DEVELOPING PERFECTION:
UNDERSTANDING AND REDEFINING PHOTOGRAPHY IN A DIGITAL AGE

By

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WORKS CONSULTED
DEVELOPING PERFECTION:
UNDERSTANDING AND REDEFINING PHOTOGRAPHY IN A DIGITAL AGE

Taylor Hahn

As digital photography has grown in popularity, it has lead to the development of sophisticated digital image modification software. This thesis employs Kenneth Burke’s theory of perfection-seeking behavior to examine the usage of digital image modification in modern society. Engaging the work of Jean Baudrillard, I establish the impact of image modification in everyday life through a lens of Hyperreality. I examine genealogies of photography and image modification as a means of rhetorically comparing digital technologies to the photographic processes seen prior to computer-based modification. The conclusion establishes the potentially dramatic implications of digitally modified images retaining an ethotic dwelling place as truth-telling forms of visual communication.
CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

For every major event in my life, there is a photograph. Long before you or I were born, photography was established as the ultimate form of visual communication, carrying with it the potential to perfectly capture a moment in time. As a result of cultural norms, the idea of not having a photographer present at a wedding, child’s birthday, or high school graduation is unthinkable. Neglecting to take pictures has become an audacious concept. We have cameras in our phones, on our computers, and orbiting thousands of miles overhead in space. Photography has become a central form of collective memory, but it has also become something more. Taking a photo of someone has become a form of social acknowledgement: how would you feel if you were the only one not in a group photo?

As we continue to take pictures at an astronomical rate, our collective desire to perfect those images has become its own rhetorical phenomenon. Photoshop and other forms of digital image modification software have given us the ultimate power over our photographs. With a few clicks of a button we can make our zits disappear, merge two animals into an other-worldly creature and recreate historical events to our liking. Digital image modification has grown from a nerdy subculture to an everyday part of photography. Cameras are now equipped with digital formatting options that make editing easier, but also make image editing practically mandatory. For those of us that do not have the time or dedication to modify images, there are automatic forms of modification hardwired into digital cameras. Automatic redeye reduction, a process
which automatically darkens the color of our eyes, is but one example of routine digital modification in modern photography.

Photography has become a primary source for visual communication in modern society, carrying with it a rich history of innovation and discovery. Archeologists indicate that visual communication dates back to our ancestors who painted crude ideographs on cave walls. Advances in the field of visual communication have remained steady, developing throughout human existence. Various forms of image capture include tracing, drawing, painting, heliography, and lithography; yet none of these examples have retained their previous designation as a primary form of accurate event capturing technology. Over time, photography has emerged as the forefront in human technology, providing near-perfect reproductions of events captured through cameras. Chapter 2 of this thesis will provide a brief historical context behind these transitions in visual technology.

After a particularly stunning victory, ancient emperors would requisition murals to commemorate a likeness of the event. Today, events are immortalized with digital cameras, used to capture intricate detail that even first-person witnesses might have missed. Attempts to use other forms of single-frame visual communication to relay events accurately are laughable. Other visual ideographs are classified as an artful rather than an accurate depiction. For example, court rooms will accept photographs as evidentiary claims in trials and the intelligence community dismisses visual evidence not produced with a camera.

Our collective dependence on photography as an accurate form of visual communication continues to this day despite the ease of modification available to anyone
with a computer. This thesis seeks to identify the unique ethos granted to photography and the implications that digital image modification software has towards our collective acceptance of photography as an accurate form of visual communication.

**Significance of the Thesis**

More specifically, this thesis is designed to analyze how digital image modification software affects photography as a truth-telling form of visual communication. By classifying photography as truth-telling, I do not mean to imply that photographs are taken as factual evidence. Rather, these images have generally been considered as a viable form of realistic story-telling that are superior to other forms of visual communication. Photography is unique in the field of visual communication because society has “looked to photography to give us reports on nature, for knowledge about others, to arrest time, to document and remember…” (Kember 1998:2). In Chapter 3 I will address the ethos embedded in photographic depictions, an attribute which makes the study of photographic rhetoric imperative.

In recent years, photography has made the leap from a chemically-based development process to a purely digital form of visual communication, bringing with it new and exciting tangential technologies. As cameras became increasingly digital it was only a matter of time before the rest of the photographic process followed suit and it was not long before the first forms of digital modification software hit the consumer market. Referred to as the “digital darkroom” by many photographers, digital image modification software provided the opportunity for amateur and professional photographers alike to edit and enhance their photos on personal computers. Once a mere hobby for the tech-
savvy, digital modification has emerged as a mainstream technology and is considered by many to be a critical part of photography in the digital age.

The lynchpin of image modification is Adobe Photoshop; the first consumer friendly digital modification software written by Thomas Knoll, a doctorate student at the University of Michigan in 1990 (Hormby 2007). Since its release, Photoshop has developed from a monochromatic image modifier to a full-fledged software phenomenon containing algorithmic features making advanced modification a simple point-and-click process. Modification on this scale has not gone without notice. Geopolitical discussions on security-related intelligence and family photo albums alike have been transformed by digital modification. The broad spectrum of Photoshops’ availability has created an urgent need to study and understand the way digital modification is used to alter photography as a form of truth-telling visual communication.

Technological advances in photography have revolutionized every facet of image capture. The time society has devoted to developing simple ways of taking, copying, printing, and distributing images illustrates the importance attributed to photography. The sophistication of modern digital modification technology indicates a strong attachment to photographic visual rhetoric, providing kairos to the analysis of new media and the rhetoric found in digitally modified images. Computer-based modification of photographs has quickly become normative for both professional and amateur photographers alike. Contemporary reports tell us that: “if you wanted to remove an ex from an old snapshot, you had to use a Bic pen or pinking shears. But in the digital age, people treat photos like mash-ups in music, combining various elements to form a more pleasing whole” (Williams 2008). Modification of images not only effects the way we view our family
portraits, but can also spur preemptive violence as a means of preventing a non-existent threat. In the summer of 2008, Iran distributed digitally modified images meant to illustrate their launch capabilities against hostile nations. These images were quickly identified as digitally modified falsehoods, but not before international agencies began weighing their military options against a seemingly hostile (and capable) enemy. Examples of individual and geopolitical editing will be analyzed later in my thesis as an argument towards the potentially negative implications of digital image modification.

On a more holistic level, modification does more than merely alter a picture. Roland Barthes tells us that photography is a collaborative event in which the photographer and the audience engage in a creation of meaning towards the image (Barthes 1981). While the photographer has the power to determine the parameters of the photo, it is ultimately the audience which decides what to focus on and take from the image. This power sharing has existed since the conception of photography and has come to be known as an inevitable attribute. However, digital modification software has added the modifier as a powerful third-party to this power sharing structure. Before modern technology, modification was either minimalist (taking place in the kind of photo labs found at convenience stores) or was conducted by the original photographer who would take his or her film into the darkroom to process and develop (Anderson 1919). Digital image modification has rendered the process of editing increasingly user-friendly, inviting a frenzy of modification. Entire professions have been established with the sole purpose of modifying digital images, granting unprecedented power to the modifier. My analysis works to establish the rhetorical significance behind this transformation in power structure and image creation.
Despite overwhelming evidence that photography has grown beyond traditional definitions provided to us by authoritative texts, there is a significant lack of scholarly analysis regarding the limits of photographic communication. Common dictionaries such as Random House and American Heritage continue to this day to refer to photography as a chemically-based process (American Heritage 2006; Random House 2006). Based on these definitions, neither digital cameras nor digital image modification could be accurately designated as photographic, since neither are a chemically-based process. Despite these definitional contradictions, there is limited literature arguing that digital technology has established a new (non-photographic) form of visual communication. It is clear that digitally modified images are still considered potentially photographic in modern society. William Mitchell offers the deepest analysis of digital photography available to visual communication, stating that:

Photographs appeared to be reliable manufactured commodities, readily distinguishable from other types of images. They were comfortably regarded as causally generated truthful reports about things in the real world, unlike more traditionally crafted images, which seemed notoriously ambiguous and uncertain human constructions – realizations of ineffable representational intentions…But the emergence of digital imaging has irrevocably subverted these certainties, forcing us to adopt a far more wary and more vigilant interpretation….An interlude of false innocence has passed. Today, as we enter the post-photographic era, we must face once again the ineradicable fragility of our ontological distinctions between the imaginary and the real, and the tragic elusiveness of the Cartesian dream. We have indeed learned to fix shadows, but not to secure their meaning or to stabilize their truth values; they still flicker on the walls of Plato’s cave (Mitchell 1994:225).

Identification of the radical changes occurring in photography via digital image modification provides a timely call to action for continued analysis on the question of digital photography. Mitchell identifies the status quo as a ‘post-photographic era,’ yet provides little analysis of the implications of this new term. Due to the rapid advances in
digital technology, a regenerative analysis of digital image modification software is necessary to understand the ever-changing communicative relevance of photography in modern society. This thesis will build upon the arguments of Mitchell, providing a supplementary methodological lens of communicative theory that has previously been lacking. Simultaneously, this analysis will work to bridge the observations of social theorists with those of communicative scholars who have, up to now, merely identified the likely benefits of digital image modification while ignoring the potentially negative implications.

The rhetorical phenomenon embedded in our usage of and digital image modification software requires further analysis. In their recent book, *No Caption Needed*, Hariman and Lucaites praise the advent of digital modification in photojournalism as an important means of ensuring that the general population is not victim to malicious propaganda (Hariman and Lucaites 2007:304). We must keep in mind that every coin has two sides. Assuming that image modification can act as a liberator of the people implies that only those with good intentions will use the technology. Image modification might allow individuals to “distort and criticize” (Hariman and Lucaites 2007:305) the intended effect of propaganda campaigns, but it is equally likely that modification will be used to create new powerful forms of propaganda.

Hariman and Lucaites have provided an excellent analysis on the importance of iconic images in modern discourse, but their work stops short of providing an inquiry into the implications of image modification. Given the award-winning status of *No Caption Needed*, analysis of these social implications is becoming increasingly important. The popularity of image modification on internet message boards is but one example of the
ever-increasing importance of image modification in popular culture. Across the board, 
changes, which have dramatic effects on our social institutions at large, are occurring in 
the photographic genre (Hariman and Lucaites 2007:23).

Unfortunately, studies on the effect of digital image modification on visual 
communication have failed to identify the rhetorical significance of this technology. The 
vast majority of photographers, both amateur and professional, have adopted digital 
photography and modification as a primary form of communication. This thesis argues 
that the adoption of digital technology in photography, though seemingly benign, is a 
mistake that must be revealed. While I realize that the arguments presented here will be 
in the minority, it is important to discuss the negative ramifications of digital image 
modification software. Even if new technologies in photography are advantageous, the 
lack of extensive study of these innovations is deeply troubling given the power that 
photography has in society.

It is no accident that new photographic technologies have not been properly analyzed. 
Digital image modification software has been strategically presented as a photography-
enhancing technology, capable of drawing out truer and deeper detail in images while 
still maintaining the original photo signifier. Studies concerning this phenomenon have 
fallen short largely due to the strategic marketing of software developers who have 
introduced their image technology as photography-enhancing rather than a modifier. The 
strategic use of advertisements to subvert discussions of digital image modification will 
be discussed in Chapter 4. Recognizing image technology’s rhetorical role as a modifier 
is critical to the analysis of photo modification, as it will allow this study to question the 
majority consensus of digitally modified images as being photographic.
Methodology

The development of digital image modification software as a mainstream factor in photography-based rhetoric has ties leading back through a substantial lineage of visual communication. In order to gain an appreciation for the historical relevance of new media technologies in photography, this analysis will work to establish both a historical understanding of the genre and a working definition of photography. This analysis will investigate the relevance of image modification and its unique status in the realm of photographic technology. Following a literary review of photography and its history of rhetorical significance, a theoretical analysis utilizing the works of Kenneth Burke and Jean Paul Baudrillard will be used to examine the importance of digital image modification.

I draw upon several key theories postulated by Kenneth Burke as a means of establishing the importance of photography in modern discourse. Specifically, Burke’s definition of man provides a powerful argument for photography being a vitally important form of communication. Burke states that humans are:

- The symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol misusing) animal
- Inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative)
- Separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making
- Goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order)
- And rotten with perfection. (Burke 1966:16)

Two sub-points of this definition will be utilized throughout this analysis: humans being (a) “rotten with perfection” and (b) a naturally “symbol using (symbol—making, symbol-misusing) animal” (Burke 1966). Perfection-seeking behavior is a facet of Burke’s studies which has been given considerable analysis in recent communicative analysis. The diversity of studies which have used Burke’s theory on perfection-seeking as a lens
for analysis poses a strong argument for this theory as one of the rare universal truths in human nature.

My analysis of perfection-seeking behavior in photography draws upon the work of Michael J. Hyde, specifically his theory that “perfection is something pure and simple, although…it can be transformed into something egotistical, selfish, and even rotten.” (Hyde: 2006:183). While Hyde focuses his analysis of perfection-seeking on a holistic level, my study will focus on photography and image modification as a uniquely kairotic and transformative form of perfection-seeking.

The relevance of perfection-seeking in photography is granted authenticity when viewed through the lens of humans as symbol-using animals. The act of engaging in photography illustrates a desire to create an external referent for memories which would otherwise be lost over time or comparatively difficult to relay to others. The creation of images depicting previous events not only locks us into a symbol-using mentality, but also implicitly implies perfection-seeking. Memory, which allows us to archive snapshot images in our mind, is no longer good enough as a means of preservation. Photographs are increasingly seen as a far more reliable and precise means of recording events, giving perfect detail that our mind simply can not facilitate.

Beyond our attempts to achieve the “perfect” photograph through increased clarity, digital photography has given rise to an increased interest in image modification. Digital modification appears to be the next logical step in the continuing evolution of photographic perfection-seeking. Rather than forcing the photographer to sit in the woods for hours at a time, the clever individual can take a few snap shots of subjects that might look good together. The rest of the ‘development’ process can then occur outside of the
picture in the computer lab. With the proper collection of source images, digital modification allows us to combine a number of trivial pictures in order to create something spectacular. I cannot think of a better example of perfection-seeking than the creation of new worlds within the photograph as a means of creating the ‘perfect’ shot. As digital image modification has lead to ever-clearer images, the standards for photography have been raised to unprecedented levels. This has, in turn, required the photographer as modifier to engage in ever-increasing forms of perfection-seeking in order to maintain an attentive audience. This trend in photography to increasingly modify images plays directly into Burke’s theory on the nature of perfection-seeking.

Burke also provides a startling argument concerning the potential consequences of digital image modification in modern society. Given how humans tend to use symbols as a means of understanding and interacting with the world around them, the manipulation of representative images epitomizes what Burke describes as being “like the situation of an author who has an idea for a novel, and who will never rest until he [sic] has completely embodied it in a book” (Burke 1966:19).

Burke’s studies of language lay the groundwork for clarifying the horrific implications that arise from the blind acceptance of a perfectionist use of symbols, stating that: “Insofar as any of these terminologies happen also to contain the risks of destroying the world, that’s just too bad…” (Burke 1966:19). Burke’s notion of humankind naturally striving for perfection despite the potential costs makes the study of new technologies not only wise, but essential.

The purpose of this analysis is not to criticize perfection-seeking behavior, but rather to understand its role in photography and the effect that it has on our lives. Perfection-
seeking is both a necessary and inevitable part of the human condition (Burke 1966). Hyde argues that “although too much perfection can lead to disaster, not having enough of this specific pharmakon can also be dangerous to our health” (Hyde 2007:3). In making such claims on the importance of perfection-seeking, Hyde and others (Schrag 1961; Razdan 2005) illustrate their points by citing examples of how working towards perfection is what gets us out of bed everyday. We strive for a better tomorrow. On the other end of the spectrum, it is perfection-seeking that spurs dangerous behavior such as anorexia, bulimia, and plastic surgery addiction. The ability of Photoshop to magnify negative (and potentially dangerous) forms of perfection-seeking is an issue that has already been tangentially introduced in communication (Platt 2004:77). Given the implications of negative perfection-seeking behavior, my analysis will function as a focused safeguard against the potential consequences of continued image modification. Without a constant and vigilant analysis of how our understanding of photography and our viewing of images affects the world that we live in, our blind conquest of the imperfect would likely damn us all.

Upon establishing the relevance of this analysis through the application of Burke’s definition of man, the writings of Jean Paul Baudrillard will be applied in order to understand the potential implications of digital image modification. Hyperreality, as postulated by Baudrillard, can be understood as an inability to delineate between reality and fantasy in everyday situations. This analysis will argue that due to rapid advances in photographic technology, facilitated by perfection-seeking in visual communication, digital image modification has become a form of hyperreality in modern society.
Hyperreal depictions are generally considered to be an extremely altered depiction of events that are still vaguely referent to the real world. Photography serves as an example of hyperreal visual communication by giving us the ability to freeze time, capturing a single temporal event in permanency. Baudrillard argues that this action creates a new type of viewing for the audience because, despite being just a moment surrounded by millions of other moments that we see daily, a photograph locks us into reviewing and re-seeing the same thing for an extended period. Ordinary experience is viewed in rapid succession, preventing the viewer from closely observing and reviewing a singular event (Baudrillard 2000). The continual observation available to us through photography is nothing new in visual communication, yet it is the modification of the object being observed that has become increasingly important.

Baudrillard provides a strong argument for photography’s intrinsic separation from reality. While a photograph has the ability to represent a real moment in time, it is this very ability to continually depict a previous event that makes it unnatural. We can look at an image and see an event that we remember as real, but by continuing to stare at the image, unabated by the passage of time, we become witness to the unrealistic nature of the photograph (Baudrillard 2000). Baudrillard tells us that “photography affirms itself as both the purest and most artificial exposition of the image” (Baudrillard 2000), showing that photographs, by their very nature, function as an example of hyperreality through their ability to distort our perceptions and freeze time. Arguments on the hyperreal nature of photography are relevant to this analysis, but are trumped when compared to the hyperreal nature of digitally modified images that are presented as photographic.
This analysis will argue that the repercussions of hyperreal modification on photographs go well beyond the theoretical. While academic study allows us the possibility to analyze the modification of images, casual viewers run the risk of allowing hyperreal depictions to transform their expectation and understanding of images. The fact that most people do not know the general background context to iconic photographs (Hariman and Lucaites 2007:6) illustrates that images are often taken at face value. Barthes illustrates this point on hyperreality’s implications in photography, arguing that the art of photography has the potential to create and transform reality because of its power over the viewer (Barthes 1981:4). Examples of hyperreal image modification will be provided on both the individual and international level in this analysis. Specifically, the rhetorical implications of modifying images found in family photo albums and those used by governments to dictate international policy will be given considerable analysis.

It can no longer be taken for granted that “reality can be represented, that things give off signs which guarantee their existence and significance – in short, that there is a principle of reality. All of that is now collapsing with the dissolution of the subject” (Baudrillard 2001:126). Baudrillard’s subject has become progressively subverted by the use of modification which transforms and distorts our perceptions of the original scene. Our ability to look at an image and expect a reasonable facsimile to reality is increasingly encumbered by modification in the digital realm.

Focused analysis of modification is increasingly important, but has thus far been pushed to the periphery. Baudrillard explains that “No one wants to bother about these problems. The great systems of information relieve the masses of the care of having to know, understand, be informed, to be up on things” (Baudrillard 2001:127). In this
analysis I will attempt to illustrate the importance of remaining ‘up on things’ and the
kairotic importance of continued communicative analysis on the ever-changing genre of
digital photography and image modification.
CHAPTER 2:
A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY

Long before digital technology, photography was already considered a central form of visual communication. In recent years, photography’s importance to visual communication has only increased with the development of digital technology. Recent technological advances in photographic technology have revitalized the field and have created exciting new practices previously unimaginable in photography. While this thesis will focus on the recent developments taking place in digital modification technology, the ramifications of this new form of image editing can be better understood once the reader gains a basic appreciation of photographic historiography. Indeed, the history of photography has been granted new significance because of digital technology. Kevin Robins tells us that:

It is notable that much of the most interesting discussion of images now concerns, not digital futures, but, actually, what seemed until recently antique and forgotten media (the panorama, the camera obscura, the stereoscope); from our post-photographic vantage point these have suddenly acquired new meanings, and their re-evaluation now seems crucial to understanding the significance of digital culture (Robins 1995: 45).

Realizing the importance of historical context in photography, this chapter provides evidence to the claim that digital modification technology is intrinsically dissimilar from all other previous forms of photographic technology. In the event that digital image modification has redefined the parameters of photography, the uniqueness of modern technology must first be compared to previous breakthroughs (Phillips 1993). The following chapter will establish the history and changes that have occurred in film-based
photography. Upon presenting a condensed genealogy of photography, development
procedures, darkroom modification, and a historical framework of defining photography,
delineations between film and digital photography can be formed.

**Genealogy of the Photograph**

Joseph Nicéphore Niépce is commonly credited with developing the first photograph
in 1816 when he took an eight-hour exposure outside of his studio window (Gernsheim
1969: 58).¹ From the humble beginnings of
Niépce’s image showing rooftops in his native
village, photography has evolved from a
difficult and trying process to a user-friendly
means of distributing images at the touch of a
button. It would be fool-hardy to credit Niépce
with creating the entire foundation of photography. His success in 1816 would have been
impossible without having the benefit of history on his side. A long procession of
chemical, technological, and artistic advances provided valuable knowledge to Niépce,
giving him the resources required to create the first photograph.

Visual record keeping is as old as humanity itself. Even before recorded history,
people took great pleasure in being able to look at an image, such as a cave painting, as a
frame of reference for previous occurrences. There appears to be an innate desire in
human nature that calls out for us to engage in symbolic visual communication. Given the
complexity of formulating written and spoken language, it should come as no surprise
that visual representations were a critical form of communication in the dawning days of
human intelligence.

¹ Niépce’s eight-hour exposure. Available from: http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/permanent/wfp/
Beyond mere storytelling, visual communication has also been used as a critical means of external memory storage. History is replete with examples of humans using visual representation as a tool of remembering. Karl Schinkel’s painting, “The Invention of Drawing,” depicts a woman’s shadow being traced onto a flat rock with a piece of charcoal.\(^2\)

Long before technology advanced beyond the use of simple tools, humans went out of their way to create images as a means of remembering events and of making their presence known (Mitchell 1994:1).

Archeologists have discovered countless cave walls covered in art displaying accounts of hunting parties and their prey. This method of painting and illustration captured important moments in time, often depicting a memorable event. When oral storytelling was not enough, visual communication was utilized as an accurate means of conveying an idea. Prior to photography, it was difficult for artists to include distinct details in their work. Because of the limited capacity of the human hand to recreate intricate detail, artists were often forced to approximate their work, creating visual representations that were imperfect in their attempt to reproduce reality. While minute details could be found in images, their accuracy could never be proven. As time passed, the desire to increase the clarity and accuracy of visual communication continued to grow. Artists, despite their best efforts, were hard-pressed to update their work for a changing world. Changes in visual rhetoric were becoming increasingly important to the viewing public. Luckily, the creation of image-capturing devices answered our collective cry for increased depth and

clarity in images and lead to an age where images are fantastically easy to produce and distribute.

The first documentation of camera technology references a device known as ‘camera obscura’. An ancestor of the cameras we know today, the term camera obscura, meaning ‘dark chamber/room,’ was coined by Johannes Kepler (Grüber 2000:114). In its early conceptions, camera obscura consisted of a darkened room where the only light was supplied by a pinhole in the wall or ceiling, creating a vague luminescence of the outside world. Upon light entering the darkness, a reflection of objects outside of the room would appear on the opposing wall, allowing those inside the room to see the world in a 2-D model. The general public fell in love with the camera obscura, often paying to step inside the darkened room at carnivals or festivals. Artists also grew to appreciate the device, which allowed them to easily trace images of what was occurring outside.

Observations on the general principle behind camera obscura date back through the centuries. Arabian scholar Ibn Al-Haitham theorized on the ability to view images in a darkroom in approximately 1038 A.D. Despite his clear articulation of the science behind camera obscura, Al-Haitham’s observations were not the first mention of the science behind obscura. In his writings, Aristotle “observed the crescent shape of the partially eclipsed sun projected on the ground through the holes of a strainer” (Gernsheim 1969:17), indicating an understanding of the basic principles that eventually lead to the creation of camera obscura.

3 An early version of camera obscura. Athanasius Kircher, 1646.
Giovanni Battista Della Porta tells us that camera obscura was not originally seen as a new art form, but merely a tool for more accurate tracing for the artistically inept.

If you cannot paint, you can by this arrangement draw [the outline of the images] with a pencil. You will have then only to lay on the colours. This is done by reflecting the image downwards on to a drawing board with paper. And for a person who is skillful this is a very easy matter (Della Porta 1558).

Limiting the usage of camera obscura to tracing ignored the true potential of a device capable of displaying the world on a two-dimensional surface, but this did not diminish its popularity. Camera obscura’s widespread reputation led to a plethora of unique designs as large and complex as whole rooms complete with a mirror reflecting images onto a viewing table or as simple as tents carried on the artists’ back. Design innovations were a welcome phenomenon, since the room-sized version of obscura was gaining a reputation as “a relatively large and clumsy drawing apparatus” (Batchen 1997:78).

Public interest in the concept of camera obscura only accentuated the need for a better form of remote viewing, since the discoverer of a better form of obscura would surely find a lucrative market. Innovation surrounding camera obscura created a frenzy of new devices for viewing and tracing images. Many of these designs, though short lived, contributed to later developments in photography. In 1807, Hyde Wollaston created a divergent device from the camera obscura where the artist sat at a glass tabletop and viewed images through the table, allowing them to trace an outline of the image in broad daylight (Gernsheim 1969:29). Wollaston’s device would later lay the groundwork for the modern viewfinder.

Drawing and tracing images to create a copy of real-world events led to fine pieces of art, but this process was neither quick nor did it result in the accurate depiction of
worldly events. A fatal flaw of camera obscura as a tracing tool was that it still relied on the artist to provide intricate detail to the image. Artist and audience alike desired a way to automate the process, allowing both simpler and clearer forms of visual communication. Slowly, the field of chemistry began answering the call for new and better forms of visual communication with a series of scientific discoveries. One such discovery came when silver nitrate was found to darken when exposed to light in a proportional manner based on the length of exposure and the amount of light.

Artists in the early 1800s made attempts to “reproduce a stenciled pattern by placing it over a light-sensitive material and exposing it to sunlight” (Thompson 2003:3) in hopes of mass producing images. Observation of silver nitrate’s darkening properties was first observed by Angelo Sala in 1614 (Gernsheim 1969:14), though the usage of silver nitrate in photography was still a distant thought. Early attempts to apply the chemical properties of silver nitrate to image capturing were only marginally successful. Difficulties in timing, exposure, and stencil positioning made this a troubling and arduous task. Additionally, displaying a finished image in daylight caused the silver nitrate to indiscriminately darken, eventually destroying the original tracing.

Despite these difficulties, the world was not ready to give up on chemically-based image capture. Lithography, the act of copying drawings from tracing light (as seen in camera obscura), eventually gave way to heliography, which consisted of painting or drawing with silver nitrate and exposing the illustration to the sun, causing the image to be captured. Heliographic artistry was developed by Niépce around 1813 (Gernsheim 1969:55) and is commonly attributed to be the inspiration that lead to Niépce’s later creation of the first photograph.
In 1816, Niépce sat down with three locally-made cameras of various sizes that he had designed and began taking imprints of the view outside of his window (Gernsheim 1969: 55). The images captured with these cameras would later be known as the ‘first’ photographs, rapidly gaining notoriety as a major breakthrough in visual technology. Although Niépce’s success in 1816 is referenced as the first photographic process, many historians question why it took so long to establish the field of photography (Ware 2002). Given that the knowledge required to develop images similar to Niépce’s was common for some time before the creation of photography, it comes as a surprise to many experts that no one had thought to incorporate camera and silver nitrate technologies earlier.

Issues concerning the permanency of the images captured with Niépce’s cameras are another bizarre example of technology taking a surprisingly long time to develop. While successful, Niépce’s original images had two fatal flaws: they still could not be viewed in direct sunlight (since the silver nitrate would continue to darken, eventually leaving the canvas completely black) and they could only be produced as negatives, making all colors on the print polar opposites of those viewed in nature.

Stability in image development was later established by Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, who created the daguerreotype, the first photo-engraving system (Gernsheim 1969: 65). Daguerre is credited with creating the first process of developing latent images, the very process that is used today when film negatives are used to produce photographs. However, the daguerreotype faced the same problem seen in Niépce’s original photographs: developed pictures inevitably became overexposed and faded away. This problem, however, was solved in 1837 with nothing more than a bath of salt and hot water, which prevented images from fading (Gernsheim 1969: 65). Once the process of
permanently capturing images was perfected, it was a comparatively simple task to miniaturize this process onto small pieces of film, which lead to the film cameras we see today (Eastman Kodak 1943:10). Silver nitrate, placed in a thin layer over the film, was found to capture images and allowed stable development when exposed to a number of chemical baths in order to develop the latent image.

Photo development has gone through incalculable changes as it has evolved beyond mere guesswork into a near-science. With an increase in photographic technology came the development the amateur market, a branch of photography that was geared towards the average consumer that wanted personal photographs, but had neither the time nor capital to become a professional photographer. In a widely successful attempt to appeal to those potential photographers that wanted nothing more than use a camera without fussing with the intricacies of professional photography, the Kodak Company began development of its point-and-shoot camera models. Kodak’s intended market niche is declared by company’s first slogan “you press the button, we do the rest” (Adventure of Photography 1998). The phenomenal success of Kodak’s marketing strategy towards amateur photographers is likely responsible for the longevity of photography as a central form of visual communication. This longevity was also abated by the breakthrough of color development, which increased the detail seen in pictures.

Black and white photography, developed by the darkening of silver nitrate based on light exposure, was eventually eclipsed with the discovery of color development. James Clerk Maxwell, previously famous for his work in magnetism, discovered the process of color photography by placing a variety of color filters over the lens of his camera (World Famous Photos 2007). In order to capture a full-color image, Maxwell took three
independent pictures, which were later layered in order to create the appearance of a full spectrum of color. This process was later internalized into the actual film used to capture images. Unlike earlier forms of film, color film utilized three layers of silver nitrate, each chemically filtered to react to red, green, and blue light. The combination of these three prints allowed the developer to create full-color images similar to those seen today.⁴

While color printing required significantly more work to develop, it abided by the same rules of chemistry and light sensitivity dictated by black and white photography. Red, green, and blue filtered placed over multiple layers of silver nitrate were used because these three colors are known as ‘primary’ and by combining the three layers into a single flattened image, a full spectrum of color can be seen. Color photography, while a major breakthrough, did not dramatically alter the basic principles behind the development process of photography. Chemical reactions and the difficulty of development became increasingly complex, but the fundamentals behind photography (light sensitivity, chemical processing, etc.) remained. The process of development, be it black and white or color, was the pinnacle of photographic technology for the better part of a century until recent years when digital technology began to take hold, a phenomenon which will be discussed in the following chapters.⁵

Through countless experiments, inventors like Niépce were able to develop a stable means of capturing and developing latent images, a process that has continued and

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⁴ Diagram depicting the layering of color-sensitive silver nitrate, a process used for creating color film. (Johnson 2007:86)
⁵ For additional detail into the history of photography prior to digital technology, see Batchen’s *Burning With Desire*, 1997.
advanced over the years. Development procedures that once required entire rooms and a plethora of chemicals are now automated, making it easy for a local drug store employee to develop a set of prints in under an hour. Despite the changes that have taken place in technology and development procedures, film photography has always depended upon light and chemicals to capture and develop the images captured in the camera. In order to understand the role of development and processing in film photography, the following section will focus on the modification that takes place during the development of film-based images.

Photographic Modification

Before the first photograph was successfully developed, considerable effort had already been dedicated to chemically developing and capturing images. The chemical develop process makes a certain degree of image modification an inevitable attribute of photography. Because development requires a variety of chemical mixtures and light exposure variables, spaces still exists for the developer to artistically, or accidentally, change the image in the darkroom. Decisions made by the person in the darkroom determine multiple factors dictating the photograph being developed. Depending on the time of chemical and light exposure, multiple factors such as the color, hue, and brightness of images can be easily altered. Inventors, chemists, and photographers alike have all found themselves hunched over baths of chemicals and developing agents in the darkroom in order to develop their photographs. Modification of this sort was not necessarily meant to alter the image, but was required since the person developing had to decide how long images were left in chemical baths or exposed to light sources. Despite
the modifying-nature of these early developing techniques, those who have studied photography have historically endorsed a minimalist form of modification.\(^6\)

Henry Maskell identifies this minimalism by asking “was there ever a time when the use of pencil or knife on the photographic negative was not protested against as bad taste and bad art? We cannot recollect any such epoch” (Maskell, 1912:392). Maskell was very specific in delineating between forms of modification which he found to be acceptable.

The retoucher's work should consist chiefly in correcting obvious defects in the negative, contrasts between colour of dress and complexion, giving true emphasis to prominences which, owing to colour, are too dark and would appear to recede in the print, exaggeration of freckles and pock-marks, etc. Not that freckles and other complexion marks should be wholly removed, but that they should not be allowed to record themselves in the portrait as something much worse than the truth (Maskell 1912:393).

To Maskell, image modification was only meant to remove attributes that were inaccurately captured by the camera. Any attempt to change an image that would cause it to be further from an accurate depiction of reality would be unacceptable. At the time of his writing, Maskell held one of the most conservative opinions concerning the role of modification in photography, but his views were in no way outside the realm of popular opinion.

While the developing process has always allowed extensive modification, image purity has generally been considered preferable. Minimalism in image modification has generally been endorsed throughout the history of photography (unless images were

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\(^6\) A color index chart indicating the variation resulting from different chemical exposure baths and time of image exposure. (Hedgecoe 2002).
being created purely for the sake of entertainment or art). Despite a general agreement on the undesirable nature of over-modification in early photography, there was no consensus concerning what exactly constituted modification. Anderson tells us of: “one man who vehemently insists on the impropriety of using a pencil on the negative, but does not hesitate to sun down portions of the print while it is in the printing-frame, and there are others who are equally irrational in their attitude, some refusing to work on the negative with pencil, but eagerly working over a gum print with a brush” (Anderson 1919:29).

Disparities in the acceptability of various forms of archaic image modification are rooted in discussions on image purity which continue in modern society. In his quest to establish a suitable amount of modification in the darkroom, Anderson eventually chose a logical permutation; allowing for minor modification as long as it did not alter the original characteristics of the photograph. In explaining his belief that minimalist modification was the optimal form of darkroom development, Anderson tells of the inevitability of minor modification: “The logical conclusion, of course, is that if straight photography is to be insisted on, all plates must be developed alike for modifications in development are control and that all prints are to be made in precisely the same manner, but the camera user who should follow out this idea would soon find himself reduced to practice a " base mechanic art " devoid of any interest beyond that which attaches to mechanical precision of any kind” (Anderson 1919:29).

Anderson’s discomfort with modification gives way to the acknowledgment that there is inevitability to changes occurring during the development process. Without at least some modification, photography would be reduced to a purely mechanical action, which is surely not the intent of the photographer.
It becomes apparent in chemically-based photographic literature that Andersons’ view of image modification was the majority opinion in the 1900s. While little literature exists focusing on the rhetorical role of image modification in early photography, subtle indicators provide valuable insight as to the favorability of modification at the time. Photographers’ discomfort with the role of modification in their work is visible in how they explain the role of the modifier.

The retoucher has always been an individual under a cloud, so to speak; and this is not altogether a matter to be wondered at. Professional photographers of the common type send their negatives in batches to a trade retoucher, who, in consideration of a fee by contract of perhaps three pence or four pence each, works his sweet will upon them (Maskell, 1912:392).

The rhetorical stance of the above quote tells us that not only are modifiers rarely spoken of, but they are also considered a puppet-master of sorts; working their ‘sweet will’ upon the photograph. Maskell continues his indictment of the modifier, stating that “from under his hand all emerge plump, blooming, and youthful, if somewhat characterless specimens of humanity” (Maskell, 1912:392).

Choosing to sacrifice the character of humanity in exchange for pristine images might strike some as an acceptable compromise, but regardless of our personal dispositions, Maskell indirectly casts doubt on the role of the modifier. Cold, hard terms (characterless, specimens) are used to describe the modifier in Maskell’s writings; terms that lead the reader to identify the modifier as unnatural and overtly science-laden. Anderson is more direct in his hard-line approach against modification, stating that photography is: “the making of an uncontrolled print from a negative which has not been modified by hand” (Anderson 1919:28-9).
The negative portrayals of image modification provided by Anderson and Maskell appear to epitomize the common view of photography in the age of darkroom development, but this philosophy was in no way universal. While many theorists and photographers were preaching and practicing the philosophy of photographic purity, a smaller and less vocal subculture was busy exploring the potential of analogue image modification.

Increased precision in development sparked an exciting new trend in photography: the purposeful distortion of images. While darkroom modification was originally considered an unfortunate side effect, it eventually became an entire sub-genre of photography, granting increasing importance to the techniques used to develop images. As developers became more skilled with the precision tools used to alter and modify images, human creativity took over and led the way into surrealist modification. Photographic images were now malleable materials, capable of being transformed into unworldly visual depictions of subjects that border on the inconceivable.

Intense modification in photography was not an original part of producing images, but rather a gradually increasing form of self expression applied by the individuals developing images. Minor corrections made to proofs, such as lightening certain areas of an image, are a prime example of Burke’s perfection-seeking behavior. However, this perfection-seeking takes on an entirely new form when images are modified to the point where they are virtually unrecognizable when compared to their non-modified originals. In the event that images are modified to an extreme point, Burkian perfection-seeking also takes on the attribute of being a hyperreal means of communication. When a
modified image crosses over to the hyperreal, the modifier attempts to not only perfect images that show real events, but also to perfect events that have never actually occurred.

With increased modification, experimentation with the development methods used in photography created an entirely new subgenre of images that were meticulously distorted and placed together for the sake of artistic ascetic. These images became known as ‘combination prints’, a technical term for modification requiring the conjoining of multiple images (Mitchell 1995:7).⁷

Extensive modification of images in the darkroom grew in popularity as the ease and knowledge base of such manipulation grew. The same tools that were used to repair damaged prints were of equal utility to those developers who created completely new images by changing an original photograph in its entirety. Over the course of film-based photography, skillful artists have demonstrated the ability of darkroom procedures to create images modified to the equivalence of examples created by Adobe Photoshop and similar computer software.⁸

Images modified by darkroom-based analogue methods might appear crude compared to their digital counterparts, but it is important to remember that the grainy and blurred texture of the image is not due to modification. Increased resolution due to digital technology has increased the smoothness and clarity of images in general, making modified versions of images appear equally stunning.

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⁷ The works of Henry Peach Robinson and Oscar G. Rejlander are some key examples of nineteenth-century composite plates.
Modified images in the age of darkroom development were generally of equal clarity as their original non-modified counterparts.

Darkroom modification eventually became a novel means of engaging in surrealist art, often producing an end result unparalleled to scenes seen in the real world. Professional artists dedicated their talent to testing the limits of photography and darkroom modification, creating stunning masterpieces that bordered on the surreal. However, despite the apparently inexhaustible potential of image modification in film photography, the sharp learning curve required to master the development and manipulation of photography prevented modification from penetrating mainstream culture.

Despite not gaining much popularity in pop culture, modification of images did beg the question of determining how much modification an image could undertake before it stopped being a photograph and started becoming something new entirely. Minor modifications, such as lightening and darkening of the image, could be easily excused by most photographers, but extensive modification was something entirely different. In an attempt to illustrate the definitional conundrums facing film photography, the following section will layout a brief framework defining the genre of photography. This framework, while in no way conclusive, utilizes a combination of professional definitions in order to establish a working parameter of what has historically been considered photographic.

**Defining Photography**

The importance of distinguishing photography from other forms of visual communication stems from the assumption that photographs offer fairly accurate depictions of the real world. The rhetoric of the photograph implies a link to reality, causing the audience to assume that what appears in a photo must have occurred in real
life. Claims that photography provides a realistic form of visual communication are hedged on the idea that photographs are easily distinguished from other forms of imagery. While an audiences’ ability to distinguish between photographs and other forms of visual communication is often taken for granted, it is not always the case that photography can be easily classified as a unique form of communication.

“Photography,” as a term indicating a particular form of visual communication, was born into the English language with little consideration given to defining the word. The term “photography” was coined by John Herschel, who was presenting his findings to the Royal Society of London in 1837. At the time, Herschel classified photography as a form of visual communication that was created through usage of the camera lucida and was developed through chemical processes. Unfortunately, classifications of this nature do little to distinguish photography from other forms of visual communication (Lipkin 2005).

Dictionaries tell us that photography is “the process or art of producing images of objects on sensitized surfaces by the chemical action of light or of other forms of radiant energy, as x-rays, gamma rays, or cosmic rays” (Random House 2006) or “the art or process of producing images of objects on photosensitive surfaces” (American Heritage 2009). While these definitions provide a general framework for photography, they do little to distinguish photographs from other forms of visual communication. Many descriptions of what constitutes a photograph focus on the light-based development process to classify the genre. Photographs are indistinctly described as “fossilized light” (Mitchell 1994), “images ‘revealed’…by the action of light” (Barthes 1980:81) or “writing with light” (Baudrillard 2001). Unfortunately, definitions that depend on light-development as a critical indicator of photography are troubled by the art of heliography.

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9 See Chapter 3 for an in depth analysis of the truth claims found in photography.
which uses similar chemicals as chemically-based photography to produce artistic tracings. Definitions that fail to delineate between photography and other light-based arts, such as heliography, fail to accomplish their goal of isolating the unique functions of photography. This flaw becomes problematic when the unique importance of photography as a truthful form of visual communication is taken into consideration.

The most prominent model for defining photography relies on chemical development and light-based image capture to explain the difference between photography and other forms of visual communication. In the 1950s, Baines defined photography as the “processes in which pictures are produced by the agency of light” (Baines 1958:63). This definition suffers from similar problems to those we face today: it is too broad and allows other forms of visual communication to be potentially photographic. Under Baines’ definition, lithographic tracing could be photographic, despite being an entirely different form of communication. Despite proving a framework of what constitutes a photograph, this and other definitions do little to identify what makes a photograph different from other forms of visual communication. Without a clear understanding of the uniqueness of photography, attempts to study photographs as uniquely powerful examples of communication become impossible.

Batchen identifies photography as being an ‘unstable term’ as early as the eighteenth century due to the wide variety of developmental processes that were available (Batchen 1997:76). Variations in the development techniques made it virtually impossible to define photography by its creation procedure. In 1839, Henry Talbot attempted to single out photography while still accounting for its variation in development by defining it as being uniquely affected by the “boundless powers of natural chemistry” (Batchen 1997:66).
Some theorists have attempted to circumvent the discussion of definitions in photography altogether by mocking the very idea that photographs are potentially untruthful. John Berger once described photographs as “records of things seen…no closer to works of art than cardiograms” (Mitchell 1994:26). As photography became increasingly popular and affordable, camera makers ensured that photographs would be seen as accurate beyond artistic forms of visual communication.\textsuperscript{10} In a Kodak photo manual published in 1943, the company states in their opening sentence that “Photography appeals to most of us because – despite the fact that it is a science – it is not remote or impersonal” (Eastman Kodak 1943). Rhetorically, photography was isolated as both a hard science providing visual truth and an artistic means of capturing our most precious and personal memories.

Jerry Thompson echoes the sentiment that photography is an indescribable yet uniquely accurate form of visual communication, stating that “the photograph is a view, a view taken from a single point in space – a point of view” (Thompson 2003:7). Thompson’s truth-based definition is particularly interesting due to its circumvention of the debate over chemicals as a critical indicator of photography. Under this definition, photography is defined as a point of view; as real as the images captured by our eyes and as subjective as individuals’ perspectives. While photographs do not offer objective truths, they provide a viewpoint, opinions of a visual situation, which are open to individual interpretation.

Based on the means of defining photography, as shown above, a clear and universal definition is difficult to establish. Luckily, the combination of multiple historic texts does offer a framework for photographic images. This framework, while in no ways

\textsuperscript{10} A phenomenon that has carried over to digital photography; to be discussed later in this thesis.
authoritative, does provide a series of criteria that have been used to classify photography compared to other forms of visual communication. Based on the above analysis, we can conclude that photography has been classified as a light-based means of producing images, requiring chemical development, and as a uniquely accurate form of visual communication.

This framework does little to authoritatively classify photography, but it does provide context to the assumed traits of photographic images. Regardless of how we choose to define photography, our collective appreciation of photographs as realistic forms of visual communication provides valuable insight into how we interact with realistic images. Despite having no particular definition that can be easily applied to photographic technology, it remains clear that there is something about photography that makes us consider it one of the most accurate forms of visual communication. In iterating our societal notion towards photography, Barthes tells the reader that “the photograph is literally emanation of the referent” (Barthes 1980:80). It is important to keep in mind that due to the lack of definitional framework capable of accounting for like technologies, theorists choose to point to photography’s truth-telling capacity as a unique signifier of the genre.11 A collective willingness among scholars to leave photography a vaguely defined form of visual communication implies a communal willingness to acknowledge photography as an indescribably powerful form of communication.

Despite society’s inability to classify photography, groups and individuals alike still seem reasonably comfortable in their ability to distinguish between photographs and other forms of visual communication. Photography has typically been granted the

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11 The majority of the following chapter will be dedicated to analyzing these theories pertaining to photography as a uniquely accurate and truthful form of visual communication.
attribute of “truthiness,” a term coined by comedian Steven Colbert to indicate a type of truth assertion that “comes from your gut, not books” (Colbert 2005). It appears that questions concerning the definitional limitations of photography are largely inconsequential to a society that has collectively chosen to grant photography a sense of truth-telling ethos.

The definitional frameworks found in film photography provide valuable insight into the importance of truth-telling as an indicator of the photographic. It is the authority granted to photography which provides importance to the study of new technology in photography and the ever-changing role of visual communication. In the following chapter, the truth-based assumptions found in photography will be analyzed with the intention of providing a better understanding on the historic role of photography as a communicative device. Upon identifying the role of ethos in photography, Chapter 4 will then turn to isolating the changes that have taken place in recent years, leading to the rise of digital technology in photography. New technologies, including digital cameras and digital image modification software, will be examined comparatively to their film and chemically-based counterparts analyzed in Chapter 2. Once the preceding chapters have provided comparative analyses on both film and digital photography, the remainder of this thesis will examine the implications of digital technology, the supposed authoritative gaze granted to photographic images, and the role of digital modification in modern visual communication.
CHAPTER 3:
TRUTH-TELLING IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Despite being an imperfect form of visual representation, photography has historically captured a special place in society as a uniquely truthful type of communication. Photographs are used in court cases, often being presented as factual evidence, in newspapers, showing the world beyond our front lawn, and in family albums, presenting a vivid linear history of us and our loved ones. It is hard to establish exactly what authority has been grated to photography, but it is safe to say that photographs have become a central form of visual communication. While modification techniques, as discussed in the previous chapter, have always allowed darkroom developers to modify images, photographs have still been considered the most truthful form of visual communication available.

In saying that photography is a truth-telling form of visual communication, this thesis does not suggest that all images are taken at face value. Rather, the arguments that will be outlined in the following chapter will highlight the historical usage of photography as a means of remembering and representing the past. No one claims that photography is a perfect form of visual representation of the real world, but it has been argued that photography carries with it a certain sense of authority; offering with it an imperfect representation of the real world (Thompson 2003:3; Batchen 2001:139; Lister 1995). Prior to providing in-depth analysis on the truth-based assumptions embedded in photography, it is important to first establish what is meant by ‘real world’ representations and ‘truthful’ depictions of events. For the sake of this analysis, the real
world can be identified as the reality created by our organic sensory organs, unaltered or inhibited by external forces. There are obvious exceptions to this framework: someone who wears glasses would not believe their perception to be any less real when they are using corrective lenses. While this definitional framework of truthful reality is in no way perfect, it provides reasonable clarity for the purpose of analyzing photography; a genre which itself is laden with imperfect definitional frameworks and inconsistencies.

By identifying photography as a truthful form of visual communication, this thesis does not argue that people have looked to images with unabated certainty as to the accuracy of the image. Rather, photography has been identified as the form of visual communication which is most likely to create an image that is closest to reality. In the early days of photography, claims pertaining to the accuracy of photography “meant that the picture looked exactly like a view seen from the camera’s exact position” (Thompson, 2003:21).

Modification of images has created a healthy amount of skepticism in the viewing public, but most people have still been historically willing to look at photographs as potentially real. While modification has always been a threat to the idea that photography is a truthful representation, it has been assumed that, absent modification, there exists a “special bond between fugitive reality and permanent images that is formed at the instant of capture” (Mitchell 1995:24). In order to establish the role of modification and future technologies in photography, I first examine the truth-based assumptions that exist towards photographs. Upon establishing the assumed accuracy that photography has towards reality, I address the role of modification on our collective willingness to trust photography as an accurate form of communication.
Relations to the Photographic

When considering the truth-based assumptions found in photography, there exist two kinds of images: those that are personal and those that are public. Personal photographs are not necessarily hidden from public view, but are not intended for a wider audience. These images, such as those found in a family album, are a visually referent form of a personal history. In contrast, public photographs have the intent or potential to be relevant to a larger audience. Photographs of this sort are seen in magazines, on television, and popular internet websites.

Private photographs have a unique “truthfulness” because they are often taken by the same people that later become the audience. An individual can capture a moment, look at a photograph, and draw upon the image to recall the past. While the photographer may not have full control over the development process used to create their images, for instance if they take their film to a photolab, they are still able to draw upon the image as a truthful portrayal due to its proximal accuracy. The assumed truthfulness of these images, commonly labeled as ‘snapshots’, is often considered a given because they are “a matter of personal reference having no explicit political significance” (Hariman and Lucaites 2007:18).

Family photographs might have a slightly larger audience base, but still retain the same authenticity to viewers. When we receive holiday greeting from family members, they will sometimes contain a picture of the loving family. Though we as the remote audience are incapable of objectively identifying the accuracy of the image to the actual appearance of the individuals, it is generally assumed that the photograph is indeed accurate. What motive would the family have to deceive us of their appearance?
Furthermore, how could the family hope to deceive us knowing that we are already well aware of their typical appearance? The lack of motive and inability to deceive a familiar audience drastically limits the potential of personal photographs to be purposefully modified.

In contrast, public photographs carry with them a required cultural index, requiring a diverse audience to have a basic understanding of a broader collective history in order to understand the message being portrayed. Viewing an image of flag-draped caskets returning from the battle field requires the audience to know, at a bare minimum, that:

- a.) the receptacles being photographed are used to transport the dead.
- b.) the flag, an American symbol, symbolizes a nation-state where the deceased held citizenship.
- c.) the draping of a flag over a casket indicates that the deceased was a soldier serving in the armed forces of the United States.\(^{12}\)

To view a photograph of events that we have never personally witnessed requires a leap of faith if we are to believe the image to be accurate. Why is it that, despite having no concrete means of verifying the accuracy of the image, photographs are often taken as accurate depictions of reality? Unlike familiar subjects found in personal photographs, the people, places, and things seen in popular public photographs are often only known through their existence in the image. We will likely never meet the men that ate lunch together while sitting on a beam hanging far above the ground, yet we assume this event to have occurred, these

\(^{12}\) Text included with photograph: Flag-draped coffins of U.S. war casualties are seen aboard a cargo plane in Dover Air Force Base, Del. Available at: http://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/2009/02/military_caskets_photos_banlifted_022609w/
men to have existed, and for this photograph to have captured the essence of that afternoon meal. ¹³

In the event that audience members can form a personal connection to a photograph, that personal significance becomes all the more important as time passes. Hariman and Lucaites highlight the personal importance of photography as a referent to the past in stating that “images from snapshots to icons have had decisive impact on individual viewers. ‘That’s when I….’ fell in love, decided to enlist, knew whom to vote for, or otherwise made up one’s mind” (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007:8).

Our collective willingness to consider two-dimensional representations, such as photographs, to be realistic is explained by what Baudrillard calls hyperreality. Unlike things experienced in the ‘real world’, things experienced through our personal interactions, the hyperreal functions outside the world of personal linear existence. Hyperreal representations are those that have been skewed, altered, or modified for the sake of creating what is often considered a ‘better’ world. Rather than letting our lawns grow naturally, hyperreal modification causes us to trim the grass, plant and maintain hedges, and water an assortment of strategically-placed flowers. Unaltered reality would never have nature look so kept, but in a hyperreal world, this has become the norm.

Hyperreality in the realm of photography is grounded in the nature of visual imagery itself. To take a depiction of a moment in time and to capture it in permanency at a certain angle with certain lighting is an example of attempting to alter a situation for the

¹³ “Lunch atop a Skyscraper” by Charles C. Ebbets, 1932.
benefit of the viewing audience. Photography as a hyperreal means of representing reality is a phenomenon that is only heightened with increased modification of images, an event intended to alter and ‘improve’ upon reality.

Examples of hyperreality in photography also play heavily into Burke’s analysis of perfection-seeking. Hyperreality, the act of modifying and recreating reality in an attempt to improve upon unaltered experience, requires a certain level of perfection-seeking initiative. Whether or not humans intend to recreate reality through photography, the adherence to visual representations as reasonably accurate imprints of real events illustrates an attempt to gain control over our surroundings. When we choose to engage in photography, we strive to “create a ‘double’ of the reality, one that approximates to the referent, not only in terms of appearances, but also in terms of other (invisible) properties and qualities that it possesses” (Robins 1995:36). To take a photograph with the intention of capturing an event is to create and maintain perfect control over a situation by capturing it forever in a two-dimensional archive.

Perhaps humanity’s continuing attempt to understand and control our surroundings is what causes us to consider photography an accurate representation of the world. To have the technological capacity to freeze time and place it within a visually appealing form is to gain ultimate mastery over our surroundings. Beyond the general authority granted to photography, there exist a number of factors that dictate the rationale and level of authenticity placed on photographs. In order to prove the authority granted photography, it is important to delineate between various forms of photographs and the bases for reality-assumptions pertaining to each type of photography.
**General Truth Assertions in Photography**

Regardless of the personal nature of a photograph, implied truthfulness remains a constant throughout the genre. Barthes reminds us that Lacan once referred to the photograph as ‘the real’ (Barthes 1981:4); implying a sense of authority and connection to the world outside of the image. Due to its striking loyalty to the objects captured, people have “looked to photography to give us reports on nature, for knowledge about others, to arrest time, to document and remember…” (Kember, 1998: 2). Photographs might fail to provide unquestionable certainty pertaining to the accuracy of the images they portray, but their *capacity* to create close likenesses to previous events has inspired unfettered loyalty and fascination to the genre.

Since its creation, photography has grown to be considered nothing more than an illustration depicting a moment in time through a particular point of view (Hariman and Lucaites 2007), causing photographs to develop a sense of ethos and logos; implicitly serving as imperfect representations of the real world (Silverstone, 2004). By identifying photographs as uniquely ethotic, this chapter asserts that photography is granted a uniquely powerful dwelling place in the real of realism. Specifically, photographs dwell in our personal and cultural histories, providing vivid details pertaining to our past. Photographic depictions are often found to carry with them a sense of ethotic truthfulness due to their perceived relevance to our own personal existential dwelling places. In referring to photographs as ‘experience captured’, Susan Sontag implies that to question the truthful nature of photography is to call our very memory and senses into question (Sontag 1977: 3).
The human brain has proven adept at rewriting memories in the event that photographs depict slight variations in our personal histories. Alternations, such as different lighting, are generally considered to be more accurate than our personal memories, making us believe the photograph in question. The assumed accuracy of photography is often based on the static nature of images. While humans can forget and distort things, a photograph never changes. Due to the limited and diminishing capability of the human brain to recall detail over time, “we have become reliant on [photographs] as cues to remember moments in our lives” (Strange et al 2008:1).

While always willing to question the authenticity of individual images, history shows that people have generally agreed that, in theory, photography is an accurate means of capturing events that have occurred. History shows us that:

For over 160 years we have looked to photography to give us reports on nature, for knowledge about others, to arrest time, to document and remember, to bring the spatially distant close, to be securely placed as observers in relation to objects and events that interest us. Overall, we have used photography to provide a picture of a reassuring world in which everything appears to stay in its time, space and place (Kember, 1998: 2).

Historical accounts indicating a universal acceptance of photography as an accurate means of preserving historic moments is, in part, due to social movements at the time of photography’s creation (Lister 1995: 12). Camera technology developed at a time when society dictated that science and record-keeping would one day allow humans to harness the world around them (Robins 1995: 33). Yet despite historical appreciations of photography as representative of real events, Robins reminds us that romanticizing historical perspectives of photographs would be academically irresponsible. Our fascination with new technology “has managed to persuade us that photographs were once ‘comfortably regarded as casually generated truth reports about things in the real
world’, and it has convinced us of how unsophisticated we were in such a regard” (Robins 1995: 31-2). Robins is probably correct that contemporary studies of photography as truth-telling through history has been partially romanticized, but he seems to hold the dissenting opinion on this subject.

Romanticizing historical perceptions of photography presupposes that our current fascination with new photographic technology is the first and only time that society has been swept up in the marvel of image capturing technology. The very fact that photography did not disappear shortly after its conception is proof against this notion. Without a popular fascination towards the photographic, artists and inventors would have had no incentive in continuing to develop cameras and capturing techniques. Sontag reminds us that in the late 1800’s the Paris police believed photographs to serve as ‘incontrovertible truth that a given thing has happened’ (Sontag 1977: 5). Examples of photography being utilized as evidentiary claims of previous events, though historically popular, have always been viewed skeptically.

Skepticism towards photography’s truth-bearing has given rise to prolific analysis on the nature of the image and its association with the items it depicts. Bourdieu argues that photography is naturally disorienting and threatens realism; “In stamping photography with the patent of realism, society does nothing but confirm itself in the tautological certainty that an image of reality that conforms to its own representation of objectivity is truly objective” (Bourdieu 1965:113). Even though many theorists are uncomfortable in making classifications that specify exactly how photography is different from other forms of visual representation, it is commonly held that there is a difference that gives
photography more external credibility than other forms of visual communication, such as a painting (Sontag 1977; Anderson 1919).

Photography as a more ‘realistic’ form of media has also been compared against written forms of truth-telling, which take a back seat to photographic representations as reality-portraying tools (Sontag 1977). Many indict against photography as a truth-telling medium take on a generic quality intrinsic to all forms of symbolic communication. Take, for instance, the observations of Barbara Kruger when describing human interaction with technology: “the instant things become man-made products, artefacts [sic], signs, commodities, they perform an artificial and ironic function by their very existence, whose origin is transparent (Kruger 2001:135).

Indictments of photography which can be linked back to a general discomfort with the role of technology in society are inconsequential to this study insofar as they merely indicate a call for analysis. In fact, hesitance to endorse the realness of technological portrayals supports the need for increased and consistent analysis as new technologies are invented. Academic discomfort with photography’s truth-telling potential appears to be merely that: theory-laden accounts that rarely penetrate the public sphere. What is most important to any analysis of photography is its application in everyday life.

Early in her writings, Sontag draws explicit connections between the photograph and Plato’s cave; both giving us imperfect shadows of the real world (Sontag 1977: 3). Similar to shadows on a cave wall, photographs can only show us vague facsimiles of reality. We can never see what lies beyond the photographers’ gaze, though what we do capture in the photograph does appear to be a genuine fragment of reality. Precision and clarity of these images is a likely contributor to the perceived credibility that photography
is granted. Edgar Allan Poe once wrote that “…the closest scrutiny of the photogenic
drawing discloses only a more absolute truth…” (Mitchell 1994: 5). Subtle nuances in
photographs ensure extreme levels of detail found only in the real world and rarely, if
ever, discovered in other forms of visual communication.

The role of photography has grown to infiltrate virtually every aspect of our daily
lives. Photographs are used to mourn, celebrate, and remember our cultural and personal
histories. Through images, individuals draw upon deep personal feels, directing affection,
distaste, or even outrage towards a particular event. Oftentimes, photographs are
specifically oriented with the intention of spurring intense emotional reactions, causing
the audience to react dramatically.

Emotion-Based Ethos in Photography

Even when we look at photographs and question their authenticity, the potential
realness of the image is enough to make us react as if what we see actually happened.
Images are tied to strong and complex emotional responses that can cause the reader to
take pause and focus on what is being shown (Hariman and Lucaites 2007). Depictions of
grotesque violence illustrate our inability to escape realist implications in photography.

Walker draws our attention to ‘an
Iraqi solider inside his tank, burnt to a
dusty cinder, his mouth a ghastly
images of lifeless bodies are easily
created in a digital realm, as proven

time and again by the Hollywood special effects subculture; yet we still turn away in
disgust when we see potentially real images of mutilation. Why hasn’t Hollywood, the
media, and image proliferation desensitized us from fearing the ghastly image? Walker
theorizes that “I guess we don’t want to see such things. Because we – still – believe
them” (Walker 1995: 246).

The medium of the message certainly plays a role in the perceived realness of the
image, similar to how sources are seen as a critical indicator of ethos in written works.
Perhaps the medium being studied in Walker’s analysis, a major newspaper, creates a
sense of ethotic authenticity that surpasses the image itself. It should come as no surprise
that, despite the controversy of printing such an image, graphic photographs are often
seen in the media. As Sontag tells us; “something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven
when we’re shown a photograph of it” (Sontag 1977: 4). Despite many emotionally
charged photographs having grotesque imagery embedded in their portrayals, the
audience often finds it difficult to look away. Sontag admits that it is difficult to explain
why distressing images capture audiences’ attention, but theorizes that people believe that
looking away is a slight against those in the photographed situation (Sontag 1997).

A collective assumption that photography is capable (and likely to) portray real-world
events can be seen through our social reactions to the images we see. Hariman and
Lucaites argue that photographs have become an increasingly important determinant to
public reaction towards unsettling events.

The photographs found in print media function in both dimensions:
providing generic forms of assurance regarding the existence, nature, and
legitimacy of the public world and the public media, and also specific
validation and infusions of meaning for public action when events are
chaotic, dangerous, or disturbing (Hariman and Lucaites 2007:13).
Upon viewing an image relaying the suffering of others, individuals appear far more likely to take action to alleviate or prevent continued suffering. Being exposed to graphic depictions of pain makes even the most pacifistic person desire retribution.

Given the unsettling nature of suffering-based photography, the question is begged: why do people keep making these photos? Even better, why do we keep looking at them? Fetishism towards images reminding us of our mortality appears to be hardwired into our brains, constantly reminding us of our place in the universe. Sontag ponders a similar question when telling us that “it seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked” (Sontag 2003:41). Like other forms of fetishism, it is the absurdity of the desired object which seems to draw us in. While we are appalled by images of suffering, we appear to also consider it a means of testing our limits.

In a sadistic game where we see how far we can go, “there is a satisfaction of being able to look at an image without flinching” (Sontag 2003:41) but there is also “the pleasure of flinching” (Sontag 2003:41). This phenomenon explains why we find ourselves rubber-necking every time we pass a car accident or were incapable of changing the channel as we watched stock brokers leap to their demise as the World Trade Center slowly burned around them. Whereas text requires paragraphs of detail to describe an event, a visual event, such as a photograph, provides a quick and easy means of communication by presenting a story in abundant and immediate detail (Hariman and Lucaites 2007:91).

Reports of atrocities can easily be dismissed as propaganda, but a photo somehow brings the story home reminding readers that sometimes you can believe everything you
read. Instances of photographs vindicating unbelievable stories function as an example of strategic photographic truth-telling. The example of the burned Iraqi soldier shows one side of the coin where photographs supply evidence of previous events, but theorists are all too ready to remind of us that not all examples are so clean-cut. Baudrillard explains the subjective objectivity of the genre when stating that “the photographic act consists of entering this space of intimate complicity, not to master it, but to play along with it and to demonstrate that nothing has been decided yet” (Baudrillard 2000). Viewer and photographer alike have varying degrees of mastery over a photograph by deciding what to view, how to analyze the image, and what their reaction towards a photograph will be.

In fact, it is often admitted that even when photographs are used to depict presumable real events, it is often impossible to create an objective illustration of a moment in time. Hannah Arendt illustrated this point when discussing holocaust and concentration camp photographs; “all the photographs and newsreels…are misleading because they show the camps at the moment the Allied troops marched in” (Sontag 2003:84). Images depicting events will never be considered exact records of the past, but they are the closest thing we have, and our treatment of these images as truth-telling illustrates a willingness to assume the truthfulness of images.

It is our collective, often intense, emotional reaction that gives authenticity to images illustrating unsettling events. While our eyes are often drawn to grotesque and uncomfortable images that spur emotional outrage, these are not the only kind of emotion-based photographs that have cemented photography as a truthful form of communication. Celebratory events, be they birthdays, weddings, or reunions, are all clear examples of situations where photography can emanate deep personal connection.
John Berger reminds us that photographs are important because they grant us an audience with the past. Berger observes that in modern society, “we regret, hope, fear, and love with images” (Robins 1995:33). As stated earlier in this chapter, most of these pleasantly emotional photographs tend to be of a personal nature, whereas uncomfortable images, such as the Iraqi soldier, can create universal emotional outrage.

Exceptions to the rule of pleasant photographs being predominantly personal are not as common as their unpleasant counterparts, but they do prove that emotionally charged images do establish a sense of authoritative truth in images. When we witness beauty, we often desire for it to be real. An image of pop icons blissfully in love might hold no personal relevance to our lives, but it still makes us happy to share the memory through a photograph. Equally, images of children often create a sense of calm and comfort, reminding us of simple joys and satisfactions found all too often only in childhood.

Though not mutually exclusive with emotion-based truthful authority, many photographs take on additional forms of meaning. In the event that a particular photograph is able to appeal to a mass audience and is considered iconic of a particular shared event or experience, this image is capable of becoming popularly considered a symbol of particular meaning. In the next section I discuss the phenomenon of iconography in photography and the importance of popularity in the truth-telling nature of photography.

**Photography as Iconography**

Once iconocized, images retain a particularly powerful importance in society. Unlike essays or articles explaining the events taking place around the world, photographs are unique in that “they reiterate. They simplify. They create the illusion of consensus”
Hariman and Lucaites apply their study of photojournalism to the portrayal of iconic images, arguing that photographs become iconic symbols of entire generations. A sailor and his lover kissing in time square. A young girl running naked down the street as her home is burned by American napalm in the background. A free spirit delicately placing a flower in the barrel of a soldier’s gun during a protest rally. These images have proven their ability to captivate audiences while simultaneously serving as an iconic depiction of an entire era (Hariman and Lucaites 2007).

Though we are held to the parameters of what we see before us when taking a photograph, we have the ability to impose our will on the image by identifying the subject, selectively masking or highlighting certain traits, and choosing what is photo-worthy. Whether or not we consider images to be good indicators of the world around us, we associate our everyday lives with the photographs we keep. Even if photographs are not granted a truth-telling status, their ability to place objects and ideals within a system of social relationships is undeniable (Hariman and Lucaites 2007). They are our links to the past, providing “a way of relating to the world – not only cognitively, but also emotionally, aesthetically, morally, politically” (Robins 1995: 33). The importance of these images is largely phenomenological (Hariman and Lucaites 2007:31), constantly developing as further consideration is given to the role of indexical image in our lives.

Beyond the assumed traits of photography in everyday situations, we must also acknowledge the way in which modification of the originally captured image effects our perceptions of the photographic genre. The logic of arguments attesting to the realist nature of photography are based on the argument that photographs only depict what was captured when the shutter opened.
Realist theories give priority to the mechanical origins of the photographic image. They argue that the mechanical arrangements of the photographic camera means that physical objects themselves print their image by means of the optical and chemical action of light (Lister 1995:10).

Despite being a potentially mechanical means of creating images, photography still relies on the human photographer to capture and develop the image. The human factor in photography, though inevitable, has often become the focal point concerning questions of photography’s ability to depict real events objectively. While images might be neutral observers, the same can not be said for the creators and developers of images. Studies pertaining to the truth-telling nature of photography would be incomplete without addressing the issue of image modification and the potential for photographers to distort events in their photographs. Focusing on the effects of image modification on the idea of photography being realistic is essential if photography is to be considered potentially realistic. I will address these issues by analyzing various modification techniques, their historical basis, and the contemporary beliefs that society holds towards modification.

**The Effect of Photographic Absence**

Examples of personal and collective experiences that have proven the authority granted to photography as truth-telling are virtually innumerable, but perhaps the most powerful proof of photography’s power is seen when photographs are absent from the public record. Reinhardt reminds us of the U.S. media and government’s quest of strategically avoiding the distribution of images showing children suffering during the first days of the 2003 Iraqi invasion. Providing a blank canvas, Reinhardt displays the mocking irony of a silent conflict in an unnamed location by providing a completely dark
photograph’ with the title “Iraqi Children Killed by American Bombs.” The displacement of images capable of swaying social transformation or public outrage was no accident on behalf of government officials and newspaper editors.

Lack of specific evidence of gross misconduct against the children of Iraq ensured that the American public did not become entranced with the goal of ending the war immediately. This is particularly important in the instance of the 2003 Iraq invasion because there was already public distrust and unease towards the war that was waiting to be pushed over the edge. Photographs depicting the suffering of children are of critical importance to ensure that atrocities are put to an end without delay. Lacking any such evidentiary claims, attempts to call the general citizenry to action are likely to fall on deaf ears (Sontag 2003).

The importance of photography in determining the level of civil outrage towards ethical atrocities has been proven time and again as images have become a central form of transglobal communication. Hariman and Lucaites identify the ethotic authority of photography as contingent upon its appeal to massive audiences. In identifying the role of iconography, they state that “photos’ rhetorical power also comes from channeling emotional tensions and social energies through norms of civic decorum” (Hariman and Lucaites 2007:21). Those images that are incapable of appealing to either a wide cultural audience or a smaller, but personally significant, private audience are doomed to

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obscurity. Alternatively, those images that are able to capture the eyes of their viewers are the ones which are then granted authoritative truthfulness, becoming known as accurate depictions of the past.

Claims that photographs are capable of providing realistic depictions of the world are not without their critics. Since the creation of photography, there has been a heated debate pertaining to the role of photographs and their ability to accurately relay information in a way that does not distort the event being captured. While there is far more evidence that photography has been considered (generally) truthful, there is a minority view against the ethos of photography that must be mentioned.

**Critiquing Truth in Photography**

Reality-based assumptions of photography are not without their critics. By entering into an analysis on the authenticity of the image, we engage in what Lister describes as a “debate between those who have stressed the photographic image’s privileged status as a trustworthy mechanical analogue of reality and those who have stressed its constructed, artificial, and ideological character” (Lister 1995:9). Analysis of this sort is increasingly necessary given Lister’s further claim that “almost overnight, it seems, the photographic image and other analogue visual media (film, television and video) became realist images viewed by passive dupes” (Lister 1995:8).

A healthy amount of skepticism is not only wise, but essential when viewing photographs that have the potential to change the opinions and parabolic predispositions of entire countries. Based on the points discussed previously in this chapter, the decision to question particular photographs while establishing the generic role of photography as a realistic form of visual communication has provided a reasonable compromise between
cynicism and gullibility. Choosing not to believe any photograph based on a singular
discredited image would be to denounce a central form of visual communication.
Similarly, choosing to believe any image based on the potential accuracy of photography
would deny human potential for individualized thought and analysis.

Questions concerning the role of photography as an accurate means of portraying
reality in a two-dimensional medium are not limited to debates specific to actual
photographs. While questions of humanity’s existential place in reality are not new,
rarely have these concerns penetrated into popular culture with such tenacity as with
discussion over photography. The case leveled against photography and our collective
willingness to consider images realistic depictions of reality stems from general
discomfort with perceived reality in the first place. Echoing the philosophy of Descartes,
Michael Punt has pointed out that skepticism towards the science used to create
photography has actually stemmed from “the suspicion with which human perception and
the senses became regarded as unreliable witnesses” (Punt 1995:60).

Rather than a direct attack against photography’s ability to recreating reality in two-
dimensional snapshots, Punt argues that debate over accuracy is engrained in a growing
uncertainty towards our sensory organs and their capacity to relay the world to us. While
this theory makes the analysis of reality-based assumptions in photography significantly
more difficult, it also grants credence to the claim that while photography is not a perfect
means of presenting reality, there is no such perfect system to compare photographs
against.

Attacks against photography as realistic are rarely broad criticisms, more often
pertaining to a singular image or set of prints. The majority of discussions regarding how
much and how well we should trust photographs have originated as debates about
modification and distortion. In order to address this point, I will address multiple
instances in which the purity of photography has been brought into question due to
purposeful manipulation of images. While modification is problematic to the belief that
of photography is an accurate form of communication, it is far from damning to the claim
that photographs can, and often are, realistic depictions of the world.

Modifying the Truth

While photography requires a certain amount of distortion of reality, based on the
limited view provided by any given image, debate has raged over the role of modification
in photography and the implications that manipulation of images has on the potential
truth-telling nature of the genre. Despite the need to alter original images through the
development process, as discussed in Chapter 2, the inevitable variations caused through
development have generally been deemed permissible. In identifying the role of
inevitable alteration of original images, Hariman and Lucaites tell us that “despite a
thousand [cropping] variations introduced through the reproduction and circulation of
these images, they remain fixed as if they were a single moment of visual truth”
(Hariman and Lucaites 2007:51). Given that every individual has a unique viewpoint, the
choice of the photographer and modifier to select the angle of exposure or crop an image
to draw attention to detail has been deemed permissible compared to other modifications.

Even with a general acceptance of photographs providing only a subjective point of
view towards an event, there remain questions pertaining to the subjects captured in
photography and their fidelity to real events. In an example of mainstream modification,
pictures taken during the American civil war showing dead Union and Confederate soldiers were proven to have been staged many years after their creation.

The reason for this professional distortion of the battle field was likely due to a desire to increase the dramatic aesthetic of the image, causing the photographer to move dead bodies to more dramatic locations. While the Battle of Gettysburg provided more than enough subjects for a photographer to capture the hellishness of war, photographic evidence clearly indicates that modification took place on a large scale in order to create dramatic images. The more famous of the images in question depicts a dead soldier lying next to his rifle in the trenches of Gettysburg. This lone soldier, laying sprawled before a dynamic background of rocky trenches, captured a sense of captivity and enclosure not seen in most photographs from the Civil War. The aesthetic quality of this photography was unquestionable, as it provided a very strong depiction concerning the loneliness of dying on the battlefield. While visually stunning, the authenticity of this image was brought into question when another such print was revealed to be taken by the same photographer on the same day. This photograph, not entirely dissimilar from the first, shows the same soldier, now in a completely different position, lying dead on the open battlefield.

Originally accepted as truthful depictions of the Battle of Gettysburg, analysis by government experts later revealed that there were multiple inconsistencies in both images. The most startling being that the weapons shown next to the soldier in either photograph were not used by the regiment indicated by his uniform.

The importance of this well-documented example of image modification outside of the realm of darkroom development illustrates that despite initial modification having the capacity to deceive the public, increased analysis has tended to expose instances where photographs are less than completely truthful. The visual clarity seen in famous photographs has lent itself to analysis beyond questions of darkroom modification techniques. Inconsistencies seen in images, such as the discrepancy of the guns seen in the above images, are only visible when photography provides the startling clarity that the genre is known for. Perhaps this clarity and ease of detailed examination seen in photographs is partially responsible for the perceived truthfulness of photography.

Not all types of modification in popular photography have taken place through the manipulation of the subjects seen in images. Rather, the vast majority of images that are modified in a deceptive manner have tended to undergo their modification during the development process. One such example can be seen in the analysis of a famous photograph of supposed P.O.W.s from the Vietnam War.

In a scandal that shook the nation, a photograph of supposed P.O.W.s from the Vietnam War was sent to the Pentagon in 1991, quickly raising accusations that the U.S. had left soldiers behind when they had pulled out of the area decades earlier. Fearing widespread outcry from the unauthenticated photography, government officials quickly attempted to identify the men in the image and confirm or deny their continued
imprisonment. Following identification, the families of the men were notified and sent copies of the photography. All three of the soldiers were positively identified by their families and swore to the authenticity of the image. In conjunction with widespread public support, the families called for immediate intervention in Vietnam to return the lost men (Mitchell 1994:47).

Immediately following the distribution of the photograph, multiple questions were raised to its authenticity. The placard, held by the men, was not only cryptic, but appeared completely unlike the rest of the image. Inconsistencies in the development of the P.O.W. image were troubling, but difficult to prove unequivocally. Due to the blurriness of the original image and the likeness of the men in the photograph to the lost soldiers, suspicions to its authenticity were held by a large portion of the population.

Some time later, the men in the original photograph were identified as farmers posing for a local periodical, the image having been modified to imply their captivity (Mitchell 1994). Extensive study of the image by both experts and family members of the supposed soldiers led to its uncovering as a forgery. This case study proves that even in the world of purposeful deceptive modification, popular analysis has tended to reveal the original truth captured in images.

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18 Top: The image distributed to the Pentagon and families of soldiers lost during the Vietnam War, depicting the men supposedly still alive and in captivity (Reuters/Bettmann). Bottom: the original photograph which was modified from its original print. The original photograph showing three Soviet farmers holding a plaque. Photographs grouped and compared in Mitchell 1994:48.
As time has passed and modification techniques have evolved, so has public awareness and skepticism towards seemingly improbable photographs. Older forms of modification, now considered obvious alterations, were at one time grandiose and seamless manipulations capable of convincing even expert developers. One of the first surrealist images created through modification, a girl surrounded by supposed fairies, was initially praised as accurate by many photography experts.¹⁹ In fact, the first mention of this image was published under the heading of “an epoch-making event – fairies photographed” (Sanderson 1973:89). Caught in the frenzy of collective desire to believe the event being depicted in this photograph, Sir Arthur Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes stories, wrote *The Coming of the Fairies*, a full length book dedicated to analyzing the implications of the photograph, which he took as accurate. A renowned spiritualist, Doyle opens his book stating that humanity has either been presented with “the most elaborate and ingenious hoax ever played upon the public” or, as his writing supports, “an event in human history which may appear...epoch making” (Doyle 1922:13). Though, at the time of his writing, Doyle had never personally seen the photograph, his assumption on the truthfulness of the image was due to its photographic quality. A renowned writer and scholar declaring the authenticity of a claim based solely on the existence of a photograph is quite telling of the power of photography. At the time, mere rumors of photographic evidence were enough for very learned people to assume claims to be true.

¹⁹ One of the Cottingley Photographs, showing a young girl surrounded by fairies in the woods surrounding her house. Elsie Wright, 1917.
Though initial examination of the Cottingley Fairy Photographs concluded the images to be unmodified, later examination would come to debunk claims of their authenticity. Lack of expedient distribution of the original film prints likely accentuated original claims of authenticity in this case, since the images were first authenticated by only one self-proclaimed professional who swore to their authenticity upon first examination (Sanderson 1973). Additional authority was granted to the fairy photographs due to the detailed advocacy provided by Mr. Snelling, the expert in question. Snelling’s original account of the fairy photographs stated unequivocally that “these two negatives are entirely genuine unfaked photographs of single exposure, open-air work, show movement in the fairy figure, and there is no trace whatever of studio work involving card or paper models, dark backgrounds, painted figures etc. In my opinion, they are both straight untouched pictures” (Sanderson 1973).

Eventually, through additional analysis and inquiries into the development process used to create the original photographs, it was discovered the Cottingley Fairy Photographs were indeed faked. These images were cleverly created with a series of cutouts which were placed in the forest in order to create the illusion of their presence without having to modify the original images in the darkroom.

All of the above case studies in modification have indicated a common tendency for new exotic forms of modification that in the short run fool the viewing public, but have eventually been exposed and the respective photographs debunked. An important trend is presented through this phenomenon: as modification techniques advance and become more fluid in their capacity to seamlessly distort photographs, public awareness of image modification has slowly grown to keep up with new trends.
Despite the consistent and important trend that has taken place in photography concerning the vigilant analysis and skepticism towards particularly stunning images, such analysis can not be taken for granted. As photographic technology has progressed, there has been a systemic need to constantly update and renew the means in which photographs are analyzed. Given the potential for the realm of photography to gain mastership over the realm of visual communication, questions concerning the nature of new technologies are not only pertinent, but essential. Without continued and ever-improved analysis, technology is likely to leave rhetorical scholars in the dust, dooming our cultural ability to question photographs in the new age of digital technology.

Modifications such as those discussed in this chapter have brought the truthfulness of photography into question, but have generally tended to merely illustrate our cultural adherence to the doctrine of ‘innocent until proven guilty’ in photography. Unless a specific image appears modified, than its status as a photograph has caused the image to be considered accurate and truthful. In the world of photography, the mantra of ‘innocent until proven guilty’ has been holistically applied to questions of modification and purposeful distortion.

Digital technologies, though they may appear benign and not dissimilar from film-based modification techniques, have completely redefined the means and limits of modification in photography. As identified by scholars in modern photography, “The search of the high modernist hero of photography, such as Paul Strand and Edward Weston, for a kind of ‘objective truth assured by a quasi-scientific procedure and closed, finished perfection’, is anachronistic and no longer supportable” (Lister 1995:17). The change in technology and photographic development due to digital innovations can not be
understated. In order to successfully establish the changes that have occurred in photography and the implications these changes have had on the integrity of photography, new technologies must be taken into consideration. Working to establish the changes that have occurred concerning photography as a truthful form of visual communication, I will now focus on digital technologies in recent years. Specifically, the transition to digital cameras and computer-based development will be examined, concentrating on the distinctions between these new technologies and the film-based photographic technology of yesteryear. Upon establishing the status of digital technology in modern society, the social and geopolitical implications of these changes and of digital modification will be analyzed.
CHAPTER 4:
DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN PHOTOGRAPHY

From the advances in both technique and technology in photography over time, we have found ourselves at a time when digital technology has established a new means of appreciating and practicing photography. Despite apparent similarities, the shift from analogue photography, seen in film capture, and digital photography, using computers and microchips, has completely altered the nature of the genre (Lister 2007). As technology continues to advance, photography as a truth-telling medium could quickly find itself subject to increasingly manipulative violations, leading to modified images being taken as near-truths.

Using nothing more than a digital photograph and some computer software, an individual can recreate events to their liking and then pass the modified images off as unaltered reality. The potential for individuals to edit their own pictures to hide blemishes or imperfections is problematic, but pales in comparison to the threat of photojournalists editing their images to increase ascetic appeal. Images in mainstream news outlets, such as the burned Iraqi soldier analyzed earlier, can now be easily fabricated and passed off as real, forever changing the opinions of the reader. Due to the overwhelming implications of this and similar possibilities, an analysis of digital photography and its role in society is essential. It is not only digital modification, but digital photography itself that poses a threat to the accuracy of photography.

Following an exploration of digital technology in photography, the role of digital image modification software can then be analyzed. Throughout this chapter, digital technology will be compared to the analogue forms of photography and modification,
discussed in Chapter 2. Upon identifying the history and usage of digital photography and modification the definitional framework of photography can then be revisited and applied to digital technology.

**History of the Digital**

Like most technology, digital photography advanced faster than expected from even those intimately involved in the field. In 1998, Peter Hamilton, a photography historian, predicted that digital photography would surpass film in “20 or 25 years” (Adventures of Photography 2003). Hamilton’s predictions on digital technology were debunked far earlier than he had expected. Years before Hamilton’s prediction, Kodak began shutting down its film camera factories in 2004 (Digital Photo Review 2004), indicating a firm commitment to a digital world in photography. The transition between film and digital photography has gained considerable momentum as digital technologies have advanced and become more affordable. The rapid transfer from film to computer has allowed camera users to shift mediums of development while still receiving the same end product: a seemingly similar picture provided through either method.

Photographic theorists have warned against the unabated transition from film to digital photography. Providing evidence to the importance of academic study, Mitchell cautions that “we might, of course, choose to regard the digitally encoded, computer-processable image as simply a new, non-chemical form of photograph or a single-frame video, just as the automobile was initially seen as a horseless carriage and radio as wireless telegraphy” (Mitchell 1994:4). Digital and film photographic prints can look nearly identical if compared under similar conditions. Digital images, which can be printed at home and placed in picture frames, can easily become virtually indistinguishable from images taken
with a film camera and developed in a darkroom. Given that the end result of photographic images is strikingly similar between film and digital development, assuming that these processes are similar in nature is understandable. The first digital pictures were not entirely dissimilar to the first chemically-processed photographs.  

Early digital photographs were blurry, difficult to make out, and provided little detail to the viewer. In addition to their low resolution, these images were far from being commercially viable alternatives to film-based photography. The expense expended in producing the first digital images was astronomical compared to the inexpensive alternative of film photography. Like camera obscura, digital camera technology had to undergo substantial refinement before it could become a practical and appealing form of visual communication. As computers became smaller and more powerful, the technology required to digitally create images was also miniaturized until, finally, the first commercially viable digital camera, the Apple QuickTake 100, was released in 1994 (Archives and Museum Informatics: 1994).  

Digital technology has developed exponentially since Apple’s release of the QuickTake. The ‘megapixel,’ a term used to identify the number of pixels (squares) used to create an image, has become a central signifier for image clarity. Simply put, the more

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20 One of the first digital photographs: A 5x5 centimeter image of Russell Kirsch’s baby, produced on one of the first programmable computers, the SEAC in 1957. Using a rotating drum scanner, Kirsch and his colleagues at the National Bureau of Standards created this digital image by scanning a photograph into the massive computer. In 2003, Life magazine identified this image as one of “the 100 photographs that changed the world.” Image and information available from: http://www.nist.gov/public_affairs/techbeat/tb2007_0524.htm

21 The QuickTake 100 was the first digital camera to cost under $1,000, a factor which drastically improved its sales performance compared to earlier digital cameras.
pixels contained in an image, the clearer that image will be. The fewer pixels contained in
an image, the less clear that image will become, leading to “pixilation,” an attribute in
which the individual blocks making up the image become viewable to the audience
(Lipkin 2005). The QuickTake, capable of capturing images with the clarity of .3
megapixels, has been surpassed by modern digital cameras that are capable of taking
images containing upwards of 500 megapixels.22

In an example of technological determinism, a trait which causes people to blindly
adopt new forms of technology simply based on their innovative potential, the desire to
increase the clarity of digital photography has spurred photographers to digitally connect
large collections of images in order to create pictures with multiple gigapixels of clarity.
These images allow the viewer to zoom in on intricate details, allowing them to easily
identify individuals standing miles away from the camera.23

Questions concerning the increasingly sophisticated nature of digital photography
have given rise to increased analysis focused on our collective social understanding of
what constitutes a photograph. Drawing distinct delineations between lithography,
heliography, photography, and others forms of visual representation is a difficult yet
important aspect of understanding the history of the genre. Why is it that, despite photo-
like images being created for decades prior to Niépce’s image of his local village, that his
is considered to be the first photograph? Digital photography has compounded concerns
over the definitional nature of photography due to its drastic departure from film-based
methods of image capture. Mitchell reminds us that “Although a digital image may look

23 One such example, http://www.yosemite-17-gigapixels.com/, offers a startling image of Yosemite
National Park, a composite image created through the meshing of 2,046 smaller pictures. The final
photograph weighs in at 17.26 gigapixels.
like a photograph when it is published in a newspaper, it actually differs as profoundly from a traditional photograph as does a photograph from a painting. The difference is grounded in fundamental physical characteristics that have logical and cultural consequences” (Mitchell 1994:4).

The history of photography illustrates numerous transitions that have occurred in a collaborative attempt by inventors, artists, and chemists to perfect image capturing procedures. Capture by hand (seen in tracing, drawing, and painting) gave way to capture by chemistry and light (seen in heliography and analogue photography). Digital photography, while it may appear identical to chemically-based photography, has breached the traditional norms of visual communication by reinventing the methods used to depict visual imagery (Lipkin 2005; Mitchell 1994). Mitchell explains this process when comparing chemical and digital photography, stating that:

A photograph is an analogue representation of the differentiation of space in a scene: it varies continuously both spatially and tonally….But images are encoded digitally by uniformly subdividing the picture plane into a finite Cartesian grid of cells (known as pixels) and specifying the intensity or color of each cell by means of an integer number drawn from some limited ranges. The resulting two-dimensional array of integers (the raster grid) can be stored in computer memory….In such images, unlike photographs, fine details and smooth curves are approximated to the grid, and continuously tonal gradients are broken up into discrete steps. (Mitchell 1994:4)

The sophistication of digital technology has exponentially increased the number of pixels available in digital images, adding to the complexity of the raster grid. While the intricacy of these images continues to grow, the general principles behind the creation of digital images remains the same. Unlike film photography, which begins and ends with chemical properties enabling the development of images, digital photography requires translation from binary code to a visually comprehensible representation. Upon light
entering a digital camera, an image is formed by a grid of sensors that registers color data and combines the information from each individual sensor in order to form a complete image. While there are a variety of sensor designs, all digital cameras rely upon a grid-like structure that views images in a very compartmentalized fashion. Rather than being seamless and fluid byproducts of chemical reactions, images are captured pixel-by-pixel and only later are they pieced together to make sense to the viewer. The difference between chemical and numeric coding is no small distinction.

Lipkin draws attention to the importance of digital technology, stating that “As photographs become nothing more than strings of numbers, the medium itself is transformed” (Lipkin 2005:8).

The digital camera, operating as a computer, concentrates on the action of “creating, storing, and manipulating numbers in a computer, and then rendering them into visual images” (Lipkin 2005:13). The complexity of this code continues to advance, sparking ever-increasing clarity in digital photography. While images may become clearer as digital technology develops, the same attributes of eventual pixilation still apply.\[25\]

\[24\] A digital camera sensor arranged to capture red, green, and blue color data independently. Once the color data is saved, the information is combined to form a single image. (Johnson 2006:86)

\[25\] An example of pixilation in digital photograph, an inevitable blurring of digital images upon zooming in on minute detail. (Mitchell 1994:5)
There are fundamental differences in the way digital and analogue photography are captured, stored, developed, and distributed. Despite the systematic changes taking place in digital technology, much of the analysis conducted towards film photography does not adequately consider the implications of digital technology and the changes that come with digital image creation and storage. Academic studies have not been immune to the absurdity of applying film-based photographic assumptions to new forms of digital photography. Mitchell reminds us that the knee-jerk reaction of applying old theories to new technologies is an all-too-common occurrence:

We might...choose to regard the digitally encoded, computer processable image as simply a new, nonchemical form of photography or as a single-frame video, just as the automobile was initially seen as a horseless carriage and the radio as wireless telegraphy. Indeed the terms ‘electronic photography’, ‘still video,’ and ‘digital camera’ have rapidly gained currency. But such metaphors obscure the importance of this new information format and its far-reaching consequences for our visual culture. Although a digital image may look just like a photograph when it is published in a newspaper, it actually differs as profoundly from a traditional photograph as does a photograph from a painting. The difference is grounded in fundamental physical characteristics that have logical and cultural consequences. (Mitchell 1994:4)

Once scholars are capable of resisting the urge to apply old theories to new technologies, the distinctions between digital and analogue forms of photography are not hard to identify. Differences between film and digital photography, as discussed above, are apparent in the development and capture of images, but distinctions are made all the more obvious when image modification is taken into consideration. The grid-like nature of digital images has not only restructured the core essence of photographic images; it has also made those same images increasingly easy to rearrange. Whereas image modification was once an unfortunate inevitability in the darkroom, digital technology is itself designed with the intention that images will, and should be, modified (Lister 1995).
The rise of digital modification in software is no small change in the creation of images. Entire industries have developed with the intention of increasing the subtly and proliferation of modification techniques, all the while continuing to argue that modification does not make an image non-photographic. The limits of what can be considered acceptable forms of modification have yet to be defined. What is clear is that digital modification has the potential to revolutionize photography, if it has not already.

**Digital Image Modification**

Since the creation of Photoshop in the early 1990s, digital image modification has grown into a multi-million dollar industry. From their humble beginnings, Photoshop and similar programs have expanded, providing a plethora of options and levels of sophistication. Some of the more basic programs, such as those provided with Microsoft Windows operating systems, provide minimal modification options. Meanwhile, many of the high-end modification programs, such as Adobe Photoshop, are capable of completely recreating images through both advanced automated algorithms and user-friendly manual settings. Providing a nearly endless cascade of options, there is very little that can not be produced through digital image modification, assuming that the proper time, dedication, and source images are available.

Anderson illustrates that there has (begrudgingly) been a historical acceptance of modifying images post-capture. In his extensive analysis, Anderson states that “a photograph cannot rank as a work of art unless it carries some suggestion of a lofty emotion, and…this result is rarely attained without the intervention of the artist himself through some hand work on either plate or print” (Anderson 1919:30). While Anderson
accepts that modification is inevitable, his writings on modification assumes the use of brushes on a print or plate, adding or diminishing detail to the original image.

Digital modification allows the photograph to become fluid in the sense that they are capable of constantly adapting and conforming to new ideals at the click of the mouse. It is important to distinguish digital modification from previous forms of image distortion because digital technology works in direct contradiction to previous connotations of photography, which identified images as static and locked within a particular moment of time (Lister 2007). While darkroom-based modification techniques, as seen in Chapter 2, have the potential to radically transform images, there are two critical attributes that distinguish digital technology from other kinds of modification.

Firstly, digital image modification has become increasingly simple to use, often requiring nothing more than clicking a few buttons and letting pre-programmed algorithmic modifications do their job. As software such as Photoshop has become increasingly user-friendly, the potential for modification has increased exponentially. What was once a procedure reserved for those who had dedicated years to learning the subtleties of modification in the darkroom can now be conducted by an elementary school child in less than an hour. This relative ease of usage has exponentially increased the amount of images that are being modified on a daily basis, overwhelming the potential for public deliberation on the authenticity of images (Lister 1995).

Secondly, the precision of modification available through digital technology is unprecedented. While modification techniques in the past have been steadily debunked and exposed as fraudulent images, the continuation of this trend can not be assumed when digital technology is used. Modification techniques in the past required extensive
and tedious planning and execution with a steady hand, but the modification of digital images is far simpler. The pixilated nature of digital images allows modifiers to merely rearrange blocks of information, allowing a far more seamless form of manipulation that, if done correctly, is nearly impossible to detect. The precision of modification available through digital technology in conjunction with the proliferation of modification on a scale unprecedented in the age of film photography makes the advent of digital photography entirely unique.

Concerns of unchecked image modification have not gone unnoticed by those in the software industry. Multiple tools have been created in an attempt to identify modification in images, many of which analyze any given image on a pixel-by-pixel basis. While these programs are capable of identifying some types of modification, there has yet to be a publicly-announced means of identifying all forms of modified images.

There are a multitude of reasons why checks against extensive manipulative modification have failed thus far. Firstly, though modification techniques used in the darkroom have usually been exposed soon after their usage, the rapid development of new and increasingly sophisticated types of digital modification makes it increasingly difficult to detect changes that have occurred. Secondly, digital image modification is by nature discrete and difficult to detect. Given the amount of working hours that have gone into the development of image modification software, it should come as no surprise that the level of sophistication available is extremely advanced. Keeping this in mind, Hyde explains that, “A good technology does not call attention to itself; rather it ‘withdraws’ in use and becomes transparent so not to impede the endeavor that it is helping to facilitate” (Hyde 1995). Based on this indicator, digital image modification is a very good
technology indeed. This is particularly true given Hyde’s later observation that, “the more inconspicuous the technology, the less we tend to question it” (Hyde 1995:52). These observations are compounded by the final point that modified images have become difficult to detect because the sheer number of images being modified make it virtually impossible to keep up with the potential modifications taking place.

Digital image modification software has enjoyed a steady stream of public investment since its creation in 1990 with the release of the first Photoshop software package. Popular acceptance of digital image modification software is due only in part to the successful advertising campaign organized by the producers of such technologies. The same kind of technological determinism that spurred the creation of digital photography is also largely responsible for the levels of modification seen today. Similar to the technologies that it affects, technological determinism is a very fluid concept. As time has gone by, the very roots of technological determinism, a sort of manifest destiny of scientific discovery, has evolved into a far more sinister form of desire. Determinism has given way to a new form of technological fetishism; a state where society has decidedly forgone the precautionary principle in lieu of a new paradigm where technology is euphoric, benevolent, and constantly pushing us to a better tomorrow (Lister 1995).

Societal acceptance of new technology and increased image modification is certainly not inevitable. The choice to utilize increasingly manipulative forms of technology stems from a socially-groomed effect of military and scientific agendas (Hayles 1999). The practice of presenting entirely new technologies as nothing more than ‘upgrades’ to old and previously tested products is a widespread strategy among advertisers and technological enthusiasts:
To win you over, they tell you the computer is merely a handier, more complex kind of typewriter. But this is not true. The typewriter is an entirely external object. The page flutters in the open air, and so do I. I have a physical relation to writing. I touch the blank or written page with my eyes – something I cannot do with the screen. The computer is a true prosthesis. I am not merely in an interactive relation with it, but a tactile, intersensory one. I become, myself, an ectoplasm of the screen. (Baudrillard 2002:179)

By choosing to ignore the sensory-based differences between analogue and digital means of engaging in reality, those who benefit from digital technology succeed in taking control over not only our photographs but also our senses themselves (Baudrillard 2002; Hyde 1995; Robins 1995). This is “a radical departure from lens-and-film-based photography, which can produce only a likeness of something that has a physical existence” (Lipkin 2005:8). This is not to say that digital image modification is a direct means of controlling populations. Conspiracy theories of this nature are a tempting conclusion, but they do little to address the roots of technological fetishism in modern society.

In actuality, the ‘military and scientific agendas’ referenced by Hayles have a genealogy that transcends the interests of any singular government or corporate entity in modern society. Rather, it is the technological fetishism of previous generations that has spurred the technologies seen today. John Dewey’s concept of ‘occupational psychosis’ supports this never ending cycle of technological advancement by stating that methods of production inevitably promote certain types of thought (Burke 1965:40). Dewey’s theory, largely adopted through a Marxist lens, identifies the methods of production as critical to the cultural views held by a given society. Though the name might imply a level of derangement, Hyde states, “Burke does not use the word ‘psychosis’ in a psychiatric
sense; rather he employs it primarily to signify ‘a pronounced character of the mind’ that both reflects and informs one’s interests and occupations” (Hyde 1995:48).

In the case of digital image modification, the success of a few token images has created the belief that modifying image is a successful and reasonable means of altering visual indicators. Once pop culture icons began having all of their photos modified to appear more desirable, social norms dictated that to modify was, indeed, to become desirable. Dewey’s studies of occupational psychosis dealt primarily with food gathering, but his logic still applies when social, rather than physical, life is taken into consideration (Burke 1965).

Through a lens of occupational psychosis, it becomes apparent that technological determinism on a large scale is responsible for the unhindered adoption of digital image modification software in modern society. With increased industrialism and constant technological innovation has come a desire for newness, often causing ideas to be supported long before their actual worth is ever considered. A collective societal encouragement of newness and innovation in technology makes artistry and visual communication equally susceptible to the blind adoption of ‘newness.’ Burke applies Dewey’s theories to artistry, stating that, “The artist deals largely with the occupational psychosis in its derivative aspects. He projects it into new realms of imagery. If a hunt psychosis leads to a prizing of the new, we may expect him to socialize his art by discovering all the possible devices by which he can suggest the experiencing of newness” (Burke 1965:39).

Newness is a theme seen in most advertisements of digital image modification software. Constant upgrades, innovations, and add-ons make the software more than just
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a profitable business; it becomes an iconic example of occupational psychosis in action. Most computer users will never need the majority of the features that they pay for, but it is not the utility of the technology that is relevant; it is its status as innovative.

It is the desire for newness in technology that transforms Dewey’s concept of occupational psychosis into something known as ‘technological psychosis’ in modern society. Whereas hunting techniques were once the pinnacle of human ingenuity and survival, technology has grown to become the critical indicator of success in society (Burke 1965). Given the esteem placed upon technological innovation, it was inevitable that something as popular as photography would undergo continual technological advancement.

Observations on technological psychosis are particularly true in the case of digital image modification, which allows individuals to gain mastery over photographs. Keeping in mind that photography has historically been considered a means of accurately displaying the past, mastery over images becomes much more than a question of visual rhetoric. Given the ethos applied to photography as an accurate depiction of reality, the ability to control and modify photographs makes modifiers not only the master of the image, but of reality itself. Burke classifies desires of this sort as a ‘mastery psychosis,’ a state of being where control becomes quintessential to success (Burke 1965).

While there are a multitude of historical factors that play into the cultural acceptance of new technologies, this does not mean that certain individuals do not benefit from this phenomenon. By establishing the norms and means to modify images, individuals and groups become capable of gaining and granting authority to an image based on the level of sophistication used when engaging in modification. Speaking on analogue forms of
photography, Barthes explains that every photograph requires the creation of a power relationship between the person being photographed, the photographer, and the viewer of the image (Barthes 1981:9). Together, these three entities grant meaning to the photograph. The subject of the image gives meaning by choosing their posture and placement in the image. The photographer gives meaning by zooming in on the subject and deciding when to take the picture. The viewer gives meaning by deciding what to take from viewing the image and determining how to interpret what is being seen. It is the viewers of photography that have the ability to interpret and contextualize an image, similar to Bakthin’s theories on the role of the reader when dealing with written text (Bakhtin 1981).

While intriguing, Barthe’s theory presupposes the immediate transfer of the image from film negative to print. Such is not the case in the digital age, where image modification brings a new actor into the fold: the modifier. Despite the power of the viewer to tweak the role of the image or text, the ultimate decision-maker that determines what will be seen or viewed has always been the photographer, who decided where to point the camera and what to distribute to the viewer. Image modification strips the photographer of this power, allowing the modifier to recreate the world in the image, distorting and recreating it to their liking.

In the context of power-relations in photography, the modifier also creates a unique capacity for hyperreality in photography. In the real world, events occur only once, passing on as a memory frozen in time. Assuming that minimal changes occurred in the darkroom, film photography has generally been considered capable of accurately capturing and depicting these frozen moments. Contrary to film photographs, “electronic
images are not frozen, do not fade; their quality is not elegiac, they are not just registrations of mortality” (Robins 1995:41). The ability of digital photographs to be constantly edited and renewed with no threat of losing the original image makes digital editing unique. It is this ability to edit, alter, and endlessly recapture (copy and paste) digital images that make them a ‘hyper-realization’ of an event (Baudrillard 2002:23). Images take on a life of their own, forever in a state of flux and modification.

The potential for digital photography to be constantly renewed and recreated has implications far beyond mere data transfer. As Lipkin explains, “The relation between a photograph and the scene it portrays has been called indexical…however, the intervention of electronic technology has severed the tie between the photograph and the world. As the artist David Hockney says, ‘Computer manipulation means it’s no longer possible to believe that a photograph represents a specific object in a specific place at a specific time” (Lipkin 2005:9). By making digital images capable of being constantly updated and modified with the click of a button, the indexical quality of photography becomes jeopardized, if not destroyed entirely.

Changes in the way photographs are interpreted due to their ever-transforming status is just one example proving that digital modification has changed the fundamental way that pictures have historically been viewed and created. Given the academic attention directed towards digital images and their potential to completely redefine the genre of photography it seems curious that so little mainstream attention has been given to the issue. While modification software may appear benign in the age of countless technological revolutions, this attribution is actually the carefully calculated agenda that has been put forth by the creators and distributors of digital image modification software.
Selling the Lie: The Campaign for Modification

Consumers do not have to look far to see the tactics employed in digital image modification software advertisements. The rhetorical strategy of naming modification software provides insight into how companies sell their products. Despite disagreements on what constitutes a photograph and how much modification an image can undergo before it becomes a new form of visual communication, digital image modification software advertisements tell us that as long as the source image is a photograph, regardless of any manipulation, the end product is a photograph. Photoshop, Photosuite, and Photocenter are all product examples which utilize their names to imply to the audience that these products do not change the photograph, but merely enhance it.26

Products like Photoshop are not exclusively used to modify photographs; they can take any image and modify it with the greatest of ease. This raises an interesting question: If a product has universal application, why specialize its usage to a limited genre? Strategies of this sort may raise an eyebrow upon first consideration, but it is through these practices that a select few products have gained overwhelming popularity.

When family photographs need touching up, an ‘image modifier’ sounds far less appealing than a ‘photo modifier.’ Rhetorical backing for the strategic naming of image modification products is deeply rooted in society. People do not keep ‘image albums,’ they keep ‘photo albums.’ In terms

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26 An example of product naming designed to imply that digital images, when modified, remain photographs.
of establishing a perceived relevance to our everyday life, modification products labeled as specializing in photography practically have the work done for them.

On rare occasions a product can be found that does not use “photo” in its title, but this does not imply that these products do not work to establish a base in photography. In these rare examples, the subtext of the advertisement ensures that the same message is conveyed. In the example seen here, Microsoft Digital Image Suite appears at first glance to not endorse the appearance of being photo-based in its advertisements; but immediately following the product name we are told that the product provides “Complete photo editing and organizing made easy.” Even here, the audience is told that their images are and will always be photographs.

Beyond the cover art of digital image modification software, examples of modification are commonly used in order to better sell the product. These advertisements utilize a variety of modified images, ranging from the most discrete of modifications to the radical and surreal. Many modifications are shown as a means of astonishing the viewer, causing us to tell ourselves that the software being demonstrated is a masterful deception, capable of transforming our pictures into something new and exciting that are indistinguishable from the original image.

Examples of modification are commonly used in order to illustrate the benefits of specific software options. In these advertisements, a modified image is juxtaposed with the original photograph, typically selected for its flawed, yet perfectible appearance.

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27 A rare example where digital image modification software does not include the word ‘photo’ in the product name.
Blemishes and undesirable attributes in these examples are obvious to the casual observer, but are also easily eliminated, thus allowing us to easily imagine how beautiful the subject could be if we were to make a few minor changes. 28 Maybe the sun shone just a little too brightly, the portrait showed just a little too much detail on the subject’s face, or a few pesky tree limbs were invading an otherwise pristine landscape.

Digital image modification software and the advertisements used to sell these programs have made a profession out of showing people how imperfect they and their surroundings truly are. In addition to the perfection-seeking nature of digital image modification, constant exposure to advertisements that make obvious claims that to look ‘natural’ is undesirable has problematic consequences. Products designed to produce sameness by eliminating traits that are considered undesirable carry with them an otherizing potential where individuals that are not modified are comparatively disfigured (Hyde 2007).

Advertisements appeal to our desire to tweak and perfect these images by first establishing a desire to see a modified version of the original and then immediately providing it. The modified image is typically shown to the right of the original image, causing western audiences to ‘read’ from left to right, which creates the illusion of a conclusive process where the modified image becomes a more-perfect result. In this way,

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advertisements appeal to our perfection-seeking by creating a sense of completion offering a sense of perfection obtainable through the achievement of a final and absolute answer to imperfections in the real world (Earle 1976:157; Hyde 2007:5). Using similar logic in contrast to the advertiser’s original intent, these advertisements could be flipped as a means of advocating the preservation of the originally captured image.29 Here the audience ‘reads’ a transition from the artificial to the more-natural; a return to photographic purity. When we flip such advertisements, we are left with images surrounded by a jumble of backwards text. For the sake of exploration, let’s solve this problem by creating our own written proclamation of what this mirrored advertisement might be telling us.

This illustration shows a reversal of the process of image modification, a process which normally tells us to abandon the real world in favor of a more favorable reality. This specific advertisement tells us that, “Portrait Professional is a radical new way to enhance portraits because it has been trained in human beauty.” Flipping this logic in conjunction with the flipped illustration, perhaps reversing the process of image modification would require a subtext along the lines of, “Not using Portrait Professional is a radical new way to view your portraits because it trains you to appreciate human beauty.” No longer would we be locked into the ideal of modifying our appearance to appear less earthly or human. Natural looking people without perfection-seeking makeup and image modification could reclaim their naturalness as a blessing, not a curse.

29 The previous advertisement of Portrait Professional, flipped 180 degrees.
Taking into consideration the technological determinism (fetishism) that has developed a stranglehold on modern society, a transformation of this sort is highly unlikely, yet not impossible. Parodies, such as the advertisement shown above, illustrate the covert signals that readers take in every time they see these images. The potential for change will likely stem from the ability of individuals to call out the absurdity of the claims presented by image modification software.

For many people, myself included, modified images take on an unflattering characteristic of appearing unreal. This echoes Hyde’s observation that “our existence is perfectly structured as an imperfection” (Hyde 2007:23). As earthly creatures, we have come to expect and be at comfort with imperfection. Yet, for some reason we continually attempt to transcend these imperfections by identifying with two different forms of ethos as a dwelling place. The first form, illustrated in the ‘imperfect’ picture, appeals to our dwelling place in the natural world. We identify with our flaws and see them as a signal of being part of humanity. In contrast, the second form of ethos, seen in the second ‘more perfect’ picture, appeals to our desire-bound fetish with the transcendent idea of perfection. Eliminating our identifying features as imperfect beings perceptually brings us one step closer to achieving God-like stature. Seeing ourselves modified into more-perfect people makes us feel as if we are the ones declaring “here I am!” in response to our flawed selves crying out “where art thou?”.

Advertisements of this kind are not without consequence, and many social standards of acceptability are affected by the modification we endorse through this technology. Body image analysts have shown that the dangerous trend of anorexia and bulimia has become more frequent as people attempt to fit into the current standards of beauty. But
our conceptions of the human form go well beyond physically torturing ourselves for good looks. The cheap and accessible nature of photographic image modification software has allowed every teenager in America to erase their imperfections prior to distributing pictures of themselves on websites such as Facebook and Myspace.

Regardless of the advertisers’ original intent, teenage insecurities have provided a powerful means of selling image modification software. Companies have used digital image modification to capture younger audiences by promising to erase their blemishes and eliminate any distinguishing marks that don't fit into what we are told is beautiful. It is no mistake that the majority of digital image modification advertisements show us teenage faces being modified. Insecurities with physical appearance serve as a catalyst to consumer loyalty.

Once someone modifies a few pictures of themselves and posts them online for their friends and family to see, the standard of beauty has been raised to unrealistic levels. Choosing not to maintain this level of increased perfection becomes increasingly unlikely, because it would seem as if the person being photographed had suddenly become ‘less perfect’. In these situations, a slippery slope condition is created where some modification ultimately leads to more and more images being edited. If the subject were to suddenly stop editing their photos, they would be revealed as the imperfect form that they had tried very hard to hide from the

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30 Portrait Professional advertisement depicting a young woman undergoing image modification. Courtesy of Anathropics Technology.
public eye. In this way, people find themselves trapped in an endless cycle of image modification.

The cycle of ever increasing modification takes place on a scale beyond adolescent desires to hide perceived bodily imperfections. Advertisements that do not depict teenage youth in order to persuade us of the benefits of image modification take a different route in order to sell their product. A more mature audience is shown how to be sexier, more seductive, and mysterious to their viewers. Blemish removal still is likely to take place, but takes a backseat to the purpose of making a photograph appear more artistic. Here we are witness to a different idea of perfection, one that focuses in on the individual, making them the single most important thing in the world. Even though the woman seen in this illustration was originally the center of attention in the photograph, being in the middle of the action simply is not enough.

Now, with digital modification, the modifier can ensure attention is given to the proper subjects by forcefully blurring out any non-crucial detail. The advertisement tells us that with this software we can “Put the focus where you want it.” The advertisers make it quite clear that with some minor photo editing, the attention can be drawn towards one specific person, and the audience is forced to acknowledge her. Our eyes are instantly drawn to the woman’s gaze. Looking at the surroundings would be useless; there is

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31 Focal Point advertisement showing the advertising techniques used to attract an older audience to image modification software.
nothing there but blurred colors and shapes. She is our world. It is a minor leap to insert ourselves in her situation: all things around us become blurry, and the audience is forced to acknowledge us. With some selective blurring, we can become the center of the world.

Purchasing image modification software does not allow individuals to make themselves more dynamic or attention-grabbing in the real world, but that is not the point of editing images. Image modification does more than show audiences how we could look; it communicates to audiences how we wish to look. Countless websites and companies now offer services where they will, for a fee, digitally alter an image to make the subject appear skinnier, tanner, or more muscular.32 In the case of the Focal Point advertisement, modification of personal attributes such as facial tones and blemishes are not important. What these kinds of product advertisements display is a strong desire to be more attention-grabbing. To not get lost in the crowd. To be unforgettable. To be acknowledged.

Similar modifying techniques have been available to artists since the dawn of photography, but never before has the process been so simple and readily accessible. Artistic forms of defining focal points and locking the viewer into a specific way to view the photograph no longer requires cunning skills and countless hours of training in a darkroom. Algorithms and automatic settings now make the human aspect of image modification increasingly minimal. Consumer demand has made the process of eliminating culturally classified ‘imperfections’ from our bodies into a process that is largely automated.

32 Once such website is available at: http://www.seeyourselfslimmer.co.uk/. This company specializes in modifying an image to make the subject appear thinner as a means of motivating them to lose weight.
The potential for digital image modification software to transform our personal appearance is merely the tip of the iceberg. While most advertisements focus on facial and bodily modification, these examples are merely the gateways used to persuade consumers to buy into modification. Upon purchasing and using modification software, a plethora of options on how to modify images become available to even the most inexperienced computer user.33

Concerns over the classification of visual communication genres have little effect regarding adoption of new forms of technology. This technological determinism has forsaken the potential for analysis concerning the classification of images and the potential behind misconceptions towards visual communication. In order to better understand the realm of photography and the inconsistencies created by classifying digital images as definitionally identical to previous forms of visual communication, we must redefine modern photography.

**Defining Photography is a Digital World**

While imperfect, the definitional framework established in Chapter 2 provides a reasonable means of distinguishing film-based photography from other forms of visual communication. Unfortunately, this framework cannot account for digital technology and the recent technological innovations that have occurred in photography. It is troubling that all three of the definitional parameters used to identify photography prior to digital technology are now largely inaccurate. In Chapter 2, photography was classified as a light-based means of producing images, requiring chemical development, and as a uniquely accurate form of visual communication.

33 Such examples will be discussed in Chapter 5 of this thesis.
The first point of this framework has the potential to be applied to digital technology since digital cameras still rely upon light exposure in order to process and digitally create images. Unfortunately, the second and third points of this framework are not so easily applied. Since merely applying the first point of this framework would allow any light-based image to be considered photographic (heliography, lithography, etc.), other indicators of photography must be considered.

The second framework point in Chapter 2 focuses on the chemical development seen in photography as a unique indicator. Unfortunately, digital technology has made this means of classification obsolete. While photographs can eventually be printed, it is more common for digital photographs to remain in the virtual world, experiencing distribution through e-mail and blogs. Websites such as Picassa.com have dedicated themselves to the sole purpose of storing and distributing digital images, proving that digital photography has led to a drastic reduction of images that are actually printed or developed.

The third and final point of the framework seen in Chapter 2 identifies photography as an indescribably truthful and accurate form of visual communication. While many writers simply apply this attribute to photography, blindly applying such traits is academically irresponsible. Increased skepticism and uncertainty about images that have been digitally modified make it difficult to identify digital photography as a uniquely accurate form of visual communication.

Whether or not we chose to identify digital photographs as an equally realistic form of visual communication as analogue photography, changes in the development and capture of images make it clear that additional study is necessary. Before applying old definitions of photography to new technologies, the attributes of digital photography must
be considered. Because of digital photography, Lipkin claims that, “the boundaries of the photographic act, once quite clear, are now shifting in unexpected and unrecognizable ways” (Lipkin 2005:8).

Despite its constant advancement, photography previously maintained the critical characteristics which have been used to classify photographic images. The chemicals, procedures, processes, and cameras have changed, but dependence on chemical processes has remained a constant. Digital photography does more than identify a loophole in modern definitions; it requires a complete reconsideration of the parameters of photography. Mitchell recognizes the definitional tension existing in modern photography when he observes that with the advent of digital technology, “the distinction between photography and computer graphics completely dissolved” (Mitchell 1994:18). Lister’s classification of images as photographic appears to be the only definitional framework capable of accounting for new technologies in image creation and development.

According to Lister, ‘photographic’ as a textual framework:

…is meant to encompass more than the discrete chemical photograph, the framed print, the ten-eight in the developing tray, the snaps collected from Quick Print. It is used to point to a whole range of images which have been consumed on a massive and historic scale, which, while originating in a camera, are subject to processing by other graphic and reprographic technologies, and are crucial elements of several major forms…It is also a term which stretches to include images which share some of the mechanical, lens-based and analogue features of the chemical photographic process by which are registered by electromagnetic means: broadcast television and video (Lister 1995: 3-4).

Choosing to circumvent definitional questions on photography by relying instead on the exceptionally vague term ‘photographic,’ relieves the tension that exists when attempting to classify digital photography. Unfortunately, proximal definitions of this nature are
insufficient because the variety of technology classified as potentially photographic is extremely broad.

The threat of classifying television and video as the same form of visual communication as photography endangers the principle that single-frame images are distinct from moving-frame videos. Because computer-based images are composed of a series of binary codes, “any computational process capable of generating a set of numbers can theoretically create a digital image that resembles a photograph” (Lipkin 2005:15). If we were to merely define images as potentially photographic, the ability for a computer to randomly create images based on a binary algorithm would enter us into a whole new world of hyperreality. Not only would ‘photographic’ images be unhinged from reality, but the creation of new images would no longer be limited by human creativity. Images such as this certainly cannot be considered equal to photographs, and thus it is not possible to merely classify images based upon their ‘photographic’ quality.

Opting to depend upon photographic definitions allows us to classify digital technology as being similar to analogue photography, but it also eliminates any delineation between all other forms of visual communication. Additionally, choosing to broadly classify images as potentially photographic, circumvents discussion on the nature of digital photography and the significance of new forms of image development. In a digital world, cameras are no longer the sole means of creating ‘photographic’ images.

Lipkin draws attention to the transformative nature of digital technology by explaining that, “since bitmaps are composed of numbers, any computational process capable of generating a set of numbers can theoretically create a digital image that resembles a photograph” (Lipkin 2005:15). Broadening the definitional framework of
photography by contextualizing images as realistic due to their ‘photographic’ clarity solves the problem of classifying digital and film photography in the same genre. Unfortunately, this definitional strategy fails to establish a workable framework for delineating between digital photography and other forms of digital visual communication.

Both Mitchell and Lister identify the status quo as the “post-photographic era” (Lister 1995; Mitchell 1994), providing little context as to what we should call images that are no longer photographic. Similarly, definitions of ‘digital photography’ lack the framework required for a holistic definition. Academic studies have indicated that digital photography is a technology that has created a realm of visual communication that is far more difficult to distinguish than previous forms. Examples of definitions that account for digital technology tell us that digital photography is “a method of photography in which an image is digitally encoded and stored for later reproduction” (American Heritage 2000).

Attempting to define photography by stating that images are digitally encoded might appear to be a successful strategy, but that presupposes that the definition of ‘photography’ allows additional definitional extrapolation. Merely adding the act of digital processing onto the definition of photography does little to solve the problem of accurately defining what constitutes a photograph. Firstly, the digitally encoding of images completely removes the attribute of photography being a chemically-based process. Secondly, the definition provided by American Heritage presupposes that images will later be printed and developed, similar to their darkroom counterparts. As discussed previously, this is generally not the case for digital images.
Problems concerning the definition of photography are accentuated by digital technology, but these same problems began long before photography emerged from the dark room. Due to the nebulous nature of photography, attempts to provide an authoritative definition of photography have historically failed. Despite Barthes’ love of photography, and his firm dedication to studying photography, he was unable to create a meaningful definition of what is a photograph (Orban 1997:15). For now, my analysis will cease its exploration on the definitional framework of photography. It is all too easy to get lost in the semantics of defining photography as a unique and distinct form of visual communication.

It is important that substantial time is given to analyzing the implications of digital image modification and the increasingly fluid framework used to classify images as photographic. Given the importance of photography in contemporary society, continued analysis of visual communication, especially in photography, is imperative. As in the beginning of this thesis, it is important to remember Burke’s warning of “the author who has an idea for a novel, and who will never rest until he [sic] has completely embodied it in a book. Insofar as any of these terminologies happen also to contain the risks of destroying the world, that’s just too bad…” (Burke 1966:19).

Prolonged distractions concerning definitional frameworks towards photography are a dangerous threat, as they would prevent analyses, such as this thesis, from studying the communicative implications brought upon by new advents in photographic and image modification technologies. Burke draws upon this threat by telling us that there is a “‘terministic compulsion’ to carry out the implications of one’s terminology, quite as, if an astronomer discovered by his observations and computations that a certain wandering
body was likely to hit the earth and destroy us, he [sic] would nonetheless feel compelled to argue for the correctness of his computations, despite the ominousness of the outcome” (Burke 1966:19). Burke’s notion of perfection-seeking is apparent in the continual desire to perfectly categorize images that defy linguistic parameters. For the sake of continued analysis, I will concede that the creation of digital photography has irreconcilably muddled the debate over what exactly constitutes a photograph. Rather than calling for an exact and holistic definition that is capable of accounting for both digital and analogue photography while simultaneously distinguishing the genre from other forms of visual communication, I suggest that academia should engage in increased skepticism towards images.

Without an increased awareness towards the potential for photographs to be wildly distorted and modified in a digital society, the potential for personal and public dissociation from reality is all too great. The threats are many and the potential for image distortion is great. Already we have seen examples of image modification having dramatic effects on our lives and only continued and increased skepticism towards digital images can prevent a landslide of manipulation that has the potential of tricking us into believing non-truths.
CHAPTER 5: IMPACTS OF DIGITAL MODIFICATION

The potential for deceptive and disastrous forms of image modification is legion. There are some acts of modification that are purposeful in their intent to deceive and misdirect the audience. Other forms, no less dangerous, operate through a veil of mere entertainment. Modification of this sort is often not intended to deceive the viewer, but can still have dramatic unforeseen consequences.

Digital image modification has proven a unique and dubious form of manipulation, difficult to detect and virtually impossible to prevent. Covert forms of technology have often made regulation of dangerous practices difficult. International treaties have failed to stop nuclear proliferation, create enforceable bans on human cloning, or prevent the development of new biological weapons of mass destruction. Like countless controversial technologies before it, digital image modification is here to stay whether we like it or not. Because its impacts are not immediate and are not perceived to have the same widespread effect on world populations, digital image modification is unlikely to become an issue addressed by influential international commissions in the near future.

For this reason, it is important for scholars and communicative experts to better understand the implications of digital modification, both manipulative and artistic. The social implications of digital modification are difficult to quantify, but it is the rapid development of new modification software that guarantees that new images will continue to proliferate. In order to provide an appreciation of the issue at hand, multiple examples of digital image modification and the implications of these ‘photographs’ will be analyzed. Taken independently, these examples may appear inconsequential in the grand
scheme of things, but taken in context they illustrate a systemic threat to the role of visual communication as a means of accurately conveying knowledge of the world.

**The Natural World**

In relation to nature photography, there are two forms of digital image modification that are worthy of analysis. The first type of modification, herein identified as surrealist, makes no attempt to deceive the audience concerning the presence of digital manipulation. Surrealist modification in the context of nature photography is used to create new exciting creatures that can not be found in the real world. Heavy and indiscrete alterations in surrealist modification are an immodest act, replacing preconceived notions of reality in exchange for the possibilities conceived within the human imagination. The potential of surrealist modification has become so diversified and prolific to the point that virtually any image can be created given enough time, experience, and source images.

Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality is best illustrated in examples of this type of image modification because these images attempt to improve upon nature in truly overt and unnatural ways. Whether it involves giving an animal an extra head or creating cats with wings, surrealist modification makes it possible to completely rethink and restructure the things around us.\(^{34}\)

As surrealist image modification has been perfected, it has become increasingly clear that the line between surrealist art and surrealist photography has blurred beyond recognition. These images epitomize the

\(^{34}\) An example of surrealist image modification; a shark’s body seamlessly given crab claws. Untitled. SomethingAwful.com 2006
question of whether or not surrealist modification removes an image from the realm of photography. At what point is it possible to reclassify an image as being unreal?
Modification of this nature is difficult to classify and can not be accounted for in any current definition of photography.

In opposition to the obvious nature of surrealist image modification, discrete modification in nature photography has the power to persuasively transform the viewers’ beliefs through covert alterations. With the proper computer skills, endangered species can be seen in large flocks, pollution and deforestation can be casually glossed over, and the very existence of plant and wildlife can be altered for the benefit of the editor. The true power of these images is seen in instances where we as viewers are completely unaware of their alternations. Seemingly small changes – the minor touch-up of a landscape, the addition of a few more birds to a flock, or the increased intensity of a predator’s stare – all affect how we see an image.

Environmental groups have not been immune to the image modification craze. Essentially, these groups face a double-edged sword: If they choose not to modify images to promote their cause, their message appears dull and unimpressive. On the other hand, if these groups choose to modify an image for the betterment of the organization’s message, they may be called out for their “distortion” of the message. As an example, if an environmental organization were attempting to save an endangered species, for the sake of argument, we’ll say an endangered type of rhino, a photograph of a singular rhino in the middle of a wasteland, or even surrounded by the skeletal remains of other rhinos, would be tremendously persuasive towards the intended audience. An animal standing in desolate tundra surrounded by its fallen brethren would be a once-in-a-lifetime find for a
photographer, but because of digital image modification, this image can be created in under an hour. It is hard to blame environmental organizations for being tempted by this technology, especially if they can rationalize to themselves that, “surely, the situation must exist somewhere, so it’s reasonable to recreate it.” Examples of this type of editing are few and far between due to the incentive to keep any modification hidden and undetectable. This trend, while interesting, would likely be impossible to study due to the incentive to hide any instance of modification.

Still, the potential to modify images begs the question: Do the ends justify the means when digital image modification is being used as a way to solve social ills? Is it possible to salvage our appreciation of nature by utilizing the same tools that have distorted that appreciation? More specifically, in the event that image modification is used in a way that allows for increased environmental exploitation, such as clear cutting, does it become acceptable for environmentalists to use the same technology to refute the claims of those who are responsible for the environmental destruction taking place?

These are the questions which environmental groups and organizations will need to grapple with in the near future, if they haven’t already. Most likely, the fear of the public discovering that image modification has taken place does not prevent them from using modification software for the benefit of the environmental movement. Rather, this fear would create an increased incentive for discrete changes, focused professional software utilization, and strategic usage of written messages in order to create a solid rhetorical backing for these images.

Using digitally modified images as a means of inciting environmental consciousness serves as a powerful rhetorically transformative tool, illustrating the implications of
neglecting environmental responsibility. Discretely altered images show the audience a “what if” scenario, implying that humans have the power to change images as easily as they have the power to make the image a reality. Beyond oversimplifying the problem of environmental degradation, our lowered awareness of the irreplaceable nature of the environment will likely accelerate the decimation of seemingly renewable resources.

Studying the implications of human presence on the environment, Alan Weisman provides an example of this oversimplification: present-day Manhattan juxtaposed with its pristine past. While impossible to recreate in the material world, images such as these imply our ability to revert back to a time where currently extinct species of plants and animals flourished in abundance.

With quick and easy means of image modification, it becomes increasingly possible for the general public to be convinced that environmental destruction is not taking place and that most of the world is still a lush and green habitat. After all, we have a picture to prove it.

Nature photography is but one example of the dangerous potential of digital image modification. The environmental impact of propagandist image modification is an issue that will likely develop in coming years. This factor, in conjunction with a variety of other physical and communicative acts against the environment, has the potential to accumulate into a disaster of epic proportions. Future use of digital image modification and visual communication will be integral to the preservationist, or destructionist,

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ventures of special interest groups. For the time being, there are a multitude of other implications deriving from digital image modification that have a much shorter timeframe. Many of these dwell in the realm of politics, having the ability to escalate a situation in a matter of minutes, not years. One such event took place in recent history with the launching of multiple weapons-grade rocket systems.

**The Iranian Missile Crisis**

In the summer of 2008, Iran announced the successful launching of four rockets, each with nuclear capabilities of striking Israel, a known enemy of the state. Proof of this successful launch was presented in the form of a picture, showing the rockets being deployed from truck beds. Immediate reactions towards the image ranged from surprise to unfettered alarm. Given Iran’s strong rhetoric against Israel and other U.S. allies, a nuclear Iranian regime was a possibility that was intolerable to the international community. Speaking against Israel, former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been quoted as stating, “Our dear Imam ordered that the occupying regime in Al-Qods be wiped off the face of the earth. This was a very wise statement. The issue of Palestine is not one on which we could make a piecemeal compromise… This would mean our defeat. Anyone who would recognize this state [Israel] has put his signature under the defeat of the Islamic world” (Ahmadinejad 2005). Ahmadinejad’s hard-line aggressive military posturing made the possibility of flawless Iranian rocket launch a dangerous situation for the United States and its allies.

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36 The originally released photograph, showing the successful launch of four weapons-grade rockets. Iranian Revolutionary Guard 2008.
Concerns over the sophistication of Iran’s weapons systems were short-lived as updated news reports came in pertaining to the rocket launch. On the same day that the first picture was released, analysis began to reveal discrepancies; photographic imperfections that seemed to reveal that modification had taken place. News of the photo’s alterations came after numerous news agencies, including the New York Times, BBC, and Chicago Tribune all ran stories on the rocket launch, using a different photograph of the event.

The difference between these news stories and the initial reports distributed by Iranian news services was that the new stories provided a new picture of the missile launch. This image, while very similar, showed that only three rockets had launched. In this version of the photograph, the fourth rocket remained on the ground due to an unknown malfunction. Later analysis proved that Iran had altered the original image to strengthen their claim that they were in possession of missile technology, only later to be classified as “in possession of Photoshop” (Kamen 2008).

The question of Iranian rocket technology is an important example of how minor alterations to digital images have the potential to radically affect geopolitical situations. While much of the intricacies of U.S.-Iranian relations are hidden from the public eye, it is likely that the original image, prior to analysis, created quite a tense situation in the intelligence community. The successful launch of three rockets capable of striking Israel

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37 A photograph of the Iranian rocket launch, showing only three of the rockets successfully launching. This image was later used as proof that Iran had digitally modified their version of the rocket launch photograph. Iranian Revolutionary Guard 2008.
is no trivial matter. Given Iran’s repeated attempts to acquire nuclear technology, the threat of a hostile missile launch is still present regardless of the success rate of Iranian rocket deployment. The Iranian missile crisis of 2008 might not have revealed the specific launch capacities of the Iranian regime, but it does provide valuable insight into the thought processes of Iranian officials.

Rhetorically, the decision to digitally modify the original image of the Iranian rocket launch implies a strong discomfort and uncertainty held by Iran towards their missile systems. Rather than distribute an image showing that they had a 75% chance of successfully attacking Israel, Iranian officials chose to cover up the imperfections in their launch systems. The choice to cover up a rocket malfunction rather than pass it off as a rare and inconsequential occurrence provides an implicit communicative event in which Iran has shown its displeasure at its technological status in the world.

In this instance, digital image modification has disproved claims made by a nation harboring hostile intentions towards a U.S. ally. This revelation might appear to be a positive indication of the potential for digital image modification to help in geopolitical situations, but this is not the case. While the Iranian rocket launch provides an example where digital image modification was exposed and promptly debunked, this event also provides indisputable evidence that government and media conglomerates are engaging in deceptive forms of image modification.

It is no longer a question of whether or not the public is being exposed to modified images in the media and through official government newswires. Now, the only question is: How many images are being modified, and how many are never exposed as inaccurate depictions of reality? Had the image modification in the Iranian event been better
executed, it is unlikely that the modifications would have been so quickly discovered. Instances of better executed image modification, such as the faked image of P.O.W.s discussed earlier, have only been exposed due to extensive analysis. In modern society, where technology has dramatically increased the number of images, which can be altered quickly and effectively, clever instances of modification can now easily get lost in the shuffle.

Media coverage of the Iranian missile crisis constitutes a dangerous example of the abuse of power that comes with intentionally deceptive image modification. Baudrillard proves the importance of these modifications, stating that, “our reality comes to us through the media” (Baudrillard 2002:17). While media resources can be individually discredited, stories and images in mainstream news have maintained their general ethos of authenticity. Instances of modification in the media prove that abuses are not only possible, but likely. Baudrillard follows this logic, asking the question that we are forced to consider once an image has been proven manipulative: “‘When it comes down to it, did all these things really exist?’ The question may be stupid or morally indefensible, but what is interesting is what makes it logically possible to ask it. And what makes it possible is the way the media have substituted themselves for events, ideas and history (Baudrillard 2002:18).

With the ability to control what audiences see, regimes and news outlets also gain the capacity to change how groups and individuals think and interact with their surroundings (Baudrillard 2002). Power structures established through mechanisms of truth-telling visual communication give rise to Foucault’s biopower, a scenario that allows photographs to be recreated for the betterment of discursive regimes (Hariman and
Lucaites 2007:46). Undiscovered instances of image modification make the threat of biopolitical exploitation very pervasive in modern society. In this manner, potential exploitation is but one example of the intricate powers embedded in visual rhetoric in general, and photography specifically.

The creation and eventual debunking of virtual threats such as the falsely-launched Iranian missiles might appear to have no lasting consequences, but this is hardly the case. In the context of digital and virtual hypothetical situations, often originally taken as potential realities, the virtual often has a way of becoming reality. Baudrillard admits that, “we are dominated by bombs and virtual catastrophes which do not explode;” but he does not preclude the possibility that, “one could, of course, argue that all these things will inevitably blow up in our faces” (Baudrillard 2002:21). Iran will eventually succeed in launching their missiles. Painful events will be permanently erased from our memory. The natural world will become putty in our hands, allowing us to create and destroy entire species at whim. The digitally modified photograph does more than illustrate a potential future, it predicts and displays the future which we anticipate and desire.

Burkean logic supports the idea that modified photography serves as an index for future events. Modification as an act of perfection-seeking causes modifiers to create a reality that they desire to see in the real world. Modification of images is often merely a tool that is used to create utopian (dystopian) events that we as imperfect beings are incapable of replicating in real life. Changing images only makes sense in a context where the modifier desires different results than what reality has to offer. Had Iran succeeded in launching their missiles, there would be no need for image modification. At home or in a public forum, image modification displays the innate desires of the modifier.
Nowhere is this more apparent than in our personal lives, where individuals can be added into an image, altered, or erased entirely.

**Modification on the Home Front**

Accounts of digital image modification in the media are rarely as serious as missile launches, but oftentimes hit closer to home. Williams points out that there is an increasing consensus that, “snapshots and family photos need no longer stand as a definitive record of what is, but instead what they wish it was” (Williams 2008). The ease of digital modification appears to have revolutionized the amount of modification taking place in the average family album.

In a frighteningly casual observation, Ms. Laura Horn, a woman who had recently divorced her husband, spoke quite pleasantly about using Adobe Photoshop to erase her ex-husband from family photos.38 Speaking of her memories of traveling with friends, Horn told the New York Times that, “In my own reality, I know that these things did happen… [but] without him in them, I can display them. I can look at those pictures and think of the laugh we were sharing, the places we went to” (Williams 2008). In rationalizing her decision to digitally erase her ex-husband from group photos, Horn told reporters that, “This new reality is a lot more pleasant” (Williams 2008).

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38 An example, provided by Horn, where her ex-husband was digitally removed from group photographs. Available from Williams 2008.
Horn’s choice to erase her ex-husband from her photographs was not meant to trick her into forgetting his presence. Given that she was in the original image and responsible for the digital modification, it would be unlikely for her to completely forget the presence of her ex-husband. Digital modification might not afford Horn with the ability to actually go back in time and prevent her ex-husband from being in the original image, but it does allow her to alter the referential materials used to recall her memories. Horn’s photographs provide a clear example where digital modification is used to illustrate the world desired by the modifier. Similar to nature photography, the ability to erase something or someone from history is a gateway to making them unacknowledged in the real world.

When images are altered new realities are created, and a rupture occurs between photographs and the reality they are presumed to represent. Chris Johnson explains the desire of individuals to alter family photos, stating that “what we’re doing is fulfilling the wish that all of us have to make reality to our liking” (Williams 2008). For Laura Horn, her reality calls for her ex-husband to disappear, to not exist, and to be forever erased from the public record.

This exercise is strikingly similar to the activities undertaken by Winston Smith in George Orwell’s 1984. Describing the job of Smith, Orwell writes:

The messages he had received referred to articles or news items which for one reason or another it was thought necessary to alter, or, as the official phrase had it, to rectify. For example, it appeared from the Times of the seventeenth of March that Big Brother, in his speech of the previous day, had predicted that the South Indian front would remain quiet but that a Eurasian offensive would shortly be launched in North Africa. As it happened, the Eurasian Higher Command had launched its offensive in South India and left North Africa alone. It was therefore necessary to rewrite a paragraph of Big Brother’s speech in such a way as to make him predict the thing that had actually happened (Orwell 1949/1990: 38-9).
Like Big Brother’s “Ministry of Truth,” where history was altered for the convenience of those in the story’s present, the usage of digital image modification has the potential to make individuals completely infallible. The careful and meticulous editing of historical texts is used in an attempt to eliminate undesirable information.

Like rewriting historical events in *1984*, digital image modification has proven capable of altering audiences’ perceptions of the past. After editing multiple wedding photographs in order to insert an absent family member, Johnson made a startling revelation that, despite everyone knowing the images were altered, “[the] faked photograph actually created the assumption – people kind of remember him as there” (Williams 2008). Johnson’s revelation initially appears benign due to his observation that everyone who attended the wedding knew that the photograph was altered. However, this assumes that the viewing audience was limited to those who attended the original event. As memory fades and photographs become mere icons from past generations, this background knowledge dissipates, eventually causing future audiences to assume that the absent family member was indeed present at the wedding.

The ability for digitally modified images to alter the memories of the audience has implications beyond wedding attendance. Recall from Chapter 3 that photographs have often been used in legal trials to prove, or disprove, a case. Radical alteration of events through digital modification is inconsequential as long as no one believes the modified image, but Johnson proves, modified or not, audiences find it hard to not believe photographic evidence. In court, it would no longer be the individual with the best lawyer that was likely to win the case, but the person with the best *image modifier*. 
The possibility of legal disputes being muddled by increased image modification is unsettling, but the effects of individuals willing to believe modified images is a possibility that is already affecting the way visual communication is used. The intentions of altering personal images are strikingly similar to those of the Ministry of Truth. Explaining the relevance of his job, the character of Winston Smith explains that, “All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed exactly as often as was necessary. In no case would it have been possible, once the deed was done, to prove that any falsification had taken place” (Orwell 1949/1990: 40). The complete elimination of past events would be difficult to accomplish in public media, due to the sheer number of audience members, but in a private context, history can become a very fluid concept.

With baseline Photoshop and other digital modification software selling for under a hundred dollars, the trend of individuals altering their personal histories is likely to continue and expand. Presently, Adobe expects its modification software sales to constantly rise, based on last year showing a twenty percent sales increase (Williams 2008). Given the positive market for digital image modification, analysis of digital modification on a personal level will be critical to preventing increasingly dramatic alternate histories from being presented as accurate.

**Universal Implications of Digital Image Modification**

The implications presented in the above case studies are in no way limited to their particular events. While some violations of truthfulness and accuracy in photography are more likely in geopolitical discussions than in personal or nature-based photography, the repercussions of image modification operate on a continuum, each instance having the capacity to end disastrously.
Even without disingenuous intentions, digital image modification of any sort may have terrible consequences. Aldous Huxley’s insight that, “familiarity breeds indifference” (Huxley 1954/1990:115), echoed by Hyde when examining Elie Wiesel’s prize-winning writings (Hyde 2007:20), is in this way applicable to modified images. Increased availability of awe-inspiring images through image modifications has raised societal expectations of how a photograph should look. Elevating expectations of what a photograph should look like is likely to lead all photographers down a dark path where digitally modifying images to improve their quality is the only feasible way to earn a living. In the event that altering photographs is not enough, entirely new images can be created and passed off as non-modified photographs. The possibility of such images being distributed under the ruse of unaltered photography has the potentially to completely eliminate the distinction between photography and graphic design. Photography would cease to exist, ushering a new era of digital imaging where it would be impossible to identify fabricated images from realistic depictions of reality.

In analyzing the potential implications of genetic modification, the President’s Council on Bioethics warns us that with an increased threshold of perfection, comes the potential for “diminished tolerance for the ‘imperfect’” (PCB 2003:56). Despite these fears, modification and the advertisements which endorse modification software continue to imply this technology as benign in nature. Only through careful analysis can we work to understand the implications of these technologies and the advertisement campaigns which represent them.
It would be all too easy to dismiss the dangerous implications of image modification as being over-hyped. For that reason, we should consider another such story in photography where it was once said that social implications were being over analyzed. In the 1980s Kevin Carter was a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer, well documented for his work in Africa where he shot countless images showing us the brutality of famine and apartheid. Carter’s most famous photograph shows an impoverished girl desperately trying to escape a seemingly well-fed vulture.

When asked what happened to this girl or why he had not helped her, Carter’s response was that he knew the girl managed to crawl safely to shelter, but that he did not know her ultimate fate. On the question of why he chose to take a picture instead of helping the girl, Carter has been cited as explaining his philosophy, stating:

I had to think visually, I am zooming in on a tight shot of the dead guy and a splash of red. Going into his khaki uniform in a pool of blood in the sand. The dead man's face is slightly gray. You are making a visual here. But inside something is screaming, "My God.' But it is time to work. Deal with the rest later. If you can't do it, get out of the game (Macleod 1994).

Choosing to ignore the voice screaming in our heads telling us, “My God” might seem justifiable in the name of the image until we incorporate this philosophy into the ultimate fate of Kevin Carter, who ended his own life in 1994.

In his suicide note, Carter explained that, “I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings & corpses & anger & pain ... of starving or wounded children, of trigger-happy madmen, of police, of killer executioners...” (MacLeod 1994). Applying this unfortunate story to the realm of image modification, Carter’s life teaches us that choosing to work

39 Wanting a Meal, Kevin Carter. © Corbis.
purely to achieve the perfect image without consideration for how our choices affect the world around us is not a sustainable strategy.

A willingness to sacrifice our humanity for the sake of creating a better image leads us down a slippery slope because while only considering the aesthetics of the image might produce an awe-inspiring final product, it can also cause us to abandon our humanity. Rationalizing the usage of digital image modification in photography potentially leads to the same remorse that was such a heavy burden on Carter. It is far too easy to manipulate an image without understanding or appreciating the truly devastating consequences of hyperreality in photography.

Today’s blind ambition towards a better image is reinforced by Ruskin’s belief that “the picturesque demands a perception of reality that only functions when all associations with utility and morality, along with historical and political issues, are kept out of consideration for the sake of aesthetic effect” (Kemp 1990:107). Observers only have to ask themselves what the world would look like if this philosophy was universalized in order to realize that this interpretation of photography is damning not only to the photographer, but the subject, the audience, and the craft itself. Following the logic of Ruskin and Carter, it is apparent that image modification’s negative implications far outweigh the positive. Still, this practice is not without its benefits.

An increase in the public’s awareness of the prolific nature of image editing has also led to an increase in the skepticism of photography. Increased skepticism has in turn spurred a redistribution of the power relationship between the visual rhetorician and the audience. Whereas images were once considered by some to be imperfect representations of an objective reality (Barthes 1981:5), the ability to modify and distort any given image
has given rise to a minimal level of increased awareness and public acknowledgement of the need for personal analysis and review of the photographic truth. The result is an empowered public that, assuming constant vigilance is held, is less likely to be duped by modified imagery. While modification may be impossible to detect, it is because of this covertness that individuals should have no fear of questioning any image they encounter.

Without increased vigilance and skepticism towards the rhetorical tools applied through image modification, it is likely that rhetoricians will gain a new and powerful tool capable of not only distorting the truth, but of recreating it completely. Only by stepping back and analyzing how image modification affects the way in which we interact with the world around us can we ever hope to halt this process. Society is at a crossroads where either digital image modification will be unconditionally embraced as the wave of the future without consideration for their impact on the world, or individuals will choose to stop and rethink the implications of modifying images.
CHAPTER 6:
CONCLUSIONS

Digital image modification has proven a capable tool for altering images with only human imagination as its limit. With modification, entire new worlds can be created to replace the unwelcome imperfections that humans face on a daily basis. As an escape from reality, the digital modification of photographs is an unprecedented means of recreating events for the comfort of the audience.

The ability to create a virtual utopia through digital image modification is dually alluring and dangerous. As Lipkin has observed, “…it is not always easy to distinguish the utopians from the dystopians” (Lipkin 2005:64). All too quickly, wondrous prospects in digital technology can cause users and audiences alike to become jaded from reality.

While much more academic investigation is necessary, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that changing the way that society views digital photography and the ethos of modified images is not an impossible task. The numbers of sources that attempt to gloss over the differences between film and digital photography vastly outnumber those whom attempt to analyze the radical transformations taking place in visual communication.40 Largely due to the technological psychosis of digital image modification software, there remains a vast number of analyses that must be conducted in the near future if digital modification is to be properly analyzed.

Areas for Future Study

Rhetorically speaking, the importance of establishing a clear definitional framework for digital photography is essential to continued study of new media in visual communication.

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communication. The attempts in this thesis to provide a clear bright line between film photography, digital imagery, and other forms of visual communication prove the difficulty of drawing distinctions between nebulous forms of communication. I anticipate several avenues of future investigation that would solve these definitional issues.

Firstly an extensive analysis of previous definitions, both of film and digital photography, would provide a deeper understanding of the modification techniques that have been used to distinguish photography from other forms of visual communication. Increased analysis of previous definitions might also reveal a timeline of definitional transformations. Such an analysis might not provide a better definition of current photographic technologies, but it would create a better framework for future analysis.

Secondly a coherent definition of digital photography and discussion of photographic imagery’s limits would benefit from the creation of a holistic analytical framework. Such an outline would account for new forms of technology, the effects of digital image modification on the classification of an image as ‘photographic,’ and the development methods used for capturing and presenting images.

Additionally, future study also needs to address the subtle but significant technicalities of film and digital image capture. Most photographic mechanisms have become standardized, but there exist peripheral means of image creation, both in film and digital photography. In film, diversity of printing paper has the potential to produce different textures, potentially heightening certain qualities of the image while hiding others. Digitally, there are a variety of camera-based light sensor arrays. The structure of these digital sensors can significantly alter the image that is created. Any of these
investigations would require highly-technical analysis and considerable knowledge of both film and digital image creation.

Future studies of digital image modification software and digital photography will require regular reconsideration as new technologies are created. As with all communicative studies of new media, it is impossible to write a conclusive analysis of still-developing technologies. It is critical that communicative scholars continually engage in exploratory research to ensure that examination of new photographic technologies does not lag behind new forms of visual communication.

**Moving Forward in the Age of Digital Photography**

The arguments presented throughout this thesis paint a very negative picture of digital image modification and technological psychosis. It is important to remember that the arguments presented in this thesis are not against digitally modified images. Indeed, many are beautiful pieces of art. My goal was to delineate between these aesthetic images and the truth-telling photographs used to convey cultural knowledge on a daily basis. Unfortunately, the choice to abandon dangerous forms of visual communication is not an individual decision. Due to the overwhelming popularity of digital modification software, it is obvious that digital image modification is a technology that society will have to learn to live with.

Despite the negative implications of digital image modification, it is important not to ‘throw the baby out with the bathwater’. Some publicly accessible techniques, such as those in Adobe Photoshop and similar forms of image manipulation have equalized power relations by provided consumers with the same capabilities as professional photographers. Whereas professional developers were once the only people capable of
truly controlling images, the power to modify images has been decentralized, ensuring
that the common person is no longer dependent upon others when they wish to edit
photographs. Hariman and Lucaites state that decentralized power of this sort has the
potential to weaken propaganda campaigns instigated by manipulative governments
(Hariman and Lucaites 2007).

In an attempt to fight back against the manipulative potential of digital image
modification, some artists are working to expose the dangers of photography directly.
Rather than using photography to prove the validity of photographs being realistic
depictions of reality, Lipkin explains that “Artists are using digital photography to make
us acutely uncomfortable about equating photographs with reality” (Lipkin 2005:9). The
practice of extensive alteration with the full disclosure of image modification has the
potential to expose the changing dynamic of photography. Unfortunately, this strategy
also runs the risk of completely destroying the ethos of photography as a truth-telling
medium. Hyperreal depictions, taken to the extreme, will provide an interesting point of
analysis in the years to come.

Regardless of the strategies used to expose digitally modified images as a radically
different form of visual communication, the threat of increased indifference towards
unedited images is indeed a severe and ever-present problem. Unlike acts of violence or
contempt, it is through our inaction that the consequences of image modification have
eluded substantive analysis. Already, individuals have grown indifferent to the sheer idea
of the photograph, and only impressed by the truly spectacular. Citing John-Paul Sartre,
Barthes explains that:

Cases occur where the photograph leaves me so indifferent that I do not
even bother to see it ‘as an image’. The photography is vaguely
constituted as an object, the persons who figure there are certainly constituted as persons, but only because of their resemblance to human beings, without any special intentionality. They drift between the shores of perception, between sign and image, without ever approaching either (Sarte, used in Barthes 1981:20).

The day when the viewer begins to feel the same way towards unedited images as we currently do towards an unremarkable photograph will be the moment that we reach the point of no return. With the ever-increasing levels of digital modification, the day may soon be upon us where modified images become iconic references for an entire generation.

Two lovers kiss in Time Square, an American flag is raised over Iwo Jima, a single man stands in front of a line of tanks as they role through Beijing. These are images that have become symbols of entire generations. Though they tend to gloss over the differences between film and digital photography, Hariman and Lucaites provide valuable insight into the potential for photography to effect society on a whole. In their analysis, Hariman and Lucaites argue that images indicate culture, so when a modified image becomes iconic, it will also indicate an artificialness in society (Hariman and Lucaites 2007).

The long term implications of this transition are difficult to predict but increasingly artificial means of communication do invariably point towards new varieties of hyperreality. The phenomenological nature of photography means that future analysis will require multi-layered forms of examination. Continued and injunctive forms of study will be necessary to account for unpredicted side effects of digital image modification in photography.
Even if digital image modification is debunked as a useful form of communication, trends towards technological innovation prove that any renewed appreciation of older technologies, such as film photography, will be peripheral at best. Even with the knowledge of digital image modification’s hazards, history indicates that it is difficult, if not impossible, to stop using technology once it has already been adopted. It is possible that photographers will renew their love of film-based photography once the dangers of digital modification are realized, but technology will always move forward regardless of the cost. This increasing cultural acceptance of a persistently transformative environment may very well be a ticking time bomb, just waiting for our constantly changing perceptions to reach a climax, where one day we look at the world through undoctored image and no longer give a damn.

Describing the unfortunate and damaging trend for technology to be adopted regardless of the human cost, the Drive-By Truckers tell the story of John Henry. Racing against a machine designed to replace him and his coworkers, John Henry faces his demise because, regardless of how hard he tries, he can never win against an enemy that produces such immediate results. Like John Henry, film photography and the production of unquestionably realistic photographs is no match for the technological fetishism:

We knew about that big machine that ran on human hope and steam. Bets on John were far between and mostly on the side. We heard he put up quite a fight. His hands and feet turned snowy white. That hammer rang out through the night the day John Henry died.

It didn't matter if he won, if he lived, or if he'd run. They changed the way his job was done. Labor costs were high. That new machine was cheap as hell and only John would work as well, so they left him laying where he fell the day John Henry died.

Drive-By Truckers, The Day John Henry Died
WORKS CONSULTED


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