

The Roots of Pictorial Reference
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JENNIFER TODD

The Roots of Pictorial Reference

IN THIS PAPER I argue that Nelson Goodman's theory of pictures, as it is developed in *Languages of Art,* results in pictorial reference being ambiguous.[1] This ambiguity becomes obvious when we consider the example of photography.

Photographs, whose reference seems naturally or technologically determined, have been seen as a test case in the recent philosophical debate about conventionalist theories of pictures.[2] The arguments show, I think convincingly, that photographs do not always represent the things that caused them, and do not always represent them accurately; photographic reference is not technologically determined and artistic creativity is as possible in photography as in painting. I shall show that these arguments against technological determinism follow from Goodman's theory.

In another intellectual tradition, Walter Benjamin and, more recently, John Berger and Susan Sontag have discussed the social and political meanings and uses of photographs.[3] Sontag argues that photographs necessarily tend to express a disjointed anecdotal view of the world and to reinforce a "nominalist view of social reality";[4] she claims that this is due to the technical nature of the camera which prevents creativity in photography similar to that in painting.[5]

The plausibility of Sontag's claims is not diminished by the philosophical arguments mentioned above, for these arguments rely on counterexamples which are not telling against Sontag's tendency claims. Even more disturbing is the fact that Goodman's theory cannot be used to criticize Sontag's views. Goodman's theory can be interpreted in a radical conventionalist manner whereby pictorial rules of reference (and thus pictures) are constituted by their use, by how the viewers take them. Sontag's claims depend upon such a radical conventionalist view. Thus Goodman's theory can be used, on the one hand to defend photographic creativity and yet, on the other hand, cannot be used to criticize Sontag's view that such creativity has become increasingly impossible.

This is not an outright contradiction, for Sontag's claims go beyond Goodman's radical conventionalist views. Yet the tenor of the philosophical arguments and, I think, of Goodman's views on art, is to defend a pluralist view of photography which recognizes the wide-ranging creative possibilities of the medium. My argument is that Goodman does not go far enough along these lines; paradoxically this is because he does not pay sufficient attention to the social constraints on our choice of symbol systems.

In the following pages I will suggest how we can at once

(a) accurately show the wide-ranging possibilities of photographic creativity

(b) reconstruct Sontag's social and political arguments so that they are opened to detailed criticism and testing.

(c) accept some of Sontag's theses while rejecting a technological determinism incompatible with (a) above.

In short, I am using the example of photography to move Goodman's theory into a

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social setting. Through the discussion of photography I hope to clarify the role played by the social context in constituting the rules of pictorial reference.

I

Nelson Goodman has argued that pictures do not represent objects because of any natural resemblance between picture and object; in particular, pictures do not represent objects because they "look like" them. Rather pictorial representation is constituted by the rules of the symbol system to which the picture belongs; we correlate picture and object in terms of these rules. Indeed since a picture, for Goodman, is only a picture (as opposed to a wind-block or damp-patch-on-the-wall-coverer) through its symbolic functioning, it is constituted as a picture by the rules of reference of the relevant symbol systems.[6]

Goodman argues that there are no logical or natural limits on the range of possible symbol systems. Given the appropriate symbol system, "almost any picture may represent anything."[7] Our choice of a particular symbol system may be said to be *conventional,* not because it is arbitrary (some conventions may be better than others), but because it cannot be explained or justified by logic or natural science; it cannot, for example, be explained or justified in terms of the physiology of visual perception. While most of the discussion of Goodman's theory has centered on his view of representation, his discussion of exemplification and expression shows that these modes of reference are equally as conventional as is representation.[8]

I find Goodman's conventionalist analysis convincing, although I am aware of the criticism it has received. In what follows I do not attempt to answer Goodman's critics, except to say that his view may seem more acceptable when it is realized that he is not asserting that representation is quite independent of our ways of perceiving pictures. Goodman's view is compatible with psychological research on the relations between object perception and picture perception; indeed it suggests new possibilities for such research.[9] It is not compatible with the claim that our present modes of object perception and picture perception are the only possible ones.

Goodman gives no adequate explanation why we pick the symbol systems we do. The rules of pictorial reference, for Goodman, are (at least partly) constituted by tacit agreement among members of a community, and thus are community-relative.[10] Yet the proper extent of such a community is left ambiguous, as are the sorts of reasons which are relevant in choosing a symbol system with certain semantic rules. On the one hand, Goodman says that we identify the symbol system to which a picture belongs by seeing the picture in the art-historical context of its production, as an elaboration of or reaction against previous works; thus we see how it should be interpreted, that is, which rules of reference are appropriate.[11]

On the other hand, Goodman often points out that a symbol is as the symbol does. A painted canvas can function as a wind-block, a plan for war games, or as a landscape picture; Goodman implies that there is nothing else to the landscape picture other than its functioning as such.[12] We change the nature of the object by using it differently. On this interpretation, symbol systems are constituted by, and can be changed by, any set of viewers; the context of consumption is all-important in determining pictorial reference.

While the latter position is liable to decline to an unacceptable extreme relativism, it sharply raises the question of the constraints on our choice of symbol systems. On what criteria, if at all, can we say that a socially accepted interpretation of a picture is in fact a *misinterpretation,* that it has misidentified the symbol system to which the picture belongs. How is it possible to steer between "the Scylla of historical relativism and mere descriptivism . . . and the Charybdis of essentialism?"[13] I shall not attempt to answer these large questions in the abstract, but rather consider how they manifest themselves in photography and in theories of photography.

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II

The technological determinist challenge to conventionalism is that:

> (T_1) photographs automatically represent what caused them.
> (T_2) photographs automatically are accurate representations.

For example, Sontag writes:

> The mechanical genesis of these images and the literalness of the powers they confer, amounts to a new relationship between image and reality.[14]

I will briefly review the arguments against technological determinism before returning to discuss a more interesting conventionalist formulation of Sontag's view.

(T_2) rests on a false inference from photographic technology and so may be dealt with easily. If the camera position, type of lens and film, developing process, aperture speed and time of photographing are given, then the resulting photograph is a determinate product of physical and chemical laws and its patterns are in principle predictable. From this, however, nothing follows about photographic accuracy. Even if we assume that photographs represent what caused them (and I criticize this assumption below) there is no reflexivity between the determinate causal process and any determinateness, let alone accuracy, of representation. So many variables affect the final print that, simply by looking at a photograph, it is impossible to say anything about the conditions under which the photograph was taken.[15] We can, for example, say nothing about the intensity of light at the time without knowing the type of film, length of exposure, whether or not filters were used, etc. If all these variables are known, as in scientific uses of photography, then the photograph can be used to give accurate information about conditions when the photograph was taken. Yet in the cases in dispute, where ordinary viewers see the photographs without such background knowledge, photographic technology gives *no* guarantee of accuracy; if such photographs are more accurate than other pictures it is not because of the technology alone.

Turn now to the main contention, (T_1), that photographs always represent what caused them. This formulation suffers from the imprecision of the notion of cause. We might plausibly argue that any of the following is the cause of a photograph: the object in front of the camera; the type of object in front of the camera; the light rays from the object; the image of the object on the film. (I omit discussion of more complex phenomena such as molecular particles or air diffraction and interference). As H. Gene Blocker has noted, "even if we accept the causal criterion, . . . we shall have to choose among many causally correct candidates the most appropriate label."[16]

Most especially we must recognize that photographs do not necessarily represent the *particular* object, event or state of affairs in front of the camera. Edward Weston's famous photograph of the green pepper shows a pepper so perfect in the sensuality and solidity of its curves that the picture surely does not represent the particular green pepper which was beginning to wither under the lights and which, Weston tells us, he ate afterwards. This representation is no more or less particular than the lemon shown in a Cézanne still life; in neither case does it make sense to ask what particular fruit is represented.[17] Yet this representation of the *typical* is, in each case, a product of the artist's skill and choice. Another photographer may purposefully represent a momentary state of affairs; Cartier-Bresson shows the exact moment when the prelate looked disdainfully at his parishioner. The causal thesis, (T_1), if it is to be at all plausible, must allow that the precise definition of the object represented is—or can be—manipulable by the photographer. Such definition of one's subject is one of the central creative tasks in any medium. Thus the argument that photography is not intrinsically as creative a medium as is painting is crucially weakened.

Take (T_1) to say that photographs always represent *something* causally related to them. Even this watered-down thesis must be further revised. Some abstract photographs do not represent anything. And some

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representational photographs represent things which are not causally related to them at all, or related only in the most indirect manner. Photomontage is often clearly representational; yet it is effective precisely as it conjoins images to construct a scene which never existed. Some of the shapes in Aaron Siskind's photographs clearly represent people or conflicts; we may be aware of this while remaining unsure of the real objects on which he focused his camera. Finally, consider that some photographs of pictures (those in an auction catalogue) represent pictures; other photographs of pictures (those framed and hanging on the living room wall) represent the same objects as do the original pictures.

I am not denying that the causal history of a picture is, at least sometimes, relevant to what the picture represents. Even if a Woolworth photograph taken of my cousin looked much more like me than like my cousin, we would still say that it *really* represented my cousin; immigration officers would rightly be suspicious of my counterarguments. Jenefer Robinson dubs this view, where the genesis of the picture fixes its meaning, the Kripkean theory of pictures.[18] I agree that it sometimes accurately describes our practice. I am denying that the causal history of a photograph is *always* relevant to what it represents, and that this differentiates paintings and photographs. H. Gene Blocker, despite his other cutting criticisms of technological determinism, holds to such a view:

> A photograph is not *just* a picture, but it *is* a picture. It is a special sort of picture because of the causal criterion on which Cavell and others lay so much stress. Not only are photographs causally produced, but we *know* they are, and this knowledge enters into our approach to and perception of the pictures.[19]

I think even here Blocker makes too sharp a distinction between paintings and photographs. As the examples above indicate, we miss the entire point of some photographs if we try to discover what objects were in fact in front of the camera. As we become accustomed to such photographs, I suggest that we cease to think in terms of the technological genesis of the photographs and analyze them in exactly the same terms as we might analyze a painting.

Goodman's theory immediately shows the faults of (T_1) which I demonstrated more laboriously above. On his view, what a picture represents depends only on the symbol system to which it belongs. *In fact* many of the photographic symbol systems which we accept do fix representation in terms of the technological genesis of the pictures. But this simply means that in these cases we take the genesis to be relevant to the picture's reference. We could, and sometimes do, treat the technological genesis of photographs as irrelevant to their reference. While in fact many of our present photographic symbol systems are "Kripkean," this is not determined by photographic technology, which in no way limits the range of possible symbol systems. In photography, as in other media, the choice of new symbol systems is open. Radical artistic creativity through the use of new modes of representation is as possible in photography as in painting.

III

Consider a more sophisticated reconstruction of Sontag's argument which accepts the above refutation of technological determinism, yet shows sensitivity to the socially conditioned constraints on our choice of symbol systems.[20]

Sontag claims that the general tendency of photography is to reinforce "a nominalist view of social reality as consisting of small units of an apparently infinite number—as the number of photographs that could be taken of anything is unlimited."[21] We may interpret her view in a conventionalist manner.

(S_1): Because of our awareness of the nature of photographic technology we make and take photographs as members of symbol systems which reinforce a nominalist view of reality.

To cover Sontag's insistence that this tendency is inevitable, we must postulate the thesis that

(S_2): (S_1) is true because of psychological factors beyond our conscious control.

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It is not altogether clear if Sontag would claim that these psychological factors are relative to our culture or if they are (genetically) built-in to the human mind. I take it that the latter claim is improbable; however Sontag's comments about photography in the USSR and in China suggest that she holds that (S_2) is relative, not just to modern American society, but to any modern complex industrialized society.

Consider in more detail just how, according to Sontag, photographs reinforce nominalism. On the one hand, she suggests that photographs tend to represent isolated momentary states of affairs; I have already criticised this view. Her position, however, is more subtle:

> The contingency of photographs confirms that everything is perishable; the arbitrariness of photographic evidence indicates that reality is fundamentally unclassifiable.[22]

She is suggesting

(S_3): The nominalist, anecdotal attitude is *exemplified* and *expressed* in the photograph, whatever the photographer's intentions or skills.

Sontag is unwilling to allow counterexamples to (S_3); we shall see below how she attempts to rule out such counterexamples.

Sontag's discussion of the epistemological status of photographs is also rather more complex than I suggested in section II above. She claims that photographs have a privileged epistemological status and are accurate to the momentary states of affairs they represent. She also suggests that photographs give a distorted view of the world and encourage an ill-founded belief in their own accuracy. I do not think that Sontag is merely inconsistent here. We may interpret her position as follows:

(S_4): Photographs often represent physical details accurately and viewers tend to assume (falsely) that photographs are always accurate representations.

Yet Sontag claims that photographs necessarily show details out of their proper context; they are non-narrative; they do not show historical development nor do they show the meaningful interrelations between particular events. Thus Sontag says that they suggest a false view of social reality as consisting of "a series of free standing particles . . . a set of anecdotes and *faits divers*" [23] Because of (S_4) we tend to accept this false view of the world with, Sontag claims, pernicious social and political consequences.

I find Sontag's argument plausible as an account of our reaction to newspaper photographs, but much less plausible as an account of our appreciation of art photographs. However Sontag would claim that

(S_5): The habits developed in looking at newspaper photographs are "carried over" to other forms of photography so that we increasingly come to expect and to find the same anecdotal quality in art photographs as in newspaper photographs.

Sontag believes that the tendency described in (S_5) will gradually make nonanecdotal art photography impossible. Interestingly, some art photographers have made similar complaints about this tendency among their viewers.[24]

(S_3)-(S_5)[25] have, I think, *prima facie* plausibility as sociological descriptions of the way many modern Americans and Western Europeans have come to see photographs. With some more refinement, the theses might be formulated so that they might be tested by sociological research and psychological experiment. Note that Sontag's position, as sketched thus far in this section, does not presuppose technological determinism. While she says that viewers have a psychological tendency to see photographs as exemplifying a nominalist, nonnarrative attitude, the cause of this tendency is left open —it might lie in social institutions rather than in the technological genesis of the pictures. Sontag implies that this psychological tendency is irreversible; it is hard to see how such a claim could be defended. This point aside, Goodman or any conventionalist could accept Sontag's theses, subject to empirical verification.

Sontag, however, wants to make a stronger claim than any formulated above. In effect, she wants to rule out counterexamples to her theses.

Clearly we can immediately think of counterexamples to (S_3)—photographs which ex-

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press stability and whole-ness. Clearly at least some people, including art photographers and aestheticians, do not succumb to the tendencies described in (S_4) and (S_5). Indeed we might argue that even if many people do succumb to these tendencies, they thereby *misinterpret* photographs. This fact, while sociologically interesting, would not generate the strong ontological claim that Sontag wants to make—that the process she describes is inevitable in modern industrialized society and that photographers cannot change this trend. To say that viewers misinterpret the photographs would imply that really the photographs were neither contingent nor arbitrary and that photographic creativity was really possible.

Sontag, therefore, asserts that the viewers who succumb to the trends described above do not misinterpret the photographs. Rather she suggests that

(S_6): What photographs are (what they represent, exemplify, and express) is determined by how people interpret them.[26]

That is, Sontag claims that there are no grounds on which to argue that a socially accepted interpretation of a photograph is a misinterpretation. But Sontag goes further than this general social-relativist position by narrowing what counts as a "socially acceptable interpretation." She rules out the interpretations of a few aesthetes or academics as unimportant; their isolation, which may let them escape the trends of (S_4) and (S_5), at the same time prevents their interpretations from gaining wide social acceptance. The trend of interpretation, and thus the trend of photography, is determined by the mass public. Sontag claims that even art photographers are affected by this trend; she cites Robert Frank and Diane Arbus as photographers who increasingly produced anecdotal and nonnarrative pictures. Sontag, then, is not merely saying that it is correct, within one symbol system, to view photographs as exemplifying a nominalist attitude. Rather, since this symbol system is shared by the mass of the population and meets their needs, it is more worthy of attention and respect than an alternative symbol system which is appropriate to a more esoteric form of life. She shifts from social relativism to a Thrasymachean position of "might makes right" in pictorial interpretation.

(S_6) is incompatible with any "essentialist" theory of pictorial reference, for example a "copy theory" which says that pictures always represent the things they look like. (S_6) is, however, compatible with Goodman's account. Goodman's theory tends towards the same social relativism as Sontag's—that there are no grounds on which to argue that a socially accepted interpretation of a picture is a misinterpretation. I shall suggest that even this amount of relativism sits uneasily with Goodman's pluralistic stance towards photography. While Goodman's relativism does not support Sontag's extreme Thrasymachean views, neither does it allow him to criticize Sontag's interpretation of photographs as exemplifying an anecdotal, non-narrative attitude.

Recall that, for Goodman, a picture is only a picture when it functions as a member of a symbol system. A pictorial symbol system consists of a number of paintings, sketches, or photographs, and a set of semantic rules of interpretation.[27] One painting or photograph could be a member of several symbol systems and there is no natural or physiological reason for categorizing it as a member of one symbol system rather than another. Goodman notes that it would not be impossible for us to choose a symbol system in which Constable's paintings represent pink elephants.[28] The philosophically interesting questions are whether we can have good reasons for saying that a picture belongs to one symbol system rather than another, and what would count as a good reason.

Goodman thinks we can have such good reasons. He points out that the time and place at which the picture was produced often, not always, gives us a reason for categorizing it in one way rather than in another.[29] Yet this criterion provides no indication of how broad or narrow our category should be; we do not know how many other pictures we should include in the same set.

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Nor does Goodman's criterion indicate how we should identify the semantic rules of the system.

Goodman does suggest that our categories and interpretations are justified by "their relevance, their revelations, their force and their fit." [30] He points to our habitual preference for entrenched categories and interpretations. [31] These suggestions at best serve as heuristic aids to interpretation. At worst, fit will conflict with force, revelations with entrenchment, and even what we count as relevant will vary with our own purposes and interests. In the latter case, there seems no defense against relativism. Goodman says that "application and classification of a label are relative to a system; and there are countless alternative systems of representation and description. *Such systems are the products of stipulation and habituation in varying proportions.*" [32] It is just because the proportions vary that Goodman will have difficulty in saying which of two very different interpretations of a painting or a photograph is correct. Where two social groups take very different, but internally consistent, interpretations of paintings or photographs, I think Goodman will be forced into the relativist position that they are speaking of two different pictures (one painting or photograph which belongs to two different symbol systems).

Goodman would not accept this position happily.[33] Such relativism would prevent him from criticizing "common sense" interpretations, even when such "common sense," like Sontag's interpretation of photographs, goes against Goodman's general artistic pluralism and his sense of the wide-ranging creative possibilities of any medium. Further the consumer-oriented nature of this position—whereby it is the viewers' interpretation of the picture which determines the symbol system to which it belongs—sits uneasily with the other tendency in Goodman's thought where the time and place of production of a picture partly determines the symbol system to which it belongs.

Sontag, however, accepts the relativist position without qualms. A photograph, she says, just does refer to different things when it is seen in different contexts and thus interpreted differently. Photographs come more and more to exemplify contingency and arbitrariness just because we come more and more to see them that way. Even if a few people claim that many photographs seem to them to be creative and meaningful, this is irrelevant unless this group can impose its interpretation on the mass public. Since, on her view, there can be no reasoned argument that one interpretation is better than another, might must make right. Even if Sontag is wrong about what the mass public in fact expect from photographs, her methodology is disturbing. I have argued that Goodman's theory cannot be used to criticize Sontag until it is supplemented with a detailed account of the reasons paintings and photographs fall into one symbol system rather than another. As Goodman has argued, these reasons must be discovered in the social world.

IV

Consider the way we actually do interpret photographs, and consider the case most favorable to Sontag's argument, newspaper photographs. I shall argue that neither technological determinism nor Sontag's relativism are true even of newspaper photographs. I shall argue that the symbol systems to which these pictures belong are partly constituted by the social relationships between the photographer, his/her employer, and his/her audience; further, that in everyday discussions we do take facts about these relationships to count as good reasons for changing our interpretation of the photographs.

We tend to believe in the accuracy of newspaper photographs. We feel that we can be fairly certain who or what was in front of the camera when the photograph was taken; we also feel that photographs of Biafra, Vietnam, and Belfast were and are important documents which add to our knowledge. When we examine the presuppositions of our confidence, however, photographic technology is not the crucial factor; rather we must consider the semi-institution-

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alized rules and roles which photographers follow. For the pictures only work as easily readable and fairly trustworthy "traces" of real objects when the photographer looks at the object from what we deem to be a normal angle and position, with a normal lens and film in normal light, and when he/she uses standard developing procedures. (I will return to the social content of the term "normal" below.) Given these conventional provisos, which are built into Woolworth machines, photographs often work as relatively trustworthy records. As in scientific experiments and reports, although with nothing like the rigor, the procedures described above are intended to lead to intersubjectivity—anyone in that situation, whatever their personal eccentricities, would have taken a similar photograph. Further the picture is to be taken from an angle and position such that the final print will be in a style familiar to modern viewers—linear perspective.

The trustworthiness of the photograph does not, however, depend on its perspective form. If the photographer consistently made pictures with wide-angled lenses we could learn to interpret the pictures as accurate traces of events. The accuracy and trustworthiness which we attribute to photographs rather depends on our assumption that the photographer will see and choose the photographs as we would have; we assume a common set of interests and values and, trusting the photographer as an extension of ourselves, we take the photographs as accurate records of the events. Of course, assuming a shared language and shared values, there is never any difficulty in interpreting and evaluating any other person's work in any medium. Newspaper photography is different from art photography and from work in other media because in the former case we seem to have good reason to believe that values and interests will be shared. For news photographers are trained and told by their employers to follow certain typical rules in making photographs; these norms promulgated by editors and owners restrict the photographers' range of choices and activities more than, for example, art-photographers' choices and activities are restricted. Viewers take it that the rules actually followed are those that the viewers themselves would have laid down. The rules which the photographer follows define what constitutes a normal position for him/her; the rules implicitly express certain values and interests which we, as viewers, assume to be similar to our own. Further, many photographers and editors claim that values and interests are shared, and one norm of photo-journalism is that photographers should make pictures which provoke the viewers' interests but do not offend their values.

Given a pluralistic or conflict-ridden society, however, photographic symbol systems themselves become an area of contention. Photographs should only be taken as trustworthy and accurate records when there is general social agreement on what counts as a normal position and angle for the photographer and when there is general agreement on those aspects of the event or scene which are to be represented accurately. Today there is such agreement in scientific photography, passport photography, and usually in newspaper photography of sporting events and dog shows. In more extreme cases, however, the term "normal" has no fixed meaning. Take an ordinary demonstration and ask what is the normal position for the photographer—with the demonstrators or with the police? Depending on the photographer's choice, his/her pictures will differ quite radically, as will the appropriate way to interpret the photographs; even this simple choice partly constitutes the symbol system to which photographs belong. To restore an agreed meaning to the term 'normal" would be precisely to resolve the sociopolitical disagreements which led to the demonstration in the first place. Typically, however, photographs are made from the side of the police, but are presented to the public as "objective" and "accurate"; the viewers may well misinterpret what is represented and expressed because they are ignorant of the rules imposed by editors and followed by photographers.[34]

More generally, the very concept of photographic accuracy, as Sontag herself has noted,[35] presupposes general agreement on

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those aspects of the scene which are to be represented accurately. This point is exemplified so often and so crudely in the present Northern Irish context that it is easy to miss its philosophical relevance. Is a photograph of a man with bruises down his back accurate? The public argument is not about the bruises but about the picture's significance in showing breaches of human rights or in maligning the security forces and ignoring the heinousness of terrorism. Without an accepted context of interpretation, and this context has social, moral, and political aspects, photographic accuracy degenerates into the reporting of unrelated details. For the intersubjectivity involved in the norm of accuracy presupposes a set of rules which news-photographers follow and which viewers accept. When the rules actually followed by the photographer are unknown, concealed or misidentified, the viewers have no way of knowing the appropriate way to interpret the photographs. In such cases it appears as if Sontag is correct—the most popular interpretation is taken to be the normative one. Yet once the rules promulgated by editors and followed by photographers are made clear, viewers are ready to change their interpretations of the photographs. We interpret Margaret Bourke-White's Depression photographs for *Fortune* differently when we discover how she purposefully waited until her subjects looked despairing before she made her photographs.[36] Disagreements may still occur on the rules which ought to be followed if photographs are to be accurate records; some will say that the photographer should stand with the police, others, with the demonstrators. I am suggesting that once the actual rules are known, viewers can come to a rational agreement on the meaning of the photograph, although perhaps not on its accuracy or on its wider significance.

To summarize this section, neither the (assumed) accuracy of newspaper photographs, nor their tendency to show us a world of unrelated details, is determined by photographic technology. Rather the important variables are the rules governing photographers' behavior, which are to a large extent constituted by the photographers' relationships to their employers and less directly to their audience. Since these relationships are radically different in newspaper photography on the one hand, and in art photography, on the other, there is no reason to believe that the tendencies Sontag describes are common to all forms of photography. Sontag suggested that photographic symbol systems are constituted and entrenched by the viewers and that no rational argument about the appropriate way of interpreting a photograph is possible. I think the discussion above shows that Sontag is wrong even on a sociological level. Viewers' interpretations of newspaper photographs are partly based on their implicit assumptions about the values, relationships, and social roles of photographers and editors. Knowledge of these values, relationships, and roles provides one set of good reasons for interpreting a photograph in one way rather than another. Arguments about what counts as an accurate photograph are in part arguments about what these relationships could and should be.

V

Finally some rather programmatic points about how pictorial symbol systems are constituted and how they should be interpreted. I will suggest some reasons, often thought irrelevant, which in general count as good reasons for interpreting a picture in a given way. The full argument must, of course, be made in a rigorous conceptual manner beyond the scope of this paper. I am content here to suggest a plausible, if provocative, thesis.

Mark Sagoff has argued, following Goodman, that one major reason for categorizing a picture as belonging to one symbol system rather than another is the time and place of its production.[37] I would like to broaden this historical dimension to include the social context of the production of the pictures, and I suggest that knowledge of the social relationships and roles of artists and employers always provides a relevant reason for a given interpretation. For it is often difficult to see what values are expressed by an artist's choice to use or change pictorial conventions. The artist's own intentions are

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a notoriously unreliable guide. The social relationship between artist and employer partly defines the actual rules the artist uses in his/her work, and their implicit social import. Thus they often help us both to explain and interpret the values expressed in a work when the rules are followed and when they are broken. I am not, of course, suggesting that knowledge of these social relationships provides any magic method of interpretation, nor even any fully reliable guide; I am suggesting that such knowledge always provides a relevant reason (not always an overriding one) for an interpretation.

It may be objected that the social relationships between artists and dealers, publishers or gallery owners have minimal importance in defining the artist's practice or in aiding our interpretation. I am willing to admit this point. I insist on the relevance of the social relations in order to point to one set of cases where these relations become crucial to pictorial interpretation. Emphasis on the social context of the production of pictures is especially important when the relations between artist, employer, and audience are themselves an arena of conflict, that is when the various parties disagree about what their social relationships in fact are and about what they should be. This conflict may itself be fought out in the realm of pictorial interpretation. Artists produce new sorts of pictures which employers refuse or viewers misunderstand; viewers demand new sorts of pictures, or interpret the old styles in new ways.[38] In such cases, disagreement on interpretation is itself part of a wider conflict within the art world. A stance on what constitutes the correct interpretation is then, indirectly, a political stance. The roots of reference can indeed reach into our political life. Yet the possible political implications of some disagreements on interpretation does not mean that there are no rational resolutions of the disagreements; it does mean that some of the reasons relevant to this resolution will be moral and political reasons.[39]

In summary, photographic reference is not technologically determined. Sontag is correct to point out the possible social and political implications of our interpretations of photographs but wrong to think that these are specific to photography. Benjamin and Berger are correct to point out the possible interrelations of art criticism and politics, but fail to make their case persuasive because they lack a clear theory of pictorial reference.

I have argued that Goodman's theory is eminently useful in criticizing technological determinism; it shows that photography is not like Aristotle's acorn with a fixed potential but is open to as much creativity as is any other medium. Goodman's account of the reasons why pictures fall into one symbol system rather than another results in pictorial symbols being ambiguous and threatens to decline to relativism. I have not here attempted to argue against the general relativist position. I did suggest that our choice of symbol systems is partly dependent on our awareness of the social context of pictorial production and that this context provides one basis for rational discussion about the correct interpretation of pictures. But this defense against relativism is only possible when we admit the political nature of some art criticism.

[1] I use the term "reference" in its broadest sense to cover all the ways in which pictures may be symbolic. For example representation, exemplification, and expression are all modes of pictorial reference.

[2] See Irving Singer, "Santayana and the Ontology of the Photographic Image", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* XXXVI, No. 1 (Fall 1977) 39-44. H. Gene Blocker, "Pictures and Photographs," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* XXXVI, No. 2 (Winter 1977) 55-62. Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen, "Photography, Vision and Representation," *Critical Inquiry,* Vol. 2, No. 1 (1975) 143-69.

[3] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969). W. Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," *Art Forum,* Vol. XV, No. 4 (Feb. 1977). John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York, 1973). Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, 1978). While Benjamin, Berger, and Sontag share many views, for the purposes of this paper I concentrate on Sontag's arguments.

[4] Sontag, *On Photography,* p. 22.

[5] Ibid., p. 158.

[6] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, 1969), pp. 40, 226.

[7] Ibid., p. 38.

[8] Ibid., Chapter II. See Geoffrey Hellman's "Symbol Systems and Artistic Styles," *Journal of*

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Aesthetics and Art Criticism, XXXV, No. 3 (Spring 1977), 279-92, for a detailed and sympathetic discussion of Goodman's account of exemplification and expression. See also Goodman's comments on exemplification in his "Reply to Beardsley," *Erkenntnis* 12 (1978), 171-72.

[9] Robert Schwartz, "Representation and Resemblance," *Philosophical Forum,* Vol. V, No. 3 (Spring 1974), 499-51. Marx W. Wartofsky, "Rules and Representation: The Virtues of Constancy and Fidelity put in Perspective," *Erkenntnis* 12 (1978), 17-36. Wartofsky's footnoted references provide a guide to recent psychological research on these questions.

[10] Goodman, *Languages of Art,* pp. 37, 40. See also Hellman's "Symbol Systems and Artistic Styles" for an elaboration of this aspect of Goodman's work.

[11] Nelson Goodman, "The Status of Styles," *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis, 1978). See also Mark Sagoff, "Historical Authenticity," *Erkenntnis* 12 (1978), 83-94.

[12] Goodman, *Languages of Art,* pp. 41, 226.

[13] Wartofsky, "Rules and Representation," p. 27.

[14] Sontag, *On Photography,* p. 158.

[15] See, J. Snyder and N. W. Allen, "Photography, Vision and Representation," pp. 157-62, for an interesting discussion and examples of this point.

[16] H. Gene Blocker, "Pictures and Photographs," p. 161.

[17] Goodman notes that "a picture, like a predicate, may denote severally the members of a given class," *Languages of Art,* p. 21. See Jenefer Robinson's discussion in "Some Remarks on Goodman's Language Theory of Pictures," *British Journal of Aesthetics,* Vol. 19, No. 1 (Winter 1979), 63-75.

[18] Jenefer Robinson, "Two Theories of Representation," *Erkenntnis,* 12 (1978), pp. 37-54.

[19] H. Gene Blocker, "Pictures and Photographs," p. 161.

[20] There are both technological determinist strands and conventionalist strands in Sontag's argument; consistency is not one of her failings; however I find her discussion sufficiently insightful to try to reconstruct it in a more systematic manner.

[21] Sontag, *On Photography,* p. 22.

[22] Ibid., p. 80.

[23] Ibid., p. 22.

[24] Minor White consistently emphasized that viewing photographs was itself a creative art which was in danger of vanishing in the modern secular world. See Minor White, *Mirrors, Messages, Manifestations* (Millertown, N.Y., 1970).

[25] Since (S_1) and (S_2) may be explicated in terms of (S_3), (S_4) and (S_5), I do not mention them in what follows.

[26] Sontag, *On Photography,* p. 106. Interestingly Ferenc Fehér ascribes just such a view to Walter Benjamin. Ferenc Fehér, "Lukács in Weimar," *Telos* (Spring 1979).

[27] Goodman, *Languages of Art,* pp. 40, 143.

[28] Goodman, "Review of E. H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion,*" *Problems and Projects* (New York, 1972).

[29] See Goodman's "Status of Style," and his "Reply to Sagoff," *Erkenntnis,* 12, 1978, pp. 166-68.

[30] Goodman, "Words, Works, Worlds," *Ways of Worldmaking,* p. 19.

[31] See Goodman's *Fact, Fiction and Forecast,* chapter 4, for an explication of the term 'entrenchment' as applied to predicates; this can easily be generalised to apply to all types of symbols—see *Languages of Art,* p. 40.

[32] Goodman, Languages of Art, p. 37. (My italics.)

[33] Goodman, "Reply to Wartofsky," *Erkenntnis* 12, 158-59.

[34] For this example I used evidence and arguments from *Camera Work* (November 1977). This issue of *Camera Work* gives an interesting and detailed account of how photographers actually did work during the Lewisham (London) demonstration of 13 August, 1977.

[35] Sontag, *On Photography,* pp. 17 ff, 23.

[36] See my "Symbol, Sight and Society: An Inquiry into the Social Conditioning of Art" (Doctoral Dissertation, Boston University, June 1977), chapter 4, for an extended discussion of this and related examples.

[37] Sagoff, "Historical Authenticity," *Erkenntnis* 12 (1978), 83-94.

[38] See my "The Rigors of Business: Mathew Brady's Photography in Political Perspective," *After Image,* Vol. 7, No. 4 (Nov. 1979), 9, 12.

[39] Walter Benjamin consistently argued for such a position. The possible political nature of art criticism is clearly exemplified in the 1930s debates between Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, and Georg Lukács on the interpretation and evaluation of modernist writing. See E. Bloch, G. Lukács, B. Brecht, W. Benjamin, T. W. Adorno (ed. Fredric Jameson), *Aesthetics and Politics* (London, 1979).

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