Photographic (In)authenticity

Making Strange as a Creative Practice Response

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Abstract

Debates around authenticity within photographic discourse are persistent. Some have revolved around documentary photography, while other discussions focus on the ethical validity of digitally edited news photographs and indeed the photographic medium itself. This article proposes that discussions around 'authenticity' should be focused instead towards contextualising photography more appropriately within the creative practice of 'making strange'. It acknowledges existing debates around photography and authenticity, before locating the discussion within creative practice. It then moves to a discussion, using Robert Capa's 'Falling Soldier' (Capa, 1936) as a starting point, before drawing on examples from the author's own creative and professional practice. In the process, the article argues that visual researchers embrace the challenges of *making the familiar strange* within photographic creative practices.

Keywords

making strange – photography – design – defamiliarisation – communication design – creative practice

1 Introduction

Notions around authenticity and photography are considered important, both within communication design and photographic practice, as well as in contemporary scholarship on visual communication in general. However, debates often revolve around the limits of either empirical or philosophical

degrees of authenticity. For example, debates have emerged in discussions around ethnographic authenticity (Banks, 2013) or evidential partiality (Winston, 1998), as well as investigations into new forms of subjectivity, such as the democratisation of photography in relation to social media images and news narratives (Borges-Rey, 2015). Moreover, as discussed later in this article, photographic manipulation begins even before an image has been taken, continues during the selective framing process at the point of image capture, and contextually in its display and consumption.

These debates and practices are not new. Indeed, long before even the invention of Photoshop, as far back as the 1930s, photographers such as Brassai and others were staging and doctoring documentary images (McNatt, 1999). In 1977, Susan Sontag addressed photographic alteration as fiddling “with the scale of the world” (2008, p. 4). Since then, increasingly accessible and often artificial intelligence informed photo-editing applications, have rendered the practice of altering photographs incrementally easier (Shen et al., 2019). In turn, concepts around photographic authenticity can sometimes appear nebulous for a new generation of vernacular photographers and consumers (Yao, Perlmutter, and Liu, 2017).

Within professional communication practice, nearly all news organisations (such as the Associated Press (AP) and Reuters (Reuters)) have guidelines on the use of photographs within news and documentary reporting. Breaking these guidelines, even accidentally or without intent to deceive, can lead to severe peer criticism and often sparks public debate (Times, 2015). These guidelines are numerous and various and in full are a topic for another time. However, to provide context, it is worth quoting some of these. For example, The National Press Photographers Association’s ethical guide to photojournalists includes the reminder that “Editing should maintain the integrity of the photographic images’ content and context” and “Respect the integrity of the photographic moment” (NPPA). Similarly, a report for World Press Photo concluded that photographic ‘manipulation’ was unacceptable (Campbell, 2014).

These debates around photographic authenticity and photojournalism have been covered elsewhere (Newton, 2012) and are not the subject of this article. Instead, this article suggests that the premise of debates around authenticity are unhelpful when trying to engage with the language and form of photography within creative practice. By using historical examples as well as photographs from my own practice, this article reflects upon the medium of photography as a practice of *making strange*. It argues that photography is a practice which, like any artistic reproductive technique, is essentially simulacral – that a photograph is by default, and as Baudrillard claimed

(1994), often by knowing intention a distorted copy of an original, an enhancement of the everyday (Lai, 2006), or what Barthes refers to as the Spectrum (1993).

I initially engage with this topic by using a reflexive method to discuss the photography form of Robert Capa's 'Falling Soldier' (Capa, 1936). In doing so I allow an engagement with the shadow in photography as a metaphorical refractive moment of strangeness in photography. In doing so this article suggests that framing photography as an inherently strange creative form is, ironically, a more authentic interpretation than attempting to debate or assign degrees of authenticity or documentary language to a form which is not capable of being so. Finally, photographic imagery will be discussed within the context of part of my own visual creative practices – communication design and photography – indicating how, by generatively altering photographs, these practices inherently and intentionally render photography as a form of *making strange*.

In taking this approach, I put aside debates around photographic authenticity within the discourses of news and media as inadequate for addressing photography as a form of creative practice. Instead, this article treats photography as a creative form and language which is, by definition, 'inauthentic' and, as a result, a practice of and for making the familiar strange.

1.1 *A Creative Practice Response*

It is important to clarify that I am not suggesting that there is no such thing as ethics in photography or visual reportage. Nor am I arguing that photography is not a legitimate element of the language of factual news communication, documentary narrative, or other media narratives. On the contrary, in an age where debates around the meaning of authenticity have reached an absurdist peak, with terms such as 'post-fact' entering the media lexicon (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017) and the topic of deep fakes becoming increasingly current (Portmess, 2019), it would be wrong to do so.

However, as a professional visual communicator, this article is a creative practice response (even a provocation) to the traditional photographic debates which can sometimes occur within my own professional practice. Communication design practice, almost without fail, involves using photographs to illustrate, enhance, or promote – for example within brochures, magazines or websites – all uses which have little to do with authenticity (and much to do with simulacra).

In addition, as a photographer, questions inevitably arise at exhibitions or when I publish a photo-book, as to whether any of the photographs have

been ‘altered’ or have had ‘something done to them’. It is a question that is difficult to answer adequately. For example, is the questioner making judgments about the validity of a photograph? What does the questioner believe is an ‘unaltered’ photograph? Is the assumption that an unaltered photograph is somehow a ‘default’ or more authentic? In an attempt to break the loop of this endless authenticity debate, I believe it is worth refocusing the discussion of photography back into its physical visual form, as art and design, and reflecting upon, analysing, and deconstructing those forms. Indeed, rather than being sidetracked with notions of photographic authenticity, it is more productive to simply acknowledge that all photography, at every stage of the process, is a product of what is best described as *making the familiar strange* and that this strangeness manifests at every level of photography.

2 Making the Familiar Strange

Making the familiar strange, as creative practice, originated from within Russian formalism (Lvov, 2015) as ‘defamiliarisation’. The term was coined by Shklovsky in 1914 (Bell, Blythe et al., 2005; Forrest, 2007), who uses the term in relation to the avoidance of what he describes as automatisations (Crawford, 1984). For Shklovsky (1965), the aim of making strange is to overcome this automatised ‘habitual recognition’, or the familiar. This is achieved by ‘describing’ it as if it were happening for the first time (Lemon & Reis, 1965). For Shklovsky strangeness is achieved by generatively using “any number of devices” (Lemon & Reis, 1965, p. 4), or creative methods.

For example, in his 1917 essay ‘Art as Technique’, Shklovsky (1965) documents the phenomenon of making strange by citing a piece of fiction by Tolstoy entitled ‘Kholstomer’. Discussing the story, Shklovsky describes how Tolstoy’s use of a horse as a third party narrator renders the subtext (the normative concept of private ownership) strange, allowing Tolstoy to tackle readers’ hegemonic perceptions about private property. In projecting the narrative literally through the horse’s mouth, allowing the reader into the mindset of the horse as it contemplates its position as an owned commodity, this challenges the reader to move beyond automatic assumptions. As such, Shklovsky’s example depicts fictional textural narrative being used as a metaphorical device to first make strange and then render familiar a complex philosophical outlook.

Researchers in a number of creative practices have used defamiliarising techniques to disrupt habitual patterns; for example, the use of literary

devices such as uneven rhythms or wordplay to make linguistic communication strange and, at the same time, enhance awareness of language in a more vivid way than usual (Kaomea, 2003). The quote attributed to Edgar Degas that “art is not what you see, but what you make others see” (Good Reads, 2016) would also be an example of this. As would Mel Gooding’s assertion that artists, such as the surrealists, used games and surprise to subvert established methods of enquiry (Gooding, 1991). As Elliot Eisner puts it (1995), “the artist recontextualises the familiar so that it takes on a new significance” (p. 2) and describes making strange as central to the visual arts (2003). These are practices, he argues, which use techniques that can extend into qualitative research and “show us aspects of the world we had not noticed; they release us from the stupor of the familiar” (2003, p. 53).

Methods for making strange have also included performative approaches, such as Augusto Boal’s forum theatre (1998), which breaks the normativity of performance by inviting audience intervention (Boal & Jackson, 2002; Meisiek & Barry, 2007). Similarly, Berthold Brecht’s Epic theatre borrows from Shklovsky’s estrangement for the concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* (Radosavljević, 2013) or alienation (Brecht, 2014). These approaches have informed the pedagogical practices of process drama (O’Neill, 1995; Schneider & Jackson, 2000). These methods, in turn, have a lineage to experimental designers such as Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, as well as projects developed by William Gaver such as the use of cultural probes (Gaver, Dunne et al., 1999; Gaver, Boucher et al., 2004) and in such diverse design fields as experiential futures (Candy & Dunagan, 2017). Ethnographic studies such as Dawn Mannay’s (2010), have used visual defamiliarisation exercises to create analytical distance between her role as researcher and the subjects of the research, whom she had known personally for many years. Similarly, Lisa Morriss (2016) experimented with an ethnomethodological approach, to challenge her professional familiarity and identity with the research group. While the methods and disciplines vary, the approaches unite in using ‘devices’, physical or metaphorical, to help render the familiar strange.

2.1 *Photography and Making Strange*

The photographic form, as well as the photographic process, are also strange phenomenological manifestations. Burgin argues that many of the photographic aesthetics – the relationships between “seeing, representing and knowing” (Watney, 1982, p. 155) of the 1920s and 1930s – were influenced by Shklovsky’s concept of making strange (Watney, 1982). John Berger’s (1982) dictum that “what makes photography a strange invention – with

unforeseeable consequences – is that its primary raw materials are light and time” (p. 85) is a helpful starting point. It allows us to position the language and form of photography as ‘products’ of process, as well as practice.

Even merely the technology of photography captures, as a visual language, a subjective and repurposed aesthetic; technical processes which include infinite variations of capturing *light and time*. It is why the generative term *re-present*, as opposed to the passively neutral *represent*, is more applicable when discussing the process of photographic creation. At each stage of the process, the photographic form becomes increasingly strange. Indeed, photographs become altered even before light enters the camera. Much as history starts with the historian (Carr, 2008), so the photographic process starts with the photographer.¹ For example, we can start with the subjectivity of the photographer (or even their employer’s intentions, societal motivations and so on) and the context where the photograph is taken. The infinite variations of alteration are then subject to factors including the types of cameras, lenses, film or digital sensors, development techniques, post-processing, presentation mediums and viewing environments. Moreover, when capturing an image, there is the framing of the photograph itself – a lens can exclude more of the surrounding visual environment than it captures or, in the case of a wide angle or fisheye lens, overtly distort the visual form. The technological format of photography plays a further role in the photographic process. The use of filters on lenses, different types of digital camera sensors, or film types, the numerous types of in-camera software algorithms used to process images, all contribute to further make strange the visual reproductions before they even get near a computer or film lab for post-processing. Indeed, the post-production intentional manipulation of photographs is as old as the medium itself (Fineman, 2012). Even following the capture and editing of photographic images, the display, labelling, and cultural and historical contexts in which photographs are viewed, continue to ensure that photographic narratives remain simulacral and subjective (Zarzycka, 2012).

With the advent of digital photo editing, the post-processing of photographs is perhaps the most ubiquitous of photographic ‘moral panics’

¹ Perhaps the most absurd example which renders discussions of photographic authenticity moot is the viral example, whereby a monkey apparently accidentally took a photograph of itself (AP, 2016). Where does one start to consider photographic authenticity or documentary truth in a case where, while the photographic apparatus was set up by a human, an animal has framed and taken a photograph?

when it comes to discussions about authenticity. The media sources at the start of this article indicate some of the professional concerns around editing photographic images. These concerns differ from the process of actually taking a photograph in that it involves, even if only by implication or assumption, the active involvement and intention to alter, decontextualise and potentially deceive the viewer. It evokes notions of the practices of dictatorial regimes, such as airbrushing political opponents out of photographs, or even the more banal practices of promotional images designed to enhance the splendour of properties for sale or rent. Indeed, within professional creative communication practice, there are many other factors which impact on the presentation and visual language of a photograph. For example, as a communication designer, I am mindful that the use of photography within editorial design layout is subject to endless human and technological intervention and alteration. This includes the choice of image, its cropping within design software, digital post-processing, the positioning of the photograph on the page and the context of the textual content and headings. All of this occurs even before the intervention of the vagaries of either the commercial printing processes, or the multiple mediums of screen-based and interactive media visual communication devices and processes.

The following discussion is located within the context of the photographic image itself, as an artefact and the end result of a creative procedure which, intentionally and by default, makes the familiar strange as a result of mixing photography's light and shadows to create a visual form. In this discussion I shall draw on reflections with examples, including from my own practice, to try to contextualise the photographic form as inherently strange, rather than authentic.

3 Robert Capa's 'Falling Soldier'

There is no doubting the emotional and cultural impact of Robert Capa's (1936) alternately named 'Falling Soldier' or 'Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death'. In isolation, the photograph's aesthetic is so iconically representative of the pinnacle of photography's gold standard – Henri Cartier-Bresson's (1952) *decisive moment* – that these accompanying captions seem superfluous. The position of the subject in the frame of the photograph even adheres to the traditional compositional gold standard of the visual arts, the 'rule of thirds' (Males, Hedi et al., 2012).

The momentary nature of the photograph is especially visually symbolic, when considered within the context of the history of the Spanish Civil War, between 1936 and 1939. The Spanish Civil war, ostensibly a fight between fascist and democratic forces, was a conflict that took place in its own unique historical moment; in the space in between the aftermath the first world war and the second world war and arguably functioning as a rehearsal for the second global conflict (Preston, 2016).

This historical context of the photograph has attracted a wide discourse, including, in recent decades, increasing debate around the authenticity of the Falling Soldier photograph. In particular, whether the photographic scene was staged and, if so, the motives of the photographer (Nelson, 1997; Taylor, 1999; Whelan, 2006; Pingree, 2009). But to entrench the debate simply into historical authenticity is to divert the discussion towards historical discourse which, for this article, takes us into the realms of historical interpretation or investigative science and that is a topic for another day.

Once again, none of this is to devalue forensic debates about the role of photographs as historical evidence, for example the posture of the falling soldier's arm, or how he holds the rifle as he falls (Winston, 1998). But limiting ourselves to these empirical investigations impinges opportunities to engage with the creative form and emotional impact of photographic images in their own right.

If the Falling Soldier was somehow definitively proven to be 'inauthentic', the historical empiricism of the photograph would be affected, as would the context of any analysis. However, would the cultural impact of the image be any less valuable? For example, Picasso's *Guernica* is no less emotionally or historically powerful as a documentation of a moment from the Spanish Civil War. However, simply because its medium is paint rather than the light and time of photography, questions of documentary authenticity simply do not arise for *Guernica*. In this context, debates around the authenticity of photography seem almost banal, when relating to the interaction between the photograph and the viewer. Indeed, we could contextualise viewers' emotive interpretation of physical visual imagery alongside the historical context of the photo, with Barthes' concept of *Punctum* (1993), as a form of making strange.

Historically contextualised debates around authenticity, whilst important in themselves, can deflect from a deeper reflection with the photographic artefact in itself and, as stated earlier, it is not the topic of this article to engage with these. On the contrary, the intention is to engage with the photograph as a visual artefact, as a tool both of and for making the familiar

strange. A generative creative tool, both as photography itself and within the visual communication arts.

3.1 *Photography Contextualised within Visual Communication Practice*

If one accepts that photography is not a form of authenticity but is, instead, a defamiliarising subjective and creative activity, it allows us to move the debate forward. For example, graphic design, as practice, makes no claim at authenticity. It is a form of visual activity, the process of which intentionally takes an original subject (such as company or a product) and re-presents a form of it graphically, as a brand, within an advert and so on. For example, few would claim that a brochure – consisting of text, images and illustrations – is an authentic representation of the original subject of the brochure.

For example, the visual communication of food products in design and advertising regularly channels notions of pastoralism (such as ‘naturalness’), far removed from their origin, with images being used as a form of visual linguistic persuasion (Evernden, 1992; Ledin & Machin, 2018). Once again, the pastiche of simulacra intentionally visually transforms the original. Similarly, the use of corporate portrait photography in brochure or annual report design, is far from empirically authentic and some research suggests it is more focussed on aesthetic methodologies (Guthey & Jackson, 2005).

My practice as a designer involves visualising the perceptions of the consumers of visual imagery. Professionally, this is sometimes informed by more involved methods of persona and scenario creation drawn from wider design practices; for example in usability studies (Eriksson, Artman, Swartling, 2013) and testing (Penin & Tonkinwise, 2009), project communication (Blomquist & Arvola, 2002), interactive devices (Iacucci & Kuutti, 2002), awareness-raising among designers about the needs of specific user groups (Newell, Morgan, Gibson, Forbes, 2011) or visualising future societal design needs (Blythe & Dearden, 2009). Of more relevance here, however, are those practices informed by ‘in-situ’ reflective design practices – the ‘doing of design’ – which have been documented by design researchers (Schön, 1983; Cross, 2006), which as discussed shortly, inform the practice of making strange. More specifically, it is my practice as a graphic designer, which forces me to critically assess the photograph as a communication artefact with an audience (Gillieson & Garneau, 2018). As a result, when reflecting on *The Falling Soldier* my practice almost sub-consciously focusses my mind on imagining what the effect of the image might be for other viewers or, more clinically, ‘consumers’ of this image. I imagine it contextualised when it first appeared in the 1930s (Capa, 1936) in popular print media. The Metropolitan Museum in New York, which owns an original

print, suggests that the image remains “strangely familiar and retains its powerful impact”, despite its historical distance (metmuseum.org). Indeed, its iconic contemporary status is wildly distinct in comparison to its original placement; as an illustrative image on page 19 of *Life* magazine, without even being discussed in the accompanying article (Cosgrove, 2013).

The effect on magazine readers, as they viewed the photo, several days or weeks after it had been taken is difficult to gauge. In the days prior to cheap air travel and the immediacy of news consumption, the article and photograph portrayed a war which, at the time, must have seemed to be taking place at a metaphorically further distance than it might for today's viewers of visual imagery. How did it impact on their lives? Did it affect their views of the conflict in Spain, if they had any? Was the momentary image of death as shocking and powerful then, in a society arguably more visually sanitised to everyday media portrayals of the horrors of war? While sanitisation of war imagery continues (Schwalbe, 2013), the 21st century saturation of 24 hour news coverage, especially combined with social media variants, surely increases consumer exposure. On the other hand, less than 15 years since the end of WWI, perhaps this is a naive view. Indeed, how did the medium of presentation enhance or decrease the emotions of the photograph's viewer? For example, the image was taken and printed in black and white, which would have been predominantly a costing requirement of the publishing technology at the time – commercial colour printing was available, but expensive and time consuming. So, did the monochromatic nature of the image sanitise or enhance these effects and perceptions? Certainly, the pre-war years saw a large increase in the technological ability and actual production and distribution of print media, with new and cheaper ways of producing photographic imagery (Keil, 2017).

These historical and cultural implications indicate the requirement for nuance in debates around the contextualisation of photographic images. Moreover, they inform me as a professional creative practitioner. I find myself imagining how I, as a graphic designer, might present the image within a 21st century paradigm of design communication. How might it be laid out and consumed in a contemporary printed format which is predominantly in full colour and probably also online, or within an interactive online environment?

Designers often use reflective and methodological practices to channel the generative practice of making the familiar strange (Meron, 2019). For example, making strange has been re-envisioned by critical design, using ludic objects such as cultural probes (Gaver, Dunne, Pacentini, 1999; Gaver, Boucher et al., 2004; Bell, Blythe, Sengers, 2005; Sengers, Boehner, David,

Kaye, 2005; Celikoglu, Ogut, Krippendorff, 2017) or in wider creative practice by tools such as Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's (1980) Oblique Strategies cards, all of which simulate the principle of Shklovsky's defamiliarising 'devices' to enable strangeness (Lemon & Reis, 1965; Bell et al., 2005).

3.2 *Making Strange as a Reflective Visual Method*

In Design Thinking, Nigel Cross (2011) discusses a study by Lloyd and Snelders (2003) in which they deconstruct the creative process that Philippe Starck undertook to design his famous lemon squeezer (Alessi, 2016). Lloyd and Snelders describe how design thinking and creative concepts do not appear as inexplicable flashes (Cross, 2011), but instead manifest as the result of applying an analogy to a problem. In Starck's case, he marshalled his design thinking skills to move from visualising a squid-like metaphor (physically drawing a squid on a napkin) through to application, before emerging with a design solution. This took the form of a lemon squeezer with a squid-like resemblance. Starck's lemon squeezer was allegedly designed to "start conversations" as much as it was intended to be used to juice lemons (Watson-Smyth, 2010), in essence functioning as a visual device for making strange – its strange appearance provoking discussions and debate.

Within communication design, the practice of making strange can extend to the reflective reading of visual elements such as photographs. For example, graphic design can provoke critical engagement with notions of photographic truth and representation when photography can be digitally altered, cropped, positioned in a layout and otherwise made strange, to portray alternate, hyperreal or re-presented narratives (Berger, 1982; Newton, 2012). Indeed, recontextualising the familiarity of photographic imagery is part of graphic designers' creative practice (Eisner, 1995) and helps to overcome the "stupor of the familiar" (Eisner, 2003, p. 53). Once again, the unity of these defamiliarising approaches comes from their inherent simulacral function (Baudrillard, 1994): taking an original concept and reproducing it as an intentionally altered, even distorted, copy. Through these practices, communication design is intrinsically defamiliarising, altering the way in which the creator, participants or intended audience view a design outcome.

To try and escape my instinctive professional designers' viewpoint, I have to try to create a metaphoric distance, by consciously redirecting my focus from the context of the photograph by using my professional design skills to focus on its inherent strangeness. Like the design thinking of Starck's process, it is a conscious design response, also drawing on John Mason's (2002) *professional noticing*, an extension of what Mason describes as intentional

noticing. Mason's approach is a less linear variation on the principles of Donald Schön's (1987) ladders of reflection, whereby actions and reflections create a recursive 'ladder'; each set of reflections promoting a new series of actions and reflection. Thus, making strange helps me to view the photographic image outside of its familiar framework – the communication designers' need to constantly contextualise and repurpose photographs for third party viewing by others.

3.3 *Refractive Prism, rather than Reflective Mirror*

By consciously reflecting on the photograph, I find myself noticing that the emotivity of *Falling Soldier* is inescapable. The photograph depicts a human figure at the moment of death. It is a visual depiction of a soldier, a man, caught at the moment of involuntarily surrendering a position of strength and perhaps masculinity, casting aside his rifle. It aptly invokes Sontag's (2008) commentary that photographs "participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability" (p. 15). The figure is looking away from the camera, seemingly already resigned to his fate. It is a moment of such tragic limbo, in between life and death that, once again, Sontag (2002) hauntingly describes the militiaman as "...about to fall, dead, onto his own shadow" (p. 87).

In describing it as such, Sontag's identification of the shadow as a version of the subject (the militiaman) is an interesting observation of the photograph's subject and resonates strongly with the language of Bresson's photographic moment (1952). In this particular photographic moment, the shadow holds a symbolism which personifies this moment, but also extends it by reflecting the subject (the falling soldier) of the photograph. Being a shadow, it also provides a strange counterpoint for the falling figure, in the distorted way that shadows do. As such, the shadow's strangeness suggests the refraction of a metaphoric prism, rather than a reflective mirror. A shadow as a strange distortion of an original form that "confers on each moment the character of a mystery" (Sontag, 2008, p. 23).

Within my own photographic practice, I have generatively utilised shadows as part of the creative simulacral process and outcome; producing an intentionally altered copy of an original. I discuss this process further below. This practice of making the familiar strange is intentional; embracing the inauthenticity of photography (masquerading as authenticity) enabling the photographic image to be viewed in its own form, using its own language, rather than attempt to clumsily integrate it into distractive discourses, such as historical empiricism, editorial ethics, or documentary objectivity.

For example, when creating a photograph, I often intentionally frame the shot to disguise the location, or to distort an expected aesthetic. In combination with various post-processing techniques, brand new sanitised shopping centres, for example, can be made to look old and abandoned, or beautiful country landscapes can be portrayed as post-apocalyptic wastelands. In the following example, I reflect on some of the outcomes that the refractive practice of making the familiar strange can produce.

4 A Tale of Two Shadows

The two photographs below were taken with an old point and shoot film camera. This is relevant because, as discussed earlier, it identifies a subjective intervention into the photographic process; in this case due to the way in which the cheap plastic lens deals with the photographic capture of light and darkness. In addition, the use of a long discarded photographic technology brings its own series of visual aesthetics and practitioner interaction with the photographic equipment. Even prior to this act of photographic capture, the viewfinder of this camera itself is so small and inaccurate that the framing of the image itself was somewhat of a lottery. The images were captured on black and white film and processed by a third party laboratory using unknown chemicals.² The images were scanned with a cheap desktop film scanner, a further intervention which affects the quality and rendering of the image, before finally being digitally post-processed in Photoshop.

It is this final post-processing which especially allows me to consciously impose my own subjective narrative onto the photographic form. It is a digital process, but it is, in essence, little different to the analogue photographic manipulations of pre-digital photographers and their post-production technicians.

I want to turn the attention to the form of the following two photographs, depicting bicycles.

² Using different types of processing chemicals can affect the development of the image on photographic film, ranging from contrast, to grain and sharpness, for example.

FIGURE 1

Leaving aside the processes involved in the capture of the photograph, and the fact that the image has obviously been post-processed – and we have already established that it is impossible not to post-process a photograph – in the first image (Figure 1), one can predominantly see the shadow of a bicycle. It could be described as abstract, however, a fragment of the ‘original’ bicycle remains visible at the top of the frame and the format still presents an identifiable representation of a bicycle. The original bicycle appears upright and appears to be viewed slightly from above.

In the second image (Figure 2), only the shadow of a bicycle is viewable in the frame. There is no visual guidance, or reference point, for the ‘original’ bicycle.

FIGURE 2

The second photograph has been subjected to several more levels of post-processing (or digitally generated strangeness) than the first photograph. The shadow was photographed on a pavement, but has been digitally manipulated so that the bicycle appears upright. In this second photograph, the bicycle's apparent uprightness is more normative and familiar. Its wheels are barely distorted and the seat is prominent, perhaps almost welcoming. One could almost imagine sitting astride the seat of this shadow bicycle and riding it away. Because of this distortion, the manipulated shadow assumes a more familiar visual form of an actual bicycle as we are used to engaging with it, than the more empirically 'authentic' portrayal of the bicycle in the first photograph.

Conversely, in the first photographic form one is drawn to the shadow, as a normative shadow, rather than to the bicycle itself. Partially, this is because the shadow appears more conventionally located on the ground. But perhaps this is also because of its distorted handlebars, which assume a kind of gothic swanlike posture. In addition, the shadow's wheels are splayed at disturbed angles to each other and, even though we can see part of the original form of the 'physical' bicycle as a reference within the photographic frame, it is more identifiably merely a shadow, a metaphoric reflection of the original. Indeed, it is because of its distortion that we identify the shadow as such.

By contrast, the second photograph is refracted and rendered strange yet, having gone through an extensive process of manipulation and then viewed

from a unfamiliar, non-automised, viewpoint, becomes familiar again. It is a creative practice phenomenon that Eisner (1995) asserts “recontextualises the familiar so that it takes on a new significance” (p. 2), “making the familiar strange and making the strange familiar” (2008, p. 11) and that other discussions of the discourse describe as ‘newly strange’ (Ortony, 1993; Schön, 1993) or ‘new familiar’ (Sadowska, 2019).

5 Conclusion

I started this article by critiquing debates around the problems of authenticity within photographic discourse. I argued that, for creative practitioners, photographic communication is more helpfully suited to being contextualised within the established generative practice of making the familiar strange. Focussing on photographic examples from history and from my own practice, this exercise has shown how the photographic form can sit far more comfortably as a subjective creative process for making the familiar strange than it does as a representation of authenticity, let alone empirical documentary.

Moreover, debates around notions of originality and photographic authenticity are unhelpful in this context, in that they attempt to engage in discussions around a subjective representative power of the photographic form that photography has never been. Photography is not a conveyor of authenticity outside of itself. On the contrary, photography is a form of visual communication with an aesthetic language that lends itself far more comfortably to *re-presentation*, rather than *representation* – strangeness rather than authenticity, refraction rather than reflection.

In making strange, photography is perhaps the ultimate simulacra – the intentional creation of an altered (and momentary) copy of an original – even gaining its own linguistic justifier with the term photorealistic. By utilising and manipulating real lights and real shadows to appear so ‘authentic’, photography beguilingly taunts us with its faux reproduction of reality. By accepting this creative subjectivity as a strength of photography, as a generative creative practice for making the familiar strange, rather than a limitation of the photographic form – and by not letting ourselves be distracted by third party debates around authenticity – it also allows creative practitioners to more comfortably engage critically with wider, and continually changing, discourses around the use of photographic images.

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