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Book Review: *Co-Illusion: Dispatches from the End of Communication; Photography and Belief;* and "On Images and Magic: Towards an Iconopolitics of Belief"

Co-Illusion: Dispatches from the End of Communication by David Levi Strauss, with Susan Meiselas and Peter van Agtmael. MIT Press, 2020. 184 pp./$39.95 (hb).
Photography and Belief by David Levi Strauss. David Zwirner Books, 2020. 96 pp./$ 12.95 (sb).
"On Images and Magic: Towards an Iconopolitics of Belief" in *The Critique of the Image Is the Defense of the Imagination*, edited by Peter Lamborn Wilson. Autonomedia, 2020. 260 pp./$19.95 (sb).

"The true mystery of the world is the visible."
—Oscar Wilde

"Just remember: what you're seeing and what you're reading is not what's happening."
—Donald J. Trump
National convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars
Kansas City, Missouri, July 24, 2018

"It is proven more and more true every day that images matter, that it is images that are making the political changes that we see happening around us possible. Focusing on what those images are, and how they work, and how they can be changed to work otherwise, is not a side issue anymore, it's a necessity. And trying to separate 'real politics' from 'mere aesthetics' is a mistake. It matters what we imagine to be possible. Change can only happen if we imagine things differently."
—David Levi Strauss, "On Images & Magic: Towards an Iconopolitics of Belief"

Not too long ago, I had lunch with a friend I hadn't seen in years. The whole encounter was off-putting to me. The entire time she seemed distracted and unengaged with our conversation, and frequently checked her phone. She posted pictures of our lunch on social media, however, seconds after we parted ways. This really upset me, because clearly she valued the posting of our meeting more than the meeting itself. Indeed, her Instagram post about our lunch had little to do with the actual encounter, describing it as a joyful and rosy reunion in which we effortlessly reconnected. I know this kind of encounter is

Afterimage, Vol. 48, Number 1, pps. 99–109. ISSN 2578-8531. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/aft.2021.48.1.99

IMAGE 1. *Indiana Governor Mike Pence, VP nominee, speaks to the RNC. Cleveland, OH. 2016* (2016) by Susan Meiselas, Magnum Photos; courtesy MIT Press.

by no means unique, and I am certain most of us have experienced this kind of engagement (or lack thereof). On the surface it might appear just a simple annoyance, but I feel there are some deep cultural patterns and codes reflected within it.

When photography emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was assumed to be grounded in reality and truth (the Japanese word for photography, *shashin*, literally means "copy of the truth"). In this current digital age, many feel we now live in a post-truth culture, pushed to the brink with the incredible ease with which photographs are manipulated, reconfigured, and disseminated. Nevertheless, we all actively construct our realities—perhaps more so than ever—using photographs (think of social media, or compare and contrast representations of former presidents Barack Obama or Donald J. Trump on both conservative and progressive news sites). Early in the Trump era, Press Secretary Sean Spicer talked about "alternative facts." At the time it was easy for me to roll my eyes at this and dismiss it as inconsequential, and yet I now understand clearly that this accurately represents how we construct and visualize meaning today. Truth and facts are made to order, and with social media and the remarkable influx of information and images, photography is at the heart of our daily constructions of truth and reality.

If I think back to my lunch meeting and apply this methodology to politics and the mass media, it is easy to understand the confusion, manipulation, and chaos that define our media culture today. During our lunch, I felt manipulated by my friend, as though she were moving things around to narrate the sort of story she wanted our meeting to embody. And truth be told, during the last four years I've felt this way almost every day. Politics and media have reached entirely new levels of manipulation and deception, and

images and information are moved effortlessly in order to narrate an agenda attached to a particular set of beliefs, and without any intent of sharing facts. Perhaps this has always been the case, but today I understand truth to be something selected from a menu, so that one can simply find what feels like the right set of facts for one's palette.

In his new book *Co-Illusion: Dispatches from the End of Communication* (2020), writer David Levi Strauss investigates the culture changes at the heart of the 2016 elections that led to the rise of Trump. At the very core of his investigation, Strauss looks at the role of the media and photography in creating the myriad of truths that led to this cultural upheaval, and talks about our "reality tunnel," a narrow dark passage in which "facts" are simply manipulable resources to help get a desired result. In the essay "Dispatch 14: Reality Tunnel. Philadelphia, Friday, July 29, 2016, 11:55 AM." he writes:

> I thought that the epic change we're going through, from written and spoken language to the image, and from policy to perception, is making a quantum leap in this campaign, on both sides. Under the old rules, insight and thoughtful policy proposals mattered. In the New World of tweet and leaks and bombast bluster, all that matters are the images projected on the walls of your own particular Reality Tunnel. (38)

This change Strauss identifies is a subtle manipulation, one that often has the appearance of a self-motivated, grassroots ideal, but it is a complex deception, one in which appearances supersede facts, one in which the image is more valuable than the action or that which is represented.

IMAGE 2. *Richard Spencer, American white nationalist known for promoting white supremacist views and coining the term "Alt-right." Spencer advocates for a white homeland for a "dispossessed white race" and calls for "peaceful ethnic cleansing." Clarendon, Virginia. 2016* (2016) by Peter van Agtmail, Magnum Photos; courtesy MIT Press.

Anyone seriously committed to understanding photography and our contemporary media world has some familiarity with the work of Strauss. Currently the chair of the MFA Art Writing Department at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, Strauss is a prolific art and cultural critic, essayist, poet, and educator. His 2012 publication, *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics*, features a diverse range of essays on photographers and artists including Jim Goldberg, Leon Golub, Sebastião Salgado, and Francesca Woodman, and fiercely addresses ideas about politics, propaganda, and dreams.

This past year, Strauss released three new publications that solidify his voice as a critic of photography and politics, based on an understanding that politics and the image are more intertwined than ever, and that the foundations of our beliefs, both personally and culturally, are embedded with the images selected to justify our narratives. *Co-Illusion: Dispatches from the End of Communication* is largely composed of short writings Strauss made during the final months leading up to the 2016 presidential election in the United States, seemingly journalistic in intent and methodology. *Photography and Belief* is a much more theoretical work, in which Strauss negotiates the disparate foundations of our cultural belief systems, from the Shroud of Turin to the writings of Roland Barthes. Strauss's essay "On Images and Magic: Towards an Iconopolitics of Belief" in *The Critique of the Image Is the Defense of the Imagination*, edited by Peter Lamborn Wilson, addresses the major cultural shifts that happened in the wake of 9/11, defining this specifically as a moment in our shared history in which images took on an entirely new value. According to Strauss, these three publications are the culmination of fifteen years of work—all rooted throughout the last thirty years of his career—and together represent a sustained meditation on how images function politically and socially.[1] Strauss's texts are essential writing today, in a media environment run amok.

To relate my lunch date more fully to Strauss, however, requires more than just acknowledging the mediation of the experience. I do think my friend *believed* that her social media posts fully and accurately described our meeting. Why? Because, fundamentally, many people use photographs to justify, sculpt, and defend their *beliefs*. This idea lies at the heart of these three new works by Strauss: that in our hypermediated world, photography still holds a sense of fact or truth, and is allotted a credibility on which we can build our most important personal and cultural beliefs.

It is worth breaking down each of these new works by Strauss. The best place to start in looking at these publications is *Photography and Belief*. In many ways, this book provides the foundation for all three of the publications. True to the title, the book investigates how photography is used to substantiate social and political realities, and exposes the vision behind the other publications. The book begins with a discussion about the Shroud of Turin, which many refer to as the first photograph, as it is etched with a negative image of man revealed on its surface. Some claim the image to be Christ's likeness, embedded into the cloth by the very power of his divinity. Others agree that this

1. Information from a series of emails exchanged between the author and David Levi Strauss on November 21, 2020.

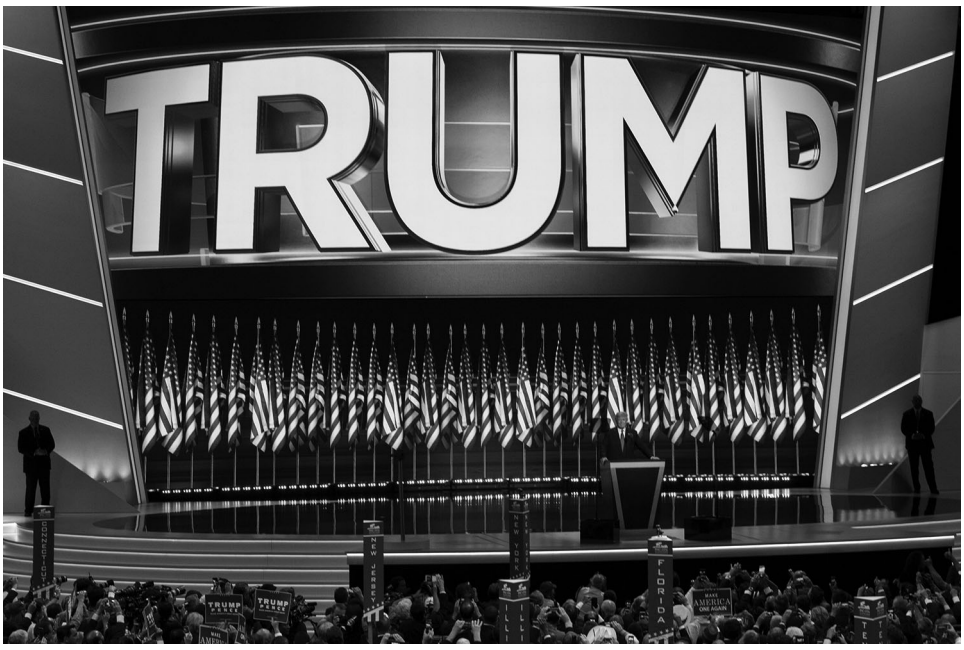

IMAGE 3. *Donald J. Trump speaks to the RNC. Cleveland, OH. 2016* (2016) by Susan Meiselas, Magnum Photos; courtesy MIT Press.

was the first photograph, but that it was produced by Leonardo da Vinci using light-sensitive salts, the likeness being da Vinci himself. Strauss's text looks at the early debates about the Shroud and how these reveal a lasting legacy about the nature of seeing and belief. Many felt the Shroud provides evidence of Christ's resurrection, though Christ himself suggested that true believers need only his word. Within this, Strauss argues, is a lasting cultural conflict about belief and the nature of the visible, ultimately expressed in the ageless adage "seeing is believing."

In the following chapters, Strauss analyzes the work of several different cultural and photographic theorists, parsing out particulars of their arguments about the nature of photography and its appearance of objectivity. This is all done in an effort to better understand the evolution of this idea of *seeing is believing*, of the visible's relationship to objectivity, and how this has played out since the invention of photography. Notably, Strauss discusses the work of Barthes, Walter Benjamin, John Berger, and Vilém Flusser. In looking at these critics, Strauss addresses the epistemological foundation of photography, specifically in its relationship to truth and establishing cultural belief and foundations. At the core is a questioning that photography can or could claim any kind of objectivity, and Strauss addresses how each of these critics tackles the dilemma, the confounding question of what photography actually represents. The addition of Flusser among this more typical pantheon of critical giants is timely, as Flusser felt that disinformation was an inevitable component of human communication (extremely pertinent in an age of Breitbart and media campaigns targeting individuals based on our social media habits). The book closes with two interesting sections, a chapter titled "Without

IMAGE 4. *Early in the morning after Election Day. People watch the returns coming in at Fox News headquarters as Trump edges towards victory. Donald J. Trump won the election in a startling reversal of expectation. New York City. November 9, 2016* (2016) by Peter van Agtmael, Magnum Photos; courtesy MIT Press.

a Future: Post-Photography and the Problem of Belief" and "A Brief Anthology of Quotations on Photography and Belief (Homage to Walter Benjamin and Susan Sontag)." The first of these addresses Strauss's own interest and belief in photography in an age in which images are altered and manipulated, but also globally disseminated, all effortlessly and instantly. The anthology of quotations, while an unpredictable ending, provides a number of great insights from a disparate range of sources including the Marx Brothers, William Henry Fox Talbot, Paul Valéry, Plautus, and Yogi Berra ("I wouldn't have seen it if I hadn't believed it"[2]).

Co-Illusion: Dispatches from the End of Communication is a collaborative project made with Magnum photographers Susan Meiselas and Peter van Agtmael. The bulk of the book was developed during the 2016 presidential campaign, and includes photographs and Strauss's reportage from the campaign trail and the conventions preceding the election. The photographs provided by Meiselas and Agtmael clearly illustrate the grandiose spectacle of the conventions, characteristic of the excess of modern politics.

Developed over four years, the book is divided into two different sections. The first is composed of a series of dispatches written during the 2016 presidential campaign, and

2. According to Strauss's text, this has been attributed to a number of sources, including Yogi Berra, Marshall McLuhan, and George Bernard Shaw.

IMAGE 5. *Final celebration of the RNC. Cleveland, OH. 2016* (2016) by Susan Meiselas, Magnum Photos; courtesy MIT Press.

ends with the election of Trump as the 45th President of the US.[3] With media access to the campaigns and conventions, Strauss had a front-row seat to the events that defined the election. For the second half of the book, Strauss uses an approach he calls "picaresque documentary," or "rogue" or "subversive" documentary.[4] This section is written as though authored by Trump or members of his inner circle, all heralding the truth of their power, corruption, and deceit, as though the mask of politics had been removed.[5] The combined effect of these sections is a layered look at a remarkable cultural shift, defined by the manipulation of images and information that created the conundrum of the Trump era. As Strauss writes in the introduction for *Co-Illusion*, in looking at the remarkable degree of information and the complicity of our media environment:

> As a student of images and how images are used to affect public opinion and public sentiment, I watched in dismay as a whole new kind of iconopolitics, largely at the service of these psychopathologies, captured our screens. We created new platforms for communication, and then watched helplessly as they became overwhelmed by expressions of hatred and fear. (xi)

3. These dispatches were published in real time on Power2016.net, *Huffington Post*, and *Brooklyn Rail*, and in *The Public* in Buffalo, New York.

4. Strauss addresses the idea of a picaresque documentary in an interview with Roberto Tejada, "FotoFest Creative Conversations/digital: David Levi Strauss with Roberto Tejeda," August 12, 2020, YouTube Video, 1:07, www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7tRWYrh0Xw. This was also discussed in an email interview with the author on November 21, 2020.

5. When asked in our email exchanges, Strauss said he comes from a family in Kansas, many of whom are Trump supporters, so it was easy for him to assume the voices of this movement.

The title for the book, *Co-Illusion,* explains a great deal about the content. The title can be read literally, and refer to the sorts of illusions, manipulations, and misinformation at the heart of American politics and the rise of Trump. Read in this way, it also implies complicity, that the illusions that define our political life require an active and willing audience, an illusion made possible by complicity. It is also a near-homonym for *collusion*, the dark truth at the heart of Trump's successful rise to office.

Creating a narrative about the rise of Trump that mixes conventional journalism with picaresque documentary, or a rogue documentary style that speaks as though with an authentic voice, does provide an appropriate metaphor for describing the Trump era and the conflicting narratives of our contemporary lives, a time in which the manipulation of images and rhetoric have reached entirely new proportions. It can also provide an entry point to Strauss's essay "On Images & Magic: Towards an Iconopolitics of Belief."

This essay is included in *The Critique of the Image Is the Defense of the Imagination*, a collaborative project developed by five different writers over seven years, all organized by Wilson, a political theorist and poet. The collection of essays addresses the crisis of images born in an age of such extreme image production and dissemination,[6] with each of the writers representing different philosophical disciplines, thus providing a variety of perspectives.

Strauss's essay discusses the roots of our cultural connection to and belief in photography, which is founded on equal parts magic and science. Grounded in an experienced reality, photography and digital media present with an aura of authenticity or truth, a conundrum for critics of the medium from the beginning:

> We believe that technical images have a more direct relation to the real, so our default setting in relation to them is credulity. Seeing is believing. This makes it possible for us to be manipulated and influenced by technical images in subtle and particular ways. (62)

In this essay, like in *Co-Illusion,* Strauss is particularly interested in this phenomenon in regard to how it is expressed and exploited in our political lives. He looks at a series of image events,[7] and how these have come to shape our experiences of politics and photography in the twenty-first century.

The events described are all iconic and essential parts of our collective cultural consciousness today—the photographs of torture made by American military in Abu Ghraib, Obama's staff in Central Command tracking the assassination of Osama bin Laden, and the attacks on the US on 9/11. The most important of these, in Strauss's narrative, is 9/11, which he argues is a major cultural shift in regard to our belief in photography. With the development of postmodernism and digital imaging at the end of the twentieth century,

6. In an essay published in the *Atlantic*, Rose Eveleth presents the theory that today more pictures are made every two minutes than in the first one hundred and fifty years of photography's existence. Given that Eveleth's article was published in 2015, it is quite likely this is now a conservative and dated estimate. Rose Eveleth, "How Many Photographs of You Are There Out in the World?," *Atlantic*, November 2, 2015, www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/11/how-many-photographs-of-you-are-out-there-in-the-world/413389.

7. Anthropologist and writer Karen Strassler describes "image events" as a social phenomenon and construction intended solely as a stage for the subsequent images and conversations that follow. See *Demanding Images: Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia* (Duke University Press, 2020).

IMAGE 6. *Blind singer Marlana VanHoose from Kentucky singing the National Anthem at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio. July 18, 2016* (2016) by David Levi Strauss; courtesy MIT Press.

a post-photographic culture emerged, a cultural and critical awareness that recognized the malleability of photography and objectivity. The events of 9/11, however, and the photographic representation of it, reinstated a cultural belief in the image and its objectivity. Our mediated experience of 9/11 was enough to provide popular political and cultural support for a never-ending war on terror, for a population to willingly accept a suspension of civil rights, and for a popular acceptance of torture and extraordinary rendition.

In his discussion of these image events, Strauss also includes clear examples of photographic manipulation within political discourse. He provides pictures from North Korea in which Kim Jong-un had his political adversaries removed from photographs, likened to examples of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin doing the same. These are juxtaposed with fake photographs depicting bin Laden's death, and descriptions of conversations Strauss had with Magnum photographers about the controversy around Pulitzer Prize–winning photographer Narciso Contreras's digital alteration of an image from the conflict in Syria, and the impact such a thing would have on the entire field of photojournalism.[8]

8. In 2014, Narciso Contreras admitted to digitally altering a photograph of a Syrian rebel, with waves and repercussions felt throughout the field of photojournalism. For more information see www.alteredimagesbdc.org/contreras.

Putting these together, these image events and such clear examples of manipulated propaganda leave us on thin ice, and pose challenging questions about complicity and the trajectory of our culture, specifically in relation to images and political discourse. And these questions are at the heart of all three of these new publications by Strauss.

The Great Hack, Karim Amer and Jehane Noujaim's 2019 film about Cambridge Analytica, leaves the viewer with some deeply disturbing and difficult questions. Are technology and information working against democracy? Is democracy possible in a world with such targeted data-mining and manipulation? Is freedom itself possible with so much power in the hands of tech giants and politicians? Difficult questions, indeed, and similar to feelings I experience after reading these three new publications by Strauss: *Photography and Belief*; *Co-Illusions: Dispatches from the End of Communication*; and "On Images & Magic: Towards an Iconopolitics of Belief."

The answer to these kinds of questions, at least in Strauss's texts, is spelled out at the beginning of *Photography and Belief*, which I feel is at the core of all of these publications. At the beginning of this text, Strauss addresses the origins of *seeing is believing*:

> The year this proverb was first printed in English is usually given as 1609, in an unpublished manuscript by S. Harward (now housed in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge) where it emerges as "Seeing is leeving." *Leeving* is loving. The term comes from the Indo-European root *leubh*, meaning "to love or desire": the Anglo-Saxon *leof,* English *lief*, is "dear," "beloved." To believe is to hold dear. Believing is loving. (11)

Each day, I venture out into the world to make pictures, or at least into my studio to make sense of them. And yet each year I lose money doing so. Why do I do this? Love. Love of the physical process of making pictures—that light in the landscape, the clumsy feeling of stumbling around with a 4 x 5, engaging the beauty of a landscape or a person, the insight that can still come from well-seen photographs, and that intoxication that inevitably comes from making a really good print. And this, I think, is what David Levi Strauss wants us to take from his writing. Love matters, and engaging images with it can provide a constructive way forward.

There is no denying that everything is a mess. Wars are erupting in Africa and the Middle East, political confusion abounds in the US, and a pandemic is raging across the world. What keeps us going? Belief. What is belief? Love. No denying that chaos and confusion are around every corner, and that democracy in the US is under siege. And yet, I've gotten through 2020 by picking up my camera and making pictures, by finding a way to put one foot in front of the other, and to use images as a way to reconcile and rejoice. Chaos and confusion are a political strategy of the day, weaponized to sedate our population, and yet more than eighty million people in the US showed up during a pandemic to voice their desire for a new vision. And this, ultimately, I think is at the heart of Strauss's recent publications. Illusions and chaos abound, and yet if we sincerely show up each day, strive for something new and affirmative, although a new world probably won't emerge, at least something a little closer to love, something in alignment with that impulse to venture forth and declare our intentions as humans by making really

IMAGE 7. *Donald Trump waves farewell to the crowd at a rally at Verizon Center on the eve of the New Hampshire primary. Manchester, NH. 2016* (2016) by Peter van Agtmael, Magnum Photos; courtesy MIT Press.

good pictures, will. The chaos is real, and David Levi Strauss is here to tell us it is probably worse than we know, but he is also here to tell us that new possibilities might be out there. Believe, love, and make new kinds of pictures. ■

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