CHAPTER 14

Cameras

Beci Carver

When photography first became possible in the mid-nineteenth century, it was heralded as an opportunity to make the world visible, not just to the forgetful eye of memory but to everyone whose curiosity stretched beyond her means of travel and her immediate visual range. Photography made distant wonders such as the Grand Canyon visible in the 1870s to those who would otherwise never see them, while also revealing what has always been under our noses. Walter Benjamin coins the term "optical unconscious" to describe elements of our experience we feel but cannot see.[1] He explains, by reference to the act of walking: "Whereas it is a commonplace that … we have some idea of what is involved in the act of walking (if only in general terms), we have no idea at all of what happens during the fraction of a second when a person actually takes a step."[2] Photography has allowed us to catch up with our bodies, to see our limbs act.

In the years following its invention, photography made the visible world tangible to the imagination. When Louis Daguerre discovered in 1839 that he could record light onto a silver-coated photographic plate, he exclaimed "I have captured the light and arrested its flight,"[3] as though he had caught an until-now elusive bird. For the inventor of the photographic negative, Henry Fox Talbot, "the eye of the camera" embodied a new superhuman avenue of sight; he writes, reflecting on the "*invisible rays* which lie beyond the violet, and beyond the limits of the [human] spectrum," that "the eye of the camera … see[s] plainly where the human eye would find nothing but darkness."[4] In this chapter,

[1] Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings, 1927–1934*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 511.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Quoted in Roger Watson and Helen Rappaport, *Capturing the Light: The Birth of Photography* (London: Macmillan, 2013), v.

[4] Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature,* repr. in *Henry Fox Talbot: Selected Texts and Bibliography*, ed. Mike Waver (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1993), 91–92. Emphasis in original.

I understand cameras not only to make the visible world familiar, as early inventors hoped they might do, but also to make it *strange*. Footsteps are odd to an eye that has never been able to examine them, as Edward Lear gleefully suggests in a limerick of 1871:

> There was an Old Person of Deal.
> Who in walking used only his heel;
> When they said, "Tell us why?" – he made no reply;
> That mysterious Old Person of Deal.[5]

1 Specimen

The "specimen of a building" in William Empson's poem of 1930, "Description of a View," is wholly bizarre until we suspect it of being a photograph:

> Well boiled in acid and then laid on glass
> (A labelled strip) the specimen of a building,
> Though concrete, was not sure what size it was,
> And was so large as to compare with nothing.[6]

Photographic negatives are not boiled, but they are bathed in acid in the volcanic red light of a darkroom, elevated, laid out to dry on a screen, and "labelled." They are "specimens" in the double sense that they are examinable extracts from a larger whole, and visual objects; "specimen" comes from the Latin *specĕre*, meaning "to look."[7] In the second line quoted above, the absence of an 'I' to govern Empson's predicate, "was not sure what size it was," makes us wonder *who* is looking – whether the specimen is itself prompted to ask "what size it was," like Lewis Carroll's Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* wondering whether she is being shrunk: "I must be growing small again."[8] Not only do we not know who is looking here – just as photographs do not show us an onlooker – but we also have no way of solving the mystery of size. The building in the image is "so large as to compare with nothing," meaning both that it has been removed from its original environment (as specimens always are) and that it has been photographed at sufficient distance to be seen whole. The photographer has been obliged to make the building small so that its full proportions were visible

[5] Edward Lear, *The Complete Nonsense and Other Verse* (London: Penguin, 2006), 331.
[6] William Empson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Haffenden (London: Penguin, 2001), 54.
[7] *OED*, online edition.
[8] Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* (London: Penguin, 1998), 18.

in the shot. By a sequence of paradoxes, the building has been made small to be seen big, with the result that its size has become enigmatic.

Empson suggests that poems and photographs have a similar capacity to make the known world strange. His title, "Description of a View," is a synonym for "specimen of a building," whose central component, "-script," invokes "photography's" suffix, from the Latin for "writing."[9] Photographs make the world unfamiliar from the moment an aperture is made to manipulate an object's size. What the eye does naturally, the camera achieves by artificial means. For early photographers, this artifice was pushed to the fore by the novelty and extreme delicacy of the procedures in which it became necessary for them to train themselves. Saved from all this fiddle by new technology, members of Empson's generation could Kodak, a verb since 1890,[10] and, as the slogan ran, leave it to professional developers to "do the rest."[11] Yet Empson himself knew enough about cameras in 1930 to be able to visualize a darkroom's weird red twilight.

The oddity of the camera's recreated worlds seemed to Empson worth insisting upon, as it did to film theorist Jean Epstein, who in an essay of 1921 on the cinematic close-up, "Magnification," compares the ripple of emotion across actors' faces on the silver screen to "seismic shocks."[12] Photographed bodies were not people; they were monstrous enlargements of visual data. At the other extreme, the era's inventors sought to make photography seem natural. In the 1920s in New York, the inventor of the photobooth, or as it was then called, the "Photomaton," Anatol Josepho, debuted a machine that carried a tiny darkroom around in its gut, and could produce portraits within minutes of its subjects' having posed for them.[13] The end-products could be disconcerting; Roland Barthes complained sixty years later: "the Photomat turns you into a criminal type."[14] But the intention at least was to make photography as natural as looking. At midcentury, the first Polaroid cameras achieved on a practical level the spontaneity that photography has always feigned, enabling their operators to activate a self-developing dye in the paper onto which their images fell. But the results were and still are

[9] *OED*, online edition.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Quoted in Elizabeth Brayer, *George Eastman: A Biography* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 69.
[12] Jean Epstein, "Magnification," trans. Stuart Liebman and Richard Abel, ed. Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism, a History/Anthology, 1907–1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), vol. I, 236.
[13] Näkki Goranin, *American Photobooth* (New York: Norton & Company, 2008), 18.
[14] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), 12.

dreamily adrift from anything our eyes see: fuzzy, blanched, either golden or too pale, somehow emphatically rectangular.

In its second two stanzas, Empson's poem wanders away from the subject of photography, but returns again in the last line to the heart of the matter. Writing of the sky above the building, he now pictures "A dome compact of all but visible stars."[15] Empson's phrase "all but visible" here paradoxically restricts photography's domain to that of the invisible, as there is still no way for machines to arrive at what real eyes see. Photography stops at almostness, and in the space of illusion it opens up between seeing and not seeing, writers of the last two centuries have sketched alternative forms of visual encounter with the world.

2 Realism

Ironically, one sense in which photographs may seem to depart from reality is by making it *too* real. When in the 1850s, John Ruskin sought a word to describe the effect of excessive vividness he found so discomfiting in the sixteenth-century paintings of Agnola Bronzino, he chose "realism,"[16] which by then had come to suggest "photographic."[17] *Everything* is shown in Bronzino, with an accuracy that looks like excess. Writing of Bronzino's treatment of the "grotesque," Ruskin concludes that "the grotesque seems better to be expressed merely in a line, or light and shade, or mere abstract colour, so as to mark for a thought rather than a substantial fact."[18] It was not simply the case that more was less for Ruskin but that absolute fidelity was untrue – enough was too much. The single "line" that Ruskin proposes as an alternative to Bronzino's lavish detail here implies the opposite of "substantial fact," since, as Roger Fry would write in 1919, painterly lines rely for their success on the contradiction between their own bareness and the "infinite complexity and fullness of matter."[19] Lines succeed as art by the same measure that they depart from material reality, or more precisely, they succeed as art by remaining evocative of reality while simplifying it.

Part of what made realism's "resemblance to what is real" unsightly for critics in the 1850s was the huge and expanding popularity of cameras in the period.[20] For, undeterred by the formidable weirdness of darkrooms,

[15] Empson, *The Complete Poems*, 54.
[16] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* (New York: John Wiley, 1863), vol. III, 102.
[17] *OED*, online edition.
[18] Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 102.
[19] Roger Fry, *A Roger Fry Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 329.
[20] *OED*, online edition.

the immense lists of equipment, from squeegees to tripods, the practical inconvenience of even a single photograph's creation, and the near-certainty that most photographs would be duds, Victorian amateur photographers multiplied in their thousands. Magazines on photography in their turn proliferated, houses were fitted with little gloomy cubicles, and the silhouette of the hopelessly overburdened portraitist became a familiar one. In this era, the word "photograph" was used synonymously with "sun picture,"[21] which, though it does no more than translate the Greek and Latin pantomime horse of "photo-" and "-graph," more distinctly conveys the idea of an outflow of script from the sun. That almost anyone seemed able to achieve solar miracles of this type (equipment permitting) ironically made them cheap. In an essay of 1967, John Berger snapshots the first, frantic theoretical endeavors to dissociate painterly portraits from photographic ones as follows: "Only a man, not a machine (the camera), could interpret the soul of the sitter. An artist dealt with the sitter's destiny: the camera with mere light and shade. An artist judged: a photographer recorded. Etcetera, etcetera."[22] Berger here makes the distinction between paintings and photographs seem tenuous by stressing its defensiveness, and a similar air of insecurity haunts the complaints of nineteenth-century reviewers whose reading matter now increasingly faced comparisons with photography. When in a review of 1850, George Eliot snorts that her rival, Charles Dickens's, novels are mere "sun pictures,"[23] the clear injustice of her comment hints at an anxiety on behalf of her own reputation. Novels and paintings alike were under pressure in this period to explain how human artistic vision improved upon mere fidelity, or how fidelity could either be too much (as in Bronzino's case) or too little (as with the sitter whose soul goes unappreciated). The poet-critic Alfred Austin wrote in 1870: "No realistic writer can by any possibility be a great writer. He may be amazingly clever, remarkably entertaining, and even overwhelmingly popular; but the gods know him not."[24] Like Berger's skeptics, Austin here hurts his argument by exposing its reactionary nature. At the same time, his concept of art as an act witnessed by God betrays its origin in a camera-crowded age, when the ultimate proof of being was to be seen.

The reflex of snobbish dissociation between literary mimesis and photograph-like realism continued into the twentieth century. Virginia

[21] Ibid.
[22] John Berger, *Selected Essays*, ed. Geoff Dyer (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 98.
[23] Quoted in David A. Novak, *Realism, Photography and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 63.
[24] Alfred Austin, "Charles Dickens," in *Charles Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Philip Collins (London: Routledge, 2005), 148.

Woolf chortled at the puny craft of Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* in 1940: "I think she has a photographic mind,"[25] having herself, for years, been reassured by obsequious critics that "there [was] 'nothing 'photographic' about Mrs Woolf's characters,"[26] or that her fiction was "not, of course, photographic."[27] In literary criticism of the last decades, too, "realism" has slowly been cordoned off from photographic fidelity as its own self-contained, superior aesthetic mode. Nancy Armstrong insists in her seminal study: "As I use this term, realism does not indicate a genre or mode of writing that strives to document actual social conditions by means of visual description … By 'realism', I mean the entire problematic in which a shared set of visual codes operated as an abstract standard."[28] In Armstrong's view, for an author simply to invoke the visual as a touchstone may be a realist gesture, meaning that a fictional character's exaggerated description of a fantasy may be just as realistic as an author's faithful description of a street scene. According to this logic, Empson's building from the last section may be realistic in spite of its birth in boiling acid, since in Armstrong's words it offers "a visual definition of the real."[29] Going even further than Armstrong, David A. Novak invents an "alternative version of Victorian … photographic realism" whereby authors consciously *include* "figures that [would] seem out of place in the realist novel."[30] Novak's realism turns traditional realism upside down in order to make a home for the novel's fugitives, among whom were those whose defiance of social and aesthetic convention rendered them "grotesque" to the Victorian gaze.[31] We may wonder at this point whether we have come full circle. Would Bronzino's excessive fidelity be welcome in Novak's realism?

3 "Shy" Photography

In his preface of 1909 to *The Golden Bowl*, Henry James suggests that one way for photography to protect itself against attack from critics is to appear "shy …."[32] Having chosen to illustrate his own novel with his friend Alvin

[25] Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* (London: Hogarth Press, 1975), vol. 6, 382.
[26] Louis Kronenberger, review for *New York Times* (May 8, 1927), in *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Robin Majumbar and Allen McLaurin (London: Routledge, 2003), 197.
[27] Raymond Mortimer, article in *The Bookman* (February 1929), in *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, 242.
[28] Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 11.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Novak, *Realism*, 31.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (Ware: Wordsworth, 2000), xxi.

Langdon Colburn's photographs, James was convinced that the images in the book had found their own distinctive and compelling "way … not to keep, or to pretend to keep, anything like dramatic step with their suggestive matter."[33] This absence of harmony between text and picture, achieved through a continuous "discrete disavowal of emulation,"[34] develops in the book into a steady rhythm of disagreement without rupture: a friendly, loveless, yet successful marriage – notably unlike any of the marriages on which the novel focuses. The photographs "plead their case for relevance with some shyness,"[35] and with an inbuilt acknowledgment that, where written language has an immense repository of effects at its disposal, photographs may only be "optical symbols or echoes."[36] Berger would write in 1968 that "photography has no language of its own,"[37] and James preempts him here with a theory of the photograph as art's shyly dependent sibling, incapable of the autonomy that makes art art. In Berger's more positive view, the photograph's status as a referent to scenes beyond itself may potentially bring it closer to our own reality. For the fact that we do not "expect [it] to be as conclusive as a painting" may seem to capture the essential spirit of modern life as a thing of loose ends.[38] But for James in 1909, art was most successful when complete in itself.

When James associates photography with the creation of "optical symbols," he at once points to the medium's tentacular dependence on external sources and articulates a persistent irony of the photographic image: that, for all its granular precision, it may not specify the unique. Based on visual events that are themselves so unique as to be unvisitable by the eye ever again, photographs nonetheless confer generality onto everything they show. A photograph of a street becomes a typical street, a photograph of an elephant a typical elephant. The growing popularity of photographic portraits in the mid-nineteenth century when James was a child would have sensitized him to the flattening impact of writing with light. It was during this period too that the prevalence of the "type" qua cultural phenomenon led to the birth, in 1887, of a new "-type" suffix. From now on, one could enjoy claret of a "Burgundy type" while feasting on a "California-type barbecue" in a "Dutch-barn-type building."[39]

[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Berger, *Selected Essays*, 217.
[38] Ibid., 102.
[39] *OED*, online edition.

In my opening paragraph, I alluded to the photographs taken of the Grand Canyon in the 1870s that introduced those who saw them to a region hitherto almost unknown; but photographs introducing new sights were far outnumbered in this period by those confirming preconceptions. The freedom of photographers to move around at all was then still novel, following the invention of the photographic "dry plate" in 1871, on which the previously "wet" chemical coating of the camera's equivalent of the retina was applied in advance. Roving photographers who had long been saddled with liquid chemicals now had their burden marginally lightened. Yet these pioneers continued to haul after them a "large, view camera, tripod, … heavy glass plates" and a "portable darkroom,"[40] even across the canyon's crags. Portable, adventurous photography thus remained far from being fashionable. The form of photography that everyone knew of, whose products everyone had seen, and which Ruskin, Eliot, Austin, and James were most likely to have in mind when distinguishing between photographs and art, was that which belonged to the portraitist's studio: a place of choreographed gestures and planned costumes.

Dickens was likely to have connected cameras with portraiture, especially toward the end of his life, when his customary look of windblown exhaustion achieved household fame. In keeping with this probability, one of the few outright references to photography in his work is to a portrait. In his novel of 1865, *Our Mutual Friend*, he writes of the cherubic Reginald Wilfer:

> If the conventional Cherub could ever grow up and be clothed, he might be photographed as a portrait of Wilfer. His chubby, smooth, innocent appearance was a reason for his being always treated with condescension when he was not put down. A stranger entering his own poor house at about ten o'clock P. M. might have been surprised to find him sitting up to supper. So boyish was he in his curves and proportions, that his old schoolmaster meeting him in Cheapside, might have been unable to withstand the temptation of caning him on the spot.[41]

Dickens could be said to court comparisons between his method of characterization and photography here, although he does so *not* by establishing Wilfer's life-likeness or indeed his more nuanced mimetic qualities, but by insisting on the blond's collapse into a type. Whatever he does, Wilfer

[40] David Nye, "Visualising Eternity: Photographic Constructions of the Grand Canyon," in *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographic Imagination*, ed. Joan M. Schwartz and James M. Ryan (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 80.

[41] Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 32.

is, and cannot help but remain, a cherub. Throughout his career, Dickens had been accused – both sternly by his detractors and affectionately by his admirers – of reverting to stock characters, either in pursuit of laughter or out of an aversion to psychological depth. Wilfer is a stock character whose status as such is announced as loudly as the blush on his cheeks, while Dickens, in the act of knowingly conforming to his own believed tendency, becomes a type himself. Wilfer is a cherub-type so that Dickens may be a Dickens-type. And this outcome in a sense keeps everyone happy; Wilfer's "old schoolmaster" may continue to divert himself with fantasy punishments and Dickens's critics may go on punishing him for the same flaws. The only downside (in the novel) is that Wilfer develops a complex about being the person he is; he is "shy, and unwilling to own the name of Reginald, as being too aspiring and self-assertive a name."[42] Dickens suggests by this that the espousal of types may lead to a loss of the distinctions that make identity possible. What would Wilfer, what would photography be, if they were granted characters of their own?

4 Kodakers and Kinema

As time wore on, photography strengthened its claim to lifelikeness by getting up and leaving the studio. In his poem of 1937, *Letters from Iceland*, W. H. Auden snapshots a crowd of modern tourists "Massed on parade with Kodaks or their Leicas."[43] The two cameras identified here – the Kodak, cheap and easy to use, and the Leica, expensive and intricate – mark a division in the expectations brought to them by their different operators, who ranged from the artless to the earnest to the playfully avant-garde. Auden was himself among the avant-gardists, and contributed an array of whimsical snaps to the first edition of the text, including that of a horse's bottom.

Everyone seemed to become fixated on capturing their lives on photographic film in the modernist period. In a poem of 1929, "ANAGRAMMAGIC," Robert Graves mockingly follows the example of Kodak's founder George Eastman, who had famously hit upon Kodak's name during an anagram game, when "trying out a great number of combinations of letters that made words starting and ending in 'k.'"[44] Graves's poem blames Kodak and Eastman for afflicting the British "nation"

[42] Ibid.
[43] W. H. Auden, *Letters from Iceland* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), 50.
[44] Elizabeth Brayer, *George Eastman: A Biography* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 63.

at once with an artificial new temperament, "lustalgia," and with an alliterative disease.[45] In the last stanza, Graves balances one Kodakian concocted word upon another; he ends by responding to the challenge with which he opens; namely, to "anagrammatis[e] / TRANSUBSTANTIATION":[46]

> By such anagrammagic
> And masturbantiation
> They fathered then this tragic
> Lustalgia on the nation,
> And after that, and after that,
> ON A TIN SIN TUB ART SAT.[47]

The miracle of the Catholic Eucharist is here caricatured by the capitalized anagram of the last line, which achieves intelligibility only by a whisker. Graves thus accuses Kodak and Eastman of writing bad poetry and encouraging the writing of bad poetry, and even of writing Graves's own bad poem. Art sits on a "SIN TUB" defaced by the monstrous words of an ingrained Kodak mindset.

Could good Kodak-era poems be photographic? Empson's "Description of a View" comes to mind here, although Empson avoids entangling himself with the newly mobile photographers of the period by insisting on his photograph's stillness. On the other hand, in 1917, Thomas Hardy's brilliantly weird poem "The Photograph" embraces the modern notion of the moving photograph, bringing it into dialogue with the macabre dimensions of early cinema. Where the Kodakers freed photography from the studio and (to an extent) from what James calls "optical symbolism," Hardy sets out in his curious poem to repurpose the photograph as a kind of weapon. The following stanzas eroticize a woman's paradoxically animating destruction:

> The flame crept up the portrait line by line
> As it lay in the coals in the silence of night's profound,
> And over the arm's incline,
> And along the marge of the silkwork superfine,
> And gnawed at the delicate bosom's defenceless round.
>
> Then I vented a cry of hurt and averted my eyes;
> The spectacle was one that I could not bear,
> To my deep and sad surprise;

[45] Robert Graves, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Beryl Graves and Duncan Ward (London: Penguin, 2003), 307.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

But, compelled to heed, I again looked furtivewise
Till the flame had eaten her breasts, and mouth, and hair.

"Thank God, she is out of it now!" I said at last,
In a great relief of heart when the thing was done
That had set my soul aghast,
And nothing was left of the picture unsheathed from the past
But the ashen ghost of the card it had figured on.[48]

Hardy's invented word "furtivewise," whose first syllable etymologically stems from the Latin for thief,[49] is an attempt to snapshot in sound an act of spectatorship that is at once greedy, guilty, ruinous, harmless, and irrevocable. On one level this is a poem about the reanimation of an ex-lover in flames that progressively reveal her "delicate bosom," moving with a lover's curiosity from her breasts to her mouth and hair. She seems "defenceless," as no mere image can be, as if brought to life by the curl of scorched paper and the consciousness of threat. It is one of the persistent oddities of photographic portraits that they cannot return our gaze in the way that painted ones do, but Hardy creates a woman who looks back and sees him burn her. With the opening line's metatextual allusion, "The flame crept up the portrait *line by line*," an inverse relation is established between the poem's composition and the desired body's decomposition, between the upward-creeping flame and the author's writing hand as it moves downward line by line. To write is to set fire to by photographing.

Laura Marcus provides a lovely account of the first film the Lumière brothers exhibited, on March 22, 1895, in which workers at a photographic plate factory (by then manufacturing modern dry plates with their built-in chemicals) peer into a camera that records their peering.[50] Viewers of the film watched the animated eyes of the workers, who in a sense really did look back, though not at the viewer herself but at their own mirrored faces. One of the permanent weirdnesses of cinema manifested itself at this early moment, in the disillusionment of the viewer whom instinct is trained to expect reciprocation from live eyes. In the act of confronting their own desire to see their look acknowledged, audiences of *La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière Lyon* – like Hardy's killer in "The Photograph" – saw only ghosts. Hardy's poem may be read as protocinematic in the macabre dimension of its gaze, although it remains more photographic than

[48] Thomas Hardy, "The Photograph," in *Selected Poems*, ed. Tim Armstrong (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 211–22.
[49] *OED*, online edition.
[50] Laura Marcus, *Dreams of Modernity: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Cinema* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 178.

cinematic in its final insistence on the ultimate stillness of the woman in the still, whose life is as much a conceit as the poem's own words are conceits of real utterance. In 1927, Alexander Bakshy wrote that "The only real thing in the motion picture is *movement*,"[51] a statement that aims to remind us of the conjury whereby cinema's illusions fool us but may also indicate a decaying scene all around the forlorn vibrancy of the film reel. What was sometimes called "kinema" may have looked, in Marcus's suggestive phrase, like "progress being made in photography";[52] but the new medium also reasserted and added to the limitations of photography's experiments with the lifelike.

5 "Wishing Rose"

In a poem of 1934, "Easily, my dear," Auden pictures the tightening circle of a camera's aperture as a rosebud making a wish, whose pink plea then in itself evokes an upturned mouth waiting to be kissed. The last line in the extract below offers up its lips at the line-break, pursing them to make a full stop:

> Easy for him to find in your face
> The pool of silence and the tower of grace,
> To conjure a camera into a wishing rose.[53]

In the automatic apertures of our own twenty-first-century cameras in smartphones, computers, and tablets, the pursed lips that Auden imagines are now either invisible or understated. And so among the shocks of the Covid era has been the mismatch between our cameras' view of us and our vision of ourselves. For the first time ever, perhaps, we have wondered about the location of the aperture on our screens. But if Auden's analogy seems remote to us now, the association of cameras with wishing remains robust. We have never stopped wanting cameras to recreate life as we see and know it, or to stand in for lives we cannot see or know. Photography has always been shaped by the irrational weight of the expectations brought to it, gaining definition through its failures as much as through its progress.

From the late nineteenth century through to the early twentieth, the ripple of new inventions associated with recording differed in their legacy from other scientific advances in that rather than promoting rationalism they seemed to confirm visual superstitions. Late Victorian journalist

[51] Quoted in ibid.
[52] Ibid. Emphasis in original.
[53] W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), 34.

W. T. Stead credited them with "mak[ing] psychic phenomena thinkable,"[54] while photography in particular lent itself to accommodating belief in the otherworldly through those of its effects that appeared unnatural. In 1903, early color photographer John Cimon Warburg dyed the naturally white dandelions in his photograph of 1903, "Fairy Clocks," an ethereal pale gold, letting the darkroom's interspace between visual fact and photographic representation enchant them. Photography was for Warburg a site of wishful thinking, perfectly complemented by the dandelion's fairy clock, that not only measures time but also grants wishes. In the same period, his fellow photographers experimented with double exposure to create ghosts.

In 1869, Lewis Carroll accompanied his amateur interest in photography with a poem on wanting to see ghosts. "Phantasmagoria" is a playful poem about the demand among new homeowners for residential ghosts, as exemplified by a single, male homeowner, and endowed with inevitability by a heavy terminal rhyme between "haunted" and "wanted":

> "That Spectre left you on the Third –
> Since then you've not been haunted:
> For, as he never sent us word,
> 'Twas quite by accident we heard
> That anyone was wanted.
>
> "A Spectre has first choice, by right,
> In filling up a vacancy;
> Then Phantom, Goblin, Elf, and Sprite –
> If all these fail them, they invite
> The nicest ghoul that they can see."[55]

Photograph-like, Carroll's "ghoul" is a product of light and writing, "Seen in the dim and flickering light" *while* written into existence by the poem's words. The creature is apparently afraid of light too, and announces to Carroll's homeowner that "Ghosts have just as good a right, / In every way, to fear the light, / As Men to fear the dark."[56] This fear sends a continuous tremor through his body in the poem, as though the same double exposure that created him made his existence unsteady. Carroll here presents the human fear of the dark as the equivalent of the ghost's photophobia,

[54] Roger Lockhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy, 1870–1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 139.
[55] Lewis Carroll, *Selected Poems*, ed. Keith Silver (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2002), 41.
[56] Ibid.

which may also explain why his company is "wanted." It as if he were photographed to soothe the fears of an inverted ghost (the homeowner).

Just as photographs generate and invigorate wishes, they also draw attention to the facilitative work of the imagination in accepting the camera's partial untruths or complete fantasies. Writing in 1945 in his short story "Time and Ebb" of the perennial oddity of human flight, Vladimir Nabokov opines: "it is not easy to imagine airplanes, particularly because old photographic pictures of those splendid machines in full flight lack the life which only art could have been capable of retaining."[57] To see a stationary plane in the air is to witness what technology cannot achieve: the mere suspension of a heavy object without the help of propulsion. The fragility and danger of aerial suspension was a fresh issue at the time of writing; a decade before Nabokov's story appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the word "jettison" had begun to be used to describe the urgent disposal of planes' fuel tanks in the event of an imminent break in momentum.[58] Nabokov's suggestion is that it is the artist *in us* who makes the plane move, responding to the photograph by contradicting its assertion of stillness. Jean-Paul Sartre had made a similar point in 1940 in *L'Imaginaire*, in relation to a photograph of a man named Pierre: "if [a] photo appears to me as the photo 'of Pierre' … it is necessary that the piece of card is animated with some help from me, giving it a meaning it did not yet have. If I see Pierre in the photo, *it is because I put him there*."[59] In Sartre's example, the philosopher's own reflex of "animat[ing]" Pierre is echoed by ours in imagining a hypothetical figure (Pierre) as a real man within a hypothetical photograph. Sartre animates Pierre and then we do, the irony being that Pierre does not exist for either of us (not even for Pierre). Our imagination thus goes further than a photograph ever could, in not only compensating for the partial unreality of a photograph but also providing the whole reality of one: creating Pierre *ex nihilo*.

Sartre here may seem to conclude as Nabokov does that fiction, in its capacity as imagination's equal rather than its parasite, is superior to any photograph. But what if an alternative artistic achievement may be understood to reside not in granting viewerly wishes but in exposing and threatening them? What if it may be aesthetically more compelling to discover with a shock that photographs are still?

[57] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 585.
[58] *OED*, online edition.
[59] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, trans. Jonathan Webber (Oxford: Routledge, 2010), 19. Emphasis in original.

6 "Night Photograph"

Bernard Stiegler sees as the defining feature of modern late-capitalist society "a rhythm of constant innovation,"[60] in which the instillment of consumerly habit is offset by "the evolution of the technical system."[61] In Stiegler's prognosis, our modern temporal consciousness is reduced to a thin hyperawareness of the future, because only the future has meaning in an environment of constant novelty. We are never satisfied, yet we never lose our faith in the prospect of satisfaction. An adherence to the principle that the grass is greener or *will* be greener robs us of the present. Stiegler's argument belongs very much to its 1990s moment, a time of widespread technological optimism when cultural theorists were obliged to work harder than ever to incentivize critique. But there is still – in 2022 – truth to his broad premise that new technological innovations are never enough for us, and that we would prefer to project ourselves into the future (looking ahead, say, to the more densely "megapixelated" cameras of forthcoming iPhones) than to coexist with our disappointments in the present. This predicament applies especially well to cameras, whose promise to show us ourselves and the world as we see them, or might see them, or would like to see them, is impossible to keep. If it is the task of the inventor to adapt his device to the demands of a declared wish, photography's innovators fail from the start by harnessing themselves to a shooting star.

But at the same time that our consumerly eagerness compels us to think ahead, photography's cat and ball games with our wishes may still inspire inquiry. We do not only live in the future, as Stiegler would have us believe. In a poem of 1992, "Night Photograph," Lavinia Greenlaw turns her back on two decades of photographic advances – the invention of the digital camera in 1975 and of the color-capable digital camera in the 1980s – in describing a Polaroid photograph taken at night:

> Crossing the Channel at midnight in winter,
> coastline develops as distance grows,
> then simplifies to shadow, under-exposed.
>
> Points of light – quayside, harbour wall,
> the edge of the city –
> sink as the surface of the night fills in.

[60] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 17 and 43.
[61] Ibid., 39.

Beyond the boat, the only interruption
is the choppy grey-white we leave behind us,
gone almost before it is gone from sight.

What cannot be pictured is the depth
with which the water moves against itself,
in such abstraction the eye can find

no break, direction or point of focus.
Clearer, and more possible than this,
is the circular horizon.[62]

The ambiguity of Greenlaw's "we" in the third stanza permits us to imagine not only two pairs of eyes but also two ways of seeing: that of the speaker on her boat and that of her Polaroid camera. The scene "we leave behind us" is thus visible on two retinas at once, whose different mechanisms are woven together by the mutually descriptive technical language of the second lines: "coastline develops as distance grows, / then simplifies to shadow, under-exposed." In the first and second stanzas, the interchangeability between human and Polaroid vision establishes a harmony between them. In the third, conversely, the hairbreadth's time lapse between "sight" and visual fact in the statement "choppy grey-white we leave behind us, / gone *almost before* it is gone from sight" evokes two different processes of obscuration. Where the Polaroid's eyes go blind in the overexposed image, those of the speaker move out of range of the white water. Finally, in the last stanzas, the two visual perspectives are abruptly tugged apart, then combined with a jolt like agitated flotsam, when the depth of the unlit water becomes too much for any camera ("What cannot be pictured"). Then almost immediately afterward, the "circular horizon" is clear and bright for both. At this point, the relationship between the two perspectives subtly acquires the depth of a human emotional intimacy, in which the immersive darkness seen by one observer and not the other threatens to end their closeness, while their glimpse of the horizon's beacon is an ice-breaker. Greenlaw finds a lovely, lived, ongoing complexity in the competitions of eyes.

In our own more recent present, the disparity between real and virtual vision has been less inclined to seem romantic than frustrating, and even heartbreaking when, in the depths of lockdown, "abstraction" – to borrow Greenlaw's paradox – has set the conditions of our sight. In May

[62] Lavinia Greenlaw, *Night Photograph* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), 54. Emphasis added.

2021, Tiana Clark published a wonderfully arresting poem in the *New Yorker*, "First Date during Social Distance," in which vision forfeits its old role as the primary medium of sensory vividness. For Clark, it is touch, taste, smell, and sound that convey reality most effectively, rather than sight. Mimesis is impossible without these. When vision is introduced, it achieves efficacy only by the oblique route of taste: "the sky dimmed from spring / and wet-paint blue to sherbet / shades of pink fruit juice."[63] In the 2010s, the quick rise of Instagram and the emergence of TikTok made virtual images in all their manifold Photoshopped falsity seem as though they defined our modern moment. However, in the 2020s, we have become unsure of what we want from visual media. Imagining a camera and a literary discourse of the camera suited to our own era may in the future involve a recognition that photography's limitations and permissions may be doing us damage, while its accustomed functions may, with benefit and pleasure, be outsourced to our other virtually recreated senses. It is tempting to hope for a modern camera based on Clark's tongued eyesight, that tastes sherbet in a sky's fizzy pink.

[63] Tiana Clark, "First Date during Social Distance," *New Yorker*, May 10, 2021, online edition.