

THE PORTRAIT

LOOKING AND SEEING ARE NOT THE SAME THING.

- *Looking* – is an act of vision
- *Seeing* - is an act of perception and recognition

How we look to friends and family in photographs matters (especially weddings, birthdays, religious ceremonies, holidays, meeting people on the internet etc) because we know the photographs are not only part of our looking at one another, but also involve part of how we see each other.

- If a photographic portrait is a shorthand description of a person, then portraiture is more than 'just a picture'.
- A portrait fixes our identity in what is essentially an art of description.
- The abundance of portraits is a direct result of the massive impact photography has had.

HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAITS

THE INDUSTRIAL PORTRAIT

- Studio portraits
- ‘Democracy of the Image’
- John Tagg argues the centrality of the portrait is as a:

“sign whose purpose is both the description of an individual and the inscription of social identity.”

SOCIETY PORTRAITS

- Nouveaux riche Victorians rushed to have their portraits taken.
- *Carte-de-visite*
- Backgrounds, settings – aspirational
- Roland Barthes – Camera Lucida & the Punctum
- Jacques Lacan – ‘the gaze’ – the look from another which pertains to our identity, but whose meaning we cannot exactly *know*.

BUREAUCRATIC PORTRAITS

- Police and criminal legal administrative systems
- Medical evaluations
- Scientific measurements
- Anthropological taxonomies
- Colonial administration catalogues and collections
- 1871 Prevention of Crime act in Britain made it a legal requirement that all persons arrested for a crime must be photographed.

ELEMENTS OF A PORTRAIT

- FACE – personal appearance, including facial expressions, hair etc
- POSE – manner and attitude, “upbinging” and expressions
- CLOTHING – social class, sex, cultural values, and fashion
- LOCATION – social scene, background setting (or lack of it) of the person depicted
- PROPS – objects or other things that indicate the status or dignity of the sitter

Different types of portraiture (sub-genres) vary the emphasis they give to each of these components. Each element affects another in the overall potential for meaning.

FACES

- Expression is crucial and can exert a considerable impact on how a portrait signifies meaning.
- Facial expressions signify a repertoire of 'states' indicating the potential mood of the sitter.

POSE

- The pose is a visual argument, a form of rhetoric. A pose can be a self-consciously adopted manner intended to express a specific cultural 'identity' eg goth, punk, banker, homeless person or business manager.
- Pose, poise and posture connote all kinds of aspects of the perceived character (mental, physical, social etc)
- The skill of a good portraitist is to recognize this rhetorical aspect of the picture.
- Celebrity portraits have cultivated, highly manufactured , fixed appearances (iconic codes). Paparazzi photography can be seen as an attempt to correct this.

CLOTHES

- Clothing (or its absence) and various accessories all contribute to the rhetoric of the portrait.
- Clothes indicate social identity and how they relate to it (pose).
- The body is caught up in the rhetoric of clothing as difference. Which part of the body is covered, uncovered, clothed, unclothed is crucial to different fashions and styles.
- Clothes (and facial and body expressions) have cultural meaning.
- Clothes signify something about a person's identity, although the context/ location in which they wear them also infers another meaning or message about the person.

LOCATION

- The location or background provides a 'context' for the sitter. It locates the sitter within a social place and we judge their position accordingly.

PROPS

- Props can significantly alter the meaning given to the identity of the sitter.
- Props maybe more personal, acting as a transitional object enabling subjects to link themselves to their own homely context (eg child with teddy bear, adult with briefcase)

MAKING MEANINGS

- All these 5 elements work together into the rhetorical argument of the portrait.
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RECOGNITION

- In the perceptive act of looking at a portrait we recognize the human figure. There is pleasure involved in this very process of recognizing.
- (Freud & the pleasure of recognition & repeated behaviour)
- In portraiture we encounter 3 general categories of people:
 1. Familiar – friends, family, ourselves, relatives, neighbours, acquaintances, colleagues etc
 2. Unfamiliar – strangers, foreigners, etc
 3. Social representations – people who are known to exist primarily through media images celebrities, politicians, royalty etc

IDENTIFICATION

- with the camera , as viewer
- of the person depicted (recognition)
- with the person (or object) depicted
- with the look of the person (s) in the picture at us or other characters in the picture

NARCISSISM AND LOOKING

- Freud – pleasure in looking (Scopophilia)
- Lacan – mirror stage – identity constructed through identification with others

PROJECTION

- The viewer casts off uncomfortable feelings and relocates them within another person or thing.

BLANK EXPRESSIONS

- A blank expression which does not reveal a sitter's thoughts or feelings the face is 'neutral'.
- Mona Lisa – her expression depends up the mood of the viewer.
- The portrait reflects with viewer's desire in looking.
- Sfumato technique – Julia Margaret Cameron, Edward Steichen
- When we look at a portrait , what we see is what we can recognise in ourselves in another and in another in ourselves. These experiences may not be conscious, so that another person otherwise not like us from our own experiences of looking may resemble something else that we seem to know.
- *Ambiguity of meaning means that the spectator is caught up in an oscillation between different readings of the portrait in the imagination.*
- The viewer invents meaning based on their relation with the signifying elements of the extant portrait.

ULTIMATELY PORTRAITURE IS QUESTIONING

‘WHO ARE WE?’