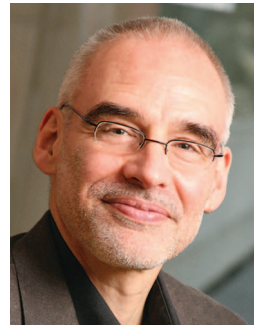


# Authenticity and Deception in an Age of Visual Wearables



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Since prehistoric times, art and images have been created by humans and used not only to capture key aspects of our existence, but also to communicate those conditions and experiences to others. Examples range from documenting hunting methods in ancient cave paintings, to capturing the essence of God in sublime Renaissance works of art. Even today when we take in these images they shape our perception and understanding of the world.

But the visual world is rapidly changing, or at least the human's ability to produce images and the range and speed in which they circulate. World-wide media networks can now make a local event almost instantaneously global. Moreover, producing still and moving images is now no longer the domain of professionals or of amateur photographers and filmmakers. Everyone with a smartphone can take an image and circulate it through numerous social networks. By 2017 there will be an estimated 5.2 million mobile users interacting in a world that offers ever more ways to receive and share information [1].

New technologies, including the Internet, have democratized the production and circulation of images. The new visual world offers an abundance of opportunities for sharing and learning across political and cultural boundaries. But these advances in technology have also come at a certain cost.

Anxieties abound. CCTV cameras now capture our every move around the clock. In the United Kingdom conservative estimates put the number of CCTV cameras at almost 1.9 million, or one for every 32 citizens, resulting in major protests against the resulting infringement of privacy [2]. Drones circulate above us and numerous new mobile visual devices multiply the extent to which our lives are recorded: there are not only cameras in houses and cars, but also increasingly numerous wearable visual devices, from armbands and



Fig. 1. Croatian Parliament president Marko Došen, in 1994, giving Nazi salute (far left), accompanied by Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac (far right) and other Catholic Church leaders.

watches to glasses, all potentially recording everything, 24 hours a day. These recording devices are even more intrusive than CCTV cameras, for they are mobile and can record anything, anywhere, anytime, thus capturing people in potentially very compromising situations [3]. Some commentators speak of *Überveillance*, of a world in which omnipresent recording, sharing and data-gathering devices leave very little room for privacy [4]. Consider how a woman wearing a new prototype version of Google Glass – a so-called optical head-mounted display (OHMD) – was attacked in San Francisco by a man who ripped off her glasses [5].

There are good reasons to worry about the spread of a surveillance society and what this does to both our individual freedom and our societal interactions. But some of these worries are founded on a misplaced notion that images somehow produce evidence that is authentic, or at least more authentic than words. Why, for instance, was there no comparable outcry at the emergence of mobile tape-recorders? They

too could record evidence that document people in compromising situations. What is it about the visual that creates such unusual anxieties?

The belief in the authenticity of images is seen everywhere. Car-mounted dashboard cameras, for instance, are meant to provide irrefutable proof in case of an accident. A main producer advertises them as devices that “capture critical moments ... to keep yourself safe from fraudulent claims” [6]. Such belief in the authenticity of the visual goes a long way back. In documentary photography it was long assumed that a photographer is an “objective witness” to political phenomena, providing authentic representations of, say, war or poverty [7].

Images seem to give us a glimpse of the real. They provide us with the seductive belief that what we see in a photograph or a film is an authentic representation of the world: a slice of life that reveals exactly what was happening at a particular moment. Roland Barthes speaks of analogical perfection, of an authentic mimetic reproduction of reality [8].

But images deceive, as Barthes knows very well, and not only because they can be manipulated or even faked. All images — still and moving — do so. They do so in at least in two ways.

First, images reflect certain aesthetic choices. They represent the world from a particular angle. They inevitably exclude as much as they include. Consider the two version of the historical photograph reproduced here. Taken in 1944, the photograph depicts the president of the Croatian Parliament, Marko Došen, and several Catholic Church leaders, including the Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac. Both the original (Fig. 1) and the cropped version (Fig. 2) of the photograph produce a visual simulacrum, showing exactly that the lens and sensor capture. But the two versions show completely different political realities. The cropped version depicts three clergy engaging in what seems a normal and uncontroversial activity. The original version places them next to soldiers and civilians giving Nazi salutes, thus visually documenting their complicity.

Second, images do not make sense by themselves. They always need to be interpreted, and this interpretation takes place in the context of existing cultural practices. Take, again, the above photograph. To make sense of the image we need to know something about the history of Fascism in Europe; we need to know what a Nazi salute is and what kind of atrocities are associated with its politics. To understand the shocking nature of the image we also need to know a range of things about religion, from how priests dress to Christianity’s presumed embrace of humane values.

The arbitrary and at times deceiving processes are at play in all images, whether they be captured by CCTV cameras, drones, dashcams, mobile phones, or by augmented reality headwear. All of the so-produced images are partial. They do not contain an unquestionable



Fig. 2. Cropped version of Fig. 1.

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visual truth. Recognizing the ensuing politics of representation does not diminish the concern many have about the loss of privacy in a hyper-surveillance-society. But it does require a more nuanced understanding of — and corresponding discussion about — the role of images in a rapidly changing age of visual wearables.

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