

Painting Photography & Film
Creative Arts, Fine Arts, Philosophy
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Andreas Teuber

QUOTATIONS

Unlike any other visual image, a photograph is not a rendering, an imitation or an interpretation of its subject, but actually a trace of it. No painting or drawing, however naturalist, belongs to its subject in the way that a photograph does.

A photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image) an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask.

The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction.

Painting is, after all, an inferior way of making likenesses, an ersatz of the processes of reproduction. . . . The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the 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.

A photograph does not present us with a likeness of a thing; it presents us with the thing itself. In a photograph the original is still as present as it ever was. But while the reality in a photograph is present to me, I am not present to it, although the reality I see before me is, in actuality, not before me since it is past.

In looking at photographs we are on vacation from artifice.

Photography is linked with the Egyptian sarcophagus most immediately and definitively by the social practice of keeping photographs (souvenirs, keepsakes) in memory of loved ones, who have passed away. But even when the person is still living, when he or she is photographed and the print produced, the moment in the photograph has passed away, vanished forever. Strictly speaking then the moment in the person's life captured by the photograph is dead, dead for having been shot.

The snapshot, like death, is an instantaneous abduction of the object out of the world into another world, into another kind of time. In all photographs we have this same cutting off of a piece of time, and keeping what has been shot, keeping it unchanged while the world around it continues to change.

All photographs are ambiguous. All photographs have been taken out of a continuity. If the event is a public event, this continuity is history; if it is personal, the continuity which is broken is a life story. Even a pure landscape breaks continuity: that of the light and the weather.

The photographic take is immediate and definitive, like the constitution of the fetish in the unconscious, fixed by a glance in childhood. . . . Photography is a cut inside the referent; it cuts off (cuts out) a piece of the referent, a fragment or part object, for a long immobile journey of no return. Within each photograph a tiny piece of time brutally and forever escapes its ordinary fate, and is protected against its own loss.

The funeral rites which exist in all societies have a double significance: a remembering of the dead, but also a remembering that they are dead and that life goes on for others. Photography, much better than film, fits into this psycho-social operation: since it suppresses from its own appearance the primary marks of "livingness," while simultaneously preserving a convincing reproduction of the object: a past presence.

To look at a photograph beyond a certain period of time is to court a frustration; the image which on first looking gave a pleasure has by degrees become a veil behind which we now desire to see. If we spend a long time with a photograph, it is often because the photograph has acted as a catalyst — exciting mental activity which exceeds that which the photograph itself is able to provide.

To remain long with a single image is to risk the loss of our imaginary command of the look, to relinquish it to that absent other to whom it belongs by right — the camera. The image then no longer receives our look, reassuring us of our founding centrality, it rather avoids our gaze, confirming its allegiance to the other.

The world can be seen through photographs. With the assistance of the camera, I am able, quite literally, to see long deceased relatives. So I can say: my great-grandfather died before I was born. He never saw me. But I occasionally see him, when I look at photographs of him. They are not great photographs by any means, but like most photographs they are transparent. The viewer of the photograph sees, literally, the scene that was photographed. We see through photographs. Why do photographs, even poorly exposed and focused ones, seem more of an invasion of privacy than do paintings or drawings of the same subject? Surely it is because the former are transparent whereas the latter are not.

Like dreams in Freud's analysis, photographs are typically laconic.

Photographs beg for interpretation and words usually supply it. Photographs, irrefutable as evidence but weak in meaning, are given a meaning, more often than not, by an accompanying text and, if not, seem to crave to be underwritten by at least a title of some kind.

An instant photographed can only acquire meaning insofar as the viewer can read into it a duration extending beyond itself. When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future.

Photography preserves moments like flies in amber.

A photograph is transparent to its subject, and if it holds our interest, it does so because it acts as a surrogate for the represented thing. Thus if one finds a photograph beautiful, it is because one finds something beautiful in its subject. The aesthetic or emotional qualities of a photograph tend to derive directly from the qualities of what it represents: if the photograph is sad, it is usually because its subject is sad; if it is touching, it is because its subject is touching, and so on.

Looking at a photograph is a substitute for looking at the thing itself.

The history of the art of photography is a history of successive attempts to break the causal chain between what is before the camera and what appears (ends up) in the photograph, by inserting a human intention between the subject and the appearance in such a way that the subject is recognized for what it is and yet, at the same time, is recognized in a certain light, i.e., in terms of the photographer's intention. It is the history of an attempt to turn a simulacrum into an expression of a representational thought.

Photographs can be “read” as commentaries on photography itself.

A photographer who aims for an aesthetically significant representation must also aim to control detail: “detail being understood in the broad sense of “any observable fact or feature.” But the causal process of which the photographer is a victim puts almost every detail outside of his control. Even if he does intentionally arrange each fold of his subject’s dress, and meticulously construct, as studio photographer’s sometimes do, the appropriate scenario, that would still hardly be relevant, since there seem to be few ways in which such intentions can be revealed in the photograph. We lack all except the grossest features of style in photography: and yet it is style that persuades us that the question: Why this and not that? admits of such fruitful exploration in the case of painting. Style enables us to answer that question by referring solely to aspects of the painting rather than to features which are in no way manifest in what is seen. The search for meaning in a photograph is therefore thwarted.

Photography has an outspoken affinity for un-staged reality.

A drawing is a translation. That is to say each mark on the paper is consciously related, not only to the real or imagined “model,” but also to every mark and space set out on the paper. Thus a drawn or painted image is woven together by the energy (or lassitude, if the drawing is weak) of countless judgments. Every time a figuration is evoked in a drawing, everything about it has been mediated by consciousness, either intuited or systematically. In a drawing an apple is made round or spherical; in a photograph the roundness and the light and shade of the apple are received as a given.

All photographs are impregnated with melancholy.

The time which exists within a drawing or a painting is not uniform. The artist gives more time to what he or she considers important. A face is likely to contain more time than the sky above it. Time in a painting accrues according to human value. In a photograph time is uniform: every part of the image has been subjected to a chemical process of uniform duration. In the process of revelation all parts are equal.

Photographs “do” what the camera does.