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Myth, Montage and Magic Realism: Rethinking the Photograph as a discursive document.

The purpose of this paper is to propose that the social agency of photographic practices lie within maintaining a 'productive tension' created by the photograph's paradoxical roles of documentation and the aesthetic abstraction of events or moments, that is a vital force in the use of photographs as discursive documents.

One means of considering this productive tension, this paradoxical double function is through an exploration of the subversive and transgressive qualities of the literary genre, 'Magical Realism.'

While the term magical realism in its modern sense first appeared in 1955 in relation to Spanish American fiction, the phrase was first coined in 1925 by the German art critic Franz Roh, to refer to a new post-expressionist art movement in the Weimar Republic known as New Objectivity.ⁱ

It is important to note that Roh believed magical realism was related to but distinctive from surrealism.

The influence and relationship between surrealism and photography has been explored extensively and even though magical realism and surrealism both explore the illogical or non-realist, it is important to note some vital differences.

According to Maggie Ann Bowers, Surrealism seeks to express the sub-conscious, unconscious, the repressed and inexpressible. Magical realism, on the other hand, focus's on the material object and the actual existence of things and rarely presents the extraordinary in the form of a dream or a *psychological experience*. As Bowers writes, "The ordinariness of magical realism's magic relies on its accepted and unquestioned position in tangible and *material reality*."

It is the oxymoronic ambiguity of the term Magical Realism that makes it so useful in discussing photographic practice. The productive tension created by the photograph's indexical relationship to its referent and its abstraction into imagery is equivalent to Magical Realism's inherent inclusion of contradictory elements. Lois Zamora and Wendy Farris suggest that because Magical Realism breaks down the distinction between the usually opposing terms of the magical and the real, it is often considered to be a disruptive narrative mode... magical realism is a mode suited to exploring...

and transgressing.... boundaries whether the Boundaries are ontological, political, geographical or generic. Magical Realism explores the impact fiction has on reality, reality on fiction and the reader's role in between; as such, it is well suited for drawing attention to social or political criticism.

Bowers argues that the root of Magical Realism's transgressive and subversive aspect lies in the fact that,

“once the category of truth has been brought into question and the category of the real broken down or overturned, the boundaries of other categories become vulnerable. The reader becomes aware that if the category of the real is not definitive then all assumptions of truth are also at stake.” P. 67-68.

Photographic Myths

To explore the potential relationship between Magical Realism and Documentary Photography I want to use an image that was published on the front page of the New York Times' on 'Wednesday, August 29, 1979.' The cover page is dominated by a photograph of a multiple execution by firing squad, of a line of blindfolded men (see slide 02). The caption for the photograph reads:

Army forces loyal to Ayatollah Khomeini executing Kurdish rebels and two former officers of the Shah's army. The men were found guilty by Ayatollah Khalkhali. of crimes against the state. (Kurdistan 1997: 289).

The Photograph of the execution was, of course, chosen for front page of the newspaper for of its spectacular depiction of the 'decisive moment' as the firing squad open fire. The photograph, which was taken from just behind and to the right of the crouching firing squad, enables us to see along the line of Kurdish rebels who are photographically captured in various, involuntary contortions, as the bullets rip through their bodies. Or at least most of them are...

This particular photograph offers a darkly 'unreal' reading, as at least two of the men are still standing upright, indicating that the bullets have not yet struck their bodies. This is especially so for the figure with the bandaged hand closest to the photographer. His seemingly calm and dignified posture is desperately at odds with the chaotic scene that surrounds him.

Through the camera's ability to visually freeze a moment, the photograph seems to be representing simultaneously, a scene that is chaotic and violent, whilst also foregrounding the dignified calm of at least one man who is about to be shot. It is without doubt an arresting image, which serves to be both disturbing as it confronts us with the moment of mortality, while reassuring us of the possibility of dignity in the face of death. Within the discourse of professional photojournalism, it is obviously an exceptionally successful photograph, and it is of no surprise therefore, to learn that this image won the 1980 Pulitzer Prize for 'Spot News Photograph.' Importantly, it is the only Pulitzer Prize that has been awarded to a photographer anonymously. The press release that accompanied the announcement of this Pulitzer Prize, read:

The name of the photographer who won the 1980 Pulitzer Prize for spot news photography today is not known at this time. The picture, showing a government firing squad executing nine Kurdish rebels and two former police officers of the deposed Shah, in Iran, was distributed by United Press International August 28th, 1979. In entering the photo, UPI managing editor Larry De Santis explained: "Standing by helplessly, armed only with a camera, this photographer did the only thing he could—make a photo, get it distributed and hope it arouses the world to react and put an end to bloodshed... Because of the present unrest in Iran, the name of the photographer cannot be revealed at this time." If he won the Pulitzer Mr De Santis said, "the prize can be forwarded to him as soon as the trouble in Tehran is history." (Kurdistan, 1997: 291)

The anonymity of the photographer responsible for capturing this photograph allows us to explore the mythic construction of the 'concerned photojournalist' by unpicking De Santis's description of the photographer and his actions. The tone of De Santis's quote strongly suggests that he knows the photographer and by implication, is 'speaking for him.' This allows him to depict the photojournalist as the romanticised, archetypal 'hero'. De Santis sets the scene as we picture the photographer 'standing by helplessly, armed only with a camera,' suggesting perhaps he would have intervened (heroically) if he had been armed with anything more deadly. He immediately goes on to boldly state that the photographer's motivation to photograph

the event was to 'put an end to bloodshed.' Although, how this impossibly noble desire might be achieved is of course, left unformulated.

Post-structural writers such as Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler have expertly critiqued this casting of the photojournalist as moral crusader against injustice and injury. They exposed this as a mythological fog that masks the ideological delineations of the large media institutions. Rather, they argued that role of the photojournalist is to produce spectacular images that stir our conscience just enough to recognise and take pleasure in our own empathy.

In her seminal text 'In and around and Afterthoughts on Documentary Photography', Rosler describes the process by which the photographic image's potential social agency is dissipated.

Utopia has been abandoned and liberalism itself has been deserted... The exposé, the compassion and outrage, of documentary fuelled by the dedication to reform has shaded over into combinations of exoticism, tourism, voyerism, psychologism and metaphysics, trophy hunting- and careerism. (Rosler 2004: 178)

The use of a 'spectacular' prize that celebrates the role of the photographer rather than critically engages with the subject matter of the image obscures the historical and social context of the making and dissemination of photojournalistic images. For example, it is not acknowledged that the Pulitzer Prize was awarded to this photograph just one week after the US severed diplomatic links with Iran, due to the on going Iranian hostage crisis; hinting, perhaps towards a selection process that was not entirely photographic or journalistic in its deliberations.

De Santis' mythologizing depiction of the 'Heroic' photojournalist is further exposed by the fact that nobody at UPI knew who had *actually* taken the picture, let alone speak for, his/her motivations or intentions. The true identity of the photographer wasn't established in the western press until the journalist Joshua Prager published an article in the Wall Street Journal in December 2006. The photographer was finally named as Jahangir Razmi, who was a staff photographer for Ettela'at, (Iran's largest national newspaper) during the Islamic Revolution.

In an interview with Prager, Razmi recounts that the trial of the eleven men ‘heard no evidence,’ and only lasted approximately thirty minutes, before they were proclaimed as ‘corrupt on earth’ and sentenced to death. The condemned men were immediately led outside onto the grounds of the Sanandaj municipal airport, lined up in front of the firing squad and shot.

The chief editor of Ettela'at, Mohammed Heydari, decided to use the now iconic image for the front page of the Tehran edition of the paper. Importantly, while Razmi claims that he felt ‘totally free’ to take pictures during the executions, it was also Mr Heydari who decided to publish the photograph without accreditation, hoping that anonymity would go some way to protect his young staff photographer.ⁱⁱ

On the same evening of the publication, the Ettela'at head office in Tehran was flooded with requests for the image from other newspapers and agencies. The first to arrive was a representative of UPI, who collected the picture *without obtaining the identity of the photographer* and wired the image to the Brussels office of UPI and from there it was forwarded onto De Santis in Manhattan.

Around the same time that UPI was sending/selling copies of the image to news organisations across the globe, agents from the new Iranian regime visited Ettela'at to confiscate the image that Ayatollah Khalkhali had publically denounced as a fabrication. Indeed the Ayatollah claimed that the images were created ‘by the hands of western imperialism... and surely montaged by Zionists.’ (Kurdistan 2007: 290) Meanwhile however Mr Razmi had secretly printed a selection of eight enlargements and created a contact sheet of 27 images out his 70 photographs. He smuggled these images out of the newspaper and hid them in his home, returning to them each year as an act of quiet personal memorial to the men he had witnessed being killed.

The images that Mr Razmi hid, provide a visual sequence wherein we can see the blindfolded men being lead out onto the place of their execution, and eventually through to their deaths. The series allows us to imagine Mr Razmi working from left to right behind the line of kneeling soldiers as they prepare to shoot. The moments continue up to and beyond the ‘decisive’ moment of the prize-winning photograph. We can see the dignified presence of the blindfolded man with the bandaged hand, now identified as Naser Salimi, an employee of the Sanandaj health department. This

dignified presence is shattered however in the next image, which captures the moment the bullets rip through his body. The sequence continues as the dust rises with all eleven men now dead.

After reading the article in the Wall Street Journal, the photographic artists, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, travelled to Tehran to meet Mr Razmi. They were granted permission by Razmi to scan the images at a higher resolution for their own work, entitled *Afterlife* (2009). From the scans that they made, the artists selected and 'cut out' individual figures from the various frames within which they are visible, and reinserted these isolated figures back into a single frame, with each frame dedicated to a single person. For example, we have a montage of moments depicting Naser Salimi from seven different angles and at seven different scales within the frame, including the image of his dignified stance in the seconds before his execution. (See slide 9) In a text that accompanies this series, the artists state that the images work as "an iconoclastic breakdown or dissection of the original image, which interrupts our relationship as spectators to images of distant suffering." (Broomberg & Chanarin 2009) ¹

The use of this stripped down, almost minimalist form of collage does shatter the myth of the decisive moment, so important to professional photojournalism.

However by foregrounding the *Afterlife* series as an iconoclastic dissection of the original image limits the disruptive qualities of the artwork to photographic discourses. Their work reformulates the formal aesthetics of the photographs of the execution to provide an intelligent critique of photography that, unfortunately in the process can mask the visibility of the historical moment.

Indeed I would argue that there is always the danger that the desire to disrupt our unthinking assumptions of the photographic medium can distract from the social or political contexts within which the image was made.

Rather I want to propose that each collaged frame points towards the possibility of an almost infinite number of photographs of the event that disrupts any authoritative claims to truth.

According to Ben Highmore, in his book *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory* (2002), "there is a huge potential for montage to generate critical forms of reading, by making

¹ (<http://www.choppedliver.info/afterlife/> 10/12/12)

contradictions and antagonisms explicit within the social realm.” (Highmore 2002: 90) As an artistic practice there is the refusal of montage to subsume these diverse elements into a homogeneous whole.

Instead of accumulating these elements into a resolved and meaningful unity, collage offers a bombardment of materials that resist narrative resolution... collage allows its condition as an articulation to be made evident: the relationships between elements are denaturalized, suggesting that they can always be re-articulated in different arrangements (ibid).

The practice montage, when successful, “is an aesthetic of experimentation that recognizes that actuality always outstrips the procedures for registering it” (Highmore 2002: 91).

In the same manner as Magical Realism montage can work to maintain a ‘plentitude’ to what is possible, offering the possibility to speak against totalitarian regimes, by attacking the stability of the definitions upon which these systems rely.

Rereading Broomberg and Chanarin’s Afterlife series, the deliberate use of photographic montage can offer the possibility of challenging our understanding of the event as much as our assumptions about photographs. In particular, the last of the series titled ‘Afterlife 11’ is a collage of a young man wearing ‘white shoes, white pants, white shirt, dark sunglasses and his cowboy inspired gun holster’ (see slide 10). His ostentatious dress sense marks him out visually and Prager identifies him as Ali Karimi, one of Ayatollah Khomeini’s bodyguards. From the original sequence of images, as well as Razmi’s testimony of the event, we know that Karimi approached the line of eleven bodies and supplied the coup de grace, one shot to the head for each man.

As shocking as Mr Razmi’s prize winning photograph is, the images of Ali Karimi are perhaps more telling of the blind arrogance of power in Karimi’s casual attitude to murder. In Broomberg and Chanarin’s image we can see Karimi from various different angles, bent over pointing his gun towards the ground, although the isolation of this figure means we can no-longer see what he is pointing his gun at. However the deliberate disruption of the authority of any single photograph works in conjunction with his casual body posture and his improbable ‘American inspired, film star’ dress sense. The combination of the tangible, the improbable and the impossible more

effectively undermines any legitimacy or authority the regime might have claimed in carrying out these killings.

Jean- François Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) requests, 'Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences.' (1984: 82)... By waging war on totality magical realist devices can be used to disrupt fixed categories of truth and this disruption of categories can create a space beyond authoritative discourse where the unrepresentable can be expressed." (Bowers: 2004 82)

ⁱ "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction" by Angel Flores in 1955 and has since then come to be considered to refer to a literature genre and indeed primarily with Latin American Literature.

Post-expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the most recent European Painting. (1925) Franz Roh. The Artists he discussed included, Otto Dix, Max Ernst, and George Grosz, whose work has become associated with New Objectivity movement coined by Max Beckmann in 1926.

ⁱⁱ Mr. Razmi remained in Kurdistan, where at a Sanandaj newsstand he came across a copy of Ettela'at featuring one of his other photos showing the blindfolded men standing in wait. He understood why his more incendiary photographs were unprinted but nonetheless was disappointed. "I expected my name to be published," he says.

Two days later, reporter and photographer returned to the Ettela'at office in Sanandaj. The office manager lifted from his desk the Tehran edition of the paper that had reported the execution, they recall. He said copies brought to Kurdistan were selling for more than double the cover price. The manager was a Kurd and Mr. Razmi recalls

him saying: 'We have to build a statue of gold of you.' And because of what he told me, I understood that this photo was dangerous." (Pregar WSJ, 06/12/2006)