Fiddling While New Orleans Flooded: The Production, Dissemination and Reception of “‘Dubya’ Serenading the ‘Madonna of the Superdome.’”

By Kris Belden-Adams

Monday, August 29, 2005, the city of New Orleans’s most vital levee had broken, saturating the poorest parts of the city with toxic floodwaters in the wake of the category-four Hurricane Katrina. About 30,000 residents without a means to flee the city huddled into the Superdome, which claimed to have a 36-hour food supply. For two days, Louisiana officials and the state’s National Guard had been placing urgent calls for help to the Pentagon, to F.E.M.A., and to the office of President George W. Bush.¹

New Orleans was in peril. But nobody, it seemed, was listening.

As the first rush of toxic water washed out homes, President George “Dubya” Bush shared a piece of birthday cake (and a photo-op) with Senator John McCain. That night, Donald Rumsfeld went to a San Diego Padres baseball game. And Condoleezza Rice attended the Broadway show “Spamalot” during her New York City vacation.

By the next morning, law, order and peace had dissolved into a frenzy of looting, rape and murder on what remained of the streets of New Orleans. The city was out of control. Many policemen had fled. However, that same afternoon, Pentagon spokesman Lawrence Di Rita reported that Louisiana already had enough National Guard units to handle what had become a state of anarchy.

Meanwhile, President Bush – 2,000 miles away in California – had a guitar jam-session with country singer Mark Wills. He then flew to his Texas ranch for a little “R&R.”²

But that night, a two-year-old girl slept in a pool of urine in the Superdome. Crack vials littered the restrooms. Teenagers nursed their bleeding hands after smashing vending machines to get food to eat. At least two people, including a child, had been raped. At least three evacuees had died, including one man who jumped 50 feet to his death, saying that he had lost everything, and now had no reason to live.³

How could any city in America lapse into such complete lawlessness and despair?
Fig. 1 – The Washington Examiner, Page A1, Sept. 2, 2005.

Moreover, where was the leader of our country?
Billions of viewers watched television newscasts, waiting helplessly for someone to come to the aid of the Superdome’s captives – whose chilling screams of “Help us!” aroused Americans’ sympathies. Reporters sobbed as they described the sight and stench of bloated corpses, and the soft, eerie sound of whimpering, abandoned pets trapped inside of flooded homes. Americans in the Superdome, trapped on the rooftops of water-filled buildings – and sitting before television sets in the rest of the country – waited. And waited. A steady flow of urgent pleas were sent from New Orleans. But Bush remained aloof.4

An October poll conducted by C.B.S. News showed that George W. Bush’s approval rating had dropped to 37 percent.5 Only Richard Nixon was more disliked by the American public, and that was following his impeachment.6 George Bush already had been plagued by allegations that he knowingly engaged America’s sons and daughters in a war in Iraq under false pretenses.7 But the president’s failure to respond in a timely, attentive and sympathetic manner to the devastating floods of Hurricane Katrina opened Bush up to brand-new charges that the president could not be entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of the American people. The majority of evacuees were African-Americans who already were impoverished. The president immediately was labeled a racist by high-profile blacks such as Jesse Jackson and filmmaker Spike Lee.8 “Dubya’s” policy of giving high-level jobs as favors to unqualified pals (such as Mike Brown, then the leader of F.E.M.A.) and of providing tax breaks to the richest Americans cast him as an enemy to the poor, and to people who got jobs the old-fashioned way (by earning them). Things looked bad for President George Bush. An entire city needed him, and he – like Nero, fiddled as the people under his care begged for his help (Fig. 2).
Fig. 2 –President George W. Bush strums a guitar (adorned with the United States Presidential seal) during an appearance at Coronado Naval Base in California on Aug. 30, 2005. He was presented the guitar by country singer Mark Wills (right). (Photograph by Martha Raddatz, The Associated Press)

In the months following Hurricane Katrina, media reports gradually tapered off. But the American public did not so quickly forget the tragedy. Many Americans wanted to do their part to help the victims, and to channel their feelings of helplessness into action. Often, this desire was driven by selfishness. But it also was prompted by the guilt of being unaffected, or by the need for reassurance that such a horror would not be permitted to ever happen to them. Others wanted George Bush to be held accountable for his slow response, and for what they felt was his lack of compassion for those afflicted by the flood. So they turned to the one way that they knew they could reach a wide audience very easily, quickly, cheaply and effectively: the internet.

A surge of new web sites emerged. At the time this paper was written, 16,400,000 web pages were dedicated to gathering donations to help the hurricane’s victims, and to help rebuild New Orleans. A stunning 1,440,000 sites were dedicated to promoting the impeachment of President Bush. Twice that many web pages featured “Dubya” jokes
and digitally altered photographs poking fun at the president, his policies and his staffers.\(^{11}\) (In just the last month, the number of sites featuring altered photographs grew more than \textit{ten-fold}.\(^{12}\)) Photographs from these web sites typically are produced anonymously, and they available for viewing (and copying) on the site. They have given rise to a new form of political cartoon. Images typically are shared by viewers as attachments to e-mail messages. Often, these images are so seamlessly crafted that it is difficult or impossible to discern whether the image is an un-tampered news photograph, or a Photoshop montage. E-mail attachments typically are circulated with no information about their authors, origins or the process by which they were made. They rarely confess to their artifice – if indeed they are false. In this paper, I will trace the production, dissemination and reception of one digitally altered photograph depicting the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina at the Superdome.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Fig3.jpg}
\caption{“CAY7UZ7L.jpg,” Source and Date Unknown.}
\end{figure}

On Saturday, Sept. 10, 2005, I was among 27 people who received an e-mail from a Graduate Center colleague Sharon Suchma. Attached to her e-mail was an uncaptioned photograph (\textbf{Fig. 3}) with the cryptic file name “CAY7UZ7L”. The only text
accompanying the image was Sharon’s message: “I know...terrible...but I just couldn’t help it.”

The image depicts President George “Dubya” Bush, dressed in a navy blue suit and light-blue tie, strumming a tan-colored guitar with the presidential seal on it. He smiles as he tries to entertain a sobbing black woman who dabs at her eyes with a white towel. She holds a nearly naked, concerned-looking baby in her other arm. We do not see the baby’s father in the scene. His absence suggests that the mother and child were left to fend for themselves in the hellish Superdome. The abandoned mother-and-child image has been a mainstay of the practice of documentary photography for more than a century (Figs. 4-5).

The lone mother represents a sympathetic nurturer figure whose primary desire, above all else, is to selflessly protect her offspring. “Madonna” figures – as they were depicted in early 20th-Century documentary photography – are very composed, graceful and they are willing to die, if necessary, in order to save their brood. For instance, the “Madonnas” photographed by Lewis Hine and Dorothea Lange face a future of poverty and struggle.
Their trial is one of fortitude, and of the strength of human spirit. These women do not emotionally crumble, or feel sorry for themselves, because their kids need them to be strong. These two iconic women have become symbols of human perseverance in the face of adversity. However, the “Madonna of the Superdome” (Figs. 1, 3) is a woman pushed past her limits. She is a “Madonna” of a post-9/11 world, one who just spent two nights contained in a nightmarish cesspool of rapes, murders and other acts of unrestrained violence. We can only imagine the atrocities this woman has experienced. We know that it must have been unthinkable, because she cannot contain the tormenting thought of what she has witnessed, even for the sake of being strong for her child – (which is, after all, what mothers do, first and foremost).

The “Madonna of the Superdome” stands in a parking lot filled with litter and clusters of other destitute evacuees who have no place to live, and likely – no earthly possessions beyond the shirts on their backs. Most of them are also African-Americans, except for one figure, our president. The diagonal lines of the stadium and the pavement markings are offset by the angle of “Dubya’s” guitar. Our eyes are drawn at first to the crying mother, who wears bright yellow. And then, we glance to the left toward President George Bush. He is oblivious to the sadness and horror of the situation. Our president offers her no food, no diapers, no baby formula, and no helicopter ride to his ranch in Crawford for some “R&R.” Instead, he laughs, strums, and enjoys himself while the abandoned mother cries.

The photograph was not accompanied by the name of a photographer, news agency, or even – the name of the crying woman. A lack of contextualizing information is not unusual for e-mail attachments, which circulate with the casual, often ephemeral, air of chain letters. These private e-mailed notes are exempt (so far) from the reach of copyright laws, which has made e-mail a popular forum for circulating photographs like this one. Such anonymous transmission of images prompts us to wonder if the internet is a realm where authorship is irrelevant, where Roland Barthes’ suggested “death of the author” is a foregone conclusion, and where infinite electronic copies if images can be disseminated freely and without accountability, and without a single, material point of origin. Internet-distributed photographs are translated into digital bits of data (assuming they did not already begin their lives as “data” – as the products of a digital camera).
digitally altered image is typically shared in copy form (or as the copy of a copy of a

17 Tracking down an “original” digital file proved to be an impossible task, and one which
exemplified Walter Benjamin’s suggestion (written more than 50 years before the
internet even existed) that one of capitalism’s “basic conditions” would include a shift
from production to reproduction. 18 Benjamin foresaw that technology would transform
the way we relate to images, and that it would allow that even reproductions could be re-
reproduced endlessly. (Let us not also forget that internet-distributed, digitally altered
images are made from images which themselves might exist in a potentially endless series
of copies, too.)

The photograph had been forwarded by at least four generations of recipients
before it reached me. By my count, this image had been seen by 90 other people. I passed
it along to about a dozen more. If every one of those 90 people did the same, this version
of the image would have had a circulation of more than 1,000 viewers, probably in less
than three hours. (And that does not even take into consideration that those recipients
might pass it on, and the next generation of recipients might do the same, and so on. And
it does not take into account the circulation of the image before it reached me.) The
circulation path of an e-mailed image is circuitous, haphazard and potentially endless. It
is limited only by the recipient’s attention span upon reception, his or her receptiveness to
the photograph’s political message, on a recipient’s willingness to pass it along, and the
image’s ability to hold the attention of its busy audience. This is the nature of internet
image circulation. It is intermittent and unpredictable.

Quickly abandoning the search to track a definitive “original” photograph as a
futile effort, I began to research the possible source of the image. A month of researching
this photograph netted only one hint toward finding the maker. The image originated as a
digitally altered photograph posted on a website gallery featuring an array of manipulated
images. In other words, it entered the public realm to be appreciated for its technical
prowess. I could only guess that it presumably was copied, circulated by e-mail, and
finally became assimilated into political web pages. (In just one month, the number of
political web sites carrying this image jumped from 2 to 72.) 19 According to Xeni Jardin,
who posted an unconfirmable note on the discussion board Boingboing.net, this image

Belden-Adams: Fiddling While New Orleans Flooded... 299
may first have been created by “a fairly well known Photoshopper named ‘Farker Guy Incognito,’ now known as ‘Chasie’ on Somethingawful[.com] and elsewhere.” Jardin noted that the artist was said to have first uploaded this image to the site Mechapixel.com, a Photoshop contest forum which promotes the open exchange of digitally altered photographs and allows authors to work under false names (to protect their anonymity). As of October 23, 2005, the image was not available on Mechapixel.com, and attempts to track down the author by either of his aliases were unsuccessful. Because admitting authorship of digitally altered images such as this one can open the creator up to privacy risks and floods of unfavorable feedback from people who might disagree with their political message, the makers of photographs such as these use changeable nicknames (much as graffiti artists do), and they develop an underground audience – and even “fans.”

Authorship of internet-distributed digitally altered photographs is not “dead.” It is merely well-disguised.

Covert authorship raises questions about the factual authenticity of the photograph. This e-mailed photograph has the tone of an authoritative, photo-journalistic voice at first glance. But online research revealed that this image was made by digitally merging two separate images – both taken by photojournalists working for The Associated Press (Figs. 1-2). (It is worth mentioning that few, if any, other recipients of this image would have taken the time to track its source material to confirm its fictionality – something most readers would automatically assume. Images like have given the political cartoon new form, and certainly, a new, unofficial, manner of circulation.)

Photojournalist Eric Gay took the photograph of the woman at the Superdome. An unofficial audit of national newspapers’ front pages posted at the Newseum showed that 18 daily newspapers ran the photograph of the “Superdome Madonna” on their front pages. (No data was available to determine how many publications chose to run the image on inside pages or in magazines.) The “Madonna’s” name is noticeably absent from captions, implying that Gay either failed to ask, or the woman declined to give her name. Gay’s “Madonna of the Superdome” photograph conveyed the horrors of the Superdome though the presentation of a visually dominant, sympathetic figure who simultaneously speaks to poverty (as an apparent single mother), Christian values (as a
“Madonna”), to universal values (the imperative to protect one’s children, and the appeal to our humanistic sympathies), to racial tension, and to the unspeakable violence sparked by the event. In short, it had the makings of a photograph that had the ability to be “iconic,” by summarizing the entire event (the tragedy, the loss of hope, fear…and even racism) in a single image.

The guitar photograph was taken by photojournalist Martha Raddatz. No newspapers at the Newseum had published the guitar image on their front pages – undoubtedly because it was released on a day which was full of important breaking news. Raddatz’s photograph, however, surfaced most often online, on web sites which juxtaposed photographs of New Orleaner residents wading through shoulder-high water with the president’s jam session. (It is likely that the maker of the montage man have run across the guitar photograph while visiting one such left-leaning web page.)

The e-mailed, digitally altered, image which combines these two news photographs is well made. It does not reveal any obvious evidence that it is the result of photo-manipulation processes. The edges of both figures are clean and devoid of any hint that they were carefully cut out from another image and pasted into another. (Achieving crisp edges, which do not appear so crisp that they look harsh and artificial, is a very difficult thing to master in PhotoShop – the computer program commonly used to manipulate digital photography in the graphic design and publishing industries.) Both the crying mother and the president are consistently lit from above, by a light source that appears to be of a similar strength. Whoever made this image knew what they were doing (and probably was a trained graphic designer, illustrator or artist). The only potential flaw is the scale of the figures. The president’s head is smaller than the mother’s, even though he is standing in front of her.

But evidence of manipulation, in this case, would make a big difference in my interpretation of the photograph. If the photograph was a “straight,” unaltered image, it would prompt a grave, outraged response. But if it were altered, it could be dismissed as a joke – with a serious political message. In other words, montaged images such as these have taken on the form of a political cartoon, redefined by the digital age. Patricia Leighten argues that “the point of photomontage is not simply, to create a visual lie, but to elicit a psychic truth.” 24 The “truth” of this image, as a creation, still spoke to the
“psychic truth” recipients witnessed by reading press reports and watching news broadcasts from New Orleans.

But the concept of “manipulation” leaves much room for interpretation, according to Leighten, who reminds us that insomuch as a photographer selects the scene he or she shoots, “every photograph is manipulated.” However, there is a difference between overt, collaged manipulation of John Heartfield (or its antecedent, Pictorialist Henry Peach Robinson’s multiple-exposure tableaus) and the “straight” photography work of Alfred Stieglitz, for instance. Every image published in the print media has been subjected to cropping and “toning” processes which have the potential to alter the meaning and appearance of a photograph. Digital manipulation of any degree is inherently a representation-altering process – but to varying degrees.

Generally speaking, news photographs carry different expectations of “truth” value than other kinds of images. News photography is expected to provide a surrogate eye for the viewer, yielding something which Barthes described as a sense of “having-been-there.”

A news photograph is often trusted without question, even though viewers know that a photograph is always a re-presentation of the real. When news publications that typically run unaltered, “straight” images “retroactively reposition” one of the Great Pyramids to fit the image on a vertical cover of National Geographic, or when they choose to run a purposefully darkened mug shot of O.J. Simpson, as Time magazine did on their cover, the publications cast doubt upon their credibility, and the perceived truth value of every image they publish. Illustrative images typically – but not always – are marked by publications as such. But far too often, that information is downplayed and revealed very modestly. (So modestly that most readers overlook it, and assume that every image they see conveys truth.)

Although the resulting montaged photograph may lack photojournalistic “truth value,” it does speak to a different kind of truth about our government’s slow response to Hurricane Katrina. But the impact of this image upon political discourse at a broader level is difficult to discern. President George Bush’s public approval rating is low, but it certainly would be overshooting to attribute this discontent to the circulation of one digitally altered image on the internet. The image does not present a complete political
argument, but instead presents our president, as a walking “punch line.” Viewers who like President Bush probably would find the image to be inflammatory (like a political cartoon), rather than genuinely thought-provoking. They probably would not continue to circulate the photograph. Indeed, this image is not likely to prompt viewers to change their minds about their political leanings. But it serves to provoke discussion, just as political cartoons do – only on an indescribably vast and unprecedented scale. Images such as these can be considered symptoms of a new kind of news consumption, especially among the internet-savvy population. Evening news programs have lost ten percent of their viewers in the last four years. On the other hand, satirical news programs have a steep increase in viewers. According to Pew Research Center reporter Carroll Doherty, ‘Twenty percent say they learned something regularly from ‘The Daily Show,’ ‘Saturday Night Live’ or shows like that. This has doubled over the last four years.’ Photo-montaged images, such as the one at the center of this study, also feed the public’s increased appetite for news which is delivered with a wry sense of humor. Such photographs have not only redefined the political cartoon, but have given it a new audience, and therefore, a new life.

Notes

3 Information about Superdome atrocities is from: The Los Angeles Times, Sept. 1, 2005, as reported in: “The Progress Report”.
4 Stuck in the same dangerous, toxic, unhygienic, desperate environment as the hurricane victims, journalists developed an emotional bond with their subjects that runs contrary to the detached pathos taught in journalism schools and preached in newsroom handbooks. Some journalists (such as C.N.N.’s Anderson Cooper) became noticeably testy with politicians because journalists such as Cooper maintained that the slow government response came at the expense of many lives. Eric Deggans. “Journalists’ Outrage Evident in Coverage,” The St. Petersburg Times (Fla.), Sept. 8, 2005.
Jimmy Carter’s approval rating at the time he left the presidency was within the margin for error of George W. Bush’s. Incidentally, “Duyba” had the lowest approval rating of any president in 80 years upon the very start of his second term.


Of the seemingly countless number of web sites call for the impeachment of George W. Bush, the most neutral one that summarizes the charges against Bush is:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Movement_to_impeach_George_W._Bush


Although I am summoning the “death of the author” in a more literal sense in the body of this essay, it is important to clarify that Barthes’ full argument is much meatier, and it is one which has great impact upon the writing of art history. In his essay, Barthes suggests that the intentions of the author are no longer meaningful in the determining the interpretation of a text. This, according to Barthes, would make a photograph, for instance, a place open for free “play,” where an author cannot determine a right or wrong meaning of the work. In one essay, Barthes does not just open up the possibilities for the interpretation of works of art, but he also makes room for creative revisions of art history.


17 Batchen. 151-156.


The Photoshop gallery of Somethingawful.com is located at: http://www.somethingawful.com/photoshop/


22 Ibid.


25 Leighten, 133.

26 Press images are not always manipulated with the intent of deception. Often, the process of adjusting brightness and contrast has more to do with compensating for the shortfalls of your printing presses than changing the meaning of the image.


30 Ibid.