
Miscellaneous

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Submitted

September 13th, 2023

Approved

December 29th, 2023

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Communication & Society

ISSN 0214-0039

E ISSN 2386-7876

www.communication-society.com

2024 – Vol. 37(2)

pp. 109-124

How to cite this article:

Susperregui, J. M. (2024). Slightly Out of Focus. Analysis of Ambiguity in Robert Capa's Photography, *Communication & Society*, 37(2), 109-124. doi.org/10.15581/003.37.2.109-124

Slightly Out of Focus. Analysis of Ambiguity in Robert Capa's Photography

Abstract

The concept of Slightly Out of Focus, attributed to the photographer Robert Capa, is a line of research that invites us to delve into icons, such as the photographs "The Falling Soldier" and "Crawling through the Water". Regarding the version presented by proponents of Robert Capa's work and the results of recent investigations, there are some discrepancies regarding the classification of The Mexican Suitcase II and his photographic style. The conflicts concerning cameras lost negatives, and the effect of blurriness in both icons are coincidences that may form a pattern in the discourse about Robert Capa. This research also analyzes two theses on the biases of press photography and documentary photography. The first thesis considers that in press photography, staging is fraudulent information, but not in documentary photography. The second thesis posits that staging is an unacceptable fraud in both photographic biases. The methodology applied in both theses compares two icons of Robert Capa, considered typical of press photography, with two other icons by photographer Arthur Rothstein, namely, "Cattle Skull" and "Dust Storm". Rothstein is a reference figure in documentary photography and the 1936 Resettlement Administration program, later known as Farm Security Administration. The press's reaction to the staging of the photograph Cattle Skull left no doubt about the incompatibility of staging in the context of documentary photography.

Keywords

Robert Capa, myth, Slightly Out of Focus.

1. Methodology

The methodology takes into account the concept of "ambiguity" from the subtitle of this research, stemming from the mantra "Slightly Out of Focus" originated by a comment from journalist O. D. Gallagher regarding the photograph of the militiaman taken in 1936, which led to the title of the book published in 1947. Another crucial reference in this research is the photograph "Crawling through the water," part of the report on the 1946 Omaha Beach landing.

Discrepancies exist in the narratives of both photographs regarding their authenticity due to their ambiguities, which have been analyzed and compared with photographic technique and various statements from biographer Richard Whelan and *LIFE*'s graphic editor John G. Morris.

This research delves into the concepts of press photography and documentary photography, as they are distinct photographic categories yet closely related. Concerning the militiaman photograph, when applying the concept of press photography according to professional ethical codes, as no staging is permissible in either, it is valued as documentary photography for being considered less strict.

This research also analyzes staging in documentary photography, drawing primarily on the Resettlement Administration and Farm Security Administration projects involving Arthur Rothstein, as well as discrepancies concerning his photographs "Cattle Skull" and "Dust Storm," also taken in 1936, which generated public rejection of stagings.

2. Introduction

Figure 1. Robert Capa. *Der Welt-Spiegel* 1933.



Robert Capa's professional career as a press photographer began in 1933 when Simon Guttmann, director of the Dephot agency, sent him to Copenhagen to cover Leon Trotsky's conference at the Sport Palast, discussing the significance of the Russian Revolution before a university audience. According to his biographer Richard Whelan (1985, p. 41), the account Capa later recounted about the difficulties of taking photographs for his first report published in *Der Welt-Spiegel* in March 1933 (Figure 1) is untrue. It is a narrative stemming from his imagination that Whelan dismisses because the episode he describes corresponds to a rally of Léon Blum in Paris in May 1936.

Robert Capa's inventiveness is a recurrent theme in his narratives, and the Leon Trotsky incident is an example. This reportage was captured with the camera mounted on a tripod because three photographs from this reportage share the same framing, a coincidence that can only be guaranteed with the camera fixed on a tripod, contradicting his account.

According to the biography published by the International Center of Photography (Hostetler, 1999, p. 211), his significant initial phase as a photojournalist was during the Spanish Civil War alongside his partner Gerda Taro. He achieved the pinnacle of his professional career when he published the photograph "Death of a Militiaman" in *LIFE* magazine. Later, the headline of the *Picture Post* magazine, with a circulation of 1,350,000 copies, edited by his friend Stefan Lorant in December 1938, declared him on the cover as "The Greatest War-Photographer in the World: Robert Capa," earning him enduring international fame. The tragedy of his girlfriend Gerda Taro, who died when a Republican tank collided with the car she was fleeing in during the Battle of Brunete, is a significant episode in Robert Capa's biography. His collaborations with American magazines *LIFE* and *Collier's* during World War II were also pivotal, notably the reportage on the Normandy landing on Omaha Beach, where he captured some significant photographs published in *LIFE* magazine.

Between these two phases, the Spanish Civil War and World War II, he also covered the Sino-Japanese War for over seven months in 1938. An important reference from this period is the May 16, 1938, cover of *LIFE* magazine, featuring an upward angle shot of a young Chinese soldier, titled "A Defender of China," and the portrait of General Chiang Kai-shek in June 1938. From 1948 to 1950, he produced several reports on Israel following its declaration of independence, involving clashes with the armies of Egypt, Transjordan, Iraq, and Syria lasting just over a year. Some of these conflicts were covered by Robert Capa.

Little is known about the reports dedicated to Israel between 1948 and 1950 in terms of photographs. The Magnum Agency only publishes eleven images on their website, seven of which depict the social life of immigrants arriving in Israel, two refer to the bombing of the Altalena ship ordered by Ben-Gurion, and the last two relate to the Central Front associated with a kibbutz. The International Center of Photography does not showcase any photographs from these reports on its website.

However, in 1950, the book *Report on Israel* by Irwin Shaw and Robert Capa (Shaw & Capa, 1950) was published. The prologue serves as a good indicator of the book's content, portraying an epic narration about the authors' experiences during the short time they spent in the state of Israel. They focused on reporting what was happening at that moment. This edition featured 85 photographs of Independence Day and the cities of Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Galilee, analyzed by Mendelson and Smith (2006, pp. 187-201), concluding that it draws on Israeli cultural myths, particularly the creation of a state from a desolate place into an oasis. Critic George Rodger (Miller, 1997, p. 96) struggled to publish his work due to his disagreement with Israeli annexations of Palestinian territory, unlike Robert Capa and David Seymour, who found success due to their political affinity with Jewish editors of certain American magazines. Miller also expressed his disagreement with Magnum's ideology, which did not stand up for the Arabs expelled from their lands, taking the side of the occupiers.

Robert Capa's photographs serve as an excellent case study for examining the construction and reiteration of myths through the objective coverage of news. His images from the birth of the state of Israel advocate for a specific reading, celebrating a supposed righteousness/naturalness of the Jewish state and embracing dominant Israeli cultural myths related to its foundation. Furthermore, his photographs argue that the Israelis were creating a state *ex nihilo* by turning a desolate place, an uninhabited strip of land, into an urban and agricultural oasis. Capa's images leverage the myth of reclaiming the land, which the settlers believed was rightfully theirs, and their spiritual connection to that territory. This analysis provides insight into the practice of photojournalism as a human craft rather than a mechanical one.

The book *A Russian Journal* by John Steinbeck (Steinbeck, 1976), illustrated with photographs by Robert Capa, a project funded by the *New York Herald Tribune* newspaper, was an interesting experience for both John Steinbeck and Robert Capa. According to the Magnum Agency (Magnum, 2023), the aim of this project was to create a firsthand account of everyday life in the Soviet Union. In reality, both authors wanted a personal experience of Soviet politics to serve as a reference for evaluating the information disseminated by American media during the Cold War years.

Figure 2. Robert Capa. Magnum Agency.



Sixty-eight photographs were published in the book out of a total of 4,000 negatives that Robert Capa captured during this journey. Most of the published photographs depict mundane landscapes with minimal human presence. Overall, in this project, Robert Capa adhered to his maxim: "If your photographs aren't good enough, you're not close enough."

Robert Capa's experience in the Vietnam War marked the end of his professional career and life. According to Whelan, Capa's final reportage was a consequence of the conflict caused by David Douglas Duncan's reportage in the relations between France and the United States. The peasants working in rice plantations while French tanks fired their cannons, the French motorcyclist skirting the ditch where the peasants were, and his last photo of an infantry platoon advancing in open fields (Figure 2) align with the situations described by Whelan (1985, pp. 297-300) regarding this reportage.

3. The Two Capa Icons

On the occasion of the placement of a commemorative plaque at Robert Capa's residence on 37 Froidevaux Street in Paris, Cynthia Young¹ published the article "Les Deux Icônes de Capa," referring to the photographs "Death of a Militiaman" from the Spanish Civil War and the photograph "Crawling through the water" during the landing on Omaha Beach in June 1944. The selection of these two photographs among thousands that Robert Capa took in both wars corresponds to the fact that "in these two images, he managed to capture in a fraction of a second a combatant symbolizing the sacrifice of millions of volunteers and soldiers." Regarding the photo of the militiaman, Young asserts that "the exact scenario has never been clear and probably never will be."

This statement confirms that she does not recognize that this enigma was previously resolved, as expressed in the *New York Times*² editorial "Falling Soldier," stating that "The truth of 'Death of a Militiaman' is especially important. It matters for Capa's reputation to know if this man fell and never rose again, or if he got up and left."

The primary argumentative resource to maintain the mystery of the photograph of the militiaman is the adverb 'never,' which is reiterated in N. Pulido's³ article: "We will never know what happened, but, as Juan Barja, director of the *Círculo de Bellas Artes*, says, 'that photo contains truth. It tells the truth of a war.' That's why it's an icon." This statement is surprising in that the lack of knowledge about what really happened does not impede knowing the truth, and consequently, the photo of the militiaman represents the truth of a war.

3.1. First Icon: "Death of a Militiaman"

Subjectivity reigns supreme in these controversies (Mandoqui, 2004, p. 12): "It no longer surprises many that a photograph can show reality as well as hide it, falsify it, or transform it... The code of interpretation tends to be purely affective." Also interesting is the assessment of the authenticity of photography (Lavoie, 2017, p. 177), which considers it "an imputed value, not an inherent quality."

Concerning the term 'inherent,' which is considered according to the RAE as "something that is inseparably linked to its essence, although it can be rationally distinguished from it," authenticity in photography is a demand of the Ethical Codes of press photography to ensure that its integrity remains free from manipulation. The denial of the inherent quality of authenticity in press photography is a viewpoint contrary to the estimation of the media.

On the other hand, the subjectivity of interpretation seems to contradict the inherent authenticity of photography defended by the media. However, there is no such contradiction because the media safeguard authenticity. However, the readers' code of interpretation may be influenced by various motives. When a media outlet discovers manipulation with the intent to deceive, it rejects the photograph for ethical reasons and also because it affects the trust relationship between readers and the editor. The Ethical Codes of press photography were already in force when Robert Capa took the photograph of the militiaman (Figure 3).

¹ Young, 2018. *Les Deux icônes de Capa. Le Monde Hors-Série*. Octobre-Novembre, 78.

² "Falling Soldier", *The New York Times*. August 19, 2009.

³ Pulido, 2016. "A Robert Capa le sacan los colores", *ABC*. 20/10/2016.

The definition of an icon (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, pp. 17-175) as “those photographic images... understood to be representations or responses, reproduced across a variety of media, genres, or themes,” regarding the effectiveness of the newsworthy value of the iconic photograph, considers that it is not sufficient if not accompanied by a caption. However, it values the importance that “a single image can do important work within public discourse,” but an essential condition for a photograph to become an icon is that “there must be broad recognition of the conflict, tension, and underlying cultural values” (Chin-Chuan, Hongtao & Franci, 2011, pp. 335-336).

The two icons by Robert Capa referenced by Cynthia Young in her article are key references for the recognition of the conflicts they represent because they maintain public discourse despite the passage of time, overshadowing other highly media-covered conflicts like the Vietnam War.

Regarding the “Death of a Militiaman” icon, the discussion of staging or authenticity of this snapshot is concluded by the evidence demonstrating its staging. The final objective certainty lies in the coordinates of the site where the militiaman posed, complemented by his position, dismantling Robert Capa's account in various media outlets.

Figure 3. Robert Capa. “Death of a Militiaman”. *LIFE*.



3.2. Second Icon: Crawling through the Water

The issue of *LIFE* magazine featuring Robert Capa's report on the Omaha Beach landing was first published two weeks later, on June 19, 1944. The report contained 21 photographs, the first ten of which were by Robert Capa. Five of these photographs belonged to Robert Capa's 35mm Contax camera, and the rest to the 6x6 cm format Rolleiflex.

According to John G. Morris (2002, pp. 6-7), the photographic editor at *LIFE*, stationed in London during World War II, he received a package from Robert Capa containing four 35mm rolls and 12 rolls of 120 from the Rolleiflex camera, along with a note indicating that the action was on the 35mm roll. Continuing Morris's account, the lab chief handed the rolls to Dennis Bank for development.

This narrative becomes confusing because if the LIFE London headquarters had received four 35mm rolls, the handwritten note only referred to one roll. According to this account, the lab chief then gave them to Dennis Bank for processing. Photographer Wild commented to Morris that the negatives had some grain but looked fabulous. Minutes later, Dennis Bank alerted them that Capa's photos were lost due to the heat in the drying cabinet. As a result, three of the rolls revealed no negatives, while the fourth roll produced eleven negatives. Morris praised the negatives for their greatness as they were the most spectacular war photographs ever taken.

The technical explanation for the lab accident was that due to the heat in the drying cabinet, the emulsion on the negatives had melted and detached from the rolls, leaving only the transparent acetate as a result of the accident.

The 35mm negatives from the Contax camera, according to Whelan (2007, p. 239), show perforations at the bottom due to the emulsion slipping on the negative surface. Coleman (2019, p. 31) refers to the presence of these perforations, stating that "it was due to a mismatch between Kodak's 35mm film rolls and the design of Capa's Contax II camera used that day, and not due to any damage to the films." Coleman's observation aligns with McElroy (2015) because the 2mm mismatch between Kodak rolls used by Capa in the Contax camera caused the upper perforations to appear on the negative (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Robert Capa. Leipzig 1945.



As the photographic image is inverted inside the camera, positioning it correctly causes the perforations to appear at the bottom of the negative. Coleman (2019, p. 31) notes that this effect of dark perforations also appears in Capa's reports in the 1940s because he continued using the same combination of Contax camera and Kodak Super-XX rolls. Whelan's connection between the emulsion slippage and the presence of part of the drive perforations in Capa's Omaha Beach negatives lacks consistency.

If we analyze Morris's account, there are contradictions. If the four rolls were developed in the lab session, dried in the same cabinet, and under the same temperature conditions, it's unclear how three rolls had all negatives melted, and only one roll had eleven negatives fixed. If it's true that the high temperature melted most of the negatives, it's odd that eleven were saved. Moreover, the emulsion of the negative doesn't melt due to high temperatures; it might affect the image quality by crystallizing the emulsion, reducing its definition.

If the handwritten note accompanying Capa's four 35mm rolls referred only to one of them and not all four, and considering the lab results, the logical explanation would be that three rolls delivered by Capa didn't contain any latent images, meaning Capa hadn't used them, and only the fourth roll contained eleven exposures that were developed in the lab. If the heat in the drying cabinet caused the loss of Capa's negatives, the eleven negatives from the fourth roll wouldn't have been preserved either. The main conclusion is that with the 35mm Contax camera, Robert Capa took only eleven photographs.

Regarding the media coverage of D-Day, Richard Whelan (2007, p. 209) reveals that in London, over five hundred American and English correspondents were accredited. They included daily press photojournalists, magazine photographers, newsreel cameras, and mainly radio commentators. However, John G. Morris (2002, p. 20) states that D-Day "will be forever remembered for those photographs," similar to Robert Capa (2001, p. 152) when he commented that "seven days later, I heard that the photographs I took on Easy Red were considered the best of the landing." Both statements express the quality of Capa's report but without comparing them to other photographic reports.

Figure 5. Robert Capa. Omaha 6/6/1944.



Capa's statement (2001, p. 148) about his physical state during the report is important because "the empty camera shook in my hands. It was a new kind of fear that shook me from head to toe." Following this chapter, Whelan (2007, p. 234) states that "from that moment on, he couldn't reload the camera or take more photos on the beach." Additionally, adding to the cold temperature of the English Channel (Capa 2001, p. 140) which in June doesn't exceed 13°C, the shaking of his hands is noticeable in the photograph titled by *LIFE* as "Crawling Through the Water" (Figure 5), however, the caption (*LIFE*, 16(25), 27) attributes the blur to "the intense

emotion of the moment caused the photographer Capa to move his camera and the image became blurred." The tremor due to fear and cold caused the photograph to blur, unlike an unfocused image, it reproduces a double outline on the left side of soldier Huston Riley's helmet, reminiscent of the moment, as described by J. Baughman (2019): "two men expose themselves to enemy fire and help Riley take cover, one of whom has a camera around his neck. The photographer is Capa... His hands are shaking. Shortly after, his camera jams." This same effect due to Capa's trembling hands also appears in the photograph from *LIFE*'s report titled "The First Wave" (Figure 6), where the same result reproduces the double outline of the soldiers' left profiles.

Figure 6. Robert Capa. Omaha 6/6/1944.



The identity of the soldier crawling through the water was initially attributed by Richard Whelan (1985, p. 212) to Edward K. Regan "who recognized himself as the soldier emerging from the water in Capa's most famous D-Day photograph." Later on (Whelan, 2007, p. 233), he rectified and identified him as Huston S. Riley, who landed in the first wave at Easy Red, just like Capa. Huston S. Riley's mother was the first to identify her son based on the photographs published in *LIFE* magazine.

In 2016, on the eve of his centenary, John G. Morris made significant statements (Estrin, 2016, p. 4) about Capa's report on Omaha Beach: "Mr. Morris now believes that the negatives did not melt and that Mr. Capa only exposed 11 frames on one of the four rolls that were sent," and continues, "I don't think he himself knew how many photos he had taken. I think there were three rolls that had nothing. Thank God we have one roll that had something."

4. Similarities and Differences between Capa's Icons

In an interview with Robert Capa⁴ conducted by the *New York World-Telegram*, he stated "There's no need to resort to tricks to take photos. You don't have to make anyone pose in front of the camera. The photos are there, waiting for you to take them. The truth is the best, the best propaganda." This statement aligns with the professional ethics outlined in

⁴*New York World-Telegram*. September 2nd, 1937.

photojournalism codes. However, in Capa's case, the results of various investigations reveal some contradictions, recurring in the stories behind the photographs "Death of a Militiaman" and "Crawling Through the Water".

The icon of the Spanish Civil War doesn't align with his statement "you don't have to make anyone pose" because it's been proven that the militiaman posed for his camera. Concerning the identities of the Spanish militiaman and the American soldier, in both cases, the initial identification was incorrect. In the press release by Magnum Agency (Boot, 1996) on September 2, 1996, the Spanish militiaman was identified as Federico Borrell García, which was erroneous. Three years later, the location of the photo was found in the town of Espejo and not in Cerro Muriano, as announced by Magnum in its statement. The identity of Capa's militiaman remains the last mystery to uncover, but it lacks significance in the investigation of the photo's staging because the location of the site is the primary key.

The Magnum Agency's press release revealing the militiaman's identity coincided with Capa's book release (1996) on the sixtieth anniversary of the militiaman's photo. The conjunction of the Magnum statement and Capa's book release had significant impact, although the main evidence, the portrait of Federico Borrell García, bore no resemblance to Capa's militiaman, nor did their ages match.

In the icon of the Omaha Beach landing, the identification of the American soldier initially assigned to Edward K. Regan was rectified. He was ultimately identified as Huston S. Riley, who, apart from resembling the photograph in "Crawling through the Water", testified about Capa's modus operandi in taking the photograph, as previously documented by Baughman.

"Slightly out of focus" is one of Robert Capa's aphorisms and the title of his book published in 1947. It's also a fundamental piece in the narrative of his icons and highly debated. The controversy arises between the version of *London Daily News* correspondent O. D. Gallagher, reproduced by Phillip Knightley (1975, p. 212) and Richard Whelan (2002). In an encounter with Robert Capa at a hotel in Hendaye (France) in 1937, Gallagher commented that the militiaman's photo was very genuine because it wasn't entirely focused. Capa laughed and said: "If you want good action snapshots, they shouldn't be entirely focused. If your hand trembles a bit, then you get a good action snapshot."

Regarding the blur in the militiaman's photograph, there's a difference in photographic technique between the two photographs of dead militiamen first published in the French magazine *VU* (Figure 7).

In these two photographs sharing the same framing on both sides, the difference in focus is noticeable. In the upper image corresponding to the iconic photo of the militiaman, the foreground is out of focus, while the mountainous background is in focus. In the second photograph, the focus is the opposite, with the foreground in focus and the mountainous background blurred. This analysis of both photographs leads to reconsideration of Capa's aphorism, suggesting that the blur in the upper photograph was due to a technical error, and the author's explanation was merely a justification to conceal it.

In the second icon, "Crawling Through the Water", the visual effect isn't a blur but a blurred photograph. Handheld photos require a steady grip on the camera, a condition Robert Capa couldn't control due to external circumstances. A war setting generates tension that affects the photographer's stability, and if the water temperature was only 13°C, as stated by soldier Huston Riley and Capa himself, their hands were obviously trembling. The trembling of the hands caused two different moments during exposure, resulting in a double outline on soldier Huston S. Riley's helmet.

Figure 7. Robert Capa. Magazine *VU*.



The camera used by Robert Capa in the militiaman's photo also created another ambiguity when Richard Whelan (2007, p. 43) assigned the photos from the Leica camera to Robert Capa and those from the square-format Reflex-Korelle camera to Gerda Taro. However, a comparative analysis of the militiaman's photo from *VU* and *LIFE* magazines concludes that it was taken with the Reflex-Korelle camera (Susperregui, 2009, pp. 83-86). Following Richard Whelan's assignments, the conclusion that the militiaman's photo wasn't taken with the Leica but with the Reflex-Korelle implies that the photo's author wouldn't be Robert Capa but Gerda Taro.

The disappearance of the negatives of both icons is also a singular coincidence. Brian Wallis (2011, p. 13) along with Richard Whelan considered that the negative of the "Death of a Militiaman" photo could be the key to definitively prove that the snapshot wasn't staged. If the negative were found in The Mexican Suitcase, it would open up possibilities to better understand the photo's message, but they didn't find the negative.

This line of inquiry set forth by the International Center of Photography could have been influenced by the experience with the Omaha Beach negatives. The insistence on considering the negative as a crucial part is not substantiated because the essential part is the positive copy of the photograph. This high regard for the negative generated the myth of the lost negative, which later turned into a legend. In 2019, the auction house Sotheby's⁵ announced the sale of a copy of "Death of a Militiaman" for €75,000.

⁵ <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2019/photographies/robert-capa-death-of-a-loyalist-militiaman-cordoba>

There was doubt regarding its authenticity because if the negative was lost, what was the source of the copy? In the investigation, the starting point was the MoMA copy, considered the only existing one. A comparison between this copy and the reproduction in *LIFE* magazine's cover on July 12, 1937 (Susperregui, 2020), reveals that the MoMA copy had removed the stalk of dry stubble from the bottom left corner. With the presence of the dry stubble in the Sotheby's photo and an analysis of the scratches, it was concluded that the auctioned copy was a positive from the original negative, maintaining the image's integrity and new scratches due to poor negative preservation.

Another interesting coincidence between both icons is the magazine *LIFE*, which had a significant influence on public opinion. This magazine stood out from others for its visual approach endorsed by photography. Henry Luce, the magazine's editor, before the first edition's publication, disseminated a manifesto (AA.VV., 1976, p. 62) describing the power of photography to "see life; see the world; witness major events," among other values. Additionally, Henry Luce's essay, *The American Century* (1999, p. 165), constituted *LIFE*'s editorial line because it "helps large masses of people confront the world as it really is, helping them make smarter decisions." In this declaration, photographic information is fundamental to understanding reality, and it's in this context that the photograph "Death of a Militiaman" had a projection that the first edition in the French magazine *VU* did not achieve. However, photography editor Wilson Hicks (Stomberg, 2006, p. 953) already stated that carefully organized photographs accompanied by subtitles "are subject to the same manipulation as words." The caption in the *LIFE* edition was crucial for readers' assessment of the snapshot: Robert Capa's camera captures a Spanish soldier the moment he is struck by a bullet in the head on the Cordoba front. This caption interpreted that the prominent visual element on the top of the head was due to the bullet impact, whereas it was actually the tassel of the militiaman's Isabelline hat.

"Crawling Through the Water", unlike the militiaman's photo, doesn't occupy a prominent space. This photo is one among a series of ten. Its size is half a page and ranks fifth. It stands out because it's a frontal photograph of a single soldier. It's the only photograph that allows for identification and later the testimony of the protagonist, marking a significant difference from the militiaman's photo, which has been subject to speculation for many years.

5. Various categories for assessing the photo "Death of a Militiaman"

Depending on the category assigned to the photograph "Death of a Militiaman", the interpretation of this photograph will vary, unlike the photo "Crawling Through the Water" and the other negatives taken by Capa at Omaha Beach because there is no doubt about their authenticity. All of them are considered press photographs, and the dispute over the supposed laboratory accident does not affect the authenticity of any of them. However, concerning the militiaman's photo, the categorization is broad and confusing because depending on how the value of authenticity is considered, the photo's relevance may vary.

5.1. Assessment as a press photograph

The concept of photographic manipulation applied to photography, in the case of "Death of a Militiaman," must take into account both the author and the editor. If press photography has inherently generated a degree of mistrust despite the optical neutrality of the image in front of the camera, the concept of photographic manipulation in general (Headley, 2006, p. 1006) can refer to any technical choice that intends to alter the natural vision of the photographer. However, in photojournalism, the specific concept of manipulation is fundamentally limited by ethical reasons that do not allow manipulated photographs. As defended by the National Press Photographers Association (NPPA) in the United States, the best way to avoid an ethical violation is to uphold truth in photojournalism.

In the case of Capa's militiaman in the Spanish Civil War, the manipulation involved staging a death that did not occur. According to Michael Griffin (1999, pp. 131-138), war photographs are not analyzed merely as illustrations but as symbols, even if they result in implausible images. He attributes Robert Capa's fame to the implausibility generated by the risk the photographer took and also to the ongoing significance of that photograph.

Another key aspect is the relevance of *LIFE* magazine's editor, Henry Luce, who envisioned the magazine project (Doss, 2001, p. 2) as something significant for investigation because it would compile information.

Prior to the publication of *LIFE* magazine, Henry Luce initiated a newsreel experiment called *March of Time* in 1935, a project he described as "fakery in allegiance to the truth," an oxymoron that explains the institutional relativism with which the photograph "Death of a Militiaman" has been treated.

5.2. Assessment as a documentary photograph

When it's established that the photograph "Death of a Militiaman" is a staging that cannot be accepted as press photography, the concept of documentary photography is invoked because it is considered more tolerant of stagings. The case of Arthur Rothstein, who participated in the Resettlement Administration and Farm Security Administration projects for rural rehabilitation in the United States, is an important reference to clarify this conflict of photographic concepts, as these projects are considered the primary references for documentary photography.

To draw a comparison between press and documentary photography, we have Arthur Rothstein's photographs "Cattle Skull" and "Dust Storm." Unlike press photography, documentary photography does not have an immediate commitment but rather a medium to long-term one. As indicated by D. Geo (2006, p. 407), "photojournalists tend to work with short deadlines, having few opportunities to truly understand their subject," whereas documentarians "spend a lot of time researching, observing, and methodically photographing the chosen subject." In an interview with R. Doud (1964), Arthur Rothstein stated that he did not admit any photographic falsification and valued the different compositions of the animal skull as an experience comparable to what Steichen did with a cup and a saucer. Rothstein combined different textures of dry earth with the animal skull, which according to E. Morris⁶ corresponded to a very old animal due to the wrinkles at the base of the horns, and the bleaching of the skull indicated it had been exposed to the open air for three years or more. The temporality of the animal skull demonstrates the falsehood of the icon of the 1936 North Dakota drought because it corresponds to an earlier time.

The different versions presented by Arthur Rothstein of "Cattle Skull" (Figure 8) caused a scandal in numerous newspapers during the summer of 1936, being labeled as a "wandering skull" due to the various stagings. Ultimately, the evidence of the drought presented by the Resettlement Administration turned out to be a fraud, discrediting the New Deal project for resettling rural families affected by the drought.

Figure 8. Arthur Rothstein. "Cattle Skull". Library of Congress.



⁶ Morris, 2009. The Case of the Inappropriate Alarm Clock (Part 1). *The New York Times*. October 18.

Regarding Arthur Rothstein's second icon, the photograph "Dust Storm" (Figure 9), he told J. DeClue (1942) that he "asked the youngest child to stay behind and cover his eyes with his arms, and the father and older son to lean forward, as they would have during a powerful dust storm." Years later, he told Doud (1964) that "the farmer and his two young children were walking past a shed on their property, and I took that photograph with the dust swirling around them."

The most convincing version is the first one, where the staging of the photograph is evident. The child covers his eyes with his hand to protect himself from the dust, and simultaneously, the father leans forward to face the wind, but his hat reveals the staging. If they were indeed in the midst of a dust storm, the hat would have flown off. Not even the father shows any sign of holding onto his hat. It's also worth noting that this photograph is sharply focused because there is no "dust swirling around them."

Figure 9. Arthur Rothstein. "Dust Storm". Library of Congress.



6. Conclusions

The first conclusion about the photographs "Death of a Militiaman" and "Crawling through the Water" is the relevance of *LIFE* magazine for the notoriety and endurance of both photographs in collective memory.

The second conclusion is the coincidence in the implausible narratives accompanying both photographs. The identities of the militiaman and the soldier were erroneous despite the arguments put forth by Magnum Agency in the former case, not so in the identity of the soldier, which was corrected. The loss of negatives is an enigmatic coincidence. The technical conflicts, in the first case, the Leica camera, and in the second case, the alleged accident in the photographic laboratory, have turned out to be fictitious.

The third conclusion is the recourse to relativism as an argument to defend the importance of the photograph "Death of a Militiaman," shifting the bias from press photography to documentary, considered more tolerant of stagings, when in reality, it is as demanding as press photography. It is worth noting the rejection motivated by the staging of Arthur Rothstein's photograph "Cattle Skull," a paradigm of documentary photography.

Stuart Franklin's proposal (Chéroux & Bouveresse, 2017, p. 374) regarding the consequences of image manipulation is the differentiation between acceptable and unacceptable manipulation of images, given that image manipulation will become increasingly common. His defeatist viewpoint, probably with reason, does not encourage moving in that direction because the syntactic structure "acceptable manipulation" equates to an oxymoron with indefinite limits.

Regarding the photograph of the militiaman (Franklin, 2016, p. 180), Robert Capa is justified because "staging was the only way he saw to show loyal Republican soldiers in action." This argument might have some validity if the author of the photograph had admitted its staging. Robert Capa always defended the authenticity of the photograph of the militiaman and it has always been considered a press photograph, as highlighted by *Picture Post* magazine with the headline "The Greatest War-Photographer in the World: Robert Capa."

Following the differentiation by D. Geo, previously mentioned, between press and documentary photography, wherein photojournalists operate with short deadlines and often with little information about the subject at hand, documentarians work based on research and prior observation. From this comparison, it can be deduced that documentarians operate with a certain advantage over press photographers, who are pressured by immediacy.

In addition to temporal conditions, the attitude of the photographer is also important. In this case, Robert Capa's attitude regarding the photograph of the militiaman cannot be considered exemplary; on the contrary, because he invents a fictional story (Hersey, 1937, p. 47) "at the instant the machine gun released its burst, he pressed the shutter."

The concept of the "decisive moment" by Henri Cartier-Bresson may serve as a professional reference for press and documentary photographers (Cartier-Bresson, 1984, p. 9) "photography, for me, is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event, as well as the rigorous organization of visually perceived forms that express this event." The forms coinciding in a fraction of a second on a specific event are unrepeatable, and when the camera records this formal-temporal coincidence, the photographic act is consummated satisfactorily, as explained by Henri Cartier-Bresson (Warren, 2006, p. 246): "To take a photograph is to hold one's breath when all faculties converge on the fleeting reality. It is at that moment that mastering an image becomes a great physical and intellectual joy."

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