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5 Conclusion

My purpose in this essay has been to contribute to a characterisation of photographic understanding which accounts for the role of intention of the photographer. I began by adopting Richard Wollheim's definition of 'intention' as a well-balanced and thereby useful notion for understanding what motivates picture makers, with a view to applying it to photographers. In characterising the four elements I believe to be involved, to varying degrees, in our understanding of a photograph – the causal, intentional, cognitive and contextual – I have paid particular attention to the intentional and its interaction with the causal. In order to whet intuition I pointed to a few of the many common ways intention is expressed by photographers: through control of focus, selective grain structure and use of lighting. I also emphasised that the photograph is standardly the result of a photographic *process* – sometimes a fairly complex process – which may involve any number of standard manipulations, of varying degree, at different stages, before culminating in a photographic print or transparency.

Wollheim's well known and sophisticated seeing-in thesis offers, as a background theory of depiction, I believe, the most explanatory power over photographic understanding when compared with other theories of depiction. One of the seeing-in theory's great strengths is its ability to capture and explain an especially wide variety of depictions, including not only ancient, naive and ethnically traditional pictures, but also theoretically challenging pictures such as impressionist, cubist and abstract works – works, we should note, which have developed alongside and influenced the medium of photography and which bear the marks of cross-influence with them.

The photographic medium itself is especially diverse, and in this essay I have sought to indicate some of the extent of this diversity and demonstrate the reasonably lively set of

photographs which stand outside the well known sets of documentary, photojournalistic and snapshot photographs.

The notable diversity of the medium is no doubt due to the potential complexity of the photographic process and the potential for manipulation at each stage of that process for different pictorial ends. Manipulation in professional creative photography is often employed for artistic ends. But we should not forget that even snapshot photography is supported by a complex and highly sophisticated (highly mechanised and computerised) production process which manipulates the image at many stages for rather different ends – to ensure a high degree of pictorial *standardisation*.

Counter to Wollheim, I have argued that a painter's intention need not *uniquely* set the standard of correctness for understanding a painting; other people's intentions may contribute to that standard, non-intentional factors (such as weathering and randomly generated factors) may contribute to that standard, and causal-mechanical factors inherent in painting (and other media) and its tools may intrude and affect the correct standard for understanding a picture. Turning to photographs, I argued that with some images, especially non-documentary ones, the intentional element may play a greater role – may be of more epistemological importance – than the inherent causal element in establishing a standard of correctness for appropriately seeing and understanding them. Further, I suggested that in some unusual 'boundary' cases of digitally manipulated, yet essentially *photographic*, images, the photographer's intention may *uniquely* set the standard of correctness for seeing and appropriately understanding them, drawing photographic understanding very close to that of painting.

I am not convinced by the subject/model distinction, which is often raised to drive home the difference between correctly understanding photographs and correctly understanding pictures such as paintings. I suggested a counter example – comparing the painterly and photographic projects of portraiture involving the twins John and Jim – which I believe captures well

intuitions about some professional photographic projects and practices, especially creative ones. Wollheim's notion of 'seeing a photograph as a photograph' appears to presuppose documentary type photographs, so that it is merely *specified* that the intentional element will always be dominated by the causal element. This seems to stipulate photographic understanding, rather than explain it. I also suggested it would be ironic if the seeing-in thesis, which captures so well a wide variety of paintings as art, should let slip through its fingers a wide range of *photographs* as art. I believe isolating photographs as rogue pictures, which stand somewhere between non-representational images such as Rorschach ink blots and representational images such as paintings, unnecessarily complicates, and thereby weakens, the intentionalist thesis.

I also questioned Wollheim's notion that photographers necessarily *use* their photographs as representations, rather than (directly) produce representations. By distinguishing four different types of photographic project, (documentary, documentary used for other representative purposes, documentation of an artistic creation, and the 'creative' project; no doubt there are many more), I argued that the *creative* photographic project is one which directly represents its subject matter, and is not simply used to do so. That is, what I call 'creative' photographic projects can only be understood in terms of creative photographic expression, and not in terms of documentation. It is in these types of photographic projects, I suggest, that fictional subject matter and universal subject matter, for example, may be depicted. These are the declared intentions of many creative photographers and the stated experience of many who view such photographs.

I queried whether we could jettison the intentional element in photographic understanding, through an investigation of Roger Scruton's 'ideal photograph' thesis. Can photographs be understood not as interpretations of reality but essentially as substitutes for reality; are photographs presentations of how things looked? The main problem with ideal photographs is that they appear to stand at too great a distance from real photographs to sufficiently help

explain the latter. I pointed to a number of disanalogies between photographs and objects standardly discussed in the associated literature, such as mirrors, frames held up to reality and television, which Scruton has raised and likened to ideal photographs. The set of real photographs contains many photographs, even documentary photographs (such as those of Muybridge, Edgerton and modern science), which are not surrogates for seeing their subject matter directly, or which do not present 'how something looked'. Many of these sorts of real photographs, which are far from transparent, may better be understood as interpretations of their subject matter – a line I have not pursued here. Non-documentary photographs clearly diverge from ideal photographs to an even greater degree.

If we take Scruton's ideal photographs seriously – in that it is at least *possible* for agents to produce them – and take them to be, as he says, 'copies of an appearance' of an object as seen by 'a man with normal eyes and understanding', then there is good reason to believe that some intention on the part of the photographer will be required to get images to appear this way. If so, this illicitly imports the intentional element into the notion of an ideal photograph.

Understanding photographs in terms of ideal photographs has also lead Scruton to conclude that photographers are 'victims' of the causal process and to deny photographers the possibility of expression and treatment of subject matter. As a result, photographs attract no 'aesthetic interest'. This seems ill founded if one considers the history of photography and some photographic practice and its associated projects. Any position which seeks to view a producer of the highly manipulated, abstract and other non-documentary types of photographs discussed here as more akin to a painter than a photographer, and thus place her and her pictures outside of photographic explanatory theory, needs to articulate why we should ignore this history and to say more about why we should ignore this particular type of picture maker's intentions.

In support of my earlier conclusions regarding the importance of the intentional element in photographic understanding, I sought to undermine some notions concerning realism in photographs through an investigation of likeness theses. The terms ‘likeness’ and ‘realism’ are vague and require qualification. Equating likeness or realism with notions of deception offers little help – we are rarely deceived into believing that we are looking at the subject itself when looking at a photograph. More sophisticated notions of *pictorial* likeness may sharpen our understanding, but even here it is not clear that photographs are characteristically pictorially like the subjects they depict. Print size and colour are simple examples. Even sophisticated resemblance theories, which concentrate on subjective similarity between an experienced visual field shape of subject matter seen in the real world and subject matter seen in a picture, have difficulties in explaining our understanding of non-Albertian photographs, paintings and other pictures in terms of pictorial likeness.

The intentional element cannot be ignored in photographic understanding, for a photographer’s intentions – her thoughts, beliefs, experiences, emotions, commitments which cause her to photograph as she does – will, to some degree, almost invariably contribute to that understanding. Occasionally, and especially in non-documentary projects, the intentional element will be *crucial* to photographic understanding. The intentionalist account ventured here allows us to express something substantive about understanding the diverse range of photographic images we encounter, including not only photographs as records of things seen, but also photographs as Art.

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Plates

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