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Portraits in painting and photography

Cynthia Freeland

Abstract   This article addresses the portrait as a philosophical form of art. Portraits seek to render the subjective objectively visible. In portraiture two fundamental aims come into conflict: the *revelatory* aim of faithfulness to the subject, and the *creative* aim of artistic expression. In the first part of my paper, studying works by Rembrandt, I develop a typology of four different things that can be meant when speaking of an image's power to show a person: accuracy, testimony of presence, emotional characterization, or revelation of the essential "air" (to use Roland Barthes' term). In the second half of my paper this typology is applied to examples from painting and photography to explore how the two media might differ. I argue that, despite photography's alleged 'realism' and 'transparency,' it allows for artistic portraiture and presents the same basic conflict between portraiture's two aims, the revelatory and the expressive.

My paper will address the portrait, a genre that is surprisingly under-examined in aesthetics—especially in relation to its importance in art history. I find such neglect odd, because the more I think about portraiture, the more philosophical problems the genre seems to raise. Our discipline is still struggling with the notorious mind/body problem, something portraiture promises to resolve through its very nature: rendering the subjective objectively visible. Hence this would appear to be a thoroughly philosophical form of art.

It has often been observed that portraiture has two fundamental aims that can conflict: a *revelatory* aim, requiring accuracy and faithfulness to the subject, and a

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creative aim, presupposing artistic expression and freedom.[1] Matisse spoke in favor of the latter aim:

> The art of portraiture... demands especial gifts of the artist, and the possibility of an almost total identification of the painter with his model....[2] I believe, however, that the essential expression of a work depends almost entirely on the projection of the feeling of the artist in relation to his model rather than in organic accuracy....[3]

A large question to be addressed, then, concerns the reconciliation of these two aims in both painting and photography. But before taking up that challenge, we must answer questions about the first aim. How can a subject, a person, ever be "revealed" in an image? What is meant by speaking in this way, and why do some images appear to do this more successfully than others? To address these questions, in the first part of my paper I will offer a brief history of portraiture in painting, including a quick look at one of its most respected practitioners, Rembrandt van Rijn. I will use this survey to develop a typology of four different things that can be meant when speaking of an image's power to show a person's essence or individuality.

In the second half of my paper, I will apply my typology to examples from the distinct media of painting and photography. I want to consider how the revelation of a subject is affected by the allegedly "transparent" nature of photography. If, as has often been claimed, photographs have a superior realism, then we can see their subjects directly. But this seems to alter the fundamental problematic of portraiture. The alleged realism or accuracy of the photograph should simplify the task of revealing the subject, thus affecting the basic tension that confronts the portrait artist between faithful rendering and artistic expression.

Against such a conclusion, I begin with the intuitive idea that not all photographs of people are equally successful as portraits. Despite the effects of its "transparency," photography, like painting, leaves room for the expressive aims and intentions of artists. Even if photography can better reveal individuality in some senses, these are not the only ones relevant to the goals of portraiture. At best, photography succeeds "naturally" in just two of my four possible ways of rendering the sitter's subjectivity. The others remain as ideals to be pursued through the photographic artist's skills.

My paper focuses on just one of the two broad, and apparently conflicting, aims of portraiture: rendering the subject. Still, much that I have to say is relevant to consideration of how artists carry out the second aim, creative expression. In my conclusion I will venture to say a few words more about this conflict and about how portraiture, in whatever medium, resolves it.

1 Portraiture as a genre of art

Portraits have been with us almost since the beginning of art in the sculptures and painted sarcophagi of the ancient Egyptian kings like Tutankhamen. The ancient Greeks and Romans used portraits, typically in sculpture, to record the character, social origin, or

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[1] Ricahrd (1991) On another duality, between the portrait as likeness and as idealization, see West (2004).

[2] See Matisse, Henri (1954). Quoted in Klein (2001)

[3] See Matisse, quoted in Klein, p. 23.

group membership of very important individuals.[4] Some of the earliest works now classified as portraits by art historians were funerary paintings done in Roman Egypt in the 3rd and 4th century, CE, deriving from cults of the dead.[5]

Norbert Schneider in *The Art of the Portrait* tells us that portraiture "came into its own" between the late Middle Ages and the seventeenth century, when members of various social groups, and not just princes, clergy, and nobles, began to sit for portraits.[6] As more people were depicted, more styles developed and the form evolved. From focusing on external details, portraits came to pay more attention to psychology, showing sitters' inner states and moral attitudes. Portraiture developed along with Renaissance and early modern conceptions of the human individual. It was not even until the time of Poussin that the term became specialized enough to be restricted to human (as opposed to animal) subjects.[7] As notions of identity evolved, so did aesthetic views about the appropriate aims of portraiture. Schneider reports that Hegel thought a portrait image should emphasize "the subject's general character and lasting spiritual qualities."[8]

Historians of portraiture have articulated specific modes in which painters worked to convey personality. In his book *Depiction* Michael Podro identifies three ways in which a painting relates to the figure or sitter. The artist can "rehearse scrutinizing the figure, ...rehearse the sense of movement within the figure... and a portrait may itself be a mode in which the sitter, with the cooperation of the painter, presents himself"[9] In the best cases, the portrait is supposed to involve reciprocity—a notion I shall return to below.

The portrait encompasses distinct and even contradictory aims: to reveal the sitter's subjectivity or self-conception; and to exhibit the artist's skill, expressive ability, and to some extent, views on art. But historically this second aim was more restricted than we now imagine, and reciprocity was not the dominant paradigm for the painter/sitter relationship. Even the greatest artists of the Renaissance and modern periods worked on commission and at the pleasure of patrons. Portraits documented status, and artists were paid to reveal power, wealth, and authority. It was not until the twentieth century that this changed, as Matisse was one of the first artists to do portraits with clear contracts specifying conditions for their execution. Sitters had to agree to his requirements during the process; their protection was that in the end they could reject the painting. Even so, Matisse remained frustrated by the expectations of sitters in portrait painting, and stopped painting portraits after 1924.

Given the tensions involved in faithful versus flattering rendering of the subject, it is not surprising that some of the earliest "personality-filled" portraits were *self*-portraits.[10] Especially noteworthy are those done by Albrecht Dürer near the end of the fifteenth century.

> Through Dürer the sub-genre of self-portraiture gained its independence from its dominant counterpart, portraiture. Dürer first accomplished this art-historical milestone in the *Self-Portrait of 1493*, now in the Louvre. Not only was Dürer a progenitor of the autonomous self-portrait, but, more than any of his predecessors, he

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[4] Walker (1995).

[5] Schneider (2002).

[6] Schneider (2002 p. 6).

[7] Schneider (2002, p.10).

[8] Schneider (2002, p.15).

[9] Podro (1998).

[10] Schneider (2002 p. 104).

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assigned his own self-image a significant place in his *oeuvre*, employing it as a tool of personal exploration as well as a public statement of his worldly ambitions.[11]

The conflict between demands of truth and expressive artistic vision can arise in self-portraiture, however. One painter who is often criticized for failing to capture or convey the subjectivity of the persons he depicted, for "reducing" persons to mere objects, is Cézanne. A typical comment is this one: "In the artist's eye, there was no difference between a human sitter and a bowl of fruit, except that the reflection value and the palette were different."[12] This attitude applies to his self-portraits just as much as to his depictions of others. It has been said, for example, that Cézanne treated his own head like a skull or an apple.[13] Merleau-Ponty, who admired Cézanne greatly, commented that, "Cézanne's painting suspends habits of thought and reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself. This is why Cézanne's people are strange, as if viewed by a creature of another species."[14]

Painters now continue to comment upon the tension that arises when they are painting people. The controversial contemporary artist John Currin asks,

> Have you ever experienced a moment when you can't believe how cold-hearted you are? It's an emotional moment. I've realized that it's analogous to painting—to paint you have to be very observant and cold about it. This act of portraying is, in a way, paradoxical. I have to have a feeling to paint, but as a painter I cannot have the feeling so much that I can't objectify the image.[15]

2 Subjectification

A key aim of portraiture is depicting the sitter so as to convey his or her "person-ness". This goal is central to our modern conception of the portrait, since "at the core lies the relation of viewer and viewed".[16] We could describe this aim by saying that the painter seeks to convey the subject's unique essence, character, thoughts and feelings, interior life, spiritual condition, individuality, personality, or emotional complexity. Just how this is done involves use of the varied techniques of portraiture to show many significant external aspects of a person, such as physiognomy, in addition to the depiction of features such as status and class through the use of props, clothing, pose and stance, composition and artistic style and medium.[17] But ultimately we expect a good portrait to convey the person's subjectivity. The sitter should appear to be autonomous and a distinct person, with unique thoughts and emotions. As a person, the sitter is embodied, but the self is there "in" the embodiment, and the artist must "realize", "concretize" or "objectify" it in the image.

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[11] See Platzman (2001).

[12] Pioch (2002).

[13] Platzman (2001 p. 181).

[14] Quoted by Merleau-Ponty (1945).

[15] Currin, John. Quoted in Rosenblum (2003).

[16] Podro (1998 p.106).

[17] See Schneider (2002 pp. 25–27) on how settings and props provided symbolic access to information about a subject's interests, moral beliefs, and notions of virtue.

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Thus, a second tension arises. Portrait painting invariably requires making the person, a subject, into an object. (In fact, this basic idea lies at the root of certain distinctions commonly made in art history, such as that between a portrait and the painting of a (mere) model.[18]) I want to reflect on the oddity of trying to capture the essence or subjectivity of a person within an image. Studies of actual portraits can help us understand more precisely how artists have succeeded at this, so I turn now to examples from one of history's greatest portrait artists, Rembrandt.

In his recent book *Rembrandt's Eye*, Simon Schama describes specific techniques the artist used for making his portrait subjects seem to "live". One such technique was composition. Schama says, "Increasingly, Rembrandt found himself experimenting with framing devices that, instead of containing the subject within a conventional picture space, could make it appear they were emerging through it, entering the 'real' space of the viewer."[19] Another example also involves the painter's use of lighting in the portrait. For example, he depicted a plain but wealthy woman as a noble, dignified subject by using rippling light and patterns of shadow and half-shadow. Schama comments, "Instead of being a liability, Agatha's milky face becomes the very picture of artlessness, the unpretentious saving grace of her fortune."[20]

Another way in which Rembrandt's portraits set the scene for more modern depictions of identity was by expressing the idea "that an identity might be most candidly exposed when caught *in medias res*, in the midst of things." Schama finds this approach typified in Rembrandt's "Young Man at His Desk" of 1631. We see a man who looks back at us as if surprised, glancing just slightly over his shoulder, with a pen poised over his text and "stubby fingers securing a writing sheet on the book". This technique of Rembrandt's "...anticipates photography not in any crude sense of duplication but in the faith that the entirety of a character can be implied by the revelation of a single instant."[21]

In other portraits Rembrandt reveals personality through a sitter's gestures. For example, Schama detects an inner dimension of conflict and resistance in a faithful wife in relation to her overbearing minister husband, revealed through the subtle depiction of her hand:

> But if her face speaks of patient resignation—the skin scoured pure, the hair pulled, skin-tight, into the cap, the thin-lipped mouth set against idle gossip, her hands say something else. The left hand in particular, with its veins standing out, the knuckles tensed, kneads and crumples the handkerchief, conveying the hard work of being perpetually on the receiving end of the Word.[22]

Another detail that specialists note is how Rembrandt depicts people's *eyes*. The artist conveyed the mercantile ambitions of fur trader Nicolaes Ruts in 1631 well through tiny details. In the painting he used "catchlights dancing in the pupils between slightly pinked inner eyelids as though Ruts had sacrificed his sleep for the good of the investors."[23] Or again, Rembrandt created an effect of "poignant venerability" in a painting of an

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[18] Podro (1998 p. 106).

[19] Schama (1999).

[20] See Schama (1999 p. 474).

[21] Schama (1999 p. 341).

[22] See Schama (1999 p. 480).

[23] Schama (1999 p. 337).

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eighty-three-year-old woman by placing the woman's weaker eye on the brighter side of her face to show a "slightly unfocussed melancholy".[24]

With these examples in mind, we can return to my question about what is meant when we speak about a portrait as revealing a subject's personality or essence. I suggest that portraits can show subjects in any of four ways (and sometimes in more than one of these ways at once): by being accurate likenesses; testimonies of presence; evocations of personality; or presentations of a subject's uniqueness.

3 Category 1. Likenesses

First, a portrait can be an accurate likeness if it renders the person distinguishable and recognizable. We could pick the person out of a crowd. This task is accomplished by some sub-genres of portraiture not held in any high regard, like the police photograph and the passport picture. This important early use of portraiture was recognized as a European achievement when Islamic miniature painters came into contact with works by Bellini and other Venetian artists in the late fifteenth century.[25] Members of the Ottoman court of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror were amazed by the realistic portraits of their ruler done by Bellini and Ferrara in 1480:

> When the [sultan] saw what Gentile was able to do with paint, he remained more wonderstruck and awed than ever before; on account of this, the sultan for his own part could not imagine anything else except that Gentile had "some spirit divine" behind him. And were it not for the fact that by law such exercises were forbidden, and that whoever worshipped statues was punished with death, the sultan would never have given leave to Gentile to depart, but instead would have honored him greatly and kept him near him.[26]

The portrait likeness will typically render the key aspects of a person's physiognomy or external appearance. Thus Rembrandt recorded the "plain" face of Agatha in his portrait of her, with its high forehead and somewhat bulbous nose. At various times in art history, the profile was preferred to the full-face portrait, and the line drawing or silhouette to the painted portrait, because of the belief that such images could provide the most accurate possible renderings of appearance.[27] Certainly this sort of accuracy of rendering is part of what we praise and appreciate in Rembrandt and other great artists like him. But of course, it is not the whole story. As Schama writes, "Though it's difficult to avoid the impression that no painter of his century looked at the human face harder, longer, or more observantly than Rembrandt, his painstaking face-mapping was never done in a spirit of physiognomic pedantry."[28]

4 Category 2. Proofs of presence

The second way in which a portrait reveals subjectivity is by providing testimony to the *presence* of an individual person. This can occur in two rather different ways. First, the

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[24] Schama (1999 p. 339).

[25] Barry (2004). Barry explains that contrary to popular belief, figurative art was common in medieval Islam, 159.

[26] Barry (2004 p. 41).

[27] Bellion (1999).

[28] Schama (1999 p. 338).

image can show that a person existed: that he or she is or was *there*. Second, it can show us that what existed was indeed a person: there is a *person* there. In the first sense, the portrait functions like an icon to certify or manifest some sort of presence. This function might be fulfilled by a death mask as well as by a photograph, where likeness is also an aim and contributes to the sense of realistic presence. But for determining presence in some cases, likeness may not be very relevant. In a very old photograph of one's great-grandmother as a small child, what is interesting is that "Great-Grandma was there at the Chicago World's Fair." Here the image is a testimonial to existence.

"Presence" has another meaning, which is also important in icons. They are taken to accomplish the actual presence of a person in the sense of *bringing a person there into contact with us*—as in Rembrandt's forceful portraits where the person seem to emerge from the canvas. In this sense, photographs are often described as providing some kind of privileged contact with the dead.[29] However, one might equally well carry in one's wallet or locket the miniature portrait of a loved one done in paint, as many soldiers of earlier times did, when traveling to distant lands or off to war. The image becomes a stand-in for the person.[30] Again, actual resemblance need not matter a great deal here. The image could be replaced by a lock of hair since it is functioning like a relic, magically.

5 Category 3. Psychological characterizations

The third sense in which a portrait can render subjectivity is by offering information about the sitter's personality, emotions, or attitudes. The artist has delved deep to convey information about the sitter's interior life and psychological states. Schama explains Rembrandt succeeded at this through composition, lighting and shadow, or the minute depiction of a hand or an eye. We can see, similarly, in Goya's painting of the royal family that King Charles IV is simpering and silly, while his wife has "a look of fury, violent and coquettish" and "repugnant ugliness"—in fact she looks downright "crazy."[31] Photographer Diane Arbus could show the disjunct between a society matron's self-satisfied view of herself and her pompous way of presenting herself to the world, or the genocidal madness lurking inside a thin blond boy in the park. But the psychological information packed into a portrait does not need to be so easily decoded by viewers; think of the famously inscrutable smile of the *Mona Lisa*. Successful portraiture might involve the expressive abilities of the subject, the artist, or both—whether the image is done by a painter or by a photographer. I return to this further below.

6 Category 4. Evocations of essence

Fourth and last, a portrait can capture a person's essence or unique "air". Rembrandt did this for the fur-trader Rues by showing his pulsing energy, his *particular* ambitious industriousness. My idea here derives from Roland Barthes' discussion in *Camera Lucida*, a text which, on the one hand, purports to be an examination of photography in general. But on the other hand, it turns out to be a uniquely personal pursuit in which Barthes searches through images of his recently deceased mother to find one that captures her

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[29] Sidén (2001).

[30] West (2004 pp. 59–62).

[31] Quoted from Countess de Gasparin (1869).

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"air". Barthes' inquiry was inspired by the recent death of his mother, as he was seeking a photograph in which he could "recognize" her. But he initially found only portions of her, "I never recognized her except in fragments."[32]

What exactly captivates Barthes so much when he finally finds an image that reveals his mother's essence? In a blurry photograph that shows her as a young girl, he claims to find something that goes beyond resemblance, something he calls her "air (the expression, the look)."[33] He says it is unanalyzable: "The air is that exorbitant thing which induces from body to soul—animula, little individual soul, good in one person, bad in another."[34] He also describes the air as "a kind of intractable supplement of identity". He writes about the one photograph that "reveals" his mother:

> All the photographs of my mother which I was looking through were a little like so many masks; at the last, suddenly the mask vanished: there remained a soul, ageless but not timeless, since this air was the person I used to see, consubstantial with her face, each day of her long life.[35]

Readers may be skeptical that any portrait can convey such an air, or that there is such a "something" that goes beyond some combination of the other three features listed above: accurate rendering, testimony of presence, and psychological characterization. But I feel personally drawn to Barthes' notion as a poignant meditation upon death and loss. I think many of us might share his feeling that certain images do in fact, whatever their defects, work especially well to show the unique personality and demeanor of someone we know very intimately.

7 What changes when portraits are made in photography instead of in painting? Part one: accuracy and certification of presence

How do portraits in photography reflect the traditions of painting? How are they different? Are portraits in photography inherently more realistic or more revealing or truthful than those in painting? I propose to approach these questions by taking up my four categories of subjectification in portraiture and examining what, if any, implications the medium of photography has for each one.

Within the first category of accuracy, photography has been credited since its inception with superior powers vis-à-vis painting. Photography caught on quickly as a new means of portraiture and enabled many more people to acquire depictions of themselves than had ever before been possible. John Tagg tells us that "By 1853, three million daguerreotypes were being made annually and there were eighty-six portrait galleries in New York City alone..."[36]

From its launch in the nineteenth century, photography offered a special means of affording contact with the sitter. Thus photographic portraits seem to excel also in my category 2, as certifiers of presence. George Santayana wrote in "The Photograph and the Mental Image":

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[32] Barthes (1985).

[33] Barthes (1985 p. 107).

[34] Barthes (1985 p.109).

[35] Barthes (1985 109–110).

[36] Tagg, John (1988).

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> Photography was first employed in portraiture; that is, it was employed to preserve those mental images which we most dislike to lose, the images of familiar faces....photography came as a welcome salve to keep those precious, if slightly ridiculous, things a little longer in the world. It consoled both our sorrows and our vanity, and we collected photographs like little relics and mementoes of the surfaces of our past life.[37]

It is also well-known that many people feared the photographic apparatus might steal something or take something away from them—perhaps a little bit of their soul. The early photographer Nadar described the fear that even some educated people had of this new device, for example, Balzac.[38]

Discussions of photography's alleged realism and transparency tend to confuse the first two of the senses I have described in which a portrait can present a subject. It is thought that portraits in photography have superior accuracy because of how they are created; at the same time, their causal history is said to guarantee a kind of contact with their subjects. Many prominent writers have argued that photographs possess unusual veracity.[39] Photography is said to have greater realism than painting and to be more direct, operating mechanically through light, chemistry, and machinery, so that depiction occurs without (or in spite of) the intervention of artistic intentions. Susan Sontag speaks in *On Photography* of the photograph as "a trace," "a material vestige of its subject in a way that no painting can be." For her a photo, unlike a painting, is "part of, an extension of that subject,' 'co-substantial' with it."[40]

Kendall Walton staked out a position in the realist camp concerning photography in his article "Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Seeing." There he claims, "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."[41] Photographs are distinct from paintings in this regard. Walton asks, "What about paintings? We do not see Henry VIII when we look at his portrait. We see only a representation of him. There is a sharp difference of kind, between painting and photography."

Walton admits that photographs can be inaccurate and says that there is no particular tie between transparency and accuracy. The key difference is that seeing something in a photograph is caused by that object in a mechanical way. But objects cause paintings "in a more human way, involving the artist; hence we don't see through paintings."[42] Walton doesn't deny that photographs can be artistic or expressive, but he says this doesn't mean they become (in his terms) "opaque."

For Walton, what is important is not that we glean information from photographs of our dead loved ones. Instead, what matters is that "we can see our loved ones again, and that is important to us".[43] He reiterates this point in a more recent defense of the transparency thesis:

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[37] Santayana (1981).

[38] Nadar, Felix (1900). "My Life as a Photographer," In Goldberg, 127.

[39] See Cavell (1979), Walton (1984, 1986, 1990). For criticisms, see Martin (1986), also Gregory (1995). See also Maynard (1997).

[40] See Sontag (1997); See also Maynard (1997 p. 232).

[41] Walton (1984 p. 241).

[42] Walton (1984 p. 261).

[43] Walton's emphasis (1984 p. 253).

> One of the larger objectives of 'Transparent Pictures' was to show that information gathering is not the only important function of perception. We sometimes have an interest in seeing things, in being in perceptual contact with them, apart from any expectations of learning about them. This interest helps to explain why we sometimes display and cherish a photograph of a loved one..., even a fuzzy and badly exposed photograph, long after we have extracted any interesting or important information it might contain... We value the experience of seeing the loved one (even indirectly), the experience of being in perceptual contact with him or her, for its own sake, not just as a means of adding to our knowledge.[44]

Walton's transparency view emphasizes what I have called sense 2 of a portrait's subjectification, the testimony of presence. He argues that when we see a person through a photographic image, we somehow are in contact with them. Our sense of the truth of this contact is why we care about such images. Through photographs we can "get in touch with" a significant American hero like Lincoln, or an ancestor like his own grandfather.

Similar views can be found in many other prominent analyses of the photographic image. Patrick Maynard sums these up by commenting that, "...testimonies about 'nearness,' 'contact,' 'emanation,' 'vestige,' 'trace,' 'co-substantiality,' and so on, register a sense that photographs of things can combine with these (depictive] characteristics a strong manifestation function as well".[45]

So far I have allowed that features specific to photography might permit certain photographic portraits to be said to succeed or even excel at two of the four aims I have identified for the achievement of subjectivity in portraiture: accurate rendering of the subject, and testimony of presence. In a moment I want to consider photography in relation to the other two aims. But first let me comment that photographic portraits do not *necessarily* succeed at the first two aims, and they may not be superior in either of these regards to painted portraits. A photographic portrait can be very inaccurate. Even a realist like Walton admits this. It might be blurry or under- or over-exposed. It may be taken from an angle such that not much of a person is shown, not enough to identify that person.

Similarly, photography allows too many manipulations to be convincing as testimony of presence; we are all familiar with the dubious concoctions of the tabloid front-pages to prove for once and for all that UFO's or the Loch Ness monster really exist. Even good, clear photographs seem to need context to be accepted as proof of contact. What I once took to be a photograph of my grandmother as a small child actually proved to be a photograph of her brother! I couldn't tell this just by looking at the image, but learned it through external evidence about the dating of the picture.

8 Part two: psychological characterization and evocation of the essence

I now take up the relation of photographic portraiture to the third and fourth aims I have described in relation to subjectification: psychological characterization and the revelation of a person's "air" or essence.

Turning to my category 3, emotional characterization, the strengths cited above for photographic portraiture in terms of their mechanical ease or accuracy seem to be weaknesses for their service as art. Photography's accuracy was taken to be tied to its

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[44] Walton (1997).

[45] Maynard (1997 p. 247).

mechanical nature and hence regarded as restricting artistic expressiveness. Thus John Ruskin wrote, "Believe me, photography can do against line engraving just what Madame Tussaud's waxwork can do against sculpture. That and no more."[46]

Of course, technical requirements of early photographic portraiture could result in stiff unnatural poses, since sitters had to hold still for as long as two minutes at a time. Changes in technology have eliminated this problem, perhaps giving rise to a new kind of problem for portraiture, namely, the camera's ability to catch a person off guard and thus to present a less than desirable image to the world. This raises an important issue concerning a point I raised earlier and promised to return to: the reciprocity between a portraitist and his or her subject.

When a photographer succeeds in a portrait that reveals the sitter's inner states or psychological traits, *why* does this happen? Consider first the view that the success of such an image depends wholly on non-artistic factors stemming from the very medium of photography. Whereas a painter must work to craft the exact tilt of someone's head, the brightness of their eyes, or the gesture of their hand, the photographer simply snaps the shutter and records all of these as they are manifested by the subject. Call this the "naïve realist" view of expressiveness in photographic portraiture. We can oppose this to the "full artistic expression" view, which would insist on the artist's ability to function just as much as an expressive agent in this genre as in painting.

Which view seems more plausible? Let's reconsider the painter's power to portray emotions or inner states of his or her subject. If the painter is fully in control of this process, why is the subject needed at all? Surely the painter must pay some attention to the subject unless the result is to be a bad rendering or mere caricature. This is why we praise great artists like Velázquez and Titian: they have the ability to show us people so that we feel almost as if we are seeing them directly. Of course we know we are not, and we value the painter's enormous skill, but what strikes us is the crafty expression in Pope Innocent's eyes and his claw-like hands (the ones Francis Bacon later made hay with!), or the innocent seriousness of the boy Ranuccio Farnese, painted by Titian in 1542.

For a photographer to show us the conniving side of a powerful man or the youthful somberness of an adolescent might equally require artistic skill. Photographers too use lighting, angle, depth of field, film and lens, and composition to bring out aspects of a person's demeanor that they notice, just as a painter highlights things in making a portrait. The naïve realist view is wrong to attribute the entirety of the expression on a photographic subject's face to the mirror-like power of the camera lens to capture what is simply there. Of course, one could add that the success of the portrait depends on the sitter's ability to "enact himself" by displaying a public persona that conveys the very qualities most desired. An example of this is Daniel Webster's strong pose, recorded by the early Boston photography studio Southworth and Hawes.[47]

But if this were the whole of the story, then all photographs of a person should be equally successful at rendering the person's emotional state. Of course the realist might say yes, this is right; or, that if some are not, it is because the person hides this inner state or just is not good at self-representation. I disagree with the former answer, and as for the latter, one would think that the task of the photographer is either to elicit some emotion from the sitter or, in a more candid mode, to watch for it and capture it when it does emerge. Eliciting it from a subject in a photo sitting might involve the same sort of

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[46] Ruskin, John (1865). From "The Cestus of Agalia." (In Goldberg, 153).

[47] See Brilliant, 56–8.

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complex interaction that goes on when a painter deals with a sitter. In short, I agree with a remark made by Ernst Van Alphen,

> Although a camera captures the appearance of a person maximally, the photographer has as many problems in capturing a sitter's 'essence' as a painter does. Camerawork is not the traditional portrayer's ideal but its failure, because the essential quality of the sitter can only be caught by the artist, not the camera."[48]

The argument I have just sketched depends on the premise that not all snapshots depicting a person are portraits—not all photographs of a person are equally successful at rendering subjective states and interior life. Some might disagree; the naïve realist no doubt would. We could redefine a portrait as any image that shows a person. Still, I think the realist has to admit that some photographic pictures of people do seem to achieve a fuller characterization than others. The tricky question is whether this is due to the presentational abilities of the sitter, the skill of the photographer, or perhaps both. It is hard to assess these options because we are all inundated with pictures of ourselves and others from infancy on. Very young children learn to put on a "say-cheese" face for the camera, to display themselves for public approval. And studio photographers employ numerous tricks to elicit "cute" expressions from babies (or kittens and puppies). Perhaps what we now commonly accept as a persuasive portrait is due neither to the subject's power of self-presentation nor the artist's skills at emotional characterization, but to tricks of props and poses.

I resist this conclusion. We should acknowledge that is unfair to cite the lowest common denominator of popular images in trying to contrast possibilities of portraiture in photography and painting, when the painters I have discussed are great masters. If we turn to recognized artists of photographic portraiture, we might be better able to answer my question about the sources of emotional characterization in such images. Some examples of excellent portraiture in photography to mention are Richard Avedon's frank portraits of his dying father; Edward Steichen's portrait of an ominously powerful J.P. Morgan; Julia Margaret Cameron's haunting portraits of distinguished men and beautiful women; Edward Weston's revealing and intimate images of his muse and fellow artist Tina Modotti; and many more by such great artists in the medium as Yusef Karsh and Imogen Cunningham.

Portraits by these great photographers succeed at both artistic expression and the subtle rendering of the sitter's inner psychological states or character. But what does this tell us about my fourth category of subjectification: evocation of the person's essence or what Barthes calls their "air"? It might seem that this should not be a separate category since how, after all, would a person's "air" be conveyed by an image if not through the very efforts I have just been summarizing, efforts that aim at psychological characterization? Yet Barthes clearly had something in mind distinct from conveying an emotion. Though it is vague and hard to pin down—"unanalyzable," in his words, it seems to be crucial to our notion of a successful portrait. Great portraits are prized for showing us a person's very essence.

An initial question to raise is whether we can only recognize the essence or air in the case of people we already know, and indeed, know well. It is telling that Barthes seeks just the right image for his much-loved and recently departed mother. Indeed, he refuses to reprint the one revealing picture of her he does find, because he says it would mean nothing to anyone else. This makes sense. But still, we often read remarks, about great portraits showing a person's essence. As Richard Brilliant puts it, "Portrait artists have always

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[48] Van Alphen (1997).

sought to discover some central core of personhood as the proper object of their representation'', the ''invisible core of the self''.[49]

In such cases I would say that we imagine that we know the person and gain insight into their essential character through viewing their image. This involves more than just conveying the person's particular feelings or state at any given moment, but penetrating more deeply into their very innermost self, their nature, and even their self-conception. Portraits are praised for doing this, but how they succeed at such a goal is a conundrum. After all, can anyone really sum up another person in such a manner? Why should we suppose that it can be done in an image? People in some cultures might resist such an idea as either silly or almost sacrilegious. And an alternative account has been suggested: namely, that an artist's rendering of a person might be more convincing if it is more schematic, and comes to stand in for the person when memories have faded.[50]

I think that questions about revelation of the essence or air are the hardest ones to answer about portraiture. But since I do believe in the importance of this as a distinct way in which portraits are alleged to reveal subjectivity, I keep it in my list. And now I want to examine how photographs would differ at this challenge from paintings. In the case of the greatest painters, we give credit to their powers of observation of small details, and also to their psychological acuity and their ability to delve into the psyches of their subjects. This is understood to be part of their success; and there is also thought to be a standard process of interaction and deepening acquaintance that occurs in the rather lengthy time periods it takes for a sitter to pose for a painter. For painters now who work from photographs, or for photographers, it seems that such opportunities are more limited and that, accordingly, their chances of success would be lower.

And yet the naïve realist might say that the photographer (or painter working from photos) could succeed at capturing the subject's ''air'' fortuitously just in case the sitter was posing in a very characteristic way, wearing their most characteristic expression, at the time the shutter snapped. Then the artist's success would be owing to skill at hunting rather than to actual powers of artistic expression. Barthes mentions that the revealing photograph of his mother was a snapshot of her as a young girl, which sounds like just such a fortuitous case. That photo captured her particular air as someone who managed to manifest a somewhat assertive meekness, he says.

The ''air'' might seem to amount to some combination of one or more of the previous three ways in which a portrait can be said to ''subjectify'' a person. Perhaps what Barthes saw in his mother's portrait was simply a characteristic expression on her face, one that corresponds to his personal assessment of the key component of her personality. In my own recent history of loss, I was struck when my mother arranged photographs of her mother (my grandmother) for her funeral and observed (without ever having read Barthes) that there were two pictures from different ages of life that seemed to capture her particular ''look''. I could see exactly what my mother meant when I looked at the pictures myself. The ''look'' in question was a sort of twinkling facial expression accompanied by a small duck of the head. Perhaps what we were responding to was more like my second way in which a portrait makes for person-hood—as testimony of presence. But I am more tempted to say the aims are nevertheless distinct, since other photos work equally well to certify presence without capturing that elusive ''air''.

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[49] Brilliant, 67.

[50] Brilliant, 74, quoting from R. Bernheimer, see 180, note 37.

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9 Conclusion: subjects and objects

To make a person into an object in an image involves the exercise of an artist's skill with his or her medium in tandem with the artist's own aims in making the artwork. The artist has allegiance both to the sitter and to his or her own artistic vision. This tension between artist and subject recurs in our relation as viewers to the subjects shown in artistic portraits. That is, we can also ask whether the audience of a particular portrait interacts with the sitter as another person or as a mere object. In other words, we can inquire not only whether the *painter* has treated the person as a subject, but whether we *viewers* do. This issue has been central to feminist discussions of the alleged maleness of the gaze, the objectification of women in art.

I am in danger of being swept off into very deep waters here concerning the ontology of the artwork and the psychology of viewing.[51] I shall swim back to shore soon. But first let me at least mention that some philosophers as well as artists offer what I consider a promising escape (a lifeboat) here. They do not regard artworks as "objects" in the usual sense of the term. For pragmatist John Dewey, as for phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, our experience of things in the world, and especially of other humans and of artworks, is always a *combination* of subjectivity and objectivity. Dewey wrote, "Because every experience is constituted by inter-action between 'subject' and 'object,' between a self and its world, it is not itself neither merely physical nor merely mental, no matter how much one factor or the other predominates."[52]

Similarly, in *Eye and Mind* Merleau-Ponty wrote,

> The painter "takes his body with him," says Valery. Indeed we cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body—not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement.[53]

One of the other key points these two philosophers seem to agree about is the realization of the mental within the physical realm depicted in art. Dewey put it this way:

> The thoroughgoing integration of what philosophy discriminates as "subject" and "object" ... is the characteristic of every work of art. The completeness of the integration is the measure of its esthetic status.

And Merleau-Ponty quotes from two of his favorite artists who spoke about the ways in which the so-called outside world becomes an intimate part of oneself in art. "Nature is on the inside" says Cézanne.[54]

Merleau-Ponty tried to learn from artists like Cézanne, and Dewey looked to Matisse, whom he often quotes. A particularly relevant passage from the artist is this one, "When a painting is finished, it is like a new-born child. The artist himself must have time for understanding it."[55] I close with this remark because it highlights the strange quality of the portrait that has drawn me to this genre: the fact that it seems to be alive and yet not at all easily understood. In this regard, portraits are very much like the people they purport to represent.

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[51] A recent book in which the author *was*, I believe, swept off to sea is (Mitchell 2005).

[52] Dewey (2005).

[53] Merleau-Ponty (1960).

[54] Quoted by Merleau-Ponty (1960 p. 125).

[55] Quoted by Dewey (2005 p. 106).

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