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Photographic Fictions: Nineteenth-Century Photography and the Novel Form

DANIEL A. NOVAK

Modern critics have most often linked photography and the realist novel in terms of a shared goal, ideology, and imaginary. This ranges from early twentieth-century discussions of an author's "photographic" eye—for example, in Sergei Eisenstein's essay on Dickens and Griffiths—to recent work on photography and British realism, such as Jennifer Green-Lewis's *Framing the Victorians* and Nancy Armstrong's "Fiction in the Age of Photography." While Armstrong describes a highly nuanced relation between realism and fiction, she ultimately argues that fiction and photography participated in an epistemological project devoted to the presentation of a so-called real world—that photography would define what would be "real" for literary fiction. In doing so, she offers a historicized and expanded version of Barthes's claim in *S/Z* that "realism (badly named, at any rate often badly interpreted) consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy of the real" (55). This essay leaves aside the question of whether the Victorians associated photographic "realism" with scientific objectivity—with a representation of the particular and the immediate. As I have argued elsewhere, Victorian writers and photographers consistently represented photography as a process that both dismembered the body and rendered photographic subjects abstract, anonymous, and interchangeable (Novak 40–52). Instead, I focus on the relationship between Victorian photography and narrative and conclude with a brief discussion of the relationship between photography and Lukács's theory of the novel form.

Certainly some nineteenth-century critics linked novelistic and photographic representation in terms of a shared realism. For example, the author of an 1860 essay titled "Thackeray as Novelist and Photographer" writes, "[W]e know few instances more marked than the resemblance between our latest developed art and our greatest living novelist; between the mirrorlike narrations of the one, and the permanent mirrors represented by the other; between what we shall venture to call the photography of Mr. Thackeray and the photography of Mr. Talbot" (15). An 1886 essay even reads Tennyson's *Lady from the "Lady of Shalott"* as a photographer: "Poor lady! We know she never had a positive, but her negatives, as described by the Poet-laureate, are most lovely" ("Lady of Shalott's Negatives" 626). Yet paradoxically, rather than focus on a shared devotion to objective representation, Victorian critics linked photography and the realist novel through a shared dilemma: a preponderance of details without a governing structure. Photography provided a particularly contentious field for an old debate about the relationship between an ethics of realism and an ethics of form. Critics routinely argued that photographic form was fragmented and incoherent. For example, attempting to distinguish art and photography, John Leighton wrote, "[M]any photographic pictures may be cut up into several pieces, all beautiful, but no particle can be removed from a work of art without detriment, since it possesses unity" (74). In other words, there is no



Figure 1 Henry Peach Robinson, Studies for *Bringing Home the May* (1862). Reproduced by permission of the National Media Museum and the Science and Society Picture Library, London.

photographic figure that is not always already *misplaced*, because a photograph provides no proper space to begin with. Or, as John Ruskin puts it, photography lacks "disciplined design" (35).

For consumers and critics alike, this translated into a general disappointment not only with photographic "likeness" but also with the ability of the photograph to represent a coherent form. Images of groups seemed to split apart. The author of an article from *All the Year Round* titled "Those Who Live in Glass Houses" (1864) argues that "when two or more persons are taken in one picture, it is no uncommon thing to see them standing without any connexion whatever with each other, as isolated and independent as the statuettes on the board of an Italian image-man" (373). But photography even failed to keep its bodies from falling to pieces. As a contemporary wrote of an ordinary family photograph: "[T]he figure as wooden as a figure head, the limbs *perfect dissected members*, that might be dead bones in Ezekiel coming oddly together" (Foard 17). Photographic technology stepped in to put such unruly bodies in their place and render photography both more realistic and more literary. "Composition photography," or the practice of printing from several negatives, was at the center of the debate over the relationship between photography and art and was the specific technique that defined an emergent category referred to as "art-photography." Art photographers explicitly invoked academic painting in theory and practice as a proper aesthetic model for composition while also attempting to legitimate photography as an imaginative art. In this technique,

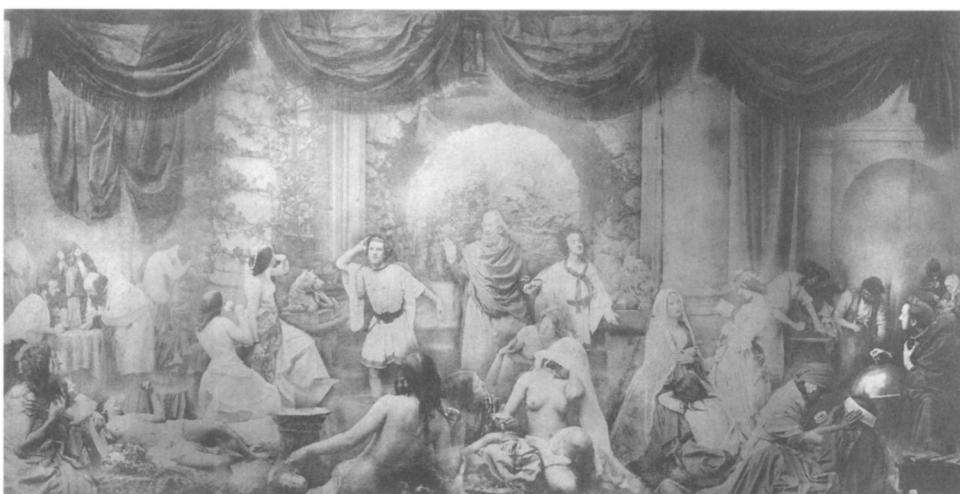


Figure 2 Oscar Gustav Rejlander, *The Two Ways of Life* (1857). Reproduced by permission of the Science Museum and the Science and Society Picture Library, London.

figures were transposed from one scene to another, bodies from different images were juxtaposed in new (and often compromising) contexts, and single bodies were even sutured together from different models. As Henry Robinson argues: "It is sometimes necessary to print a single figure from two negatives: Ophelia is an example of this kind. The head was taken from one model, and the figure from another" ("On Printing" 94). In such cases, the photographic body and its private identity were torn apart: made abstract, anonymous, exchangeable, and endlessly divisible. Using the technology of "realism," these photographers produced new bodies that existed only in a fictional, photographic space (see figures 1 and 2).

What is essential to understand, however, is that such manipulation was seen not as a violation of a realist ethic but as essential to realistic representation. As Robinson asserts: "I maintain that I can get nearer to the truth . . . with several negatives than with one" ("Composition" 190). In other words, Oscar Rejlander and Robinson blur the boundary between realism and fiction not only by using photography to represent scenes and encounters that never occurred; going further, they argue that such photographic fictions are both more realistic and more photographic. As Rejlander puts it, "I never see a photograph containing many persons in which they do not all look like a series of distinct figures, that won't mass together, and this effect appears to me to be unavoidable. . . . In photographing groups I should prefer to produce the figures singly . . . and combine them in printing afterwards, which can be done satisfactorily . . . without any violation of pictorial truth" (50). For Rejlander, by failing to achieve "pictorial truth," the photograph failed to capture truth itself. This perceived need to make the photograph "realistic" through a form of photographic fiction stemmed from a widespread conviction that the photograph could not represent individuality, particularity, and even the temporal moment—what (in *Camera Lucida*) Roland Barthes calls the "that-has-been-there" of the photograph.

As one can see from Rejlander's allegorical photograph *The Two Ways of Life* (made up of over thirty negatives), the presumed incoherence of photographic space, along with the possibility of adding or subtracting any piece from an image, made possible and perhaps even necessary the production of photographic narrative. Accordingly, composition photography was directly associated with narrative, and the photographic body itself came increasingly to be described in linguistic and narrative terms. The "value" of composition photography, one Victorian critic argued, resided in the "thought it embodies. . . . All else is no more to the picture than words—regarded simply as words—are to the poem or essay" (Wall 8). In this analogy and in the theory and practice of art photography, the photographic body acts as a form of abstract linguistic raw material ("simply as words") evacuated of specific meaning, context, or origin—making possible the composition and writing of photographic narrative. As an admirer of Rejlander described one of his composition photographs, "[It is] as good as a new novel" (Jones 15).

Criticisms of this particular photograph ranged from disgust at the use of nude models (who were compared to prostitutes) to perplexity at the "unintelligibility" of the allegory and the attempt to press photography into the service of allegorical painting. In fact, when it was first exhibited, the "dissolute" portion of the photograph was covered by a curtain, leaving only the small portion of the photograph devoted to the virtuous "way of life." While reviewers found the display of nude bodies shocking and far too "realistic" to be artistic, Queen Victoria made sure to buy the first copy. For my purposes, what I want to stress is that for these photographers and critics, photographic narrative, photographic form, and even photographic realism depended, paradoxically, on an effacement of identity and an abstraction of the individual body—a body that could take on any identity or meaning. Only when the photographic subject is an abstract "word" in the photographic composition can the photograph achieve both the truth and the "unity" denied to ordinary photographs—what Robinson referred to as the "perfect whole" of a body produced from several negatives ("On Printing" 94).

Just as photography was read in narrative terms by both photographers and critics, it was invoked to both critique and celebrate the realist novel. For example, comparing Charles Dickens's style to a daguerreotype, an anonymous reviewer for the *Spectator* (1853) noted, "So crowded is the canvas which Mr. Dickens has stretched and so casual the connexion that gives to his composition whatever unity it has, that a daguerreotype of Fleet Street at noon-day would be the aptest symbol to be found for it; though the daguerreotype would have the advantage in accuracy of representation" (Flint 28). While the reviewer argues that Dickens's style is photographic despite being less accurate than a photograph, his or her complaints about the casual connection of elements that provide only a tenuous unity suggest that it is the breakdown of compositional integrity that links writing and photography.

G. H. Lewes offers a version of this same critique in his *Principles of Success in Literature* (1865) through a distinction between "detailism" (which he associates with photography) and a true realism of discrimination and selection: "Of late years there has been a reaction against conventionalism which called itself Idealism, in favor of *detailism* which calls itself Realism. . . . The rage for 'realism,'

which is healthy as far as it insists on truth, has become unhealthy, in as far as it confounds truth with familiarity, and predominance of unessential details" (101). Like Dickens's "crowded" canvas, the "detailists" produce a set of details without connection, design, or form. A true realism, as George Eliot wrote in a review of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, selects its details and recombines them: "all the truths of nature cannot be given. . . . 'The inferior artist chooses unimportant and scattered truths: the great artist chooses the most necessary first, and afterwards the most consistent with these, so as to obtain the greatest possible and most harmonious scene'" (371).

Perhaps the most famous complaint of this kind, as well as the most famous comparison of Dickens's style to photography, is Eliot's description of Dickens in "The Natural History of German Life" (1859): "We have one great novelist who is gifted with the utmost power of rendering the external traits of our town population. . . . But while he can copy Mrs. Plornish's colloquial style with the delicate accuracy of a sun picture, while there is the same startling inspiration in his description of the gestures and phrases of 'Boots,' as in the speeches of Shakespeare's mobs or numskulls, he scarcely ever passes from the humorous and external to the emotional and tragic, without becoming as transcendent in his unreality as he was a moment before in his artistic truthfulness" (111). Eliot's backhanded compliment to Dickens suggests that Dickens's style is photographic not despite but because of his failure to represent the psychological identity, the "character" of his characters. For Eliot, Dickens is an author who produces *only* photographs or "sun pictures" because he represents only "external traits." She argues that the photographic author fails to form this excess material into a whole body because he or she is unable to signify a connection between body and character, "external traits" and internal "emotion." Or rather, she suggests that this failure defines the photographic aesthetic as such, and even locates this failure at the level of structure and grammar. Only a collection of "gestures and phrases," the photograph is grammatically challenged. Photographic writing produces only ill-fitting and agrammatical details or collections of "phrases" that fragment internally and threaten to disrupt the grammatical coherence of the textual "composition."

In these accounts, then, what photography and literary realism share is their failure to produce coherent form—a sense that realist detail disrupts the "grammar" of pictorial and novelistic structure. In an important and complex way, this theory of the relationship between realism and form, as well as the relationship between photography and literature, has extended into the twentieth century. In particular, Georg Lukács's famous comments in *Theory of the Novel* about novelistic totality (and its failure) could be grouped with many of the comments about both photographic and novelistic form that I have quoted. In fact, in "Fiction in the Age of Photography" (an essay that explored some of the questions addressed in the book of the same name), Armstrong invoked Lukács in this same spirit in connection with composition photography and Dickens's style when she argued that photography and especially composition photography are incompatible with narrative: "As Lukács apparently suspected, these bits of visual information stubbornly resist every traditional attempt at linear narration" (41). Armstrong has in mind, of course, Lukács's contention from *Theory of the Novel* in which the novel

form lacks the organic totality of the epic, has only a “weak cohesion,” and always threatens to “disintegrate into disparate, heterogeneous parts”: “The COMPOSITION of the novel is the paradoxical fusion of heterogeneous and discrete components into an organic whole which is abolished over and over again” (72, 84; emphasis in original).

Yet in later work, Lukács makes organic unity and abstract totality the defining characteristics of the realist novel. This shift is most clear in *Studies in European Realism* (1949) and *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1958), as Lukács comes to associate realism and the novel form with a totality in which the parts refer to and imply the whole. Essential to this definition of realism is the category of the “typical,” by which realism achieves the “peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular” and in which each “descriptive detail is both *individual* and *typical*” (*Studies* 6; *Meaning* 43). This theory of the novel form as an abstract totality is echoed in Terry Eagleton’s definition of realism as an “aesthetic ideology of ‘type’ and ‘totality’” (126) and Michael McKeon’s theorization of the novel form as a “simple abstraction” of a variety of novelistic practices.

Of course, neither my use of Lukács to theorize the connections between literature and photography nor Armstrong’s invocation of Lukács is in line with Lukács’s comments on photography itself. Lukács separates realism (and eventually the literary itself) from photography, often echoing Victorian critiques of the photograph: “In the works of a great realist, everything is linked up with everything else. . . . The plot is a poetic form of reflecting reality, i.e. that essential pattern which the relationship of human beings to each other, to society and to nature form in real life. The poetic reflection of reality cannot be mechanical or photographic” (*Studies* 145, 168). Naturalism and modernism, on the other hand, present details and characters with a photographic accuracy but as figures isolated both from the totality of the text and from the totality of society: “[I]solated characters of purely private interest, characters sketched in with only a few lines, stand still, surrounded by a dead scenery, described with admirable skill. . . . [D]etails meticulously observed and depicted with consummate skill are substituted for the portrayal of the essential features of social reality” (*Studies* 143–44).

While I do not have space to explore this fully, Lukács extends the fragmentary aesthetics of “photographic” literature to the fragmentary politics of capitalism. In fact, in formulating an aesthetics, ethics, and politics of realism, Lukács aligns the project of “true” (nonphotographic) realism with the project of Marxism in general because both attempt to restore the “complete human personality” (*Studies* 7). Reading Marxism as a form of bodily composition that reconnects the human and the social body, Lukács argues that “Marxist philosophy of history analyses man as a whole, and contemplates the history of human evolution as a whole. . . . Thus the object of proletarian humanism is to reconstruct the complete human personality and free it from the distortion and dismemberment to which it has been subjected in class society” (*Studies* 5, 8). While a photographic “distortion and dismemberment” of the human in naturalism and modernism isolates details from wholes, individuals from society, realism participates in both an aesthetic and an ethics of totality and community.

I have discussed Lukács’s meditations on the novel form (both early and late)

to help outline a different relationship between photography and the realist novel as well as to underscore the degree to which the novel and nineteenth-century photography shared both a common dilemma and a common solution. While it might seem strange to associate photography with the kind of realism advocated by Eliot—an aesthetic selection of details and an arrangement of such selected details “by an inventive combination”—read through the photographic technology and discourse I have briefly sketched, photography is perhaps best suited to perform this form of selection and combination that realistic narrative demands. Paradoxically, it is precisely the abstract nature of photographic representation—its tendency to homogenize individual identity—that enabled photography to produce both a more coherent form and a more realistic one. If, for the Victorians, both photography and realism seemed to challenge formal totality, they also offer new techniques of totalization—the means by which to turn “unessential details” and “scattered truths” into the picture-perfect scenes of narrative fiction.

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