

THE ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN DIGITAL PHOTO MANIPULATION AND
EDITING

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

CREATIVE PROJECT: The Ethical Considerations in Digital Photo Manipulation and Editing

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This creative project will provide the needed assets to run an empirical study to determine if there are boundaries within digital photo manipulation. This project did not conduct a study with participants, it simply created the needed stimuli for this study to be conducted elsewhere. This project consisted of 1,100 photographs shot at *Burning Man* where 55 photographs were selected, edited, and then displayed on a digital website platform. Each photograph was edited on Adobe Photoshop in a minimalistic way that told *Burning Man's* surrealist narrative.

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2016, I started a different kind of medium than what I went for college originally. I was finishing up my junior year at Capital University, pursuing my Bachelors of Arts with a focus in Electronic Media and Film. Earlier that academic year, I started getting into photography. I began photographing my friends, in order to get my feet wet. As time went on, I photographed more people, collaborated with other artists in the area, and even made some money from it sometimes. Nonetheless, I kept myself busy and was constantly shooting more and absorbing as much as I can.

One shoot in the spring was particularly memorable. In our minimalist studio that Capital provided in the art room, I photographed a fashion model, a woman in her early 20s. The setup was simple and included a white backdrop with two soft box lights. The model exhibited beauty standards that our culture traditionally finds to be sexually attractive. Throughout the shoot, we shot a variety of styles but the main theme was underwear and lingerie. I felt the shoot was productive and I left feeling I had some great pictures. We packed up our things and I told her when I would send the photos.

Early in my photography career, I did not know much about editing. I would email the photos to my phone, then import the photos into this app called "VSCO." From there, I would look at different filters and choose what I felt best fit the photograph I took. Part of it was ignorance, but I also did not like the idea of manipulating the original photos. I edited a couple of

photos and sent them to the model to see what she thought of my edits. The response I got surprised me.

She sent back two photos of her and said that she “changed the colors and tones a little.” When I viewed them, something looked off. I could not quite put my finger on it so I toggled back and forth from my edit and hers. I realized she had edited her body to appear thinner at the waist while her bottom was bigger. As I sat there going back and forth between the photos, I could not help but feel disappointed. I realized that she had a very different view of what was beautiful than I did.

This girl still models and posts photos of herself regularly. From time to time, I will see another post on Instagram where she models a swimsuit. After photographing her first hand, I realized this image, while considered “perfect” by the model and her thousands of followers is actually edited to the point where she is pictured far different from her real image. This leaves me with the question I have been pondering since our first shoot. What is photography really about? Is it presenting “perfect” images even though they are clearly edited or showing the real images of real people-perceived flaws and all.

That’s exactly what this project is about.

A photograph is one of the essential ways an individual can tell a story to others. Photography over the years has played a pivotal role in telling narratives. Whether it is through

editorial, street, or photojournalism, a story is told. Photography allows the general public to interpret a moment in their own way, or even create an open-ended perspective for the viewer.

In news, politics, and sports, we are told a story through the medium of a still shot. We are constantly getting information through photographs. Events happen every day and we want to stay up to date with what is happening. Even with ourselves—we are constantly trying to document our lives and social media is our stage and we choose the content. In a way, it allows anyone to be a storyteller. Many people are trying to produce something that makes their life seem more interesting than the average human. That means they need “content.” With that, people hop in this rat race for who can create the “best” content. With technology improving rapidly within the past thirty years, taking a photograph has become as simple as owning a cell phone. Before digital, people used film cameras, took photographs without even knowing how the picture would turn out, processed the film in a dark room, then they would be able to view what they captured to the world. Even then, people still had the power to manipulate. Now, we can take a photograph, edit it with an application, and share it on multiple platforms in a matter of seconds. With this sort of “power” we all possess, how can we know what is and is not real anymore?

However, this has always been something we as humans do regardless of the time period. We are always trying to tell the best story that we can—even if it did not happen the way we wanted to. If we can make a story more pleasing or attractive, then, why would we not? Take for example the iconic photo taken during World War 2 “Raising a Flag over the Reichstag” is in fact, altered (see Appendix A). The Soviets sent the photographer Yevgeny

Khaldel to the Reichstag and capture a moment of victory as the Soviet were closing in on Berlin. Yevgeny rounded some nearby soldiers and had them pose for a whole roll. Afterwards, Yevgeny manipulated the contrast and superimposed dark smoke in order to make the photo more dramatic. What is also different is the watch removed in the photo to the right, to erase any suspicion of looting. When the Soviets invaded Germany, their actions were horrendous and included murder, rape, and looting. Due to the negative perception, the original photograph needed to be manipulated in order to maintain the narrative (Lowndes, 2018).

For as long as humans have created narrative, we have been trying to change and modify the way visual imagery can be perceived. Whether it is to enhance or perhaps take away what reality has to offer, we naturally want to present the best narrative as storytellers. Another example of this is the oil painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (see Appendix B). While it does not involve digital manipulation it still amplifies that narrative to a new level. The painting displays President Washington at the front of the boat, pushing blocks of ice to the side and coming in from what seems like an ocean. While it is a well-known piece of work, many aspects are inaccurate. Even though paintings are not meant to present objectivity, Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze created a piece of work that showcases America's founding in a beautiful and dramatic way. To begin with, Washington would have fallen out the boat if he perched his foot on the edge as pictured. Also, the boat would have been flat and filled with water, as well. Another error is the depiction of the time of day. Washington led troops across the Delaware as a surprise attack in the middle of the night, rather than at the break of dawn. The wide expansion of the river is rather fabricated as well, due to the real crossing spanning a few hundred meters (Kaplan, 2017).

Despite all of the historical inaccuracies-it is still considered a fantastic piece of work that is on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Minnesota Marine Art Museum. Even with all the errors in this piece of work, one aspect stands out: it is still admired, regardless of the narrative. When dealing with photographs, it is even easier to skew a story we are trying to tell or depict. With the different types of technologies that have been developed over the years, such as Photoshop or Lightroom, editors can easily manipulate the photographs. Consequently, people can twist, showcase, remove, or alter their work in ways that can stray from the original photograph. While we are always constantly searching for truth, there are many instances in journalism or media that present a departure from the truth.

In the *Allegory of the Cave*, Plato argues that nothing is ever permanent and that the present can be deceiving. Our senses of sight, touch and taste can let us down from time to time which makes the material world unreliable.¹ Plato believed the more *real* world is the world of “Forms” where any conceivable thing or property exists in an abstract state but in perfect form. We may attempt to recreate these perfect forms but fail since everything in this world is an imperfect representation of its perfect form. Plato then uses the analogy of people who spend their entire lives living in a cave who only see shadows on the walls created by their campfire. Real physical events and objects are analogous to shadows and we can only understand one’s true form by leaving the cave in search of sunlight (see Appendix C). So, if what we see in the material world is a shadow, then what is a photograph or a video of a physical event or object? Our senses can sometimes fool us especially when we have control of what everyone sees and

¹ Cohen, M. (2015, July 25). The Allegory of the Cave. Retrieved November 6, 2018, from <https://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/cave.htm>

interprets. Is it the storyteller's duty to tell its narrative as close as it can to the fire, or the shadows? Or even a shadow once removed? Should a photograph leave that up for interpretation?

As the role of a photographer in that analogy, whatever is in front of the camera is considered real world. However, an absolute perfect form of that object exists elsewhere. So already, whatever the photographer is capturing is not perfect. With that, everyone has a different interpretation of what they see. Whatever the photographer captures will then be interpreted by viewers in their own way. However, the photographer will always know how the original image looked, the actions that were happening in that moment, and the narrative of that moment (fire). All the photograph can do is capture a fraction of a second within that moment. It is a more imperfect representation of something already imperfect.

These are all questions that are worth considering when taking photographs, because photographers have control when depicting the material world. Many places, people, and events seem familiar. One example is the Eiffel Tower. Since it is one of the top tourist spots in the world, many different eyes will see it. Some may think it is dreamy, while others might describe it as overrated. Through many different photographs of the Eiffel tower, we may develop different perspectives of this wonder. Whether shot in the evening, mid-day, summer, or winter: all these different images can convey different narratives. What becomes tricky then is what happens when you are photographing an event. Events are unique because everyone can experience an event differently. Whether an art gallery, music festival, or sports event, different moments deliver different perceptions and experiences. Photojournalists are attempting to

capture and deliver these moments in the most objective way possible. Many events around the world have been captured in order to depict these moments. One event, however, separates itself from many others. One that has kept its authenticity from the beginning and continues to do so: Burning Man.

Whenever I am asked what it was like to attend Burning Man, the typical answer is never really a description, but more a suggestion: you must see it for yourself to understand it. Is it a music festival? Where is it? What happens? These are all questions I first asked once I heard about it. How does one get tickets? How do you get there? Where can you stay? Is there food? What is the currency? So what does a photographer do when one goes to an event like Burning Man where everything already seems surreal? How are the photographs edited? How are those stories told? We first need to know what *is* Burning Man. Burning Man is an annual event that takes place in Black Rock City located in northwest Nevada. According to the official Burning Man website, every year, around 70,000 people flock to the temporary city that experiments in community and art from August 25 to September 3. The event is inspired by its ten principles: radical inclusion, gifting, de-commodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, leaving no trace, participation, and immediacy.² Through these ten principles, Burning Man unites people from many different backgrounds for one week in the desert. Out of all these principles, participation may be one of the most essential ones. Selfless giving of one's talents for the enjoyment of everyone is encouraged and actively reinforced while at Burning Man. Some of these acts of creative giving can include experimental

² Welcome Home. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://burningman.org/>.

and interactive sculpture, building, performance, and art cars, among other media. Every year is inspired by a different theme picked by the organizers.

Burning Man is not only an event, but also a lifestyle to some. One can see this event as simply a camping trip for a week where people dress funny while biking all around a lake bed but there is a lot more to it than we think. Workshops, artwork, ceremonies, and human bonding occurs throughout this event. Due to its unique culture, it is important to showcase this to others who would consider going and experimenting with this peculiar lifestyle. In telecommunications, we are always trying to find ways to tell stories to others in whatever medium we prefer. People are allowed to be as self-expressive as they want and when people from the outside look in and see that, it can potentially inspire others to do so as well. It can inspire one to try things or travel to new places that maybe they would not have done so before. However, it is in our nature to always try to sometimes “stretch the truth” or put a twist on what actually happened. Storytellers are always trying to sell their narrative in the best way possible, but is there a line? What if that narrative is of an event or experience that has a limited audience? With that, very few could share the event or experience. With an event like Burning Man where it isn’t quite the event for the normal citizen, people want to share their experience with the world the most unique way they can. But how removed from the “campfire” is it? And is that a negative? What makes the event unique within itself is this: you can’t even begin to make this stuff up.

My primary goal with this project is to break down the photographs I took at *Burning Man* in 2018 and explain the editing process in my photos to prove there must be a line when manipulating a photograph. Within my pool of 1,200 photographs I took over the span of a week,

I selected specific ones that I felt highlighted my experience there and see through my editing process whether I crossed an ethical line. Through this process, I attempted to explore where the ethical boundary lies between art, documentation, and reality. With technology growing at an alarming rate, it is easy to alter a photograph or video from its original form. Plato's *Theory of Forms* goes over how the essence of something is non-physical and how we will never be able to see the essence of anything in the real world. We only have what we can see in this physical world. There is an essence to a photograph and there is physical form of a photograph. Technology nowadays can alter and change photos in the snap of a finger, which then alters its original form in the physical world. Within my photos, I will go over my editing process to display my style in photos, but without altering its original form unless it is for a fine art purpose. Through this process, I will attempt to establish where the boundary lies, while maintaining a strong sense of creativity and abstractness as provided by the source material and within the spirit of *Burning Man*.

Literature Review

Before I began editing my photographs, I had to think about how to go about it in a way that does not cross any ethical boundaries. I needed to conduct research on the different perspectives and areas in digital photo editing in order to see if there were certain areas. I could not find any specific studies or papers that focused on editing photographs taken at *Burning Man*, but there were different articles that hit on digital photo manipulation, in general. Amongst these articles, there were a couple different themes that could not help but be brought up when questioning the ethics within manipulation. With there being a wide range questioning if there was a limit or not, each article pressed the issue of manipulation in its own specific way.

Fashion

Depending on specific industries, photo manipulation can be inevitable. One area where it almost seems to be a must is within fashion. With fashion having to market certain products, looks, and design in order to profit, editors will change what they must in order to persuade consumers. *If Looks could Kill: Digital Manipulation of Fashion Models* offers an insight within the moral issue of magazine ads rendering models to look thinner. The purpose of the article was to see if readers valued public health more than artistic freedom. According to Reaves (2004), “It is an art—but it is one that has psychological consequences for an audience and involves a technology that pits the moral principle of protecting artistic freedom against the moral principle of protecting public health”. Are readers aware of this photo manipulation and can they distinguish what is real and what is not? Within the study, students were recruited and placed to see if they could spot a difference between an edited photo and its original. By the end of the study, it seemed as if the consensus was that most readers had a general awareness of the digital photo manipulation that was taking place. “They did not approve of the use of digital editing to make models appear thinner, considered it manipulative of viewers, and a selling tool. Indeed, they judged it dishonest, unethical, and unfair. They expressed the intention of being very careful when looking at magazine photos”.

From the rendering thinness standpoint, I agree that it is unethical to manipulate a woman’s body in order to create this “expectation” for female readers. It creates this idea that the perfect body is the one we see on a magazine cover, when it in fact, does not exist. “Consistent across studies are findings that indicate that exposure to the thin ideal tends to reduce body satisfaction, increase self-consciousness, and reduce self-esteem”. With that being said, there is this pressure applied to readers to strive for a thin look that can take a toll on one’s health because of the strive for a tighter waist. However, I do think there are certain manipulations

within photos that are important to consider within fashion. There are physical traits of a human that are permanent that I believe should not be altered. Examples of such would be a birthmark, body orientation at the time, facial structure, or eye color. These are variables that if changed, would not hold true to the person. If a model were to show up to a photo shoot, and they had acne spots that would show up rarely, or perhaps a bruise on the body, I do not see an issue with such. Fashion still hold an important purpose in displaying beauty and if there are things that are temporary that can negate that goal within beauty, I think it is legitimate. Prior to photographing *Burning Man*, I was wondering how I would edit my photographs afterward. By taking the considerations in this article, it allowed me to focus on what is permanent within the photograph. Altering what is true within the image would not be ethical but altering what is temporary would be fine.

Media

The media in general is another industry where manipulation within photographs is constant. In *Photo Manipulation in the Media*, Coffaney (2011) attempted to find out what are the different types of editing that go beyond the tolerable limit. In her article, she goes over Adobe Photoshop and lists out the different functions one can use within the software. One of them is the Puppet Warp Tool. "Puppet Warp is a technique, which allows the user to modify shapes within an image: for example, the curve of an elephant's trunk or the position of a dancer's arms and legs" (Drury, 2019). One may create anchor points along the object and then move each anchor point, which grabs the bit it is attached to, in any way to change the shape. Anchor points are points that the editor designates along a part of an object that will be altered. The anchor points break up the part of the image that is being altered so the editor can move only those parts (2011). Functions as such can harm and alter reader's perception, depending on the

publications purpose. Descriptive research and content analysis done on 139 participants found that majority of the participants were aware of photo manipulation, but when asked about where the photo would be published, the participants deemed it more unacceptable in a news publication instead of a magazine or advertisement. It seemed as though if a publication has an informative duty, then the readers feel as if there is a moral obligation to put a disclaimer with the image.

Discovering that majority of the participants in this study are also aware of photo manipulation goes to show that it is not a phenomenon, but understood and noticed. What was interesting was that the images purpose dictated how participants felt with its publication. With my project having the purpose of documenting a trip and experience, if I were to make drastic changes to my images, this group of participants would not be keen with my decision making. If there were elements that I would add to my image that were not previously there, then that would raise a flag for readers, even if it was not previously there. An example of that is the Iran Missile incident where Iran Media posted a photo of four missiles being shot in the air, when there was in fact , only three that were shot. “it appeared to contain one too many missiles, a point that had not emerged before the photo was used on the front pages of The Los Angeles Times, The Financial Times, The Chicago Tribune and several other newspapers as well as on BBC News, MSNBC, Yahoo! News, NYTimes.com and many other major news Web sites” (Nizza & Lyons, 2011). With this kind of image being published, and understanding the magnitude of the subject at hand, it is misleading the public of an international threat. International affairs are not taken slightly, and in this case, manipulating digital images crosses a line of ethics. Multiple well known and reliable news sources delivered information to readers that was consumed and taken seriously. For me, I did not have to worry about my photographs containing important

information for the masses. Nonetheless, that still did not mean I should create a narrative that strayed from the truth.

However, if these images were used for perhaps an art gallery, then more participants would not see any issue with it. Thus, Coffaney (2011) explains the idea that as long as a reader is not in dire need of truth, manipulation is acceptable when in a superficial realm. With something like *Burning Man*, what would a reader view it as? Superficial? Journalism? Coffaney creates a distinction that needed to be made within my own work, which was what is the purpose within my work.

Deep Fakes

With manipulation being recognized and even accepted at certain points, where is the line drawn when the creator of content is maliciously attempting to distribute false content? The First Amendment protects artistic freedom, but should it protect work that purposefully misleads? In “Lies, Line Drawing, and (Deep) Fake News,” Blitz questions when factually false expression qualifies for First Amendment protection and when does it not. “Deep fakes, for example, are generally video or audio creations, and such creations have typically been considered a form of expression. So too is a painting created in the style of Rembrandt, perhaps so faithfully that even viewers educated in art history will mistake it for a Rembrandt painting.”(2018). You would hope for most that are creating content of any sort to simply try to showcase their style of freedom of expression. In this article, we understand how there are people who simply try to create for the wrong reasons. There is the good and the bad in art and media, but regardless of its purpose, it still keeps its rights. Being able to see that there is this side of creating allows others to understand what draws red flags. But whether you are aware of it or not, should you have an alibi?

“Do these types of expression receive First Amendment protection even when they are intended to deceive, and succeed in their deception? If they are protected by free speech guarantees, then how is government to protect people from the kind of havoc which writers predict may arise from deep fakes? If, on the other hand, they are not protected, then does this also open the door for government to restrict other kinds of expression—beyond doctored video- or audiotapes—such as false evidence of events that takes the form of words rather than video footage?” (2018) If false information becomes so overwhelming to a point where the First Amendment can no longer can protect it, would that then allow more expression to get a slap on the wrist? If there is a gallery of photographs, and one of them is extremely edited and fictional, does that discredit all the other photos as well. With Blitz bringing up that point, it made me think a lot more about my collection of images. There were some photos I edited for a finer art feel, but I can get away with it because the event was a celebration or art and self-expression.

However, amongst all the different articles, there is still the argument of whether an original photograph can manipulate perceptions without even being altered. Can there be context or narrative that manipulates a message without altering? And if so, is that worse than altering an image? Does it seem more malicious? In *Annie Leibovitz at Work*, Leibovitz (2018) wrote about her experience covering the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon back in 1982 for *Rolling Stone* magazine. One of her vivid memories of her trip was watching some wire service photographers rearrange a scene at an observation post in an abandoned villa in the hills overlooking the city. They were moving rifles around to make a better picture. She wrote how it confused and shocked her. “I was developing my own style of setting up formal portraits and theatrical scenes around this time, but I didn’t consider those conceptual portraits to be journalism. Portrait photography

was liberating. I felt free to play within the genre. Photojournalism—reportage—was about being an observer. About seeing what was happening in front of you and photographing it. You didn't tamper with it." (2018).

Before going to *Burning Man*, being an observer was definitely an approach to consider. While I have and had no one to report to or report for, there was a balance that needed to be found. Reporting about war and reporting about a temporary community are different, but tampering the truth is still considered an issue. Without even the photograph being edited, Leibovitz pointed out how the manipulation prior to the shutter of the camera depicts a narrative that heavily influences multiple perceptions. With war, readers could misinterpret events in a certain country, when it may not even be that serious. These things do matter and can have a ripple effect on many other things.

Reality Itself

In *Can We Trust What We See?*, Farrington (2016) poses the question of what are the different ways that a photograph can be manipulated and are there ethical considerations to consider? Does social construction play a role as well? Farrington argues that even if a photograph is not physically altered, the end result of what the photograph represents is what's altered. Whether it is through a software, staged, or described with a specific caption, Farrington believes that *any* alteration can still influence the understanding of its content. Nonetheless, Farrington mentioned "However, if the manipulation is mainly to provide better proportions, balance or light to make the photograph more attractive, the implications on society as a whole is not as great as the content is not greatly changed". As long as the main factors are not removed or altered, then manipulation in this case should not be as worried about.

Farrington brings up interesting points and solid examples for the varieties of photo manipulation. It seems as if narrative can be skewed in multiple ways without just editing a photograph manually. Sure, you can see it in journalism with certain headlines or the way certain subjects could be staged is an issue, but when it comes to simply enhancing an image, it is not as stressed about. Before *Burning Man*, I was not sure if I would come across a picture I shot where the photo itself could mislead the audience. Afterwards, Figure 1 had me convinced otherwise. The narrative within this image presents the idea that a camp served perhaps sexual acts...but did it? This photo, without digital manipulation, creates a rather taboo narrative based off what is seen. The only ones who would know what truthfully happened are the ones who were there. Truthfully, inside the camp were people who had machines that blew bubbles, therefore, coining the phrase “blowjob.” If I were to leave that image open-ended, then readers are questioning if that was there or really happened. Having an image, I took myself display manipulation without altering it makes Farringtons article that much stronger.

Another article that briefly hits on the same points is “Fantasizing Reality” (Witherill, 2014). Witherill says “In truth, photographs have never possessed the attribute of being able to depict intrinsic truth, much less that of sufficiently defining any reality, as we know it.” (2014). With that being said, no picture alone can capture reality the way that the naked eye can see it. In a way, every photo taken is altered based off its composition, lighting, and other components within a photograph. If there is an apple set on a table where natural light is the source of light from an angle, and someone takes a photograph of it, the image itself is no longer what is was in the moment. I may remember how the scenery felt, the way the apple looked, and the warmth of the light coming in. For anyone else, they would not know all those details that I know, because

their own view or perception has already been created. Reality is now twice removed, which gives readers a lesser understanding of that specific moment.

Tom Wheeler's *Phototruth or Photofiction? Ethics and Media Imagery in the Digital Age* (Wheeler, 2016) also touches on how untruthful certain images can be. "Despite our knowing that cameras can lie, that some photos—even famous ones—were faked in one way or another, for more than a century we have nevertheless bestowed upon photography a remarkable measure of trustworthiness." (2016). While Wheeler points out how there has been plenty of faux photographs, this also displays how important and relevant photography still is. Video is on the rise and is more accessible for others than before, but photographs still hold weight. Video may capture more, but photographs can be studied. They continue to remain what they are, because we cannot change them. They may not have every bit of the truth, but they have the potential of holding some, and readers will take every ounce they can get.

Over the course of reading the variety of articles and books covering this issue, there was an array of issues that my project could potentially fill in for. Obviously, there is always the constant questioning of what is real and what is not. Readers will always have some sort of curiosity towards anything is seen with the human eye. With my photo-journal consisting of not only photographs, but photographs of an event that some may not even believe, it will test me to determine if I would even need to manipulate my photos in the first place. With reality already being removed once the shutter is released, is there even a worry when it comes to what readers think? I believe it will all depend on context.

Methodology

Attending an event like Burning Man can be disconcerting-especially for novice attendees. Anything I read about it or anything I heard from someone who went all touched on the same idea that you really have to experience it for yourself in order to truly understand. I would have felt a lot more comfortable at the outset if I had a general idea about what to expect. After ordering tickets online, you are sent a “survival guide” prior to attending the event. Included are tips about how to have an enjoyable time while staying in the Black Rock Desert. Food, water, activities, accommodations, random necessities, and many other suggestions. It mentions how weather can affect your experience too including the possibility of sandstorms throughout the week. My friend, Kelsey and I planned to stay in an eight person tent I brought with me and drive up from Los Angeles all the way to Black Rock City where the event takes place. Although I had done everything I could think of to prepare for this adventure, I could not help but feel uneasy about the impending event.

The map for participants attending Burning Man is set up like a clock. The columns are different times every quarter of an hour (2:30, 6:00, 9:15) and the map ranges from 2:00pm to 10:00pm. Throughout the different times, there are rows that begin with the letter A and stretch all the way to letter L. Throughout the map, different sections pertained to certain groups of campers. One section indicated an area all the way back by L between 2:00pm and 6:00pm that is available to free campers. Free campers were attendees who could not bring their vehicle past a certain point because they did not pay for a vehicle pass. As the week went on, Kelsey and I realized we were perfectly fine with this because it allowed us to be secluded from all the

constant noise, and also reduced the risk of our camping supplies and camera equipment being stolen.

One of our major concerns was keeping our expensive camera equipment safe. To capture the best photographs, I brought two separate cameras: a Canon Mark ii EOS-1 Ds and the Sony Cybershot DSC-HX350. Both are full frame cameras, which allow the most possible amount of light within a frame. In photography, people typically shoot with either a crop sensor camera, or a full frame camera. A full frame camera provides broader range along with a better low light quality that produces a better-quality image than a crop sensor. This helped a lot with sunrise and sunset photographs, considering the low amount of light. Had I come with cameras equipped with a crop sensor, then I feel as if I could not have reached my full potential. Crop sensor cameras have a smaller size camera and capture less within their frame while also losing quality within the photo.

I also brought a 24-70mm lens with a filter so that dust did not damage the original lens. With the possibility of sandstorms occurring and damaging a lens worth \$1,500, this filter would serve not only as a color enhancer, but a shield for the original lens. While the Sony was also a full-size frame camera, it has a zoom lens that can capture from far distances, but would lose its image quality. Using this camera was not as risky as using the Canon, so I would use it if bad weather arose.

If I were trying to capture the best shot, I would use the Canon despite it being significantly heavier and more fragile when traveling across the playa. That camera was used for my specific portrait shots or artistic shots where I would be able to lower the F stop as low as I can in order to let in the smallest amount of light. Having a low F stop and the ability to shoot in

RAW, allowed me to capture the best possible image and in the case of RAW photos, allows me a wide range of editing possibilities in post-production. The Sony camera has a zoom lens that stretches from 24mm all the way to 400mm, but the quality of the image becomes less detailed with longer focal lengths. The image becomes too pixelated and makes the image look almost blurry. Although you cannot shoot RAW images with it, it is good for photos while moving, is less heavy, and captures 20 megapixels. Having these two different cameras was helpful for shooting a variety of subjects and capturing different moments.

One thing that I think is important to highlight within all the different processes of creating this narrative through the medium of photography is that many different ways to capture certain moments are available. It would be foolish to say there is only one right way to go about capturing a moment. Some of the most celebrated photographs are a mix between spontaneity, staged, and sheer luck. Sure, all these specific moments involve some sort of preparation before taking the photos, but it all depends on the context and the image captured. In the industry, you would not go straight into a photo shoot without scouting the location, take consideration of the lighting setup, the time of day, who or what the subject is, and thinking about the different poses and looks you would like to capture. You simply cannot as it does not allow the photographer time to adequately prepare for the realities in the field. Throughout the event, I knew I wanted certain shots as the week progressed. If you wanted a silhouette styled shot of a person or piece of art, your best shot is either waking up early for sunrise, or waiting until sunset. If you wanted to utilize all the natural light, it would be a good idea to see where the sun is and adjust to the best side possible during the middle of the day. Understanding these concepts adds to one's work if they prepare for it correctly.

However, at the same time, at an event like Burning Man (or really any aspect in the real world), you cannot always wait for the perfect moment. Sure, if you have all the time with a subject, that is a different story. For many cases, though, you have to sometimes pounce on a moment. You see a lot of this in street photography. Something catches your eye and you want to capture it without altering or disturbing what is actually happening. Why? Because it is natural and it is happening before our eyes. A photographer should almost be invisible. One example involves a photograph seen in Figure 2.

Before the shot was taken, I saw a man on his bike, perched, and fixing his face protection during a sandstorm. I was biking around, seeing who was out and about. I saw this man from afar and noticed he was about to begin biking. As he pulled away, I was able to get behind him and capture this shot.

This all happened in a span of perhaps one minute, but if I would have thought too hard about it or hesitated for just an instance, I would have missed that shot. Anticipation is another factor that is important and relevant in the industry. Sometimes if you cannot plan a shot, then you improvise a different way to capture something. Especially in street photography sometimes, or journalism, you have to focus on getting the best shot you can before it is too late. In a good number of my photographs were strictly spur of the moment.

One rule I truly respected during Burning Man was “Ask First.” The rule basically states “You should get permission before taking somebody’s photo.” Throughout my time, I saw many different people with amazing outfits along and around the playa. To get the best photograph, I would stop and ask them for permission. At the end of the day, it is important to be granted consent from a subject because you have no idea if they would even want their photograph taken.

Any photograph I took where you can distinguish a person's face, I asked for permission beforehand. The rule also helped me to connect with people at the event and I even made some friends. The kind of photography where the photographer interacts with the subject during and after taking photographs requires trust and a willingness to create with you in the moment. This interaction made a difference in the photographs.

Whenever I was taking portraits, I made sure to really examine the potential subject as best I could. I would typically shoot a low aperture because you want to have your central focus in your shot to be your subject. By having a low aperture, it blurs out the background but makes your central subject clear. With the event taking place on a lake bed, the barren landscape allows subjects to stand out more with the sky and ground in the background. However, depending on the location, I would have to change the aperture depending on the composition. Sometimes, subjects were in front of a piece of art and you would want to include the art as well without it looking blurry, so I would not have the aperture as low. The sun was bright every day so I never really had to change my shutter speed unless it was sunset or sunrise because the image would come out dark if my shutter was too quick. The direct natural light also made shooting at the Burning Man easier.

From time to time, I would notice or come across people and moments that would not allow me to request permission prior to taking a photo. Most of the time, it was because the subject was too far away or extremely in tune with the moment they were feeling. If I ever did take a photo without the subject knowing, it would be from a far enough distance so that you could not make out the person. This was out of respect for the attendee and their self-image because, again, you do not know what that person wants public or not. With that said, I was still

able to capture certain moments that I believe describe Burning Man in a different way when you don't see what the person looks like. Through that technique, you capture a moment that perhaps more people can relate to. When you see a portrait of a person and you can distinguish who their identity, you have this sense of certainty. . When you cannot see who the person is, it creates this image where people can go "Oh, that could be me," "I have done that before," or "I have felt that in one way or another." The lack of identity in a photo brings out emotions.

Many moments throughout Burning Man shed light on human emotion. You saw people interact with others they have never met before, in ways you rarely see in the real world. You saw people behave how they wanted to, but, you also saw people behave in ways they wish they could in the real world. Most narratives many try to create hope to try and trigger human emotion. It is one of the few things we as humans can all relate. Everyone feels happiness in different ways, but, we have all felt that at some point in our lives-same with despair or grief. Grief is something every human will encounter in their lives, and it is something that will never be easy. To me, if I could capture these variety of emotions in a way that did not need any sort of edit or manipulation, then I felt as if I could prove my stance on the line for editing a digital photo because emotion is real. You can manipulate a photo all you want, but you cannot manipulate emotion because it cannot be impersonated, and at a place like Burning Man, everyone felt free to express their emotions

When I had returned from Nevada, I took a little bit of a break and did not look at my photos for a week or two. In a way, I was still digesting what I experienced because it all still seemed like a weeklong dream. Being able to pause and think was beneficial in the editing process because I was able to decompress. Many times, people can work on a creative project

and believe certain aspects in their work look fantastic. However, if you take time to step aside for a little, then come back to work on it, they may see something different they did not see before. I wanted to make sure I could take some time and perhaps see my photographs from a different perspective.

When I finally sat down to edit my photographs, the process of it all was both exhilarating yet meticulous at the same time. I went scrolling through my photos I took from my first day there to my last and began categorizing my photographs. I inserted one of my three memory cards into a Mac computer and scrolled through all the photos on the Finder application. I ended up saving every single photograph I took, but I made sure to create a separate folder for all the photographs I would end up editing. If I came across a photograph I wanted to edit that I shot with my Canon, I would open the RAW image in Adobe Photoshop CC 2018 which allowed me to manipulate a variety of things within the image. If I came across an image that I shot with the Sony, I would edit those photos on a photo editing application called “VSCO” since I did not need to use Photoshop Raw Edition because my Sony could only shoot in JPEG format and not RAW. Down the road, I would edit a couple of photos shot with the Sony particularly for aesthetic reasons.

As I was observing my photographs, I began diving into how I wanted to truly present them to my audience while understanding my limits in digital photo editing. In relation to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, and with me going to an event like Burning Man, I had to edit in a way that depicts reality the way I saw it. I took photographs that I would split into three different categories: Portraits, Art, and Moments. Among these photographs, I had to observe what the X factor was in each photograph and think what could best amplify that “thing.” In photo editing,

the main elements in a photograph worth changing include: exposure, contrast, clarity, highlights, shadows, saturation, and vibrancy. Depending on what was included in the photograph dictated what element needed to be changed. Sometimes I felt as if I did not need to change certain elements at all in a photograph, whereas for some I always did. In nearly every photograph, I would always heighten the clarity of it. When you raise the clarity of a photo, it allows the viewer to see more details in the photo than readily apparent. For example, if I took an up-close portrait of one's face, I would raise the clarity in order to see just enough to see perhaps the wrinkles, dimples, or just more definition. I would alter the clarity until it matched how I felt it looked in the moment. The key was to find balance within all the different editing elements in order to produce a "real" image. If you raised the clarity too much, you would begin to see too much definition in a person or an object and that would not look natural to the naked eye.

The color in a photograph is similar. Saturation describes the intensity of color in a photograph, and some of the images I captured had color, but it did not pop as much as I wanted. By raising the saturation in certain images, it allowed bright colors to be even brighter. With majority of the population wearing colorful outfits, and the different times of day that produced beautiful natural light, many to nearly all my photographs had their saturation increased a little bit. Again, if the saturation was raised too high, the image would begin to look unnatural to the naked eye. It was all about finding balance in those elements in order to keep these visuals truthful. An example of that is Figure 3.

This photograph was taken early in the morning on the sixth day of the event. At this time of day, the sunrise produces a variety of warm colors including red, yellow, and orange. By putting the performer between the sunrise and me, I was able to create this silhouette aesthetic of

her body, but still being able to capture the fire she was twirling. By simply lowering the shadows and raising the saturation, I was able to create an image without changing what really happened in that moment. These are natural colors that sunrises produce and by raising the intensity of those colors to a degree that does not look unnatural, it maintains the honesty of that moment. While I was focused on not changing too much in my photos, I changed a handful of photographs to black and white. While reality as we see it is not in black and white, certain factors in specific photographs I knew would look better in black and white. In color, the light and dark aspects in the photograph is what determines what will be black and white. Composition can be extremely considered when editing in black and white because you have to understand which areas will be black or white. One example where I believe the photograph was better in black and white than in color is Figure 4 and 5.

In the photograph, we notice a woman walking in between what appear to be doors setup on the playa in a half-circle. A sandstorm was occurring during the moment of the photo, which hides any other art or bystanders in the background. In the original photograph, the subject is wearing mostly red with a blue sky as a background, and the doors are white. While it is still a photograph I am content with, switching it to black and white made it a much better photograph. By switching the photograph to black and white, I am able to draw a lot more focus to the woman and the doors. With the doors being white, the doors will remain the same when switched to black and white. With the outfit being red, it will switch to a dark/black look that pops between the doors. Due to this switch, it changes the image to give it a more surrealist look. It seems as though this art setup and woman are in the middle of the desert secluded. The black and white add a sort of mystery to the image which I think propels the image more than what it could have been, and all that comes with understanding light. Understanding where the light hits

certain areas in your shot makes all the difference when you are working in post-production. It can leave an audience questioning where, what, and how which I think makes a good photograph, and create a dialogue—which is what storytellers want to do.

I believe that if one were to attend this event just to take photographs of whatever they encountered, then they did it wrong. Telling a narrative takes precision and observation of your surroundings in order to best emulate a moment. If one were to not consider emotion and strictly document what was in front of them, then one is capturing for a different objective. You are shooting for content, not substance—capturing for attention and promotion rather than trying to share a story. When one aims for that, they then have to find a way to make it better because what it was is not sufficient enough because they want more. I believe there are ways to focus more on a certain aspect within a photograph, but the second there is adding or a removal from the picture, to me, is contorting the narrative. Through my editing process, I changed my photos in a way that I felt does not have my audience questioning the validity of my work.

Discussion of Project

My creative project consisted of breaking down the photographs I took at Burning Man 2018 and my work in the editing process to determine the ethical line between what art and reality. I created an online photo-journal which displays a collection of photographs that I both captured and edited. Within the 1,200 photographs I took over the span of that week, I selected the ones that I felt best described the experience, culture, and community. Through that, I was able to draw a distinction whether a fine line exists when manipulating a digital photograph. My photography website has a page specifically for my Burning Man photo-journal that displays all the images that I felt seemed fitting. The layout consists of a slideshow that displays my

photographs one by one while having a written excerpt of the photo, explaining why I edited the photos the way I did, along with background information of the photograph itself. Included within the excerpt is my conclusions concerning whether that image crossed a boundary in manipulation.

To me, what makes all the difference in whether a photo should or should not be manipulated is determined by purpose. Storytellers are always trying to make their work stand out . If a photographer's purpose is to simply display their creative vision through a lens or create images that stir up conversation, I believe that sort of manipulation can be deemed as inspiring. Fine Art photography has and continues to influence artists to produce work that pushes the boundaries of creativity and propel other artists to explore new themes. If it were not for certain artists who pushed boundaries, there would not be a ripple effect that would inspire many other artists. Even though styles and themes are always revisited, newer artists can always bring something fresh to the table. I would consider myself guilty if I claimed to have never enhanced a photograph for aesthetic reasons. Without personal manipulation, artists have no voice or style.

However, if your purpose is to report information to an audience of an idea or a narrative objectively, I believe that sort of deception is wrong and distorts the reality that the public digests as real. Journalism is meant to provide information to the masses without bias. Photographers capture what they experience in order to tell a narrative of truth. If the photographer knows that the slightest change can make a big influence and goes forth doing so, then they are taking advantage of the power they hold. The purpose to inform is overshadowed by the desire for notoriety, which I deem unethical.

Over the course of examining my photographs from an ethical standpoint, I felt as if the photos I captured and subsequently manipulated at Burning Man did not cross any ethical boundaries. The main factor that differentiates my photo-journals from others is that I was in a surreal environment to begin with. I did not feel as if I needed to manipulate any image in the first place in order to tell a compelling narrative. I confronted it as a photo-journalistic approach and photographed what I experienced. I felt that a lot of my photographs did exactly that: told it as it was. I edited all my photos to highlight whatever the main theme was in my photograph, while at the same time displaying my editing style. I felt as if a majority of my images never crossed a line from a journalism standpoint, either. The way I edited my photographs remained in the realm of what would seem natural to the naked eye. Even when you take a photograph, you lose some vividness in the image compared to how you see it with your own eyes. I edited the images as best I could to depict that moment. The only times where I felt that an image of mine could mislead an audience was due to the level of absurdity within it. It did not come down to altering anything within the image, rather just the moment captured walking that thin line of reality. Shooting Burning Man made me realize the more convincing a moment can seem, the more likely one is willing to question it. When images as such create curiosity among viewers, that is where the power of informing can be used for good because it pushes viewers to leave that “cave” and seek what is and is not real. Having my photo-journal be edited between a mix of journalism and fine art allowed me to come to the realization of how understanding that a storyteller’s purpose makes all the difference in whether or not digital photo manipulation is unethical.

Conclusions and Recommendations

My photo-journal of Burning Man illustrates the variety of themes I hit on in photography while also displaying my eye for the multiple themes I think are important to showcase as well. I am always trying to learn, observe, and reflect from taking photographs. Creating this photo-journal and understanding whether or not a certain threshold in photo manipulation exists, I think added a deeper insight for me as photographer for years to come. Discovering that through an event like Burning Man benefits me in the long run and makes me look at documenting future events with an even more analytical approach than before.

If I were to do a similar project again, I would try to document an event that did not focus so much on radical self-expression. With that being one of the main focuses at Burning Man, it creates this theme that anything can be possible and that the audience needs to just accept it for what it is. I think if I did a photo-journal of an event that is controversial or a place where real-world tragedies are happening, I believe my approach to photo editing would be different, and even my take on digital manipulation could shift. When there is a need for information that can be determined on the depiction of one image, I believe that I would have a different approach depending on the situation, which would make me dive deeper into this problem space.

If anyone were to go out and do something similar to what I did, I would hope that they would find balance while out there. You can easily get caught up in trying to capture every single moment, but if you do, you will miss out on the actual experience. This applies to any event someone is trying to document. Sure, you want to tell the best story you can, but if you do not try to grasp your own experience, then you are simply a tourist. We are always trying to capture the

experience, but if you can find balance with living the experience as well, only then will your depiction of reality feel justified.

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APPENDICES

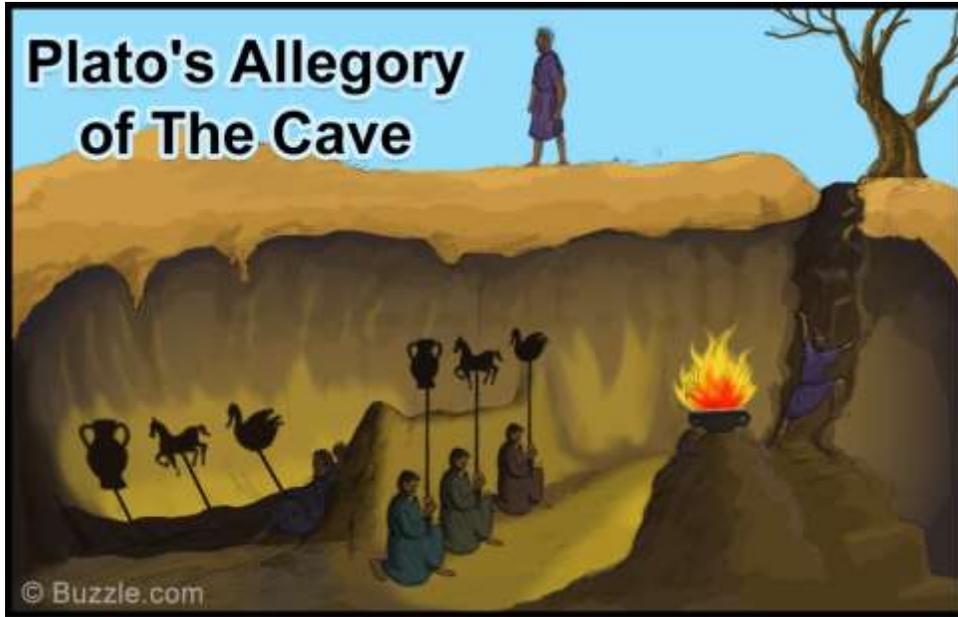
Appendix A



Appendix B



Appendix C



Appendix D



Figure 1. Lady promotes campsite offering blowjobs in Black Rock City, Nevada. August 28, 2018.

Appendix E



Figure 2. Man bikes into the eye of the sandstorm in Black Rock City, Nevada. August 26, 2018.

Appendix F



Figure 3. Fire dancer performs at sunrise in Black Rock City, Nevada. September 1, 2018.



Appendix G and H



Figures 4 and 5. Woman walks amongst doors on the playa in Black Rock City, Nevada. August 28, 2018.