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Picture Research

The Work of Intermediation from Pre-Photography to Post-Digitization

By: Nina Lager Vestberg

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PREFACE

In the late 1990s I started out as an intern in a small specialized picture library in London. All the photographs in our collection were shot on film and stored as duplicate transparencies in filing cabinets. Two land-line telephones rang at regular intervals as clients called to place searches, which were carried out by staff rifling through hanging files in cabinets, bending over lightboxes with loupes to examine transparencies, hand-writing paper delivery notes in triplicate carbon copies, and parceling up bundles of file sheets in special envelopes marked "Please do not bend." My working day was mainly spent on my feet, and would invariably end with a dash to the local post office to get the day's search results off to clients in time for next-day delivery. A few days a week I would spend a couple of hours in front of the single office computer, inputting what we would now call "metadata" about pictures newly submitted by photographers into the computer catalog. By early 2000 I had moved on to a full-time picture research position at a national UK newspaper, and now I was the one calling up picture librarians with a list of keywords and concepts to be illustrated, and waiting impatiently for parcels of potentially relevant pictures to arrive by post or courier bike.

Within a year or two, this procedure had been considerably speeded up and automated by the widespread adoption of email and searchable websites. And by the time I did my last freelance shift on a newspaper picture desk in 2007, I could not remember the last time I saw, much less handled, a sheet of transparencies in a stiff envelope. I would now spend my entire working day sitting in front of my designated computer—one of the six or seven that made up the physical manifestation of the picture desk in the newsroom—watching photographic images from all over the

world tumble into the image browser of my virtual desktop at an average rate of 6,000 per day. Most of my work entailed inputting search terms into this browser and various online image banks accessed through regular internet browsers, then digitally marking, saving, or downloading selected pictures for use, and “queuing” or uploading them onto the picture management system that was shared across the newsroom. Formerly essential tools such as loupe and lightbox were now sitting as rarely consulted relics alongside the huge, hooded screens on the image processing desk (“the scanners”), their functions having been virtualized as zooming and saving options in the picture management software. And along with many of the analog tasks and tools, a number of human operators (known to me as colleagues) were also being phased out of the picture-industrial workplace. The very profession of the picture researcher was at this point facing what business gurus like to call disruption: challenges to its core operational model from automated technology, on the one hand, and from differently skilled operatives of that technology, on the other.

Prompted by a sense that picture research as I knew it was fast disappearing and that it would be important to make some sort of record of the working practices before, under, and “after” digitization, I designed a small-scale oral history project of interviews with experienced picture researchers and editors, which the J. Paul Getty Foundation generously agreed to fund through a nonresidential postdoctoral fellowship in 2007–2008. This project was the seed from which the plant of the present book grew. In the considerable number of years that have gone by since then, many metaphorical gardeners have contributed to its development and fruition, and it will be my pleasure to acknowledge them over the next few pages.

My first and foremost thanks go to those who taught me most of what I know about research: Tag Gronberg and Patrizia Di Bello, who guided me through postgraduate study and doctoral research; Jason Shenai and Niall O’Leary, who introduced me to the delights of picture librarianship; Guy Lane, who was the nicest boss any new recruit to a London newspaper picture desk could have; and the picture desk team at *The Independent* between 2002 and 2007, whose collective struggles with recalcitrant computers and dodgy keywording directly inspired me to make a research object out of digitized research.

Insights into the past, present, and future of the picture business were generously shared, at different times and in different places, by Barry Cerasoli, Marie-Louise Collard, Rick Colls, Kevin Coombs, Delphine Desveaux, Luigi Di Dio, Nathalie Doury, Denis Fruit, Tom Gillmor, Adam Goff, Cédric Gressent, Julia Hanson, Jérôme Lacharmoise, Karen Leach, Judith Mason, Sarah McDonald, Harald Østgaard-Lund, Susi Paz, Albert Raymond, Violaine Sand, Guro Tangvald, and Caroline Theakstone. Library, archives, and museum staff who have been especially helpful in answering questions about digitization in addition to providing research materials include Tom Gillmor and Luci Gosling at Mary Evans Picture Library; Natalie Hayton and Katharine Short at DeMontfort University Special Collections; Arne Langleite and Tone Rasch at the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology; Nils Kristian Eikeland at the University Library Special Collections, Trondheim; and Grete Irene Solvold at the University Museum in Trondheim.

Over the years, the development of this book has benefited from two terms of research leave, one granted by the Faculty of Humanities under former dean Kathrine Skretting, and one by the Equality Officer at NTNU, as well as one year of research leave funded by the Research Council of Norway as part of the project “Digitization and Diversity” (NFR 247602, 2015–2020). I am grateful to the whole project team for the opportunity to think and talk through the concept and consequences of digitization in their company, and in particular to Anne Ogundipe, who as my PhD student probably taught me more than I taught her in the course of writing her dissertation. At NTNU, three successive heads of department—Anne Marit Myrstad, Jon Raundalen, and Tore Kirkholt—have shown support through understanding and flexibility.

I wish to thank Estelle Blaschke, Costanza Caraffa, Anna Dahlgren, Elizabeth Edwards, Eirik Frisvold Hanssen, Michelle Henning, Hanne Holm-Johnsen, Geraldine Johnson, Diana Kamin, Martha Langford, Martin Lister, Shannon Mattern, Gil Pasternak, Krzysztof Pijarski, Annabella Pollen, Jennifer Tucker, Doireann Wallace, Amanda Wasielewski, Liz Wells, and Kelley Wilder for showing their interest and support as the ideas in this book have developed, either through invitations to speak at seminars and conferences or by sharing their own ideas and research on related matters.

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Pierre Auboirn, Stina Barchan, Lucy Davis, Sherry Dobbin, Francesca Fenn, Andy Kenward, Allan Ross and Christopher Wobschall, Eleanor Fraser Stansbie, Sally Waterman, Johanna von der Waydbrink, Marta Weiss, and Kendall Smaling Wood were all friends, colleagues, and lifesavers in the UK during a dramatic year of ill health that nearly put paid to both me and my research career. I thank NHS heroes Dr. Vijay Hajela and Dr. Helen Lachmann, as well as the staff at University Hospital Lewisham, for giving me back a life worth living, and St. Olav’s University Hospital, Trondheim, for helping me go on living it.

“Of all the ways of acquiring books, writing them oneself is regarded as the most praiseworthy method,” wrote Walter Benjamin in his essay “Unpacking My Library.”¹ Without ever having read Benjamin, as far as I know, my father instilled this attitude in me from early age, and effectively fostered me as a writer from childhood. Sadly he did not live long enough to see anything I wrote published in book form. But Benjamin’s statement is also an occasion to note that, while this whole book has been written by me, I hardly did it by myself. The work of other writers and scholars has illuminated my path to writing it, and these are acknowledged in citations throughout the book. The emotional and professional support of a host of friends and colleagues have helped me stay on the path, and among these special recognition is due to Anna Dahlgren, Anne Karine Kleveland, Julia Leyda, Matilde Nardelli, and Margrethe C. Stang. Jane Jones, Kali Handelman, and the Elevate 2020 group helped me discover a new way of living with writing; the intermediary skills of Summer McDonald at Ideas on Fire helped me pinpoint the argument I was really making all along; and Laura Portwood-Stacer has been online agony aunt extraordinaire. Many thanks are also due to those who, with

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