

Life before Photoshop: Erased from the Past

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Lesson Scenario

Introduction

1. Begin by asking the students whether they know what Photoshop is and whether they have come across the verb 'to photoshop'. You can most likely assume that nearly all of them will know what Photoshop is about. Ask them to provide examples they know and ask whether altering a photograph is easy to do now and why it is done. As most of the answers will be positive, write down together all the information giving the reasons for photograph manipulation and its goals. Through brainstorming, your list can be quite long after a few minutes, particularly with points relating to image enhancement, rejuvenation or aging, smoothing out facial imperfections, etc. During the brainstorming session, it is worth focusing on identifying areas where photograph manipulation is often used (modelling, advertising, conspiracy theories, etc.). Reflect together on the pros (benefitting whom?) and cons that photograph retouching brings.
2. During the exchange of ideas and thoughts, direct the discussion towards how an altered image has been used to create a new narrative relating to a particular event or person. Reflect on whether in the age of analogue photography, it was possible to alter photos and manipulate them freely.
3. Distribute the worksheets and sets of source material among the students. The script includes a single suggestion for using them, yet that can be adapted.
4. Inform the students that during the lesson they are going to work both individually and in groups, on the basis that their reflections will lead to a joint debate on the problems posed. What matters is freedom of expression as well as the ability to formulate arguments and counterarguments.

Development

1. Falsifying photographs dates back to the mid-1900s. Ask the students to familiarize themselves with Sources A and B. Draw their attention to the differences between digital and analogue photography as well as the time needed to retouch or manipulate a print. While getting familiar with Source A, the students should do Exercise 1 in the worksheet. Once that is done, a volunteer will read the answers and the others will correct/approve them.
2. Divide the students into groups of four to six people and ask them to write on post-it notes¹, their observations concerning the use of photograph retouching in pursuing expedient political goals or manipulating facts. To make it easier, write the following question on the board/flipchart: How is photograph retouching used for obtaining expedient political goals? Once the work is done, a member of each group will attach the comments they have developed onto the board. Successive groups will add their post-it notes. Should their comments/ideas be similar, group them together; if not, create a separate collection of ideas. Then together with the students formulate a definition of historical manipulation based on photographs. Write that definition down on the board or flipchart so that is visible (and can be used) until the end of the lesson.
3. In order to understand the notion of manipulation using photography, analyse with your students a fragment of the ever-relevant literary work by George Orwell 1984 – Source G. It is a splendid literary description of how history is falsified by totalitarian regimes. It is worth you working together to highlight all the features of history falsification, particularly photographs (Exercise 6). The students create a metaplan (working in the groups established at the start of the class). Explain what the method is about. A master metaplan can be found on the worksheet.
4. In the Soviet Union, manipulating history by regime-faithful propaganda was advanced and commonly applied. It reached its peak during the rule of Joseph Stalin. Not happy with just removing his political opponents (e.g. Leon Trotsky, Lev Kamenev and Nikolay Jezhov), who were often accomplices to the mass crimes committed within their own nation and neighbouring populations,

¹When working online, students can be split into groups/rooms (depending on the platform used). Instead of post-it notes, they use a teacher-enabled online board for their own comments.

he also resorted to propaganda, the aim of which was to denigrate all (often imaginary) enemies of the system. In the 1930s, however, methods of manipulating facts and history similar to those shown in Source H or similar were more frequently used. Joseph Stalin ordered the eradication of the memory of each person who according to him posed a threat to his dictatorial power and the totalitarian foundations of the Soviet state.

5. During a brief teacher's talk or minilecture, explain to the students what the Great Purge in the USSR was about, and make them familiar with the number of victims and the names of the executioners. Draw their attention to the role of the state security service (NKVD) and commonly applied torture (adapt this aspect according to the students' age). Then, go on to discuss Sources C, D and E.
6. Split your students into groups again and tell them that the teams will work using the Phillips 66 technique, that is fast and intensive work on a given theme. At the first stage of the exercise, the task of the groups is to work for ten or so minutes with the source material (C, D and E) and the information found online. At the second stage, the groups meet up in order to debate the results of their discussions and exchange their ideas and note them down on the board/flipchart. In that way, the group members learn about their respective positions. At the third stage, each team works independently again, verifying its own ideas and consolidating them. There can be as many stages as you wish, but my suggestion is at least three. After the final one, the students take part in a discussion based on the principles of democracy and together attach two ideas per question – ones that in their opinion best illustrate the instruction. Having familiarized the students with the rules, ask them to have a look at Exercises 3, 4 and 5.
7. Once the work has been done, the students present the results in the form of a mindmap², the main theme of which is 'erasures from the past'. When concluding, you can refer to the example of Nikolay Jezhov, head of the NKVD responsible for crimes and for murdering tens of thousands of Soviet citizens. It is also worth giving some other examples of erasures from history by communist propaganda, in particular of records relating to various crimes and nation resettlements.

² For online classes, applications and dedicated websites for mindmap creation like Blumind and FreeMind can be successfully used.

Encourage your students to make their own searches, reminding them that in the countries behind the Iron Curtain similar methods were used to those practised in the USSR: doomed soldiers; the displacement of the Crimean Tatars; 1956 Budapest events (see the spot about [Péter Mansfeld](#), the youngest victim of the Hungarian revolution on 1956) and the operations of the Államvédelmi Hatóság (Hungarian secret police); the infamous Sighet Prison in Romania; the examples of the arrest and execution of General Heliodor Píka and [Milada Horáková](#).

Conclusion

To conclude, present the case of the North-Korean Marshal Ri Yong-ho (Source F) to your students. Reflect together whether communist history manipulation by means of erasing people found inconvenient by the regime ended with the collapse of the USSR. Encourage your students to independently find examples of similar falsifications in the 21st century.

Homework

Prominent members of the communist regime can never feel safe in the presence of tyrants. Discuss the matter (in the form of a brief written piece/essay), quoting examples from the 21st century.

Keywords

photograph manipulation, history manipulation, history falsification, propaganda, Great Purge (Great Terror), NKV, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Iron Curtain, Photoshop, George Orwell