
What stays with me after reading Image Ethics in the Digital Age is the opening phrase of the editors’ introduction: “Depending on where you came in . . .” (p. vii). An odd, trivial thing, perhaps, but through this colloquial phrase, editors Larry Gross, John Katz, and Jay Ruby convey a distinctive feature of the social and technological worlds charted by their collection. Literally, the phrase suggests the multiple ways readers and researchers come to or take up places in the conversations about ethics and visual culture. More figuratively, the phrase conveys a sense of this topic’s volatility. The proliferation and adoption of new visual technologies perpetually outstrip burgeoning scholarship, evolving legal context, and critical debate. It seems to be accident only when such conversations sync up with the flurry of adaptive and adoptive social uses made of digital image technologies.

A measure of the growth rate of scholarship in this area can be seen by comparing this book with the previous volume these authors edited, in 1988: Image Ethics. I hesitate to suggest that these collections are “similar”: in 1988, we apparently were not yet in a “digital age.” The 1988 volume’s subtitle suggests a very different focus: “The moral rights of subjects in photographs, film, and television.” Such moral rights appeared to be a common entry point into the conversation about image ethics, whether the conversation was about the rights of public figures, research subjects, or others contesting the use of their representations. In 1988, the editors did not feel equipped to propose a “prescriptive framework for guiding professionals in the paths of ethical practice” (Gross, Katz, & Ruby, 1988, p. 7), though they did feel confident that they could enable the conversation about image ethics by nudging readers away from “excessive faith in objectivity and the rights of image makers” (Gross, Katz, & Ruby, 1988, p. 7). Perhaps as a demonstration of the mastery of that conversation, it was also possible for the editors to include a 100-page, annotated bibliography by Lisa Henderson, “organized by medium and source” (Gross, Katz, & Ruby, 1988, p. 273). The absence of such an effort to encompass the contemporary field in this more recent volume suggests the complex profusion of conversations and entry points a decade and a half later.

Three distinct issues organize the essays in Image Ethics in the Digital Age: digital manipulation, the convergence of media industries, and public and legal debates related to copyright. The editors identify what could be considered a fourth issue, surveillance, but only essays by Larry Gross on “Privacy and Spectacle” and Laura Grindstaff on “Daytime Talk Shows” speak to this topic. Arguably, these three or four themes are symptoms or effects of the proliferation of digital technologies. The phrase “digital age” is defined through anecdote and example as that period involving “dramatic change in technology” (Gross, Katz, & Ruby, 2003, p. vii), while the nature of “image” is broadly conceived as practices of “journalism, entertainment, and advertising, in the visual environment itself” (p. vii).

The 15 essays in the collection, framed by the editors’ introduction and the afterword by Howard Becker and Dianne Hagaman, are not arranged with respect to these themes. David Perlmutter’s substantial essay “The Internet: Big Pictures and Interactors” sets the theme of media convergence in motion by exploring whether the Internet will influence the circulation and determinations of what have since come to be referred to as iconic images (Lucaites & Hariman, 2002). Dona Schwartz engages the issues of digital manipulation by summarizing research conducted with news editors on the evolution of stan-
ards of practice in her essay, “Professional Oversight: Policing the Credibility of Photojournalism.” Sheldon Halpern’s article on “Copyright Law and the Challenge of Digital Technology” downplays specific application to visual culture to focus on the broader legal context of copyright. The essays by Faye Ginsberg and John Katz reprise concerns with the moral rights of subjects common to the 1988 collection, but in Ginsberg’s case with greater emphasis on new, indigenous media practices.

The common ground for these essays goes beyond technology, ethics, and the visual. In their afterword, Becker and Hagaman refine the ways we think about the impact of technology: “New techniques and new possibilities undermine the bases of established cooperative arrangements among makers, distributors, and consumers of images” (p. 349). With one or two exceptions, the essays situate themselves within the social worlds of particular groups of visual or media practitioners whose activities are under revision in responding to or keeping pace with changes in technology. As Paul Frosh notes in his essay dealing with the technological transformations of the stock photography industry, “. . . one must resist conceiving of technology in terms of its ‘impact,’ as though technology were a hurtling meteor . . .” (p. 184). As he goes on to summarize, “the question of technology is primarily a social, cultural, and political one” (p. 185).

For a collection edited and published in the United States, there is a strong Canadian presence here. Matthew Soar’s work on advertising images has been influencing research at Concordia University, while Hart Cohen’s work on Australia’s Aboriginal image archives builds on a visual training from McGill University. For those interested in indigenous media, Faye Ginsberg’s work expands on Canadian cases in this area. Many of the essays dealing with journalism would be broadly applicable in Canada, but the legal nuances of copyright and use of images diverge from Canadian practices. For someone interested in using this book in a course on media ethics, supplemental legal cases would be beneficial.

Some readers might be grateful to see authors steer the discussions of digital manipulation away from a re-statement of the mass culture view of audiences-as-dupes. Unlike the post-photography debates of the early 1990s, the concerns with manipulation here keep within a broader social frame: How is public outrage at digital transgressions constructed and performed? Given the background of at least one of the editors (Ruby, 2000), it is surprising that questions of reflexivity in relation to digital-image ethics are not evident. Certainly, a case could be made that the tracking of social practices related to the ethical use of images is reflexive, but discussion of the use of visual culture by academics is absent. In summarizing critical research on the appropriation of documentary style by fashion photographers Avedon and Salgado, Soar makes ironic reference to “middle-class audiences (myself included)” (p. 291), whose consumption practices maintain the place of privilege these photographers have. His brief, parenthetic comment is suggestive of the critical space that would be opened by a reflexive exploration of the uses that (middle-class) academics make of these images. Perhaps this will be a dimension explored in a subsequent volume on image ethics.

References

*Brian Rusted*

*University of Calgary*