

# 3

## Material vision

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Figure 3.1 P.C. Parekh, an Indian businessman, showing a photograph attached to the minutes of a business meeting, part of his own personal archive. Jamnagar, India, 1998

### 3.1 Object and representation

All I want is a photo in my wallet  
A small remembrance of something more solid  
All I want is a picture of you.

‘Picture This’ (Chris Stein/Deborah Harry, 1978)

Debbie Harry’s desires are both ubiquitous and unique: many of us carry photos in our wallets, yet each of us carries photographs that are uniquely meaningful to ourselves. The photo in my wallet is not the photo in your wallet. But is that creased and ragged-cornered photo-booth photograph in your wallet any less ‘solid’ than the person or persons it represents? Most photographs, films, videotapes and certain types of art objects represent or stand for the thing depicted, at least in

some contexts. With photography, as with most mechanical forms of reproduction, the thing depicted is a concrete thing, manifest in the world at a particular point in space-time – my lover, your dog, their garden. The object and its representation are linked indexically in a photograph; light reflected from the object causes chemical changes on the surface of the film, subsequent manipulation in the dark room notwithstanding. One material object is substantively linked to another material object. Practically speaking, the linkage lasts only for the fraction of a second it takes to expose the film. The death of a person does not cause all the photographic representations of them to fade; the destruction of a photograph does not cause the person depicted to die.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, in Euro-American society the idea of an enduring link between a person (or thing) and their representation, especially a photographic representation, is quite commonplace. Take the following familiar examples: pinning a picture of the autocratic boss to a dartboard and throwing darts at it; shredding a photograph of a lover who abandoned you; airbrushing a Party colleague who has fallen from favour from an official photograph of the Party faithful; tying a photograph of Princess Diana to the railings of Kensington Palace and laying flowers before it. In these and many similar examples, the initial link between the person and their photographic representation is not merely indexical but symbolic – and it is the symbolic linkage that endures. The photograph is not just a representation of a person, but a representation of a representation – the qualities or actions or knowledge associated with the person represented. It is a change or shift in the social relations between persons that causes action to be done to the photographic representation: he thinks he's so powerful, but I'll get him right between the eyes; she left me and destroyed our relationship, so I will shred her photograph; he was in the way on my rise to power so I had him removed; she brought beauty and pleasure into our lives but then died and left us, so we will adorn her photograph with beautiful but soon-fading flowers.

The symbolic linkage can be more banal, and less obviously a product of social relations. If I show my friends a photograph of my new Aston Martin, improbably purchased with the royalties I have received from this book, I am claiming something about the wealth and status I have, or aspire to. But as with all symbolic linkages, there has to be a common cultural field that we share in order to interpret the symbolism correctly, and we establish our co-presence in that cultural field through sociality, through the sharing of social relations. Social researchers need to be alert to this intertwining of the material, the symbolic, the social and the cultural; they also need to be alert to the contexts in which one element

appears to be privileged, and the social mechanisms which permit that privileging.

### 3.2 The materiality of visual forms

Similar to the need to distinguish between external and internal narratives in the reading of images, it is important for the social researcher to distinguish between the *form* of a visual image and the *content* of a visual image. While linked, form and content are at least analytically separable and it is often helpful to consider the extent to which form dictates or mediates content. In all cases of mechanical image production and reproduction, such as video and still or moving photography, as well as in many non-mechanical cases, the material characteristics of the form serve to shape or even constrain the possible content. Conversely, through paint or other non-mechanical media it is possible to represent both those things that can be seen with the naked eye and those that cannot (but see Latour 1988 on the rise of scientific rationalism and the consequent difficulty of representing 'heaven' in religious painting).

By the time of the development of still photography in the mid-nineteenth century, the possibility of photographing that which could not be seen had been both ideologically and mechanically circumscribed, and indeed special attention was and continues to be paid to photographic images which appear to breach this, such as Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths's images of fairies (the 'Cottingly Fairies') which so captivated Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, or the attempts of psychics and others to photograph ghosts, ectoplasm and the like (see Figure 3.2).<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, with marked exceptions which are generally recognized as such, film, video and photography serve to depict only a limited and finite range of all possible content, partly as a result of convention (for example, Jay Ruby's exploration of a genre of photography, post-mortem images, that was thought no longer to exist for reasons of taste rather than practicality [Ruby 1995a: 3]) and partly as a result of material constraint. Thus the social researcher should consider in advance of research both what kind of images she might possibly encounter, as well as the various media that may be encountered.

In considering the relationship between form and content, attention should also be paid to the extent – if any – to which one is privileged over the other in any particular social context. Attention paid to the materiality of the visual image, and the materiality of its context, can serve to illuminate the distinctive texture of social relations in which it is performing its work. In a survey of Catholic homes in southern Europe a



Figure 3.2 One of the 'Cottingly Fairy' photographs: a fairy offers harebells to Elsie Wright. Photographer: Frances Griffiths

researcher might expect to encounter images of the Madonna. But in one home she might find a framed chromolithograph of Mary and her angels

hung on the wall over the bed, in another she might find a photograph of a particular statue of the Virgin to which the householders accord special respect tucked into the corner of the frame of another picture, and in yet another she might be shown a damp patch on the wall of the kitchen that forms the rough outline of a woman praying and which the householders and their neighbours sincerely believe to be a divine apparition. The social relations surrounding and enmeshing the images will be very different in each case. In the first, the medium is commonplace and its material form probably of little concern to the householders: for them, the content is what matters. In the second, the householders have formed a particular relationship with a material object – a specific statue of the Virgin at a certain pilgrimage shrine – and they represent that relationship through another material object, the photograph. In the third, the unusual material form is what animates what is otherwise commonplace content, and this physical form will bring about a whole train of social relationships involving the Church hierarchy, the press, visiting pilgrims and the like.

While this example is both hypothetical and (in the last case) unusual, some researchers have used the form versus content distinction to problematize the ‘meaning’ ascribed to a visual image. For example, in 1996 the National Gallery in London organized an exhibition focused on a single painting: John Constable’s ‘The Cornfield’ (1826). Prior to the exhibition, the organizer and staff of the Gallery used notices in a local newspaper and next to the painting itself in the Gallery to find members of the public who had reproductions of the painting in their homes. Some of these reproductions then became part of the exhibition, together with a videotape in which people described what the painting (or their reproduction thereof) meant to them (Chaplin 1998: 303–4). The selected reproductions were in a variety of media but were typically utilitarian objects decorated with a reproduction of a part or the whole of the painting: tea towels, plates, firescreens, thimbles, clocks, wallpaper.<sup>3</sup>

One, perhaps not terribly surprising, finding from this exercise was that some of the 45 people who answered the newspaper advertisement ‘were unaware of the existence of the original painting and had never heard of John Constable’ (Chaplin 1998: 303). The domestic objects, even if not used for their functional purpose but displayed ornamentally (as doubtless the decorated plates and thimbles were), were part of an assemblage of material items within the home that conveyed meaning in conversation with one another, and with their owners and their visitors. Vague yet comforting associations of a golden rural past, of leisure and days out in the country, of childhood innocence, triggered by the

reproduced content of the known or unidentified original painting are combined with the class and status imperatives to maintain a nice, well-ordered and well-decorated home triggered by the material form, existence and display of the decorated objects. It is the consumption of material goods and their decorative content that would appear to give meaning to these visual artefacts, not merely their association with what Alfred Gell has called 'the art cult' (Gell 1992: 42; see also Gell 1998: 62–4, 97).

### 3.2.1 *Displaying family photographs*

In the example above, the material forms of the Constable reproduction place their owners in a particular relation to the art world that gives the painting meaning, even if this place is rather peripheral prior to the 1996 exhibition. Chaplin, however, does not discuss how these visual images stand in relation to other visual images in their homes, nor how they mediate or represent relationships between their owners and others in their more immediate social environment.

David Morley cites a number of studies to show that domestic television sets frequently act as a dual medium for the display of visual images, as there is a common tendency to place a variety of physical objects on top of the set, especially photographs – the viewer thus receiving two images for the price of one, as it were (Morley 1995: 182 ff.). In Euro-America the photographs displayed on the top of television sets are commonly family photographs, very often studio portraits or at least posed pictures representing important life cycle events, as opposed to holiday snapshots which tend to be hidden away for more intimate consumption in albums. From my own observations, British middle class householders rarely make a distinction in their displays between photographs of the living and photographs of the dead, a marked contrast to photographic displays I have observed in India. My mother, for example, now elderly and living in the suburbs of a northern town, has on her television set a photograph of her deceased husband with her still living sister, taken on the occasion of my graduation, several photographs of her only grandchild as a child (though the 'child' is now a teenager), and a graduation photograph of her daughter who later died, together with a photograph of the still-living spouse. My brother and I – both childless – are not represented at all, though she told me this was simply because we had not given her photographs of ourselves. For all of these images, as far as I can establish, the frames around the photographs are cheap high street items, selected only for their ability to fit the photograph and

be self-standing on the top of the set but otherwise unmarked, sociologically speaking. Content is all, and form or medium entirely subsidiary. To some extent the television set top acts as a kind of shrine for the display of a family's significant images and other objects such as china ornaments and holiday souvenirs, the bounded and pier-like surface acting as a more suitable space than a run of shelves or another item of furniture that is already designed to hold objects, such as a table or sideboard. Mantelpieces, in homes that have them, may serve a similar shrine-like function.

In Indian homes by contrast I have never seen family photographs displayed on a television set, though I don't doubt that some are as television sets themselves become more prevalent. More particularly, photographs of the living are also rarely on show in any context, but are generally confined to albums (the ubiquitous wedding album) or tucked away in their envelopes in drawers or boxes (day trip snapshots, photographs sent by relatives overseas). Photographs of the dead, however, are frequently displayed,<sup>4</sup> as are photographs or other visual representations of sacred places – shrines, temples, mosques – together with chromolithographs of divinities and other sacred persons where appropriate. In most of these cases the materiality of the image is marked, sometimes quite literally. In relatively wealthier urban homes I have visited in western India, where access to studio portrait photography was possible during the past few decades, a standard practice is to enlarge a studio photograph of the deceased person in the prime of life, sometimes to have it hand coloured, and then to frame and hang it on the wall in a prominent position. In Hindu homes it is common to hang a garland of fresh or artificial flowers around the frame of the image on the anniversary of the death of the person. Incense may be burned in front of such photographs, and the foreheads of those represented may be dotted with vermilion or sandalwood paste.<sup>5</sup> Photographic images of the dead, intermingled with photographic and artistic representations of sacred places and persons, can also be found away from the domestic context – in the meeting halls of religious groups and caste communities, for example (where the dead will be revered religious or community leaders). In cases such as these the content of the images is obviously important, but so too is the material form around and upon which social acts are performed. In the domestic context there is little or no cultural space for a 'mere' photograph of a living family member.

In his work on the social production and consumption of photography in central India the anthropologist Christopher Pinney provides a number of related examples from a village community, one with less access to wealth and the material trappings of urban domestic life than my own

informants. He found no correlation between the wealth or status (i.e. caste status) of the villagers and the number of photographs they might have displayed, nor in the arrangement of such photographs. He did, however, find a number of framed groups of images hung on the walls of some homes (Pinney 1997: 154–64). These can be seen as biographical narratives of an individual or family and therefore do include photographs of the still living. They are not, however, family photographs in the Euro-American sense. Typically, for example, the assemblies of images will also include photographs or chromolithographs of deities or shrines, or of family members visiting such shrines or performing other auspicious acts. All in all, the physical association between the variety of images in a single frame is the point of the display rather than it being an attempt to provide a catalogue of relatives.

Clearly a great deal more can be said about family photographs, their use, their circulation and so forth, but I believe the discussion above should be sufficient to alert the social researcher to a consideration of their materiality; or, as has recently come to be the case, their apparent immateriality. In the late 1990s computer manufacturers began a series of aggressive campaigns to market relatively cheap multimedia computers to domestic consumers for recreational use (rather than the office-like management of home finances, for example). A persistent theme in many advertising campaigns, particularly around Christmas time, was the ability offered by the technology to send digitized photographs and video clips to distant family members. With a multimedia computer, a digital camera and access to the Internet (the latter two also aggressively marketed at this time) the possibility was offered of an archive of family photographs, freely exchanged between family members and others, that had no apparent physical form whatsoever. In Section 3.5 below I will address some of the problems that computer-based and other digital media pose for those attempting to incorporate a material perspective into their study of visual images. First, however, I wish to consider another aspect of the materiality of visual objects: their commodification and exchange.

### 3.3 Exchanged goods

One further social attribute of family photographs, beyond their capacity to memorialize the dead and to display to the living, is their role in social exchange, generally intra-familial exchange. On the whole, photographs do not serve as the opening tokens in exchange relationships, but they most certainly serve to maintain relationships.<sup>6</sup> They distinctively do this