4. Realism in Photographs – The Likeness Thesis

In the last chapter I concluded that photographs are graphic representations, rather than transparent views, of the world around us. It is a common notion, though, that photographs are more 'realistic' than other types of pictorial representations, that photographs represent the world to us in a much less interpreted or much less distorted manner. In this chapter I critically examine notions concerning seeing and understanding realism in photographs through different notions of 'likeness', in an attempt to dispel some common preconceptions and further support earlier arguments for an intentionalist understanding of photographs.

Gregory Currie (1998) usefully distinguishes a *likeness thesis,* which claims that 'photography faithfully reproduces appearance, in the sense that photographs of things are or can be superlative likenesses of them …'.[1] Currie's major caveat, though, specifically limits the application of the thesis to 'photographs of a relatively unmanipulated kind, ignoring darkroom techniques that blur the distinction between photography and painting'.[2] Presumably he would also wish to ignore techniques *outside* of the darkroom which might similarly blur the distinction between photography and painting, such as the use of distorting lenses and filters, digital manipulation and so on.

Consider first some of the different understandings of likeness concerning depiction in general.

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[1] Currie distinguishes two other theses concerning photography – the 'mechanicity thesis' and the 'reality thesis'. By now I hope to have given sufficient reason why we should avoid *characterising* our understanding of the medium solely in terms of mechanicity. That is, despite the causal-mechanical element inherent and near unique to photography, photographs may be understood as 'essentially' mechanical (and not intentional) only if the photographic process is collapsed to a moment of exposure, which I believe is to misunderstand them. I address some of Currie's concerns regarding the reality thesis in discussing transparency in Chapter 3.

[2] Currie (1998) p. 378

4.1 A Simplistic Understanding of Likeness

On a simplistic level, and using a very tight definition of 'likeness', two-dimensional marked surfaces of pictures are nothing like three-dimensional objects in the world. Most obviously, we can approach the three-dimensional world from a variety of different viewpoints, whereas with pictures we are restricted to the view(s) depicted. Objects in the world are continuous with that world, whereas objects in pictures are isolated by, and often truncated by, their medium's edges. And so on.

Counter to the above, and perhaps even more simplistically, there is a sense in which *everything* is like everything else in some respect. (Two-dimensional marked surfaces are like three-dimensional objects to the extent that they share two dimensions and other properties, such as having colour, weight, etc.). This view is the result of working in the opposite direction – by beginning with a very *loose* definition of 'likeness' and applying it equally to photographs and the world.

These simplistic criticisms and supports of the likeness thesis are of limited value in articulating our understanding of pictures generally and photographs in particular. Clearly 'likeness' is a vague term in need of sharpening. What we need is *sufficient* likeness between picture and subject matter.

4.2   Realism and Deception

In understanding likeness in terms of *realism*, we can say that a photograph is like its subject matter to the degree that it is in some manner a realistic substitute for it. It is sometimes suggested that a picture is realistic to the extent that it *deceives* a viewer into believing that they are looking at the subject matter itself. On this view, when we look into the eyes of a realistic portrait we have a strong impression that it is not a two-dimensional array of surface markings that we are experiencing, but the person themselves. Unfortunately, this doesn't seem to be our experience of most, if any, photographs. We are rarely tempted to adjust the collar of, or engage in conversation, a photographic portrait.

Arguably, there are some respects in which we do react to photographs in certain ways as we would with their subject matter face-to-face. For example, we may get excited when viewing a photograph of last year's FA Cup winning goal (or we may become dejected). We may become genuinely distraught or angry or outraged over a photograph of the victims of famine or a bloody war scene. See, for example, Larry Burrows' war photograph *Reaching Out, The DMZ (During the Aftermath of the Taking of Hill 484, South Vietnam)* (1966) in **Plate 21**. But this doesn't necessarily involve deception. We almost invariably remain conscious of the fact of depiction; we rarely believe the depiction to be the subject matter itself.

4.3 Pictorial Likeness: Are photographs pictorially like the subject matter they depict?

Rather than understand likeness between a photograph and the subject matter it depicts in simple, physical terms, we can understand the relationship in more sophisticated terms of *pictorial* likeness. Pictorial likeness is not what an object (for example) would have looked like had we been there to see it face-to-face, but, we might say, it is what an object would have looked like had we been there and seen a single, static moment of its existence in two dimensions from a single viewpoint. In photographic terms, this would be similar to seeing an object appear for a (single) moment on the ground glass viewing screen of a camera.[3] In painterly terms, this would be similar to how an object would appear for a (single) moment marked (in some fashion) on a glass sheet interposed between viewer and object, in the manner of Alberti's guidance to artists keen on achieving pictorial realism.[4] (See Albrecht Dürer's illustration of this principle in **Plate 22**). With pictorial likeness we restrict our understanding of 'likeness' to properties relevant to pictures.

It is not straightforwardly clear, though, that photographs are *pictorially* like the subjects they depict. Photographic enlargements of an object, for example, may not appear to be pictorially like the object itself. That is why some enlargements of mundane objects are shocking. In another sense, photographs produced from unusual or unexpected viewpoints may not pictorially look like the objects they depict, and similarly shock or surprise viewers. Michel Frizot considers the work of some photographic artists of the 1930s who utilised techniques of extreme close-up and enlargement to depict details of the human body (such as a single toe, an isolated mouth, a curve of neck or tongue): 'Such details, made monstrous by

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[3] Straightforwardly with an SLR camera; reversed and upside down on a plate camera.

[4] Alberti (1966), p. 51. Alberti says: 'I beg studious painters not to be embarrassed by what I say here … They should know that they circumscribe the [picture] plane with their lines. When they fill the circumscribed places with colours, they should only seek to present the forms of things seen on this plane as if it were of transparent glass'.

enlargement, were a way of subverting modern objectivity …'[5] That is, these photographers were trying to get viewers to see these subjects in a way they had not seen them before. I will leave it an open question whether any such attempts in subverting contemporary 'pictorial objectivity' have been successful. We can note, though, that there *is* a lengthy tradition recounted in the history of art of attempts to shake up viewers' preconceived notions about the 'ordinary' through pictures.

In a more subtle manner, and perhaps on firmer philosophical ground, colour is another dimension along which photographs may fail to achieve pictorial likeness to their subject matter. It is not just black and white photographs which fail in this regard (the world is robustly colourful), but also colour photographs. Different brands and types of colour films have different colour properties – exploited by photographers for different ends. (The world does not appear in the warm red-balanced tones of Kodachrome 64, for example).

I do not want to press these pictorial dissimilarities between photograph and subject matter too far, for there is a sense in which even a giant advertising image of a catwalk model is pictorially like the catwalk model as seen on the ground glass screen of a camera (when the giant image is viewed from a distance, for example). There is a sense in which black and white images are pictorially like their subject matter (in terms of pictorial shape). Colour balance of film represents a level of subtlety most ordinary or casual viewers of colour photographs are not normally conscious of.

The notion of pictorial likeness, though, does help to eliminate some of the cruder understandings of 'physical' likeness sometimes applied to the relationship between photographs and their subject matter.

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[5] Frizot (1998a), p. 453

4.4   Pictorial Likeness: Sophisticated Resemblance Theories and 'Looking Like'

Earlier (in Section 1.3), I briefly touched on sophisticated resemblance theories, which are expressed in terms of 'experienced resemblance' – subjective similarity or likeness between picture and subject matter – which focus on *visual shape*. This, it seems, might be a useful route to supporting a likeness thesis concerning photographs. We can begin by asking the broad question: Are pictures, in general, pictorially like the subject matter they depict, in the sense that they deliver to viewers an experienced resemblance of that subject matter?

Let me take Malcolm Budd's 'looking like' theory – which I find the most persuasive. Budd assumes that a viewer is aware of the picture surface when he sees what a picture depicts (the picture doesn't look, and isn't thought, to be three-dimensional). He then distinguishes: (i) the 'visual world' – the complete way the world is represented to the viewer by his visual experience, including depth (distance in front of him); and (ii) the 'visual field' – which is all of the above, but with the apparent distance eliminated ('abstracted'). That is, the viewer's visual field is his visual world considered (in abstraction) from one of its spatial dimensions – the distance outwards from his point of view.

So, for example, if I stand looking down a broad canal lined by old oaks, distant trees are 'seen to be' similar in size to those just before me in my visual world, but they 'look' smaller in my visual field (because the height of the distant trees subtends a smaller angle from my eyes than the height of the closer trees).

A visual field representation is not some existent entity that I see, nor is it a sense datum that mediates my visual access to the world. It is a theoretical entity: 'a representation in my visual field is the manner in which the world is in some way visually represented to me in

two of the three spatial dimensions'.[6] It is the *content* of my visual experience. Budd says: 'When you see what is pictured in the marked surface you see the structure of the surface as being isomorphic with that of the visual field of the state of affairs depicted ...'.[7]

I believe an easy and straight-forward way to understand the visual field – and thereby understand what it is to see the structure of a picture's surface as being isomorphic with the visual field of some state of affairs – is to, again, think in terms of Alberti's suggestion to artists involving the interposed glass sheet. Budd himself talks in terms of keeping one's hand at a set distance before oneself and tracing objects with a finger. Robert Hopkins suggests outlining a scene seen through a slightly misty window[8]; Peacocke suggests imagining a silhouette hanging on a wall.[9]

As interesting as these models are, I think they illustrate where these sophisticated resemblance theories go wrong, for the theories seem to presuppose the Albertian type of picture as a sort of paradigm image. Clearly, documentary photographs, like the works of some Renaissance painters adept at two- and three-point perspective, stand as almost ideal Albertian images. For many pictures (probably for most pictures), though, the visual field representation is going to be different from the subject matter depicted. And there are a host of styles and systems of depiction which greatly diverge from Alberti's 'rule', such as caricatures, Kwakiutl split-style pictures, children's paintings and photographs produced with very wide angle lenses or which have been extensively manipulated. All of these are bona fide pictures, so a theory of depiction cannot easily ignore them or put them to one side.

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[6] Budd (1991), p. 8. What is advantageous in having the visual field as a theoretical entity is that through it subjective similarity between a picture and its subject matter cannot be condemned as a 'private' experience. Roughly speaking, this is where Budd's view appears an improvement over Peacocke's equally sophisticated experienced visual field similarity theory.

[7] Ibid., p. 10

[8] Hopkins (1998), p. 53

[9] Peacocke (1987), pp. 385-6

Budd considers Cubist and reverse perspective pictures: he believes we see them as 'distorted depictions of the object'.[10] In addressing these 'tough' examples, and in order to capture full pictorial content, Budd seems to radically loosen up what 'experienced structural isomorphism' means, for he says we are now: 'not restricted to the spatial structure of a visible state of affairs...'.[11] (The notion of pointing out the edges of an object at fixed hand distance seems to be left behind.)

Peacocke, addressing caricatures, admits that the visual field presented by a Gerald Scarfe drawing of Baroness Thatcher, for example, presents a shape nothing like that found in the Baroness, but suggests that the visual field is related (is 'F-related') to something like a *hypothetical*, *distorted*, *three-dimensional* model of Thatcher – such as a *Spitting Image* puppet.[12] But positing hypothetical models for the wide range of caricatures (or any of the other non-Albertian pictures mentioned above) seems unrealistic, if not far-fetched. Further, there seems no reason to believe that the relation between such intermediary hypothetical models and the subject matter they are modelled on will be any easier explained than the relation between pictures and their subject matter. Another problem is that the subject matter of some illusionistic type pictures – and we might count some multiple exposure photographs among this group – only seem to be representable in two dimensions, and not three.

Budd notes that we are concerned with *relations between the elements of two visual fields*, 'which is compatible with great differences between the corresponding elements', and therefore viewers can still see one field *resemble* the other despite dissimilarities.[13] (He also points out that the visual field representation of the picture surface may have fewer features, or it may have more features than the subject matter depicted.)

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[10] Budd (1991), p. 14

[11] Ibid.

[12] Peacocke (1987), p. 397

[13] Budd (1991), pp. 11-12

But how can this be so? If the relations between the elements of the two visual fields is such that they can have 'great differences' in spatial structure between them, how can we still be talking about a *likeness* or *resemblance* theory? In what sense is the picture like its subject? Surely what we require is a *sufficient degree* of resemblance between corresponding elements of two related visual fields, and this seems to be precisely what we are losing as we progress through the theory and move away from Albertian type depiction. The relationship of the elements of our visual field when looking at a Cubist painting or abstract photograph may be very different to the relationship between the elements of our visual field when looking at the subject matter. To say these fields resemble each other appears to stretch the term too far. This seems to define 'likeness' and 'resemblance' in terms of the theory.

The problem with sophisticated resemblance theories in general is that they appear to presuppose – to internalise – the Albertian conception of depiction by identifying (in at least some general way) the picture surface with the visual field. Subsequently, any attempt to explain our understanding of the diverse range of pictures which do not follow this system of depiction forces 'likeness' and 'resemblance' beyond common usage and ordinary understanding.

4.5 Pictorial Likeness: Are photographs more pictorially like the subject matter they depict than other pictorial media?

If we continue to focus on pictorial likeness – restricting 'likeness' to properties relevant to pictures – and compare photographs with *other* pictorial media, it is apparent that even many unmanipulated photographs do not resemble their subject matter to a greater degree (are not more realistic) than other types of pictures treating the same subject. A photograph of Jane made using high speed film – which depicts her on a print only suggestively, in the manner of a 'snowy field of dots' (the image of the dancers in **Plate 2** approaches this, for example; some high speed/low resolution prints are very abstract indeed) – would be much less a likeness of Jane than a realist style painting of her. *Black and white* high speed film would render a photograph even less like the realist painting of her. Arguably, a photograph of Jane taken from an extremely unusual perspective (viewing her from the tip of her left boot, say), or under extremely unusual lighting conditions (with a spotlight hard under her chin) may bear less pictorial likeness to Jane than a courtroom artist's pencil sketch of Jane. We can note that none of these sorts of photographs are manipulated in Currie's sense – they don't blur the distinction between photography and painting.

4.6   Are photographs superlative likenesses of things because they convey more information than other pictorial media?

Another take on depictive realism may be thought of as an *informational* view, which, broadly put, would hold that the more information a picture offers a viewer, the more realistic a depiction it is. A documentary photograph, on this view, would deliver a greater amount of information than an abstract photograph and therefore be more realistic; a colour photograph would yield more information than its black and white equivalent and therefore be more realistic. These two examples seem right. But compare pictorial media. Although a documentary photograph may offer more information than a painting of the same subject, the reverse is equally plausible: a painting may offer more information than a photograph simply by depicting more detail. Drawing on Nelson Goodman's (1976) examples, it is also at least conceivable that an architectural plan or a wiring diagram of a given building may provide a greater amount of information than either a good photograph or painting of the same building. Given this, intuition still rebels against the notion that either architectural plan or wiring diagram are more *realistic* than, more *pictorially like*, the building than either the photograph or painting. I suggest that the information content of a picture is more an indicator of a picture-maker's intentions (although there may be more than she intended) and her pictorial project than realism, the faithful reproduction of appearance, or creation of superlative likeness.

4.7 Is institutional usage a guide to the realism of photographs?

Consider the fact that certain institutions, such as law courts, passport and custom agencies and the like, depend on pictorial likeness of photographs to their subject matter as decisive empirical evidence. In these contexts photographic depictions are often taken to *stand in for* – to be pictorially very much like – their subject matter, while paintings and other types of pictures are rejected. The correct response here is surely that courts and passport agencies *specify* that such photographs be unmanipulated in a variety of ways, including Currie's ways, for them to be acceptable as evidence. They specify by setting a particularly detailed algorithm – one which leaves very little license for a photographer's intentions. William J Mitchell cites this example:

> The United States Immigration and Naturalization Service … requires identification photographs to be three-quarter colour portraits with the right ear exposed (no earrings or hats), framed so that the head fits within an oval of strictly specified dimensions, made with a white background equal in reflectance to bond typing paper, sharply focused and correctly exposed, unretouched, printed on glossy paper at a standard size, and not stained, cracked, or mutilated. Snapshots that deviate in the slightest way from this specification are rejected …[14]

So, passport and other agencies not only reject as evidence paintings and sketches as unlike their subjects, they also reject some very common photographs as unlike their subjects.[15]

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[14] Mitchell (1992), pp. 30-31

[15] A brief aside: there is worry in some quarters over the admissibility of digital photographs as legal evidence, because it is thought that in them the tracks of intentional manipulation may be covered over and the picture passed off as straight documentation. Substantial yet seamless, undetectable digital modifications of an image, though, are probably much more difficult to achieve than is generally believed – and no doubt digital graphic experts will soon find themselves called upon as expert witnesses in law courts.

4.8   The Cognitive and Contextual Briefly Considered

Pictorial likeness is also likely to involve the cognitive element I briefly outlined in my introduction – a viewer's cognitive stock brought to bear on a picture will partly determine how like its subject matter it is understood to be. For example, lack of familiarity with John may lead us to think that a certain painting or photograph looks much like him. Conversely, intimate familiarity with John may cause us to think that the same picture does not look much like him. Most of us have experienced photographs of ourselves which 'don't look like us' – or at least don't look like the familiar image of ourselves we greet in the mirror each morning, or see in ordinary snapshots.

Going a little further afield within photography, we can ask: How pictorially 'like' their subjects are x-ray photographs, microscope photographs, or heat-sensitive photographs? Attempting to answer these questions concerning unusual photographs (if that is what they are) simply puts into sharp relief the fact that pictorial 'likeness' of photograph to subject matter itself may depend subjectively on who the viewer is (drawing on the above examples, whether one is a chiropodist, a scientist, a military advisor, a layperson). It also emphasises the extent to which pictorial realism or likeness may be a matter of context (whether an x-ray photograph, for example, is viewed in a laboratory, in a Sunday supplement magazine, or on a gallery wall). This is not to say we cannot find objective realism in photographs. We can, and often do, find photographs objectively realistic through broad *consensus*. (Consensus is often summarised by statements such as: 'Everyone agrees, this snapshot looks like Billy'; or 'Most people believe that the photo on the cover of yesterday's *Times* looks like Tony Blair'.) Here is a rich area for investigation, but it oversteps the bounds of this thesis. We must note, though, that the cognitive and contextual elements will bear on our understanding of photographs.

4.9   Brief Summary Concerning Realism and the Likeness Thesis

No medium inherently produces greater subject likenesses or pictorial likenesses than another, deceives more than another or delivers more information than another. The question of a picture's faithfulness and superlative likeness to its subject is to a great extent a matter of what we may call, in an ordinary sense, artistic style, rather than medium. Even respecting Currie's caveat, we encounter photographs which do not offer the realism so often claimed for photographs. If we diverge from Currie's caveat, and not restrict ourselves to 'photographs of a relatively unmanipulated kind ...', it becomes clear that common and simple modifications and manipulations of the photographic process can, and sometimes do, produce pictures quite *un*like their subject matter. This is what we would expect if, as I have been urging, we acknowledge that different photographers, like other picture makers, will treat subject matter in different ways by bringing their intentions – their thoughts, beliefs, experiences, emotions and commitments which cause them to work as they do – to bear on their work in different ways.