
Deception and Imagery

By Deni Elliott

A picture speaks a thousand words, but "truth" is not always one of them. What matters not at all in art photography is vital in news photos.

News photos must be truthful. That is an achievable goal. But, don't expect the photos to represent reality. Only the most unfocused moving picture could claim to represent reality. And then, who'd watch it?

The news photo is no more, or less, than a slice of the action.

A news photo must be truthful in that viewers need to believe what they see. Photos ought not mislead the viewer to a false conclusion. They ought not deceive.

"Don't deceive!" means something different from "Do not manipulate!" By the very act of inclusion or exclusion, the image is manipulated. Some KINDS of manipulation are morally acceptable and others are not. An understanding of what counts as deception can go a long way in distinguishing the manipulation that is o.k. from that that is not.

The bottom line with deception is that, without good reason, no one wants to be purposely misled to a false conclusion. From the point of view of the person who has been deceived, it doesn't matter if she's been misled by an out-right lie or by the failure of some person to disclose the relevant truth.

If the manipulation of images creates a false depiction of reality or if the manipulation fails to disclose some relevant piece of reality, the manipulation is deceptive. In the first case, the photo is a visual lie; in the second it is an example of withholding information that the newsphotographer has a duty to tell.

As any investigative reporter knows, journalistic deception can sometimes be justified, but it's rare to hear photojournalists talk of news photos in terms of 'justified deception'. When it comes to image manipulation, the claim is usually that the manipulation is not deceptive. That reasoning is sound. If the photojournalist's image manipulation is not deceptive, nothing wrong has been done. No justification is necessary.

It helps to sort out what counts as deceptive if one can keep the perspective of the viewer. Consider the following: Using a long lens, the photographer brings into the frame a striking combination of a nuclear power plant in the background, a commercial fishing boat in the midground and a small child playing in the water in the foreground. The lens concentrated the depth of field so that it appears that the three objects are much closer than is real. Indeed, the fishing boat and the playing child seem to be in the shadow of the plant.

Such manipulation sacrifices truth for a good picture. It may have its place in political persuasion, but is deceptive if presented on the news pages. Viewers will rightly feel that they have been misled to have a false conclusion, namely that the nuclear power plant is very close to the fishing and recreational areas of a nearby bay.

However, using the criterion of calling manipulation deception only if it MISLEADS viewers, I would argue that *The Hartford Courant* and *Orange County Register* did nothing wrong when they "corrected" the color of the famous Challenger explosion photo as transmitted on the AP wire. The sky in the wire photo was heavy and dark. The call in those shops was to adjust the color so that it accurately reflected the light blue sky that most Americans had been seeing all day on their TV screens as the accident was replayed.

This criterion can also help sort out what can legitimately be removed from a news photo. Anything that doesn't distort reality can be removed by camera angle or by cropping. Nothing should be electronically deleted.

The slice of reality reflected by news photos is necessarily limited in frame. But, what is in that frame, whether it is a stray Coke can or whether it is an irrelevant person, is part of the reality slice. Minor mis-truths can damage the ability of viewers to believe what they see in newsphotos as seriously as major distortion. People don't like being lied to, not even a little.

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