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Pictures and Photographs

THERE IS NO established tradition or discipline of film aesthetics, as there is for theater or painting. But opinions are beginning to coalesce along the lines of several important contemporary debates out of which an aesthetics of the film may soon emerge. The most important of these concerns the question of film realism. Spokesmen for cinematic realism include some of the best known figures in film criticism: Panofsky, Bazin, Kracauer, and more recently, Stanley Cavell.

According to these writers, the most striking feature of film, and that which differentiates it most dramatically from other art forms, is its complete realism, the neutral objectivity of the film representation of reality. Other arts attempt to represent reality accurately, but they are limited by the necessity of an indirect representation of the world through the intermediary of a subjective point of view and an artistic medium which transform the object and thereby distort its true, objective character. In other art forms, then, we never get the object itself, but only the object *as* perceived by the artist and *as* it emerges through the artistic medium of word, line, texture, color, etc. Film, on the other hand, according to this view, presents us with the object itself. As Panofsky says,

> The processes of all the earlier representational arts start from an idealistic conception of the world. These arts start from an idea to be projected into matter and not with objects in the physical world. The cinema . . . , on the other

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hand, organizes material things and persons into a composition that receives its style, not so much by an interpretation in the artist's mind, but by the actual manipulation of physical objects. The medium of the movies is reality as such.[1]

Bazin says of still photographs that "in spite of any objections the critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented." [2] According to Bazin, what we see in a photograph is a piece of reality which took place in the past, hence "re-presented," and which is and is understood to be part of the larger context of the actual world as it was at that point in time. And finally, the most widely discussed film theorist today, Kracauer, says that "film . . . is uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality and, hence, gravitates toward it; . . . it must always be kept in mind that the most creative film maker is much less independent of nature in the raw than the painter or poet; that his creativity manifests itself in letting nature in and penetrating it." [3]

Cavell takes as his point of departure his basic agreement with Panofsky and Bazin that the medium of the movies is physical reality itself. This, then, is one side of the contemporary debate, stressing the objectivity of film and playing down subjective interference. The other side is represented by Rudolf Arnheim and, more recently, Lincoln Johnson,[4] who argue that film is like the other arts in conveying a sense of reality only indirectly through the interference of subjective point of view and artistic medium. This largely philosophical debate

is given a certain urgency by the intense controversy going on in film circles today, as between Kracauer enthusiasts and Jordan Belson. In what follows I will argue that the Arnheim-Johnson side of the debate is more nearly correct than the Cavell-Panofsky-Bazin side. Several years ago I argued that Goodman erred in exaggerating the role of conventional rules in artistic representation; here I find Cavell erring in the opposite direction, underestimating the role of cinematic convention.

I will begin by briefly sketching Cavell's position in *The World Viewed*. He agrees with Panofsky's claim that the medium of film is physical reality, proof of which includes the fact that in remembering films we remember the objects depicted therein. Of course, as he points out, we are not literally presented with physical objects, but only with photographs *of* physical objects. Still, Cavell argues, when we analyze carefully the relation of photo to physical object we cannot find any intermediary, such as "sense data" or "likeness," through which the photo presents the object. This, Cavell argues, is how film differs from painting. A painting of a dog presents us with a likeness of a dog, rather than the dog itself, while "a photograph does not present us with 'likenesses' of things; it presents us, we want to say, with the things themselves." [5]

Borrowing a line from Wittgenstein's and Austin's analysis of emotion as embodied in, rather than associated with, emotional expression, Cavell argues that whatever middleman we try to place between the photo and the physical object will fail because the connection between them is too close — there is no gap between them large enough to fit any intermediary, such as "sight" or "sense data." In the case of sound, on the other hand, we do have a possible intermediary. We say, for example, that we hear the "sound" of a train. So a recording would present the *sound* of a train, rather than the train itself. But the analogy won't work, Cavell says, in the case of vision. I don't see a sight of an object; I see the object. Therefore, it makes no more sense to say that in looking at a *photograph* I see a *sight* of an object. Where we do speak of "sights" in ordinary English, sights *are* physical objects, though very large ones, like the Grand Canyon. "Objects don't *make* sights, or *have* sights. I feel like saying: Objects are too *close* to their sights to give them up for reproducing; in order to reproduce the sights . . . you have to reproduce *them*." [6] Those familiar with Cavell's doctoral dissertation (Harvard, 1961) will recall his analysis there of the similar argument of Wittgenstein concerning symptoms and criteria of emotion in *The Blue and Brown Books* which Austin later employed in distinguishing anger from signs of anger in "Other Minds." Even Bazin's suggestion of the photo as a "mold" is not direct enough, for this analogy implies "clear procedures for getting *rid* of their originals, whereas in a photograph, the original is still as present as it ever was." [7] Anything standing in the way of or being substituted for the object, simply will not do.

Photographs escape subjectivity, then, and the reason they do is that they are made mechanically, or as Cavell says, "automatically." It is this, Cavell argues, which frees us at long last from subjectivity in the artistic representation of the world.

> So far as photography satisfied a wish, it satisfied a wish not confined to painters, but the human wish, intensifying in the West since the Reformation, to escape subjectivity and metaphysical isolation—a wish for the power to reach the world.[8]

By "automatism" Cavell means that the photographic image is not "*hand*-made," [9] but mechanically produced through the causal interaction of light and the physical properties of the object, along with the physico-chemical properties of the camera and the film. The reason a photograph is a photograph of Ian Smith rather than John Vorster is that Smith rather than Vorster was part of a causal chain which produced the photograph. The light waves which entered the lens and chemically interacted with the film were light waves reflected off of Smith and not Vorster. Later I will refer to this as the *causal* criterion of "is a photograph of." As Cavell puts it, "Photography overcame subjectivity in a way undreamed of by painting, . . . by automatism, by removing the human agent from the task of reproduction." [10]

Again, Cavell does not mean that a photo of a dog is a dog. He means that when we describe what it is a photo of, the best we can come up with is the name for the object itself. The photo differs from what it is of in two ways: in our absence from it (traditionally known as aesthetic "distance") and in the absence of the "existence" of the object in the photograph. Concerning the first point, Cavell writes,

> One could . . . say that photography was never in competition with painting. What happened was that at some point the quest for visual reality . . . split apart. To maintain conviction in our connection with reality, to maintain our presentness, painting accepts the recession of the world. Photography maintains the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it. The reality in a photograph is present to me while I am not present to it; and a world . . . to which I am . . . not present . . . is a world past.[11]

A painting is subjectively biased, and so we are present to the painting to the extent that these biases are our own. A photograph is objectively realistic though we are not ourselves present before the object at the moment the picture was taken. Indeed, these objects may have radically altered or even ceased to exist.

The second point, concerning "existence," is closely related. "That the projected world does not exist (now) is its only difference from reality. (There is no feature, or set of features, in which it differs. Existence is not a predicate.)"[12] Again, those familiar with Cavell's dissertation will recognize the language. In talking about Wittgensteinian criteria of emotion, Cavell argued earlier that even where the person was acting or faking, we would have no other way to describe his behavior than in terms of the emotion in question. The only difference between genuine and faked emotion, he argued, is one of existence. In meaning, or essence they are identical. So, in the case of a photograph. When asked to say what it is a photo of, we cannot do better than, "Ian Smith." And the only difference between this Smith and the one now conferring with colleagues in Salisbury is that only the latter "exists." By these two criteria Cavell comes very close to Plato's famous analogy of art to a mirror image.

The fact that we know it's a mirror image distances us from the object represented which is just like its mirror image except that it alone exists beyond the mirror.

A kind of proof for this which Cavell offers is that the representational content of a painting, but not a photograph, ends at the edges of its frame and goes no deeper than the background actually shown. The painted scene is not perceived as part of a larger world, while a photograph is always seen as a piece of a larger reality lifted out of context.

> You can always ask, pointing to an object in a photograph—a building, say—what lies behind it, totally obscured by it. This only accidentally makes sense when asked of an object in a painting. You can always ask, of an area photographed, what lies adjacent to that area, beyond the frame. This generally makes no sense asked of a painting.[13]

The great power of photography, and more so of cinema, is therefore that it allows the objects in the world to speak for themselves, rather than be manipulated by the artist in the artistic medium to say what the artist wants them to say. It is a possibility of the cinematic medium, Cavell says, "to let the world happen, to let its parts draw attention to themselves according to their natural weight."[14]

Looking first at Cavell's arguments, before proceeding to a more general diagnosis of this realist posture, Cavell seems to me to fail to draw the distinction he wants between painting and photography. Many of the considerations he raises turn on the fact, which I fully accept, that we describe the content of photographs in our ordinary physical object language. But this is not due, as Cavell supposes, to anything peculiar to photographs, but to the general economy of a natural language in describing all representational content — whether in paintings, stories, movies, or photographs. By a kind of linguistic Occam's Razor, we don't invent a new language for every occasion but extend the object language we have to new situations, in a way which is usually so widely accepted as to avoid misunderstanding. But this holds for our description of all representational arts. The story of Hansel and

Gretel is about a boy and his sister; Picasso's *Weeping Woman* is about a weeping woman, etc.

So Cavell's argument that photos are unique in being immediately of objects, rather than sights, likenesses or sense data is off the track. Picasso's painting is not of the sight of a weeping woman, but simply of a weeping woman. This provides a better explanation for the fact Cavell alludes to that we remember films in terms of the objects depicted. We tend to remember things generally as we are able to describe them (we remember very little, for example, of our lives before we learned to talk). So we describe all the representational arts, whether presently before us or in recollection, in the ordinary object language because that is all most of us have. But we do the same with paintings and stories. "Surely you remember *Night Cafe,* a bartender standing near a pool table in the center of a cafe, with small groups of customers slumped over tables along the sides." "You know, the Hemingway story about an old fisherman who finally lands the big one he has dreamed about only to be eaten by sharks, etc."

Photographs most certainly do *not* escape subjectivity. Less so do movies. We cannot look at Civil War photographs or 1930s Hollywood movies without being struck with the overwhelming sense of period style. The same is becoming true of the backlighting and the stop-action cliches of the 1960s (*The Knack,* for example, or early Beatles' films, such as *Hard Day's Night*). Indeed, it is precisely to capture this photographic style which has inspired many of the "New" or "Photo Realist" *painters,* such as Goings, Mahaffey, and Estes. Bert Stern's *Marilyn Monroe,* 1968, is an interesting example of a *photograph* which captures a photographic style popular in the 1950s. And many of our popular movies of the mid-seventies capitalize and exploit the period style of earlier movies.

Through the selection of subject, angle, amount, and direction of light, background, sharpness of focus, and light-dark contrast — in all these ways the photographer represents the object from a subjective point of view, expressive of feeling and mood. The photo-

graphic subject can indeed be made to say whatever the photographer wants it to say. Nilsson's *Scissors,* for example, is organic, which the real pair of scissors was not. Not to mention the case most damaging to Cavell's objectivist thesis, that of radically nonrepresentational art photography in which it is impossible even to identify the real object, as in Minor White's *Birdlime and Surf* and the recent films of Jordan Belson, who says of his work,

> My camera is an inner camera which doesn't do very well when it points out at external reality. I'm trying to focus on something, bring it back alive from the uncharted areas of the inner image, inner space.[15]

At the extreme end of nonrepresentational cinema are experimental films, like George Semsel's *Film Infinity,* in which the image has been punched, scratched, or painted on film which was never placed in a camera.

Nor is there any difference I can see between painting and photography concerning the presumed world beyond the edges and behind the presented object. In Raphael's painting of the Holy Family in *The Alba Madonna,* there is a clear presumption that the pastoral scene continues beyond the edges of the painting, that what we see is part of a broader landscape of the same kind. Just as clearly the painting excludes a stretch of the Chicago "El" rising a few feet off to the left of young John the Baptist. Picasso's *Weeping Woman* is similarly understood to be in a room. This is precisely why the background is presented as it is; enough is indicated to suggest the broader setting not shown but clearly represented and highly important for the representational and expressive meaning of the work — a feeling of calm and repose in the Raphael and a sense of privacy and withdrawal in the Picasso. Anything in the Picasso painting which suggested that the scene takes place in a group-therapy session would spoil its effect (but, like the Holy Family under the "El," might create another effect, one perhaps of irony).

What I think Cavell is really getting at is that some photographs do invite us to explore objects in much the same way we visually explore real objects, discovering for our-

selves their peculiar thingness. But this is a *style* of photography which happens to have been popular a few years ago, not the abandonment of artistic style. It is an artistic rejection of one convention of photography (the "arty" photography of the '40s and '50s, e.g., Nilsson) and an endorsement of another conception of photography (the New Realism). It is therefore an artistic *statement about* thinghood, not a subjective withdrawal to let the things speak for themselves. This kind of statement can also be made in paintings (Dürer, Chuck Close, Richard McLean, Alan Turner, Noel Mahaffey, Richard Estes, Ralph Goings) and in stories (Butor, Robbe-Grillet). There are degrees of realism and abstraction in all the representational arts. Some photographs are almost totally abstract (White's *Birdlime and Surf,* and Kevin Kampman's *Old Man's Cave* and Belson's *Samadhi*), while some paintings are obsessively devoted to object detail and texture (the "Photo Realist" painters). And all points are represented along this continuum (Nakahara, Nilsson, Callahn, and Stern). It may be that photography and cinema have a greater affinity for thingly interest than painting or fiction (and it may be for this reason, as Glynis Lee points out,[16] that Robbe-Grillet has turned almost exclusively to film as an artistic medium). But this in no way detracts from the fact that this is an artistic, subjective, anthropomorphic *statement about* objects, stating, for example, as Sartre did in *Nausea,* that objects exist independently of us, unheeding, uncaring, and indifferent to us, and carrying with it obvious emotional overtones of *our* loneliness, defiance, or indifference. Ironically, even to say, as Robbe-Grillet does, "they just *are!*" is a powerful human comment on nonhuman reality and its relation to us.

Like Cavell, I have been going to the movies for a long time and I too find them visually convincing. But, unlike Cavell, I attribute this to my own complete cultural immersion in cinematic conventions, not to the absence of these conventions.

More generally, I think Cavell, Bazin, Panofsky, and Kracauer exaggerate the transparent objectivity of photography and cinema, and the reason they do is that they fail to recognize an important ambiguity in "is a photograph of." To be a photograph, I will argue, requires *two* things. By stressing only one of these the realist account is therefore exaggerated and inadequate. The two requirements are that the photograph must 1) be a picture of X, and 2) be causally related to X. Cavell, et al. emphasize the second, and by ignoring the first fail to give a complete analysis.

By "is a picture of" I mean "is a representation of." Of course, this is itself a notoriously difficult notion to define. But I hope we have some rough sense of it, at least, and whatever more precisely we mean or ought to mean by it, I want to say that the full meaning of "is a photograph of" must include it. To take a stab at defining what I mean by representation, let me specify at least some of the necessary conditions, after which we can argue whether these are the right ones, enough of them, and what exactly *they* mean. A pictorial representation is a two dimensional image intended as a visual correlate of an object (as evidenced, for example, by its identification in the language used to describe the object), an intention which is likely to be understood and accepted by others (i.e., be visually convincing) because it conforms to the pictorial conventions of that group, conventions which, unlike linguistic conventions, translate at least one visual correlate of the object onto a two dimensional plane. The naive view that it is also a likeness of, or resembles the object I take to be a shorthand and confused version of the acceptability part of the above definition, and indicates the speaker's wholehearted immersion in the conventions of that society and the success of the representation in conforming to those conventions.

A photograph is not *just* a picture, but it *is* a picture. It is a special sort of picture because of the causal criterion on which Cavell and others lay so much stress. Not only are photographs causally produced, but we *know* they are, and this knowledge enters into our approach to and perception of photographs. This means, among other things (which Cavell interestingly does not mention), that we agree that there are many

details in a photograph not intended by the photographer, but unavoidably, necessarily there because of the object. This is why photographs can be used as evidence in a court of law. An amateur film buff shoots some footage of the U.S. President's motorcade in Dallas over ten years ago and experts are still studying the film for evidence of multiple assassins, etc. from details of the film the cameraman had no notion of whatever. In Grant Woods's painting, *American Gothic,* on the other hand, the loose strand of the woman's hair is significant because it is presumed to be intentional, and this too has to do with our knowledge of how paintings are made. That strand of hair had to be hand-painted, so we presume that there is a reason for it, especially as it conflicts with the general mood of moral rigidity in the rest of the picture.

So I accept the causal criterion. Where I disagree with Cavell is that I think "is a photograph of" ambiguously includes the representational criterion as well. That is, normally, or better, in the paradigm case, a photograph is and is seen to be causally related to the object it is a photo of, and it is also accepted as a *picture* of that object. But these two criteria needn't go together, and when either one is present without the other we find ourselves in a quandary whether to say it is a photograph of X or not.

Is a photograph taken one inch from Ian Smith's forehead a "photograph of Ian Smith?" The causal requirement is met but not the representational requirement. Or we can think of examples in which the reverse holds, photographs which represent (are considered pictures of) what they were not caused by. A newspaper photograph of "Zimbabwe freedom fighters" turns out to have been taken in Angola two years earlier. If we don't know this we assume the picture is of Rhodesian guerrillas because it appears in a *New York Times* article about the Rhodesian insurgency. Our quandary over the first example, and our willingness to accept the second, indicates that "is a photograph of" includes both representational and causal requirements. When one or

other is absent, we feel somewhat inclined to say it is a photograph of X because of the criterion which is present, but we also feel somewhat inclined to say it is not because of the other criterion which is absent. Of course, if we *know* the true facts in the second case we will rescind our claim that it is a photograph of Rhodesian guerrillas. But the fact that we first accepted it as such shows that the causal history of a photograph is ordinarily *presumed* knowledge garnered largely from the representational content of the photograph itself and the context in which it is placed (title, surrounding text, news background, etc.). One of the best known photographs of the Vietnam war (by Phillip Harrington) of a GI emerging from a tank with a peace sign on his helmet was actually taken in West Germany. But this in no way prevented it from counting as a *picture* of a GI in Vietnam, and, in the absence of this bit of causal history, this did not prevent it from counting as a *photograph* of a GI in Vietnam.

Notice that while it is true that in describing photographs we use an object language, we tend to use common nouns of general types of things more often than proper nouns of particular people and places. It is a photograph of an old man sunning himself, a girl and her boyfriend, a soldier, or a mother and her child. In choosing the right descriptive label we look to the representational content. In a photo study of mother and child, it may turn out that the causal woman (the model) is not the mother of the child at all, or that "the child" is only a doll. Imagine a photograph of a lone pine tree against a background of snow-covered fields as a photograph of the Battle of the Bulge (Christmas Eve, 1944). It represents a placid natural scene; it is causally quite different. Or, a photograph of a lake surrounded by boulders and trees as a picture of New York City (i.e., causally of Central Park). Because the representational content of a photograph is usually of a general nature (i.e., a photo of "a nurse" rather than "Jane Smith"), and thus, as Aristotle would say, the *kind* of thing which happens or might happen, the

photograph represents the photographer's *idea of* the object. Thus, the difference between a photograph of X and X itself is not "existence," but, if we must use this Latinizing dichotomy, "essence."

Even if we accept the causal criterion as primary, we still have to choose among many causally correct candidates the most appropriate label, and this will obviously depend on its representational appropriateness. Which is the best description in our earlier example, "Ian Smith," "Smith's face," "Smith's forehead," "a person's forehead," "a person's face," "human skin," or what? If the last seems better, why does it? Because that is what the photograph is a *picture* of; it is the best description of what it *represents*. On the other hand, a photo causally of Smith's face does count as a photo of Smith because our representational conventions dictate that a person's identity is largely determined by his face.

Notice to what a large extent photographs follow pictorial conventions. First, even to be seen as a photo of an object one has to know a great deal about pictorial conventions. There are, of course, peoples in the world today who do not initially see photos *as* photos of objects. In "Languages of Art" [17] I explored these conventions in some detail; for now I would like to simply mention the main convention, which is to look *through* the picture plane as though one were looking through a pane of glass at an object some distance behind the picture plane.

There is also an important group of "gestalt" or compositional conventions which apply equally to painting and to photographic representation, all of which must be learned and are not perceived universally, cross-culturally. These include 1) "figure-ground," the convention that a picture is a picture of only one thing (or event) to be picked out against a background of other visually identifiable objects (for example, it is a picture of a girl, although there is also a recognizable tree, house and moving car in the background), 2) the object or event depicted is the one which dominates the picture plane in size,

centrality or objective importance, 3) that the displayed background is typical of the surrounding background not shown (thus the photograph causally of Central Park is representationally of a wooded wilderness), and 4) "closure," the identity of the object is determined as that which is most likely from contextual clues shown in the picture. A photograph of a young person carrying books along a tree-lined walk will tend to be seen as representing a student even though it might have been a delivery person bringing an order of books up the lawn of a large suburban home. An interesting exception to these conventions are photographs of scenic beauty. This is a separate genre with its own conventions, deriving historically from the eighteenth-century interest in the "picturesque." It was not always obvious that a picture of fields and water and trees, without people, was of any interest.

Cinematic illusion depends in many cases on getting the desired representational content without the causal correlate (usually to save money). So a photo of a man dressed in jeans and a Stetson on a horse surrounded by rocks and sagebrush is a picture of a cowboy out West, though causally the man is in fact a second-rate actor on his first horse in an indoor movie set. A woman holding a child will be understood as the child's mother; a man and woman alone together in the moonlight will be read as lovers; an older woman wearing a scarf over her head and holding a hoe becomes the representation of a worker, and so on, though causally counter to fact in each case. All of these have been so thoroughly exploited in Hollywood for decades they are now clichés. Even abstract, "fantasy" films are often causally of quite different objects. So, for example, the abstract swirl of color and shape at the very beginning of the movie version of *West Side Story* is causally of trees in a city park.[18]

This is why a photograph taken of a 1974 Lion's Club meeting in Columbus, Ohio will be more readily accepted as a photo of the 1977 Dental Convention in Chicago's Palmer House than a photo actually taken

there during the convention of one of the hotel's large potted plants, a film of which could conceivably be used as part of a low-budget Tarzan movie. The photo of the potted plant is not just a bad photograph of the Dental Convention; it isn't one at all, the reason being that while it meets the causal criterion it fails to meet the representational criterion. Of course, one might object that I am being unfair, that if the causal object were really part of the Dental Convention it *would* be a photo of the convention. But how do we know what to choose among all the things going on at the convention as being the best causal object? Simply, I suggest, what we judge to be the most *representative*. Individual photos of each participant won't do, nor will a photo of a small group having lunch in the hotel's cafe (not by itself); it must be something which we already feel looks like a convention — groups of well-dressed people with name-tags milling about a large hall, etc. In short, representational photographs cannot avoid what Panofsky called an "idealistic conception of the world."

[1] Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Moving Pictures," in *Film* (Daniel Talbot, ed.) New York, 1959, p. 31.

[2] Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema?* (Hugh Gray, trans.) Berkeley, 1967, pp. 13–14.

[3] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film.* New York, 1960, p. 40.

[4] Lincoln Johnson, *Film.* New York, 1974.

[5] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed.* New York, 1971, p. 17.

[6] Ibid., p. 20.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., p. 21.

[9] Ibid., p. 20.

[10] Ibid., p. 23.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., p. 25.

[15] Jordan Belson, "The Film Art of Jordan Belson" (interview with Larry Sturhahn), *Film-makers Newsletter,* May 1975, p. 23.

[16] Glynis Lee, *Robbe-Grillet and the French New Novel.* M.A. thesis, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, 1975.

[17] *The British Journal of Aesthetics,* v. 14, no. 2, Spring 1974.

[18] Linwood Dunn, in a talk given at the Athens International Film Festival, Athens, Ohio, 1975.