Perception is reality! How perception shapes our world.

Nicole Clay
University of Louisville

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.library.louisville.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/4172

This Master's Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. This title appears here courtesy of the author, who has retained all other copyrights. For more information, please contact thinkir@louisville.edu.
PERCEPTION IS REALITY!
HOW PERCEPTION SHAPES OUR WORLD

By Nicole Clay
B.A., Northern Kentucky University, 2020

Thesis Submitted to the faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Art(c) and Art History Concentration in Critical & Curatorial Studies

Hite Institute of Art and Design
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

August 2023
PERCEPTION IS REALITY! HOW PERCEPTION SHAPES OUR WORLD

By

Nicole Clay

A Thesis Approved on

May 26, 2023

by the following Thesis Committee:

_______________________
Chris Reitz

_______________________
Jennifer Sichel

_______________________
Felicia Jamison
ABSTRACT

PERCEPTION IS REALITY!

HOW PERCEPTION SHAPES OUR WORLD

Nicole Clay

May 26, 2023

This thesis is an examination of the role different photography techniques play in how images are perceived. There have existed techniques for manipulating the perception of images since the creation of the camera. The techniques examined in this paper are editing, staging, and the use of captions. In recent years, perception has become a powerful tool for political parties to manipulate. This manipulation of perception has led to an increasing distrust in the images the media presents to the public. This paper does not seek to answer any questions but to encourage people to have a greater understanding of photography.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................................................................. iv  

INTRODUCTION ........................................................................... 1  

EDITING .................................................................................... 3  

STAGING .................................................................................... 5  

CAPTIONS .................................................................................. 7  

IMAGE INDEX ............................................................................... 14  

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST .......................................................... 17  

REFERENCES ............................................................................ 22  

APPENDIX .................................................................................. 24  

CURRICULUM VITA ..................................................................... 26
INTRODUCTION

What is perception? According to the Oxford English Dictionary perception is defined as a way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something: a mental impression. In this exhibition perception is understood in relationship to photography and the techniques used to manipulate it.¹ In this context, perception is how the audience approaches an image using what they assume about past practices of photographic manipulation. Historically those manipulation techniques included editing, manipulation of the content, and the words assigned to the image. While there are more than three ways to manipulate perception those are the three this exhibition will be focusing on.

Why does perception matter? Perception matters because perception influences how one sees and interprets the world. In recent years perception has become a national issue with the rise of “fake news” and “deep fake” images, which have become a mainstay in the vocabulary of the far right and conspiracy theorists. The technology that allows for the creation of false images has led to a growing distrust in the images we are presented. In the era of “fake news” people can choose to believe an image is fake if it challenges their beliefs. The distrust and critical eye that has been turned on documentary and photojournalism is not a creation of the last couple of years but is something that has

been slowly festering for decades. Which raises the question, how did we get to this point where we stopped trusting the images we were seeing?
To understand how we got here we need to take a look at the development of photography because what many consider to be new practices have been around since the beginning of photography. The first photo development process was created in 1826 by Joseph Niepec, but photography became commercially accessible with the creation of the Daguerreotype in 1829 by Louis Daguerre. The daguerreotype was a direct-positive process which meant the image was printed directly onto a copperplate without need for a negative.\(^2\) There was one important downside to the daguerreotype. It had a long exposure time required to capture the image onto the plate, which ranged from three to fifteen minutes alongside the fact they could be expensive.

The first manipulation and editing of images occurred with the daguerreotype. The most popular manipulation technique was double exposure which saw the photographer exposing a plate twice to print two separate images onto the plate. For example, in “Double-exposure” circa 1905-1920 (Figure 1) from the Filson Historical Society’s All-Prayer Foundlings Home Collection the plate has been exposed twice.\(^3\) The first image is a studio portrait of two women dressed in Victorian garb staring at the camera. The second image is a group shot of orphans with their caregivers taken in the yard outside the home.

---


\(^3\) Figure 1, All-Prayer Foundlings Home. FHS 012PC33.67. 1905. Nitrate negative. Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY.
The first image in “Double-exposure” gives a ghostly appearance making it seem as though the women are specters surrounding the children. “Double-exposure” is an example of double-exposure, which was the most common editing technique of the period. This image was most likely double exposed by accident as there appears to be no connection between the women in the first exposure and the children of the second exposure.

Another common editing technique before the advent of computers was to scratch out whatever the photographer did not want in the image before developing the negative. This erasure can be seen in two “Untitled” photos from 1958 (Figures 2 & 3) from the Filson that captures the presentation of an award to a jockey seated atop his horse.\(^4\) When you look beyond the jockey you see nothing but an empty track, which in reality was not the case because this image had been edited. In the original image in distance there is a water tower and that tower had been edited out of the published image most likely for aesthetics purposes.

\(^4\)Figure 2 & 3 Uncatalogued edited & unedited horse award photos. 1958. Filson historical Society
STAGING

Manipulation such as staging a scene was another common technique of early photographers. In “Boys with Soldiers” circa 1915 (Figure 4) taken by the soldier Andre Jeunet you see two young boys posing with a group of soldiers. The photo was taken while Jeunet was serving in World War I and there appears to be nothing out of the ordinary with the photo.¹

It is this seemingly normal appearance that makes it the perfect example for discussing manipulation, which in this instance means staging. The image could be exactly what it appears to be: a candid shot of boys with soldiers. Or the image could be staged. There are a few things that suggest the image was staged. First, neither boy appears as though they want to be in the image. A soldier that is partially out of frame appears to be holding the sleeve of the boy wearing the cap as if he is trying to keep the boy still until the photo is taken. The soldiers are outside of a train car and these soldiers could have easily pulled the boys who were just walking down the road into taking a picture with them.

Manipulating an image before capturing the photo makes it difficult to discern the validity of an image. Staging a photo doesn’t imply that the creator is trying to promote a certain message. Sometimes it is done to provide closure.

¹ Jeunet, Andre. ULPA 2004.003.022A. 1915-1917. Nitrate negative. 1.625in x 2.5in. Archives & Special Collections, University of Louisville, Louisville. Figure 4
After the end of the war in Europe confusion began to stir as to whether or not Hitler had really committed suicide. Soon after, a photo emerged of a dead Hitler. Most historians believe this image to be a fake, since some of the details of the image do not align with the facts of Hitler’s death. After Hitler committed suicide his body was burnt and the Allies had to rely on dental records to identify the remains, and this caused doubt about his death to manifest for a short period among the Allies.² Hitler and the Nazi army committed numerous acts of horror across Europe and the image might have been created for his victims to have visual confirmation of his death.³ The image was a tool for closure and propaganda as it reassured Hitler’s victims of his death while providing proof for the soldiers that soon the war would be over.

² Girardin, p.132
³ Girardin, p.133
Captions

Words are one of the most common ways to influence or shape perception due to the preconceived meanings people have for certain words such as “special.” In today's world, “special” is often used to denote those with mental and physical disabilities but that was not always the case. In a photo pulled from the University of Louisville’s Photoarchives a classroom of boys is pictured making garden tools. The photo taken in 1921 is captioned "Class at Special School making garden implements" (Figure 5). Upon closer inspection there appears to be no physical disabilities that would define these boys as "special" so why has that moniker been assigned to them? In the 1920s when the photo was taken “special” had a different connotation. The Special School was an "open air" school for children with Tuberculosis. The caption of this image can influence how the photo is perceived. When that image does not fit the preconceived notion of what "special" means the viewer is left feeling confused.

Words are crucially important in the field of documentary photography. The captions given to documentary images provide the context needed to understand the images. But in some cases the captions are used to change the context of the image. The style that would become known as documentary photography began to develop in the 1850’s with the brothers Edward and Henry T. Anthony who documented the social

---

1 Caufield & Shook. CS036118. 1921. Nitrate negative. 8in x 10in. Archives & Special Collections, University of Louisville, Louisville. Figure 5
scene on the streets of New York.\textsuperscript{2} Photography started to be used as a tool for social change in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century under Jacob Riis.

Jacob Riis was a Danish immigrant who came to America in the 1870s while working as a police reporter for the New York Tribune. He ran a series of exposés in the \textit{New York Tribune} with photos that exposed the horrid conditions of the New York City slums and tenements.\textsuperscript{3} These exposés would serve as the inspiration for his book \textit{How the Other Half Lives} (1880), which used photos to expose the conditions in which New York’s poor and immigrant citizens were living. Riis’ work would be built upon by Lewis Hine who used photography to document the conditions and lives of child laborers across the country in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The images captured by Riis and Hine were used by activists to push for and implement changes to improve the lives of the documented. Documentary photography grew in the 1930s and 40s as newspapers and magazines such as \textit{Life} sent photographers across the country and the world to document the Great Depression and World War II.

Fueled by the Great Depression and, later, World War II, the U.S. government would create the largest photographic project in America with the creation of the Farm Security Administration. Under the leadership of Roy Stryker, photographers were deployed across America to document the effects of the Great Depression. During WWII the FSA transformed into the Office of War Information to document America during the war and the lives of those participating in the war effort. Those early documentarians


\textsuperscript{3} “Jacob Riis.” \url{https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/constituents/jacob-riis?all/all/all/0}, Accessed April 15, 2023
served as the inspiration for the future generations of documentarians who faced struggles not seen by their predecessors. Documentary photographers working in the latter half of the 20th century struggled for work as once strong supporters of photographic essays such as *Life* Magazine began to close their doors. Photographers turned to agencies such as Magnum as well as the art world to survive although finding an income was just one obstacle photographers had to overcome as the public started to become distrustful of the images they were seeing.

This struggle can be summed up in the quote from photographer Ann Wilkes Tucker: “We began the 20th century by believing what we saw in photographs was true and ended the 20th century by distrusting every document.”

This distrust didn’t begin with the public; it first began to ferment with editors, particularly during the Vietnam war. The Vietnam war was the first war to be broadcast on television, bringing the war into the homes of America. The images they saw on tv and in print led to many Americans protesting the war. The photographer Ken Light began his career shooting Vietnam war protests put on by his fellow students. He began to notice a marked difference in the work he was producing, and the work produced by those working for newspapers and magazines. He felt that those photographers had no sense of the history that was being made in the moment, but he also put blame onto their editors. The editors were taking these images and spinning them as if the college students were the problem. Light summed it up in his statement, “Many of their editors saw us as dirty, unpatriotic hippies, and the stories and images that they published often echoed these sentiments.”

---

5 Light, p.191
Those editors who let their own ideas of patriotism dictate how an image was used were merely the beginning of a problem that would only grow until it invaded every bit of media in the 21st century. Photographers, whether they were freelancers, working for an agency, or working directly with a publisher, sometimes had to put blind faith into their editors if the project they were working on prevented them from having control over the editing. Susan Meiselas faced this problem while she was working in Nicaragua documenting the country’s civil war. While covering the war she had to send the film out of the country to be developed, which meant she often didn’t see her photographs before they were distributed to different publications by Magnum.6 This led to a realization for Meiselas that while she could control the facts and images that would go into the books she produced but, beyond that, she had no control over her images.7

The Louisville based photographer Del Ramey is a modern-day example of relinquishing control of his images. Del Ramey uploads all of the images he takes of protests and various events throughout the city onto his website free for anyone to use. Each set of photos is accompanied by a description of the event. But once the images have been uploaded, he can no longer control the narrative. In an untitled photo (Figure 6) captured at recent March 2023 protests for trans rights at the Capital in Frankfort two teens sit upon a wall wearing pride shirts. Next to the teens stands an older man supporting the anti-trans bill. The wrinkled old man holds a small sign proclaiming his support for the bill accompanied by a picture of Governor Beshear with an anti- sign placed over his face.8

---

6 Light, p.103
7 Light, p.103
8 Ramey, Del. Untitled. Save Our Children From Bigots Collection. 2023. Digital. Louisville, KY. Figure 6
Depending on the political leaning of the media outlet that picks up this image, it could be interpreted in two different ways. The older man could be painted as a hero standing up against the woke agenda and the two teens could be mocked and described as wrong. The personal beliefs of the editor and even the viewer of the photo can shape how that image is perceived. Words in their simplest forms provide context to the images the viewers are seeing. In “Broadway, East of Shelby” (Figure 7) from the UofL Photoarchives a dog stares off to the side standing above the floodwaters while in the distance there are three rowboats with survivors inside.\(^9\) The image captures the flooding on Broadway east of Shelby and it would be easy to presume that the image is from the 1937 Great Flood. That presumption would be incorrect as the image was captured during the flood of 1884. But without the caption informing the viewer it’s easy to mistake it for the 1937 flood as very little appears to have changed on the street between 1884 and 1937.

The work produced by photographers in the 30s and 40s proved the power that photography held to shape a narrative. That power would be employed at the 1955 Asian-African Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia. At this conference 29 delegates representing various countries across Africa and Asia had come together to discuss issues that were arising in the postcolonial world. There exists a rich visual archive of the conference because a number of the diplomatic leaders present, including Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Prime Minister Abdel Nasser understood that the conference was placing them on a global stage.\(^{10}\) The images taken at the conference helped to promote a

\(^9\) R.G. Potter. ULPA_00536. 1884. 8in x 10in. Archives & Special Collections, University of Louisville, Louisville. Figure 7

\(^{10}\) Lee, p.197
myth of the “Bandung Conference”, which glossed over the complex geopolitical issues that the conference was attempting to tackle.

The myth promoted the argument that imperialism was over, and that international cooperation and the sovereignty of the nation-state were the new norm.\textsuperscript{11} The images contributed to this myth and the presentation of a united front amongst the Third World leaders through the ability of photography to capture a moment. As suggested by Miriam Hansen when a photo is taken it captures the present but also immediately becomes a picture of the past while also containing traces of the future.\textsuperscript{12} The traces of the future contained within the photo are not created from the picture being taken but from the perception of the viewer.\textsuperscript{13}

The moment a photo is taken its inherent value is unknown until the image is viewed and given a value. The leaders of the Bandung Conference understood they were participating in a historical moment and invited photographers to capture the moment. They knew that images from the conference could inspire people of color around the world. For those who lived under colonial rule and people of color living around the world the images represented the strength to throw off the chains of colonialism and that despite what society might try to tell them people of color could be leaders on a world stage. Those images that represented power and freedom for some might represent unrest to the colonial powers or an area in need of protection as America and Russia stood at odds during the Cold War. The beliefs and ideals held by the viewer of the photos affected how they were perceived.

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Lee, p.197}
\footnote{Lee, p.200}
\footnote{Lee, p.200}
\end{footnotes}
In the 21st Century perception has become a tool weaponized by both sides of the political spectrum for their own gain. The manipulation of perception has moved far beyond the images they were once associated with to now include film. Selective editing and a few choice words can transform film of violent insurrectionists storming the Capital into a calm crowd of people walking the halls. Now more than ever the media and politicians are aware of the power that perception holds and the ways to manipulate it to suit their needs. The only way to reign in this power is to acknowledge your own preconceived ideas and bias and to practice media literacy. By understanding that depending on the media source you will receive one interpretation of events and a different interpretation from another source. By acknowledging the individual’s role, we can begin to combat the distrust in our media.
Figures 2 & 3

Uncatalogued edited & unedited horse award photo.

Note. 1958, Filson historical Society, Louisville, KY
Figure 4

*Boys with Soldiers*

![Image of Boys with Soldiers]

*Note.* Jeunet, Andre. ULPA 2004.003.022A. 1915-1917. Nitrate negative. 1.625in x 2.5in. Archives & Special Collections, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY.

Figure 5

*Special School boys making garden implements*

![Image of Special School boys making garden implements]

*Note.* Caufield & Shook. CS036118. 1921. Nitrate negative. 8in x 10in. Archives & Special Collections, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY.
Figure 6

*Untitled*


Figure 7

*Broadway, East of Shelby*

*Note.* R.G. Potter. ULPA_00536. 1884. 8in x 10in. Archives & Special Collections, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY.
EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Double Exposure, ca. 1905-1920
The Filson Historical Society
All-Prayer Foundlings Home Collection, 012PC33.67

Untitled (unedited), ca. 1958
The Filson Historical Society
Miles Park Photograph Collection, 015PC68

Untitled (edited), ca. 1958
The Filson Historical Society
Miles Park Photograph Collection, 015PC68

Boys with Soldiers, ca. 1916
University of Louisville Photographic Archives
André Jeunet World War I Photographs,
2004_003_022A
Broadway, East of Shelby Street, 1884
University of Louisville Photographic Archives
R. G. Potter Collection, P_00536

Broadway Looking East from Shelby Street, 1937
University of Louisville Photographic Archives
R. G. Potter Collection, P_00524

Jesus isn’t Cis (or White), 2022
Del Ramey, photographer
Pride Parade, N6180544

Untitled, 2022
Del Ramey, photographer
Pride Parade, N6180506
Anti-Busing Protests, September 4, 1975
The Filson Historical Society
The Courier-Journal Filson Subject Photograph Collection, BLH-16

Uncle and Father of Henry Berg Brousseau, a young transgender activist who took his own life, March 4, 2023
Del Ramey, photographer
Trans/LGBTQ+/Human Rights! N3043869

Untitled, April 8, 2023
Del Ramey, photographer
The Return of the Trans Collection, N4088811
Sign to camera, contact is made, 2022

Del Ramey, photographer

Pride Parade, N6180663
REFERENCES


“Jacob Riis.” https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/constituents/jacob-riis?all/all/all/all/0, Accessed April 15, 2023


“The Daguerreotype Medium.”

All-Prayer Foundlings Home. FHS 012PC33.67. 1905. Nitrate negative. Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY.

Uncatalogued edited & unedited horse award photo. 1958. Filson historical Society

Jeunet, Andre. ULPA 2004.003.022A. 1915-1917. Nitrate negative. 1.625in x 2.5in. Archives & Special Collections, University of Louisville, Louisville
Caufield & Shook. CS036118. 1921. Nitrate negative. 8in x 10in. Archives & Special Collections, University of Louisville, Louisville

R.G. Potter. ULPA_00536. 1884. 8in x 10in. Archives & Special Collections, University of Louisville, Louisville


Louisville, KY
Appendix

Wall text

What is perception? According to the Oxford English Dictionary perception is defined as a way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something: a mental impression. In this exhibition perception is understood in relationship to photography and the techniques used to manipulate it. In this context, perception is how the audience approaches an image using what they assume about past practices of photographic manipulation. Historically those manipulation techniques included editing, manipulation of the content, and the words assigned to the image. While there are more than three ways to manipulate perception, those are the three this exhibition will be focusing on. Why does perception matter? Perception matters because perception influences how one sees and interprets the world.

Prompting questions

How would you define the word special?

Why would they have edited the original image?

How would you caption these images?

What do you observe?

Which image do you think came first?

Are there any features in this image that would help you date it?

Do these photos evoke any emotions?

Is there anything in this photo that would help you identify where it was taken?

Do you think your beliefs influence your perception of these images?
How might some view the people in these photos?

Why would a photographer choose to leave their images “untitled”? 
CURRICULUM VITA

Nicole K. Clay

6811 Norway Drive
Louisville, Kentucky 40214

DOB: Louisville, Kentucky-November 18, 1997

EDUCATION &
TRAINING: B.A., History
Northern Kentucky University 2016-2020

AWARDS: Published papers in the Phi Alpha Theta-Alpha Beta Phi journal
Presented a paper at the 2018 Celebration of Student Research and
Creativity