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## Photographic Pictures

Photographic pictures are photographs and also pictures.

Much has been said and written about differences between photographs and paintings (as well as their similarities). I will say more. But, first, I will examine two kinds of objects that photographic pictures have: what they are *photographs* of, and what they are *pictures* or *depictions* of.<sup>1</sup> More exactly, I will focus on the relations photographs bear to these objects, the *depictive relation* and the *photographic relation*. Understanding these relations and how they relate to one another is crucial for understanding the most fundamental differences between photographs and paintings.

Photographic pictures (hereafter just “photographs”) come in many varieties, but I shall pay special attention to casual snapshots, photographs made with relatively little planning or manipulation by the photographer (whether the snapping is done with a film camera, or a digital camera). Snapshots are the most distinctive of photographs, differing most strikingly from paintings and other non-photographic pictures. Photographs of other kinds — dark room constructions, lightly or heavily photoshopped images, photo-montages, double exposures, time exposures, carefully planned and posed photographs — are best understood largely as combining, in one way or another, features of snapshots and features of paintings, drawings, or prints. So it makes sense to start with snapshots.

### **Figure 1: Dorothy/Judy Garland**

Figure 1 is a *picture* of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* (the 1939 film rendition of L. Frank Baum’s novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*); it *depicts* this fictional character. But it is a *photograph* of (the real) Judy Garland, not a photograph of Dorothy. Viewers

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow this terminology from Patrick Maynard, *The Engine of Visualization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 114. “Photograph of” and “picture of” (applied to photographs) are often used interchangeably, obscuring the distinction Maynard and I employ them to mark.

may be interested in either of these objects, either Dorothy in the Oz story, or the child actress. One might be interested in both, of course, or in the relation between them: how the actress portrays the character.

**Figure 2: Frost on Window**

Figure 2 is a photograph of frost on a window. If I give it the title, “Jungle,” it becomes a *picture* of a jungle. I have no talent with a pencil or a brush, so I chose to use a remarkable tool, a camera, to make a jungle picture. What I made is also a photograph, of course. It remains a photograph of window frost, not of a jungle, despite its title.

**Figure 3: Harold Edgerton, Milk Drop Coronet**

Figure 3, Edgerton tells us, is a photograph, using a stroboscopic flash, of a drop of milk striking a hard surface. The title indicates this. But, as the title also indicates, it is a picture of a coronet, a crown.

These three examples illustrate the difference between the two kinds of objects. But many photographic pictures, including most casual snapshots, depict and are photographs of the very same things. Figure 4 is a photograph and also a picture of a certain child. That it bears both the depictive and the photographic relations to her is enormously important. It would not do to say, merely (and ambiguously), that it is “of” the child.

**Figure 4: Child in Paris Museum**

This duality is a distinctive characteristic of photographs. Paintings and drawings *depict*, as photographs do; they are pictures of things. But there is no very close analogue of the photographic relation in the case of paintings and drawings. The nearest is perhaps the relation of a painting or drawing to a model an artist might use, a person she places in front of her easel, for instance, as she creates either a portrait, a picture of him, or a picture of something else, e.g., a mythological figure. (Compare a novelist who models a character after a real person.) The analogy is distant, however, for reasons that will soon be evident, if they are not already.

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### **Figure 5: Unicorn Tapestry**

The depictive and photographic relations are relations of entirely different kinds. A picture depicting a unicorn gets people to “see” a unicorn “in” the marks on its surface. More precisely, viewers of the picture are induced to imagine seeing a unicorn, and to imagine that their actual visual experience, as they look at the picture, is a visual experience of a unicorn.<sup>2</sup> A depiction of a unicorn is an object whose function (in a given social context) is to elicit this kind of visual/imaginative experience, an object that is properly or appropriately experienced in this way. It is the function of figure 1 to induce viewers to imagine seeing Dorothy and to imagine their visual experience of the picture to be a visual experience of Dorothy.

Depiction is a *normative* notion. I said that to be a depiction is to have a certain *function*, that of being properly or appropriately experienced in a certain way. We might see unicorns in clouds; we might imagine seeing unicorns and imagine our visual experience of the clouds to be an experience of unicorns. The clouds are not pictures, depictions, however, because it is not their function to be experienced in this way. For the same reason, the (untitled) frosted window, of which figure 2 is a photograph, is not a picture of a jungle. (These might be given this function in a particular social context; then they would be depictions, relative to that context.)

The photographic relation is a causal relation of a certain kind. It has nothing essentially to do with viewers’ experiences, and it does not have a normative dimension like

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Wollheim introduced the notion of “seeing in.” *Painting as an Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 46-79. I claim that seeing-in should be understood in terms of the visual/imaginative experience I describe, although I am not sure that Wollheim would count all cases in which one enjoys an experience of this kind as instances. I give a more explicit account of my notion of depiction in *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), Chapter 8, and my *Marvelous Images: On Values and the Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008)

that of depiction. Light reflected from the body and clothing of the child into the lens of a camera resulted in the marks on the surface of the photograph of her (figure 4). Viewers might then see a child in the marks; they might imagine seeing a child as they observe the photographic surface. They will do this if the image is a picture of a child as well as a photograph of her (as it is). But experiences of this kind have nothing to do with what make the picture a photograph of the child.

It is not easy to say, in general, what kind of causal relation should count as the photographic one. Keep in mind that objects are often causes of their non-photographic depictions, as well as of their photographs. A sitter reflects light into the eyes of a portrait painter, initiating a series of physical, neurological and/or psychological events, culminating in the artist's application of paint to the canvas.

Some will describe the photographic relation as "mechanical," or "automatic," but it is far from clear what this means. Is the relation purely physical, one not involving human activity or anybody's mental or psychological states? Of course a person snaps the shutter of the camera, to get things started. Other people invented and manufactured the camera, and someone operated the processing equipment, etc. But the causal chain beginning with the reflection of light by the object and ending with the marking of the picture surface — this part of the photographic process — need not contain any human links. Think of an automated booth set up to produce passport photographs. One sits in the booth and presses a button. The photo is taken, processed and printed automatically, i.e. without any further intervention by the sitter (or anyone else).

Usually, however, this causal chain does include human actions (and associated beliefs, intentions, etc.). Someone rewinds and unloads the exposed film, then delivers it to a drugstore for processing, and the automated processing machine probably has to be turned on. Or someone downloads a digital image, and sends it to a printer. These actions may be influenced by the photographed scene and the photographer's perception of

it. Having noticed that the camera was aimed at an astonishing or beautiful or bizarre sight, the photographer might rush the film to the processor or download it to a printer, rather than forgetting about it indefinitely. Or she might choose a more reliable processor than she would have otherwise, or one that tends to produce more brilliant or more saturated colors.

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Some will be tempted to associate the distinction between the depictive and photographic relations with C. S. Peirce's distinction between *iconic* and *indexical* signs. This is not the place to wrestle with Peirce's complex and changing characterizations of these notions, let alone consider the often fuzzy ways they have been construed in the literature. But it is clear enough that there is no simple correspondence between his notions and mine; indeed it is far from clear that there even is a complex one.

Many photographs are indices in Peirce's sense, no doubt, indexical signs of what they are photographs of. But a photograph is not necessarily a sign at all, for Peirce. Signs require what he calls an "Interpretant."<sup>3</sup> A photograph of a giraffe (for instance) needn't have an Interpretant; it needs only to be caused in the appropriate manner by a giraffe. A photographic index of a giraffe might be an index also of the sun, as it illuminated the giraffe (if the required Interpretant is present), and of clouds that partially obscured the sun. But — unless the camera was aimed in their direction when the shutter was snapped — the photograph is not a photograph of the sun or the clouds. (There is no need, for present purposes, to say why it is not.)

Resemblance is central to Peirce's notion of *icons*, but has no place in my definition of depiction. Pictures usually do resemble, in non-trivial ways, what they depict. Resem-

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<sup>3</sup> See his "The Icon, Index, and Symbol," *Collected Papers*, edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, Volume II, Book II, Chapter 3 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978). See also Albert Atkin, "Peirce's Theory of Signs," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

blances in various respects encourage the imaginative/perceptual experiences I take to be central to depiction. But peculiarities of the human visual system, independently of resemblances, also have a lot to do with our propensities to see things of certain sorts in certain designs.<sup>4</sup> Titles do also, as we shall see. Although many depictions count as icons, for Pearce, some probably do not.

I leave to others the exegetical task of ascertaining whether there is any normativity in Peirce's notion of iconicity. But if there is, I suspect his notion of indexicality has one as well. (Perhaps normativity derives from the presence of the Interpretant.)

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We should take note of several corollary differences between the depictive and photographic relations, before exploring their significance.

Only real things can be photographed. There are no photographs of unicorns, although there are lots of pictures of them. Nor are there any photographs of Dorothy or her fictitious friends, the Tin Man, the Cowardly Lion, etc. They don't exist, and so cannot cause marks on picture surfaces.<sup>5</sup>

What a picture depicts sometimes depends on its title or other associated text (as we noticed). But titles don't affect what a (photographic) picture is a photograph of. A drawing that "looks" equally like Tom and his twin, Tim, is (probably) a picture of Tom if it is titled "Tom," and a picture of Tim if its title is "Tim." But a photograph of Tom is a photograph of Tom no matter what its title.

**Figure 6: Klee, Kettle Drummer (1940)**

Paul Klee's *Kettle Drummer* depicts a kettle drummer, a tympani player, but only because of its title. We would never guess that figure 7 depicts birds making scientific

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. for example Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1960) and Patrick Maynard, *Drawing Distinctions: the Varieties of Graphic Expression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005)

<sup>5</sup> "Photograph of ..." is an *extensional* context; "picture of ..." an *intensional* one.

experiments in sex, without knowing that this is the title Paul Klee gave it. Given the title, we are to imagine watching avian sex experiments, as we look at the picture. (Never mind that birds don't do sex experiments, and that if they did they probably wouldn't look as Klee portrayed them.) We will have no idea what if anything figure 8 is a picture of, until we learn its title.

**Figure 7: Klee, Birds Making Scientific Experiments in Sex**

**Figure 8: Night in Ann Arbor**

The photographic relation is different. Figure 1, for instance, is a photograph of Judy Garland, no matter what it is titled.

With the help of titles — sometimes without their help — pictures can drastically misrepresent what they are pictures of, mis-depict them. A picture might depict a politician as a pig, a pig as a plumber, Mary as a fiery breathing monster, the streets of New York clogged not with taxis but with camels. It does not seem that the photographic content of a (photographic) picture can be false in a similar way. What a photograph is a photograph of is just what actually was in front of the camera when the picture was taken. We might be mistaken about what that is, but the *photograph* isn't wrong. We are wrong about it, about what it is a photograph of and hence what in the real world was in front of the camera when the photo was taken.

Photographs, snapshots anyway, can easily have accidental or unintended photographic content.<sup>6</sup> (This goes for depictive as well as photographic content when they coincide.) Depiction by paintings and drawings is much less likely to be accidental or unintended. Most any random dinosaur or frog or circus clown that happens into a camera's field of view when the shutter is snapped will be photographed, whether or not the photographer notices, or cares. (The moving people and vehicles that didn't register in early

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<sup>6</sup> Roger Scruton, "Photography and Representation." *Critical Inquiry*, 7/3, Spring 1981, p. 593.

long exposure photographs are exceptions.) The photographic content of snapshots frequently surprises photographers. Viewers of a snapshot of the Trevi Fountain in Rome with a pigeon in the background may well have no idea whether the photographer meant her photograph to include the pigeon or realized that it did, though there may be no doubt that she was aiming at the Fountain. Depictive content, by contrast, is rarely accidental or unintended. We can be certain that Rubens intended the birds in the background of his *Autumn Landscape with a View of Het Steen in the Early Morning* (1636?); they were no surprise to him.

Drawings and paintings, non-photographic depictions, are often better indicators of the mind of the picture maker than photographs are. And they are often better as vehicles of communication, insofar as communication is a matter of testimony, insofar as the picture maker passes on to others what she knows or believes, expecting viewers to take her word for it.

Although the depictive and photographic relations are fundamentally different, there is frequently a link between them. Not only do photographs often depict what they are photographs of, often it is *because* they are photographs of certain things that they depict them. If an untitled photograph of Tom happens to look as much or even more like his identical twin brother, Tim, than it does like Tom, we will probably, nevertheless, understand it to be appropriate to imagine seeing Tom, not Tim, on viewing the picture. It depicts Tom because it is a photograph of him; viewers are to imagine seeing Tom, in this case, because it was he whose reflected light caused the marks on the picture surface.

**Figure 9: (Sphinx)**

Figure 9 is a photograph of a part of the surface of a Sphinx, in the Egyptian Museum in Turin. (You will have to take my word for this.) Realizing this, we will probably understand it to *depict* that part of the Sphinx's surface as well, although this depictive

content is not apparent from the image itself. The usual default is that viewers of a photograph are to imagine seeing whatever it is that reflected light into the lens of the camera when the shutter was tripped. A special context is needed to make a photograph a picture of something it is not a photograph of — its use in a film, for instance, as in the case of the photograph of Judy Garland, or a title.

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In “Transparent Pictures”<sup>7</sup> I argued that photographs are *transparent*: To look at a photograph of Abraham Lincoln is to see Lincoln himself; we see him, indirectly, by seeing the photograph. I did not make explicit enough, in “Transparent Pictures,” that what we see through photographs are *photographed* objects. We see depicted objects only if the photograph is also a photograph of them

I will not repeat my arguments for photographic transparency here. But the feature of photographs that I took to be crucial to their transparency is key to understanding the photographic relation: Photographs depend counterfactually on the objects photographed, even when the beliefs and other mental states of the photographer (and anyone else) are held fixed. Had Lincoln been different, in any of various respects, when he sat for the photographer — fatter or thinner than he actually was, standing rather than sitting, smiling rather than frowning — the marks on the surface of the resulting photograph would have been different. This is what I mean by saying that the photograph depends counterfactually on Lincoln. Moreover, the photograph would have been different had Lincoln been standing rather than sitting (for instance) *even if* the photographer’s beliefs and visual experience were as they actually were, even if she didn’t notice that he stood up just before the shutter was clicked, or if she hallucinated his being seated. The photograph is sensitive to the object in front of the camera’s lens, regardless of what the

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<sup>7</sup> “Transparent Pictures,” in *Marvelous Images*, pp. 79-109. See also my “Postscripts to ‘Transparent Pictures’” and “On Pictures and Photographs: Objections Answered,” both also in *Marvelous Images*, pp. 110-116 and pp. 117-132 respectively.

photographer sees or seems to see or thinks is there. Let's say (borrowing a phrase from Gregory Currie) that the photograph is *naturally counterfactually dependent* on the photographed object.<sup>8</sup>

I propose defining the photographic relation as being such as to support natural counterfactual dependence. A necessary condition (not a sufficient one) for X being a photograph of Y is that X be naturally counterfactually dependent on Y. An ordinary snapshot is naturally counterfactually dependent on whatever reflected light into the camera's lens when the shutter was snapped, whether or not the photographer chose exposure settings and aimed the camera before snapping the shutter, and also unloaded the film, delivered it to a processor he thought worthy of the scene, etc. Paintings may be counterfactually dependent on what they depict, but they are not, in general, naturally so. Photographs also fail to depend naturally on what they *depict* when they are not photographs of what they depict.

What does natural counterfactual dependence have to do with transparency? Roughly this: When I see something face to face, in the ordinary way, my visual experience depends counterfactually on the scene in front of my eyes, regardless of the psychological states of people, excepting of course my own visual experience itself. This is true also of my visual experience when I observe a photograph of an object, thanks to the natural counterfactual dependence of the photograph on the object. It is not true of my experience when I look at a painting of the object.

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We must not forget that photographic pictures are pictures, as well as photographs. Some do forget this, or ignore or deny it. There is a surprising tendency in the literature to suppose that depiction is incompatible with transparency or with being a photograph

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<sup>8</sup> Gregory Currie. *Image and Mind: Film, Philodophy, and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 55.

in something like my sense. Sometimes it is just assumed without explanation that this is so.<sup>9</sup> But Roger Scruton, in a sophisticated discussion of the nature of photography, argues interestingly for approximately this incompatibility. “Photography is not capable of representing anything” as paintings do, he claims; “photography is not a representational art.”<sup>10</sup> Scruton will say that the photograph of Judy Garland (figure 1) “is not a photographic representation of [Dorothy], but the photograph of a representation of [Dorothy].” (588). Garland represents Dorothy; the photograph doesn’t.<sup>11</sup> By “representation” Scruton does not mean exactly what I mean by “depiction;” at least he explains his notion differently. Our question now is whether photography is capable of depicting, in my sense. Is figure 1 merely a photograph of something, Judy Garland, that in one sense or another represents or depicts Dorothy, without depicting her itself?<sup>12</sup>

Judy Garland does depict Dorothy (if we allow, as I do, that sculptures and actors as well as pictures depict). No doubt she also represents Dorothy, in Scruton’s sense. Viewing the photograph, we see Garland as she pretends to be Dorothy. But it is clear that the *photograph* also satisfies my conditions for depicting Dorothy. Viewers of the photograph are expected to imagine seeing Dorothy, and to imagine of their perception

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<sup>9</sup> Several commentators, not noticing my discussion of the relation between photographs’ depictive function and their transparency, have even attributed to me the view that photographs are not pictures, and/or that we do not imagine seeing depicted objects when we observe photographs. I discuss two of them in “Pictures and Photographs,” in *Marvelous Images*, pp. 126-127. In an otherwise careful account of my notion of transparency, Walter Benn Michaels asserts that, for Walton, “to say that [on seeing a photograph of Napoleon’s brother] you are seeing eyes that looked at the emperor is ... to say that you are not seeing a representation of eyes that looked at the emperor,” and “the photograph, for Walton, is not a technology of representation.” “Photographs and Fossils,” in James Elkins, editor, *Photography Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 433.

<sup>10</sup> Scruton, “Photography and Representation,” p. 588. We should note that Scruton restricts the extreme version of his claim to “ideal” photographs and paintings, not everything that is ordinarily given those labels.

<sup>11</sup> Scruton’s examples are a photograph of a person labelled ‘Venus,’ and a photograph of a tramp labelled “Silenus.” (“Photography and Representation,” pp. 588, 589)

<sup>12</sup> I will not be able here to assess Scruton’s arguments for his claim, understanding “representation” as he does, and with the restriction to “ideal” cases.

that it is a perception of Dorothy. There is no incompatibility here. The fact that in seeing the photographic picture one is seeing Judy Garland (indirectly) does not interfere with imagining seeing Dorothy and imagining one's actual visual experience to be an experience of Dorothy.<sup>13</sup> After all, in looking at a painting of a giraffe one sees the painting while also imagining seeing a giraffe.

The (still) photograph of Garland is something of a special case. It is much less obvious that other photographed objects depict. Is the frosted window, photographed in figure 2, a depiction of a jungle, when the photograph (but not the window) is titled "Jungle"? Earlier I said it is not. "A film," Scruton claims, "is a photograph of a dramatic representation." (577, 598) This must mean that various discontinuous events that were photographed in the making of the *The Wizard of Oz*, those whose photographs made it into the final edited version of the film, constitute a dramatic representation, a theatrical portrayal of the story we get from the film. I suppose one might regard the film as giving these events the function of being so understood. Scruton will say that the film maker(s) use these events as a representation (588). But surely viewers of the film do not or need not think of them that way. Why not just allow that the film itself depicts the Oz story, depicts the characters and their doings, even as it enables viewers to see (indirectly) the actors on the sets? Again, this is what we should say, given my account of depiction.

The fact that photographic pictures are both photographs and pictures gives them some very special characteristics. I will mention just two.

In film, when actors are photographed and characters depicted, what viewers know or think they know about an actor influences how they understand the character. John Wayne's tough guy image, whether based on the roles he typically plays in films one has seen previously or impressions of what he really is like, colors one's conception of a char-

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<sup>13</sup> This is especially obvious, given that one can see things without noticing them, without realizing one is seeing them.

acter he plays in other films. A character will almost inevitably be a tough guy, just because he is depicted by means of photographs of Wayne. Should Wayne play a character who is an obvious wimp, however, viewers' preconceptions of the actor would probably make for a strangely ironic effect.

When a single object is both photographed and depicted (as in most snapshots), the fact that we actually see it (indirectly, via the photograph, in the past) probably increases the vivacity of our experience of imagining seeing it (directly, in the present). Whether this effect is or is not desirable, whether it enhances or detracts from the photograph's aesthetic qualities, depends no doubt on the context, the circumstances, and varies from case to case.

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