

## Waltons View on Photography

Kendall Walton's essay on transparent pictures discusses the idea of what we see when we look at photographs, and also questions the nature of reality and what it is to see.

Walton first discusses the realistic nature of photography compared with painting. He argues that no matter how realistic a painting can be a photo will still stand up as better evidence in court. Although this is just an example, the trust in photos as opposed to trust in paintings or drawing comes from a lack of trust in people. If a painting is deemed as worthy as a photo for evidence, then anyone with a pencil or paintbrush can create reliable evidence, which is not true.

Walton mentions that those who find photography especially realistic may see it as a continuation to the post-renaissance quest for realism (page 797). This may suggest that photography is an extension or different type of painting, or perhaps the next step. Yet if a photo was considered to be an extremely realistic painting, then realistic paintings would have no place in the art world. There is obviously something that separates paintings from photos. Walton then suggests that photographic images could be what paintings strive for, yet this isn't necessarily true. Hyperrealist paintings may not be striving for realism, but instead a type of imagined perfection, which photographs do not. Perhaps a photograph can be said to be more honest or just as Walton claims later in his essay, accurate.

I agree that the claim that photographic images are identical to the object photograph shouldn't be taken literally, as even an exact copy of an object isn't the same object as they both occupy different spaces. I also agree there is little chance of a photo being mistaken for reality, yet does that prove there is no illusion? When a magician performs tricks, we aren't tricked into believing the impossible, but we are tricked into seeing the impossible. Perhaps this is what photos do, yet this may or may not support Walton's argument, depending on whether being tricked into seeing something counts as seeing something. Perhaps it is an illusion that we are seeing through the photographs. Yet this does not distinguish the difference between photography and painting, and Walton is trying to do.

A photograph must be a photograph of something that exists while a painting could be anything from an artist's mind or imagination, no matter how realistic it looks states Walton. I agree that this seems to give photography a closer link to reality than painting.

Walton makes the bold claim that when we look at photographs, we actually see what the picture is of, we don't only see a picture. He calls this 'seeing through photographs', and goes on to state that you are not only perceiving the scene, but literally seeing it. In other words, we use cameras as a mechanism to see things the same way in which we use spectacles or microscopes. One may then think that the distortions of photographs cause them to be opaque as opposed to transparent (transparent meaning you see through a photo the way you do a window). Yet we must also take into account that our direct vision is often distorted, perhaps by similar factors. The fact that when we look at a photograph we know we are looking at a

photograph causes no problem to Walton as he states that being transparent is not the same as being invisible. When we look at ourselves in a mirror we know that we are looking in a mirror, yet that doesn't detract from the fact that we are seeing ourselves. Walton also compares looking at a photo to looking at the stars: both are looking directly into the past, although he fails to mention that what ever we see is fractionally into the past as there is a minute delay before the light hits our eyes.

Walton compares photography with painting stating that painting is opaque while photography is transparent. Although we may think we are looking at a person, it's fictitious. A photographic may also be fictitious, yet there is a difference. Looking at a photo of what appears to be the Loch Ness monster is fictitious in content, yet the scene is real, just not what you think it is. It's not fiction that you are looking at a mock Loch Ness monster. Whereas in a painting, even if the painting was of Henry VIII, its fiction that you are looking at Henry VIII. With a photo it may be fictitious that you see anything in the present or that things still are the way they are in the photo, but you are seeing something in the past, whereas with a painting the only thing that you really seeing is a painting. So the difference then is that photography has an element of reality as well as realism, while a painting may be realistic yet can never be real. Walton does not claim that one is seeing something directly in a photograph, because this is also fiction. Seeing through a photo is just a 'different mode of perception.'

Walton notes the difference in knowing you are viewing a photo and looking at an extremely realistic painting and thinking it's a photo. When you discover it is only a painting, you are shocked. Some sense of reality is lost and you believe you have been tricked into an illusion. He claims it is similar when you discover a guard at the wax museum is not real. So although looking through a photo isn't meant to duplicate being somewhere and looking directly at the object, there is definitely a feeling of closer contact to a photo than a painting. Yet perhaps this can be explained some other way. Perhaps when we discover that a photo is really a painting, we aren't shock by the fact that we have been tricked into thinking we are seeing through a photo, not looking at a painting, perhaps the shock is that the artist has such technical skill in the medium. Would we feel the same shock when we were told that the painting was created by camera obscura (which would require less technical skill than painting otherwise). Perhaps there is in fact more to a painting in that we can equally see through them as we do in photographs, yet we can be amazed at the skill that has gone into them as well.

Accuracy I believe is the main attribute that holds photographs higher than paintings in a courtroom, as aforementioned. Walton notes that the fact that photographs can be distorted is no problem to their transparency as our eyes can distort images as much as a camera can. It is fiction that you are seeing something that is blurred, but in reality you are seeing something that looks distorted because of its movement. Things that move quickly may also look blurred to the human eye. People often refer to being or not being 'photogenic'. This means that in photos you either look better than you do in real life (being photogenic) or worse than in real life (unphotogenic). This is a type of distortion that applies to both photography and film, and seems beyond normal conditions that would cause distortion. Why would people look different in photos than in real life? Does this suggest a lack in photographic accuracy, which may affect the level of transparency, or perhaps could be explained some how that would group it

with other distortions that may happen also to the direct sight?

Photography is a more reliable mechanism than painting, Walton claims. As both realist paintings and photographs are captured instances in time, then a photograph is more accurate in that it captures a particular instance of time (or a short instance, depending on the shutter speed). A painting takes more time to construct, so by the time it is finished the scene may have drastically changed. Walton suggests that is perhaps the mechanical nature of photography that sets it apart from painting. 'People don't make photographs'. It is the process that makes them more realistic rather than what they look like. I think this involves the lack of trust in human made objects. Even if you trust the intentions, a person will always add something of themselves into a painting, even if only subconsciously. Yet perhaps if we can see through a photograph, then a painting allows us to see through an artist's eyes. This may not be direct seeing, but we are permitted to gain another type of perception.

Yet later on Walton suggests that 'A photograph, no less than a painting, has a subjective point of view.' I would disagree with this, as though a photograph does have a subjective point of view (because of the choices the photographer makes in taking a photo, what the photo is of etc.) the photographer has less control than the painter does. Aside from darkroom adjustments, the photographer does not control every aspect of a photo, while a painter controls every brush stroke. And, as mentioned before, a photograph must be taken of something that is real, while a painting does not. As Walton mentions, in reality others may have some control over what you see, for example, pointing out something, hiding something from you, blowing smoke in your eyes, similar though perhaps to less of an extent than the photographer has, but a painter has far more control. Perhaps a photographer allows us to see something more than we would of otherwise, claims Walton. Yet why is it that a painter does not also?

Walton then discusses the use of photographic conventions. Both photography and reality involve symbols that one must understand the meaning of to understand an image. Yet I believe there is a difference. Someone who doesn't understand about reflection may not realise what they are looking at in a mirror yet they are still looking at their own reflection, or seeing themselves through the mirror. Yet when looking through a photograph one must understand photographic conventions, not the nature of reality and illusion. When looking at a photograph of a mirror, one must understand the conventions of the mirror and the conventions of the photograph. Can a line be drawn between the two, and is it important that there are more conventions to the photograph than to reality? Walton seems to believe not. If looking through a distorted mirror is still seeing, then surely looking through a distorted camera can still be. In a photograph, any distortion can be understood if you know what to look for, and you are still seeing through to something real. I mentioned before that photography adds a new set of distortions to reality on top of the original ones, but this may not be necessarily true. When you are in a white room that is lit by fluorescent lighting, the room looks white. Yet fluorescent lighting is rarely pure white. They usually have a coloured tinge, often green. Yet the eye adjusts so that instead of seeing a green room, you see a white one. A photo picks up the green lighting. So in this way, perhaps a photograph overcomes a distortion of reality, and therefore is less distorted.

Human intention is an important issue that Walton goes on to explain. Going beyond

the fact that we must trust a painter to paint reality, we also have to trust that his perception of an event was accurate. We can never fully trust that the painter will have accurately recorded an event because he or she will have put more emphasis on the details that he or she has found important. Although a photographer will photograph what he or she finds particularly interesting, we know that the photograph will not discriminate in what is in the particular frame. Perhaps if we think of a photo as a window, we could say that although the photographer chooses where the window goes, we still see everything there is to see through that window, unlike we would in a painting. The painter chooses exactly what goes in the window, even if they are intent on capturing reality, the painting highly depends on the painters' beliefs. We must trust that the photographer is not trying to trick us in the same way reality is trying to trick us, yet there is a difference between seeing a fake Loch Ness monster and believing it to be real and seeing a painting of a Loch Ness monster. The painting is complete fiction, where the photo what we think we are seeing is fiction. The photograph has nothing to do with the photographers belief, for example, someone may see something in the photograph that the photographer never noticed, such as a made in Japan sticker on the fake Loch Ness monster. The photographer has limited control. One might argue that in a dark room the photographer has complete control of the photograph, but perhaps the more a photographer alters a photograph in the darkroom, the more it becomes like a painting. If the mechanical nature of a photograph is crucial to its transparency, the more a photographer has altered, the less transparent the photograph becomes. Walton mentions an interesting example comparing a woman who sees with a bionic eye and a woman whose optic nerve is somehow stimulated by the information a doctors brain picks up from what he sees. So the woman is controlled by what information the doctors' brain finds important or interesting. If this is a metaphor for the difference between painting and photography, it suggests that painting is a type of second hand seeing, so although you do not see through a painting, the painting allows you to see through to the painters brain, while photography is more direct. Although this example shows a difference between photography and painting, I think it suggests that painting is also a way of seeing, but more about seeing the human psyche than reality.

Walton admits that a photograph can be misleading, as reality can be. Perhaps this gives photography the power of being more misleading than a painting because you have no less expectations of a painting than you do a photograph, and will be more likely to believe a photo of a fat Twiggy than a painting of one. (Pg. 266) Yet if one can interpret a photograph properly one does get the facts, Walton states. This is also true in reality, for example you don't believe that a road is shimmering if you understand that rising water vapour in heated air causes the air to give a shimmering effect to what you are looking at, its not the actual object that's shimmering. Reality is not the same as an artists intention. You may interpret a painting as you would interpret reality and still have no idea of the artists' intention.

I agree that if a photo is transparent, then there may be different levels of transparency. (Mentioned page 267) This relates back to the argument on page 262 where Walton claims that if expressiveness is a quality of art, then photographs are definitely art. Yet as discussed earlier, it seems that the expressive nature of painting is partly what makes paintings opaque. Does this mean that a photograph is less transparent the more expressive it is, and that we do not 'see through' artistic photos? Walton describes then the paradigm for transparent photos being the ordinary

snapshot rather than the artistic photograph. Yet the artistic photograph is not in the same group as paintings. I would agree, yet I believe that as a photograph becomes more opaque through artistic alterations, it becomes more like a photograph, until you get to the stage where photographic paper is used as another drawing medium, as Walton describes. Although a photograph can become more and more like a painting, there is still a difference.

I think that Edwin Martins criticisms are well refuted by Waltons reply. Martin focused on trying to come up with examples of objects that obviously aren't transparent yet fit all the criteria that makes a photograph transparent, like being mechanically made and causally linked. Yet he seemed to forget the importance of realism in a photograph, where a footprint and a suntan don't realistically portray a foot or the sun. Walton suggests that seeing requires some type of recognition, and when you look at a footprint, you recognise a footprint, not a foot. (I guess this would mean that if you don't recognise what the photo is of, then it's not transparent, which is lightly contradictory to previous arguments). Martins' statement that a completely black, white or grey photograph should be as transparent as a well-exposed one is easily refuted by Walton, who compares it with a blind person. Another example would be that people can't see in the dark, the same as you can't see through a black photo, and after a certain brightness and contrasts in brightness are indistinguishable, as there is a limit to how much light is too much or not enough differentiate objects. The causal link between an underexposed photo of Waltons great grandfather is no his great grandfather, but a lack of light hitting the photographic paper or film, which is different to a properly exposed photo.

Nigel Warburton compares the difference between looking through a microscope and looking at a photograph in his essay Seeing Through "Seeing Through Photographs". He believes that Walton has no reason to claim that both are seeing, as it would be similar to putting black dots on a piece of paper until the paper was black then calling black white. I think this is an irrelevant example as it would be like admitting seeing through a mirror is not seeing, because at any stage that the white page has black on it, it ceases to be white and becomes grey. Yet Warburton believes seeing through a mirror is seeing, so the example is therefore irrelevant.

I think Warburtons methodical way of going individually discussing different ways of seeing and comparing them to photography to prevent us from 'sliding down a slippery slope' is more effective than Martins as it gets down to more important issues. He describes seeing as having a direct causal relationship to the object. Seeing a star may be seeing into the past yet we are seeing the direct light of the object, just that they are so far away that the light takes millions of years to reach us. To see also requires a direct time relation to the event, even if its looking into the past, we see it in the same order as events took place. Photographs have no time relationship to the event. Yet there is a limit to the amount of information the human eye can pick up at any particular time, for example, a bullet moves so fast that you can't see it. This suggests that, like a film, the brain picks up intermittent pictures that, put together, look like a constant flow of information. So possibly a photograph is like one of these pictures. If so, then perhaps Walton could be right in that you look through photographs into perhaps one frame of information, perhaps as you would look at one frame in a film reel.

An important point that both Warburton and Martin did not comment on was the difference between photographs. Although they have reason to believe that Walton was wrong in his belief that we see through photographs, I think that and equally important part of his argument involved the difference between photographs and paintings, in which he makes a good argument.

# Bibliography

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