

Developing a Critical Eye: Why Media Literacy Matters

By Meg Winikates in PEM's Art & Nature Center

*In Conjunction with the Peabody Essex Museum exhibition: **Eye Spy, Playing with Perception** June 19, 2010 to May 1, 2011*

In this age of digital imaging, we're comfortable adjusting contrast, tweaking color, or even adding an absent uncle to a family photo. Advertisers also alter or enhance images to get our attention. But what level of alteration is acceptable for the media? Are standards the same for fashion or entertainment magazines as for news outlets? Should they be? How aware are you of our world's altered realities?

In popular magazines, altering images has become standard practice. To expose the extent of retouching, the women's-issues blog Jezebel published the before-and-after photos of a Redbook cover featuring musician Faith Hill. Redbook's editor-in-chief responded, "The retouching we did on Faith Hill's photo for the July cover of Redbook is completely in line with industry standards."

(Caption: Retouching alterations included changing Hill's neck, earlobe, back, arms, lines and shadows around the face, hair, and skin tone.)



Many organizations have criticized the widespread practice of excessive retouching in magazines, raising concerns about setting unreasonable expectations that can lead to self-esteem issues and behavioral disorders. Similar concerns surround advertisements whose altered images create misleading impressions about a product's effectiveness.

And the pursuit of the "ideal" image isn't confined to advertising and popular culture. In 2006, news media giant Reuters fired photojournalist Adnan Hajj when it was discovered that he had altered his photos of smoke rising above a bombed city in Lebanon to intensify the effect. Further investigation revealed that this was not the only photograph Hajj had altered, and Reuters ultimately removed all his work from its archives. Hajj is just one example among many.

(Caption: Altered photo on left, original photo on right)



Why does "a little cosmetic alteration" matter? Not only does this violate established rules of journalistic ethics, but altered images have been shown to affect people's memories of public events. According to a study by Italian researchers, viewing digitally altered images of protests and rallies can change our perception of the emotions involved, including the size of the crowd and even perceived violence.

Blatant or subtle, examples of "altered reality" abound in today's culture, so it's important to become media savvy! Below are resources to help develop a critical media eye and to raise awareness in children about image manipulation in the media at large.

Further Resources

For Adults

Dove: Evolution (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hibyAJOSW8U>)

Watch the dramatic transformation of an ordinary woman into a billboard model through use of make-up and digital manipulation.

Digital Forensics: 5 Ways to Spot a Fake Photo from Scientific American
(<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=5-ways-to-spot-a-fake>)
Tips for analyzing photos for evidence of manipulation.

American Photography: A Century of Images from PBS
(http://www.pbs.org/ktca/americanphotography/features/digital_essay.html)
A short essay on 'Digital Truth' examining the historical record of photo tampering and the possible ramifications for justice and memory.

For Kids

Retouch (<http://demo.fb.se/e/girlpower/retouch/>)
This step-by-step site uses a fake magazine cover featuring a 14-year-old girl to show the impact of retouching.

Admongo.gov (<http://www.admongo.gov/admongo.html>)
Get an 'ad-ucational' look at who creates ads, how, and why through this video-game style site.

Don't Buy It! Get Media Smart from PBS Kids (<http://pbskids.org/dontbuyit/>)
Explores advertising tricks and techniques across many themes, including food, clothing, and entertainment, with "behind-the-scenes" elements and interactives.

Source Articles

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