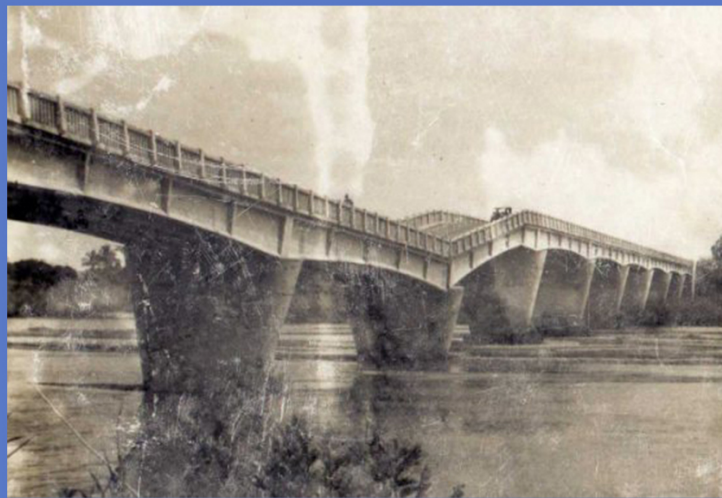


POLITICS AND IMAGE



Edited by Constantino Pereira Martins
and Pedro T. Magalhães



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Politics and Image

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*To the shining laughter of my son Guilherme
my only sun.*

May God always be by your side.

Psalm 27, 30

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In this paper, a particular case of deceptive use of images – namely, *misattributions* – will be taken in consideration. An explicitly wrong attribution (“This is a picture of the event X”, this not being the case) is obviously a lie or a mistaken description. But there are less straightforward and more insidious cases in which a false attribution is held to be acceptable, in particular when pictures are also used in their exemplary, general meaning, opposed to their indexical function in referring to a specific event. In fact, the boundary between referential use and symbolic-exemplificative use is not always clear-cut, and it often becomes the subject of ideological dispute.

The main point that this paper would like to do is that in some circumstances there is a deep-seated belief that images that are clearly misattributed could still be legitimately used to refer to the fact, even if this is not the case. This twisted epistemological stance, that I will summarize under the oxymoronic concept of “emblematic evidence”, is both the product of political and tribal polarization in the ideological debate, and the result of a shift in our understanding of what photographic images should do.

1. *The polarized image: between visual fake news and “emblematic evidence”*

Emanuele Arielli (IUAV – University of Venice)

1. Trying to get away with misattributed pictures

For most of the twentieth century, photography has been seen as *indexical* evidence depicting events and objects without bias. As it has been widely discussed, with the emergence and popularity of digital photography and the ease in manipulating images, its evidentiary objectivity is no longer assumed (Lister 1995; Richtin 1999). However, there is no ontological peculiarity in digital technology as such (Osborne 2010): manipulations of images have existed since the origins of photography, and digital pictures are still dependent on capturing an existing visual source, even though the technological means of post-production, filtering, alteration and retouching have increased and made manipulation a simple task. The problem of photographic reliability, therefore, does not necessarily depend on the technological means of image production, but rather on the “visual trust” concerning the level of credibility of a source (Fetveit 2016), and on the different *uses* that emerge from the wide diffusion of photographic images in everyday communications. The variability of uses of a picture (that is, the *purpose* with which a photo is deployed in a message) is a more complex matter than the question of real vs. fake: establishing if there is a deceptive intention in the publication of a photograph is often subject to debates concerning the use of images in the news media, advertisements, and political and scientific communication.

In this paper a particular case of deceptive use of images – namely, *misattributions* – will be taken in consideration. An explicitly wrong attribution (“This is a picture of event X”, when this is not the case) is obviously a lie or a mistaken description. But there are less straightforward and more insidious cases of texts only implicitly suggesting a false attribution through a pragmatic inference or through pictures that are shared many times without being checked for their authenticity and continue to be used and accepted as an illustration of a different event (see also Arielli 2018a).

The following provides an example: during the 2017 German election campaign, a political advertisement by the right-wing AfD party circulated in social media and showed a

close-up of a woman hassled by Arabic-looking men with the superimposed caption: “Do you remember...? New Year’s Eve!” and the hashtag “go vote”. The reference was the infamous 2015/16 New Year’s Eve night at the Cologne central station, where groups of men with immigrant backgrounds targeted passersby and harassed women causing a media uproar against chancellor Merkel’s recent refugee policies. The ad enjoyed vast circulation, in spite of the fact that the picture had nothing to do with those events, since it was taken in 2011 during the Tahrir-protests in Egypt, where an American journalist was harassed. Moreover, the original woman in the picture had been replaced with the portrait of a model. The AfD spokesperson answered the accusation of “fake news” stating that there was nothing wrong with the use of that picture (“What counts is that it’s getting the right message over”)²⁹, firstly because it is not asserted that this is a picture of a scene in Cologne (thus ignoring the intuitive pragmatic inference based on a relevance assumption), and secondly and most importantly because the picture, according to his view, should only be taken for its symbolic and illustrative value. The intention, so the argument goes, was not to show a picture of a (specific) hassled woman but simply a “hassled-woman-picture” (cfr. Goodman 1976).

The boundary between referential use (a photo as an indexical image of a specific event) and symbolic-exemplificative use is not always clear-cut. On the contrary, it could become the subject of ideological dispute, a matter of negotiation concerned not with the real/fake question (which is in this case undisputed: the picture is misattributed), but the legitimacy of this kind of image-use. Similarly, a picture circulating among German extreme right-wing social networks showed a composite image of various battered faces, blaming Muslim aggression against women. In reality, all those depicted people (including a person who was actually a man) were mostly victims of domestic violence³⁰. Again, the argument adduced to justify the picture’s circulation asserted that those pictures have purely an illustrative value, *like stock photography*, alluding to “real” violence perpetrated by immigrants.

Taking another example from the other side of the political spectrum, similar rationales were given after a picture of a small boy in a cage was used to document Trump’s inhuman policy of immigrant family separation at the US-Mexican border. In the original sources it is possible to see that the fence is only a symbolic installation used during a demonstration, in which activists show signs of protest against the policies of the White House. One of the activists shared the picture on Twitter with the caption “This is what happens when a government believes people are “illegal”.

29 <http://www.neuepresse.de/Nachrichten/Politik/Deutschland-Welt/AfD-hetzt-mit-gefaelschtem-Foto-im-Internet>

30 See <https://www.mimikama.at/facebook/ueberfallene-frauen/>

Kids in cages”³¹. On Facebook, the same post was shared almost 10000 times. It should be noted that the attribution, again, is not completely explicit, since the caption doesn’t assert that the picture was taken at the border and was a document of a real scene. Still, most commentators and many press agencies took the picture as evidential material. The activist later realized that the image was misleading but defended his decision to disseminate it to make a point: “Telling me that I shouldn't post an image that, as it happened, was from a protest that staged what is actually happening at the border is like saying actors shouldn't portray characters and situations based in real life. This is not a 'cause' for me. This is real”³².

In both cases, the general opinion was unanimous in asserting that this use of images was inappropriate and misleading and should be reported, since a photograph is usually seen as evidence and does not simply illustrate a fact (like, for instance, a drawing), rather it *indicates* a fact. The defense argument contending that these should be seen as symbolic illustrations is usually considered a weak excuse - and rightly so -, since pictures, if not explicitly stated otherwise (such as captions pointing out that we are dealing with an archive image or a stock photo), are dominantly interpreted as being evidential, not illustrative or emblematic. But in an era of political polarization and diffusion of "fake news" and "alternative facts", these occurrences are far from being rare and are often given credibility in online communication (see Shen et al. 2018).

In sum, these examples could be interpreted as following: a) they are simple cases of lying and manipulation, aimed at deceiving those members of the public inclined to believe in the message without applying any critical filter; b) they are the result of a trivial error by authors not trained in carrying out the fact-checking work that an expert journalist is usually supposed to do; c) since they are usually ideologically charged messages, where the purpose is not to reach the truth, but to propagate a political position, there is a substantial disinterest on the truth content of the sources. Harry Frankfurt (1986) famously called this attitude of indifference towards the epistemological value of information *bullshit*.

The main point that this paper would like to highlight is that all these readings would not offer a comprehensive view of such cases if one last aspect were overlooked: d) at some level there is a *deep seated belief that those images could be legitimately used to refer to the fact*, even if misattributed. This would be, of course, a twisted epistemological stance, both the product of political and tribal polarization in the ideological debate, and the result of a shift in our understanding of what photographic images should do. This kind of visual manipulation

31 <https://twitter.com/joseiswriting/status/1006541329399271425>

32 <https://twitter.com/joseiswriting/status/1007459539942178817>

could be deemed as acceptable because of the convergence of two factors that I will briefly present: firstly, the effects of ideological “ingroup-outgroup” polarization may lead individuals to see illustrative or symbolic images as actual evidence. Pictures should be interpreted either as illustrative or as evidential, but not both at the same time. However, polarization contributes to the paradoxical use of images as “illustrative proof” or “emblematic evidence”. Secondly, the abundance of photographic material, amateur production, stock-photo databases, stills from movies, etc., weakened the traditional indexical value of photographs. That is, photos are increasingly used in their exemplar, general meaning, and less as evidential documents of specific events. An exemplary case is the diffusion of stock photos, or the practice of manipulating images in the production of so-called *memes*.

2. Tribal epistemology and images as “emblematic evidence”

As the examples show, misattributed pictures arise mostly in texts that express ideological or political confrontation in which there is no desire to assess truth and objectivity, but to assert a worldview and pursue a rhetorical battle against opposing sides. When information is subjected to forces trying to boost identity and reinforce one’s own ideology, a “tribal epistemology” will occur³³. In this situation, self-interest gets in the way of objectivity, the need of confirmation becomes weaker when a message matches one’s ideological assumptions, and disconfirming evidence is willfully ignored. An example is a study by Dan M. Kahan et al. (2007) that confirms how pieces of evidence do not resolve disputes if people already have a strongly ideological conviction. In this experiment, subjects were asked to analyze data related to various scientific questions: when problems were neutral for them (for example, they concerned information about the effectiveness of a drug), people showed excellent statistical skills in evaluating the data and knew how to draw accurate conclusions. On the other hand, if the information touched topics upon which the subjects had a strong opinion (for example, the right to keep arms and their safety, or phenomena like global warming), their responses showed a tendency to deny the evidence of the presented data and to confirm their pre-existing opinions. This blindness to the data, according to Kahan, lies in the fact that we are evolutionary geared to protect the worldview we hold and would explain why we are compelled to follow the truth accepted by our group and reject opposing views.

33 David Roberts coined this expression (see <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/3/22/14762030/donald-trump-tribal-epistemology>); see also <http://www.ctrl-verlust.net/digital-tribalism-the-real-story-about-fake-news/>

Human belief formation is not free from motivated and opportunistic impulses: an audience willing to accept some facts as real will do so no matter if those facts are proven to be unreliable. The truth, instead of being the goal of a neutral dialogue and dispassionate exchange of information, is guided by mechanisms of tribal affiliation by virtue of an instinct toward *identity protection*: what confirms one's own vision of the world, is for this reason true. Tribal epistemology also intervenes in the degree of acceptability and (lack of) vigilance in using images with dubious sources or even in the belief that deception is justified for "Machiavellian" reasons.

Besides contributing to bias, ideological polarization leads to radicalization in the perception of opposing parties, which are seen as the "enemy", and is accompanied by changes in how facts concerning them are perceived and interpreted. Social psychology has long investigated how the contraposition between *ingroup* and *outgroup* membership, that is the dynamics of "us" vs. "them", often lead to a radicalization of reciprocal perceptions, so that differences between groups are emphasized, internal similarities are accentuated, but most importantly, the outgroup is perceived as internally coherent and homogeneous ("out-group homogeneity effect", Quattrone and Jones 1980). A consequence of this bias is the fact that a behavior of a single member of the opposing outgroup, when negative and confirming the ingroup's prejudices, is immediately seen as a confirmation and manifestation of the qualities of the whole group: for example, a case of aggressive behavior in a socially stigmatized group (eg. immigrants) is seen as a confirmation of its allegedly general aggressiveness and unlawfulness of this group. Moreover, uninvolved members of the group are somehow considered guilty as well, if a completely unrelated member of the same group commits acts that the ingroup perceive as reproachable. For example, when news about a theft is broadcast, if the culprit is a local (say, an Italian in Italy), he is simply a criminal and will be, individually, the subject of his behavior's blame. But news of an Italian thief in Switzerland could contribute to the strengthening of potential prejudices by people cultivating common stereotypes about their southern neighbor. An unrelated Italian in Switzerland would not only feel the embarrassment of this situation, but for ingroup local people cultivating those stereotypes, he would be somehow perceived as blameworthy. A historical and more radical example of this mechanism is the fate of Jews in Nazi-Germany: every (alleged) misdeed by a Jew was blamed on every other person of Jewish descent. Similarly, and this is one of the main point of this paper's argument, a document (like a picture) showing a misdeed of a Jewish person would *ipso facto* become a piece of evidence against any other Jewish person, since they are aggregated together in an outgroup in which every action of a single member reverberates and become an action of the entire group, and then, consequently, of any other single member of it.

Most importantly, a document doesn't even need to be an actual piece of evidence, but simply an illustration of attitudes and beliefs that are stereotypically held toward the external group. As a consequence, in the mind of the mob, documents such as a drawing, a staged photograph or a clearly propagandistic leaflet are also perceived as a kind of evidence of deeply held and preexisting beliefs against this group of people. This also explains why a social group could negatively react to *fictive* depictions of their members, like the frequent controversies around a stereotypical representation of a group in movies or books: as an example, the acclaimed tv-show "The Sopranos" was criticized along these lines because it would stereotypically depict the Italian-American community. Even though it is clear to all that this movie focuses only on the life of a fictitious family with a mafia background, the negative reaction by some Italian-Americans revealed the concern that this depiction would be perceived as evidence or an illustration of the typical life of any other family belonging to this group. A movie is not an indexical document, but through the social-psychological mechanisms we have just mentioned, it could still be seen as a cue concerning the characteristics of unrelated people.

What we have here is a particular combination in which a sign (like an image) could be a simple figurative illustration or a staged representation and at the same time, acts as evidence referring to specific individuals or situations. We could name this paradoxical combination of representation and confirmation *emblematic evidence* (or "illustrative proof"). Even though the propagandistic drawings against Jews or the caricatures in popular tv-shows do not show anything that specifically refers to an actual uninvolved individual, since they are fictional, an ideologically polarized stance could handle them as evidentiary cues regarding this individual (and not simply as descriptive illustrations). Similarly, even though a photograph may not depict a fact x (since it is the image of a different fact y), if they are seen as belonging to the same category of facts, then the photography of y could also be used to refer, in an evidential way, to the event x (in the same manner as documentation of a person's guilt becomes "illustrative evidence" of another person's guilt). Basically, through ideological glasses the misattribution is being intentionally overlooked in favor of the belief that both events are instances *of the same thing*. For the right-wing AfD voter, the picture of a harassed woman in Egypt in 2011 is an occurrence of "Arabic looking men against defenseless white women", a general phenomenon of which Cologne 2015 was also an example: in this sense, the picture does refer to Cologne not simply as an abstract illustration, but as a case in which the events in Cairo in 2011 and those in Cologne in 2015 belong to the same category of events and thus *are basically the same*. In the same manner, a picture of a full boat of Albanian immigrants landing in Italy in the 90s has been used as a misattributed image of contemporary Syrian immigrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea. For supporters

of anti-immigrant positions, both are instances of “third-world people entering our borders illegally”³⁴: in this general category, they are both manifestation of the same type of group behavior. Each image of it could be used, according to this kind of generalization, to refer to every other similar case.

One important point is that this use of falsely misattributed pictures differs from a simply emblematic or descriptive use of the image. The emblematic use of a picture is not deceptive, but is clearly used as a symbolic and abstract illustration: a stock photo or a drawing does not make us believe that we are looking at the specific scene described in the text. In contrast, a misattributed picture tries to act as *emblematic evidence*, as we have called it, with the creation of a deep link between two unrelated events: the image of men harassing a woman in Egypt in 2011 is also an image referring to men harassing a woman in Cologne in 2015; their difference becomes negligible.

3. Photography’s loss of indexicality

In order for an image to be flexibly used as a depiction of a different event, two shifts should take place: first, the image should lose or weaken its indexical reference to a specific event or person; second, the image should acquire a general, abstract value that allows for a use that is different to the image’s original destination. Keeping in mind Peirce’s semiotic distinction between index and icon, photographs are images that are primarily connected to a scene through an indexical connection, and only secondarily depict this scene iconically (Peirce 1931-58). That is, it is not the iconical similarity that allows photographs to refer to the scene they depict, but on the contrary, it is the indexical relation (the scene optically “causes” the photograph to be produced) that determines the reference. Drawing and painting, on the contrary, are icons since they could refer to a scene thanks to similarities between representation and actual events: for an observer, a painting depicting the coronation of Napoleon as Emperor of the French can refer to that event that took place on Sunday December 2, 1804 at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris thanks to a reasonable degree of similarity of what is depicted to the actual historical scene³⁵.

34 <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/reluctantinternationalists/blog/europes-fake-refugees/>

35 We could of course think of an abstract painter realizing a non-figurative canvas that refers to the coronation: in this case the painting could refer to the scene only through the artist’s declaration that create the symbolic link between the canvas and the historical event.

Photographs referring to events that are not the ones depicted by them suspend their indexical reference and keep only their iconic value, depicting a scene that is similar to what is referenced. The question then arises: how could a photograph be subject to a loss of indexicality? Several reasons could be mentioned here:

1) A typical argument concerns the fact that digitalization and the subsequent ease of post-production and manipulation weakened the indexical referentiality, making way for a mostly iconic relationship between photography and reality. In this sense, photography becomes similar to painting, as it is the product of an intentional construction and not primarily the effect of a physical trace.

2) A further consequence of digitalization is that the massive amount of image production and diffusion causes a wider distance between the original source of a photograph (the depicted scene) and the final users and viewers. In analog photography, printed images were directly produced from the original film or were at most copies of the first prints. Today, the degree of separation between original source and final pictures could be widened without limits, since there is no quality loss in duplication of digital images, allowing for long chains in which photos are copied, shared, reutilized and decontextualized.

3) Following Benjamin's famous stance on technical reproducibility (1935), the referent in a photograph is always decontextualized from its unique spatial and temporal existence, becoming an exchangeable visual material in the potentially limitless world of images. The growing distance between a photograph and its source also means a loss of the causal and historical reference that enables the connection of a photo to a specific event. Historical links to the original context is usually made possible by documents and information surrounding the image or through cultural knowledge and cues that allow one to pinpoint the specific event depicted in the image. A portrait or a family photo could lose its specific reference because all information surrounding the family is lost, as when we search old pictures mixed up in a box at a flea market, but also, today, when we search Google for a certain category of image and copy it without investigating its origin.

4) A different, but for our purpose central, reason behind the weakening of indexicality is the fact that a photograph could be produced not as a trace of some specific event, but as a representation of general or abstract scenes. All *staged* visual images, in movies, advertisements and stock photography are not meant to indexically show actors, models or set designs in the instant in which they were produced: as observers we have to abstract from the specific context of scene production and to see something (a love scene, a smiling couple, a generic product etc.) beyond the indexical presentation of the image.

4. Images as generic visual material: the case of stock photos and memes

We should take a further look at this last point. Not only in Peirce's theorization about indexes (distinguished from icons), but also in the well-known views of Benjamin (1980 [1931]: 202), Bazin, Sontag, Barthes, (Bazin 1980 [1967]: 242; Sontag 1977: 155; Barthes 1981: 88) photography is associated with its direct, indexical relation to its referent. Slater (1995) calls it the "ontological realism" of photography (p. 222), which is, like a fingerprint, a co-substantial trace or emanation of what is depicted (Peirce 1931–58). On the basis of this physical relation, we attribute to photographs an evidentiary function that allows us to determine the existence of a referent. This aspect is famously argued by Roland Barthes in his *Camera Lucida*: "What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: The Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially [...] it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the *This*." (Barthes 1984: 4). From this perspective, photography extracts an instant from the flow of unrepeatable events and crystallizes it. In Susan Sontag's words: "The force of a photograph is that it keeps open to scrutiny instants which the normal flow of time immediately replaces" (Sontag, 1977: 11).

The absolute determination of the relationship between image and referent has been put in question in image theories asserting that the meaning of photography is the product of the encounter between images and viewers in their cultural and historical context (Tagg 1988). Moreover, as we saw in the last paragraph, it is false to consider photography only as a collection of rigid traces or documents of specific past events. In contrast to paintings, photographs are based on indexical traces, but they also can refer to general and abstract ideas, as is the case of staged, illustrative and emblematic photos. This is the case, for example, of advertising images (the ad photo of a family in a holiday resort does not want to show a specific and real family, since they are actually staged images of a generic family), fashion pictures (a model wearing a dress is not intended to show that individual in a specific time and place, but to only show a generic person wearing a dress and, possibly, create an iconic image that represents a series of concepts such as femininity, grace, luxury; see Arielli 2018b), and illustrations (for example in a book on driving rules, a parking maneuver could be illustrated with a staged photograph of a car rather than a drawing showing it). In all these cases, the photographic image does not extract and fixate a unique moment from the temporal flow of life, that is, it is not the representation of a "*This*", as Barthes called it. Along Benjamin's theorization, photography is an act of decontextualization from the spatio-temporal *hic et nunc*, the transformation of the image

into a reproducible, fungible and consumable visual material. According to Paul Frosh (2004) photography would in this case refer to a temporality which is different from the linear sequentiality of existence, in which single events string together one after another, and would rather refer to a "mythical time" in which no event is contingent and individual, but each is an expression of archetypal universals (the happy family, the fashion model, the perfect car parking). Frosh refers here to the theorization of Mircea Eliade (1954) according to which, in archaic societies, consciousness "acknowledges no act which has not previously been posited and lived by someone else [...]. What he [the archaic man] does has been done before. His life is the ceaseless repetition of gestures initiated by others... The gesture acquires meaning, reality, solely to the extent to which it repeats a primordial act" (Eliade 1954: 5, cited from Frosh 2004, 161). Unique and contingent events are meaningless, an object or event "becomes real only insofar as it repeats an archetype. Thus, reality is acquired solely through repetition or participation; everything which lacks an exemplary model is "meaningless," i.e. lacks reality" (Eliade, 1954: 34).

From the background of these theoretical observations, Frosh considers stock photography³⁶ a paradigmatic example of this use of images: "based strategically upon the interminable and overt production of imitative, generic photographs, is perhaps the most faithful to mythical temporality: it erases indexical singularity, the uniqueness of the instance, in favor of uniformity and recurrence – the systematic iconic repetition of image types" (Frosh 2004, 162). Stock-photography's versatility is demonstrated by the fact that an image could be sold several times and be used for different purposes. The potential meanings and uses of stock photos is summarized by the bundle of keywords that define them, a set of conceptual and verbal categories associated with the photo and used to make them traceable in search engines: "In all these classificatory systems, however, the indexical connection of the image with its referent, and the specific context of its production, are replaced by a principle of generic similarity and iconic equivalence between images" (Frosch 2004, 92). In the digital context, what exists must be definable and captured by the bundle of research keywords. A combination of keywords defines and identifies an event / a phenomenon / a thing or a person as "real". Stock photography, therefore, is a typical example of *standardization* and *pseudo-individuation* of the culture industry, as notoriously described by Adorno and Horkheimer (1979, 120-4; cfr. Kalazić 2015, 194).

36 Stock photography (professional images of common situation, people, events or places that are used for commercial design purposes) exists from the beginning of the 20th century, expanded in the 80s and 90s in huge image archives that allowed clients to find a specific looking photo in an already existing database of possible images: "[Stock photography] creates a substantial proportion of the photographs encountered in commercial and consumer culture, supplying a majority of the images used in US advertising, marketing and graphic design and acting as a key provider of images for multi-media products and professional website design." (Frosch 2004, 7).

This explains why it is possible to use the same stock photo to represent different situations and places: for example, the same image of fashionable young people laughing in a bar could be used on a web page or an advertisement magazine to describe young people's life in Berlin, Sidney, Belgrade or Seattle, without incurring the accusation of being a potential misattribution of scenes whose real origins (the photographic set in which it was produced) are totally irrelevant.

Stock images could be reproduced and loosely reinterpreted as long as they fulfill their iconic function. Based on a similar mechanism, misattributed pictures used as emblematic evidence make use, tendentially, of this “mythical” quality of images that are at the same time expression of archetypes concerning the behavior of the outgroup (the “invading stranger”, the “violent foreigner”) and photographic documentation of a specific instance of this behavior.

A further step along similar processes of visual re-appropriation is constituted by so-called “memes”: witty contents that quickly make the rounds among users and in which images (taken freely from any possible source) are combined with captions that constitute an ironic comment, a joke, but also a political commentary. Images in memes are almost used as if they were stock pictures, since their function is to offer a visual and iconic background for messages that liberally reinterpret and contextualize them. But memes go a step further than stock photos, since they not only suspend the idea that a picture should indexically refer to a specific event or person, but deliberately violate this principle for satirical purposes. Even though memes could freely play with images and captions making systematic misattribution (e.g. attributing a funny remark in a famous person’s mouth), they could also be employed in political and ideological struggles, as a means for creating visual and semantic associations, supporting a critical thesis, denigrating the opponent and expressing innuendos (see Hancock 2010, Milner 2016)³⁷. Cases of clearly open misattribution are not even considered worth noticing, like the case, for example, of a popular meme that blamed anti-Trump activists for violence by showing a protest scene implicating them³⁸, but actually depicting an older image of violent clashes in Greece. In those cases, memes cannot even be said to be misleading, since there is no real expectation for this kind of message to be indexically reliable, even though the boundaries that distinguish a serious from a satirical use are not always clear. The referential violation can occur blatantly and deliberately, appearing just as an emblematic representation of “violent demonstrators”, but still at the same time conveying a message with an evidentiary function (“*This is the behavior of the anti-trump activists*”).

37 https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/xyvwdk/meme-warfare

38 <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/anti-trump-protesters-destroy-america/>

5. Conclusion: image use as aesthetic battleground

Versatility and re-usability are properties of images that are not restricted to stock photos or to the diffusion of Internet memes. When we conduct an image search in Google, what we get is a huge archive of images that are semantically linked by search keywords and visually associated by similarity. Although they originate from different sources (personal web pages, newspaper, real documents, etc.), within this homogeneous display they are all indifferent visual raw material that could be easily re-appropriated for further transformations, uses and circulation. From this perspective, the indexicality of *any* image is weakened and gives way to their mere iconic value and generic denotation. In this context, images could refer to reality by means of their ability to convincingly depict a state of affairs through their visual power, not in virtue of their indexical and evidentiary value. The ease and speed of re-appropriation and re-elaboration of visual signifiers have made images a fungible and versatile material for rearrangement operations that are in many cases perceived as acceptable.

Unlike fabrication and manipulation of pictures, misattribution specifically threatens the indexical mechanism of the photographic image, as outlined in the case of “emblematic evidence”. While the manufactured or manipulated image falsely refers to a reality that does not exist, the misattribution of a photo transposes the ontological reality of a scene in order to illustrate a different event: the false attribution then connects unrelated scenes creating an association based on analogy and similarity, constructing and making visible a link between images and events according to a certain world view: two different events are shown to be the expression of the same phenomenon.

Misattributions and the twisted use of “emblematic evidence” are an example of visual conflicts that are conducted by efforts in constructing semantic and symbolic associations, attempts to appropriate the most effective imagery and create narratives that serve a specific agenda. Being able to associate an image, no matter if misattributed, to a given event, allows one to expand and strengthen the range of ideological representations in one’s own favor. The struggle for appropriation of the visual exemplarity of images, and the legitimacy claims over the use of pictures takes place on a perceptual, aesthetic and rhetorical level. Visual exemplarity, along with the propensity to be shared and to become viral (as in memes), is a way of defining and structuring the visual and textual discourse around a worldview, regardless of the reliability of any factual claims.

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