

MEDIA AND THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL WITNESS



– photoshopped abuse in Iraq

Sam has put me on to a Salon.com article – A picture is no longer worth a thousand words.



“Which photograph of Lance Cpl. Ted Boudreaux and two boys in the desert is the real thing? No one knows for sure, in the age of Photoshop.”

Salon journalist Farhad Manjoo picks up the familiar argument that we can't trust photos *anymore*. So now, he says, it comes down to who you trust – the Lance Cpl. who says the picture is faked, the list subscriber who sent one picture to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), or the source of another photo with the positive message of the board.

From the beginning photographs were manipulated. The difference is now that it is easy to do so, and to leave no trace of the edit. Then there is all the selection and manipulation that accompanes framing, choice of viewpoint and the moment of taking the photograph. Photos were never innocent.

Think of the archaeology of photography. It is a material trace; we trust a photograph largely because of this materiality – the notion that it was made there, in the moment when what is depicted happened. And now it is in front of us, bearing witness. This is an **archaeological authenticity**. The photograph bears material witness to a past event.

It also references an archaeological temporality – **actuality – the conjunction of two present moments**.

This case of the archaeology of photography brings out the **political relationships** at the heart of knowing.

If you reject faith and internally secured knowledge (mathematical, logical, apodeictic, that makes no necessary reference to experience of reality), if you believe in evidence and testing out your ideas against experience, on what grounds do you assess an account of something that happened?

I visited the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center today – electrons and positrons shot down two miles of copper tubing to explore the nature of matter and energy. It takes an array of detectors three stories high to produce any significant trace of the particle collisions. And you never see the particles directly, of course. But we trust the accounts given of the interactions of what we will never experience directly, enough to justify the enormous sums of money spent on such big science.

We trust the scientists because their community, we are told, is honorable. OK some scientists make things up and bear false witness, but their community will not tolerate this. So, on the whole, we trust scientific research. Yes science achieves a great deal of practical impact – it is applied in technology; this means they must be getting something right. But many non-scientific fields have impact – faith can move mountains, terrorists driven by political ideology can shake the world. What really matters is trust.

It is quite clear that the invention of the experimental method in the seventeenth century by gentlemen members of the Royal Society accompanied a redefinition of the security of witnessing and representation. You may never enter a laboratory, may never yourself witness an experiment, but you trust the gentlemen of science to represent scientific knowledge and tell you all about it, because they are honorable. This is a political act of representation – scientists represent the reality of the world revealed in experiment to us. They are honorable in the same way as democratic representation depends upon relationships of trust between representative and constituency. However frail and fallible that relationship may be, it is the basis of democratic constitutions.

On what grounds do you trust someone? A witness can be put to question. But inquiry is time consuming. Most of the time we simply trust on the grounds of rhetorical pleas. Common pleas include – “you know me”, “look at my record”, “look at my friends and family”. Photography has had quite an impressive rhetoric of “being there” and witnessing. “Trust me – I was there.” This is an archaeological plea.

Archaeological – because we think that archaeologists have a direct material relationship with the past, unsullied by words and representations that might be falsified. Well, archaeologists may grub around in the past’s garbage, but they do not discover the past.

There is never any unquestionable witness. Things happen and may deeply affect you. But reality never simply manifests itself in its essence. Accounts and representations, often involving elaborate metaphors, arguments and qualifications, are always needed. And so we need to know when to be sceptical. Nothing has changed about photography, only our assumed innocence.