

The News Image

At Flux Between Permanence and Transformation

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ver since we learned how to reproduce images, news has unceasingly given itself a more visual dimension. While the layout and typography of the late eighteenth century produced “the effect of the text,” it was only later that the sense of sight, as such, was mobilized for the sake of the news. In the nineteenth century drawn illustrations of news were initially meant to depict an event, giving sight the same function as speech, that is to say, an expression of a line of sight on the news. Then photography introduced another major break from the status quo with the “certificate of presence” it offered, writes Roland Barthes (1980). This realism was key to the heyday of photojournalism and news magazines for much of the twentieth century, and at the heart of the success of television news. Finally, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, digitization did not make photography disappear – quite the contrary – it led to a redefinition of the purpose of the image in news. It is this assessment of not only the transformation, but also the permanence, at work in the field of news images that fuels the primary enquiry of this issue. But it is less a statement of accounts than an attempt to understand what profound changes are brought about by technical innovation buoyed by new practices.

Ambitious as the goal of this issue is, and mindful not to reduce the complexity of contemporary practices and uses, it will obviously not be carried

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out without fault. Thus, it ignores the moving image of television news and online news videos, as well as less popular but equally exciting data journalism and online documentaries – topics likely to be handled in future issues.

Before introducing the articles that address the issue of change in news images, we feel compelled to flash back to better understand how the image gradually established itself in the press; how photography contributed to the consecration and authentication of “the event” in the twentieth century; before the digital age and the Web once again transformed the role and uses of the news image in the twenty-first century. If the changes be permanent, it may be useful to recall the main chapters of this history so as to uncover both the continuations and the transformations occurring in the present era – the subject of this issue.

**FROM ENGRAVING TO PHOTOGRAPHY:
THE IMAGE DISCOURSE**

The earliest common method of printing images, the woodcut, did not allow for the inclusion of images in ancient presses because of its incompatibility with letterpress printing, even though it engendered the mass distribution of such things as playing cards and devotional images as early as the late Middle Ages. More to the point, in both one-time printings and all periodicals of the ancient press, it appears that until the nineteenth century little care was given to the rendering of reality¹, publishers being most often content to reuse available engravings as the need dictated. It was not until the nineteenth century with the advent of a new technique (the “end-grain”) and a new mindset (the very idea of “news”), that images slowly made inroads into the press, marking the rise of illustrated news (Tétu, 2008). This appearance was slow, before photography, followed by film and television, established the image as a cornerstone of news, or trampler of it, as the case may be.

Strangely, until recently the illustrated press (Bacot, 2005) has been of little interest to historians². The primary function of nineteenth century illustration was “culture”: from encyclopedic knowledge through to the “democratized” museum. The second function of illustrations was “entertainment,” inconsistent though it may have been with the third function of these illustrations: that of morality, or moral, civic, and patriotic education. The resulting image was necessarily normative. The first generation of illustrated books, dedicated to education, excluded the social and the political. The second made a spec-

tle of the world, and constructed an event as a memory of the nation. The third deviated sharply, as it represented class struggle and the struggle of the people, which the fourth generation (daily newspapers like *Le Petit Journal*) crystallized in the form of a high-strung nationalism, exalting the military hero or saviour (Caille, 1997) over the savage or the criminal. In short, the rise of the news story, directly linked to the significant growth in newspaper circulation, was greatly promoted by these engravings (Kalifa, 1995; Ambroise-Rendu, 2002).

But there is something else: the engraving contributed to a change in the representation of events by depicting the decisive moment of an action; as the arrest of public enemy no.1, Ravachol³, for example, or a mine explosion⁴, or the explosion of an oil tanker on the Gironde⁵. Although obviously created manually, etchings gradually tended to act as if they were an exact reproduction of reality. They thus prepared the reader for the photographic rendering of the world, and subsequently its movement.

**THE PHOTOGRAPHIC EVENT:
IMAGE AS INDEX AND SIGNIFIER**

The first characteristic of photography, and probably the most fundamental, has been extensively described and analyzed by Roland Barthes (1980): the photograph is an “absolute Particular,” hence its irreplaceable role in representing an event. Its “sovereign Contingency,” as Barthes writes, comes from what it shows of a singular event (even if it is infinitely reproducible), which is why it literally has no meaning – giving as it does a view of objects in the world, it is a signifier, not signified. One might also say that because photography is naturally polysemic, its meaning outside text is indeterminable.

Two other notable features explain its success in underpinning news. The first is that it lends significance to what it depicts. In the same way a headline suggest the meaning of the article that follows it, press photography shows what needs to be seen of an event by producing it: it is in this respect the signifier of the news. And this index has a second feature, which is “to ratify what it represents” (Barthes, 1980). It follows that all press photography is also proof and evidence of identity, such that its power of authentication almost always outweighs its power of representation. Press photography certainly borrows regularly from pictorial convention, which qualifies as *pieta* a weeping woman, for example, but the deliberate emphasis on the will to represent appears to immediately disqualify news photography as a simple recording of reality.

But the essential point of news photography is that it provides less a set of proposals on the world than partial and exploded snapshots, like pieces of a mosaic from which we cannot not grasp the complete design. Photographs of the world are like the collection of evidence the court presents to a jury: it all proves something, but it is not photography that explains it, and each of these pieces is all the more meaningful in that it calls for an explanation, an argument that it can not provide in and of itself. Moreover, all the images we consider “strong” are those which support the discourse that preceded them: without a discourse on the opposition to the Vietnam War, no image of a child burned by napalm can hold its own; without a discourse against the war in Iraq, a picture of Abu Ghraib prison or Guantanamo has no shock value – the “shock of pictures” slogan of *Paris Match* cannot exist without the weight of words. Whatever is said, the photograph does not make the event; it proves the existence of an event that was predefined, or at the very least, anticipated.

Photography, much quicker and more decisively than the dissemination of engravings, altered human cognitive models. While news may be the offspring of writing, of the text, the emergence of images has reintroduced to the world a part of the magic from which, about six thousand years ago, writing and texts wrested control. And the immense technological advances we have witnessed have largely freed us from the difficulties associated with the lack of lighting, too fast movement of a subject, or its moving away. But they did not alter how it functions, and digitization may not have impacted the news image as much as it has other areas.

DIGITAL IMAGING: CALCULATED... AND NOMADIC

In theory, digitization radically transforms the nature of the image. For Flusser (2004), or Baudrillard (2007), for example, digitization eliminates the irreducible and necessary link to the real world. The image is no longer an “imprint,” but an object “constructed” by technical language or computer code. Such is the would-be demise of the singular, unique moment (the capturing of the object, immediately vanished); and also the end of proof which was had with the irrefutable evidence of the negative. But it is clear that the press makes little use of the flexibility the digital image offers, most often content simply to correct light or change composition. Besides, the press did not have to wait for photo-shopping software to improve the portrait of a movie star, or rewrite the political history of a country. This is all solid from a theoretical standpoint, and yet, curiously, it has little effect on news imagery, which we still

expect (as with the previous analog image) to be a proof of reality, unaltered by special effects.

It remains to ask, therefore, what this celebrated digital revolution changes, or does not change, in the visual style of the news – the central question of this issue.

Today photography is omnipresent: in newspapers, where it has never taken up so much space; in magazines, in which it often consists of the primary material (when not exclusively devoted to it); in news agencies, whose current reputations rely in large part on it; and on the Net where it fostered the rise of networks and platforms that are almost entirely devoted to it (Flickr, Picasa, Instagram, Tumblr). Despite the sociological importance of the phenomenon of the sharing and circulation of amateur photographs on the Net, photographic news images in the press remain largely dominated by press agencies and professional journalists. It is these tensions, these confrontations, that this issue tries to bring to light. Thus, the speed of dissemination and the importance of re-publication, and the promotion of highly piecemeal iconic testimonies are core concerns of two articles in this issue. Daniel Thierry’s diachronic perspective contemplates the changes in the photographic image, now in a situation of abundance and autonomy far removed from the original intentions of the author and its initial publication. This “planetary panopticon” Daniel Thierry invites us to study shows that the world has indeed become, in the words of Sontag (1979), a “visual anthology.” Adeline Wrona’s research, which concludes this issue, reminds us that erasing the photographer is necessary for meaningful photography to work: when the photographer is photographed himself, as we see in the case of the iconic photo of the woman in the rubble of Fukushima, it is that he has himself become the hero of the story of another photograph. Her work demonstrates accurately the contemporary construction of a myth in the globalized market of press photography where re-publication and re-editing quickly transform the image, its status, and its time and place. But this also raises a formidable question about the meaning of a photograph once the business of re-publication detaches it from the text that originally accompanied it – as Plato said of writing: meaning is an orphan⁶.

The other two articles delve each in their own way into the resistance to change. As Juliette Charbonneau demonstrates, news photography is also the power of representations built up over time that become recurring motifs – authentic symbolic realities that recent developments do not seem to affect. Finally, Aurélie Aubert and Laurie Schmitt’s article looks at the phenomenon of amateurs supply-

ing the Citizenside Website. It shows that caution should greet initiatives that may seem revolutionary at first, as these new practices are regularly subject to recycling and control. And so go the amateur practices the *Agence France-Presse* tried to appropriate before throwing in the towel due to lack of profitability. The fact that the amateurs are largely “apprentice journalists,” or individuals who aspire to become one, recalls the ideology of “citizen journal-

ism,” drawn from the model *We the Media* (Gillmor, 2004), which arose at the end of the last century, and which fuels blogs and social networks. Now that nothing that affects humanity seems to escape photographic capture, the question of the meaning of these countless images remains – mobile, malleable, sometimes freed from authorial link, circulating without text and without context.

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NOTES

¹ A study of the engravings produced by Damiens after the attempted assassination of Louis XV shows the subjects and backgrounds to be unrecognizable. See *Centre d'études du XVIIIe siècle* (1979).

² Bellanger and alii (1969 ff.) give it relatively little attention, as does the “bible” of historians in this field, the *summa* of Eugène Hatin (1867).

³ *Le Petit Journal*, April 6, 1892.

⁴ Idem, April 2.

⁵ Idem, July 2.

⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus*.

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