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Essay: Icons as Fact, Fiction and Metaphor

By Philip Gelter Jul. 23, 2009

For the Lens blog, Philip Gelter, formerly a picture editor at The Times who writes regularly about photography, has adapted an essay from his new book, "Photography After Frank," published by the Aperture Foundation.

Truth-telling is the promise of a photograph — as if fact itself resides in the optical precision with which photography reflects the way we see the world. A photograph comes as close as we get to witnessing an authentic moment with our own eyes while not actually being there. Think of all the famous pictures that serve as both documentation and verification of historic events: Mathew Brady's photographs of the Civil War; Lewis Hine's chronicle of industrial growth in America; the birth of the civil rights movement documented in a picture of Rosa Parks on a segregated city bus in Montgomery, Ala. Aren't they proof of the facts in real time, moments in history brought to the present?

Of course, just because a photograph reflects the world with perceptual accuracy doesn't mean it is proof of what spontaneously transpires. A photographic image might look like actual reality, but gradations of truth are measured in the circumstances that led up to the moment the picture was taken.

In John Szarkowski's seminal book, "The Photographer's Eye," Robert Capa is referred to as "the great war photographer." Capa's most famous picture, "Death of a Loyalist Militiaman, Cerro Muriano, Córdoba Front, Spain, September 5, 1936," commonly known as "The Falling Soldier," was taken in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War. Though long considered a defining war picture, its veracity has also inspired decades of debate among scholars, curators and critics. While the picture's iconic stature rests on the precise moment captured when the Spanish soldier was shot, the possibility that it was staged undermines the historic proof it has come to signify.

New evidence reported by the *Guardian* has reignited the debate. José Manuel Susperregui, who teaches at the University of the Basque Country, recently published a book that includes research challenging the stated location of "The Falling Soldier." Several previously unseen Capa pictures in the archives of the international Center of Photography, taken in the same sequence as "The Falling Soldier," show a broader view of the landscape behind him. Mr. Susperregui uses these additional images to make a convincing case that they were taken in the Espejo countryside, some 25 miles from Cerro Muriano. This information, along with the many stories about Capa staging the picture, add to the intrigue, now rekindled in the Spanish press on the occasion of the International Center of Photography's traveling exhibition, "This Is War! Robert Capa at Work," which just opened at the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya.

"Everyone engaged with this photograph is trying to find out the truth," Willis Hartshorn, the director of the center, said in a phone conversation. "The new information about the landscape is compelling." Nothing is conclusive yet, Mr. Hartshorn added "We're all trying to build the research together," he said.

The impulse to define, perfect, or heighten reality is manifest in a roster of iconic photographs that have come to reside in the world as "truth." Mathew Brady, for instance, rarely set foot on a battlefield. He couldn't bear the sight of dead bodies. In fact, most pictures of the battlefield attributed to Brady's studio were taken by his employees Alexander Gardner and Timothy O'Sullivan — both of whom were known to have moved bodies around for the purposes of composition and posterity.

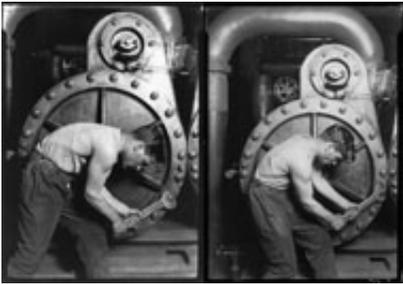


In “Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg, 1863,” by Gardner, the body of a dead soldier lies in perfect repose. His head is tilted in the direction of the camera, his hand on his belly, his rifle propped up vertically against the rocks. There would be no question that this was a scene the photographer happened upon, if it weren’t for another picture by Gardner of the same soldier, this time his face turned from the camera and his rifle lying on the ground.



In the Library of Congress catalog, the photograph “Dead Soldiers at Antietam, 1862,” is listed twice, under the names of both Brady and Gardner. In the image, approximately two dozen dead soldiers lie in a very neat row across the field. Could they possibly have fallen in such tidy succession? Knowing what we do about Gardner’s picture of the lone rebel soldier, the possibility lingers that he moved some of *these* bodies to create a better composition. Or it could be that other soldiers had lined the bodies up before digging a mass grave for burial.

Whatever circumstances led to this picture, it is at least verifiable that the Battle of Antietam took place on this field. We know that many, many soldiers were killed. Evidence of the battle remains — the soldiers that died on that date, the battlefield on which they fought, the clothes they wore, and so on. Just how much of the subject matter does the photographer have to change before fact becomes fiction, or a photograph becomes metaphor?



Lewis Hine’s 1920 photograph of a powerhouse mechanic symbolizes the work ethic that built America. The simplicity of the photograph long ago turned it into a powerful icon, all the more poignant because of its “authenticity.” But in fact, Mr. Hine — who cared about human labor in an increasingly mechanized world — posed this man in order to make the portrait. (In the first shot, the worker’s fly was open.) Does that information make the picture any less valid? Isn’t it a sad fact that the flaws in daily life should prevent reality from being the best version of how things really are? In our attempt to perfect reality, we aim for higher standards. A man with his zipper down is undignified, and so the famous icon, posed as he is, presents an idealized version of the American worker — his dignity customized, but forever intact. Still, the mechanic *did* work in that powerhouse and his gesture *was* true enough to his labor. The reality of what the image depicts is indisputable. Whether Hine maintained a fidelity to what transpired in real time may or may not be relevant to its symbolic import.



Despite its overexposure on posters and postcards, “Le Baiser de l’Hôtel de Ville, 1950,” (“Kiss at the Hôtel de Ville”) by Robert Doisneau, has long served as an example of photography capturing the spontaneity of life. How lovely the couple is, how elegant their gesture and their clothing, how delightful this perspective from a café in Paris! What a breezy testament to the pleasure of romance! But despite the story this picture seems to tell — one of a photographer who just happened to look up from his Pernod, say, as the enchanted lovers walked by — there was no serendipity whatsoever in the moment. Mr. Doisneau had seen the man and woman days earlier, near the school at which they were studying acting. He was on assignment for Life magazine, for a story on romance in Paris, and hired the couple as models for the shot. This information was not brought to light until the early 1990s, when lawsuits demanding compensation were filed by several people who claimed to be the models in the famous picture. Does the lack of authenticity diminish the photograph? It did for me, turning its promise of romance into a beautifully crafted lie.



Ruth Orkin was in Florence in the early 1950s when she met Jinx Allen, whom she asked to be the subject of a picture Ms. Orkin wanted to submit to The Herald Tribune. “American Girl in Italy, Florence, Italy, 1951” was conceived inadvertently when Ms. Orkin noticed the Italian men on their Vespas ogling Ms. Allen as she walked down the street. Ms. Orkin asked her to walk

down the street again, to be sure she had the shot. Does a second take alter the reality of the phenomenon? How do you parse the difference between Mr. Doisneau's staged picture and Ms. Orkin's re-creation?



The birth of the civil rights movement is often dated to a moment in 1955 when Rosa Parks, a black woman, refused to give up her seat on a crowded city bus to a white man. Many people assume that the famous picture of Mrs. Parks sitting on a bus is a record of that historic moment. But the picture was taken Dec. 21, 1956, a year after she refused to give up her seat, and a month after the United States Supreme Court ruled Montgomery's segregated bus system illegal. Before she died in 2005, Mrs. Parks told Douglas Brinkley, her biographer, that she posed for the picture. A reporter and two photographers from *Look* magazine had seated her on the bus in front of a white man. Similar photo opportunities were arranged on the same day for other civil rights leaders, including the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Here is a staged document that has become a historic reference point, and a revealing parable about the relationship of history to myth.

As a witness to events, the photojournalist sets out to chronicle what happens in the world as it actually occurs. A cardinal rule of the profession is that the presence of the camera must not alter the situation being photographed. The viewer's expectation about a picture's veracity is largely determined by the context in which the image appears. A picture published in a newspaper is believed to be fact; an advertising image is understood to be fiction. If a newspaper image turns out to have been set up, then questions are raised about trust and authenticity. Still, somewhere between fact and fiction — or perhaps hovering slightly above either one — is the province of metaphor, where the truth is approximated in renderings of a more poetic or symbolic

nature.

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