

# Michigan Philosophy News

for friends, alumni, and alumnae of the Department of Philosophy,  
The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Fall, 1989

Dear Friends of the Department:

As I write in early August, it hardly seems possible that we are less than a month away from the beginning of a new year. As you will remember, the pace around here is pretty furious from September on, and Ann Arbor during the summer almost seems like a different world. The relative quiet of these days is a good place from which to survey all that has happened in the past year--and to contemplate what is in the offing in the year coming.

The new year finds the Department in good shape. The undergraduate concentration continues to grow in numbers, even as the requirements become more demanding. The graduate program is just beginning an exciting period under new requirements aimed to ease the transition from courses to thesis and to enhance the coherence of the overall program. The successes this past year in placement and dissertation completions don't hurt the mood either! Finally, faculty research is blossoming. Between this past year and the coming one, new books will have appeared from five of our faculty--Allan Gibbard, George Mavrodes, Don Munro, David Velleman, and Ken Walton!

Last year we welcomed Crispin Wright to the faculty, and he has already begun to make a big impact on our graduate and undergraduate offerings in philosophy of language and core metaphysics and epistemology. This year we welcome another new member in these central areas: Gideon Rosen, who comes to us from Princeton. Rosen was actively recruited by a number of top philosophy departments, so you can imagine our pleasure at having him here with us.

Two of our faculty have been promoted. David Velleman is now an Associate Professor, with tenure, and Louis Loeb is a full Professor. Each of these promotions represents recognition by both the Department and the University of important contributions to the discipline and to the teaching of philosophy here at Michigan. We are very pleased about both, and, especially, that David Velleman will continue to be with us.

Our three emeriti, Dick Brandt, Art Burks, and Bill Frankena, all continue to be philosophically active here in Ann Arbor, and to be thriving. Last year I was able to report that Bill had come through triple bypass surgery. This year the news is that he just keeps getting stronger. Example: after initially giving a provisional "no" (as per his usual habit) to a request for a contribution to a book on Sidgwick, Bill promptly sat down and turned out drafts of three different Sidgwick papers. We are also very happy that Dick Brandt continues here with us in Ann Arbor despite various opportunities to leave.

I referred briefly to recent and forthcoming faculty books. Let me tell you more about them. Last year, Princeton University Press published the third of Don Munro's trilogy on Chinese philosophy, *Images of Human Nature: A Sung Portrait*, and Temple University Press brought out George Mavrodes's *Revelation in Religious Belief*. This fall,

Princeton University Press will also publish David Velleman's *Practical Reflection*--an ambitious work that advances a unified theory of intention, agency, freedom, and value. Two other books will appear later in the year. One is Allan Gibbard's *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, to be published simultaneously (on respective sides of the Atlantic) by Harvard University Press and Oxford University Press. And the other is Ken Walton's *Mimesis as Make Believe*, also to be published by Harvard. Gibbard's book lays out the "expressivist" theories of morality and rationality he has been developing over the last few years. And Walton's book is the culmination of many years of research and writing on the foundations of the representational arts. The publication of each of these five books is a significant event, and you can imagine how proud we feel about all five. Of course, in our subject, articles can be as significant as books; sometimes even more so. But you can appreciate that space does not permit me to tell you about all of our faculty's articles.

Research means a lot to us, but teaching philosophy, better, *doing* it together with our students, means no less. At the undergraduate level, the concentration has never been in better shape--at least, not in recent memory. This past year we saw the number of concentrators rise to 120. This amounts almost to a *tripling* over the past eight years. Interestingly enough, this dramatic increase has occurred at a time that the Department has made the concentration more rigorous and committed itself to teaching demanding core courses. This past year we continued along this path and added two requirements: a course in formal logic (in place of a more relaxed logic requirement) and a 400 level course. The latter means that all undergraduate concentrators will have some experience doing philosophy in real depth in some area or other.

The Undergraduate Philosophy Club also continues to flourish. The past year was given over to ambitious planning for events and activities this coming year and to luncheon meetings with individual faculty. All in all, the undergraduate interest in philosophy at Michigan is really extraordinary; their enthusiasm buoys us all.

At the graduate level, we are, as I mentioned, embarking on a new program. I won't bore you with the details, but the main features are a set of distribution requirements in place of the old preliminary exams and a new "thesis-orienting requirement" in the last two semesters before the thesis. The latter addresses what seems one of the most difficult problems in graduate education--how to help students transit between the different activities involved in course work and thesis writing.

Both statistics and anecdotes suggest that in the seventies and eighties students began taking longer to get the Ph.D. than previously. Doubtless, much of this was driven by decreased employment opportunities, but we have been thinking hard about how we can help students make more efficient progress through our program. And things already

seem to be picking up. This summer alone will see no fewer than five dissertation defenses, and the number for the year will be at least as large as any year since the "great retrenchment" of the middle seventies.

Our graduate students continue to get more than their share of recognition both inside and outside the University. The Charlotte Newcombe Fellowship is given annually to support dissertation work related to questions of value. This past year only six were awarded nationally in philosophy, including one to one of our students. Last year, two of our students were successful, as was one the year before. For the coming year, we also have two Rackham Predoctoral Fellows and one Research Partnership Fellow, all won in University-wide competitions. Finally, our students enjoyed great success in placement this past year.

So things are going very well indeed. I want to emphasize, however, that our continuing success is due in no small part to the readers of *Michigan Philosophy News*. In times when the state's contribution to the University budget has continued to decline in relative terms, we have had to rely more on the generosity of benefactors. Your response and support has been very gratifying. Each of the last three years has seen a substantial increase in the number and amount of contributions over the year before. We will be writing you again in the near future about these matters, but I do want to acknowledge the importance of your response here. Among other things, your contributions have enabled us to cover spiralling journal and book costs and maintain the Tanner Philosophy Library as the invaluable resource that it is. They also help to subsidize activities of the Undergraduate Philosophy Club which would simply be impossible otherwise. We are very grateful for your help in preserving and enhancing the excellence of philosophy at Michigan for present and future students.

We rely on several substantial past gifts to support our various lectures and colloquia by outside speakers. This past year's Nelson Philosophers-in-Residence were Simon Blackburn of Pembroke College, Oxford, and Barry Stroud, of the University of California, Berkeley. Each was with us for a week to give a lecture and two seminars and to participate in various informal discussions and meetings. Both addressed metaphysical issues surrounding realism.

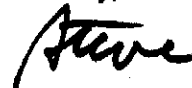
In October, Toni Morrison, the Pulitzer Prize winning novelist, gave the Tanner Lecture on Human Values at Michigan. It was quite an event. Rackham Auditorium was filled a half hour before the lecture, and Morrison kept an audience, many of whom listened to loudspeakers in the lobby, enthralled for two hours. The next morning several hundred people returned to hear and take part in a symposium on her topic--issues concerning literature and the African-American experience--with Eric Foner, Hazel Carby, and Amiri Baraka.

We enjoyed a rich series of philosophical talks throughout the year. Speakers included Graeme Forbes, Richard Foley, David Pears, Cora Diamond, Donald Davidson, Jerry Fodor, Allan Code, Margaret Gilbert, Anthony Appiah, Henry Allison, and Bernard Boxill. Finally, Saul Kripke, Mark Johnston, and C. L. Hardin were with us in April to

participate in our Spring Colloquium on philosophical issues concerning color.

Enough description of what Michigan philosophers are doing. Let me invite you now to enjoy some "Michigan philosophy": Ken Walton's "Transparent Pictures," which follows. Before I end, however, let me say again how very much we all appreciate your support. When you take the trouble to respond with your notes and contributions it confirms a connection that we all feel very good about.

Sincerely,



Stephen L. Darwall  
Chair

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### TRANSPARENT PICTURES \*

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, *What Is Cinema?*

[E]very photograph is a fake from start to finish.

Edward Steichen, "Ye Fakers"

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 "hand-made" 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. Photographs are more useful for extortion; a sketch of Mr. X in bed with Ms. Y--even a full color oil painting--causes little consternation. Published photographs of disaster victims or of 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 testify to being affected very differently, in general, by photographs from how we are by comparable non-photographic pictures. Compare the Civil War photographs by Matthew Brady and his associates with Goya's etchings, *The Disasters of War* (e.g., figs. 1 and 2). It is hard to resist describing the difference by saying that the photographs have a kind of "realism" which the etchings lack (although the etchings might equal or surpass the photographs in realism of some other sort).

But--as Steichen reminds us--not everyone regards photography as a supremely "realistic" medium. 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 fal

sification. Many emphasize the expressive nature of the medium, observing that photographs are inevitably colored by the photographer's personal interests, attitudes, and prejudices.<sup>1</sup> Whether any of these 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.<sup>2</sup> There is some truth in this. Earlier advances toward "realism" include the development of perspective and modelling techniques, the portrayal of ordinary and incidental details, attention to the effects of light, and so on. Photography mastered perspective (a system of perspective that works, anyway, if not the only one) from its very beginning. Subtleties of shading, brightness gradations 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, warts on faces, clutters of dirty dishes. Photographic images 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. Moreover, these differences of degree 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, etc.; some indeed are virtually indistinguishable from photographs. (See fig. 3).

Likewise, photographs aren't necessarily very "realistic" in the ways described. Some are blurred and badly exposed. Perspective "distortions" can be introduced and subtleties of shading eliminated by choice of lens or manipulation of contrast.

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, such as Bazin's claim that the photographic image is identical with the object photographed.<sup>3</sup>

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 Bazin's words are not to be taken literally. But there is no readily apparent non-literal 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 is under an illusion, of actually seeing the world, that a photographic image of Half Dome appears to be Half Dome? But 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. Many photographs are black and white. Still photographs of moving objects are motionless. 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.

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" (p. 15).

I shall argue that there is indeed a fundamental difference between photographs and painted pictures, 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 with the post-Renaissance quest for realism in painting. But it is enormously important. Without a clear understanding of it we cannot hope to explain the power and effectiveness of photography.

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 (pp. 97-98). This points in the right direction. Mirrors are aids to vision, allowing us to see things in circumstances in which otherwise we would not 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, 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 Frederick Wiseman's *Titticut Follies* (1967) in San Francisco in 1989 is to watch events that occurred at the Bridgewater State Hospital for the criminally insane in 1967. Photographs are transparent. We see the world through them.

I must warn against watering down this suggestion. 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. 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 deceased relatives themselves when we look at their photographs.

Does this constitute an extension of the ordinary English sense of the word "see"? I don't know. But if it does it

is a very natural extension. Our theory needs a term that 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, in any case. 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 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. I prefer the bolder 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 a burglar breaking a window via a closed circuit TV monitor, 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 we also find ourselves speaking of observing through a telescope the explosion of a star that occurred millions of years ago. Various other differences are encountered also as we slide down the slope. The question is whether any of them is significant enough to justify making a basic theoretical distinction, one that might be described as the difference between "seeing" (or "perceiving") things and not doing so.

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 Titticut 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. 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 they make. One is reminded of the familiar claim that we see only our own sense-data or images on our retinas directly. 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.

One can see through sense-data or mirror images without specifically noticing them; 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 in some cases we value the seeing quite apart from what we might learn. This is often so 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.

Paintings 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.

To be sure, 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 rather of a model dredged up from the bottom of the lake which was once used in making a movie about it (as I recall). 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. 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.

Even when one looks at photographs that 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. 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. In general, except in 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.

A major source of the confusion infecting writings about photography and film is failure to recognize and distinguish clearly between the special kind of seeing that actually occurs, and the ordinary kind of seeing that only fictionally takes place, between a viewer's really seeing something through a photograph, and its being fictional that he sees it 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.

Let's look now at the familiar challenges to the idea that photography differs essentially from painting, and that there is something especially realistic about photographs.

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.

If the point were one about how photographs look there would be no essential difference between photographs and paintings. Chuck Close's "Super-Realist" *Big Self-Portrait* (fig. 3) is virtually indistinguishable from a photograph. Suppose we see it 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 that is much deeper and more significant than the change that 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. 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 we see him.

This is a 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. But this is not the sort of illusion that is so often attributed to viewers, in the face of 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. 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 an actual killing was filmed. The obvious indications that a killing did not occur in his 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.

The debate about whether photography is special sometimes revolves around the question of whether

photographs are especially accurate. Some 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. 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 out of focus microscopes. The "distortions" or "inaccuracies" of photographs are no reason to deny that we see through them.

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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> If a person looks into a mirror and forms beliefs about the things reflected in it on the basis of what he sees, 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 objects.

Some objections focus on the idea that photographs owe their special status to their "mechanical," "automatic" origins, whereas paintings are "hand-made". 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 make photographs.<sup>7</sup> In any case the remarkable realism of photographs is supposed 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 that are caused by it in a purely "mechanical" manner. Objects cause their photographs and the visual experiences of people looking at them mechanically, so we see the objects through the photographs. 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" (Snyder and Allen, 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 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 view of the world but the photographer's. A photograph, no less than a painting, has a "subjective" point of view.

All this is beside the point. The manner in which things cause my visual experiences when I see them does not rule 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 show me things, and also enable me to see them, by making photographs? 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 something out 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 them myself. Photography can be an enormously expressive medium, but 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 that are built into the construction of the camera and our photographic processing techniques. There is nothing sacrosanct about the 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 that mirrors used in certain contexts are to be warped in a certain manner (e.g. 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.

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 and 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 we rely on the picture-maker's belief that there is a dinosaur in the case of the sketches 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 actually was there. We trust his judgment. Our information about the dinosaur is second hand. But we don't have 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, etc. 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, etc. 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, 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 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 picture would have been different (and so would our visual experiences when we look at the picture). This is why, in both cases, given that the picture is as it is, 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, even if it is not what he thinks. The artist draws his hallucination; the camera bypasses the photographer's hallucination and captures what is in the jungle.

Not all theories of perception postulate a strong link between perceiving and believing. 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. Paintings which have a counterfactual dependence on the scene portrayed lose it when the beliefs 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 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 he must have beliefs about it, and what connection there may be between his visual experiences and his beliefs.

A familiar pair of science fiction examples will clarify the difference.<sup>8</sup> Suppose that a neurosurgeon disconnects a patient's eyes from her optic nerves, and rigs up a device whereby he can stimulate the optic nerves at will. The doctor then stimulates the patient's nerves in ways corresponding to what he sees, with the result that the patient

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 the patient correct information and that the patient has every reason to trust him. The patient seems to be seeing things, and her visual experiences are caused by the things 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 one who is fitted with artificial prosthetic eyes. This patient does see. She is not relying in the relevant manner on anyone's beliefs about what she sees, although her 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 don't blind us.

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. (Not 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 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."

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\* This is an abbreviated version of "Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984): 246-277. Work on this paper was aided by fellowships

from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Stanford Humanities Center. I thank John G. Bennett, Robert Howell, David Lewis, Patrick Maynard, Christopher Peacocke, and Stephen White for helpful suggestions.

1 See Joel Snyder and Neil Allen, "Photography, Vision, and Representation," *Critical Inquiry* 2 (1975): 143-169.

2 André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley, 1967), p. 12. See also Rudolf Arnheim, *Toward a Psychology of Art* (Berkeley, 1967), p. 186.

3 See Bazin, pp. 14, 15; Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York, 1974), p. 43; Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, 2nd ed., [New York, 1979], p. 263).

4 I explain more thoroughly what I mean by "fictionality" in *Mimesis As Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

5 This example is a relative of David Lewis's case of the loose wire. "Veridical Hallucination and Prosthetic Vision," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 58 (1980), p. 244.

6 See Alvin I. Goldman. "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge," *The Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 771-791.

7 William Henry Fox Talbot, inventor of the calotype, claimed for the Lacock Abbey the distinction of being the first building "that was ever yet known to have drawn its own picture." (*The Pencil of Nature* [London, 1844-46], n. to pl. 15.) See also Bazin, pp. 12, 13; and Arnheim, "On the Nature of Photography," *Critical Inquiry* 1 (1974), p. 155.

8 Adapted from Lewis, pp. 243-244.

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### Suggestions for Further Reading

The items listed below are in addition to those cited in the text. They include several works on theoretical problems concerning the visual arts in general, as well as works dealing specifically with photography.

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Kendall L. Walton holds a B.A. in Philosophy from the University of California, Berkeley, and a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Cornell University. He joined the faculty of the Department of Philosophy at Michigan in 1965. He has served as the Department's Associate Chairman, and is currently the Director of Graduate Studies. Professor Walton's work explores connections between theoretical questions about the arts and issues of epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of mind. He has published some twenty-five



articles on pictorial representation, fiction and the emotions, the ontological status of fictional entities, photography and perception, conceptual schemes, the imagination, and aesthetics of music. His "Categories of Art" has been widely anthologized; and "Fearing Fictions" was selected for inclusion in *The Philosopher's Annual*. Harvard University Press will publish his *Mimesis As Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* in 1990. Professor Walton has held fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Stanford Humanities Center. He serves as a Trustee of the American Society for Aesthetics.

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The Department acknowledges with gratitude the following contributors during the period July 1, 1988 through June 30, 1989.

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Fig. 1.--Francisco Goya, *Tanto y mas* [Even worse], from *Los Desastres de la guerra* [The disasters of war], etching, 1810-14. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 1951 Purchase Fund. Phot. Museum.



Fig 2.--Timothy H. O'Sullivan, *Death on a Misty Morning*. Phot. Library of Congress.



Fig. 3.--Chuck Close, *Self-Portrait*, acrylic on canvas, 1968. Collection, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Art Center Acquisition Fund. Phot. Art Center.