

## Photoshop and Photography: When Is It Real?

By DAVID POGUE

In the March issue of Popular Photography magazine, the editor's note, by Miriam Leuchter, is called "What Is a Photograph?"

You'd think that, after 73 years, a magazine called Popular Photography would have figured that out. (Ba-da-bump!)

Actually, though, the editorial is about the magazine's annual Reader's Photos Contest. This year, in two of the categories, the winners were what the magazine calls composites, and what I call Photoshop jobs.

One photo shows a motorcyclist being chased by a tornado; another shows a flock of seagulls wheeling around a lighthouse in amazingly photogenic formation. Neither scene ever actually existed as photographed.

Now, in my experience, photographers can be a vocal lot. And a lot of them weren't crazy about the idea of Photoshop jobs winning the contest.

I have to admit that when I saw the winners revealed in a previous issue, I was a bit taken aback, too. I mean, composition and timing are two key elements of a photographer's skill, right? If you don't have to worry about composition and timing, because you can always combine several photos or move things around later in Photoshop, then, well -- what is a photograph?

The thing is, though, this isn't necessarily an open-and-shut case. Ms. Leuchter's editorial points out that photography has never been strictly a "capture reality" art form. It's never been limited to reproducing what the eye sees.

From the very beginning, photographers have set up their shots, posed people and adjusted brightness and contrast in the development process. So although you may think that some line has been crossed, it might not be so easy to specify exactly where that line sits.

Here's a list of things people do to and for photographs, ranging from the innocent and traditional to the dangerously artificial. If you were running a photography contest, at what point would you draw the line and say "That's not photography anymore?"

- \* You move the camera to get the best possible shot.
- \* You attach a lens that takes in a much wider or closer view than you would get with your eyes alone.
- \* You choose a shallow depth of field, providing that sharp-subject, blurry-background look of professional photos, which looks nothing like reality.
- \* You set up lights to illuminate a scene in a way that nature never intended.
- \* You bring in a professional crew to transform a model's skin, clothing and hair.

\* You witness a spectacular event, and then ask the people involved to go back and re-enact what just happened so you can have your camera ready.

\* In the darkroom, you "burn" and "dodge" to make certain parts of the photo brighter or darker.

\* You bring the photo into Photoshop to remove red-eye. (After all, the red-eye wouldn't have existed if you hadn't taken the photo to begin with.)

\* You bring the photo into Photoshop to make the colors "pop" a little more.

\* You bring the photo into Photoshop to shift one element slightly for better composition.

\* You combine two or more photographs of the identical scene, taken at different exposures, strictly to produce a better range of lights and darks (what's called "high dynamic range" photography).

\* You combine two or more elements of different photos of the same scene, taken around the same time, simply to get them all in the frame at once (like the seagulls/lighthouse photo).

\* You combine two or more elements of different photos that were taken at different times and places (like the motorcycle/tornado photo).

**\* You use a 3-D modeling program to create a photorealistic scene that never existed anywhere but in your imagination.**

**Of course, your answer may be something like, "It depends on the purpose of the photo." If you're a news photographer, you (and your audience) would probably be O.K. with tweaks to the color and contrast, but that's it. On the other hand, if you're an advertising photographer, you and your audience would probably have no problem with anything on the list above.**

**The question here is, what should the rules be for a photo competition?**

**Ms. Leuchter suggests that next year, they'll have a separate category for Photoshop creations. I think that's a good idea.**

**But meanwhile, we live in an age where Photoshop jobs are commonplace, reality TV shows dominate the airwaves, and news bites are taken out of context and manipulated. Maybe, these days, the question isn't "What is a photograph?"; it's "What is reality?"**