Photographs as Abstract Images

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An iconic photo is a photograph of an individual event or person, i.e. treated as a taken of a type, treated as the type. The question "which type?" is answered by some theory circumscribing it. For a person who does not know the relevant theory the photograph cannot possibly become iconic (like this). So the theory is a necessary condition for a photograph to become iconic; other elements necessary include the treatment the photograph gets within a culture. One cannot make an iconic photograph: not as a photographer by a certain way of making a photograph, nor as a member of the audience by suggesting the theory to specify the type with. One would be doing the latter by treating the photograph as an example of some larger event or period. But why would that example come to stand for the period? There is an element of success involved in the establishment of an iconic photograph.

The hypothesis about iconic photographs that I want to discuss here, is this: some kinds of depicted matter resist any effort of turning them into icons. The central case at stake in this paper is that of a person addressing the photographer. Another case might be victims of disasters or crimes while undergoing relevant intimate experiences of suffering.

1. ABSTRACT PHOTOS

1. Most of the time, photographs are detailed. They show individuals, and individual scenes. They even prove what they show to have been really happening. What could be less abstract? Yet, paradoxically, some photos fitting this characterisation are definitely abstract images, most photos are most likely abstract images, and only some are not.

2. Abstract images can at least be divided into two kinds: those in use in scientific publications which can be characterised in terms of the theoretical use that they are put to, and those in art: instances of what is called abstract art. I won't be concerned directly with either of these, but shall find that the characterisation of scientific abstract images helps identify abstract photos; and abstract art will play a minor role in my argument as one stage in the development of art.

3. Abstract photographs, too, show individuals, and individual scenes, like

(a) A singular magpie

(b) A general magpie

Figure 1: Photos and abstract images

most normal photographs do, and they too prove what they show to have been real, yet their meaning resides in the use they are put to, and that use derives from grounds and cognitive stock external to the picture.

4. My interest is in abstract photos of persons, because these, I submit, fail to meet a challenge all images of people must meet, namely that next to portraying people they should portray the moral space these people live in. You don't have that challenge with a magpie. First, I'll expand on the challenge of depicting people.

2. ADDRESS, AND MORAL SPACE

5. Faces cannot be *observed* face to face. Of course, we can look at someone, and then we perceive the other's face, its form and colours, its beauty or ugliness, but this is different from observing it face-to-face. I experiment with my students, asking them to look their neighbour in the eyes and observe

their face so as to describe it in detail. They giggle, and, often, refuse to partake in the experiment. That is because face-to-face we meet the other, and the other meets us: persons interact, and the watching is a mere means for that, and there is no actual way to circumvent the reciprocating—nor, I would want to add, should there be one.

6. Of course, my students could have made a photograph of the other's face, and that would indeed have allowed them to describe the other in detail. But this is exactly my point: what is it that the photograph subtracts from the face-to-face meeting of persons? I submit that what is thus removed is what I call here: address.

7. A photographed person does not directly address the person viewing the photo (or only contingently so), but someone the viewer is not present to. How could a person address an unknown multitude of unknown persons and be fully at stake in her addressing? There are no personal reciprocations to be expected from the "addressed". And this is where photographs become abstract images. By neutralising the addressing of the depicted, photos neutralise the moral space these persons are in, as the addressing is the perceptually available core of moral space.

8. Now, art history shows continuously that indeed images are at risk of getting these things wrongly, which leads me to conclude that getting the addressing of depicted persons right is the one challenge connected with people's efforts to depict people.[1]

9. It might seem to most that photography finally meets the challenge, on account of its very causal-chemical procedure. Yet, paradoxically, the challenge is, rather, enlarged with photography.

3. WHERE DOES THE CHALLENGE ORIGINATE?

10. But where exactly does the challenge originate? Whence its pervasiveness? According to my analysis this is due to the peculiar phenomenological switch people make between looking at a real event and looking at its depiction.

11. Images are primarily devised to represent things and events that are not present to the senses.[2] Hence, by definition, they are not not presentations. They are something in their own right, and as such they make present something they are not. Showing an exemplar of a coffee cup is not representing one.

12. We must realise the following characteristic distinction between what is present and what is depicted, that what is present is available for synchronous perception, and, hence, reciprocal interaction, and what is represented isn't.

13. Looking at things and events present to one, is done with all of the senses

one has available to one: all five of them, co-operating synchronously. It is because of their synchronous co-operation that we are capable of establishing the reality of what we see. One not only sees the other person, but hears, feels, smells, her.[3] What one sees will cohere with what one hears, smells, etc. This synchronous polymodal perception is where facial address has its home.

14. Pictures subtract most of these data routes from our perception: a picture is taken in through vision only, and it presents one with a momentary slice of the visual. Film advances on this, but only by introducing sound and movement, but not by automatically being more successful in rendering the relevant addressing, for the same reasons I just stated. We are not to storm the stage to rescue a heroin in distress.

4. MATERIAL . . .

15. The *material* with which one produces an image—paint, chemical emulsion, ink, or pixels—is per this same definition discontinuous with the material of what it depicts. We don't depict a human being by using his or other people's body parts, a tiger by using its skin, nor do we use sand to depict a beach. This is a conceptual point. I am not sure, if we did do it that way, what the result would count as, short of an image.

16. This is where I should say something about Sir Ernst Gombrich's account of depiction in terms of substitution. Gombrich has argued that a picture somehow substitutes for what it depicts.[4] Like a hobby horse derives its meaning from the fact that children use it to play horse-back riding without a real horse, we use a picture to watch the depicted in its absence. This account assumes that seeing is comparable to doing. But if we ride a hobby-horse we feel some object between our legs, like we would a horse, and we can move it forward, again, like a horse would, acting as if it is the object itself which moves us forward. We move up and down with the stick, mimicking the movements a real horse might make, and we can add the hinicking sounds of a real horse. But surely we could pick any rock and do these things to it, without wanting to state that the rock depicts a horse? A picture may substitute for something but not for the use that one might make of the depicted. Instead, it substitutes for a selection of our visual awareness.

17. This is nicely illustrated in the Magritte painting, *La Condition Humaine* (2a), which shows an easel in a room. On the easel, a painting is standing which depicts part of a landscape, seemingly the landscape that it, as an object hides from the view of us, those who watch the Magritte painting. We are tempted to think that indeed the depicted painting depicts what it hides, there are clear clues in the overall painting that suggest this. But Magritte
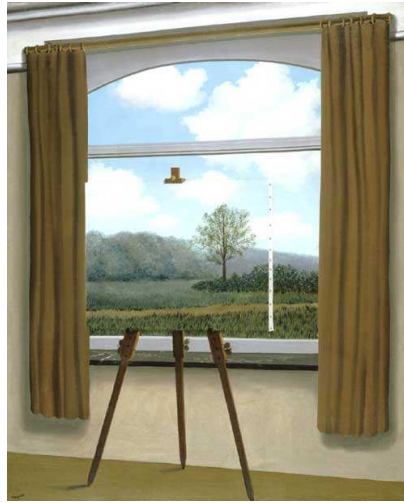
(a) René Magritte, *La Condition Humaine*

Figure 2: Moral space

paints a large tree in the middle of the scene on the depicted canvas as if daring us to assume that it is there in the space hidden from us as well. Thus he incorporates us, the external viewers, in the picture, because there would be only one way to find out about the tree: if only we were in the depicted room, we could step next to the canvas on the easel and see for ourselves. The moral space of the room, however, is not available to us: it is depicted. The picture does not substitute for it, and that is what Magritte is showing us.[5)]

18. This discussion underscores what I submitted above, that the material of the picture is discontinuous with the material of the depicted. Fossils, for instance, are not images for this same reason: they are remnants of an animal, but do not depict it. I simply have to say something more about this, because it neatly ties in with another issue.

19. A corpse in a coffin is not an image of the deceased, nor is the skeleton that results from the processes of decay, even though physical and chemical processes of reduction are at work here. Günther von Hagens developed a procedure to remove all animal material from corpses and replace it with plastics. Is a plastinated corpse an image of the human body? No, it is not, though a wax anatomical sculpture is.

20. The difference is the continuation of the material in the end product. Plastinates are remnants: to treat them as representations is a moral flaw
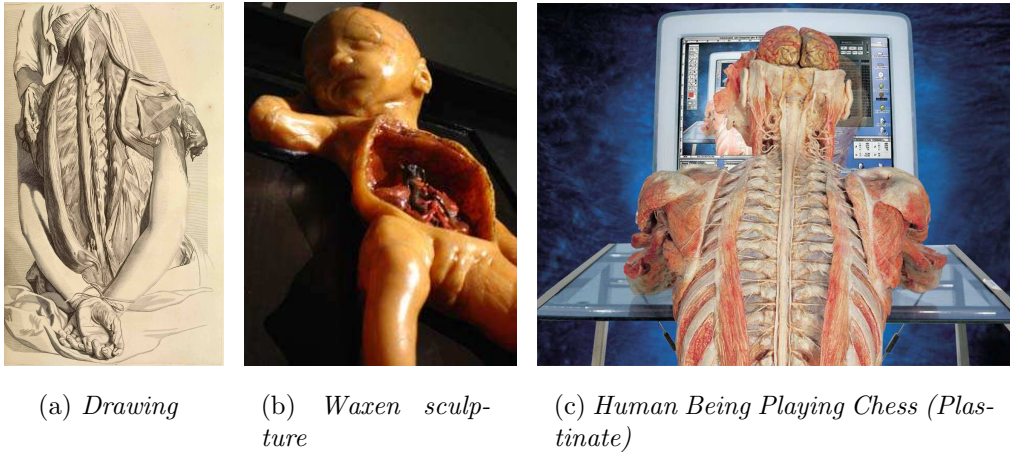
with regard to humanity (of the deceased).

(a) *Drawing*   (b) *Waxen sculp- ture*   (c) *Human Being Playing Chess (Plastinate)*

Figure 3: Anatomic Representation and Presentation

5.   . . . AND THE PHOTO

21. Now, photographs are born from a causal-chemical process, which seems to conflict with this definitory requirement. If the emulsion on the sensitive plate is caused by the thing photographed, then it may seem that the material of photographs is continuous with its subject. I argue that photos' chemical-causal origins do not remove the requirement but forces us to split our concept of image so as to accommodate this.

22. The split regarding photographic images is this: they prove what they show because they are causally linked to that. Yet, what we see in a photo is due to some psychological process, seeing-in. It is decided at the receptive side. The photograph is an image because we feel it resembles things in the real world, which happen to be there through a causal process.

23. People want images to convey the relevant moral space, but moral space is no merely causal, objective aspect of a situation, but consists in the intersubjective addressing of persons interacting. Thus, the causal mechanism of photography holds no guarantee that photographs will necessarily get it right.

24. Photographs seem at first sight the exact opposite of abstract images. Abstraction involves a removal of the individuality of the depicted, whereas photos are by definition of individuals and individual scenes. But photos are images because of what they show, and because of the naturalism required to account for the fact that they so show it (seeing-in), not because of how they

come about. Yet, it is the latter that accounts for their power to existentially prove that what they show has really existed.[6) And that confuses us into thinking that what we see in a photo is how things were.

Photos "say" only "this, here, now", without handing out the context that provides these indexicals with content. They don't assert a truth about matters—though they may verify one (provided by the accompanying text).
25. We must split the concept of the image, in a recognitional, psychological aspect, and a causal aspect.
26. The mistaken thought that these two aspects run together in photos and that they explain their peculiar value, I turn around here by arguing that it explains our fallacious trust in them. We think that the detail of what we can see in a photo is at one with the fact that the causal chain put the emulsion on the paper, and that therefore what we see in a photo is proven true in it.

(a) *Heizel drama, May 29, 1985*

(b) *World Press Photo*, 2004

Figure 4: Abstract Photos

6.   ABSTRACT PHOTOS

27. Understanding why photos miss out on address helps us understand why some photographs are abstract images. They are so exactly because their manner of abstraction is physical and chemical and they subtract something that was present in the event, whether this be a context or a process. It is this something that art has kept a lively interest in, as I argued above, and that has led artists first to develop abstract painting, and then ...to move beyond it.
28. Examples of where this fact about photograph becomes both evident, and profoundly troubling are: the live footage which was broadcast all over the world of people dying under the debris of the collapsing Heizel stadium,

May 29, 1985 (fig. 4a), where 39 soccer supporters died in front of devoted cameramen. Dying is, I submit too intimate an affair to be shared amongst millions of anonymous viewers. We watch it because we are curious about dying—of course we are, it is only natural. It does make us voyeurs, though. 29. Or this famous photograph which won the World Press Photo contest in 2004 (fig. 4b), of a woman mourning de death of her loved ones in the tsunami. She again, does not address us or the camera, but is absorbed in her grieving. Why don't we leave her alone with her intimate feelings? Well, perhaps we don't, because we have a bigger tale to tell—we want this woman and her intimate sorrow to speak for the whole disaster: she must become an emblem for the tsunami. One could argue that it is the abstracting of these photographs that explains certain ethical objections one might have against them. Surely we should not be watching these people dying, and mourning, and should leave them at it, as these are the most intimate kinds of experiences, and in ethical objections like these, it is assumed that in making a photograph, if it involves an abstracting from the element of address within the situation, we are harming those depicted, and, by extension, the viewers.[7]

(a) Nick Ut, *Vietnam*, 1972 (The Associated Press)
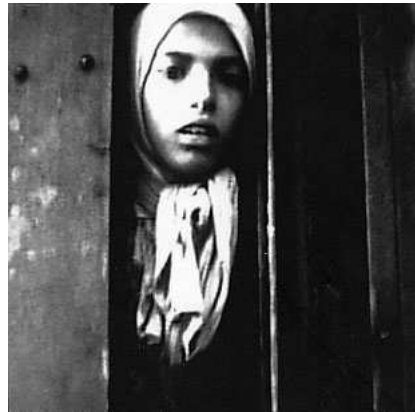
(b) Girl with a white scarf (Settela Steinbach), shot from *Nuit et Brouillard*

Figure 5: Iconic Images

7.   ICONIC IMAGES

30. An iconic image is a picture, mostly (or: necessarily?) a photograph,

of an individual scene, with individuals in it, which got to stand for an era—for something, that is, for which the individual becomes an emblem. Can a photographer choose to make an iconic image? One might hasten to answer that, no, photographers cannot wilfully make iconic images. Whether an image becomes iconic depends on its further public life in the media, in history—next to its compository properties. Yet, that answer is a bit too hasty. Photographers can make abstract images, and these, I submit are a necessary condition for an image to become iconic. People in iconic images do not facially address the viewer, or the camera, or the photographer. If they address the audience, they do so indirectly, via thought, a theory, background knowledge.

31. The Vietnamese girl fleeing a napalm attack, stirs our thoughts on the war in Vietnam. But the girl is absorbed by fear and panic. The photo merely records the fact—she is nude and vulnerable at that. You wouldn't want to be gazed at in the manner we do now observing this photo, would you? My point: the girl is absorbed in her own experience and does not in any way address the camera, the photographer, or us. The fact that we feel addressed by the tragedy shown is due to how the photograph mobilises our knowledge of the Vietnam war. Apparently, the girl was tracked down a couple of years ago. She was somehow returned her individuality by that gesture. Or was she?

32. The same happened, posthumously, with the girl with the white scarf, a shot from *Nuit et Brouillard*, the first full-length film about the shoah. In a documentary made by Aad Wagenaar and Cherry Duyns it was established that the girl is not a Jewish deportee, as one had been assuming, but a gypsy girl, and they even found her name, Settela Steinbach.[8] In the photograph though, we see, again, someone not addressing the camera or us, but fully absorbed in her own sores.

33. These examples are all of photos which got to sacrifice an individual for the sake of some greater good. My last example is of an iconic image applied for the worse: Hitler. We have had debates about whether or not we should humanise Hitler; whether or not people should make fiction films about Hitler. These worries all point in one direction: Hitler is an iconic image. Look at any picture of Hitler, and you should find that at no time does he address the viewer. He is always absorbed in his larger project. Lenie Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* can be held responsible for making the image iconic, but Hitler himself added as much.

34. These are abstract images in a sense comparable to how images used in scientific purposes are abstract images: they subtract individuality from their subject matter, in this case by neutralising all addressing from the faces, and they can be and in fact are used for external, moral or political needs. The

<center>(a)   (b)</center>

<center>Figure 6: Hitler</center>

ethical aspect of neutralising facial address and of failing to render moral space is not compensated by the use. Images of the shoah, the nazi killing of 6 million Jews, for instance, or the pictures of the Vietnamese, the Heizel and the tsunami dramas show that through abstraction these photos tamper with the intimacy of the events experienced by the depicted. We have no business observing persons dying, or lamenting the deaths of their loved ones. This is my take on the non-representability of the shoah. It shows the dark side of the challenge we confront in making images of people.

35. Portraying people like this involves an abstraction of what we deem most important in people: the moral space they inhabit. Again, art is where the challenge is met.[9)]
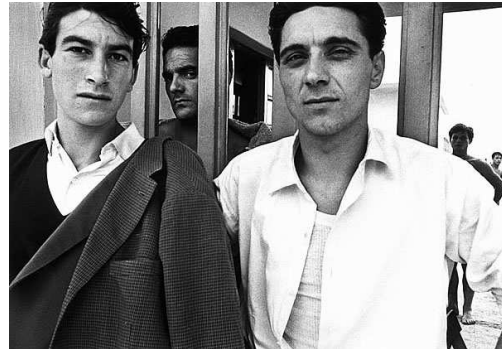
8.   ART PHOTOGRAPHY

36. All the people in the first of Klein's photos whose faces are visible, address the photographer. We see the photographer in their gazes. Beautiful. The little girl on the left is tenderly looking at the photographer and so is the bigger girl on the right, though she is showing her satisfaction the scene played by the boy and his mother (?). And that is not all. The two women in the back, too, relate to the photographing. How could this picture ever become an iconic image? I submit that it cannot, because the portrayed speak too much of themselves. They cannot be put in front of some external cart.

37. And much the same goes for the second Klein photograph, showing four

<center>10</center>

(a) Gun

(b) Entrance to the beach of Ostia, Italy (Lido de Ostia,1959)

Figure 7: Art Photography: William Klein

young men at the beach. They show their own selves to the photographer. These persons are so very present in the photograph one cannot easily, if at all, project one's own thoughts onto them. 38. The latter "morally correct" photographs seem unavailable to ever become abstract images: the portrayed seem too much in charge of their meaning.

(a) *Kolobrzcg, Poland*, 26 July 1992

(b) *Julie, The Hague*, 29 February 1994

Figure 8: Art Photography: Rineke Dijkstra

NOTES

[1] Artists try to capture the moral nature (individuality) of the portrayed. In portraits, and in larger scene depictions—an evident example would be Picasso's *Guernica*, which was painted not so much to depict the horrors of a Nazi bombing but to convey its moral expression. Typically, though there are figurative elements in the painting, Picasso refuses to turn the work into one large depiction. We see the effort ever since art stepped away from the approach that images are meant only to make the viewer think about passages in the bible, but might be put to use to actually represent them, and other scenes of life. This is not restricted to painting only, as we can see the similar effort in literature, photography, and film. Look at examples of art where the moral space has an implausible feel (note the cautious manner in which this is formulated: there is no way to objectively establish what is going wrong: one has to see it—yet, such non-falisifiability is a problem only for those who think moral space can ever be captured objectively).

[2] I say "primarily", because for now I am not referring to the schematic scientific images.

[3] When not actually, then at least virtually so.

[4] Gombrich 1963.

[5] Here is an image, by the way, that is not abstract, yet it addresses an abstract issue, and it shows that Gombrich's substitute account is wrong.

[6] I am working from what Scruton would call the ideal photograph, in Scruton 1983.

[7] More on this argument in van Gerwen 2002.

[8] *Settela, gezicht van het verleden*, 1994.

[9] See note 1

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