

Resemblance After Photography

La ressemblance diffère d'un fait matériel.
—Francis Wey, 1851

The Lottery of Portraiture

THE PORTRAIT PAINTER WAS TIRED of all the criticism of his latest work. He pretended to begin the image again from scratch and finally invited the family and friends of the sitter into his studio. Everybody arrived and took seats in the dimmed room, just opposite the opulently framed painting, which stood in front of heavy damask drapes. Again, there was plenty of criticism: some found the image to be too dark, others too light. Someone was dissatisfied with the eyes, somebody else with the hair. The sitter seemed to look too old and too heavy. In short, however diverse the perceived flaws were, everybody could agree on one point: *The resemblance was imperfect*. But all of a sudden the portrait burst out laughing and stuck out his head—the sitter had been sitting the whole time as a living *trompe-l'œil* behind the frame.

With this little story, Francis Wey, one of the most frequent contributors to the newly founded photography journal *La Lumière*, begins his “Théorie du Portrait” in April 1851.¹ It is an anecdote that circulates among artists, and it aims at ridiculing small-minded critics who make such extraordinary demands on the resemblance of images that they are not even content with the original. Wey, however, doesn’t recount it because of its quite predictable punch line. For him, it becomes a starting point for a reflection on the relationship of identity and resemblance. He himself, he writes, would agree with those who had been deceived: the alleged image did not *resemble* the

ABSTRACT Resemblance did not come naturally to photography. Soon after it became a public medium in 1839, photography’s ability to produce resemblant images—and therefore portraits—was widely challenged. Proponents of photography quickly responded to those challenges by developing more complex concepts of the new medium. This article argues that photography played an important part in evolving debates on resemblance. It also maintains that resemblance, far from being the “epistemological obstacle” it was deemed by theoreticians in the twentieth century, was exceptionally fertile for early photographic theory. REPRESENTATIONS 123. Summer 2013 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 1–22. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/rep.2013.123.1.1.

sitter—since nothing could resemble itself. To resemble something, Wey continues, always means to exist in a *different* state from the object itself. “Every comparison requires at least two terms.”²

Francis Wey, born in 1812, is a writer with many interests and a member of the intellectual circles of his time: a linguist, novelist, feature writer, a friend of Gustave Courbet and one of the early theoreticians of photography. His “Théorie du Portrait,” spreading over seven columns in the large-format *La Lumière*, aims at legitimizing photography as a medium with artistic potential. In this enterprise he proceeds more cautiously than many of his contemporaries. Instead of simply declaring that photography is art, he prefers to point out how much the traditional fine arts and the new medium can benefit from each other.³ But he also wants to prove that photography is able to produce something that contemporary aesthetics denied the new medium: *resemblance*.⁴ The first step in this endeavor is, in Wey’s words, “to comprehend what resemblance is.”

There existed, in fact, at the time Wey published his article, a lively debate about photographic portraiture throughout Europe and the United States. Was photography able to produce portraits at all? The question may seem strange, at first, given the overwhelming success of the genre from the beginning. Countless photographic studios had opened during the first years of the new medium, and everybody wanted her or his photographic portrait taken. And yet photographers encountered substantial reservations about photography’s capabilities. We notice this in a letter from Antoine Claudet, one of London’s most accomplished portrait photographers, to a friend in 1849. “It will soon be proved,” he wrote, “that photography is the best means of securing good likenesses. There is much prejudice against the new art—good sense & reason must triumph at last.”⁵ At that point, Claudet and his colleagues were already producing portraits by the hundred. This ubiquity of photographic portraits obviously did not convince the critics. As we will see, everything depended on what was meant by the expression “a good likeness.”

The critics of photography, of course, had some good sense and reason on their side. It was common for sitters not to recognize themselves in photographs—something still very familiar for us today. The history of portrait photography could very well be recounted as a history of people being deeply dissatisfied with their “likenesses”—exactly because they weren’t very resemblant. Take, for instance, Charles Darwin, who could hardly believe his own sinister looks in one of his portraits: “If I really have as bad an expression, as my photograph gives me, how I can have one single friend is surprising.”⁶ A few decades later, Robert Louis Stevenson spoke in a letter about a portrait that he, though it had not yet been taken, already dreaded: “It will not be like me.” The sun as the producer of photographs was, for Stevenson, a “treacherous” one, and portraiture was “quite a lottery.”⁷

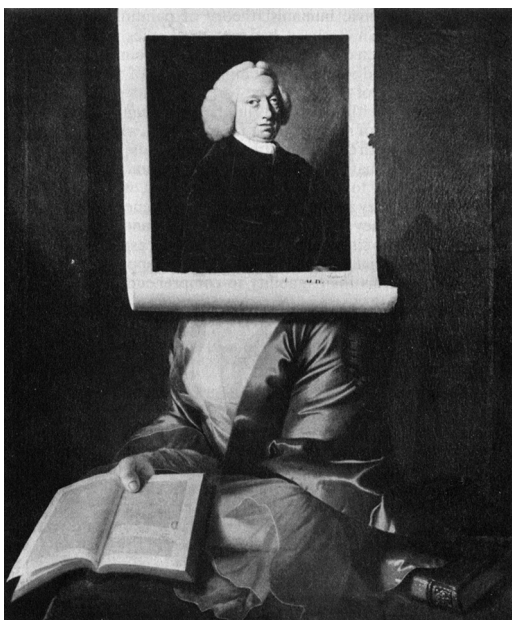


FIGURE 1. Thomas Hudson, *Miss Irons*, c. 1760. From John Barrell, *Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt* (New Haven 1986).

As Wey's anecdote made clear, however, the dissatisfaction with portraits' resemblances was much older than photography. The genre's history is full of offended sitters—and, in turn, offended painters. Sometimes these disagreements left material traces, as in Thomas Hudson's *Portrait of Miss Irons* (fig. 1). Having been painted by Hudson, who was one of England's most esteemed portraitists in the mid-eighteenth century, Miss Irons, "a well-known beauty," was not content with her image and returned it in order to have it improved. Hudson, obviously little amused by this assessment of his work, overpainted her face with a scroll showing the portrait of Thomas Mudge, a prominent clockmaker and inventor at the time. Hudson was convinced that this "would put some sense into her head somehow," as "Mudge was the wisest man he knew."⁸

The account of this incident and the corresponding picture are telling. Putting aside the obvious gender codes at work, they evoke a discourse about vanity and artistic ability. What is conspicuously not at stake, though, is the medium itself—the sitter could be conceited, or the artist incompetent, but nobody would have argued that painting *per se* was not able to produce "good likenesses." With photography, this changed: now it was the medium that became questionable. Although there might still be vanity involved in statements such as Darwin's and Stevenson's, above all they have to be read, I will argue, as surface phenomena of a much profounder set of aesthetic convictions. Claudet and his colleagues had to deal not only with

unsatisfied sitters but also with a whole aesthetic discourse that denied photography the ability to produce portraits altogether. It is the aim of this article to reconstruct this aesthetic discourse and to understand what it did to photography (as well as what photography did to it).

The question of resemblance has a bearing on today's theoretical debates as well. Since the 1970s, historians of photography have considered the separation of photography's referentiality from its mimetic qualities as the single most important step in the history of photographic theory.⁹ Both Rosalind Krauss and Philippe Dubois, for example, have used C. S. Peirce's notion of the index to establish a concept of photographic reference that is independent from any resemblance of the images to the depicted objects.¹⁰ Resemblance was, according to Dubois, a "veritable epistemological obstacle," which had to be overcome to establish more adequate concepts of the relation between the image and its referent.¹¹ As diverse as photographic theories have become during recent decades, many of them share the conviction that discourses in the mid-nineteenth century were trapped in overly simplified notions of photographs as unmediated (and therefore "resemblant") representations of reality.

But as Claudet's and the other reactions to photographic portraiture mentioned earlier might have already suggested, resemblance was, in the nineteenth century, an obstacle of a very different kind. It did not come naturally to photography. On the contrary, it was experienced—if achieved at all—as hard earned. As we will see, mimesis and resemblance had in fact become *opposites* around 1800. In order to claim resemblance, both theoreticians and practitioners therefore argued that photography did not mimetically reproduce the world. In other words, already during the mid-nineteenth century, photographic reference was conceptualized against photography's mimetic qualities. Photographic portraits especially had from the beginning something unsettling about them. Given that these images were produced mechanically and supposedly showed the world just as it was, without the interfering hand of an artist, how was it possible that one looked so little like oneself in many of them?¹²

An image taken by the French photographer Charles Nègre sometime around 1845 is a showcase of this "lottery" (fig. 2). It is a self-portrait in a mirror—not a regular mirror, but a so-called *miroir de sorcière*, consisting of eleven circularly arranged convex mirrors. The result is one larger portrait in the middle that is surrounded by ten smaller images. Even though each of the mirrors reflects Nègre's face in just a slightly different angle, the single portraits differ noticeably, presenting eleven distinct aspects of Nègre. This daguerreotype, just recently discovered and now part of a private collection in Switzerland, may have been no more than a diversion at the time—a witty



FIGURE 2. Charles Nègre, self-portrait in a *miroir de sorcière*, c. 1845–50. Daguerreotype, $3\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{1}{4}$ inches (quarter plate). Copyright Sammlung Herzog, Basel, Switzerland.

combination of two optical devices, a play on the metaphorical connotation of photography, which was sometimes described as a “mirror with a memory.”¹³ At the same time, however, it seems to reveal something about photography, about its potentialities and deficiencies. That photography could produce so many different “versions” of one person at one moment is, in theory, not very surprising, but the actual result is nonetheless intriguing. While all eleven pictures show Charles Nègre, every single one of them appears to be wanting, as if one photograph alone were just too contingent, too fragmentary, to represent a human being.

Nègre’s portrait makes clear what was at stake in discussions about resemblance. The problem was central for photography around 1850 because it touched on the core problem of photographic reference. How much of a person becomes visible in a photographic portrait? Is photography able to adequately grasp a human being at all? Or does it only deliver fragments of reality—*identities*, indeed, but no resemblances?

Francis Wey’s “Théorie du Portrait” is arguably the most profound theoretical response to this question. For him, photographic portraiture is far from being a lottery. His article is as worth reading today as it was more than a century and a half ago. We can observe here how theoreticians and photographers tried to deal with a notion of resemblance that had become more and more intricate in the preceding decades. We can also see, on the other hand, how philosophers had to deal with a new medium that threatened to refute their aesthetic convictions. With different means, Wey approaches questions with which Nègre, in his peculiar self-portrait, may have been similarly concerned a few years earlier. How could an image resemble someone at a time when it was becoming ever less clear under what circumstances a person resembled *him- or herself*? For Wey (as perhaps also for Nègre), the photographic portrait becomes a vehicle for exploring more extensive terrains: problems of reference, of the subject, of cognitive processes, and of memory. We must locate Wey’s position within the aesthetic debates of his time to acknowledge the significance—and the provocation—of his claim that photography could produce resemblance.

Disgusting Likeness

In the first years of photography, many beholders of photographs remarked on the consistency of the new images and their objects. “Those light drawings are nature and the object themselves,” a German article stated shortly after Louis Daguerre’s process had been published in 1839.¹⁴ And Samuel Morse, who was not only one of the inventors of the telegraph but also a successful painter, was convinced that he had before him not copies of nature, “but portions of nature herself.”¹⁵



FIGURE 3. Balthasar Denner, *Portrait of an Old Woman*, c. 1730. Wikimedia Commons, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Balthasar_Denner_003.jpg.

As attractive as this rhetoric of a perfect mimesis or even identity of object and image might have been, for the genre of the photographic portrait it meant complications. Since the late eighteenth century, philosophical aesthetics had worked hard to depreciate the imitation of the outside world as the purpose of art.¹⁶ Daniel Spanke, in his study of the history of portraiture, describes how portrait painting became one of the primary fields in which this debate took place.¹⁷ In a genre that was characterized by a close relationship between client and artist, a sharp distinction between fine and commercial artists had been established for some time—the latter supposedly copying their models in the most workmanlike and unimaginative way. In his lectures on aesthetics, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel presented the work of Balthasar Denner, a much appreciated portrait painter in the eighteenth century, as a particularly daunting example of an overly exact style that, while representing every hair, every pore, and every wrinkle in a person's face, failed completely to represent the person (fig. 3):

Enjoyment and admiration become in themselves the more frigid and cold, the more the copy is like the natural original, or they may even be perverted into tedium and repugnance. There are portraits which, as has been wittily said, are “disgustingly like.”¹⁸

Hegel was not alone in his almost bodily aversion to excessive precision. Spanke could show just how widespread such a critical dislike of “likeness”

was around 1800. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling insisted as well that the art of portraiture must give up its slavish imitation of outside reality and should rather make the “interior of a figure” [*das Innere der Gestalt*] visible. He demanded that the portrait should not be the imitator, but the “translator” of nature. In 1804, he declared his ideal of portraiture:

The true art of portraiture would consist in embracing the idea of a person that has dispersed into the individual gestures and moments of life, to collect the composite of this idea into *one* moment and in this way make the portrait . . . more like the person himself, that is, the idea of the person, than he himself is in any one of the individual moments.¹⁹

Schelling’s remarkable statement that the portrait should resemble the person more than the person resembles himself—“dass das Porträt dem Menschen . . . ähnlicher sey, als er sich selbst in den einzelnen Momenten”—makes clear just how demanding the concept of resemblance had become around 1800. An image had now to resemble the “entire person,” including his or her interior, as opposed to simply the outside appearance of a human being. Furthermore, as Schelling stressed, there was a temporal component to resemblance. In every single moment, one was only more or less like oneself. Only when resemblance was understood as a synthetic category, as something that required a difference to the momentary physical appearance, could one arrive at a superior kind of portraiture.

This, of course, was partly also a self-fashioning of a new generation of philosophers. At no time in the history of painting were portraits intended to depict only the superficial outside appearance of sitters.²⁰ Hegel and his followers attacked a notion of resemblance that had never existed as such. Since the Italian Renaissance, resemblance had been, as Andreas Beyer has pointed out, a “dilemma” for the genre of portraiture. The sitters’ demand to recognize themselves let the painters appear as simple copyists—as “slaves”—of nature, instead of being imaginative inventors. This was the main reason for the much lower ranking of the portrait, as compared to the prestigious genre of history painting.²¹ If a critic wanted to praise portraits—like Denis Diderot in his description of Maurice Quentin de La Tour’s paintings in the *Salon de 1767*—he had to state that, while they were indeed resemblant, this was “neither their major nor their only merit.”²²

Nonetheless, something did happen to the notion of resemblance. If resemblance had been both premise *and* liability of portrait painting throughout history, the term itself had been unambiguous. Everybody seemed to know what was meant by it. By 1800 this had changed. The notion of resemblance had lost its self-evidence and suddenly needed lengthy explanations. Different kinds of resemblance (*outer, inner, real, simple, and so on*) were played off against one another. As representation in general

became more complicated and less transparent—Michel Foucault and Jonathan Crary have written about this enormous epistemological shift in detail—the referential term of resemblance turned into a theoretical problem.²³ Concurrently, what was visually perceived as resemblance changed. A century earlier, Denner's portraits had been considered extremely ressemblant. An inscription on the margin of one of his miniature portraits declares the astonishment of its owner: "L'Original, et ce portrait sont d'une ressemblance extrême, c'est moi, c'est un autre moi même."²⁴ Now the same images became the antithesis of resemblance. Minute details such as painted skin pores and hair were suddenly objectionable, not in themselves, but because they now referred to the wrong property—the nonessential, contingent, momentary surface of a person. In the eyes of idealistic philosophers, the portraits of the so-called *Porendenner* ("Pore-Denner"), whose refinement once had commanded the admiration of connoisseurs and kings, were only dead masks.

This elaborate notion of resemblance had been established *before* 1839, so it was already in place to make life difficult for photography. After all, the single feature that astonished contemporaries most about daguerreotypes was their seemingly infinite minuteness. Early beholders hunched over the small plates with magnifying glasses and microscopes to discover countless unconsciously recorded details.²⁵ Moreover, what Schelling had demanded—condensation of "the idea of a person that has dispersed into the individual gestures and moments of life . . . into *one* moment"—appeared to be the exact opposite of what photography did, which was to single out one specific, but contingent moment (even if this moment might have been a few minutes long).

The earliest commentators were thus unsure whether the new medium was suitable at all for the art of portraiture. Daguerreotypy, it was said, only copied inanimate nature; it lacked the capacity to observe living nature and to grasp its spirit.²⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, at the beginning of the 1840s, shared the widespread disappointment after a portrait session: "You held the portrait of a mask instead of a man."²⁷ Seamlessly, the criticism formerly reserved for overly exact portrait painting had been transferred to photography.

The public was not discouraged by these negative assessments. In the formative years of the new medium, the portrait was probably its most successful application.²⁸ The run on the rapidly growing number of photo studios was so enormous that already in its first year, the term "*daguerreotypomanie*" was coined.²⁹ For philosophical aesthetics, however, these images served primarily as a proof of its elaborate notion of resemblance, which was positioned against the "spiritless copy." Friedrich Theodor Vischer presented the daguerreotype in 1851 as a most instructive example of the "lack

of dignity of mere imitation”: “Here one sees that the mean truth is in fact the full untruth, because the face, randomly reproduced by the machine with all its smallest forms . . . in a dull moment of staring into the full light, is precisely not the true one.”³⁰ In continuation of the debates that took place around 1800, detailed imitation and truth had become irreconcilable opposites.

The most challenging text for photography, though, had already appeared ten years before Vischer’s judgment. In an 1841 review of Noël-Marie Paymal Lerebours’s *Excursions daguerriennes*, Rodolphe Töpffer, a professor of aesthetics in Geneva, explicitly denied photography’s capacity to produce resemblant pictures.³¹ “No machine,” he wrote, “however perfectly it could be conceived . . . will ever be able to produce the least of the phenomena that partake in resemblance.”³² These were strong words. They were well founded, however, not only in contemporary thinking but also in Töpffer’s own theory and experience. Today he is mostly remembered as the inventor of the comic strip; in his time, he was one of the most proficient experts in visual representation and its theorization. As a draftsman and caricaturist he was immediately confronted with the question of how to produce resemblance. He argued that it was more likely to be the result of a single pen stroke than of a meticulous copy. In his view, daguerreotypes were material reproductions, reduced to “simple identities” by their fidelity and speaking only to our senses, but certainly not resemblances, which would speak to our spirit.³³

It may be interesting to note that Töpffer had developed his position on the basis of reproductions of photographs: Lerebours’s *Excursions daguerriennes* consisted of lithographs based on daguerreotypes of famous locations and monuments.³⁴ But Töpffer took the *Excursions daguerriennes* only as a starting point for his thoughts on the new medium and the problem of resemblance in general. His position is interesting because it represents a specific historical situation: photography had just made its appearance and had already begun to unsettle traditional aesthetics, but it was also often being used as an occasion to confirm and explicate existing aesthetic convictions. Töpffer evaluated photography in terms of drawing and painting, and photography, in these comparisons, always came out second. The central proposition in his aesthetic theory is that “the painter, in order to imitate, transforms.”³⁵ Resemblance, too, then, can only be achieved by *transformation* of the real. There can be no doubt for Töpffer that photography is incapable of performing this essential task of art. For him, as for Vischer later, the numerous photographic portraits only showed that photography could produce nothing but raw identity; resemblance, by contrast, surpassed simple replication and was, rather, a freer suggestion of *something more*: “La ressemblance sera le signe librement expressif d’autre chose encore que l’image.”³⁶

Manipulating Reality

It was this unfavorable situation that Francis Wey confronted when he undertook the task of legitimizing portrait photography in 1851. What he ventured to prove was exactly what Töpffer had denied: that photography could, in fact, transform reality. To challenge the new notion of resemblance would have been futile, so Wey defined it, very much in accordance with aesthetic theory, as follows:

Resemblance is not mechanical reproduction, but an interpretation, which translates the image of an object in such a way for the eyes, that the spirit can picture it with the help of memory. Thus, resemblance differs from a material fact.³⁷

At first it seems that, Wey plays into the hands of photography's critics with this definition. But where Töpffer and Vischer made categorical statements and tried to define photography's qualities in general terms, Wey looks very carefully at the images. And he discovers an interesting "anomaly": there are resemblant photographic portraits, as well as portraits that are not resemblant at all. In actuality, photography was able to produce both resemblance *and* dissimilarity. How was that possible, when it was known that it would reproduce a face with "mathematical precision"? When it was the object *itself* that drew its own image, as had been stressed so often?³⁸

This seemed to contradict common sense as well as aesthetics, if for opposite reasons. The equation of precision and resemblance went against aesthetic theory. On the other hand, it ran counter to common sense that such perfectly rendered figures would not always be resemblant. As we have already seen, though, it was in practice very common that sitters would not recognize themselves in the images. Even Eugène Delacroix, who had a very open mind about photography and was one of the few renowned painters in the newly founded *Société Héliographique*, was notoriously discontented with his portraits. Among a hundred daguerreotype portraits, he wrote in 1859, there isn't a single one that is satisfactory. Nonetheless, that did not keep him from having his portrait taken over and over again (fig. 4).³⁹

Jennifer Tucker, in her book on Victorian scientific photography, has pointed out the difficulties of identifying people with photographic images in the mid-nineteenth century. Sometimes people were falsely imprisoned because of erroneous identifications based on photographs.⁴⁰ Resemblance in photographs was not at all taken for granted. An article in the *Photographic News* called it a "wonder rather that the photograph is so frequently a successful and satisfactory likeness, than that it occasionally fails."⁴¹

By taking this wonder seriously, Wey turned the aesthetic argument against the critics: If photographs could be resemblant, then by definition



FIGURE 4. Portraits of Eugène Delacroix, 1842–1862 (by Léon Riesener, Eugène Durieu, Victor Laisné, Pierre Petit). From *Delacroix et la photographie*, ed. Christophe Leribault (Paris, 2008).

they had to be more than just mechanical reproductions. Some kind of transformation process had to be involved; some kind of difference was evidently produced. But because they were not always resemblant, it was obvious that, just as in painting, some amount of artistic skill was required to attain “good likenesses.” With this reasoning, Wey opened up a space where photography and its producers could unfold. “Il résulte que le daguerréotype, instrument scientifique, exige en dépit de sa précision . . . une faculté d’interprétation.”⁴² The formula—that photography required the ability of interpretation *despite* its precision—condenses pretty much the point at issue in early photographic theory: Was it possible for an artist to use photography as a versatile medium for ideas, much like a brush or a pencil, or were the qualities of the medium on the contrary so determined that the artist was more or less at photography’s mercy? A few years later, those two possibilities would collide in opposed accounts of the *Salon de 1859* by Charles Baudelaire and Louis Figuier.⁴³ The former would argue that photography’s precision was an irreducible given, rendering it inapt for any artistic use; while Figuier, in a formulation closer to our modern understanding of media, tried to establish that for the artist, it didn’t really matter

with what instrument he expressed himself: "The procedure is almost nothing in art; everything relies on the sentiment of the artist."⁴⁴

But this was still a rare position. For portraitists, there existed at least one undeniable difference between painting and photography. Marcus Aurelius Root, a studio photographer in Philadelphia, put it memorably: "The photographer cannot dispense with the *presence* of the objects he would reproduce." This, of course, had an immediate impact on the task of producing resemblant pictures. The painter, Root explained, was able to assemble the "scattered fragments [of reality] in a single composition," using imagination, memory, and present vision all at once. For the photographer, this was impossible: "He must seek the scattered elements which have originated the idea he would express, not by help of imagination, but *as assembled in reality*."⁴⁵

One almost believes one hears Schelling here, speaking of reality as a set of scattered fragments that have to be amalgamated in order to come closer to the "idea of a person." The task of the photographer, Root continued, was "to penetrate . . . the fleshly mask, which envelopes the spiritual part of his model, and ascertain his real type and character."⁴⁶ In the mid-nineteenth century, obviously, one no longer had to be an idealist to embrace such convictions; instead, they had become commonplace. Handbooks regarding portrait photography unanimously stated that the task of the photographer, instead of producing mathematically exact reproductions, was to represent the "spirit," the "individuality," and the "true character" of a sitter. Nadar, who even today is considered to have been particularly apt for this task, called it the "*ressemblance morale*."⁴⁷ But how was it possible to represent "true character," when each person, as Root admitted, presented an infinite number of diverse aspects?

The great difficulty in regard to the physiognomy, is to distinguish from the multitude of *different* expressions presented by the model, the one which is most *characteristic*, or best represents his *individuality*, . . . and which is, at the same time, most favorable to a good resemblance.⁴⁸

Photographers thus argued that the greater part of their artistic work took place *before* the picture was taken. If the painter could compose the image as he pleased, the photographer had to compose the object in front of the camera. Proponents of photography such as Wey asserted that the choice of the room and the background, of lighting, accessories and the sitter's position, were all acts of interpretation: "To make a choice within the different aspects of reality means, for the photographer, to interpret."⁴⁹ In pursuit of resemblance, the artist-photographer became a manipulator of reality.

In practice, to represent individuality meant to find an appropriate *pose*. "Le choix de la pose est extrêmement important au point de vue de la ressemblance," wrote André Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri in his book *L'Art de*



FIGURE 5. M. A. Root, portrait of an unknown military man, c. 1848. Library Company of Philadelphia, *Catching a Shadow: Daguerreotypes in Philadelphia, 1839–1860*, www.librarycompany.org/catchingashadow/section5/index.htm.

photographie.⁵⁰ It may seem contradictory to us today that a successful photographer such as Disdéri would fill pages and pages on the importance of bringing out the individuality and character of a model, while actually mass-producing portraits with a limited number of prefabricated poses.⁵¹ But the representation of individuality consisted of a delicate equilibrium: the character of a person, however singular, still had to be identifiable for the beholder, and thus required a conventional form.⁵² The “audacious soldier” or the “loving wife and mother” were examples of such reliable visual formulas (see fig. 5).

Poses highlighted the most important character traits, but they were always in danger of appearing too standardized, and consequently of producing “mere likeness,” but not resemblance. In the 1870s, Disdéri’s star fell, eventually leading to his bankruptcy, because, as Roger Cardinal has pointed out, clients were no longer satisfied with his quasi-industrial products.⁵³ In 1864, Root described just how tricky the production of resemblance was: “Mere likeness, without difference, becomes distasteful sameness or dull uniformity; just as mere variety, without likeness, would be intolerable.”⁵⁴ Even for photographers who produced several thousand “likenesses” a year, resemblance remained a fragile affair.⁵⁵

Travail Mental:
The Inner Picture Gallery

But what exactly was this difference, which, by general agreement, was so necessary to produce resemblance? This “*autre chose encore*” that

Töpffer had asked for? What made a picture resemblant was seemingly as hard to determine as the question, “what was art?” Once again, aesthetics seemed to escape with a vague “Je ne sais quoi.”⁵⁶

Wey, however, did not settle for this lack of distinction. It is worthwhile to take a closer look at his definition of resemblance. Not only are the terms “interpretation,” “translation,” and “difference” mentioned but so also is “memory”: “an interpretation that translates the image of an object for the eyes in such a way that the spirit can imagine it with the help of memory.” To explain how we remember faces, Wey uses a powerful metaphor: the *inner picture gallery*. In our brain we would store great numbers of portraits, picked up in passing, but so faithful that we can recognize the original when we see it. These portraits weren’t finished in one day, however; in fact, they would be completed only gradually, become slowly more and more distinct, whenever we saw the model.

Hegel in his *Phenomenology* had already described history as a “gallery of pictures.” In a “sluggish movement and succession,” the images of this imaginary museum followed one another, progressing toward completion.⁵⁷ The becoming of the world spirit thus coincided conspicuously with the new chronological presentation in museums.⁵⁸ For Hegel, the metaphor of the picture gallery might also have been attractive because it made the past seem available. With reference to Aristotle’s memory theory, he described individual memory as a depository for inner images as well.

However, if philosophers talked about such inner images in the past, it was, according to Wey, nothing more than pure speculation. Only photography was able to demonstrate that memory really worked in this way. The single portraits we store in our inner gallery, he explained, were created—just as a painter works—in multiple sessions. In due course, the many cursory impressions we have of a person would amalgamate into one likeness. In an almost ideal way, the exhibits in Wey’s inner gallery fulfill Schelling’s demand for synthetic images that are finally “more like the person himself, than he himself is in any one of the individual moments.” Resemblance was nothing else than the congruence of painted or photographed portraits with these inner images.⁵⁹ The necessary difference, then, for producing resemblance was the one between the fleeting impression and the slowly stabilizing memory image.

It is striking that in Wey’s concept, the inner picture gallery is not fully accessible to the conscious mind. The memory images complete themselves without our volition. We compare everything we see with them, but this process works unconsciously: “Le travail mental qui nous fait apprécier la ressemblance est instinctif et indépendant de notre volonté.”⁶⁰ At this point, photography showed its full potential. Because it acted—at least in the short period of exposure—independently from the artist, it seemed to produce,

for the first time, pictures that were not subjected to the dictate of the artist's unconscious. In a remarkable reversal of Immanuel Kant's Copernican Revolution, so to speak, the camera acted in accordance with the objects, and not the other way around. The clear disadvantage was that photography was pretty much at the objects' mercy. But on the other hand it could claim to give insight into processes of cognition until then inaccessible. The question of what resemblance was, and how it worked, was exactly such a case. In a time when the idea of "the unconscious" had just started to invade many fields of thought, this was certainly no small promise.⁶¹

It cannot be ignored that Wey's "Théorie du portrait" contains two seemingly contradicting arguments. The first one—we might call it the "aesthetic" argument—maintained that photography was able to *interpret*, and thus to produce, resemblance. The second, "epistemic" argument held that photography, as opposed to man, did not interpret and was therefore an instrument for *examining* the mechanism of resemblance.

This contradiction was typical for the early years of photography in that it is based on a peculiar dual designation of the new medium. It held that photography faithfully reproduced objects just as they were in the moment of exposure, but that, in able hands, it could also produce a difference from reality as it was known. The unsettling experience with photography was that it sometimes showed the world in a manner very different from how one was used to perceiving it, while there could be no doubt that it was the world itself being captured. "What was so shocking about photography," Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson have observed, "was not that it looked like the world of ordinary perception but instead that it did not."⁶² This tension between identity and difference could not be resolved, and I would argue that it was fundamental to all potentialities of the new medium.

Few photographs visualize this tension as clearly as Charles Nègre's mirror-portrait (figs. 2 and 6). To describe it as a theoretical claim about resemblance would certainly be stretching the argument. But within its own terms, it does seem to partake in this debate, making some of Wey's points more evident. With Nègre's face reflected differently eleven times, it becomes clear what kind of difference photography is able to produce: not only a temporal one (after all, it shows the same moment eleven times) but also a spatial one. The slightest change of angle can produce very different atmospheres, can bring out very different aspects of a character. No photograph is quite like the other. Photography's ability to interpret, in theory elaborately deduced by Wey, becomes effortlessly visible here.

At the same time, Nègre's self-portrait seems to confirm one of aesthetics' central suppositions: that every one of our outer appearances is contingent to such an extent that we only rarely resemble ourselves. Each



FIGURE 6. Nègre, self-portrait (details from fig. 1).

of the eleven portraits could correspond to a fragment of the person Charles Nègre. The daguerreotype appears to be a dissection of the memory images that reside in our inner picture galleries. These could be the multitude of fleeting impressions we gradually merge into *one* image of Nègre—an image we subsequently use to measure the resemblance of other images.

Strictly speaking, this is not a portrait in the nineteenth-century sense, with its purpose being, as Root stated, to find a single expression that would contain the whole character of a person. A portrait photographer, looking for this idea, was almost working against the medium: because photography isolated a single instant out of life's continuum, the sitter had to be arranged in a pose that would transcend the contingent moment and evoke an appearance of wider individuality. Nègre, the former painter and pupil of Paul Delaroche, does not assume a pose in his portrait. He seems to be interested in something else completely: in photography's ability not to synthesize, but to analyze and dissect the many possible manifestations of the self.

Is the impression of a fragmented subject, which this photograph inevitably evokes, an anachronism, owed to our modern notion of the subject? Alan Trachtenberg has suggested that photography, in its early phase, was able to do both: to affirm the conventional idea of the coherent self as well as to undermine it. It was particularly those images that could not produce

resemblance to their models that posed a potential threat to traditional concepts of the subject.⁶³ Admittedly, in around 1850, we have yet to arrive at the fragmented “I” that Hyppolyte Taine would postulate two decades later.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, Nègre’s daguerreotype, much more than the usual portraits of his time, reveals a disturbing insight that came with photography. If the human being was shown in a photographic picture but no longer formed a unity and seemed unfamiliar, the tension between identity and difference could become productive. It was this view of photographic portraits that startled Delacroix, the view of just how loosely the human spirit was connected to a person’s ever-changing facial expressions: “Which one of us doesn’t have a hundred faces? Will my portrait from this morning be the same as tonight, as tomorrow? Nothing recurs: in every moment a new expression!”⁶⁵

For modern photographic theory, resemblance might well have been an “epistemological obstacle” that had to be overcome before more adequate concepts of photographic reference became possible. But in the *history* of photography, the concept of resemblance—and this is what I hope to have shown—was epistemologically most fertile. Long before theories of indexicality were formulated, it was resemblance that positioned photography against notions of identity, and therefore against ideas of simple mimetic reference between image and object. Because photography’s ability to produce resemblance was so highly contested from the very beginning, theoreticians as well as practitioners of photography were forced to find ways and arguments to make photographs resemblant. Most surprising, perhaps, is the fact that those discussions, as seen in Wey’s “Théorie du portrait,” were not confined to photographic theory. Photographic portraits raised broader questions, regarding the coherence of the subject, for instance, the role of the unconscious, or the workings of memory—touching on some of aesthetics’ most debated issues. At the heart of Delacroix’s exclamation, as well as of Nègre’s daguerreotype and Wey’s article, there is astonishment over what photography revealed about the human.

Notes

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1. Francis Wey, "Théorie du Portrait," *La Lumière* 1, no. 12/13 (1851): 46–47, 50–51. On Francis Wey, see Anne de Mondenard, "Entre romantisme et réalisme. Francis Wey (1812–1882), critique d'art," *Etudes photographiques* 8 (2000). About *La Lumière* see Emmanuel Hermange, "La Lumière," *Etudes photographiques* 1 (1996).
2. Wey, "Théorie du Portrait," 46. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.
3. Francis Wey, "De l'influence de l'héliographie sur les beaux-arts," *La Lumière* 1, no. 1/2 (1851): 2–3, 6–7.
4. Throughout this article, I use the term "resemblance" (and not "likeness"), because it appears to be closer to the French *ressemblance* and the German *Ähnlichkeit*. In English usage in the nineteenth century, resemblance seems to become the more demanding notion as compared to likeness. A history of these terms has yet to be written. Important articles on photography's relation to resemblance include Elizabeth Anne McCauley, *Likenesses: Portrait Photography in Europe, 1850–1870* (Albuquerque, 1980); Charles Grivel, "Töpffer: Ressemblance contre photographie. Les clefs de l'art," in Rodolphe Töpffer, *Reflexions et menus propos d'un peintre genevois, ou Essai sur le beau dans les arts* (Paris, 1998), 15–44; Alan Trachtenberg, "Likeness as Identity: Reflections on the Daguerrean Mystique," in *The Portrait in Photography*, ed. Graham Clarke (London, 1992), 173–92, and John Gage, "Photographic Likeness," in *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. Joanna Woodall (Manchester, 1997), 119–30. For a recent systematic approach to resemblance see Michael Newall, "Pictorial Resemblance," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 2 (2010): 91–103.
5. Antoine Claudet to D. Hastings, 26 March 1849. Getty Research Institute, Special Collections [840174].
6. The portrait as well as the quote in question can be found at Darwin Online, http://darwin-online.org.uk/EditorialIntroductions/vanWyhe_MaullandPolyblankPhoto.html.
7. Robert Louis Stevenson to A. Trevor Hadden, 5 July 1883, in Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew, eds., *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson* (New Haven, 1994), 4:141. See Sara Stevenson, "Robert Louis Stevenson and the Portrait Photographers," *History of Photography* 37, no. 2 (2013).
8. The anecdote is written on a label that was attached to the painting in the nineteenth century; see the catalog *Thomas Hudson, 1701–1779: Portrait Painter and Collector* (London, 1979).
9. Peter Geimer, *Theorien der Fotografie zur Einführung* (Hamburg, 2009), 41.
10. Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," *October* 3 (1977): 68–81; Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part II," *October* 4 (1977): 58–67; Philippe Dubois, *L'Acte photographique et autres essais* (Paris, 1990).
11. Dubois, *L'Acte photographique*, 64.
12. For photography's role in the emergence of "mechanical objectivity," see Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York, 2007).
13. Most prominently in Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," *Atlantic Monthly* 3, no. 20 (June 1859): 738–48.

14. *Hamburger Correspondent*, 29 November 1839, cited in Bernd Stiegler, *Theoriegeschichte der Photographie* (Munich, 2006), 18.
15. Samuel Morse, cited in M. A. Root, *The Camera and The Pencil; or the Heliographic Art, Its Theory and Practice in All Its Various Branches* (Philadelphia, 1864), 391.
16. See, e.g., Frances Bradshaw Blanshard, *Retreat from Likeness in the Theory of Painting*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1949).
17. Daniel Spanke, *Porträt—Ikone—Kunst: Methodologische Studien zur Geschichte des Porträts in der Kunstliteratur* (Munich, 2004).
18. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford, 1975), 1:43. (“Aber auch diese Freude und Bewunderung wird für sich, gerade je ähnlicher das Nachbild dem natürlichen Vorbild ist, desto eher frostig und kalt oder verkehrt sich in Überdruß und Widerwillen. Es gibt Porträts, welche, wie geistreich ist gesagt worden, bis zur Ekelhaftigkeit ähnlich sind.”)
19. F. W. J. Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis, 1989), 146.
20. See, e.g., Max J. Friedländer, *Landscape, Portrait, Still-Life: Their Origin and Development* (Oxford, 1949).
21. Andreas Beyer, *Das Porträt in der Malerei* (Munich, 2002), 198.
22. Denis Diderot, *Salons*, ed. Jean Seznec (Oxford, 1983), 3:168.
23. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1970); Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).
24. Cited after C. J. de Bruijn Kops, “Twee Amsterdamse portretminiaturen van Balthasar Denner (1685–1749),” *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 36, no. 3 (1988): 173.
25. See the chapter “Detail,” in Timm Starl, *Kritik der Fotografie* (Marburg, 2012); also André Gunthert, “La boîte noire de Daguerre,” in *Le daguerréotype français. Un objet photographique*, ed. Musée d’Orsay (Paris, 2003), 34–40; and my article, “Fotografische Gegenstände unter der Lupe,” in Iris Höger et al., eds., *Mediale Wechselwirkungen* (Berlin, 2013), 120–37.
26. Ludwig Schorn and Eduard Kolloff, “Der Daguerreotyp,” in *Theorie der Fotografie*, vol. 1, 1839–1912, ed. Wolfgang Kemp (Munich, 1980), 56–59, here 59.
27. Cited in Trachtenberg, “Likeness as Identity,” 191.
28. See, e.g., Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (London, 2002), 61.
29. See Théodore Maurisset’s satirical lithograph “La Daguerreotypomanie,” Paris, December 1839, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Online Catalog, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002722650/>.
30. Cited in Spanke, *Porträt—Ikone—Kunst*, 287. (“Hier sieht man, dass die gemeine Wahrheit die volle Unwahrheit ist, denn das mit allen kleinsten Formen . . . im langweiligen, stieren Moment des Blickens in das volle Licht wahllos von der Maschine ausgeführte Gesicht ist gerade nicht das wahre.”)
31. Noël-Marie Paymal Lerebours, *Excursions daguerriennes. Vues et monuments les plus remarquable du globe* (Paris, 1842).
32. Rodolphe Töpffer, “De la plaque Daguerre. A propos des excursions Daguerriennes,” in *Reflexions et menus propos d’un peintre genevois, ou Essai sur le beau dans les arts*, ed. Charles Grivel (Paris, 1998), 390. (“aucun machine, quelque parfaite qu’on la suppose . . . , ne saurait produire jamais le moindre des phénomènes qui appartiennent à la ressemblance.”) For Töpffer’s approach to resemblance and the role of photography in it, see Charles Grivel’s excellent foreword.
33. Töpffer, “De la plaque Daguerre,” 384. For such categorizations in the nineteenth century, see Gerhard Plumpe, *Der tote Blick. Zum Diskurs der Photographie in der Zeit des Realismus* (Munich, 1990).

34. At a time when most artworks were accessible to critics only through manual reproductions, this was quite customary: see Wolfgang Ullrich, *Raffinierte Kunst. Übung vor Reproduktionen* (Berlin, 2009).
35. Rodolphe Töpffer, *Réflexions et menus-propos d'un peintre genevois* (Paris, 1858), 145 ("Le peintre, pour imiter, transforme.")
36. Töpffer, "De la plaque Daguerre," 399. See also Spanke, *Porträt—Ikone—Kunst*, 288.
37. Wey, "Théorie du Portrait," 46. ("La ressemblance est, non la reproduction mécanique, mais une interprétation qui traduit pour les yeux l'image d'un objet, tel que l'esprit se le figure à l'aide de mémoire. Ainsi, la ressemblance diffère d'un fait matériel.")
38. Most prominently by William Henry Fox Talbot in his *Pencil of Nature* (1844–46).
39. Eugène Delacroix, "Le Dessin sans Maître, par Mme Elisabeth Cavé," *Revue des Deux Mondes* 7 (September 1850): 1139–46. Reprinted in André Rouillé, ed., *La Photographie en France. Textes et Controverses: une Anthologie 1816–1871* (Paris, 1989). On Delacroix and photographic portraiture see Françoise Heilbrun, "Eugène Delacroix, un modèle reticent," in *Delacroix et la photographie*, ed. Musée national Eugène Delacroix (Paris, 2008), 120–36.
40. Jennifer Tucker, *Nature Exposed: Photography as Eyewitness in Victorian Science* (Baltimore, 2005), 65. The question of how photography tried to achieve scientific authority, especially for police work, is also discussed in Allan Sekula's classic article, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39, no. 102 (1986): 3–64. Sekula has shown that difficulties in identification were not overcome by more perfect photographs, but by archival systems.
41. "Individuality and Truth in Portraiture," *Photographic News* (1875): 558–59, here cited in Tucker, *Nature Exposed*, 65.
42. Wey, "Théorie du Portrait," 46.
43. Charles Baudelaire, *Salon de 1859: Texte de la Revue française*, ed. Wolfgang Drost and Ulrike Riechers (Paris, 2006); Louis Figuier, *La Photographie au Salon de 1859* (Paris, 1860).
44. Figuier, *La Photographie au Salon de 1859*, 14. ("le procédé n'est presque rien dans l'art et . . . tout réside dans le sentiment de l'artiste.")
45. Root, *The Camera and The Pencil*, 437–38.
46. *Ibid.*, 439.
47. Nadar [Félix Tournachon], *Quand j'étais Photographe* (Paris, c. 1900).
48. Root, *The Camera and The Pencil*, 442.
49. Wey, "Théorie du Portrait," 51. ("Faire son choix dans les divers aspects du réel, pour le photographe, c'est interpréter.")
50. André Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, *L'Art de la photographie* (Paris, 1862), 279. Root, in his book, "borrows" long passages from Disdéri.
51. By the mid 1850s, Disdéri employed more than seventy assistants in his huge studio—which he appropriately called "salon de pose."
52. On the question of poses in the portrait genre see Barbara Wittmann, *Gesichter geben. Edouard Manet und die Poetik des Portraits* (Munich, 2004), 64–71; on the relation between individuality and pose in photography see also Trachtenberg, "Likeness as Identity," and McCauley, *Likenesses*.
53. Roger Cardinal, "Nadar and the Photographic Portrait in Nineteenth-Century France," in *The Portrait in Photography*, ed. Graham Clarke (London, 1992), 6–24.
54. Root, *The Camera and The Pencil*, 233. Root here cites the English physician John Addington Symonds; see Symonds's *The Principles of Beauty* (London, 1857).

55. *The Dollar Newspaper* (Philadelphia) reports on 5 July 1848, under the headline “Daguerreotyping,” that Root had produced more than 7,500 “likenesses” in the previous year, and that number was tending to increase. See The Daguerreian Society, <http://www.daguerre.org/resource/texts/root-1848.html>.
56. See the chapter “Je ne sais quois. Warum es auf die Frage ‘Was ist Kunst?’ keine Antwort gibt,” in Wolfgang Ullrich, *Was war Kunst? Biographien eines Begriffs* (Frankfurt am Main, 2005), 9–30.
57. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg, 1952), 563.
58. See Friedrich Kittler, “Museen an der digitalen Grenze,” in Philine Helas et al., ed. *Bild/Geschichte. Festschrift für Horst Bredekamp* (Berlin, 2007), 110.
59. In a 1927 article, Siegfried Kracauer gave a very pessimistic account of the relation between photographic resemblance and memory images: Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography,” trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (1993): 421–36.
60. Wey, “Théorie du Portrait,” 46.
61. Already with Schelling, unconscious conceptions played an important role. A bit later, Carl Gustav Carus in his book *Psyche. Zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der Seele* (1846) had further developed the notion of the unconscious. In 1869, Eduard von Hartmann’s *Philosophie des Unbewussten* was published, acquainting a broader audience with the term.
62. Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson, “Introduction: Photography’s Double Index,” in *The Meaning of Photography*, ed. Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson, vii–xxxii (Williamstown, MA, 2008). Geoffrey Batchen has, in this respect, pointed to Jacques Derrida’s term *différance*, see Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 178–84. See also Theresa Levitt, “Biot’s Paper and Arago’s Plates: Photographic Practice and the Transparency of Representation,” *Isis* 94, no. 3 (2003): 456–76.
63. Trachtenberg, “Likeness as Identity,” 188.
64. Hyppolyte Taine, *De l’intelligence* (Paris, 1870). On Taine in the context of the portrait, see Wittmann, *Gesichter geben*, 156f.
65. Delacroix, “Le Dessin sans Maître,” 1145.