

The Mirage Project:

An Experimental Qualitative Reception Study

Bruno Ingemann

Abstract

The Mirage Project focuses on how readers ascribe meaning to the pictures in the newspaper. The conventions of the newspaper as regards truthfulness, reliability and authenticity see the photograph as data, as information. But the photograph is more than that. Through the project sixteen informants' reception of four different pictures are analyzed in relation to the news articles to which they belong. Through the use of different visual variants for the same article the reader gets the possibility to be critical and to choose between different pictures.

The Mirage Project gathers this chaos of the readers' choices and arguments for their choices through a series of analyses. In the light of the new digital culture the reader makes a different frame of understanding than newspaper conventions normally offer. The readers are disobedient. They have other values and other demands on quality than expected.

This article is a presentation of a reception project where the experimental method is developed to extend the semiotic meaning potential and partly defines the readers' values and preferences.

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■ Article

The Mirage Project focuses on how readers ascribe meaning to the pictures in the newspaper. The conventions of the newspaper, as regards truthfulness, reliability and authenticity, see the photograph as data, as information. But the photograph is more than that. Through the project sixteen informants' reception of four different pictures are analyzed in relation to the news articles to which they belong. Through the use of different visual variants for the same article, the reader gets the possibility to be critical and to choose between different pictures. The Mirage Project gathers this chaos of the readers' choices and arguments for their choices through a series of analyses. In light of the new digital culture, the reader makes a different frame of understanding than newspaper conventions normally offer. The readers are disobedient. They have other values and other demands on quality than expected. This article is a presentation of a reception project where the experimental method is developed—which partly extends the semiotic meaning potential—partly defines the readers' values and preferences.

The Mirage Project is an experimental qualitative reception study with the focus on complexity and experience. It is experimental in the sense that the material used is constructed in four different versions concerning the pictures and the captions—there are a total of four different topics and articles. It is experimental in the sense that the informants are put into a position where they have to sort and rank the different versions of the selected article. It is a qualitative reception study where the bodily embedded selection process is extended by very open personal interviews concerning their likes and dislikes.

■ The right picture of unemployment

We can take a look at an example from the project. The content of the article is about unemployment. The informants were presented different versions of the article and I asked them to rank the four different versions. The question I posed to each one was: "Which one do you like best?" Very quickly the informants ranked the different versions—and then we started talking about what they saw in their pictures, what they were thinking about them and how they related personal experiences to the picture in its context.



A real loser. Photo: Time Harden.

ONE IN FIVE IS A LOSER

The long-term unemployed: Almost 100,000 Danes have been unemployed so long that they will never get a job. That is on average one in five of all adults between 18 and 60. The Social Commission calls them losers. They are lost to the labour market. But do they consider themselves "losers"?

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Long-term unemployment is bad economy. But it is also freedom to expand and engage. Photo: Tine Engblift.

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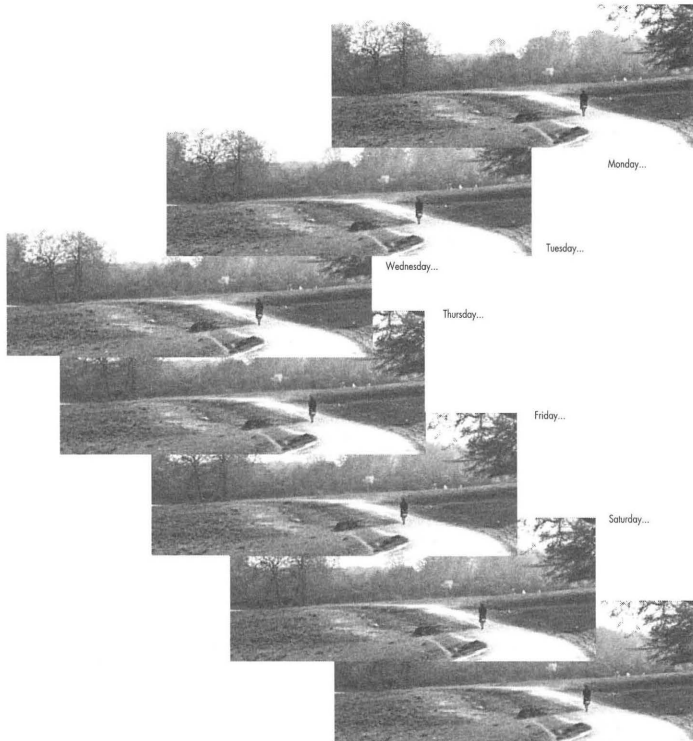
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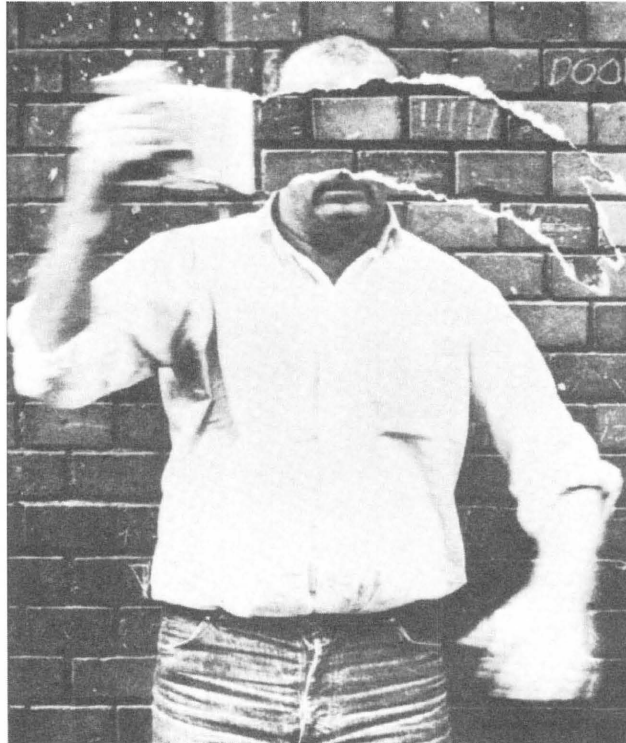
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"To lose one's job is also to lose one's identity. I am no longer a person but an anonymous 'loser'. Montage: Michael Sand.

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The lead to the article with the headline “One in five is a loser”—goes like this: “Long-term unemployment: Almost 100.000 Danes have been unemployed so long that they will never get a job. That is on average one in five of all adults between 18 and 60. The Social Commission calls them losers. They are lost to the labour market. But do they consider themselves ‘losers’?”

I will briefly describe the four pictures. In the first picture the man with the beer-belly is holding a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He is fat and seen from the side so his belly is most visible. You can’t identify him because the picture is cropped to eliminate his face. In the second picture the couple with the accordion are sitting in their allotment garden in front of their house. They are lightly dressed and the woman sits at her sewing machine. She is lovingly holding her hand on the man’s head.

In the third picture we see one picture repeated. The picture shows a lonely person walking in a deserted landscape on a path. The picture is repeated seven times and the caption goes “Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday,” etc. In the fourth picture we can see a man against a wall his face torn/away—in a way he is destroying himself.

■ Inge—The Beer-belly and The Accordion

I will focus on one of the informants. Inge is thirty-nine years old and divorced, living with two boys. She is a municipal employee and works with institutions for the mentally handicapped. In her daily life she is confronted with many depressing and tiresome problems so she attaches importance to the positive aspects in life.

She chooses the picture with the happy couple and the accordion, because she finds that she gets in a good mood by looking at them. They have a common feeling and it seems like they are a good team. But in her negotiation with herself she quickly comes to a dilemma. In the context of the article she thinks that the picture is too positive. She starts creating a conflict between “myself” and the “other.”

She says that when the “other” writes about unemployment, quite different pictures are used. The picture the other uses is more like the man with the Beer-belly. Inge says that this picture is really a typical picture and then she starts talking about the men she sees drinking every day at the supermarket. She is aware that in her thinking she is creating a narrow understanding of the unemployed. She thinks that one normally is more negative to people that are unemployed. But then she changes her attitude. In her own life she knows people that are unemployed but have a lot of energy; they are positive and some have succeeded in getting a job. She is fighting against the mediated image of the unemployed. She is close to accepting the picture of the man with the beer-belly—because it is in this way she normally finds the unemployed portrayed. But she ends up with the happy couple with the accordion, because it reflects people she knows. She understands her personal situation reflected in the good close teamwork she finds in the picture.

■ Ole—The Torn-away Face

If you think that the mediated and repeated picture of the unemployed is the right picture—and that a person like Inge is rather strange—there would be no problem. But it is more problematic. Ole is forty-one years old. He is well educated and knows a lot about unemployment. His choice is the manipulated photo of the man with the torn-away face. At first the picture itself fascinates him. He says that it is a good picture because it catches his eye and he sees the head of the man that is not there, but is transformed into a poster that is torn-away. He finds that the picture has some depth—while it does not clearly tell the story that if you are unemployed you have no identity—it makes him think.

He talks about the fact that when people meet we ask them what they do for a job, because in this culture the importance of work is greater than making money. It is more about having identity through a job, or losing identity, if one does not have work. He thinks the picture opens up this cultural norm for us to consider. Back to the problematic attitude of Ole. He is tired of hearing about the misery of being unemployed because he has heard that hundreds of times before. Now comes the problem: if the standard picture of the man with the Beer-belly were accompanying the article—he would not read it! The repetition and addition of mediated photos has worked so well that Ole would reject the article because of the picture. The picture would be invisible to Ole—and so would the article.

■ The mediated image—and “reality”

The informants act more on the mediated image—than on reality. Whether a picture covers the content of the article or the theme—is not a question of realism or the picture being authentic. Some informants have the feeling that they have to accept the mediated image—and moreover that their own experience makes the foundation for their choice. Reality is not only a depiction of the external world—but a construction in the head of the readers. The contexts the readers have consist of their experiences, a knowledge of media and a concrete knowledge about the topic. The readers’ context influences the reading strategies and values that the readers allocate to the picture in the context of the article. The reader invents and constructs different reading strategies. In the following, I will reveal how the interviews with the informants can be seen from the theoretical perspective of the reading process.

Developing a picture theory in relation to the readers from an ordinary semiotic point of view, the pictures in a newspaper are seen as signs and the whole idea of analyzing the pictures is to reveal the meaning potential of the picture. One can be more rude and say that the analysis is used to reveal the structure of signs. The semiotic analysis rules out the reader.

When a reader passes her eyes over an article and a photo in a newspaper, she first looks at the people, their eyes and their relationship to each other as expressed in their body language—from this she makes references to reality. I call this process “seeing-as.” Secondly she looks at the photograph as a photograph. This process I call “seeing-in.” She is maybe not aware of it, but she will compare this specific photo with other pictures she has seen in newspapers, magazines, photo albums and television. And she can see the color, texture, lines, tones and composition as the color, texture, lines, tones, composition. Thirdly the reader looks at the photograph and is fascinated by the way the photo looks back at her. The photo reveals emotions and feelings from her own life. This process I call “seeing-on.” This is what fascinates her and makes her interested in the picture and maybe motivates her to read the article accompanying the picture. The reader looks at the picture—and the picture looks back at the reader. It is in this double movement that the picture is ascribed quality. The quality of the picture relies not only on the aesthetic expression and composition. The quality of the picture is not only whether it covers the content of the article well. The quality of the picture arises when the reader can transfer knowledge, experience and memories to the picture.

The reader comes to the newspaper in order to get some information about the state of the world. One can say that the reader has different goals she wants to achieve. In short it can be seen as a transaction between:

- 1** aesthetic quality
- 2** attention
- 3** evaluation

The first relation between reader and object is the aesthetic quality. John Dewey describes the difference between perception and recognition as fundamental. Recognition can be seen as a relapse to previous schemes of interpretation or stereotypes when confronted with an object. Perception involves an active reception of the object so that its qualities can modify previously created habits or schemes. “Perception, on the other hand, occurs when we experience a thing and realize its own inherent character. The point is that the object imposes certain qualities on the viewer that creates new insights, which is what makes any experience aesthetic in Dewey’s perspective.”(Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981:44). Perception is essential in aesthetic experience and leads to psychological growth and learning. In the following I will call that the extension experience.

Dewey means that recognition is stopped perception—before it has had the opportunity to develop freely. (1934/1958:52–54). One can see that Inge, in the first example, used recognition in her negotiation with the picture of the Beer-belly Man and she recognizes the picture at a stereotypical level as the normal way to portray the unemployed. When she looked at the picture with the happy couple with the accordion, she was open to adjust and change her scheme; the picture involved an active extension.

Attention is the second transaction between reader and object and focuses on how psychological energy is channelled. (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981:184). In this project the informants rank the four versions in relation to each other and this process can be seen as an expression of how attention and psychological energy is channelled into the picture. At one point the picture can be seen as so boring and well known that it is rejected. Or it can be seen as so threatening that the reader can't stand looking at the picture. It is in between the extremes that the psychological energy can be constructed as a flow of integrated attention in order to guide the reader to realize her goals.

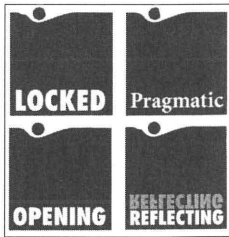
Evaluation is the third transaction between reader and object—this can be seen as the goal for the reader. Reading a photo or a newspaper article can be a goal in itself, because it serves as entertainment and pastime. Secondly, the goal of the transaction can be to reflect one's self and relate to a vision of the good life. Thirdly, the goal can be to feel enlightened as an ordinary citizen about personal and social problems.

The three dimensions in the experience of the reader are not precise enough to catch the complexity of the response from the informants. Through a grounded theory approach, the project has developed the theory of The Four Gazes. A theory of reading strategies and the values associated with them are important to the reader. This theory needs to include the aesthetic and referential in relation to topic, expression and content. It needs to include personally relevant and previous knowledge; it needs to capture the fact that the concrete readers' values are not constant but are fluctuating all the time and through the reading act there is a shift between different reading strategies. The theoretical frame gathers the aesthetic, the referential, knowledge and emotional elements in four gazes. The first is The Locked Gaze; the second is The Opening Gaze; the third is The Pragmatic Gaze; and the fourth is The Reflecting Gaze.

The Locked Gaze focuses on the photograph as a categorical picture that is a stereotype and primarily confirms the schemes the reader already has. It is through recognition that we confirm what we already know. Like Inge, when she looks at the picture with the Beer-belly man and finds that is how unemployment normally is portrayed.

The Opening Gaze focuses on the photograph itself with its inherent qualities that can function as an extension of the readers' own experiences. This is an aesthetic gaze that focuses on extension, surprise and new meanings. The aesthetic and emotional qualities mean something in themselves. When Ole chooses the picture of the Torn-Away Face, he is aware of the picture in itself as surprising and aesthetically new to him.

The Pragmatic Gaze focuses on what the reader can learn from the newspaper and how the information can be used in his or her personal life. The picture and the topic need to touch the reader's daily life. Like when Inge is discussing the represented picture in relation to her own personal knowledge of her friend's unemployment.



The four gazes

The Reflecting Gaze uses the picture as a mirror—not of reality—but of itself. It is through this reflection of other people's happiness and misery that the readers can get a clear understanding of their own identity and values. When Inge talks about the picture of the happy couple with the Accordion, she also focuses on their personal relations expressed in the situation, but mostly on the loving hand on the man's head. They are a good team.

The four gazes are used in a dialogical process. In the process, Inge fluctuates between "herself" and the "other". Between recognition and extension. Between the positive and the negative. But she maintains the picture of the happy couple and the accordion as her first priority. Inge changes her reading strategy in this negotiation. She uses The Opening Gaze where the content and aesthetic quality of the picture creates an experience of something very positive. She shifts to The Reflecting Gaze where she reflects on her wish for fellowship, happiness and teamwork. She shifts to The Pragmatic Gaze and finds her own relations to people she knows that are unemployed and have zest for life and are positive. But it is also here she finds the social goal to be informed about daily problems. This leads her to The Locked Gaze where she confronts the "others" picture of how the unemployed are normally presented and she must reject the picture of the happy couple and the accordion. She turns to the man with the Beer-belly. This is the typical picture.

It is an important point that it is not the concrete photograph that can be said to contain certain reading strategies. It is the individual reader who can use different reading strategies on the concrete picture. Even the most conventional picture can contain elements that for one reader invite the use of many different reading strategies. Even the most conventional picture can for some readers be seen with *The Opening Gaze*. It is another important point that the reader shifts between different reading strategies in relation to the concrete picture. In this process the picture changes meaning. A picture is more than it shows.

■ Description of the project

The material for the experimental reception project consists of four newspaper articles. The topics of the articles are: High-tension power lines in relation to cancer and children; Long-term unemployment; Plastic bags in relation to pollution; Global Warming. The four topics are selected in order to make it possible for the readers to relate to them personally and emotionally (cancer and unemployment) or more emotionally distant topics (pollution and climate) with elements of speculation (climate) or direct relation to action (pollution).

Each article was constructed with four different pictures. The informant was visited in her/his home and was given one article with a set of pictures at a time and was asked the question: Which picture do you like the best? This very open question made the informant think and construct the values and criteria for evaluating the pictures in the context of the concrete article. Within a very short time (about half a minute) the informant had ranked the different versions from one to four. Then they were interviewed about their choices, their criteria for their selections and how they personally connected to the pictures. The whole interview situation was very informal. In order to take away the possible feeling of being examined, the informants were told that there was no correct answer. The procedure was repeated with the following three articles and then the informant was asked to rank the four topics in relation to each other.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed. In the process of analysis, four main foci appeared: One focus contrasts three different people's readings in which they rank pictures that were very aggressive and digitally manipulated. These were seen in relation to one person's readings where he ranked the more conventional pictures. One of my hypotheses was that the more conventional and realistic pictures would be chosen by older people (40–50 years old) and that the more constructed and aesthetically surprising pictures would be preferred by younger people (20–30 years old). But to my surprise this wasn't that clear cut.

Another focus contrasts one person's reading and ranking of the more realistic pictures on emotional topics like High-tension lines and Unemployment; and the more speculative and action-oriented topics like Plastic bags and Global warming in which the more constructed pictures were selected. But it turned out to be more complex. Even the realistic pictures were seen by the readers as constructed reality and they function as a nearly empty frame for the readers' personal involvement with knowledge and emotive resonance. The readers do not use the picture as a proof, but as a mirror for themselves. This mirror is colored by their social and personal connotations, colored by the context and the transaction between picture, article and reader. When the topic and the picture are seen as threatening, the readers look through the threat and into the positive and happy elements in the picture and create a soft spot that makes it possible for the readers to stand the threat.

The third focus contrasts the mediated picture of unemployment to all sixteen informants' choice. The analysis shows the influence of the readers' personal knowledge and attitude and their ability to accept pictures and information that challenge their own situation and life.

The fourth focus is on the relation between what the informants see as important topics for themselves and how that reflects their choice of pictures. All the topics can be seen as communication research. As Giddens points out, the readers' ignorance gives foundation for doubt or watchfulness (1990). "Is it really truth? Is it a real story? It is very dubious!" But this doubt is neutralized through the readers' belief in what they want to be truth.

■ The findings of the project

In the Mirage project the empirical material of the ranked pictures and topics and the interviews with the informants have a high degree of complexity.

Through the theory of The Four Gazes this complexity is maintained. This can easily lead to seeing the informants' reading strategies as only individual readings. But it is possible to find a pattern in their readings.

Some readers have a habitus that is very narrow and can be seen as a rather closed system of solid schemes. What characterizes these readers is that they shift between the different reading strategies in this way:

- 1 The Locked Gaze
- 2 The Pragmatic Gaze

The locked gaze is exactly a search for recognition. It is a search for clichés and stereotypes. This does not mean that the reader cannot be critical towards the stereotype; criticism often happens by involving The Pragmatic Gaze and a focus on the personal self.

Other readers have a habitus that allows them to have many contradictions and challenges. What characterizes these readers is that they shift between the different reading strategies in this way:

- 1 The Opening Gaze
- 2 The Pragmatic Gaze
- 3 The Reflecting Gaze

The opening gaze searches for extension. It is a search for the aesthetically and substantially surprising and new. The pragmatic gaze is very elaborated in relation to personal use, the social self with focus on the community meaning and with a goal to be broadly enlightened. The reflecting gaze is used to reflect oneself in the “other” that is strange and surprising.

This sums up the patterns that reflect the readers’ strategies. But it must not be seen as one gaze necessarily coming before another. It is not that simple. The informants do not explicitly formulate reading strategies. They are a token of how I interpret their processing of picture meaning in their specific context. Therefore it is difficult to say anything precise concerning a succession in the use of the gazes.

In the analysis I have focused on the striking aspects or the punctum of the picture. When Barthes uses the term punctum it is an expression of what hurts him (Barthes, 1981). But through the analysis of the interviews I revealed opposition to the punctum. One can call it the soft spot in the picture or maybe the sensitive area of the picture.

In a picture concerning the relation between High-voltage lines and cancer on children, one picture showed a sandbox with a lot of playing children. One half of the picture showed the huge pylons with the high-voltage line. Many of the informants ascribe to this picture happiness, the look of the playing children and their expression of cheerfulness. Through this focusing on happiness they are able to look away or fail to see the threatening pylons. Of course they see them—but the sensitive area in the picture, the children, they transform into something that is so strong for them that the threat nearly disappears.

The sensitive area is also present in the picture of the man with the Beer-belly. He is not only seen as a loser, but the picture is transformed to a description of a real Dane. With this focus, the picture changes to more than just a picture of a loser. It becomes a loving picture that through its stereotypical depiction is well known—and the sensitive area opens the picture to another reading beyond the literal one. The sensitive area can be something in the motif, it can be part of the aesthetic of the picture—and it is a result of resonance with the reader.

The project shows that the readers are fully aware that they live in a digital culture. It is clearly expressed in the authenticity and trustworthiness of press photography in context. But it is a complex attitude the informants have. For some readers the authenticity is connected to the meaning that a photograph must never be altered digitally or physically. For more readers, the authenticity of the photograph requires that the persons and situations are depicted in such a way that the actors can recognize their own understanding of situations or persons. One can say that the ordinary focus on production circumstances makes the discussion of altering photographs important (Ritchin, 1990). But more readers focus in a sophisticated way on the use of the picture and the relation between reader and picture. By focusing on the use of pictures, the attention is displaced from the single picture to the use of all pictures in a digital culture.

■ The experimental reception project and experience

Reception projects normally take their point of departure in what can be called a naturalistic approach. They focus on ordinary media products like soaps or TV news and people are asked to reveal their readings and understanding of the programs (Jensen and Janowski, 1991) In this project an experimental element is the point of departure. Umberto Eco writes that it is a paradox that the only way one can achieve the real is to represent the absolute fake (1986). In this project the intention is to say something about the real reception by making a detour. This detour is through the experimental design.

The real is here the concrete newspaper article. The real is here in that the article refers to a concrete event or concrete information. But this authenticity is broken when the concrete article is supplied with four different pictures and through this false situation the foundation is created for the reader to construct the real. The Swedish researcher Olle Findahl writes that reflection and critical distance of the reader is unusual. The public is bombarded all the time with new information with the result that the individual hardly can reflect in depth. Most of the information must be taken as it is (Findahl, 1995:33). The experimental challenge is a challenge to the reader. Through this design the reader is prevented from doing what (s)he ordinarily does. The reader is provoked to value the four pictures in relation to each other to reach for a rejection of some possibilities and to accept one version.

The individual reader interprets and creates meaning from his or her model of the world. To what extent does one want to be confirmed in the conceptions one already has? To what extent does one want to get an extension of the conceptions about the world and oneself? To what extent does one experience the new information as threatening to one's identity? The project questions the way of thinking in communication about specific audiences and especially ordinary thinking in social and lifestyle orientations. In the mess of daily life and personal attitudes the project reveals the importance of what I have called the complexity of the schizophrenic and paranoid as extreme poles in the development and choice of reading strategies.

■ Perspective

The Mirage Project is interesting in several ways. It can first of all be seen as a methodological development of ordinary reception studies and it can be seen in relation to other experimental projects with different epistemological interests (Philo, 1990; Kitzinger, 1993; MacGregor and Morrison, 1995). The founding idea is to insert one or more layers before the qualitative interview. These layers can have the form of different versions as in The Mirage Project, but the main idea is to insert a bodily founded reaction that makes it possible to get into a level of experience not based in language. In reception studies, "Language in fact comes to equal both the tool and the object of research" (MacGregor and Morrison, 1995:143), but through an experimental approach it is possible to get closer to the experience of the informant.

Secondly, the discussion on how a picture theory can be developed, considers more than the picture itself and involves the ordinary readers' reading strategies in order to gather the complexity of the experience. In the project I have discussed the foundation of a theory, especially in the context of press photography, began by focusing on different questions generated by the project. The theory of The Four Gazes has shown a potential in grasping the complex creation of meaning in news photographs in their context. The theory of reading strategies can be transformed and used in similar projects.

Thirdly, the Mirage Project has revealed another way of looking at the use of photographs in the newspaper. Readers have a more sophisticated view regarding authenticity and trustworthiness, and by the minimized attention to conventional use of raw news photographs, the project has shown a more open attitude to a differentiated use of photographs with emphasis on a close relation to the context. A reception project with sixteen people can not be generalized, but the findings can serve as an inspiration for newspapers to experiment with new ways of using photographs.

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