"La Realidad"
in the year
2000

by Pedro Meyer

NEXT...

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The Zapatista movement in Chiapas invented a place in the jungle that went by the name of "La Realidad" (Reality), located in the southern part of Mexico. It became a geographic rallying point from which to launch many of their political communiqués. The Internet helped to bring much of the world's attention to what transpired in those parts no one was paying attention to. Although the place hardly existed, the fact is that La Realidad, became a reality through repetition and the clever use of all media.

Around that same time, faced by the onslaught of digital barbarians who were willing to engage in what was considered a most despicable of practices -manipulating images of reality in their computers- photographers, editors and not few critics, started to rally around the notion that the "reality of the image" and thus photography had to be saved from any digital assault. The representation of "Reality" (with a capital R) had to be defended at all costs.

Documentary photographers were for the most part at the center core of those arguing against all forms of digital representation. It was considered in some quarters as the root of all evil, which eventually would erode the credibility of the photographic image.

Symposia and panel discussions were organized with photographers, editors and publishers of major publications, who would try to shame each other into acceptance as to what constituted an acceptable practice and what was not. (It is fascinating to observe how fast all the trappings of an inquisitorial practice can be erected.) It was determined for instance that images had to be labeled clearly to separate those that had suffered an alteration from those that were "pure" i.e. not modified (whatever that meant).

Since I produced one of the earliest bodies of digital work, and I did not particularly care to have any "Inquisition" pass judgement on my integrity, I devised a solution that offered two dates for all those images which had been altered by me in the computer. The day when the basic image was taken (on film at the time) and when the image had subsequently been altered in the computer. Thus, you had a guide if something had been altered in the computer by observing if I offered two dates or solely one. People would actually go around my exhibitions trying to guess if something had been done to the picture or not, and then looking at the dates.

In order to avoid any sort of manipulation with the photographic image, codes of "ethics" were drawn up using arguments based themselves on every sort of manipulation using words and ideas in very questionable ways.

The central distortion was that all the other media (written word, audio, video) were considered apparently less prone to the dangers of manipulation than those posed by photography. To extract a few minutes from an hour of audiotape or from a video interview was seen as a legitimate activity by such journalists. However if a photographer took an equivalent action, for instance that of deleting a pack of cigarettes or a telephone pole from a picture, he or she had incurred in a major sin. Never mind that by framing a picture differently at the time of making it, one could obviate the unfortunate telephone pole, without being taken to task for manipulating the representation of reality. After all a photograph had always been a proof of reality, was it not? Now it turns out The New York Times, in a very interesting article of January 13th, has just denounced CBS and their news program for inserting their own CBS logo on top of the NBC one that appears in real life in Times Sq. They did so during a live transmission at the time of the New Year celebrations in New York. The fact is that the genie of altering reality has been brought out of the bottle and nothing, I believe, will make it possible to be returned again to whence it came from, regardless if this applies to still or motion pictures.

On CBS News, Some of
What You See Isn't There

To tamper with a photograph, something that is understood in most cultures as "proof of reality", is a such profound issue, that in order to deal with the ensuing problems of manipulation, these have been placed in the context of a major moral problem. In the case of photography, some have gone as far as suggesting that digital images no longer qualify for the term of being a photograph. One thus was expelled from society and declared a non-photographer. We have been told: "Thou shall not alter a photograph", and if you do, you have to place corresponding warning labels all over the neighborhood, informing of such a transgression. If you read the comments by Dan Rather from CBS, this is just what he stated concerning their own transgression in the video.

The double standards being used seemed not to bother anyone. You could manipulate anything you wanted, without it becoming a cardinal sin, as long as this happened before the legendary click. No problem in using makeup, and all sorts of cosmetics to embellish the color and tone of the skin, but if you dared to correct something once the picture had been shot you ought to make all kinds of acknowledgements that "reality" has been tampered with.

Yes you can use any filter you like, as long as these are optical and in front of the lens, but be aware that once the picture has been taken this same effort is called manipulation. Feel free to choose the film of your choice to enhance the visual interpretation of the image, but consider yourself damned if you decide upon such an alteration in a post click position using the computer.

The problem with the accusations by The New York Times, or the Dan Rather mea culpa, or the excuses presented by CBS, is that while they make all this fuss about the logo being there or not, nothing is ever discussed about the real manipulation of news behind the scenes by these institutions. It is a charade to engage with the alteration of such logos when in fact there has been ample evidence about all those news organizations' complicity with altering facts for the benefit of whatever was expedient at the time either politically or financially. Suppressing certain news is as much about manipulation of reality as sticking a logo where there was none.

Some 25 years ago, I made the following image with the man resting under his three hats. The obvious distortion of the column shooting off towards the left was the by-product of using a wide-angle lens on a 35-mm camera. I have always had a preference for wide angel lenses; they somehow bring you in closer, but they also distort reality. Do they ever! (Can you imagine if the world would really be like those wide angle lenses depicted reality, the instability of all those buildings with constructions that are always at odd angles?).

Now that I have the computer to work with, I took another look at that image, and fixed the distorted column. Today the question would be, for all those who shout foul at the very thought of using the computer to alter photographs, which "reality" is a more accurate representation of that which was. The one where the column is at an angle, or the one where it is now straight. Never mind that the picture is in black and white, which oddly enough is not a problem for photography purists. Like if the world is actually devoid of colors.

Again, as in other examples stated earlier, if the adjustment had been done "in camera" with a bellows adjustment on a 4 x 5, all would be acceptable; if done with the aid of the computer after the fact, everyone seems to be up in arms. I am sure you get the point about how we need to move forward and forget all this nonsense about the manipulation of digital photographs. Face it, all photographs are and have been nothing else but the product of manipulating reality.

They are simply interpretations by the photographers who made those pictures. As we are faced by a new millennium, to those who question the term of photography when applied to digital imagery, let me just remind you that photography means writing with light. It does not demand that such "writing with light" be accomplished through chemical means or electronic ones, we are fortunately left to pursue our own choices. As I see it, irrespective of which process we use, they are all photographs as long as they include the magic word: light.

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The beauty of light as the sun sets was best described by my four year old son, when the other afternoon as we visited a friend, he was so enthralled by the colors in the sky that he declared to his mother and me, " I want to marry the sky".
I suspect that if we responded to reality with such an open mind (that of considering marrying the sky) and allowed the emotion of light to become part of our awareness, we would appreciate the irrelevance of the present debate, as long as the image conveyed the message we wanted.
Obviously every one of you viewing this image will get to see somewhat different colors as probably no two monitors out there are identical. So which one is the true representation of the reality of that moment? What colors was Julito looking at that afternoon in Los Angeles, California as the millennium rolled around and I recorded the moment with a camera without film?

Please share with us your thoughts on these significant issues. As we start the new century we need to have a Reality adjustment with regard to all these topics.

Pedro Meyer
Junuary 2000

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On CBS News, Some of What You See Isn't There

By ALEX KUCZYNSKI

If you were watching the "CBS Evening News" broadcast live from Times Square on New Year's Eve, you might have seen a billboard advertising CBS News out in the square behind Dan Rather. You might have looked at the well-placed billboard and wondered just exactly how it was that CBS was able to place its ad so fortuitously.

The truth is, it didn't. The billboard and the advertisement for CBS did not exist. The image was digitally imported onto the live CBS broadcast and used to obliterate real objects, the NBC Astrovision underneath the New Year's ball and a Budweiser ad.

Inserting digital images has become increasingly common in sports and entertainment programming -- usually to insert advertising and corporate logos and first down markers in football -- but has generally been considered out of line on news shows, a type of programming in which the assumption of reality is considered sacrosanct and not informing viewers is considered a breach of journalistic guidelines. CBS contends such practices do not cross ethical boundaries.

CBS News is using the technology as part of a broad agreement the network signed last year with a technology company, Princeton Video Image, to provide branding services for a variety of CBS programs. The technology has been used regularly on "The Early Show" and the news magazine "48 Hours" and was used on the Evening News on Dec. 30 and 31, according to CBS news executives.

"The Early Show" has been using it almost every day since the show's debut on Nov. 1.

News show logos that appear real are being inserted on the sides of structures, like the General Motors building, on the back of a horse-drawn carriage in Central Park, in the fountain outside the Plaza Hotel and, yesterday, in the center of Wollman Rink.
In some instances, the logo clearly resembles a large billboard advertising CBS News.

"We were looking for some way to brand the neighborhood with the CBS logo," said Steve Friedman, the executive producer of "The Early Show" who is entrusted with bringing the program, in which CBS invested at least $30 million, up in the ratings from its current No. 3 spot. "It's a great way to do things without ruining the neighborhood. Every day we have a different way of using it, whether it's logos or outlines. And we haven't even scratched the surface of its uses yet."

Mr. Friedman said that the practice did not press the boundaries of ethical guidelines for CBS News.

"It does not distort the content of the news," he said, and compared the use of the technology with earlier visual innovations.

"I remember the hue and cry when people started to use graphics on news."

The CBS News deal with Princeton Video Image was reported in the Jan. 3 issue of the trade magazine Broadcasting & Cable.

Eric Shapiro, the director of the "CBS Evening News" and CBS News Special Events, said he might use the technology again on "Evening News" and that the news division examines each case individually before putting the virtual logos on the air. "The technique, I find, works best if you put it someplace where there is intended to be something," he said. "If it feels that it is not correct to use it, then we obviously won't use it."

Mr. Rather, he said, knew about the use of the virtual technology during the broadcast and did not protest the practice.

"But he did not know in advance," Mr. Shapiro said. "These are not things he needs to worry about. He spends most of his time worrying about the content of the broadcast. But as a production technique he was most certainly aware that it was happening around him."

Mr. Rather did not return a phone call seeking comment last night. Bryant Gumbel and Jane Clayson, anchors of "The Early Show," could not be reached for comment.

Harry Jessell, the editor of Broadcasting & Cable magazine, said the practice alarmed him.

"I think it does raise some ethical questions for CBS," he said. "You would think that a TV news organization would not tamper with video, especially live video. Viewers should be able to rely on the fact that what they are seeing is actually there."

Network news has flirted with similar technological issues once before. In 1994, the use of a fake backdrop caused an outcry in 1994 when the ABC journalist Cokie Roberts appeared in front of a picture of Capitol Hill. Peter Jennings, the ABC News anchor, introduced a report from Ms. Roberts, and said that she was reporting from Capitol Hill; Ms. Roberts, wearing a coat, appeared in front of what looked like the Capitol. But without the knowledge of network viewers or even Mr. Jennings, Ms. Roberts was actually inside the ABC News Washington bureau with a photographic image of the Capitol projected behind her. Ms. Roberts and Rick Kaplan, then the executive producer of "World News Tonight" and now the president of CNN, were both reprimanded and the network apologized on the air.

Spokesmen for NBC, ABC and Fox said their news units did not use such digital technology on news broadcasts. Christa Robinson, a spokeswoman for CNN, said she knew of no instance of the technology's use.

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CBS Is Divided Over the Use of False Images in Broadcasts

By BILL CARTER

PASADENA, Calif., Jan. 12 -- Dan Rather, the CBS News anchor, called the decision to superimpose a digitally created CBS logo to block out an NBC-sponsored sign in Times Square during CBS's news coverage of New Year's Eve celebrations "a mistake" that he regrets.

"There is no excuse for it," Mr. Rather said in a telephone interview today. "I did not grasp the possible ethical implications of this and that was wrong on my part."

While he questioned whether CBS should have taken the step at all to alter the reality of a scene in this way, he said, "At the very least we should have pointed out to viewers that we were doing it."

CBS's decision to use a new form of technology that allows electronically created images to replace actual structures had stirred a debate inside CBS News and today -- at news conference here attended by Andrew Heyward, the president of CBS News, and Leslie Moonves, the president of CBS Television -- it was clear the debate was not over.

Mr. Heyward, responding to questions about an article on the topic in The New York Times on Wednesday, defended CBS's use of the technology, developed by a firm called Princeton Video Image. The network has regularly used it on its morning news program, "The Early Show," to display a CBS promotion on everything from the back of horse carriages to a side of the General Motors building, where the program originates.

Mr. Heyward said he believed the transmission of the digital images during the morning program was "a whimsical and creative way to display our logo in various and unlikely places." The use during Mr. Rather's coverage in Times Square was, he said, "a closer call," which was made based on his conviction that "on New Year's Eve with confetti in Dan's hair, I saw this as an extension of our graphics, a change in this very festive, in effect, set."

He added that Mr. Rather had not been part of the "internal discussion" about using the technique and that "reasonable people could disagree on whether this was an appropriate use of digital technology."

Mr. Moonves supported Mr. Heyward. "Anytime there's an NBC logo up on our network we'll block it again," he said.

But Mr. Rather, in the phone interview, was steadfast.

"This is a new tool and we're responsible for how we use it," he said. "I'm not satisfied with how we met out ethical responsibility to viewers."

He added, "I'm troubled that this was done."

Mr. Heyward said there had been "vigorous debate" on the use of the technology inside CBS News.

"I'm certain we're not going to make blanket use of this technology," he said, but added that the network would definitely continue to use it on its morning news program.

CBS recently poured more than $30 million into remaking that program, but it still lags badly in ratings. Mr. Heyward is also dealing with a ratings falloff for Mr. Rather's newscast.

Neither of the other network morning news programs use the Princeton Video Image technology. Jeff Zucker, the executive producer of NBC's "Today" program said, "We were offered the same technology and we passed because we didn't think it was appropriate." Eileen Murphy, a spokeswoman for ABC News said: "It's been discussed at length. We wouldn't use it here."

Still, Mr. Heyward said that on "The Early Show," the anchor Bryant Gumbel had on occasions noted on the air that the digital logo was being superimposed when he thought it was being done in a particularly creative spot.

"If somebody comes to New York and is surprised that it doesn't say 'The Early Show' in the middle of Fifth Avenue, I don't think we've committed a journalism sin," Mr. Heyward said. "I don't want to apologize for being aggressive in exploiting this."

He said that he understood the argument against the use of the technol-
ogy -- which is widely employed in sports and some entertainment
programs -- on news programs. The danger is "that it looks too real
and therefore it's wrong or potentially wrong," he said. "I certainly
agree it's potentially subject to abuse."

He noted that advances in computer-generated techniques had made
things like missiles hitting Baghdad and airplanes crashing look so real
that it was incumbent on networks to underscore that these were not
real images.

"We're not sitting here rubbing our hands, saying how can we use this
again," Mr. Heyward said. "We are not in the deception business,
We're in the reality business; we're in the accuracy business. To the
extent that this technology interferes with that core belief we're not
going to do it. We will absolutely take seriously the use of this tool."

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