For my final project, I decided to dive into the history of photography to answer the question "What is Truth in Photography?" During a time when society is so dependent on technology, especially during a pandemic, I wanted to explore how I could capture photographs that were still meaningful and authentic. To me, truth in photography means that Photoshop functions such as saturation, contrast, and the smooth and blur tools are used minimally or not at all.

All the photographs I have taken for this project were of my laptop screen during a Zoom call. I used my digital camera to capture different moments during the call and the only edits made to the images were to crop and straighten the photographs. Although my images are of different people, I think all the photographs come together to show how digital photography can still be beautiful and intriguing with minimal manipulation.

I have always been frustrated with how photoshopped images have become so normalized. Photography was initially invented as a form of documentation and edits like these provide false notions of a frozen moment in time. Digital photography requires the quick snap of a button, while photographers used to have to develop their images in the darkroom. The handmade work of a photographer has now become the digital work of a computer. Photographers need to wake up and have this realization so that our medium doesn't lose its original significance.

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What is "Truth" in Photography?

Amaya T.

Since its invention in 1839, photography has been used for documenting, understanding, and interpreting the world. Now, photographs can be found everywhere, from advertisements to magazines. It used to be a labor intensive process to develop photographs, but now, the simple click of a button can capture what is right in front of you. This disconnect between photographer and product I believe is the reason that photographs are losing their truth. But what makes something "true" in photography? To answer this question, we have to understand some of the history of photography.

The Daguerreotype: 1839

The daguerreotype was the first commercially successful photographic process, invented by Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre. The daguerreotype creates a highly detailed image on a sheet of copper, plated with a thin coat of silver, without the use of a negative. The silver-plated copper plate had to first be cleaned and polished until the surface looked like a mirror. Next, the plate was sensitized in a closed box over iodine until it took on a yellow-rose appearance. The plate, held in a light proof holder, was then transferred to the camera. After exposure to light, the plate was developed over hot mercury until an image appeared. To fix the image, the plate was immersed in a solution of sodium thiosulfate or salt and then toned with gold chloride. Working with all of these chemicals and metals was expensive and labor intensive. Creating an early daguerreotype required a lot of caution to not inhale or spill these potentially harmful substances. If an error occurred in the photographic or developing process, there wasn't simply an undo button to reverse what had been done.

In order to produce a clear photograph, the subject of the photo had to remain completely still for the entirety of the exposure time. Exposure times for the earliest daguerreotypes ranged from three to fifteen minutes, but later modifications to the sensitization process and the improvement of photographic lenses reduced the time to less than a minute.

The Cyanotype: 1841

Invented by Sir John Herschel, the cyanotype process was one of the first non-silver technologies used to create photographic images. It was not utilized in mainstream photography, but as a copying technique, becoming known by the term "blueprint." A cyanotype produces a continuous tone image of Prussian Blue using a sensitizing solution of ferric ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide. These iron salts, when exposed to ultraviolet light, are reduced to their ferrous state, producing a high contrast blue image when oxidized. Oxidation is hastened by immersion in running water, which also washes away the unused iron salts.

I see cyanotypes of plants as a pure form of documentation. The details of the photograph are determined by the sun, not a person, making the final product truthful to the reality of the object itself. But even when a cyanotype appears like this one on the right, the sun is still the final factor in how the photograph will appear. Yes, cyanotypes like the one on the right has objects manipulated by the artist, but because a cyanotype is a "blueprint," the viewer can determine how the artist placed each object to create the image. I believe this type of manipulation to be different from digital manipulation because in this art piece, the artist creates a story of a mother and child, while photoshop falsifies the appearance of a preexisting story.


Film Negatives: 1888

Negatives are used to make prints by reversing the image a second time to restore the light and dark areas to their original tones. Like digital files, a single negative image can be used to generate many final prints with widely differing appearances. Negatives are typically strips or sheets of transparent plastic film and will last for many generations if handled well. A print can often be replaced as long as the negative is available, but the negative itself is usually irreplaceable. Thus, a flaw on a negative can affect many prints.

Different black and white film types and different film speeds have different development times, but the general process goes like this:

- The ideal water temperature is 68-72° F and development times will run anywhere from four minutes to 20 minutes
- Water rinse for one minute to stop and remove developer
- Fixer for five minutes to remove silver and eliminate light sensitivity of the film
- Fixer remover for two minutes to remove last of any remaining soluble silver and fixer
- Water rinse for 10 minutes to remove any remaining chemicals
- Final rinse in a wetting agent for one minute for consistent and even drying
- Dry in dust-free environment
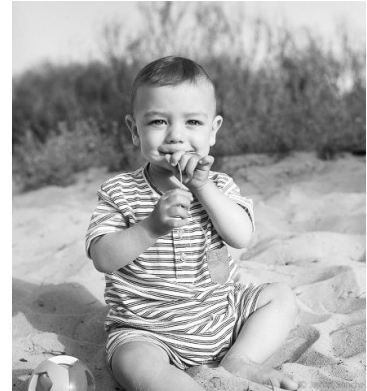
Although the removal of color in a photograph does technically make the photograph less "true," black and white photographs provide a different, yet still authentic, view of a frozen piece of time. Black and white photographs capture the highlights and shadows of the subject. This more simplistic image might even provide more truth than that of color because the lack of color forces the viewer to pay more attention to the subject rather than the colors of their clothing or surrounding background. The hands-on process of developing film also adds to why black and white film photos can be considered truthful.

But determining truth in photographs is a case by case basis, not a general one. Even though the photographer was involved in the development of the photograph, this didn't mean that the photograph was guaranteed to turn out "truthful."

Edward S. Curtis

Curtis took photographs for *The North American Indian.* In an article published in 1914, he wrote, "We want the documentary picture of the people and their homeland—a picture that will show the soul of the people." But, many of his images depict people who were imitating outdated traditions for the camera. Sometimes—as Curtis confessed was the case among the Navajos—the reenactment of ceremonies "broke down" traditional beliefs and led to disagreements among the people. *The North American Indian*'s representation of Native Americans—as already depleted in population, deprived of the resources to withstand white expansion, and incapable of dynamic change—should not be thought of as "true." Its representation had political, economic, ideological, and aesthetic determinants. It was inflected by the attitudes of mainstream culture. The project was nationwide in scope and had connections to national policies executed by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs that, seen from the vantage of the 21st century, proved extremely damaging—economically as well as psychologically—to Native peoples.

Once you stage a photograph, is there any truth to it at all? There is a difference between telling someone how to stand and directing them to do and wear things that tell an inaccurate story. What is the point of documenting things if what you're photographing isn't a current reality? I believe there is a clear line drawn to distinguish between modeling and documenting, and that it's realized through common sense. Documentation captures reality, while modeling captures reality manipulated by the photographer. But what draws the line in what is too much manipulation versus what is considered acceptable?
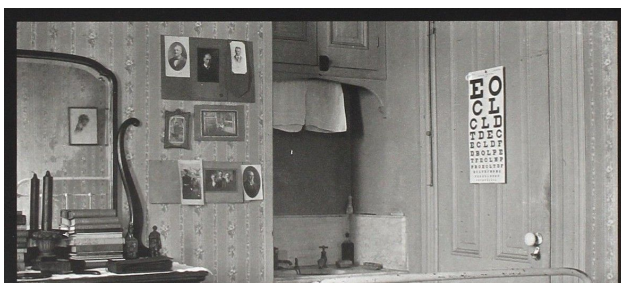
John Szarkowski, a photographer, curator, historian, and critic, published his book *The*

Photographer's Eye in 1966. In the introduction of the book, he addresses verity of photographs:

The first thing that the photographer learned was that photography dealt with the actual; he had not only to accept this fact, but to treasure it; unless he did, photography would defeat him. He learned that the world itself is an artist of incomparable inventiveness, and that to recognize its best works and moments, to anticipate them, to clarify them and make them permanent, requires intelligence both acute and supple.

But he learned also that the factuality of his pictures, no matter how convincing and unarguable, was a different thing than the reality itself. Much of the reality was filtered out in the static little black and white image, and some of it was exhibited with an unnatural clarity, an exaggerated importance. The subject and the picture were not the same thing, although they would afterwards seem so. It was the photographer's problem to see not simply the reality before him but the still invisible picture, and to make his choices in terms of the latter.

This was an artistic problem, not a scientific one, but the public believed that the photograph could not lie, and it was easier for the photographer if he believed it too, or pretended to. Thus, he was likely to claim that what our eyes saw was an illusion, and what the camera saw was the truth. Hawthorne's Holgrave, speaking of a difficult portrait subject said: "We give [heaven's broad and simple sunshine] credit only for depicting the merest surface, but it actually brings out the secret character with a truth that no painter would ever venture upon, even could he detect it… the remarkable point is that the original wears, to the world's eye… an exceedingly pleasant countenance, indicative of benevolence, openness of heart, sunny good humor, and other praiseworthy qualities of that cast. The sun, as you see, tells quite another story, and will not be coaxed out of it, after half a dozen patient attempts on my part. Here we have a man, sly, subtle, hard, imperious, and withal, cold as ice."

In a sense Holgrave was right in giving more credence to the camera image than to his own eyes, for the image would survive the subject, and become the remembered reality. William M. Ivins Jr. said "at any given moment the accepted report of an event is of greater importance than the event, for what we think about and act upon is the symbolic report and not the concrete event itself." He also said: "The nineteenth century began by believing that what was reasonable was true and it would end up by believing that what it saw a photograph of was true."

     I think it is important to acknowledge that the lens of a camera isn't the same as a human eye, no matter how similar it's designed to be. But I think the credit of a photograph always goes to the photographer because there is intention behind their photographs, while the camera is a tool simply performing the task it was created to do.

     A photograph is always in the perspective of the photographer and should be acknowledged as such, meaning that viewing a photograph is viewing one out of the infinite perspectives of reality that are possible.

Jerry Uelsmann

     Believe it or not, all of his prints are conventional gelatin silver. Uelsmann is one of the most important photographers of our time," says Billy Pittard, chairperson of MTSU's Electronic Media Communication Department. "He was the first photographer to have a one-man exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in 1967...a key event in the acknowledgment of photography as an art form." At the time, photography was still widely regarded as a tool for documenting reality,

rather than a means of artistic expression. Uelsmann's finely tuned allegorical images helped shatter those notions and push the artistic expectations of the medium.

For Uelsmann, "When you create these images you're at the fringes of your own understanding...It's not an intellectual thing." Negatives have never been the final product for him, instead it's a point to use for improvisation and invention.

In the documentary Jerry Uelsmann & Maggie Taylor: This Is Not Photography, Uelsmann talks about this approach and how he hopes his work is received: "If when someone looks at my photograph, if their first thought is, how did he make this, I feel I've failed. I don't mind that being the second question. I'm used to that. But their first response should be some authentic 'gee, this is weird,' or 'I had a dream like that,' or 'boy, that makes me feel lonely or happy.' You know, it's an authentic human response. "The technique is not the image; the technique supports the image," says Uelsmann. "It's that kind of thing that opens up possibilities to create, in my case, visual phenomena that was unachievable...with traditional photography."

Photographs like his can very easily be seen as "untrue," but I see his work as multiple fragments of reality combined. Uelsmann manually combines his images not to create the "best" photograph, but to intrigue those viewing his work. I believe that his open acknowledgment of how he manipulates his images to create a final product makes his work more authentic.

And then color was introduced to the mix...

William Eggleston

By 1976 color was everywhere—in magazine covers, movies, and television. But photography was still almost all black-and-white, guided by sayings like Walker Evans' declaration that color was "vulgar" and Robert Frank's insistence that "black and white are the colors of photography." Black and white was reassuring, as if it provided an aesthetic guarantee by removing the colors of the world. Color images were a tacky bit of business, associated with

magazines and billboards and the snapshots that ordinary people took of their vacations and weddings. The medium seemed almost completely superficial.

In a way, Eggleston did for color photography what the Dutch Masters of genre did for painting in the 16th and 17th centuries: He took it out of the hands of the wealthy institutions that had sponsored it (i.e. fashion magazines and advertising agencies) and turned it into an expression of the everyday. He brought authenticity back to color photography by capturing reality instead of producing superficial images like magazines and advertisements. If only he could bring authenticity back to digital photography too.

Compare his images to these examples of digital photography:

Both photographs are of red-heads with a blurred background, yet the digital photograph catches your eye more. Why is that? Because the digital photograph has been edited to have higher saturation and contrast levels. The woman's eye, lipstick, and hair colors all seem to be unnaturally emphasized in the photograph.

Both photographs are of people in a diner, but the details of the people's faces are drastically different. The woman's face in the digital photograph appears similar to a cartoon because not

only has the contrast level been raised, but the smoothing tool has been applied to her face and possibly her neck.

Both of these photographs are of men standing, but the digital photograph has been edited to focus more on its subject. The saturation, contrast, and exposure levels of the photograph have all been increased.

So what happened? Why does digital photography look less realistic?

Photo manipulation became popular.

Contemporary photography - a general category for photography from the 1970s onward. Over the past few decades, the medium has been defined by new technologies and formats, among the most important being color photography, digital manipulation, and large-scale printing techniques. Contemporary photographers often use these developments to present new perspectives on traditional subjects and compositions.

It doesn't sound too bad from the definition right? But **digital manipulation** has proven to be a continuous controversy in the photography community.

Melissa Lyttle (an independent photographer): It also reminds me of something I was told as a kid: lying is easy, telling the truth is the hard part. If we, as journalists, can't be trusted to tell the truth in our reporting, the entire foundation of our profession is going to crumble underneath our feet. The world is used to filters and manipulation for the sake of aesthetics. How do we as visual communicators adapt? I believe that many of us adopted certain techniques, not to change the

truth of what we were attempting to articulate, but to make our images stand out from the crowd. As photojournalists or documentarians we aim to highlight life and tell stories, but we are all do it in our own way. Each of us is a product of our own experiences in life and those experiences determine our motivation behind each click of the shutter.

Part of the **National Press Photographers Association Code of the Ethics** states: While photographing subjects, do not intentionally contribute to, alter, or seek to alter or influence events. Editing should maintain the integrity of the photographic images' content and context. Do not manipulate images or add or alter sound [referring also to video] in any way that can mislead viewers or misrepresent subjects.

Here's what the **Associated Press** has to say: Minor adjustments in Photoshop are acceptable. These include cropping, dodging and burning, conversion into grayscale, and normal toning and color adjustments that should be limited to those minimally necessary for clear and accurate reproduction (analogous to the burning and dodging previously used in darkroom processing of images) and that restore the authentic nature of the photograph. Changes in density, contrast, color and saturation levels that substantially alter the original scene are not acceptable. Backgrounds should not be digitally blurred or eliminated by burning down or by aggressive toning. The removal of 'red eye' from photographs is not permissible. But what constitutes "normal" or "authentic?" When does toning become "aggressive?"

World Press Photo had to disqualify 20 percent of the images in the penultimate round because the judges found the image content had been altered.

For now, it is hard to know what's comprised and what's not. But the industry needs to be more exact, too, about what is — and isn't — acceptable. We have to do something, but I don't know yet what that is. Do we check every single picture's RAW file before it goes out? Is that even possible? But we all have to take action, because right now, the situation is heartbreaking. It's a dangerous and slippery slope to travel down when altered work is lauded, and other photojournalists see that as the ideal. It sets a bar that is unreal, unhealthy, and unattainable.

Photo manipulation is not only an issue for photographers, it affects the viewer as well. What I found to be very disappointing during my research was that in looking for old photographs online, you can't tell which one is the original. Multiple different colored and contrasted images of Edward S. Curtis's photographs came up on Google images. So how does anyone ever truly know that what we are seeing is original in an age that photoshopping and face tuning images is seen as ideal and sometimes even required? The reason I am conflicted whether I should pursue photography professionally is because I don't want to feel the need to use photoshop to make my photos "gallery worthy" or simply just "better." Such manipulation creates unrealistic standards

for photographers who don't like photoshop to follow, and also illustrates to the public eye things like false body standards. Photographers need to remember that photography originated as a form of documentation, and that by manipulating their photographs to do the opposite, they are practically spitting on the art form they are trying to participate in.

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