



---SITE INDEX---

Go

Resources: Fun Book | Help Book | Web Book

LI NEWS

NYC NEWS

SPORTS

BUSINESS

LEISURE

- Leisure Home Page & Part 2 Section
- Books
- Columnists
- Comics
- Crossword
- Faith Section
- Food Day Recipes & Features
- FanFare Sunday Section
- Home & Gardening
- Horoscopes
- Long Island Life Section
- Movie Reviews & Listings
- NightBeat Entertainment Section
- Part 2 Feature Section
- Plugged In Section: Personal Technology
- Restaurant Reviews/Dining Out
- Theater Reviews
- Travel Sunday Section
- Television: Customized Listings & Columns
- Outdoors Section
- LI Weddings Of Distinction

OPINION

ARCHIVES

SEARCH

- Last 7 Days
- Obituaries
- LI History

Search



LEISURE

07/11/2001 - Wednesday - Page B 6

FAKING IT

Cropping, changing colors and adding or removing figures are tricks of the trade. But photo manipulation is a slippery slope.

by Aileen Jacobson
Staff Writer

A PICTURE used to be worth a thousand words. Now it could take that many to explain how a photo or video got to look the way it does.

That model's nipped waist, a celebrity's flawless complexion or even a historical scene could be as deftly doctored as a glossy sci-fi flick.

Though altering images is almost as old as photography itself, it's become increasingly prevalent and seductive in the digital age: easier to do, harder to detect and perhaps even expected by jaded viewers. Which doesn't mean that photo manipulation isn't highly controversial.

Consider the recent TV commercials that show Martin Luther King telling his dream to an empty Washington Mall or Lou Gehrig making his farewells in a fan-free Yankee Stadium. In both cases, later frames show the authentic scenes, with large audiences.

The commercials have drawn criticism largely because they use American icons for commercial purposes, though with the families' permission. Some people also feel the King ad trivializes the power of his speech. However, if Alcatel, a French communications company, had just used original footage, speculates company spokesman Brian Murphy, "no one would have noticed" the commercials as much.

Creating the fake scenes, he said, was done by Industrial Light and Magic, the Hollywood firm that, among other tricks, seamlessly placed the movie character Forrest Gump into footage of real historical events.

To create the Gehrig commercial, Murphy said, weeks of research on the stadium's architecture preceded the computer graphic, which took four weeks to produce.

The graphic includes 46,500 chairs, 14,000 bleacher seats and 31,899 other distinct elements, as well as inclusion of specially shot film of 48-star flags to "add to the realism." Gehrig's head was superimposed on the body of an actor who mimicked the player's motions during his speech. Because the stadium looked "too clean," Murphy said, they "added computer graphic dirt and dust to make it feel real." The original footage of Gehrig speaking to a packed stadium wasn't altered, he said, except to blur recognizable faces in the crowd. The King ad uses similar techniques, though it's based on film of an empty mall. Both ads, which also have print versions, make it clear with the contrast that the first scenes aren't real, Murphy said, and have been effective in drawing "media attention." But that doesn't make them right, said Dino A. Brugioni, founder of the CIA's National Photographic Interpretation Center and author of the book "Photo Fakery." "They're almost sacrilegious," he said. Brugioni also doesn't like a print trend he's noticed of using "computer re-creations" of events, even when they're labeled. "It's happening more and more. and I really think it ought to stop." In fact.

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Newsday developed a policy governing such usage after New York Newsday got into trouble seven years ago when it ran a cover, captioned a "composite illustration," that made it appear rivals Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan were skating on the same ice. The guidelines say that "any photo illustration that distorts reality must be done in a way that is so obvious or so exaggerated that no reasonable reader will be deceived - and it must be clearly labeled." Other newspapers have similar policies, though not always in writing.

"We've never come to an agreement on language that's sufficiently strict" to prohibit deceitful illustrations "or sufficiently loose to allow for photo illustrations that are more art than journalism," said Bill Parker, Chicago Tribune associate managing editor for photography. "We're still trying." At The New York Times, which does have a written policy, picture editor Margaret O'Connor said, "We don't alter anything that changes the reality of the picture." Conceptual illustrations using photos must "be something very obvious, or it's frowned upon," and they must be labeled as illustrations.

The need for watchfulness is becoming urgent. Fakery isn't new - Brugioni's book features a photo of Abraham Lincoln's head on someone else's body - but it's growing now that scanners and software are available to almost anyone, said Brugioni. "It has grown in intensity, and it's going to get worse," he said, especially since teenagers are growing up taking manipulation for granted.

"When I was in the U.K., there was quite a lot of research done about what readers expected, and are you perpetuating ideas of perfection and making people feel insecure," said Mandi Norton, who 18 months ago came to the United States to edit Mademoiselle. "And readers absolutely understood that when you're dealing with beauty images, you are buying it for an element of fantasy.

If they wanted an exact replica, they would look in the mirror." Not only is it common to remove stray hairs, "readers expect it. What I don't particularly like, and never do, is recontouring faces to remove all traces of human life." In the May issue, Mademoiselle miffed publicist Lizzie Grubman, who had posed for a photo and thought she looked so different that she doubted it was her body. "It's a different outfit," said Grubman (before her current problems involving an automobile incident outside a Southampton nightclub). Norton said the magazine had lengthened Grubman's skirt: "It's our responsibility to provide as flattering an image as we can." Some celebrities don't know how much their photos have been altered, said Helene DeLillo, president of New York's Dancing Icon, a digital imaging and digital photography company, and a specialist in digital retouching. Press agents often have publicity photos retouched, she said, or magazines do it - sometimes going too far. Elle magazine erased Cindy Crawford's belly button, in its July 1998 issue. (Famous digital makeovers cited by others include an erasure of Harrison Ford's scar in Premiere, a bonding of Madonna's gapped front teeth in Entertainment Weekly and the placement of Oprah Winfrey's head on Ann-Margret's body in TV Guide.) One way to tell if a photo has been retouched is to look at necks: "Most people have two lines, where your neck folds," said DeLillo. "Also, if there's no shadow on the inside or outside of the eyes, it's been retouched." EVEN BEFORE digital airbrushing made it easier to thin thighs, she said, people found ways: Mae West had special corsets made for her dresses that could be rephotographed later with a tighter midriff and superimposed on her photo.

Or photographers used wide-angle lenses vertically. "It's gotten easier to do on the computer," DeLillo said. These days, she said, everyone from models to readers expects to see "eyes pure white, teeth pure white." She's even been

asked to substitute someone else's six-pack abs in photos on covers of exercise videos. "The cover has to be perfect," she said.

Magazine covers, too, tend to be manipulated more than images inside. That was noticeable in the June House & Garden, where a daybed was digitally changed to light purple for the cover, while the real-life neutral cashmere shade appeared inside. Ironically, the editors had already paid to have the 1930s piece, which belongs to Maison Gerard partner Benoist F. Drut and originally was a peach color, reupholstered in the neutral fabric, said Gerard Widdershoven, founder of the Manhattan antiques gallery. "He's happy to have it in cashmere. Purple was never an option. It would not have gone with his decor." Ethical issues tend to arise more insistently when a photo is considered news. Context makes a difference, as a recent example demonstrates: A photo from the June Ladies' Home Journal, of the McCaughey septuplets visiting Disney World, was sent to newspapers via the Associated Press, which got it from the Gamma agency. Neither AP nor Gamma knew that a child in the foreground of a beach scene had been digitally inserted into the picture.

A member newspaper noticed a difference in shadows, said Lou Wheaton, AP's administrative director of photos. "We went back to Gamma, and they went to the magazine. ... We sent a note out, indicating it was a composite, and that it should be eliminated." NEWSDAY had already run the photo, on May 16, and later ran an explanatory note. A spokeswoman for the magazine said that "trying to get seven squirming toddlers into one frame does take, on occasion, some slight alteration ... One child had scooted out of the frame, and so he was moved into it." "Any image manipulation used anywhere is of great concern to the National Press Photographers Association," said its president, David Handschuh, who is a photographer for the New York Daily News. "It makes people question whether what they're seeing is indeed the truth. ... My concern is that in newspapers we can't give the readers one question mark that the images they are seeing are not real." Cropping photos and changing their tonality for a better quality print are generally considered OK, he added, though Time magazine came in for criticism when it ran a darkened picture of O.J. Simpson (labeled a "photo-illustration") on a 1994 cover. Some observers felt the altered image made Simpson look sinister and raised questions of racism. Time officials said at the time that no deception or racial implication was intended.

Cropping can become controversial, too, as happened recently after an NBC camera zeroed in on a photograph of U.S. Rep. Gary Condit (D-Calif.) with his arm around Washington intern Chandra Ann Levy, who has been missing for more than two months. The tight shot omitted another woman, Jennifer Baker, who stood under Condit's other arm.

Baker was "horrified," said Al Golub, image technology manager of The Modesto (Calif.) Bee, whom Baker approached after the incident. She thought the cropped photo suggested an affair and wanted Golub to make sure it went out on the AP with instructions to print all three subjects. That happened, but several newspapers had already reproduced the NBC image.

Among them was the Daily News, which repeatedly used the cropped image, crediting NBC in mid-May and early June but attributing the photo to AP on June 27. Golub thinks cropping the Levy photo is wrong, "because it does change the story." Daily News editor Edward Kosner disagrees. The cropped image, he said, still looks like the kind of souvenir photo "everyone has on their wall." "If it appeared to be an intimate moment, it would be different," he said.

"But to take an extraneous person out of the photograph is

OK." Some manipulated images that have been criticized are "fairly harmless," said Andrew Davidhazy, chairman of the imaging and photographic technology program at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Among these, he said, is a famous 1982 instance when National Geographic "moved the pyramids" on its cover for a better fit, a practice the magazine no longer allows.

"I don't think we should mislead, but when you're an artist, you're creating art. I take a fairly broad-minded approach" that is not opposed to all cases of manipulation, said Davidhazy, who has been called in to analyze many UFO and Loch Ness monster shots, as well as a Lee Harvey Oswald portrait and a photo of O.J. Simpson wearing Bruno Magli shoes.

If a photo has been taken in the digital age, it's harder to tell if it's authentic, he said. Davidhazy examines "the distribution of pixels and digital watermarks," a system photographers use to protect their work, to see if they've been disturbed. Digitally altered photos can be placed on film, so negatives can also be faked.

No wonder fictional films like "Wag the Dog" posit that an entire war can be concocted on tape. After all, Dan Rather appeared on New Year's Eve 2000 in a Times Square that seemed aglow with a CBS logo instead of the real-life NBC peacock, thanks to electronic wizardry that superimposed a virtual graphic on the real one. The digital switch was later condemned by Rather, though not by CBS News president Andrew Heyward.

"With digital technology, these techniques have been delivered into the hands of the multitudes. ...Literally anybody can do anything with a computer," said Terry Murphy, editor of PEI PHOTO\>Electronic Imaging, a monthly trade magazine owned by the Professional Photographers of America.

Computer software has been a boon for wedding and other commercial photographers. Those who shoot interiors for magazines can now "stitch" shots together instead of using complicated lighting for a bright panorama, said Murphy. "A composite photo can look more like real life than an unretouched photograph. The human eye can capture a large range of colors and automatically adjust. ...An argument can be made that [the composite] is really more truthful." Larry Nyswinder, director of the School of Visual Communication at Ohio University, said he believes creativity is permissible when photographs are used in "illustrative" ways in magazine and newspaper features. "My rule of thumb is: Is there an intent to deceive?" Guidelines are needed at each news organization, said Kenny Irby, leader of the Visual Journalism Group at the nonprofit Poynter Institute, an educational organization for journalists in St. Petersburg, Fla. Recently, he hosted an online forum, with interesting results. The Newsweek participant, citing her magazine's "bad experience" when it straightened septuplet mother Bobbi McCaughey's teeth in a photo, wrote that Newsweek now "won't do anything that would require surgery in real life." Irby, who worked at Newsday when the "Fire on Ice" cover ran, is wary of any manipulation. "It's a slippery slope. It sets a dangerous precedent."

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