissal.

As a new form of recognition develops according to diplomatics, which would allow for a more contextual acknowledgement of authority and authenticity and a more nuanced assessment of physical/electronic media and informational substance, a more refined approach to description can emerge. In diplomatics, there exists quite precise categories and vocabulary for types of documents and their associated processes. There is, as yet, no comparable archival lexicon for photographic images. Especially given the already-mentioned fact that photographs are not self-identifying, there is the need for a highly sophisticated vocabulary which can adequately describe the photographic functions, processes, and presentation formats of creation, alteration, and transfer. Any work on a standardized, archival vocabulary must incorporate new processes and new types of images along with descriptive terms for the original function of the image.

Such a descriptive system must somehow be able to reflect relational characteristics of images. An image might have ten provenances with as many processes associated with it. This is a complexity which may very well stretch beyond the offerings of diplomatics which have not traditionally dealt with the "plurality and fragmentation" of sources as they are now characterized.[20] Some authors are quite bleak about this general disassociation of content (or what might be understood as the "intrinsic characteristics") from provenance. Bernard Tschumi has written about this angst in his article entitled "De-, Dis-, and Ex," when he refers to the "terminal crisis of the referent."[21] William Mitchell, too, has observed bleakly that for digital imaging "the referent has come unstuck."[22] Other authors,

[17]Parinet, "Diplomatique et Photos Institutionelles," 89.

[18]David Lowenthal, "Forging the Past," in *Fake? The Art of Deception*, edited by Mark Jones (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 18.

[19]Heinrich Fichtenau, "La Situation Actuelle des Etudes de Diplomatique en Autriche," *Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Chartes* (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1962), 20.

[20]Duranti, "Diplomatics," Part I, 9.

[21]Bernard Tschumi, "De-, Dis-, and Ex-," in *Remaking History*, edited by Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989), 261.

[22]Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye*, 31.

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including David Bearman, have argued convincingly that the most successful way to overcome this growing concern for irretrievable contextual information would be to create new, proactive ways to document documentation itself, concurrently or even before the creation of the document.[23] This interaction between archivist and the office of origin is of course what would make a present-day *diplomatiste* appear to be something of an *arriviste* in the eyes of medievalists working with documents centuries older for which a "tradition" or lineage must be established between creator and diplomatic analyst.

Another concern for description of images is the essence of the description itself, which can be altered by new technology. The future will no doubt allow images to "speak for themselves," either as themselves or as close surrogates or distant resemblances, in analogous descriptive systems which fuse text and image in a new medium or which abandon preliminary descriptive text of a bibliographic tradition and replace it with documentary text in a newer "poly-centric database" perhaps of the sort envisioned by Bearman, in which "the records description file was not privileged."[24] In her Society of American Archivists' presidential address, Trudy Peterson acknowledged that, "as the 'image lock' on society increases, researchers seeking nontextual items will become even more reluctant to work through a process of image identification that requires reading first."[25] They will, nevertheless, ultimately rely upon some sort of contextual metadata to substantiate the image as evidence. Diplomatics provides a logical and multi-faceted formula for creating categories of data values.

Finally, there is also the recognition that the photographic medium is best described at the item-level. The ICA Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards concluded in its progress report for 1992–93 that photographs and graphic images have "particular requirements and specialist terminology. There is perhaps a greater likelihood in the case of new media that it will be necessary to devise rules for the exchange of descriptions at item level...than would be the case for traditional media."[26] It is at this micro-level that diplomatics functions best, with its exacting scrutiny of form, medium, and message. Furthermore, it is at this level that diplomatics best escapes the criticism of theorists like Cook, whose reservations include a perception that diplomatics cannot be exported to larger, aggregate files.[27]

The Ultimate Objective?

The alliance of diplomatics with photographic images can also help archivists focus upon the final objective of accessibility. For a *diplomatiste*, the *édition* has always been a goal. On the other hand, American archivists have for the most part abandoned the traditional role as editor of their own country's historical manuscripts. But, by loose analogy at least, archivists of photographic images can share the goal of the *diplomatiste* to "*respecter le texte publié et le rendre directement intelligible*" (respect the published text and render it directly intelligible). Rendering an image directly intelligible in a diplomatic

[23]David Bearman, "Documenting Documentation," *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992): 33–49.

[24]Related to this is a pilot project described by Thomas J. DeLoughry in "Project Aims to Save Visual Images by Storing Them on Compact Disks," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (28 October 1992): A22.

[25]Trudy Peterson, "Reading, 'Riting, and 'Rithmetic: Speculations on Change in Research Processes," *American Archivist* 55 (Summer 1992): 416.

[26]"Activities of the Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards (ICA/DDS), 1992–93," *ICA Bulletin* 40 (June 1993): 28.

[27]Cook, "Mind Over Matter," 43.

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sense means of course somehow identifying, retaining, and representing its original extrinsic and intrinsic characteristics, its function, and its authority and authenticity. This sensitivity to the composite, dynamic, but somehow original integrity of a document, be it textual or visual, is at the heart of archival issues of our new information age. It is the basis for the discussion around metadata and it can also serve as the basis for a fresh approach to a time-honored discipline.

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