

## POST-PROCESSING ERRORS IN ADVERTISING PHOTOGRAPHY

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**ABSTRACT:** In order to be appealing and therefore increase the chances of the product to be sold, advertising photographs must be of a high quality from a compositional and technical perspective. For that level of quality to be reached, the raw photographs are most of the time retouched. As the post-processing technology evolved, the possibilities of photo editing became infinite. However, the more complex and advanced the post-processing operations are, the higher are the chances of making errors. This study aims to identify the most frequent post-processing errors in advertising photography, the reasons which lead to these errors, and the way in which they affect the advertising campaigns.

*Keywords:* advertising photography, digital post-processing, photo editing

### I. Post-processing in advertising photography. Overview and theoretical considerations

#### *Advertising photography*

Before the First World War, drawing was the main type of illustration used in advertising. Shortly after the war ended, photographs

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slowly started to replace the drawings, becoming more and more appreciated for their abilities to transmit "the joys and benefits of consumerism" (Johnston, 1997). While visualizing an advertisement, the image is the first element which captures attention. Depending on how attractive or intriguing the image looks to them, the consumers decide whether they will go through the rest of the advertisement or move on. The photograph "should help more than anything else could do in like space, else use that something else." (Hopkins, 2007), which is why it should be carefully prepared, starting with the subject choice, the props, and the setup, and ending with the selection and the post-processing.

As time passed, advertising photography became more and more cosmeticized, becoming a strong catalyst for imagining an ideal universe and for projecting wishes which, thus, started to seem achievable. "Advertising promises to fulfil the parts of the viewing individual that are still unfulfilled" (Bate, 2009), making it look like beauty is only one cream jar away, family lunches are happier when there is a Coca-Cola bottle around, and the differences between social classes vanish once the housewives start using the same cheap and efficient detergent. "Advertising is a domain of social fantasy that exists to provide for and exploit the gaps, the 'voids', in the social structure. Advertising promises to fulfil the parts of the viewing individual that are still unfulfilled." (Bate, 2009), which is why the advertisements are very persuasive into convincing one to purchase a product or a service. Obviously, a soda bottle is not expected to solve the family malfunctions, but many times the good feeling, the positive vibe, and the social fantasy Bate mentioned, transmitted by the advertisement, are enough to determine the purchase.

In *Scientific advertising* (2007), Claude Hopkins highlights the importance of transmitting a positive message through the advertisement. The main aim of the advertisement is to attract the

customer, to make them interested in the product, to make them wish to own it, in order to later purchase it. If it doesn't interest the client from the very beginning, it will most probably not do it afterwards, either. If the advertisement is illustrated, it becomes the task of the illustration to arouse interest. The practices of the advertising agencies and the standards of the industry led to the current situation, where a photograph must go through several post-processing operations before becoming part of an advertisement.

In *Killing us softly*, Jean Kilbourne analyses the image of women in advertising and presents countless gender stereotypes developed and encouraged through advertisements. "I've focused on advertising because I've always considered it to be a very powerful educational force.", Kilbourne states (*Killing us softly IV*, 2010), highlighting the fact that, considering the spreading of the ads, in various forms, which makes it impossible for the audience to ignore them, the message transmitted through advertisements becomes an even bigger issue. Another important fact to consider, she states, is that most of the images and messages are processed subconsciously: "Ads sell more than products. They sell values, they sell images, they sell concepts of love and sexuality, of success, and perhaps more important, of normalcy. To a great extent they tell us who we are and who we should be." (ibid.) The standards created, however, are not reflections of reality, according to Kilbourne, but there is a lot of effort put into creating them, and post-processing has an important role in this.

### *Post-processing the photographic image. Instruments and functions*

If photographic genres such as travel, street, or even fine art leave room for and sometimes even encourage small imperfections in the photographs, this does not apply for advertising photography,

where the images must be flawless and there is no room for overexposures, underexposures, improper cropping, unwanted items in the image, or subjects out of focus. When the raw photographs contain errors or this kind, retaking them is not an option; besides, the photographs should be of high quality from a compositional and technical perspective, they should have strong colours and sharpness, and they should be dynamic and appealing - and all of these improvements and corrections are to be done with photo editing software.

Therefore, post-processing is considered one of the decisive stages of the creative process, "because of its capacity to change both the vision and some aspects of the photographs" (Asaftei, 2010). Although photo editing is subject to constant debates, when it comes to advertising photography, its importance and necessity are, most of the times, obvious: "There is (...) another category of photographs, where the collateral interests throw a shadow of suspicion over any image - advertising. In this case, however, we meet them with precaution, knowing they were created and manipulated to present an idealized hypostasis of the product." (Hurn & Jay, 2012).

Digital photography post-processing is made with special programs, which can be either RAW editors (Adobe Lightroom, Aperture) or pixel by pixel / raster editors (Adobe Photoshop, Photoshop Elements, PaintShop Pro). Adobe Photoshop is a raster graphics editing software created in 1988 by Adobe Systems, and it has been the most used software of this kind at a global level ever since. Over twenty versions of Photoshop have been launched in the past twenty-seven years, each one bringing significant improvements to the previous ones.

With user-friendly interface and tools which allow various editing actions, Photoshop is designed for both amateurs and professionals, offering the possibility to apply basic adjustments (exposure, contrast,

tones, cropping, straightening etc.) and also to create more complex editing (adding / removing elements from a picture, creating collages, applying effects, dramatically changing the appearance of an object etc.).

“Digital is fundamentally different from analog because there is no original image. The RAW file is just data. To even see an image requires processing.” (Campbell in Alexander, 2014). There is a series of basic photo editing functions out of which many are tolerated when it comes to photography competitions and press photography, if used properly: cropping and straightening (used to eliminate unwanted items and to reframe the images), lighting adjustments (brightness, contrast, exposure), colour temperature / white balance adjustments. Aside from these, there are several more advanced and more intrusive functions, with a stronger effect on the final image: increasing or decreasing saturation, dramatically changing the colours and tints, adding or removing items from an image, blurring, applying various filters etc.

### *Post-processing errors. Case study: Photoshop Disasters*

Founded in 2006, *Photoshop Disasters* ([psdisasters.com](http://psdisasters.com)) was the first website focused entirely on presenting post-processing errors in commercial photography (advertising photography, fashion photography, press photography, product photography etc.). The so-called “Photoshop abuse” (About, n.d.) of the media is penalized by the editors, who analyse and criticise all the photographs of this kind identified by them and by their readers.

According to the statistics published by the representatives of [psdisasters.com](http://psdisasters.com) (ibid.), in 2014, the website had an average number of over one million monthly unique visitors. The *Photoshop Disasters* team members and also some of the contributors are themselves

photographers, editors, or graphic designers, therefore their experience with visual communication and visual products makes it easy for them to spot post-processing errors in photography.

The *Photoshop Disasters* team has frequently criticised, over the years, fashion giants such as Victoria's Secret, Gucci, Ralph Lauren, and also famous fashion magazines, such as *Elle* and *Vogue*, for their misuse of photo editors in some of their advertisements and pictorials. Several articles published on *psdisasters.com* were taken and reproduced by media institutions such as *The New York Times*, *AdWeek*, *BBC World News*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Daily Mail* etc. (ibid.).

The website has been shut down in September 2015, but it was put back in the spring of 2016, with a new layout, new structure, and new materials. Currently, the posts are divided into eleven categories: *NSFW*, *Questionable*, *Body part*, *Clone stamp*, *Disproportionate*, *Lorem Ipsum*, *Perspective*, *Reflection*, *Shadow*, *Watermark*, and *Other*. The archive from 2006 to 2015 has not been entirely preserved, therefore a great majority of the old posts is now inaccessible. The website used to publish annual hierarchies of the biggest Photoshop disasters, based on the reach and impact of the articles published throughout the year on *psdisasters.com*, until 2013, when they published the last *Top 10 Photoshop Disasters*.

Given the recent changes in the structure and content of the website and also the fact that no new hierarchies were published during the past three years, we have decided to analyse all the advertising photographs which are currently to be found on the website. Out of the 285 posts published by May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 73 featured advertising photographs - including posters (event, movie, theatre play) and advertising materials of any kind, retrieved from both print and online. There have not been taken into consideration magazine pictorials, CD and DVD covers, magazine covers, catalogue

photographs, and any other photographs which were not used for advertising purposes, but to illustrate products.

This paper is based on an older unpublished research on *Photoshop Disasters*, from 2013, when we have analysed the post-processing errors from the advertising photographs included in *Top 10 Photoshop Disasters 2010, 2011, and 2012*. The analysis grid used back then to determine the frequency of the different types of post-processing errors identified has now been adapted and reused for the same purpose (Appendix). We have now identified the following categories of errors: incompletely exposed bodies and objects (the bodies and objects are lacking significant parts), disproportionalities (some parts of the bodies are bigger than they should be, compared to the rest of the bodies), overlapping / combined layers errors (several images combined create an unrealistic or disproportional collage; e.g. objects in the foreground are partially covered by objects in the background), extra elements left in the image (unnecessary or unwanted items, usually parts of objects and bodies, remain entirely or partially in the final collage), reflections (the reflected image does not correspond to the reflected object), lights and shadows, colours (while creating the collage, some of the layers have not had the lights and shadows, respectively the colours, adjusted accordingly), and unrealistic positions (the changes of the body shapes and proportions have led to unrealistic and unnatural postures).

Most of the posts' titles do not reveal any information regarding the types of errors, but instead consist of short, sarcastic comments, more or less hint-offering, such as: *Did they even try?*; *Half man half boy*; *Santa's mutant hand*; *Great concept, badly executed*; *Nightmares are made of these*; *Beer commercial*; *It's all in the hips*; *Perfume, a lion, Kirsten Dunst, oh, my!* etc. Some titles, however, give stronger hints regarding the errors encountered: *Huge head*; *Hard to get the soda without feet*; *Photoshop*

*haircut; Long thumb; They didn't teach you this lighting setup in art school; Be yourself (except thinner); Replay ad long arm weird waist; Lose weight by chopping off legs; Whose body is it? etc. Things are slightly different when it comes to the captions of the images, which are mostly descriptive, with an emphasis on the errors: Crazy perspectives, bizarre shadows, and all-around creepy feelings abound in this Fancy Feast ad...; As can be seen, there's some crazy photoshopped sucking-in of the midriff going on here.; How did they make it look like he was wearing heels?; Is her arm webbed? What's up with her waist? And that awkwardly turned leg?; It would be awesome to find out why the head was changed for the Korean Basic Instinct 2 poster. Problem is they forgot the mirror in the back.; Parents watch out she might swallow your kids.; For anybody not familiar with a 'tark'. It is basically a small woman that makes everything look big! Imagine what you could make big all of a sudden...The possibilities are endless!. Other captions do not highlight the errors, nor offer hints on what might be wrong with the images, but instead are just sarcastic comments: Their commercials are hilarious...not sure if they did this one on purpose or just got lazy.; I've seen worse mistakes, but still worth posting here.; - Hi, we need your ad in 2 minutes. - Ok sh\*t, but I got an idea! I'll just merge a few pictures and put some yellow background and it's perfect...; This German movie Im Juli (In July) shows quite the impossible.; First picture: I'll accept that. Second picture: Try again. Third picture: No way!; Where do you want to fly today?.*

We could observe a great variety of products in the analysed advertisements: perfumes, clothing products, cosmetics and personal care products, electronic devices, drinks, movies, plays, medicines, services, food supplements etc. Human characters are present in most of the analysed materials (66 of 73), and their bodies are usually the areas of the advertisements where the post-processing errors occur, their anatomies being dramatically and unrealistically changed. The most frequently encountered errors were related to unrealistic positions

(48 of the 66 photographs of people), disproportionalities (46), and overlapping / combined layers (42). 40 of the images include layers with unadapted lights and shadows, 22 have unadapted colours, whereas 12 include reflection errors, and 5 include extra elements. The incomplete exposure of the bodies led to unrealistic – sometimes even grotesque – images, the fact that parts of the bodies are missing becoming very obvious. The lighting errors led to obtaining volumeless photographs that look artificial and present no credibility. The disproportionalities created strong asymmetries which also led to artificial-looking images, and so did the overlapping layers errors. Six of the analysed ads feature women whose bodies have been modified in order to make their waist, thighs or legs thinner – which leads back to Jean Kilbourne’s statements about the ideals of beauty created through ads. Luckily or not, in these analysed cases, the consumer can easily tell how the real bodies look like and can get an idea about how dramatical the changes of the human features are in the post-processing stage.

Basically, every type of post-processing error – or the combination of several errors, which can be found in most of the cases analysed – led to the occurrence of so-called *Photoshop disasters*, one way or another. There are, still, commentators who consider the errors either unexistent or subtle and harmless, sometimes pointing out that that certain images shouldn’t be considered Photoshop disasters. When talking about disproportionalities and unrealistic positions, however, nobody argues about the disastrous post-processing. It is often that users (visitors) leave comments describing the error, if the post itself doesn’t do it.

The general conclusion of this analysis is that the post-processing errors lead to a diminution of credibility, the images becoming flat, implausible, and unrealistic for whoever has a minimum of visual common sense. However, there is a question that remains: in which way do these errors affect the advertising campaign?

*Advertising photography in the perception of Romanian photographers*

We wanted to learn what photographers think about the importance of post-processing in advertising photography, about the causes which lead to post-processing errors, and about how these errors affect the campaigns. The brief interview consisting of these three questions was emailed to twenty-five Romanian photographers in May 2013. While choosing the respondents, we decided to stick to experienced photographers (who have, among others, done fashion, product, or wedding photography for clients), considering they have enough knowledge in the fields of visual communication and photography to provide us with pertinent opinions regarding our topic. They are specialised in various photographic genres and have different levels of expertise, most of them working with commercial photography: fashion, wedding, portrait, product etc. Another important aspect to consider is that they all use post-processing on a constant basis. Another aspect worth mentioning is that we decided not to choose photographers from advertising agencies, because we wanted to avoid the opinions based on revenues, turnovers, analysis, and evaluations of advertising campaigns and agencies.

Out of the twenty-five photographers, ten (40%) have answered our questions: Tudor Platon, Vlad Eftenie, Andreea Retinschi, Andrea Blaga, Călin Ilea, Monica Murgu, Alex Vâncu, Rareş Pulbere, Christina One, Oana Celine. Their answers helped us in pulling some conclusions regarding our concerns with advertising photography.

First of all, our respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of post-processing in advertising photography (Q1: *How important is post-processing in advertising photography?*). They have all agreed it is a highly important step in the creation of advertising photographs, and that it is vital to the advertising campaign. Some

have concluded that the advertising industry raised a standard in this regard, post-processing becoming then a mandatory phase in the creation process. Monica Murgu believes that it might be „as important as the photo session itself”, opinion shared by Tudor Platon, who referred to the „photographing phase” instead of „photo session”, while Andrea Blaga believes that it represents „more than 50% of the final value of a photograph”.

The respondents were also invited to express their opinions about the factors which lead to serious errors in advertising photography (Q2: *In your opinion, what are the reasons which lead to serious post-processing errors in advertising photography?*). The most common reasons the photographers have identified are the lack of experience of the post-processing team, time pressure, lack of attention, lack of interest, rush, lack of visual communication education, encouraging quantity instead of quality. Rareş Pulbere mentioned it is often that the client does not „fully understand the process behind a photograph”, which might lead to „budget cuts or uninspired choices”. Oana Celine states there are cases in which „the artist’s vision is fanciful, far from the real product”, which, combined with a poor expertise in post-processing, might lead to errors of which the editor is more or less aware. Vlad Eftenie believes that in cases like this, “the person who executes the post-processing does not care much about the context and the details, fails to see the full picture, [...] does not have a sense of a parallel reality.” While analysing the answers to this question, we could notice substantial differences in the approach of the respondents. They all acknowledge the gravity of the situation, but, while some think these are isolated cases, others mentioned they often spot post-processing errors in advertisements. For example, while Alex Văncu states that “the advertising campaigns are full of serious post-processing errors.”, Rareş Pulbere and Călin Ilea believe the number of errors is low and insignificant, and Andrea Blaga believes that these errors occur less often now, because “the people who are in charge with post-processing usually have an eye for detail”.

She added that, before going to print, the image has to be authorised by a team which "will definitely observe the inaccuracies, if they have a minimum visual culture or at least visual common sense".

Through the last question we wanted to hear the respondents' opinion regarding the effect of the post-processing errors on the advertising campaign (Q3: *In which way do you think these errors affect the advertising campaign?*). On the one hand, we had the photographers who did not think that these errors can bring severe damage to the campaigns, whereas on the other hand, we had the photographers who think that if these errors go unnoticed, they can discredit the whole campaign. "Any publicity is good publicity", stated Călin Ilea, while Rareș Pulbere went even further and stated that a badly post-processed image that becomes viral "could be a solution for a very smart guerrilla campaign". Monica Murgu believes that this kind of mistake "can become nothing more than subject to jokes, shows lack of professionalism, but does not affect the campaign too much". She added that the consumer's interest is in the products, not the advertisements. In contradiction to this idea, Oana Celine recalls situations of this kind when the errors were widely publicized, and the blame was assigned to "the clients, and not directly to the editors". While other four respondents believed that the post-processing errors reveal the lack of professionalism, Alex Vâncu stated that "the attention given to these errors is directly proportional to the respect that a company shows to itself and its customers". Tudor Platon is the only one who took into consideration the effect that the dissemination of such a post-processing error might have on the photographer or the editor: "if the errors are noticed by the public, they create a feeling of unprofessionalism, which is pretty bad for any photographer in this field".

## Conclusions

As mentioned in the previous sections of this paper, the standards imposed by the advertising industry have led to the situation where post-processing the advertising image became mandatory. The images are more and more cosmeticized, in order to induce the consumer a feeling that they need a certain product or service. "[...] make-up ads just can't accept the [...] true colours (or body parts)." (Photoshop Disasters, n.d.), so they dramatically change them in order to picture an ideal universe which, they suggest, could be reached through their products. Bate (2009) stated that "how far a photograph corresponds to pre-existing conceptions of reality is partly to do with how far it fits with pre-existing beliefs about 'reality'". If we consider this statement to be true, we should also consider the media-induced perspective on reality (where advertising has had a very important impact), which might or might not coincide with the actual reality.

We have seen a large variety of post-processing errors in advertisements, some more obvious than others. We have also seen how errors occur even when it comes to the advertisements of big companies, such as Coca-Cola, Samsung, Burberry, Prada, Bulgari, or H&M. In order to determine the reasons of the occurrence of these errors, we have asked Romanian photographers to share their opinions on this subject. Lack of expertise and attention, lack of time, and unrealistic visions were only some of the reasons enlisted by our respondents. Whereas these errors affect or not the advertising campaign, it is still subject of debate and it depends on several factors.

## APPENDIX

TOTAL	66	21	46	42	5	12	40	22	48
#73	Human characters	Incompletely exposed bodies & objects	Disproportionalities	Overlapping layers errors	Extra elements in the image	Reflections	Lights and shadows	Colours	Unrealistic positions
1	X		X		X				X
2	X	X							
3	X		X						X
4	X			X					
5	X		X	X					X
6	X		X						X
7	X		X						
8	X	X	X						X
9	X		X						X
10	X	X	X						X
11	X		X						X
12	X		X						X
13	X			X					X
14	X	X							
15	X		X	X			X	X	
16	X		X	X			X		X
17	X		X						X
18	X	X	X	X					X
19	X	X		X		X	X		
20	X		X	X			X		X
21	X					X	X		
22	X	X							
23	X	X	X	X			X		X
24	X			X			X	X	X
25	X	X	X	X					X
26	X		X	X			X		
27	X	X	X	X					X

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28	X		X						X
29	X			X	X			X	X
30	X		X	X	X		X		X
31	X	X							X
32	X	X	X				X		X
33	X		X	X			X		
34	X		X	X			X	X	X
35	X		X	X			X	X	X
36	X	X		X			X	X	X
37	X	X	X	X			X		X
38	X	X	X						X
39				X			X		
40	X		X	X		X	X	X	X
41	X	X	X				X		X
42	X		X	X			X	X	X
43				X			X	X	
44	X		X				X		X
45	X	X	X	X			X		X
46	X			X			X	X	
47	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
48	X		X	X			X		X
49	X		X	X			X	X	X
50	X		X						
51	X			X			X	X	X
52	X		X	X			X		X
53	X		X						X
54	X		X	X	X				X
55	X	X	X	X					X
56	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
57	X	X							
58	X		X	X			X	X	X
59	X			X		X	X	X	X
60						X			
61						X			
62	X		X	X			X	X	
63	X			X			X	X	X
64	X		X	X			X		

65	X						X		
66	X			X			X	X	
67	X			X			X	X	
68						X			
69	X		X	X		X	X	X	X
70						X			
71	X		X			X	X		X
72	X				X	X	X	X	X
73						X			

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