Let's talk about it! A quest for visual literacy among the bumps and humps of fake photographs and misread truths

At the center of this presentation are two photographic projects with relevance to how photographic, narrational, individual and collective truths collide, coincide, converge, and conflict. Together they fit Horkheimer and Adornos reflections on the double nature of reason particularly well: myth as information and information as mythology reverted.

The first is the Norwegian Magnum photographer Jonas Bendiksen's controversial deep fake project "The book of Veles", published in spring 2021. Sitting at home at his computer, Bendiksen staged a photo reportage from the North Macedonian city Veles, a city with a reputation as a provider of fake news. The locations were real, but the people and their story were fake. The project was published as a book, but also presented as a documentary at a photo festival in Perpignan, with no questions asked. To unmask the many layers of fake, Bendiksen in the end had to fake a Twitter account where he questioned and criticized his own project by way of an avatar. He was not questioned by his photojournalist peers.

The second is Ra'anan Alexandrowicz' documentary film "The viewing booth" from 2019. Alexandrowicz is an Israeli documentarist who in this film investigates how a young American woman of Israeli descent reacts to humanitarian documentary footage of IDF human rights violations in the occupied Palestinian territories. Although his protagonist finds the clippings she is shown both revolting and surprising, her witnessing ultimately reinforces her political pre-conceptions, rather than change them. She explains this by referring to the documentary clippings as fictional, thus challenging the very idea of seeing as believing.

In an increasingly image saturated public sphere, both projects point to an urgent call for enhanced visual literacy among audiences and scholars alike, as I believe Hariman & Lucaites (2007) are correct in claiming that photographs (and other images) play a vital role in constituting both publics and politics. But how do we go about this? What theories should we lean on as we enter into uncharted visual territories and new visual regimes (Rancière)?

This presentation is a personal reflection on pathways and dead ends in my own quest for both greater understanding and communicative skills as a lecturer in journalism and media and communication.