

I

TRANSPARENT PICTURES: ON THE NATURE OF PHOTOGRAPHIC REALISM

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Photography and the cinema . . . satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism.

The photographic image is the object itself.

André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image"

Every photograph is a fake from start to finish.

Edward Steichen, "Ye Fakers"

I

Photographs and pictures of other kinds have various strengths and weaknesses. But photography is commonly thought to excel in one dimension especially, that of *realism*. André Bazin and many others consider photographs to be extraordinarily realistic, realistic in a way or to an extent which is beyond the reach of paintings, drawings, and other "handmade" pictures.

This attitude is encouraged by a rich assortment of familiar observations. Photographs of a crime are more likely to be admitted as evidence in court than paintings or drawings are. Some courts allow reporters to sketch their proceedings but not to photograph them. Photographs are more useful for extortion; a sketch of Mr. X in bed with Mrs. Y – even a full-color oil painting – would cause little consternation. Photographic

pornography is more potent than the painted variety. Published photographs of disaster victims or the private lives of public figures understandably provoke charges of invasion of privacy; similar complaints against the publication of drawings or paintings have less credibility. I expect that most of us will acknowledge that, in general, photographs and paintings (and comparable nonphotographic pictures) affect us very differently. Compare Francisco Goya's etchings *The Disasters of War* with the Civil War photographs by Mathew Brady and his associates (see, for example, figures 1.1 and 1.2). It is hard to resist describing the difference by saying that the photographs have a kind of immediacy or realism which the etchings lack. (This is not to deny that the etchings might equal or surpass the photographs in realism of some other sort, and it is certainly not to claim that the photographs are better.)

That photography is a supremely realistic medium may be the common-sense view, but – as Edward Steichen reminds us – it is by no means universal. Dissenters note how unlike reality a photograph is and how unlikely we are to confuse the one with the other. They point to “distortions” engendered by the photographic process and to the control which the photographer exercises over the finished product, the opportunities he enjoys for interpretation and falsification. Many emphasize the expressive nature of the medium, observing that photographs are inevitably colored by the photographer's personal interests, attitudes, and prejudices.¹ Whether any of these various considerations really does collide with photography's claim of extraordinary realism depends, of course, on how that claim is to be understood.

Those who find photographs especially realistic sometimes think of photography as a further advance in a direction which many picture makers have taken during the last several centuries, as a continuation or culmination of the post-Renaissance quest for realism.² There is some truth in this. Such earlier advances toward realism include the development of perspective and modeling techniques, the portrayal of ordinary and incidental details, attention to the effects of light, and so on. From its very beginning, photography mastered perspective (*a* system of perspective

¹ Perhaps the best recent defense of this dissenting view is that of Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen, “Photography, Vision, and Representation,” *Critical Inquiry* 2 (Autumn, 1975): 143–69; all further references to this work, abbreviated “PVR,” will be included in the text.

² See André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967), p. 12; all further references to this work, abbreviated “OPI,” will be included in the text. See also Rudolf Arnheim, “Melancholy Unshaped,” in *Toward a Psychology of Art: Collected Essays* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967), p. 186.



Figure 1.1 Francisco Goya y Lucientes, *Tanto y más* (All this and more); Fatales consecuencias de la sangrienta guerra en Espana con Buonaparte. Y otros caprichos enfáticos [Disasters of War], plate 22 Photograph © 2007 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 1.2 Timothy H. O'Sullivan, *Incidents of the War. A Harvest of Death*, Gettysburg, July, 1863. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Civil War Photographs, LC B8184 7964.

that works, anyway, if not the only one). Subtleties of shading, gradations of brightness nearly impossible to achieve with the brush, became commonplace. Photographs include as a matter of course the most mundane details of the scenes they portray – stray chickens, facial warts, clutters of dirty dishes. Photographic images easily can seem to be what painters striving for realism have always been after.

But “photographic realism” is not very special if this is all there is to it: photographs merely enjoy *more* of something which other pictures possess in smaller quantities. These differences of degree, moreover, are not differences between photographs *as such* and paintings and drawings *as such*. Paintings *can* be as realistic as the most realistic photographs, if realism resides in subtleties of shading, skillful perspective, and so forth; some indeed are virtually indistinguishable from photographs. When a painter fails to achieve such realism up to photographic standards, the difficulty is merely technological, one which, in principle, can be overcome – by more attention to details, more skill with the brush, a better grasp of the “rules of perspective.” Likewise, photographs aren’t necessarily very realistic in these sort of ways. Some are blurred and badly exposed. Perspective “distortions” can be introduced and subtleties of shading eliminated by choice of lens or manipulation of contrast. Photographic realism is not essentially unavailable to the painter, it seems, nor are photographs automatically endowed with it. It is just easier to achieve with the camera than with the brush.

Bazin and others see a much deeper gap between photographs and pictures of other kinds. This is evident from the marvelously exotic pronouncements they have sometimes resorted to in attempting to characterize the difference. Bazin’s claim that the photographic image is identical with the object photographed is no isolated anomaly. He elaborates it at considerable length; it is echoed by Christian Metz; and it has resonances in the writings of many others.³

³ Here is more from Bazin:

Only a photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation, a kind of decal or transfer. The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. [“OPI,” p. 14]

The photograph as such and the object in itself share a common being, after the fashion of a fingerprint. Wherefore, photography actually contributes something in the order of natural creation instead of providing a substitute for it. [“OPI,” p. 15]

And see Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York, 1974); “The cinema is the “phenomenological” art *par excellence*, the signifier is coextensive with the whole of the significate, the spectacle its own signification, thus short-circuiting the sign itself” (p. 43).

Such wild allegations might well be dismissed out of hand. It is simply and obviously false that a photographic image of Half Dome, for example, *is* Half Dome. Perhaps we shouldn't interpret Bazin's words literally.⁴ But there is no readily apparent nonliteral reading of them on which they are even plausible. Is Bazin describing what seems to the viewer to be the case rather than what actually is the case? Is he saying that, in looking at photographs, one has the impression, is under an illusion, of actually seeing the world, that a photographic image of Half Dome appears to be Half Dome?

There is no such illusion. Only in the most exotic circumstances would one mistake a photograph for the objects photographed. The flatness of photographs, their frames, the walls on which they are hung are virtually always obvious and unmistakable. Still photographs of moving objects are motionless. Many photographs are black-and-white. Even photographic motion pictures in "living color" are manifestly mere projections on a flat surface and easily distinguished from "reality." Photographs look like what they are: *photographs*.

Does our experience of a photograph *approach* that of having an illusion more closely than our experiences of paintings do, even though not closely enough to qualify as an illusion? Possibly. But this is not what Bazin means. If it were, theater would qualify as even more realistic than photography. Theater comes as close or closer to providing genuine illusions than film does, it would seem. There are real flesh-and-blood

The claim that the photographic image is identical with the object photographed has resonances in Helmut Gernsheim's observation that "the camera intercepts images, the paintbrush reconstructs them" (quoted by Charles Barr, "Cinemascope: Before and After," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, 2d ed. [New York, 1979], p. 141); in Erwin Panofsky's dictum "The medium of the movies is physical reality as such" ("Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, p. 263); and in the frequent characterization of photographs as "duplicates" or "doubles" or "reproductions" or "substitutes" or "surrogates" (see, e.g., Roger Scruton, "Photography and Representation," *Critical Inquiry* 7 [Spring 1981]: 577-603; repr. in this volume, chapter 6).

⁴ Stanley Cavell prefers not to take Bazin and Panofsky literally. The truth in what they say, he suggests, is that "a photograph is *of* the world" ("of reality or nature"), whereas "[a] painting *is* a world." In explanation, he observes that one "can always ask, of an area photographed, what lies adjacent to that area, beyond the frame. This generally makes no sense asked of a painting" (*The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged ed. [Cambridge, MA, 1979], pp. 24, 16, 24, 23). But photographs typically have their own (fictional) worlds, as do paintings. And since paintings frequently portray actual scenes, they, like photographs, are often of the real world. We *can* ask, concerning a painting of an actual scene as well as a photograph, what there is in reality outside the portion depicted. Indeed we can also ask, in both cases, what the fictional world is like beyond the frame. Smoke within a frame may indicate (fictional) fire outside it.

persons on stage, and they look more like the people portrayed than do plays of light and dark on a flat screen. But Bazin regards the fact that photographs are produced “mechanically” as crucial to their special realism – and theatrical portrayals are not produced “mechanically” (see “OPI,” pp. 12 and 14). (Erwin Panofsky explicitly contrasts film with theater, as well as with painting.)⁵

Bazin seems to hold that photographs enjoy their special status just by virtue of being photographs, by virtue of their mechanical origins, regardless of what they look like. “No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the [photographic] image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model” (“OPI,” p. 15).

To add to the confusion, let us note that claims strikingly similar to Bazin’s observations about photography, and equally paradoxical, have been made concerning painting and other “handmade” representations, the very things Bazin and others mean to be distinguishing photography from!

When we point to [a painted] image and say “this is a man” [s]trictly speaking that statement may be interpreted to mean that the image itself is a member of the class “man”. . . . [A stick which a child calls a horse] becomes a horse in its own right, it belongs in the class of “gee-gees” and may even merit a proper name of its own.⁶

[A wooden robin poised on a bird-feeding station] does not say: Such is a robin! It *is* a robin, although a somewhat incomplete one. It adds a robin to the inventory of nature, just as in Madame Tussaud’s Exhibition the uniformed guards, made of wax, are . . . intended . . . to weirdly increase the staff of the institution.⁷

What, then, is special about photography?

There is one clear difference between photography and painting. A photograph is always a photograph of something which actually exists. Even when photographs portray such nonentities as werewolves and Martians, they are nonetheless photographs of actual things: actors, stage sets, costumes. Paintings needn’t picture actual things. A painting of Aphrodite, executed without the use of a model, depicts nothing real.⁸ But this is by no means the whole story. Those who see a sharp contrast between photographs

⁵ See Panofsky, “Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures,” pp. 248 and 260.

⁶ E. H. Gombrich, “Meditations on a Hobby Horse or the Roots of Artistic Form,” in “*Meditations on a Hobby Horse,*” and *Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (London, 1963), p. 2.

⁷ Arnheim, “The Robin and the Saint,” in *Toward a Psychology of Art*, p. 325.

⁸ See Scruton, “Photography and Representation,” p. 579, and this volume, pp. 139–40.

and paintings clearly think that it obtains no less when paintings depict actual things than when they do not, and even when viewers fully realize that they do. Let's limit our examples to pictures of this kind. The claim before us is that photographs of Abraham Lincoln, for instance, are in some fundamental manner more realistic than painted portraits of him.

I shall argue that there is indeed a fundamental difference between photographs and painted portraits of Lincoln, that photography is indeed special, and that it deserves to be called a supremely realistic medium. But the kind of realism most distinctive of photography is not an ordinary one. It has little to do either with the post-Renaissance quest for realism in painting or with standard theoretical accounts of realism. It is enormously important, however. Without a clear understanding of it, we cannot hope to explain the power and effectiveness of photography.

2

Painting and drawing are techniques for producing pictures. So is photography. But the special nature of photography will remain obscure unless we think of it in another way as well – as a contribution to the enterprise of seeing. The invention of the camera gave us not just a new method of making pictures and not just pictures of a new kind: it gave us a new way of seeing.

Amidst Bazin's assorted declarations about photography is a comparison of the cinema to mirrors. This points in the right direction.⁹ Mirrors

⁹ But Bazin was fuzzy about what direction this is. The screen, he says, puts us

“in the presence of” the actor. It does so in the same way as a mirror – one must agree that the mirror relays the presence of the person reflected in it – but it is a mirror with a delayed reflection, the tin foil of which retains the image. . . . In the film about Manolete . . . we are present at the actual death of the famous matador. “Theater and Cinema – Part Two,” *What Is Cinema?*, pp. 97–8.

Obviously, spectators of a film of a matador are not in the presence of the matador, nor does it seem to them that they are. Indeed Bazin himself apparently agrees, as he continues:

While our emotion may not be as deep *as if we were* actually present in the arena at that historic moment, its nature is the same. What we *lose by way of direct witness* do we not recapture thanks to the artificial proximity provided by photographic enlargement? [Ibid., p. 98; my emphasis]

Cavell also suggests comparing photographs with mirrors (see *The World Viewed*, p. 213). F. M. Zemach discusses aids to vision more generally (see “Seeing, ‘Seeing,’ and Feeling,” *Review of Metaphysics* 23 [Sept. 1969]: 3–24).

are aids to vision, allowing us to see things in circumstances in which we would not otherwise be able to; with their help we can see around corners. Telescopes and microscopes extend our visual powers in other ways, enabling us to see things that are too far away or too small to be seen with the naked eye. Photography is an aid to vision also, and an especially versatile one. With the assistance of the camera, we can see not only around corners and what is distant or small; we can also see into the past. We see long-deceased ancestors when we look at dusty snapshots of them. To view a screening of Frederic Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967) in San Francisco in 1984 is to watch events which occurred in 1967 at the Bridgewater State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Photographs are *transparent*. We see the world *through* them.

I must warn against watering down this suggestion, against taking it to be a colorful, or exaggerated, or not quite literal way of making a relatively mundane point. I am not saying that the person looking at the dusty photographs has the *impression* of seeing his ancestors – in fact, he doesn't have the impression of seeing them “in the flesh,” with the unaided eye. I am not saying that photography *supplements* vision by helping us to discover things that we can't discover by seeing.¹⁰ Painted portraits and linguistic reports also supplement vision in this way. Nor is my point that what we see – photographs – are *duplicates* or *doubles* or *reproductions* of objects, or *substitutes* or *surrogates* for them. My claim is that we *see*, quite literally, our dead relatives themselves when we look at photographs of them.

Does this constitute an extension of the ordinary English sense of the word “see”? I don't know; the evidence is mixed.¹¹ But if it is an extension, it is a very natural one. Our theory needs, in any case, a term which applies both to my “seeing” my great-grandfather when I look at his snapshot and to my seeing my father when he is in front of me. What is important is that we recognize a fundamental commonality between the two cases, a single natural kind to which both belong. We could say that

¹⁰ Siegfried Kracauer's talk of photography's *revealing* reality could be taken as making this point (see *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* [Fair Lawn, NJ, 1960], p. 28). And so could Arnheim's claim that “by its very nature . . . the motion picture tends to satisfy the desire for faithful reports about curious, characteristic, exciting things going on in this world of ours” (*Film as Art* [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1957], p. 34).

¹¹ We speak naturally enough of seeing Johnny Carson on television, of seeing Charlie Chaplin in the movies, and of hearing people over the telephone and in recordings. We may also, naturally enough, *deny* that a person has seen Johnny Carson if he has “seen” him only on television, for example.

I *perceive* my great-grandfather but do not *see* him, recognizing a mode of perception (“seeing-through-photographs”) distinct from vision – if the idea that I do perceive my great-grandfather is taken seriously. Or one might make the point in some other way. I prefer the bold formulation: the viewer of a photograph sees, literally, the scene that was photographed.

Slippery slope considerations give this claim an initial plausibility. No one will deny that we see through eyeglasses, mirrors, and telescopes. How, then, would one justify denying that a security guard sees via a closed circuit television monitor a burglar breaking a window or that fans watch athletic events when they watch live television broadcasts of them? And after going this far, why not speak of watching athletic events via delayed broadcasts or of seeing the Bridgewater inmates via Wiseman’s film? These last examples do introduce a new element: they have us seeing past events. But its importance isn’t obvious. We also find ourselves speaking of observing through a telescope the explosion of a star which occurred millions of years ago.¹² We encounter various other differences also, of course, as we slide down the slope. The question is whether any of them is significant enough to justify digging in our heels and recognizing a basic

¹² Some find the notion of seeing the past too much to swallow and dismiss talk of seeing long-concluded events through telescopes as deviant or somehow to be explained away (see Alvin I. Goldman, “Perceptual Objects,” *Synthese* 35 [July 1977]: 269, and David Lewis, “Veridical Hallucination and Prosthetic Vision,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 58 [Sept. 1980]: 241–2). If seeing the past is allowed, one might worry that having a memory image of something will qualify as seeing it. Zemach accepts this consequence (see “Seeing, ‘Seeing,’ and Feeling,” pp. 15–16). But it probably can be avoided, at least for most memory images. Many, if not all, memory images are based on one’s own earlier beliefs about the object, in a manner relevantly similar to the way in which the visual experiences of the viewers of a painting are based on the painter’s beliefs about the object. So one does not see through the memory image for the same reason that one does not see through paintings. But, if we are to speak of “seeing-through-photographs,” we may have to allow that when an image of something one saw previously, but did not notice, pops into one’s head, one sees it again. I do not find this result distressing. For any who do, however, or for any who reject the possibility of seeing the past, there is another way out. Suppose we agree that what I call “seeing-through-photographs” is not a mode of *perception*. We can always find a different term. The sharp break between photography and other pictures remains. We still can say that one sees present occurrences via a television monitor but not through, for instance, a system of simultaneous sketching. *This* is a significant difference. And one’s access to past events via photographs of them differs in the same way from one’s access to them via paintings.

theoretical distinction, one which we might describe as the difference between “seeing” (or “perceiving”) things and not doing so.¹³

Mechanical aids to vision don’t necessarily involve *pictures* at all. Eyeglasses, mirrors, and telescopes don’t give us pictures. To think of the camera as another tool of vision is to de-emphasize its role in producing pictures. Photographs are pictures, to be sure, but not ordinary ones. They are pictures through which we see the world.

To be transparent is not necessarily to be invisible. We see photographs themselves when we see through them; indeed it is by looking at *Titicut Follies* that we see the Bridgewater inmates. There is nothing strange about this: one hears both a bell and the sounds that it makes, and one hears the one by hearing the other. (Bazin’s remarkable identity claim might derive from failure to recognize that we can be seeing both the photograph and the object: *what we see* are photographs, but we do see the photographed objects; so the photographs and the objects must be somehow identical.)

I don’t mind allowing that we see photographed objects only *indirectly*, though one could maintain that perception is equally indirect in many other cases as well: we see objects by seeing mirror images of them, or images produced by lenses, or light reflected or emitted from them; we hear things and events by hearing the sounds that they make. One is reminded of the familiar claim that we see *directly* only our own sense-data or images on our retinas. What I would object to is the suggestion that indirect seeing, in any of these cases, is not really *seeing*, that *all* we actually see are sense-data or images or photographs.

¹³ The slippery slope may make it hard to avoid sliding farther in another direction than some would like. When we look at fossils or footprints, do we see or perceive ancient marine organisms or ancient animals’ feet? I repeat that my point needn’t be made in terms of vision or perception. One might prefer to introduce a new notion, to speak of being “in contact with” things, for instance, when one either sees them with the naked eye or sees mirror images or photographs or fossils or footprints of them – but not when one sees drawings of them (see Patrick Maynard, “The Secular Icon: Photography and the Functions of Images,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42 [Winter 1983]: 155–69). It may not be desirable for our theory to recognize, in addition, a more restricted notion of perceiving or seeing, one which better fits the cases in which we use these everyday expressions; there simply may be no such natural kind. We should be prepared for the possibility that there is no very important distinction which even approximates the difference between perceiving things, in any everyday sense, and not perceiving them – that what we need is a radical reorganization of our concepts in this area.

One can see through sense-data or mirror images without specifically noticing them (even if, in the latter case, one notices the mirror); in this sense they *can* be invisible. One may pay no attention to photographic images themselves, concentrating instead on the things photographed. But even if one does attend especially to the photographic image, one may at the same time be seeing, and attending to, the objects photographed.

Seeing is often a way of finding out about the world. This is as true of seeing through photographs as it is of seeing in other ways. But sometimes we learn little if anything about what we see, and sometimes we value the seeing quite apart from what we might learn. This is so, frequently, when we see departed loved ones through photographs. We can't expect to acquire any particularly important information by looking at photographs which we have studied many times before. But we can *see* our loved ones again, and *that* is important to us.

3

What about paintings? They are not transparent. We do not see Henry VIII when we look at his portrait; we see only a representation of him. There is a sharp break, a difference of kind, between painting and photography.

Granted, it is perfectly natural to say of a person contemplating the portrait that he "sees" Henry VIII. But this is not to be taken literally. It is *fictional*, not true, that the viewer sees Henry VIII.¹⁴ It is equally natural to say that spectators of the Unicorn Tapestries see unicorns. But there are no unicorns; so they aren't really seeing any. Our use of the word "see," by itself, proves nothing.

A photograph purporting to be of the Loch Ness monster was widely published some years ago. If we think the monster really exists and was captured by the photograph, we will speak comfortably of seeing it when we look at the photograph. But the photograph turned out not to be of the monster but (as I recall) of a model, dredged up from the bottom of the lake, which was once used in making a movie about it. With this information we change our tune: what we see when we look at the photograph is not the monster but the model. This sort of seeing is like the ordinary variety in that only what exists can be seen.

¹⁴ The reader can get a better idea of what I mean by "fictionality" from my "Fearing Fictions," *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (Jan. 1978): 5–27.

What about viewers of the movie (which, let us assume, was a straightforward work of fiction)? They may speak of seeing the monster, even if they don't believe for a moment that there is such a beast. It is fictional that they see it; they actually see, with photographic assistance, the model used in the making of the film. It is fictional also that they see Loch Ness, the lake. And since the movie was made on location at Loch Ness, they really do see it as well.

Even when one looks at photographs which are not straightforward works of fiction, it can be fictional that one sees. On seeing a photograph of a long-forgotten family reunion, I might remark that Aunt Mabel is grimacing. She is not grimacing *now* of course; perhaps she is long deceased. My use of the present tense suggests that it is *fictional* that she is grimacing (now). And it is fictional that I see her grimacing. In addition, I actually see, through the photograph, the grimace that she effected on the long-past occasion of the reunion.

We should add that it is fictional that I see Aunt Mabel *directly*, without photographic assistance. Apart from very special cases, when in looking at a picture it is fictional that one sees something, it is fictional that one sees it not through a photograph or a mirror or a telescope but with the naked eye. Fictionally one is in the presence of what one sees.

One such special case is Richard Shirley's beautiful film *Resonant* (1969), which was made by filming still photographs (of an elderly woman, her house, her belongings). Sometimes this is obvious: sometimes, for example, we see the edges of the filmed photographs. When we do, it is fictional that we see the house or whatever through the photographs. But much of *Resonant* is fascinatingly ambiguous. The photographs are not always apparent. Sometimes when they are not, it is probably best to say that fictionally we see things directly. Sometimes we have the impression of fictionally seeing things directly, only to realize later that fictionally we saw them via still photographs. Sometimes, probably, there is no fact of the matter. Throughout, the viewer *actually* sees still photographs, via the film, whether or not he realizes that he does. And he actually sees the woman and the house through the photographs which he sees through the film.

We now have uncovered a major source of the confusion which infects writings about photography and film: failure to recognize and distinguish clearly between the special kind of seeing which actually occurs and the ordinary kind of seeing which only fictionally takes place, between a viewer's *really* seeing something *through a photograph* and his *fictionally* seeing something *directly*. A vague awareness of both, stirred together in a witches' cauldron, could conceivably tempt one toward the absurdity that the viewer is really in the presence of the object.

4

Let's look now at some familiar challenges to the idea that photography differs essentially from painting and that there is something especially realistic about photographs. Some have merit when directed against some versions of the thesis. They are irrelevant when the thesis is cashed out in terms of transparency.

The objection that a photograph doesn't look much like the actual scene, and that the experience of looking at a photograph is not much like the experience of observing the scene in ordinary circumstances, is easily dismissed. Seeing directly and seeing with photographic assistance are different modes of perception. There is no reason to expect the experiences of seeing in the two ways to be similar. Seeing something through a microscope, or through a distorting mirror, or under water, or in peculiar lighting conditions, is not much like seeing it directly or in normal circumstances – but that is no reason to deny that seeing in these other ways is *seeing*. The point is not that “a photograph shows us . . . ‘what we would have seen if we had been there ourselves.’” Joel Snyder and Neil Allen's objections to *this* view are well taken but beside the point (“PVR,” p. 149, and see pp. 151–2). It may be *fictional* not that viewers of the photographs are shown what they *would* have seen but that they are actually there and see for themselves. Here, again, the confusion is caused by not distinguishing this from the fact that they actually do see via the photograph.

If the point concerned how photographs look, there would be no essential difference between photographs and paintings. For paintings can be virtually indistinguishable from photographs. Suppose we see Chuck Close's superrealist *Self-Portrait* (figure 1.3) thinking it is a photograph and learn later that it is a painting. The discovery jolts us. Our experience of the picture and our attitude toward it undergo a profound transformation, one which is much deeper and more significant than the change which occurs when we discover that what we first took to be an etching, for example, is actually a pen-and-ink drawing. It is more like discovering a guard in a wax museum to be just another wax figure. We feel somehow less “in contact with” Close when we learn that the portrayal of him is not photographic. If the painting is of a nude and if we find nudity embarrassing, our embarrassment may be relieved somewhat by realizing that the nudity was captured in paint rather than on film. My theory accounts for the jolt. At first we think we are (really) seeing the person portrayed; then we realize that we are not, that it is only fictional that

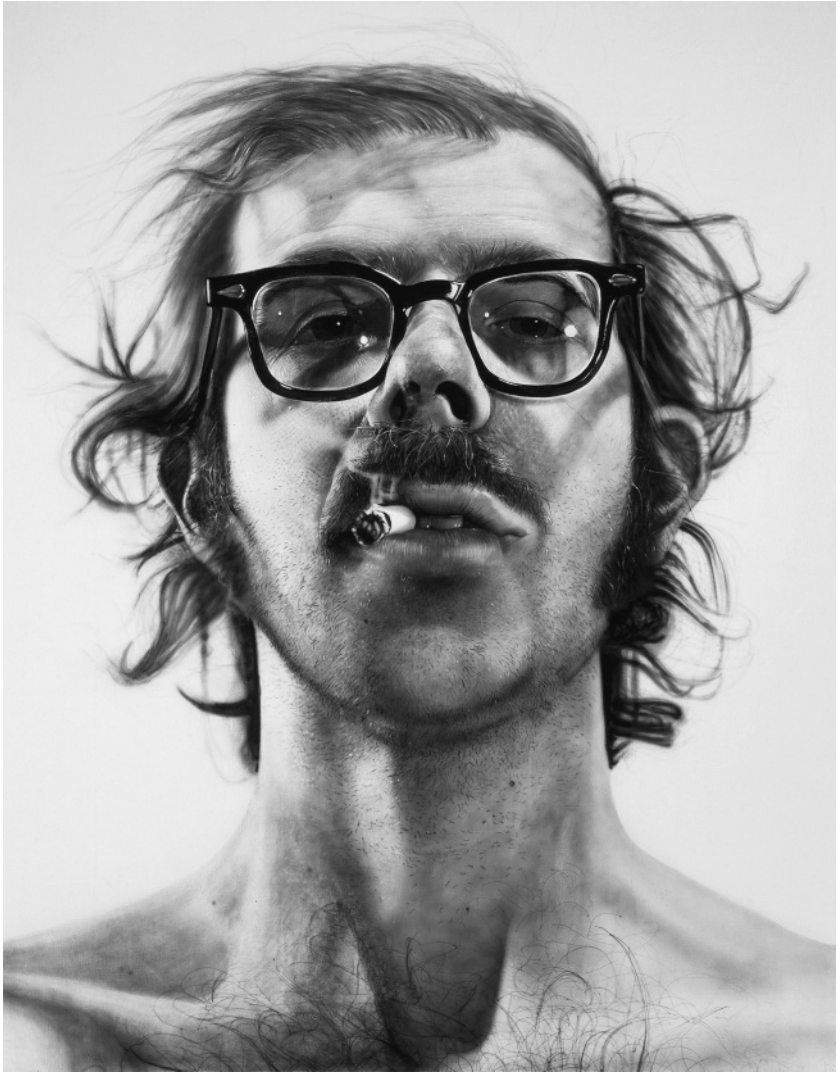


Figure 1.3 Chuck Close, *Big Self Portrait*, 1967–8, acrylic on canvas, $107\frac{1}{2} \times 83\frac{1}{2} \times 2$ ". Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Art Center Acquisition Fund, 1969.

we see him. However, even after this realization it may well continue to *seem* to us as though we are really seeing the person (with photographic assistance), if the picture continues to look to us to be a photograph. (In the case of the nude, this may account for the continuation of some of our original feelings of embarrassment.)¹⁵

We have here a case of *genuine* illusion. It really does look to us as though we are seeing someone via the medium of photography, and at first we are fooled. This is not the sort of illusion which so often is attributed to viewers despite overwhelming evidence that it almost never occurs. It does not appear to us that we see a person directly, one standing right in front of us.

We have genuine illusions also when we do see through a photograph but what we see through it is not what it seems to be. Figure 1.4 is a photograph through which we see not people but a life-sized sculpture. Illusions of this kind are commonplace in film, and they contribute importantly to viewers' experiences. A detective in a movie surprises two thugs, pulls a gun, fires, and they drop. The viewer seems to be seeing these events via the film. He *does* see one man, an actor, approach two others, draw a gun, and pull the trigger. But he doesn't see the one *kill* the others, since what was photographed was not an actual killing – the bullets were blanks, and the blood, ketchup. Still, the scene *looks* as though it were an actual killing which was filmed. The obvious considerations against the idea that a killing occurs *in the viewer's presence* are irrelevant to the illusion I have described. The sharp edges of the illuminated rectangle, the obvious flatness of the screen, the fuzziness of some images, the lack of color do nothing to keep it from seeming to the viewer that he is seeing an actual killing *via a photographic film* of it.

There are some superrealist paintings – Douglas Bond's *Ace I* (figure 1.5), for instance – which have distinctly photographic stylistic traits but are rather obviously not photographs. Their photographic character is more pretense than illusion. It doesn't seem to the viewer that he sees through the photographs, but it may be fictional that he does. It may be fictional that *Ace I* is a photograph through which one sees a group of men walking in front of Pasadena City Hall.

The debate about whether photography is special sometimes revolves around the question of whether photographs are especially *accurate*. Some

¹⁵ Here is an analogous example: suppose a proud parent hears what he takes to be a recording of Johnny playing the piano and then learns that it is actually someone else mimicking Johnny's piano playing. He thought he was hearing Johnny play, via the recording, but he wasn't. Initially he swells with pride in little Johnny, then is deflated.



Figure 1.4 John DeAndrea, *Man With Arms Around Woman*, vinyl polychrome, 1976. © John DeAndrea. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Figure 1.5 Douglas Bond, *Ace I*, acrylic on canvas, 1967. © Douglas Bond. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Figure 1.6 André Kertész, *Distortion #157*, 1933. © The Estate of André Kertész. Photograph courtesy of the Estate of André Kertész.

contend that photographs regularly falsify colors and distort spatial relationships, that a photograph of a running horse will portray it either as a blur, which it is not, or as frozen, which it also is not – and of course there is the possibility of retouching in the darkroom. It remains to be seen in what sense photographs can be inaccurate. Yet misleading they certainly can be, especially to viewers unfamiliar with them or with photographs of a given kind.

But why should this matter? We can be deceived when we see things directly. If cameras can lie, so can our eyes. To see something through a distorting mirror is still to see it, even if we are misled about it. We also see through fog, through tinted windshields, and through out-of-focus microscopes. The “distortions” or “inaccuracies” of photographs are no reason to deny that we see through them (see, for example, figure 1.6).

To underscore the independence of accuracy and transparency, consider a theatrical portrayal of actual events, an acting out in a courtroom of events that led to a crime, for example. The portrayal might be perfectly accurate. Jurors might gain from it much correct information and no misinformation. Yet they certainly do not see the incident via the portrayal.

Is the difference between photographs and other pictures simply that photographs are *generally* more accurate (or less misleading), despite occasional lapses, that the photographic process is a “more reliable mechanism” than that of drawing or painting, and that therefore there is better *prima facie* reason to trust photographs? I doubt it. Consider a world in which mirrors are so flexible that their shapes change constantly and drastically and unpredictably.¹⁶ There seems no reason to deny that people see through these mirrors, notwithstanding the unreliability of the mechanism. Perhaps the mechanism is not a *knowledge*-producing one.¹⁷ If a person looks into a mirror and forms beliefs, on the basis of what he sees, about the things reflected in it and if those beliefs happen to be true, perhaps his beliefs do not constitute *knowledge*. But this does not mean that he does not *see* the reflected things.

Some objections focus on the idea that photographs owe their special status to their “mechanical,” “automatic” origins, whereas paintings are “handmade.” What is crucial is supposed to be the involvement of a *person* in the process. Several writers have managed to imply that people don’t

¹⁶ This example is a relative of Lewis’ case of the loose wire (see Lewis, “Veridical Hallucination and Prosthetic Vision,” p. 244).

¹⁷ See Goldman “Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge,” *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (18 Nov. 1976): 771–91.

make photographs.¹⁸ In any case the remarkable realism of photographs is considered to derive not from what they look like but from how they come about.

On this point I agree. Why is it that we see Lincoln when we look at photographs of him but not when we look at his painted portrait? The answer requires an account of *seeing* (or better, an account of perception in general). I would subscribe to some variety of causal theory: to see something is to have visual experiences which are caused, in a certain manner, by what is seen. Lincoln (together with other circumstances) caused his photograph and, thus, the visual experiences of those who view it. This does not yet answer our question. For Lincoln caused his portrait as well as his photograph. The difference lies in the manner of the causation.

Putting things together, we get this: part of what it is to see something is to have visual experiences which are caused by it in a purely mechanical manner. Objects cause their photographs and the visual experiences of viewers mechanically, so we see the objects through the photographs. By contrast, objects cause paintings not mechanically but in a more “human” way, a way involving the artist; so we don’t see through paintings.

Objections leap to the fore. Photographs *are* made by people: “The [photographic] image is a crafted, not a natural, thing” (“PVR,” p. 151). Photographers and painters just use different tools in making their pictures, it seems – one uses a camera and the other a brush. In what sense, then, are our visual experiences caused mechanically when we look at photographs and not when we look at paintings?

Objectors frequently add that photographs do not present us with things as they really are but rather with the photographer’s conception or interpretation of them, that what we get from a photograph is not our own

¹⁸ William Henry Fox Talbot, inventor of the calotype, claimed for the Lacock Abbey in Wiltshire the distinction of being the first building “that was ever yet known to have drawn its own picture” (*The Pencil of Nature* [London, 1844–6], n. to pl. 15). Bazin credits photography with “completely satisfying our appetite for illusion by a mechanical reproduction in the making of which man plays no part. . . . For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man” (“OPI,” pp. 12, 13). “The fundamental peculiarity of the photographic medium,” says Arnheim, is the fact that “the physical objects themselves print their image by means of the optical and chemical action of light” (“On the Nature of Photography,” *Critical Inquiry* 1 [Sept. 1974]: 155).

view of the world but his. A photograph, no less than a painting, has a subjective point of view.¹⁹

All this is beside the point. The manner in which things cause my visual experiences when I see them is not one which rules out a causal role for human beings. People often *show* me things and in other ways induce me to look this way or that. They affect what I can see or how I see it – by turning the lights on or off, by blowing smoke in my eyes, by constructing and making available eyeglasses, mirrors, and telescopes. Why not say that photographers, by making photographs, show me things and also enable me to see them? Surely that does not mean that *I* don't really see them.

When I see, I may well get a sense of someone else's conception or interpretation of what I see. If you point out something to me, I know that you consider it worth pointing out. I learn by seeing, when others affect my vision, what things are objects of their fears and fetishes, what they value, and what they deplore. It may not be inappropriate to speak of seeing things "through their eyes." Yet I do see those things myself. Photography can be an enormously expressive medium – André Kertész's *Distortion #157* (figure 1.6) is certainly expressive – but this expressiveness does not render photographs opaque. If expressiveness is the mark of *art*, photography's credentials are beyond question. In *Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl, by careful selection and editing, "interprets" for us the Nazi Party Congress of 1934; she presents it as she construes it. It does not follow that we ourselves do not see Hitler's airplane descending through the clouds, the thousands of marching troops and cheering spectators, and Hitler delivering tirades, even if the film fosters misconceptions about the things we see, inducing us to believe, for example, that the people we see were more enthusiastic about Hitler than they actually were. We can be aware, even vividly aware, of both the medium and the maker without either blocking our view of the object.

A final worry is that photography makes use of "conventions," conventions which are built into the construction of the camera and our photographic processing techniques.²⁰ There is nothing sacrosanct about the

¹⁹ See H. Gene Blocker, "Pictures and Photographs," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36 (Winter 1977):

Photographs most certainly do *not* escape subjectivity. . . .

Through the selection of subject, angle, amount, and direction of light, background, sharpness of focus, and light-dark contrast – in all these ways the photographer represents the object from a subjective point of view, expressive of feeling and mood. [p. 158]

²⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 161, and "PVR," pp. 156 and 164–5.

system of perspective used in photography, it is argued; we just happen to have incorporated the one we did into the photographic process. Doesn't this mean that the conventions of photography get between the viewer and the objects photographed, that the viewer must know the "language" of photography and "read" its symbols, and that therefore he cannot be said to see the objects through the photographs? Not at all. We could have a convention to the effect that mirrors used in certain contexts are to be warped in a certain manner (for example, convex mirrors which enable drivers to see around dangerous corners). The convention must be understood or internalized for one to "read" properly the mirror images. Nevertheless, one sees things through the mirrors.

5

With these objections laid to rest, it is time to tackle directly the question of what it is about photographs that makes them transparent. The reason why we see through photographs but not paintings is related to a difference in how we acquire information from pictures of the two kinds. Suppose an explorer emerges from a central African jungle with a batch of photographic dinosaur-pictures, purportedly shot in the bush and processed straightforwardly. The pictures (together with background information) may convince us that there is a dinosaur lurking in the jungle. Alternatively, suppose that he emerges with a sheaf of dinosaur-sketches, purportedly drawn from life in the field. Again, we may be convinced of the existence of a dinosaur. Perhaps the photographs are more convincing than the drawings, but they needn't be. That is not the crucial difference between them; we *might* have better reason to trust the drawings than the photographs. The important difference is that, in the case of the sketches, we rely on the picture-maker's belief that there is a dinosaur in a way in which we don't in the case of the photographs.

The drawings indicate to us what was in the jungle by indicating what the artist *thought* was there. We have reason to believe that the artist set out to draw what he saw and that he is a competent draftsman. Since the sketches show a dinosaur, we judge that he thought he saw one. Taking him to be a reliable observer, we judge that the dinosaur he thought he saw was actually there. We trust *his* judgment – our information about the dinosaur is secondhand.

We don't need to rely on the photographer's judgment in the same way. We may infer that he believes in the dinosaur, knowing that he was

looking through the viewfinder when the pictures were taken. We might even assume that it is because he believed there was a dinosaur that the photographs exist or are as they are – we may assume that he aimed the camera where he did and snapped the shutter when he did because he thought he spotted a dinosaur. But no such inferences or assumptions are required for our judgment of the dinosaur's existence. Even if we know or suspect that he didn't see the dinosaur, that he left the camera on a tripod with an automatic triggering device, for instance, we may still infer the existence of the dinosaur from the photographs. In fact, if the photographs *do* convince us that he believed in the dinosaur, they do so because they convince us that there *was* a dinosaur, not the other way around.

We do need to make certain assumptions if we are going to trust the photographs: that the camera was of a certain sort, that no monkey business was involved in the processing, and so on. These may require our accepting the say-so of the photographer; we may have to trust him. And it could be that we are being taken for a ride. It is easy to see that *this* sort of reliance on the photographer does not mean that we do not see through his photographs. In order to trust the evidence of my senses, I must always make certain assumptions about them and the circumstances in which they operate: that they are not influenced by hallucination-inducing drugs, that they are not being fed misinformation by an evil neurosurgeon, and so forth. I might rely on someone else's word in making these assumptions; I might consult a beneficent doctor. If he assures me that the system is operating normally, and it is, then I am seeing (or perceiving), notwithstanding my reliance on him.

The manner in which we trust the photographer when his photographs convince us of the existence of the dinosaur differs significantly from the manner in which we rely on the artist when we are persuaded by his sketches. Both sets of pictures have a counterfactual dependence on the scene in the jungle. In both cases, if the scene had been different – if there had been no dinosaur, for example – the pictures would have been different (and so would our visual experiences when we look at them). This is why, in both cases, given that the pictures are as they are, we can judge that the scene was as it was. But why are these counterfactuals true? A difference in the scene would have made a difference in the sketches because it would have made a difference in the artist's beliefs (and hence in the way he sketched or whether he sketched at all). But that is not why a difference in the scene would have made a difference in the photographs. *They* would have been different had the scene been different *even if* the photographer believed, and so aimed and snapped his camera, as

he actually did. Suppose that the picture maker – artist or photographer – is hallucinating the dinosaur which he attempts to portray. The artist's sketches will show a dinosaur nonetheless, but the photographs will not. What the sketches show depends on what the artist thinks he sees, whether or not he is right; the actual scene in the jungle is, in *this* way, irrelevant to how his pictures turn out. But if the photographer thinks he sees a dinosaur and acts accordingly, what his photographs show is determined by what is really there before him, regardless of what he thinks. The artist draws his hallucination; the camera bypasses the photographer's hallucination and captures what is in the jungle.

A person's belief can be relevantly based on someone else's even if he doesn't realize that it is. If what convinces me of the dinosaur's existence is a painting which I take to be a photograph, I may suppose mistakenly that my belief is independent of the picture-maker's and that I see the dinosaur. My grounds for my belief do not include his belief. But still, the absence of the dinosaur would have made a difference in the picture only because it would have made a difference in the artist's belief. Unbeknown to me, my belief is (relevantly) dependent on his, and I am wrong in thinking I see the dinosaur.

Not all theories of perception postulate a strong link between perceiving and believing.²¹ We needn't assume such a link. The essential difference between paintings and photographs is the difference in the manner in which they, not the beliefs of those who see them, are based on beliefs of their makers. Photographs are counterfactually dependent on the photographed scene even if the beliefs (and other intentional attitudes) of the photographer are held fixed.²² Paintings which have a counterfactual dependence on the scene portrayed lose it when the beliefs (and other intentional attitudes) of the painter are held fixed. Both the beliefs and the visual experiences which the viewer derives from a picture are dependent on the picture-maker's beliefs in whichever manner the picture itself is. In order to see through the picture to the scene depicted, the viewer must have visual experiences which do not depend on the picture maker's beliefs in the way that paintings do. We can leave open the question of whether, to be seeing the scene, the viewer must have beliefs about it

²¹ See Fred I. Dretske, *Seeing and Knowing* (Chicago, 1969), chap. 2.

²² In some cases the important conditional counterfactual dependence which distinguishes opaque pictures from transparent ones may be not so much on the picture maker's *beliefs* as on his visual experience, or his thoughts, or possibly his intentions.

and what connection there may be between his visual experiences and his beliefs.²³

A familiar pair of science fiction examples may help to convince some that I am on the right track.²⁴ Suppose that a neurosurgeon disconnects Helen's eyes from her optic nerves and rigs up a device whereby he can stimulate the optic nerves at will. The doctor then stimulates Helen's nerves in ways corresponding to what he sees, with the result that she has "visual" experiences like ones she would have normally if she were using her own eyes. Let us add the assumption that the doctor is conscientious about feeding Helen correct information and that she has every reason to trust him. Helen *seems* to be seeing things, and her visual experiences are caused by the things which she seems to see. But she doesn't really see them; the doctor is seeing for her. This is because her visual experiences are based on his in the way I described. It is only because differences in scenes make for differences in the doctor's beliefs that they make for differences in her visual experiences.

Contrast a patient who receives a double eye transplant or a patient who is fitted with artificial prosthetic eyes. This patient *does* see. He is not relying in the relevant manner on anyone's beliefs about the things he sees, although his visual experiences do depend on the work of the surgeon and on the donor of the transplanted eyes or the manufacturer of the prosthetic ones. In real life, cataract patients owe their visual experiences to others. All of our visual experiences depend on acts of omission by those who have refrained from altering or destroying our visual organs. Obviously these facts do not blind us.

6

The intuitions I have been appealing to are of a piece with those underlying H. P. Grice's distinction between *natural* and *nonnatural*

²³ In special cases photographs may be causally but not counterfactually dependent on the scene. Then there may be no hope of learning about the scene from the photograph: the photograph would have been as it is even if the scene had been different. But one still *sees* the scene through the photograph. Perception is to be understood in terms of causation rather than counterfactuals, if the former doesn't reduce to the latter (see William K. Goosens, "Causal Chains and Counterfactuals," *Journal of Philosophy* 76 [Sept. 1979]: 489–95).

²⁴ These examples are adapted from Lewis, "Veridical Hallucination and Prosthetic Vision," pp. 243–4. But Lewis does not see a sharp difference between the two cases.

meaning.²⁵ Spots mean_N (mean naturally) measles, he says, and the ringing of the bell of a bus means_{NN} (means nonnaturally) that the bus is full. Grice would say, no doubt, that if the explorer did indeed capture an actual dinosaur on film, his photographs mean_N that there is a dinosaur. One characteristic of natural meaning is this: the fact that something means_N that p entails p .²⁶ Black clouds mean (mean_N) rain only if they are in fact followed by rain. If the rain doesn't come, that isn't what the clouds meant. This gives us a sense in which photographs are necessarily perfectly accurate. If there was no dinosaur, then the photograph does not mean_N that there was one, no matter what it looks like. One who knew enough about the camera used in making a photograph, how the film was processed, and other relevant circumstances could infer with perfect accuracy about the objects photographed. This alone does not distinguish photographs from other pictures. Presumably, if I know enough about an artist – about his beliefs, desires, attitudes, capacities, and such, or his physiological make-up – I could infer accurately, from his drawings, about what was in front of him when he drew (see “PVR,” pp. 159–62). But Grice's distinction brings out a difference between the two cases. A *sketch* of a dinosaur does not *mean*_N that there was a dinosaur, even if there was one. The sketch is not necessarily accurate in this way.

The essential accuracy of photographs obviously does not prevent them from being misleading. It affects instead how we describe our mistakes and how we think of them. Consider a photographic portrait of Twiggy, made with the help of a bowed mirror, which appears to show her with a huge paunch. If viewers are misled, it is not because of a divergence between what the pictures means_N and reality. Their mistake is about what the picture means_N. It means_N not that Twiggy is fat but that she is skinny, as one who knew about the mirror could ascertain.

To think of photographs as necessarily accurate is to think of them as especially close to the facts. It is not to think of them as intermediaries between us and the facts, as things that have their own meanings which may or may not correspond to the facts and which we have to decide whether or not to trust. To interpret a photograph properly *is* to get the facts.

Snyder and Allen claim that the way in which a photograph is made “has little to do with the way we normally interpret it” (“PVR,” p. 159).

²⁵ See H. P. Grice, “Meaning,” *Philosophical Review* 66 (July 1957): 377–88.

²⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 377.

Presumably, they would say that we interpret the photograph of Twiggy as “meaning” that she is fat, regardless of the fact that it was made with a distorting mirror. There is some truth in this. We may *take* the photograph to mean_N that Twiggy is fat; it may *look* to us as though it means_N that: Twiggy may appear to us to be fat when we see her through the photograph. Perhaps, also, the photograph makes it *fictional* that she is fat, and it might even mean_{NN} that she is. None of these facts force us to deny that the picture means_N not that Twiggy is fat but that she is skinny. Photographs, as bearers of *natural* meaning, are necessarily accurate. And our realization that they are – even when we are unsure of or mistaken about *what* they mean_N – profoundly affects our experience of them.

The fact that something means_{NN} p does not entail p . It is connected instead with the notion of *someone's* meaning p by it. Nonnatural symbols are thought of as intermediaries which stand between us and the facts. We ascertain what the symbols mean, from which we learn what was meant by them (which needn't be the same as what the symbols mean), and we must judge whether what is meant by them is true. Our access to things via nonnatural symbols is thought of as less direct than our access via natural ones.

Drawings and paintings are sometimes nonnatural symbols – but not always. Pieter Brueghel probably did not intend viewers of *Children's Games* to learn what games were played in the sixteenth century by recognizing his intention that they do so. Still, the meaning of the picture is enough like nonnatural meaning for us to see its difference from photographs. The beliefs about children's games in the sixteenth century which the painting induces are based on the *beliefs* of the painter, if not on his communicative intentions.

7

The distinction between transparent and opaque pictures will provoke a variety of intriguing examples. Some of them show that this distinction does not coincide neatly with our usual differentiation between photographs and nonphotographic pictures. Some suggest that there are *degrees* of transparency, while others suggest that a picture can be transparent in certain *respects* and opaque in other respects. In some instances the question of whether a picture is transparent probably has no determinate answer.

There are pictures which are drawn or painted by people but in a mechanical manner of one sort or another. One may attach a piece of transparent paper to a window and trace the outlines of the objects seen through

it. One may copy a photograph, conceivably without even recognizing what it is a photograph of, or paint over a photograph, matching the brightness of each spot of the original.²⁷ One might use a directional light meter and fill in the squares of a grid with shades of gray corresponding to the readings it gives of the various parts of a scene, or one might dispense with the light meter and estimate the brightnesses by eye. There are also doodles done automatically, while the doodler's mind is on other things.²⁸ Some such mechanically executed drawings are probably transparent.²⁹

Are any photographs opaque? What about ones which are devised largely in the darkroom – by combining negatives, retouching, burning out unwanted images, manipulating exposure and contrast, using filters, and so on (see, for example, figure 1.7)? Some have maintained that such photographic constructions are essentially similar to paintings.³⁰ The darkroom artist exercises as much control over the finished product as painters do; his work seems no more mechanical or less human, although his tools and materials are different. The paradigms of transparent pictures would seem to be not the work of professional photographers but casual snapshots and home movies made by doting parents and wide-eyed tourists with assists from Kodak.

Photographic constructions do differ importantly from snapshots, but to lump them with paintings would be a big mistake. There is the extreme case of a “photograph” made by exposing photographic paper, dot by dot, with a flashlight, to make a pointillist-style rendition of Lincoln, for example. *This* is drawing with a flashlight; one doesn't see Lincoln through the picture. But consider more common darkroom techniques such as combining negatives and manipulating contrast. We see a

²⁷ It was not uncommon in the mid-nineteenth century to paint portraits over photographs (see Aaron Scharf, *Art and Photography* [Harmondsworth, 1968], p. 44).

²⁸ I owe the last two examples, respectively, to Robert Howell and to George Wilson.

²⁹ It is time to confess that the Chuck Close example (figure 1.3) is not as clear-cut as I implied. Close made many of his works by projecting a photograph on the canvas and painting over it. If this is how his *Self-Portrait* was executed, its opacity may be questionable. My point of course, is unaffected. If *Self-Portrait* had been painted in the usual manner, it would definitely be opaque, and the viewer who comes to believe that it was so painted after having assumed it to be a photograph experiences the jolt I described.

³⁰ Scruton remarks that if a photographer proceeds “to paint things out or in, to touch up, alter, or *pasticher* as he pleases . . . he has now become a painter” (“Photography and Representation,” pp. 593–4, and this volume, p. 156).



Figure 1.7 Jerry Uelsmann, *Symbolic Mutation*, 1961. © Jerry Uelsmann. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

person through a photograph of him no matter how lightly or darkly it is printed – even if it “falsifies” the brightness of the person or the brightness relations of his parts – although we may not see the *state of affairs* of his being illuminated in a certain way. If a photograph apparently showing Deng Xiaoping conversing with Yasir Arafat was made by combining negatives of each, the viewer does not see the event of their conversing, even if they were conversing when the two photographs were taken. But he *does* see Deng, and he *does* see Arafat. Most photographic constructions are transparent in some of their parts or in certain respects. If a viewer doesn’t know how a photograph was made, he won’t know what he is seeing through it and what he isn’t. But he will probably realize that he is seeing *some* of the things or events or states of affairs which the picture portrays, even if he does not know which ones,

and this realization significantly colors his experience. His experience is not unlike that of seeing a white shape and wondering whether one is seeing a ghost.

It may *seem* to the viewer, moreover, that he is seeing everything that the photograph portrays even if he is not and even if he knows that he is not. Many photographic constructions appear to be transparent even in respects in which they are not, and this gives them a sort of realism which obviously nonphotographic pictures lack.

The viewer of Jerry Uelsmann's *Symbolic Mutation* (figure 1.7) hardly has the impression of seeing a hand fused with a face, however; it is too obvious that the picture was made from two negatives. In other cases sophisticated viewers may judge simply from the slickness of a photograph that it is likely to have been manipulated in one way or another in the darkroom, even if they don't spot the seams. As a result, their impression of seeing through the picture may be weakened. This is one reason why some filmmakers have deliberately tried to mimic the crudity of home movies, using hand-held cameras, purposefully bad focus, and so on (for example, John Cassavetes' *Shadows* [1960]). These techniques sacrifice any possibility of producing the illusion that the viewers are *face-to-face* with the characters – which is hardly a live possibility anyway – in favor of a more convincing illusion of seeing the characters *through the photographs*. This reconciles the immediacy which is claimed for such techniques – the feeling they provide of intimacy with the objects portrayed – with the obvious sense of contrivance that they engender – their calling attention to the medium. Emphasizing the medium is usually regarded as a way of distancing appreciators from the world portrayed. In this case it has just the opposite effect.

8

A certain conception of the nature of perception is beginning to emerge: to perceive things is to be in *contact* with them in a certain way. A mechanical connection with something, like that of photography, counts as contact, whereas a humanly mediated one, like that of painting, does not. Perceptual contact with things has rather less to do with acquiring knowledge about them than has sometimes been supposed.

We may be approaching a *necessary* condition for seeing through pictures and for perception in general, but we are far from having a sufficient condition. Imagine a machine that is sensitive to the light which emanates from a scene and that produces not pictures but accurate verbal descriptions

of the scene. The machine's printouts are surely not transparent; in looking at them, one does not *see* the scene which the machine translated into words. Yet the printouts are made just as mechanically as any photographs are.

It is easy to say that the reason why we don't see through such mechanically generated descriptions is that we don't *see* them *as* the scene they describe; perhaps we are incapable of seeing them this way. If one fails to see a photograph as Dwight Eisenhower, or as a person, or as anything but a collection of blotches on a flat surface, we might deny that one sees Eisenhower through the photograph. One doesn't see Eisenhower, perhaps, unless one *notices* him, in some appropriate sense (although it isn't necessary to recognize him as Eisenhower or even as a person). But this doesn't help without an account of *seeing-as* and an explanation of why our not seeing the descriptions as the scene should make a difference. Nor will it help to declare that only *pictures*, not representations of other kinds, can be transparent. We need to know why the machine's printouts don't qualify as pictures and why nonpictures can't be transparent.

Investigating things by examining pictures of them (either photographs or drawings) is strikingly analogous to investigating them by looking at them directly and disanalogous to investigating them by examining descriptions of them. One such analogy concerns what is easy and what is difficult to ascertain and what mistakes the investigator is susceptible to. The numerals "3" and "8" are sometimes easily mistaken for each other. So when reading about a tree which is actually 85 feet high, one might easily take it to be 35 feet high. This mistake is much more likely than that of thinking it is 85.00001 rather than 85 feet high. The reverse is true when we look at the tree directly or examine a picture of it. A *house* is easily confused with a *horse* or a *hearse*, when our information comes from a verbal description, as is a *cat* with a *cot*, a *madam* with a *madman*, *intellectuality* with *ineffectuality*, and so on. When we confront things directly or via pictures, houses are more apt to be confused with barns or woodsheds, cats with puppies, and so forth.

It would be much too hasty to conclude that it is simply differences of this sort which disqualify investigating a scene through mechanically generated descriptions as seeing it. Different mistakes are likely when we see under conditions of dim illumination from those that are likely with bright illumination. (Colors are especially hard to ascertain in dim light; outlines may be easier to distinguish than in bright light.) If there were such a thing as "seeing-through-descriptions," we should expect that the mistakes one is susceptible to when seeing in that manner would differ from those one is susceptible to when seeing in other ways. There

is a deeper point to be made – one about perception in general, not just vision.

There are important correspondences between the way we perceive (whether directly or with photographic assistance) and the way the world really is (or the way we think of it as being, but I will postpone this caveat temporarily). I do not mean that the results of perception conform to facts about the world, that things have the properties we perceive them to have. Nor do I mean that our percepts or sense-data resemble what they are percepts or sense-data of. Rather, the structure of the enterprise of perceiving bears important analogies to the structure of reality. In *this* sense we perceive the world as it is.

The mistakes a perceiver is susceptible to correspond to similarities among things themselves. Things which are easily confusable perceptually, difficult to discriminate, are things which really are similar to each other in some respect, more similar than things which are less easily confusable. An 85-foot tree resembles one which is 85.00001 feet high more closely than it does a 35-foot tree. Houses are more like barns and woodsheds than horses or hearses. Things with different shades of red are more like each other (in color) than they are like green things. In fact, the degree of similarity explains the likelihood of confusion. It is because of the similarity between 85- and 85.00001-foot trees that they are difficult to distinguish. The correspondence between similarity and perceptual confusability is intrinsic, I suggest, to the notion of perception. A process of discrimination counts as perceptual only if its structure is thus analogous to the structure of the world. When we perceive, we are, in this way, intimate with what is perceived. This goes a long way toward explaining our feeling of closeness to things which we see through photographs.

We are not similarly intimate with the world when we investigate it through descriptions, even mechanically generated ones. Descriptions scramble the real similarity relations. Houses are not much like horses or hearses. The difficulty of distinguishing a house from a hearse when we are reading about it is due not to the nature of the house and hearses but to facts about the words used to describe them. So we think of the words as getting between us and what we are reading about, as blocking our view of it, in a way that photographs and sense-data do not block our view of what they are photographs or sense-data of. The structure of discrimination by means of mechanically generated descriptions does not correspond to the structure of the world and, so, does not qualify as perception.

Are things easily confusable in perception *really* similar in some respect? Scientific investigation may suggest otherwise. Perceived colors don't correlate precisely with wavelengths of reflected light. Environments which

feel similarly or even indistinguishably cold may differ considerably in temperature, with compensating differences in humidity and wind. One might take this to mean that the correlation between how things affect us perceptually and how things are in themselves is less than perfect. Or one might recognize properties – visible colors and perceived cold – which are distinct from wavelengths of reflected light and temperature and with respect to which the correlations do hold. In any case, we *think of* easily confusable objects as being similar, despite our awareness of the scientific facts. And perhaps it is this that is intrinsic to perception. If scientific research should uncover massive breakdowns in the presumed correlations and if, after reflecting on these results, we no longer even thought of easily confusable things as being similar, I doubt that we would or should continue to speak of *perceiving* them.

Some question the very notion of real similarity. Resemblance is only a matter of how we think of things, it is argued; similarity is relative to one's "conceptual scheme." In that case it will have to be what we think of as similarities – what similarities there are relative to one's conceptual scheme – which corresponds to difficulty of perceptual discrimination. But this will suffice. We don't think of houses as being especially similar to horses or hearses; so discrimination by means of mechanically generated descriptions is not perceptual.

Why do we regard the things we do as being similar? Sometimes, I suggest, precisely because they are easily confused (when examined in ways which otherwise count as perceptual). It is because visually discriminating among paint chips of various shades of pink is relatively difficult that we think of them as resembling each other. So facts about our discriminative capacities might be said to create similarities – similarities relative to our conceptual scheme, which on the present suggestion is the only kind that there is – thereby establishing the relevant correlations.³¹

It now looks as though mechanically generated descriptions could, in the right circumstances, be transparent. Suppose that we used description-generating devices regularly to investigate the world. Perhaps this would affect what we think of as similarities, thereby changing our conceptual

³¹ This seems to turn on its head our earlier suggestion that it is similarities among things that make them difficult to discriminate perceptually. But we can have it both ways. What count as similarities for us, what respects of resemblance there are relative to our conceptual scheme, is determined (partly, anyway) by which discriminations are easy to make and which are difficult, given our usual modes of (what otherwise count as) perception. The fact that certain things are similar in these respects explains the difficulty of discriminating them.

scheme. We might recognize such properties as *apparent-via-description-generating-devices houseness* and *apparent-via-description-generating-devices bearseness* and regard these properties as analogous to visible colors, as characteristics of things themselves in virtue of which they can be alike, not just as capacities to affect us through the devices. In that case difficulty of discrimination by means of description-generating devices would be correlated with what we think of as similarities. So we might well think of ourselves as seeing through the descriptions, and – especially if there is nothing to “real” similarity among things except being thought of as similar – we might really be seeing through them. Perhaps the mechanically generated descriptions would then be transparent.

We are quickly becoming entangled in some of the deepest problems philosophy has to offer. Nevertheless, it should be clear from our recent speculations that there are fundamental differences between pictures and descriptions of a kind which plausibly allow mechanically generated pictures – photographs – to be transparent even though, apart from unusual circumstances like those just imagined, mechanically generated descriptions would not be. This challenge to the transparency of photographs is defused.

We have learned that perceptual contact with the world is to be distinguished from two different sorts of nonperceptual access to it: access mediated by intervening descriptions as well as access via another person. The common contrast between seeing something and being told about it conflates the two. When someone describes a scene to us, we are doubly removed from it; contact is broken both by the intervention of the person, the teller, and by the verbal form of the telling. Perceptual contact can itself be mediated – by mirrors or television circuits or photographs. But *this* mediation is a means of *maintaining* contact. Viewers of photographs are in perceptual contact with the world.

9

What is photographic realism? Transparency is not the whole story. Realism is a concept with many faces, and photography wears more than one of them. We must not forget how adept photography is at portraying subtleties of texture, shadow, and reflection; how effortlessly it captures the jumbled trivia of ordinary life; how skillfully it uses perspective. The capacity of photography as it is now practiced to “reveal reality” is especially important. Photographic evidence is often very reliable – hence its usefulness in court proceedings and extortion plots. This is no

automatic consequence of the “mechanicalness” of the photographic process, however. It derives rather from the fact that our photographic equipment and procedures happen to be standardized in certain respects. (They are not standardized in all respects, of course; so we have to be selective about what conclusions we draw from photographs. We can usually say little beyond gross approximations about the absolute illumination of a scene, for example, on the basis of a photograph, since shutter speeds, film speeds, and lens apertures are so variable.)

But photography’s various other talents must not be confused with or allowed to obscure its remarkable ability to put us in perceptual contact with the world, an ability which can be claimed even by a fuzzy and badly exposed snapshot depicting few details and offering little information. It is this – photography’s transparency – which is most distinctively photographic and which constitutes the most important justification for speaking of “photographic realism.”³²

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