

The Reflexive Press Photograph

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Man is then able to include the world in the sovereignty of a discourse that has the power to represent its representation. - Michel Foucault¹

With modernism, attention shifted from the view, what we see through a window, to the window itself. Reflexion is thus a key word in understanding modernism and modernist images. A paper on the subject of meta-images, about paintings of paintings, photos of photographers, or self-referencing would hardly be original, for reflectivity in literature, in the theatre, the graphic arts, film and photography has been treated rather extensively (Stam 1992; Mitchell 1994). But this paper treats a subject few have written about: reflexive press photographs and press photographers' reflectiveness.

Pictures of pictures

The meta-image that sums up all the variants in this genre is Diego Velázquez' *Las Meninas*.² (Figure 1) It shows Velázquez painting, but we cannot be sure he is painting this particular painting since we only see the back of the canvas. The formal structure of the painting is an encyclopaedic labyrinth of visual self-references, and it demonstrates how the interactions between beholder, painter and model constitute a chain of exchanges. This painting, one of the canons of Western art, has been extensively analyzed and discussed among art historians. It had also fascinated

semiologists and at least one cultural historian, Michel Foucault (cf. Sonesson 1992: 12ff).

Paintings have always been more than the sum of lines, shadows and hues painted on a flat surface. They can sometimes be fetiches and objects with magical powers – objects that are not just there, but live a life of their own; they speak, and they look back at the viewer.³ This was actually Velázquez' starting point in painting *Las Meninas*. The painting may be seen as the fruit of the tedium he experienced as court painter in the reign of Philip IV. It was a



Figure 1. Diego Velázquez (1599-1660) *Las Meninas* [Ladies-in-waiting], 1656, is the epitome of visual self-referencing.

successful attempt to transcend the genre of court paintings, which otherwise consisted of endless numbers of run-of-the-mill portraits of nobility.

Las Meninas expresses the fascinating labyrinth of reflexions over the relationships between *painting, painter, model and beholder*. If *Las Meninas* exemplifies and contemplates the meta-image in its most articulated and exalted form, the press photo bearing the caption, "Yeesss! The answer is NO!" must be among the most straightforward and mundane. In the following I hope to stimulate some reflexion on what it is *to take photos* for the press, the *press photographer*, the *subject of the press photo* and the *beholder of press photography*.

Taking pictures

The man who took "Yeesss! The Answer is NO!", photographer Mattis Sandblad, touches a different chord than a documen-

tary photographer might.⁴ (Figure 2) This one shot shows three different stages of joy among opponents to Norway's joining the European Union the moment the results of the referendum were known: ecstasy, disbelief (Do I believe my eyes?), and the modulated satisfaction of 'cashing in' a political triumph. But the photograph shows something else, as well; it includes a colleague at work. Thus, it expresses the photographer's reflexion on the work of press photography, of documenting an historic event, of being face to face with the main actors at the moment a thrilling drama unfolds before one's eyes. The inclusion of another photographer introduces a subtle message to the beholder about authenticity – a striving for the real, and the absence of staging. The press photographer hopes, as television news does, to communicate *liveness* through pictures. This has become more important for news photographers to stress, given the scepticism new digital photogra-



Figure 2. Mattis Sandblad's photo, *Yeesss! The Answer is NO!* shows the reactions of victorious opponents of Norwegian membership in the European Union, but also comments on photojournalism as a profession.

phic editing techniques have sown among consumers of images.

This picture links the photographer's reflexion on the momentary political drama and a reflexion on his own and other photographers' role in this and similar situations in the world of politics. The photography is self-reflexive in that it expresses the photographer's thoughts; it becomes a photo about taking photos. In this shot, Sandblad is part of an international trend: a growing interest in the 'window' – a focus on the photograph and photography.

Meta-photojournalism

In the final stages of the campaigns for and against Norwegian membership in the European Union press photographers covering the story apparently began pondering their own role in the story. Some of these thoughts are expressed in their coverage. A picture in *Dagbladet* (Oslo) showing Swedish Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson being interviewed after Sweden's 'Yes' to EU membership is a good example. (Figure 3) The picture, which appeared on the editorial page, is more than a portrait of Carlsson; the photographer's reflexions are there, too.

The photo shows photographer Arne Hoem's reflexions on press photography, the process and its results. Hoem imparts a critical distance to the act of photography as well as to his colleagues in the profession by including several others on the same assignment. The result is an example of meta-photojournalism. The shot took on a self-referencing aspect when the photographer began considering his own role and work and included another photographer in action. This is one of the most prominent characteristics of reflexive press photography, as I see it.⁵ And it is something photojournalists share with text journalists,

whose reportage refers to persons and things outside the frame of the event at hand, i.e., metareportage (cf, Eide 1992: 139ff).

The principal difference between Velásquez' painting and these two press photos is that the former includes the painter himself. Velásquez' self-portrait invites identification. In the two photos this identification is solicited by the inclusion of other working photographers in the shots.

Such self-referencing photography has become a recurrent feature of election campaign coverage, major trials and other 'news magnets'. We have all seen pictures of the flock of press photographers surrounding winners and losers as election returns become 'final'. A case of a somewhat



Figure 3. Swedish PM Ingvar Carlsson after the Swedish referendum on EU membership (the answer was Yes). *Dagbladet* 14.11.1995 (facsimile)



Figure 4. Anne Enger Lahnstein, Centre Party, poses for a photographer, who photographs while being photographed by a colleague. VG 19.7.1989 (facsimile)

different sort, but hardly unique, is a photograph of then Vice-President of the Centre Party Anne Enger Lahnstein during the election campaign of 1989. (Figure 4) Eager to secure the seat for Akershus, she posed for photographers seated on the sinkboard in her kitchen. "Staging," VG's photographer declares by showing the photo session, including his colleague in action. Staging, yes. But who is staging whom?

It is when political events cross the invisible line and become media events that self-referencing photos turn up. It is this distinction which prompted photographer Helge Mikalsen to express his suspicions about staging in the photo of the photographing photographer which he filed. The text accompanying the photo was equally sceptical (if not more so) of the

event, which was devoid of news value, but reeked of publicity-seeking.⁶ Consequently, the publicity aspect was made the theme of VG's coverage.

Reflexive photos are also common in American press coverage, and some of them travel widely. Many of us recall the press' interest in President Clinton's cat, Socks, during the election campaign of 1992. (Figure 5) And then there were the photos from Haiti, in which there appeared to be more photographers on hand than American soldiers. (Figure 6) The former photo, framed in self-critical commentary appeared in several Norwegian newspapers. The picture from Haiti was front-page news in *Bergens Tidende*. Both events were perceived to be 'media events' by attendant journalists and photojournalists.

Flocks of photographers



Figure 5. Socks, the Clinton family's cat, was front-page news during the election campaign of 1992. VG (facsimile)

- Økonomi betyr lite



– Økonomiske argumenter må ikke være avgjørende for din stemmegivning under folkeavstemningen om EU. Det er to av Norges tyngste økonomiprofessorer, Terje Hansen (bildet) og Lars Mathiesen, som sier dette til Bergens Tidende. De



mener EU-valget bare har minimal betydning for arbeidsløsheten og utviklingen av den norske velstandsstaten de neste ti år. Hansen vil likevel stemme ja til EU på grunn av miljø- og sikkerhetspolitikken. side 9

Medieinvasjon på Haiti

Uten noen for dramatisk ble Haiti invadert av amerikanske tropper i går. Det største hinderet for skytterne var det store oppbudet av pressetfolk som sto klare til å dokumentere landstigningen. Soldatene skal sørge for at den haitiske militærjantén holder avstanden om å gå av. Politiske observatører mener at avtalen er så full av betingelser at det kan bli svært vanskelig å håndtere den. Haitiske demokrati-krøpere er også skeptiske: – De militære får sitte med makten en hel måned, og vi forventer garantert amnesti. I ty av amnestiet kan de nå bruke sine siste uker til å slå til mot sine motstandere, sier de. side 8

METTE PÆRESSEN. De amerikanske troppene møtte bare fotografører.



TIRSDAG



Til Riksdagen

Ronja Røysvatten på turen for 6 år siden. Søndag ble hun riksdagskvinne. 21 år gamle Hanna Zemánek ble så et av «Vårhetspartets mandaler», og hun blir en av ledene i nye svenske parlamentarikere. UTLAND SIDE 8

Duell om brunann

«Nordhordlandstrua» eller «Salthaug»? Fremme er harde når namnet på den vidgjetne brua over Salthordfjorden vert diskutert. SIDE 4

Norvik på teppet

I går kveld måtte Statoil-sjefen Harald Norvik «si trøst» hos sine knallharde kritikere på Qullfikk i Plattformen. Norvik, som nå er med en bunke knallharde styremedlemmer i Oslo, ble tatt av Statoil-sjefen. Norvik mener konvensjonen oppnådde svært lite med sin gjellesoppdratt. SIDE 4

Statoil satser i Aserbajdsjan

Statoil underlegner i dag sammen med British Petroleum sin kjerneproduksjon om et oliefelt i Aserbajdsjan.

Figure 6. Clinton's soldiers undertake an invasion of Haiti – spearheading an army of photographers. Bergens Tidende 20.9.1994 (facsimile).

The USA's 'First Cat' and photographers falling all over each other to get a shot at it sparked a discussion of ethics within the profession, not least in the journal, *News Photographer*, where the coverage was characterized as yet another example of "journalists behaving primitively, but at least alerting one another and the rest of the world that it is rather primitive. I think that's a healthy sign that we're a little more aware of our transgression".⁷ Others, however, commented that they saw nothing wrong in shooting the cat, but rather considered the affair too trivial a phenomenon to debate. Photographer Mike Nelson, Agence France Presse, commented ironically (Figure 5) that photographers at work display a herd instinct.

Award-winning Norwegian photographer Oddleiv Apneseth commented on the same phenomenon:

When I arrive on the scene to be covered and I see a flock of photographers crowding around the subject, I often start taking shots of the photographers who are shooting the subject. I find myself becoming more and more interested in covering the battle to get the best shot, more than I am to report what I was sent out to cover.⁸

Whereas press photographers used to try to say something about society in their pictures, their colleagues of today train their focus on the photo itself and the process by which it comes to be. They focus on themselves, on the experience of being a

photojournalist in the field, on the documentary photo, the photographic process and the quasi-latent content of the photos.⁹

This is hardly to say that press photographers have lost interest in society and 'the human condition', that they have become totally preoccupied with one another. But the phenomenon of 'society', social comment and photojournalistic coverage are treated on another level. In short: the *grammar* of press photography has come to fill a greater share of the journalistic space. The reason is that the profession itself is discussed more often than before, not only among journalists and photographers, but among the public at large.

It is not uncommon that some of the photos in the steady stream of photographs which photographers produce deal with the means of expression rather than the content, the subject, to be expressed. One might say that what goes on in the head of the photographer has come into focus. Reflexive meta-photographs have become legitimate and appear in papers more frequently because the editors who choose the material to illustrate stories have had the same reflexions. The form, place and role of photographs in journalism is more often discussed and questioned these days.

Positioning

Many public figures, frequent 'news-makers', have become highly aware of the presence of the press and not least press cameras, and they are quick to take advantage of the situation. In the course of the 1980s one may fairly say that control shifted from the person behind, to the person in front of the camera. This is what photographers are reacting to and commenting on in their photos. Reflexive photos represent the press photographer's attempt both to put a

distance between him-/herself and the phenomenon, and between the viewer and the subject, and to foster a *closeness* to the photographer by showing photographers in action. Thus, the picture seeks to steer the beholder's identification. Reflexive photographs may also be ironic: a self-critical commentary, aimed at the profession itself.

Now, it should be noted that not all press photos which include photographers in action are conscious attempts to achieve critical perspective. Such pictures are in fashion these days, and some may simply be copy-cat clichés. For, press photography is a highly fashion-conscious profession. Such photos may simply reflect the fact that when one photographer gains renown for a picture, others are quick to pick up the scent.

In conclusion

I predict that we will see an increasing number of reflexive photographs in our newspapers in the next few years, at least. For one thing, press photographers have become interested in the window through which they see and show reality. Secondly, because an increasing number of events appear to be artificial, choreographed 'photo opportunities' – events arranged for the sake of publicity alone.

Reflexive press photos are thus both a strategy on the part of photographers with the aim of winning back the initiative, and a means by which the photographers process and express their reflections on the form and role of photography in journalism. Third, they bring subjective aspects of the photograph to the fore. Photojournalists share this reflexive perspective on their profession with journalists, writers, humanists and social scientists who have become more interested in *the act of describing than what is to be described*.

Notes

1. In *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage (page 16).
2. Originally titled *La familia real* [The Royal family], the painting was renamed by art historians in the 19th Century (Sonesson 1992:31).
3. For an extensive study of this aspect see David Freedberg (1989): *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
4. The photograph won First Prize in the News category in the Norwegian Picture of the Year competition in 1994. The leadership of the Socialist Left Party, with Erik Solheim in the foreground, celebrate the outcome of the referendum.
5. It is also one of several characteristics Christian Metz discusses in his work, *L'Enonciation impersonnelle, ou le Site du film* (Stam 1992:xiiiif)
6. Translator's note: The headline escapes translation. A pale approximation: 'Election-crazed ANNE opens her home'.
7. Dr. Jay Black to *News Photographer* January 1993, page 21.
8. Oddleiv Apneseth at a session on documentary photography at the conference, "Wo-

men, Men, Photography and Aesthetics", SND/S, Trondheim, 8.10.1995.

9. The inclusion of sequences showing the film-making process was an important element in French documentary film of the 1950s - Cinéma Direct and Cinéma Vérité.

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