Do we believe what we see or do we see what we believe? What are we shown and how are we shown it? How have we learned to trust documentary photography and whose interests have been served by that credibility? What truth value do we attach to seeing and what has seeing to do with thinking? These are some of the questions that guide this discussion of the most controversial photograph in history -- Robert Capa's ' Death of a Republican Soldier' -- and reflections on political scandals almost seventy years later, created by the recent broadcasting, and rebroadcasting, of videotapes showing members of the Mexican leftist party, Partido de la Revolución Democrático (PRD), accepting what are apparently illicit monies.

I want to return to some issues I raised in an earlier essay on Zonezero, " What's documentary about photography?: From directed to digital photojournalism ," and examine issues of digitalization and credibility, thanks to the Internet, which has permitted an ongoing interchange with readers in different countries, and provided the forum to address these topics.

In my earlier essay (and the dialogue sustained between John G. Morris and myself here on Zonezero), I argued that the Capa photo was directed. I believed that the soldier was pretending to have been shot, staging the scene for the benefit of the photojournalist. I arrived at this

conclusion based on the predominance of set-ups in Spanish Civil War photography, as well as the existence of images made by Capa, at the same time and in the same place, that are clearly not of combat. Research by Richard Whelan has recently established, at least to my satisfaction, that the photo is "authentic," that it is of a Republican militiaman captured by the camera's lens in his moment of death (Whelan). However, although the image is not directed, it may ironically be nonetheless the result, to some extent, of the photographer's intervention in the situation.

The polemics surrounding this photo have been well synthesized by Whelan in his latest essay on the subject, "Proving that Robert Capa's 'Falling Soldier' is Authentic." There, he supplies new evidence that has led me to change my reading of this image, above all when combined with John G. Morris's reflections in our published dialogue. A crucial clue offered by Whelan was provided by a forensic expert, Robert L. Franks, who noted that the soldier was not charging forward, but "had been standing flat footed when he was shot." To understand the importance of this observation, it must be combined with the testimonies of Morris and of Hansel Mieth, a German photojournalist who worked for Life, and a friend of Capa. She told Whelan that Capa had recounted to her that he and the militiamen had been "fooling around" when fascists infiltrated the lines and suddenly began to fire on them.

Capa also divulged to Mieth that he was "haunted" by the episode. Mieth's recollection of Capa's malaise about this image was corroborated in Morris's refutation of my arguments, to which I did not pay sufficient attention: "I don't care whether it was Federico Borrell or not, but a man died, and it bothered Bob the rest of his life" (Morris-Mraz, 2003). I should have asked myself why "The Greatest War Photographer in the World" would have felt uncomfortable with his most famous image, why he would not have talked about it in his autobiography, and why, as Whelan notes, "he altered details in his several accounts of the circumstances in which he had made his photograph."

The answer now seems clear, and the mystery resolved. The Republican militiamen were pretending to be in combat for Capa's camera, when a fascist machine gun killed this soldier just as he was posing. It is the coincidence between the fact that the photojournalist had focused on this individual at precisely the second before he was shot that makes this the most famous of war photographs. However, Capa's involvement left him feeling that he had somehow been responsible for the man's death. Hence, his reticence to discuss the photo, as well as a certain confusion in recounting the events surrounding the photograph's taking, decisions that are seen in a very different light if we assume that he staged the image. What this case establishes is that our interpretation of a picture is based on the presumptions we bring to the act of seeing it, but that research and reason can enable us to perceive it differently.

We live in an ocularcentric culture that has become increasingly hipervisual: we believe that what we see is true. However, although we presume the objectivity of what we observe, William Blake long ago alluded to both the subjectivity of vision, as well as its intimate relation to how we behave in the world: "As your eye is, so you see it; as you see it, so it is for you; as it is for you, so you act." Vision is the most powerful of our senses, and it is also that which has been most amplified by modern technology. Microscopic cameras make visible things that could never be seen by the unaided human eye, telescopic lenses bring close sights too far away to be discerned normally, and videotape recordings can be made of that which is often hidden from view. To add yet another turn to the screw, the technical expansion of our ocular powers is exponentially increased by the diffusion of documentary images by television, which brings them into our homes, and presents them as "information".

Mexico has recently been convulsed by a case of corruption that was recorded on videotape, and which is since being rebroadcast continuously. Some politicians of the PRD were taped while receiving money from a businessman under clearly suspicious circumstances. Time and again, ad nauseam, we witness them stuffing dollars into briefcases, plastic bags, and their pockets. These images "prove" the misconduct of the PRD for the mass media that, as everywhere, are controlled by the powerful and wealthy. Of interest here is why these images have received widespread and continual diffusion, what in fact they prove, and whether or not the credibility they enjoy is progressive or reactionary.

Mexicans are not as naive about political malfeasance as "Americans," for example. The absence of a genuinely free and critical press in the US, either electronic or written, allows for an "organic" and deep-seated corruption, such as that of Vice-President Richard Cheney who regularly receives largess from the Halliburton Company, the biggest contractor in Iraq, without any real objections being raised. The party dictatorship that ruled Mexico for 70 years fomented great corruption, because those who assumed office did so with the understanding that they would not investigate those who were placing them in power. This situation also left certain skepticism in the Mexican public.

The easy answer to why these videotapes images of the PRD have received great diffusion is that reactionary interests control television. The "information" it supplies is, in general, "disinformation". However, as Neil Postman remarked in a pathbreaking critique of this medium, "Disinformation does not mean false information. It means misleading information -- misplaced, irrelevant, fragmented or superficial information -- information that creates the illusion of knowing something but which in fact leads one away from knowing" (Postman, 109).

In this specific case, the corruption of the PRD politicians, though documented visually, is small potatoes compared to the misconduct of other parties. There appears to be abundant evidence that the PAN campaign of Vicente Fox was illegally financed in part by money from outside Mexico, funneled in through the organization, Amigos de Fox. And, the extraordinary venality of the PRI is a commonplace in Mexico, but its excesses were such that The New York Times (never a friend of real democracy in Latin America) was recently moved to describe the stealing of the 1988 election as "one of the most flagrant electoral frauds of modern times" (Editorial).

To its credit, the PRD has acted to rid itself of unscrupulous individuals, while the other parties have protected their black sheep. Hence, the media focus on the dishonesty of some

perredistas could also be explained as a result of that fact that this party has insistently presented itself as an alternative to political malfeasance.

However, the easy answers are not always the right ones, or at least are not entirely so. In the television medium, pictures overwhelm words and inhibit reflection. Hence, the prominence given the PRD tapes is, to a certain extent, a function of the medium itself: the corruption of the PRD is more real than the malfeasance of the other parties, simply because it can be seen (again and again). Anybody who works in a medium such as television will always choose pictures over words. However, images are mute; they can only speak by being placed in contexts, which then define our perception of them. Since the contextualizing media for documentary images are almost always in the hands of the wealthy and powerful, the readings are almost invariably reactionary.

The credibility of the medium is fundamental to the façade of information, and the degree to which the mass media will go to defend its pretense of truth-telling has been illustrated recently in the cases of Brian Walski and Patrick Schneider, punished for altering images digitally, when the real manipulation has been coverage by the U.S. media that is consistently skewed in favor of the George W. Bush government's imperialism. The mass media are more enlightening as objects of analysis than as sources of information: though we find out little of what really occurred, we can chart shifts in policy by changes in the propaganda we are served. That is why the Internet has developed as the most important alternative to the mass media, and it has been the pivotal factor in organizing resistance to the U.S. neo-conservative regime, in bringing about the downfall of the Partido Popular in Spain, and in preventing the coup against Hugo Chávez in Venezuela.

These reflections lead me to revise my defense of non-altered photography in my conclusions to my earlier essay, "What's documentary about photograph?" Forced to reconsider my ideas by Pedro Meyer's essays on the Walski and Schneider cases, as well as by a conversation with

Guillermo Yañez that grew into an interview published at his site, Malojo.com (Meyer, 2003; Meyer, 2003; Yañez-Mraz, 2003). I have come to feel that I was defending photography as a unique art form rather than considering its role as an believable information source. I would now argue that the salient question we need to ask is: whose interests have been served by the aura of credibility enjoyed by the documentary form? When we think about documentary images, what often comes to mind is the work of crusading reformists and critical photojournalists such as Jacob Riis , Lewis Hine , Tina Modotti , Eugene Smith , Sebastião Salgado , and Paolo Gasparini, to name only a few.

However, in general, the credibility of photography has filled our heads with the fantasies created by advertising and the disinformation propagated by the mass media. The advent of digitalization destroys that credibility, and liberates our critical capacities. We are not freed from "reality," as Pedro Meyer argued in an early essay, but we are emancipated from the pretense of reality created by the façade of information (Meyer, 1994). We need images to know the world, but we need even more to be able to think about them in a way that delivers us from the manipulation of the mass media.

John Mraz
mraz.john@gmail.com

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