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Image source criticism in the age of the digital humanities

Gérard RÉGIMBEAU

Professor of information and communication sciences, Université Paul-Valéry, ITIC, Montpellier 3. Researcher at the LERASS-CERIC

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Introduction

The screen exposes images as much as it “absorbs” them, perhaps due to some form of native coexistence. The two are subject to an infinite game of the metamorphosing of supports, places, formats, surfaces, frameworks and programmes. Digital technologies appear to have intensified what was expected of the screen. The manifold dimensions that are to be found on computers, cell phones, digital pads and other new technologies the ancestor of which was the blackboard only add images and environment to this long awaited meeting with increasing “efficiency”. The same thing can be said of projected, immersive and proliferating images, which make it possible to invent screens on all sorts of surfaces. These particularities, which are as technical as they are cultural, (and they might be called “anthropo-technical” or “socio-technical”, depending upon the fields and frameworks of the studies), go beyond the need to establish the knowledge of information mediation in an activity which involves not just the practices and terms of dissemination or publication, but also involves making this knowledge available. How is this “availability” conceived and what is its relationship to the notion of sources? Availability assumes maximum familiarity with the nature, origins and conditions under which various elements such as evidence in a trial or documents for an addressee or an authority are brought together. Is the mediation of this availability affected by its filiation and the parameters which determine descriptions, standard forms, metadata or accompanying captions?

In order to contextualise the topic of new forms of criticising image sources, we shall consider two points: it is in our interest to consider such criticism within, and beyond its pedagogical implications. These two developments relate to links between source criticism and evaluating information and the sources as the context to which the image belongs: in a nutshell, the image’s origins as they can be situated, and the traces upon which this insight is based.

EVALUATING INFORMATION AND SOURCE CRITICISM

Access to information, which is so necessary for developing knowledge and intellectual schooling for each citizen, raises the issue of sources; because it very much involves social, cultural and technical aspects of information systems, access to information is crucial in the

field of training. This is why it is so important to understand the need, which has been stated time and again, to exercise critical judgement in examining and evaluating documents which serve as a source of such knowledge. If we peruse concepts related to access to information and those related to source criticism at the same time, we can see common points regarding the reliability of information that may be attributed to a document, one of the accepted functions of which is evidence. Documenting means finding out information, and in this process, authenticating a document is one of the first steps.

Critique and criteria

Criticism in evaluating sources refers on the one hand to the terminology of historic methodology, which since the positivist school has divided on the one hand proponents of external criticism applied for naming, dating, localising and attributing a document, and internal criticism dedicated to the interpretation of a document by understanding its content, conventions, internal coherence, the intention of the document, and on the other those of have methodical doubts which have been inherited from philosophy. This may be similar to what was meant by the notion “information literacy”, since evaluation is one aspect of such literacy. Nevertheless, it would appear to be more suitable to place this concept more directly in the context of analysis and judgement: that of “information culture”. For according to Claire Panijel-Bonvalot, “controlling information” is part of an approach aimed at acquiring scientific knowledge, whereas « information culture », which is more generalist, is concerned with informational approaches which can be applied to all fields of life, such as the acquisition of methods of criticism and of the evaluation of information to be found on internet or images seen on television. Education for information is a generic term, comprising both.

This acceptance has been discussed by Viviane Couzinet, (in turn quoted by Cécile Gardiès), when Couzinet clarifies the accepted equivalent of the French notion of “informational literacy” by referring to the related notion of “expertise” to be found in information sciences and acquired especially by people who are both professors and archivists. Such professors should ask their students to evaluate the information. The vital importance of this objective is clearly set out by Alexandre Serres when he clearly limits his ambition because of the objectives that all teachers should share in their teaching: Identifying sources, discernment, vigilance with regard to the risks of manipulation, the critical analysis of documents, the construction of judgement, appropriating reliable information, decoding digital documents, etc.: while all of these objectives appear to demonstrating the importance of being able to evaluate information found on internet, they at the same time are an upstream disincentive for developing any specific training project, inasmuch as they are confused with the very objectives of teaching.

Such explanations of the links between information, documents, evaluation and criticism should better allow us to understand the need to reproduce the media quality of images : their intentions and presence in a network of practices related to their mediation, from intention to the reception or from creation to use.

We are all familiar with conditions for seeking out information on the web. A working party of academics who carry out and teach archiving in the Maine-et-Loire sum these conditions

up: "Resources designed for teaching are extremely rare when seen against the profusion of sources from journalism, advertising, politics, personal expression (such as blogs, etc.) pseudo-science (Wikipedia), or pseudo-journalism (AgoraVox)."

Commenting on the difficulties encountered in selecting documents, they add that "it is now important for teachers of archiving to identify and define the knowledge necessary to enable a student to criticise sources used in documentaries discerningly. Any new model designed to describe the activity of documentary research must therefore acknowledge the overwhelming importance of evaluating resources." Among these concepts and criteria surrounding an evaluation process based upon a text's terminology we may note categorisation, pertinence, validity, primary and secondary sources, scientific basis, veracity, credibility, reliability, verifiability, authority, whether something can be proved to issue from an author, confrontation, structure, genre, integrity, para-text, intellectual property, etc.

These links and criteria also appear to be theoretical and methodological anchors in an approach to image source criticisms which looks at the intersection of informational, documentary and communicational axes. Describing resources is one of the first points of encounter between sources criticism and evaluating information.

Images and sources

In documentation, just as in history, it is possible to distinguish sources, which indicate the type of information (press, administrative documents, the web, the radio, etc.) and resources, which specify an accessible and available piece of information. Sources represent all documents that contain information that can be used by a user. Resources consist of collected, organised documents which are processed in a particular configuration. Reducing a source to a resource and moving from one term to the other depends on the context of the proposition and the practice, for instance just as we present them here. A complementary note is that citing sources in research based upon the use and analysis of documents equally amounts to citing resources.

When looking at definitions, we should also raise a few points regarding the iconic document, since it remains difficult to arrive at a consensual acceptance of the term. For if we look at one standardising document on the subject, the introduction indicates that it is related to "businesses and institutions in charge of various types of images called works of art." It is also specified that 1) the image is "the bi-dimensional or mostly bi-dimensional representation of one or several object(s) or form(s)" and 2) that an iconic document is a "Document the main characteristic of which is an illustrated representation". Finally, it only applies to original images, whether drawings, water colours, washes, paintings, miniatures, collages, photography and related arts, engravings, etc.

The question as to differences and concordance between iconic, illustrated, figurative, visual and iconographic documents in the digital age has not yet found a definitive answer. This is all the more the case since said figurative, illustrated or visual documents are often doubly so, first at the moment of their creation and subsequently in iconographic

declinations, depending invariably on contexts that play a role in attributing meaning to the document at the moment of its reception. There are a number of respects in which the nature of the iconic document remains unclear. Having discussed this particularity on a number of occasions, we should remember that the implications of this particularity should be discussed. When, for instance, we observe that the term, “aniconic” is sometimes used as a synonym of “abstract” and that it should be logically possible to construct the phrase, “aniconic iconic document” (!), we grasp the aporia of these lexical expressions of semantic difficulties.

One can find a way out and back in when it is necessary for the specific description of the type of image linked to its support. The section, "Typologies" of annex E of the brochure entitled *Catalogage de l'image fixe* includes a list with a very eloquent gamut of media available as visual sources. It is an inventory of 183 supports and media ranging from *Abécédaire* i.e. alphabet book to *Vue stéréoscopique* i.e. stereoscopic view, but also including *Badge*, *Carte à jouer* i.e. playing card, *Diagramme*, *Faire-part* i.e. announcement, *Image religieuse* i.e. religious image, et *Pochette de disque* i.e. album cover.

Here, evaluating information based upon source criticism allows us to recognise the importance of each message by relating it to various aspects which made it possible to create and disseminate each type of image. What is more, these terms act as clues regarding the contexts of the source's reception – from an elitist reception to mass consumption. As Jean-Claude Schmitt has written, “What is at stake is not so much to isolate and read an image's content as firstly to understand the image as a whole with regard to its form and structure, its function and functions. This means identifying the support (and medium) which allows its status to be embodied.

The subject of understanding sources will not cease to be taught because of the rise of digital technologies. The function of documents is also one of the preoccupations of archivists responsible for drafting descriptions by “selecting, analysing and ordering all information which will make it possible for archive documents to be identified and for the context of their production to be explained.” Discovering the functions of these documents by referring back to the time and space of their creation is an integral part of those parameters which are indispensable for a critical approach.

Collections of sources

The other criterion which was selected in the present context is that of the collection. It is relevant at three levels at least: that of the collection or repository to which the image belongs; that of the set of themes to which the collection belongs; and finally that of the corpus set up by the researcher. This criterion corresponds to the reflection of François Lissarague, for whom each image is part of a network as well as to that of Michel de Certeau, who wrote that the “gesture of setting something aside, of collecting things and thus transforming them into documents, although certain objects had been distributed differently.... form a ‘collection’.

Previously, for an image to belong to a collection, it had to be acquired conventionally and registered in a set, thereby taking on a meaning within the context of the conditions and

missions related to each individual situation of the collection. It was possible to classify such images in any conceivable way: by author, subject, school, size, nature, place, etc. Today, the digital collection is similar to Borge's library of Babel, with infinite nesting, raising the impression of interchangeable spaces. Even prior to belonging to a site, the image is already part of the web collection because of its unification and interconnection functions, and it is also part of its site while at the same time possibly and indeed often existing in another on-line collection and dependent upon yet another site which is linked up to several other sites, etc. A description of these links may come to resemble an exercise in mapping with myriad inextricable ramifications and networks.

The impression of the limitless availability of images also entails fraudulent use violating the rights of authors, owners, copyright holders or agencies and the institutions which keep or manage them. Understanding law related to images has thus become indispensable for understanding digital data, as professional works related to iconographic collections have shown.

The ease or difficulty with which such conditions might be met, whether by passionate amateurs, or agencies seeking to position themselves, or decision-makers weighing up acquisition policies, or documentation policies within the context of the well-structured and thought through administration of institutions in charge of conserving and passing on heritage are all part of the critical evaluation of certain functions of the images. Secondly, we shall observe the particularities of other contextual aspects which allow for a broader understanding of the sources.

Photo&Graphs

In his 1939 speech celebrating the centenary of photography, Paul Valéry paid philosophical tribute to the enormous upheaval that photography had created the conditions for and conceptualising of visible phenomena – right down to the introduction of the invisible:

“It is here, in these uncertain realms of knowledge, that Photography, and even the very idea of Photography, takes on a precise and remarkable importance, since they introduce a new condition, and perhaps a new concern, perhaps a sort of new reagent the effects of which have not yet been sufficiently taken into consideration, to these venerable disciplines

Even if we had given more thought to the effects of this new reagent, photography, inspired by Paul Valéry's observation, we would have had to extend these reflections on photography to digital technologies with regard to both practice and theory. It is indispensable to relate the issue of photography to that of source criticism – on the one hand because beyond techniques that separate digital and analogue modes there is a direct filiation between the two that might be said to be ontological, involving movement from a subject to its figurative transcription through the transposition of the real (the capture or index reflection of “what had been”) , internally raising the issue of “faithfulness” to an original subject (a being, an object, an event, etc.). On the other hand, all forms of photography almost always depend on a repository or collection which incorporates

inscriptions or textual traces. Such a particularity is not foreign to digital forms, which suppose that the conditions of having included such and such a photograph in the repository or collection are clear – (page, site, chapter, data bank, blog, etc.). What is more, if we accept the definition of digital images as snapshots of a scene taken using electronic technologies or digitalised using documents such as photographs, manuscripts, printed texts or works of art, as we are invited to do by a university library in the United States, we can instantly see why it is so important to understand the permanent duplication effect produced by digital technologies.

WHICH VERSION ?

As to the question as to which of the various levels at which an image exists have to be reproduced when documenting the image – the moments at which the image was generated, edited and integrated into a collection are indispensable. These levels presuppose taking account of a particular form of updating and disseminating the image, one of the regular characteristics of which, when it is in a digital form is to be a reproduction. Traces of origins and filiation are primarily used to provide clues as to the bibliographic trajectories of the images. For instances, images from the Chauvet grotto presented in a documentary will be viewed differently from those used as photograms in advertising or photographs issuing from the CNRS with a calibration of colours and the precise measurements laid out in detailed accompanying descriptions.

To grasp the image, first of all in its appearance, presupposes a gamut of receptions, depending on the context in which it is viewed: it may be immersed, detached, objective, etc. The viewer may be attentive to such and such an architect or detached when he or she sees such and such a landscape or amused by such and such a scene or distant when detailing such and such a technique of photography; however, one of the foremost conditions for criticism as a reflective processes is to call into question the vantage the photograph evokes.

Training in digital and digitalised heritage can provide arguments for a solid methodology for a critical reception if it is inspired by the model required for drafting a description suited to the catalogue which clarifies the various levels at which the image exists – as we have mentioned, the level at which it was generated – (a matrix, a negative, prints, original file, reproduction, version, etc.), the various points in time and ways in which it belonged to such and such a collection and the editorial form which definitively allows us to “grasp” it.

Today, it is important to consider the confusion engendered by the surrounding contexts of the many “editions” of an image which are all the more insidious because they are not always expressed or explicit. Even if we deal with a digital document differently from the way we dealt with a slide, an illustration or a conventional photograph, we still have to take account of “para-iconic” texts, i.e. the words that “frame” the image, to use a sweetly ironic expression, or literal descriptions of lay-out solutions, and which provides information which is necessary for the material and intellectual understanding of the image.

Citing sources

We first recognise the difficulty of these analytical parameters in criticism since it is often difficult to provide a rigorous justification both of the faithfulness of a reproduction and of the path the image had taken before becoming part of a repository or collection. In the best of cases, i.e. when one has the information necessary to certify the qualities of the reproduction and link between the original and the photograph as well as the path taken from the author or sponsor of the photograph and their inclusion on a site, one can establish data (and metadata) corresponding to the image presented in such and such a place on the web. Thus, the viewer is informed of the “authenticity” of the reproduction available in the UNESCO’s World Digital Library of such and such a nautical chart of the “Mediterranean Sea Region 1569” in which source-related fields are broken down in the following manner:

[...]

- Material description

1 map: in colour; 50 x 84 centimetres.

- Collection

Collection of digital maps from the American Geographical Society

- Institution

Library of University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee

External resources

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.wdl/wmuw.6765>

Every field provides necessary information for correctly identifying the support and its environment while adding the necessary links to verify this information. The part which then constitutes a true criticism of the “sources” is nevertheless not entirely finished because at this stage one has to look back at the history of the path taken by the original, which is conserved in the United States. The link to the institution’s site may help us to do so, and will do so, since it draws the viewer’s attention to a detail description allowing the viewer to understand under which conditions the document was created and where it had been conserved.

It is inevitable that there will be some redundancy in source criticisms in a rigorous investigation involving the material (physical) examining of the document, but it also may be a more or less systematic recourse depending upon need.

To conduct research on a digitalised document from the nineteenth century no longer requires resorting to a direct manipulation of all of the real editions, if the state of conservation allows for a better understanding of its features, particularly in approaching an image. On the other hand, for a map from a tourist site, it may be necessary to content oneself with the digitalised form and minimum information including only the blog address as the sole indication of the source. Only summary indices on the sources of the original and its photograph will appear. It is true that the examine function (of the contextual menu on Firefox) provides access to data in HTML where the tag variable “<body>” can point to the sources, for instance the computer from which the image has been downloaded, however it

will not systematically provide information on the map's owner, the file of origin or the primary source from which it was extracted if these fields have not been filled out.

Quantities, identities and differences

Given the plethora of images which constitute the mosaics of answers to requests, one has to specify the terms, refine key words, render the questions more precise – these are traditional actions when one learns how to carry out documentary research, but one may also make use of possibilities to put new queries to the gamut of sources so as better to evaluate the declaratory context of the image. One simple means is to visit a few sites related to such and such an image selected among the results. One is better able to understand the various uses fairly rapidly. Whereas in one instance, the image might be a decorative illustration, in another it might be used as evidence in a demonstration and elsewhere it may be the central topic of a study. These various degrees of declaratory importance are established in a relationship of text to image which is still being studied actively.

For pedagogical purposes, one can use the TinEye search engine or Google's image search, which allows the internet user to find sites with an identical image (even with a different resolution or an image which has been framed differently). This tool, with which professionals of industrial property and copyright are already fully familiar, makes it possible to trace web uses of such and such an image and consequently, objects, logos and other prototypes; it is also useful for finding the context of the images, their use and their presentation. The appearance of identical images in roughly fifty identified sites shows the full importance of the media functions of the web generated by quantity. But it will also be a way to find other, older mediated or medial functions that highlight specific aspects within this mass of data, i.e. such particularities which can only be seen in the context of related texts, which now will include tags written by users.

CONCLUSION

The duplication of photographic reproduction has been extended to digital diffraction and fragmentation, which establish distances and deviations between objects of the same origins, leading to a vacillating way images are processed in the general exchange of images and also difficulties identifying sources. As iconographers are prepared to acknowledge, it is not so much alterations to the photographic appearance which poses a problem but "more the issue of the document's origin, i.e. whether the reproduced image is in fact a retouched image of the initial shot of the work or the scene of reality. It is vital that this be specified in the caption." Such reflections also underscore the need for a critique of sources which lay down the conditions for a critical reception.

To approach this question shows that beyond the terms, preoccupations surrounding the evaluation of information are related to those surrounding source criticism, but the latter present other interesting specificities that need to be restated, for "evaluating information", even the very wording, may once again situate the process in a paperless environment whereas it is now preferable to emphasise an approach which links method to intellection

when examining what remains of documents which constitute the remainder of sources. We may cite Jean Hubert, who reminds us that the “criticism of texts [and we would add images] is not a vain game scholars play. It involves the judgement of present-day man regarding the close connections between sensitivity, thought and action, between art and the development of societies. Any document, whether by intention or attribution, bears witness to a contextualised expression. Documents, which reflect what is at stake for humans who impact and are impacted by society, served or serve to express a given state of present forces by confirming, subscribing to or opposing something, just as they may falsify a hypothesis or make themselves felt by their absence. This is why counterfeits or the absence of documents provide insights into various aspects of a society. Thus, visual documents have to be seen in the cross-links of human and technical transactions, of which the web is part and parcel, while applying all the scepticism required for grasping the complexity.

Translated by Niall Bond.

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