

Fake Photos in the News

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I can distinctly remember, from the 2004 presidential election, a picture of a young John Kerry sitting next to Jane Fonda as she was addressing an anti-Vietnam War protest. The picture was widely disseminated as part of a campaign to impugn Senator Kerry's character, and it was largely effective. Kerry would go on to lose that election; quite possibly that photograph played a role in his defeat. It is also worth noting that the picture was a fake. Ten years earlier, O. J. Simpson was arrested in connection with the murders of his ex-wife, Nicole Brown and her friend, Ron Goldman. O. J.'s mug shot was picked up by the Associated Press and run on the covers of both *Time* magazine and *Newsweek*. *Newsweek* ran the shot unaltered, but *Time* drastically altered the color and contrast of the photo, making O. J. appear dark and menacing. These incidents are disturbing because they indicate that the photos we see on television or in the papers may not be trustworthy. As evidenced by the Kerry example, however, this presentation of altered images does not mean that they have no effect. A variety of communications techniques, such as doctoring images and selective editing of video footage, may result in people being led astray simply because they have faith in their own senses.

Various forms of art or artistic representation are all, in their general conception, modes of imitation (Aristotle, 2005, p. 198). Aristotle (2005) believed that art could serve as a vehicle for discovering truth. While it may not be possible to study certain objects themselves, one can spend significant amounts of time studying their imitations. In describing imitation, Aristotle (2005) stated that some imitations are accurate depictions, while others skew the positive or negative aspects of the objects they represent (p. 200). Still, the important point to note here is that Aristotle assumes that art will be viewed for what it is, an imitation of life. His writings far

predate the invention of the photograph or motion picture, both of which blur the line between art and life. In these newer media, it is much more difficult to make that distinction.

For example, Dr. Real (2009) discussed the ways in which editing may be used to present a story to an audience. One such edit is the parallel montage. In this edit, the films of two separate but simultaneous actions are spliced together to give the audience the sense that the two actions are connected. The given example was an image of a woman tied to a set of train tracks, struggling to free herself, being spliced together with an image of a train moving along a set of tracks. These two independent actions, when combined in a parallel montage, give the impression that the train is moving toward the woman (Real, 2009). This editing technique does not create a problem in the context of an entertaining film. Indeed, it is exactly what the audience expects and deserves because it is being used to make a cohesive story out of independent parts. On the other hand, a problem does arise when editing techniques are used to present art as life, rather than as an imitation thereof.

This problem seems to manifest itself in the way the news is currently being presented in the United States. According to an article regarding an Indiana University study conducted in 2006, a significant number of Americans believe that the Comedy Central humor and parody show, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, is as substantive as network news programs. This finding is not an accolade for *The Daily Show*, which is clearly dedicated to humor and not to presenting the news. Instead, it is an indictment of network news programs that are clearly not presenting the news in a manner that would be expected of news programs. According to the same article, “In an absolute sense, we should probably be concerned about both of those sources, because neither one is particularly substantive. It's a bottom-line industry and ratings-driven. We live in an 'infotainment' society” (Indiana University News Room, 2006). This

approach is further reflected in the cable news channel, Fox News. Featuring the likes of Glenn Beck, Bill O'Reilly, and Sean Hannity, Fox News is a bastion of neo-conservative political ideology, despite its moniker, "Fair and Balanced." The problem with Fox News and other so-called news networks is that they, unlike *The Daily Show*, claim to be news programs, whereas in fact they are as interested in entertaining the masses as they are in presenting the news. In doing so, they mislead their audiences into taking the entertainment at face value. This approach is no different from doctoring a photo and claiming that it is real. When Fox News starts a campaign to question the validity of Barack Obama's birth certificate or attempts to boycott a presidential speech to elementary school students while claiming to be presenting news, their behavior is no different from adding an image of Jane Fonda giving a speech to a picture of John Kerry sitting at a desk. One example is theater masquerading as news, and the other is art masquerading as life.

Aristotle believed that art was a vehicle for discovering truth. This belief makes sense when art can be recognized and appreciated as such. However, when the imitation becomes a replacement for the real thing, it becomes a dangerous and dishonest means to corrupt the thoughts of the masses. Whether it is doctoring photographs to affect the outcome of an election, using editing techniques to influence the way news is presented, or simply misrepresenting one position on an issue to make the opposition seem radical by comparison, art should not be confused with life.

References

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