AESTHETICS AND PHOTOGRAPHY

JONATHAN FRIDAY

Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art

Aesthetics and Photography

JONATHAN FRIDAY
University of Aberdeen, UK

ASHGATE

Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Gower House
Croft Road
Aldershot
Hants GU11 3HR
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
Suite 420
101 Cherry Street
Burlington, VT 05401–4405 USA

Ashgate website: http://www.ashgate.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Friday, Jonathan
Aesthetics and photography.-
(Aesthetics and the philosophy
of art)
1. Photography, Artistic 2. Aesthetics
I. Title
770.1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Friday, Jonathan.
Aesthetics and photography / Jonathan Friday.
p. cm. -- (Aesthetics and the philosophy of art)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-7546-0427-6 -- ISBN 0-7546-0428-4 (softcover)
1. Photography--Philosophy. 2. Aesthetics. I. Title. II. Series.

TR183 .F75 2001
770'.1--dc21
2001046400

ISBN 0 7546 0427 6 (hbk)
ISBN 0 7546 0428 4 (pbk)

Typeset by Manton Typesetters, Louth, Lincolnshire, UK and printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall.

Preface

Photography is ubiquitous in our lives. We are bombarded with photographic imagery throughout our waking hours. Most of us contribute to making some of the billions of photographs made every year. It is a medium we are very familiar with. Perhaps this is part of the reason why passions can run so high when it comes to the aesthetics of photography. In the several years that I have been discussing and teaching photographic aesthetics, I have often been struck that few other art media arouse quite the strength of feeling that photography can. Part of the reason for this, of course, has to do with the now thankfully diminishing shadow of the long struggle to establish the status of photography as an art. There is still perhaps a touch of sensitivity left over from a time when many an aesthetic theorist pronounced photographic art impossible – a raw nerve caused by the lingering sense that photography is not accorded the attention and respect it deserves. But if such perceived slights to a much beloved medium are remnants of a debate long since concluded in photography's favour, the time has long gone for such concerns. The mockers have been vanquished or sidelined and we can address the nature and value of photographic art as a phenomenon and not a hypothesis. This phenomenon is the subject matter of this study and, as we shall see, the medium with which we are so familiar is really quite extraordinary. Perhaps the reasons why it is such an extraordinary medium will also help to explain why aesthetic discussion of it arouses such strong feelings.

Throughout the years in which I have been thinking and writing about the aesthetic of photography many people have provided helpful suggestions and comments. The origins of this book date back to the time of my postgraduate studies, although the positions have developed and changed in many ways since then. In those early stages my thinking was guided by the excellent supervision of Tom Baldwin, whose influence remains in several places. A much later version was read and commented on by my colleague Gordon Graham. The many conversations we had about these and related matters proved not only to be very enjoyable, but also very helpful. Other colleagues have read or heard portions of the book on various occasions and have offered a number of useful comments. In particular, I had a number of conversations about issues arising in this book with Paul Tomassi who made many valuable suggestions. A number of others have made helpful suggestions either in conversation or in response to particular sections of the work – including Patrick Maynard, Nigel Warburton and Gregory Currie. I would

also like to thank the numerous students who have stimulated my thinking about photography over the years and contributed to my understanding of the medium. Of these, particular thanks go to Gavin McIntosh. I have also benefited greatly from many friends in disciplines and activities other than philosophy, with whom I have discussed these issues to my benefit. I would like to particularly thank Elizabeth Hallem, Ian Maclachlan, Jaqueline Rattray, Alexandra Everett, Francis Archer, Hazel Benyon, Timothy Lewin, Leornardo Dasso, Stephen Rosenberg and Lisa Trahair. Finally, a special thanks to Gabi Boehmer for putting up with it!

Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

Photography, Painting and Related Pictorial Kinds

I

> Any book that looks beyond [photographic] equipment and 'useful tips' ... must touch on one over-worked topic: is photography art? I realize that this well-worn question is more likely to produce groans of exasperation than to stimulate interest, but in the context of the chapters that follow, it is unavoidable.[1]

So wrote the photographer Michael Freeman, in the introduction to his discussion of photographic style and the ways in which photographers have achieved it. The memory of the long battle to establish the status of photography as a fine art that began soon after the invention of the medium[2] was clearly fresh in Freeman's mind. In the two decades since Freeman wrote these words, the concern with, and collective memory of, that battle appear to have faded almost entirely from the minds of those with an aesthetic interest in photography. More significantly, the burden of proof on the status of photography has now entirely shifted from the believers in photographic art to the few remaining sceptics, although most would be inclined to suppose that the debate was premised upon a poorly formulated question.[3] In some respects, the legacy of that battle is still with us, however, and one of the forms that it takes provides the basis for a good introductory survey of the terrain of photographic aesthetics.

Those advocates of photography who found themselves in the thick of theoretical battles regarding the status of the medium had available two argumentative strategies. The first involved arguing that the photographic medium has the potential to produce pictures possessing the same sorts of aesthetically significant properties that the other pictorial media do. On this view, photography is properly thought of as continuous with the other pictorial media and not to be distinguished from them either in aesthetic kind or value. If as its British co-inventor thought, photography is just a new means of pursuing the ends of painting, then it is not a new art, but merely a new means of doing what painters have done for a long time.[4] The thought that photographic art is continuous with, and should not be treated separately from, the other pictorial arts has attracted theorists of pictorial art ever since.[5] Alternatively the theorist could opt for the second strategy and argue that the invention of photography gave birth to a new way of making pictures possessing aesthetically signifi-

cant properties *not* possessed by other pictorial media. On this line of reasoning, the advent of photography constitutes the birth of a new art, and therefore a new and distinctive medium for artistic creation and aesthetic investigation. The primary preoccupations of those who have pursued this approach to photographic aesthetics have been the various differences between photography and other modes of picturing – most notably painting – and the identification and exploration of one or more of these differences as the source of photography's distinct aesthetic significance. The thought that photography is valuably distinctive from other pictorial media and therefore a fully independent art form has remained a regularly defended position in theoretical debates about photography.[6]

If we think of the matter in this way, it looks as if there were two disputes: first, between the believers and the non-believers in photographic art; and, second, between the believers on the issue of the continuity or discontinuity of photography and the other pictorial media. If the first of these disputes is long settled, the latter is still with us, though rather more calmly discussed than the former was. However, whether there is a real dispute here remains to be seen. For the moment, I want to observe that the two views on the relationship of photography to the other pictorial media – what we might call the 'continuity' and 'discontinuity' orientations – share a common assumption that is at the very heart of aesthetic theory. That is, that the phenomena of art are properly investigated by dividing it into its various media – or into what are typically called 'the fine arts'. Why aesthetic theorists make this assumption will be explored in the Chapter 1. For now, however, it should be observed that, although there is little agreement about what should be listed under the heading 'the fine arts', few doubt that the list will be composed of the various media in which works of art are created.

Note, however, that there are two ways of understanding the notion of a 'medium' of art in this context. We might take the term in a very general sense, distinguishing between the pictorial, musical, literary, dramatic and architectural arts. Alternatively, we might assume that the phenomena of art are properly further divided for the purpose of theoretical investigation into the more specific media categories, such as photography, painting and drawing; pure music, opera and dance; poetry and prose fiction. The continuity orientation is the natural outcome of supposing that the fine arts are composed of the art media in the general sense, together with the inference that dividing art into such general media categories provides the proper focus for aesthetic investigation. And the discontinuity orientation is the natural outcome of opting for a different way of dividing up the phenomena of art in which more specific media are identified and distinguished. If this is not wholly sufficient to dissolve the appearance of dispute between the continuity and discontinuity orientations, then we need only add that there is no *right* way of dividing up the phenomena of art for theoretical investigation. Part of what this means is that whether the phenomena of art are divided into fine art media in the general or specific sense depends on the purpose

and scope of the inquiry. Indeed, in so far as photographs are pictures, they are necessarily continuous with paintings, drawings and the like. But to the extent the photographic medium differs from that of painting and drawing in significant ways, issues arise about the specific nature of photographic art that can only be explored through distinguishing between the pictorial media. Far from being in dispute, the two orientations to photography are complementary, and the difference between them is merely that they divide up the phenomena of art differently, though not inconsistently.

Since my concern in the chapters to follow is to present and defend a characteristically aesthetic explanation of the distinctive nature and value of photographic art, this study is clearly aligned with other discontinuity-oriented explanations of photography. This is true not only in the sense that the investigation of photography to follow largely treats the medium in isolation from painting, but also in the sense that a characteristic of aesthetic theories is their commitment to dividing the phenomena of art according to media. If I did not believe such a discontinuity-oriented aesthetic theory was the best method of explaining photographic art, I would obviously not have pursued such a line of inquiry. Nevertheless, a drawback of this approach is that it appears to diminish the significance and explanatory power of the continuities between photography and painting. To further illustrate and emphasize my view that the two orientations are complementary, I will devote the remainder of this Introduction to drawing out and exploring the significance of a continuity-oriented distinction between two categories of picture, each of which contains examples of both photographs and paintings. The nature of this distinction will become apparent shortly, but it is worth observing that the point of pursuing this line of inquiry is not merely to pay tribute to a continuity-oriented account of pictorial art. Rather, exploring the distinction between two non-medium specific categories of pictorial art brings into the foreground something of great importance to a medium-specific investigation of the aesthetics of photography. More specifically, the distinction I want to explore brings into rapid and sharp focus a typical feature of photography that, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, is of primary importance to understanding its distinctive nature and value.

II

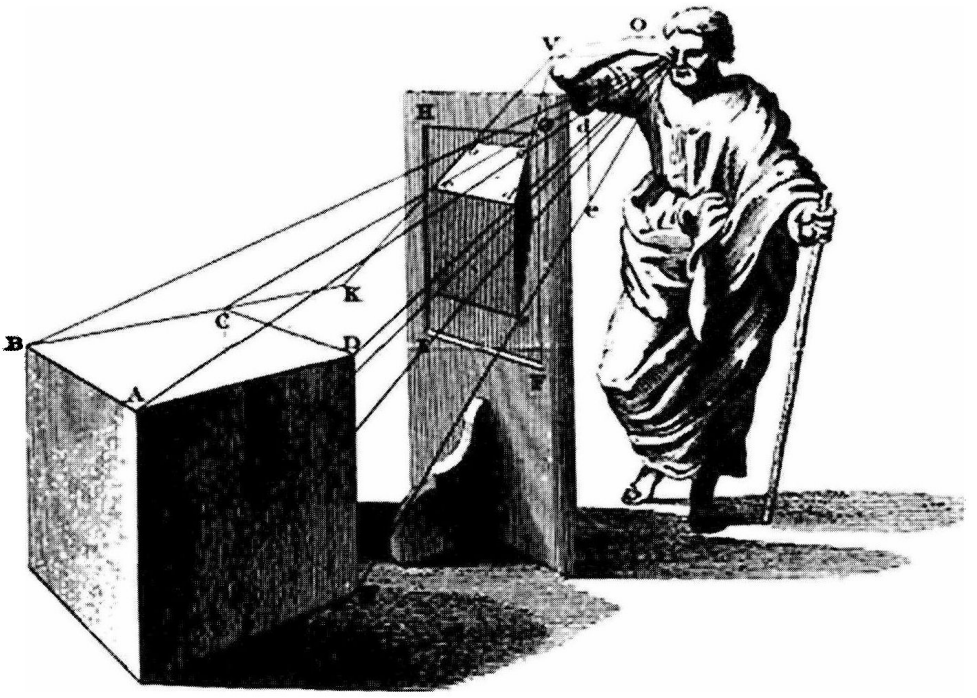
The two pictorial kinds that will concern me are probably not the only members of their system of kinds, but they are the only two we need to consider.[7] I will call them 'Albertian' and 'Keplerian' pictures, borrowing these names from a notable study of Dutch art by Svetlana Alpers, although my own account of the distinction differs from Alpers' in a number of significant ways.[8] Associating the pictorial kinds with Alberti and Kepler is, I must stress, a matter of convenience only. What I will call an Albertian picture, for example, is a conception of what a picture is that can be traced

back to, but is not identical with, that advanced by Alberti. I will in both cases, however, explore the nature of the pictorial kinds in terms of some aspects of these two very different thinkers' writings, but only because they provide material from which the two conceptions can be conveniently distilled. I must also emphasize that, in doing this, we are distilling abstract *conceptions* of pictorial kinds. Considering these is a conceptual matter to be sharply distinguished from, but nevertheless related to, the role that such conceptions may have played in the production of actual pictures. To mark this difference I will speak of Albertian and Keplerian *pictures* when referring to the abstract conceptions of these pictorial kinds, and of an Albertian or Keplerian *mode of picturing* when referring to manifestations of these pictorial kinds that emerge from within a rich intentional and cultural context. Pictorial kinds are a conceptual matter, but modes of picturing are a practical matter involving the greater or lesser use of such conceptions in the actual intentionally and culturally rich context of the making of a picture. It follows that the distinction between Albertian and Keplerian pictures is one of kind, but the distinction between Albertian and Keplerian modes of picturing is (typically) more a matter of degree, with some actual pictures being systematically ambiguous between the two kinds. This last possibility need not concern us, however.[9]

The first conception of a picture I will consider is by far the more familiar of the two. In fact, what I will call an Albertian picture is so deeply ingrained in our thinking about pictorial art that it can come as a surprise that a striking alternative exists. We will come to the alternative shortly. The Albertian picture has two distinct elements. The first is a geometrical definition of the picture surface, the basis of which long pre-dates Alberti.[10] This is the most obvious element in Alberti's definition of a picture. He writes:

> A picture [is] the intersection of the visual pyramid at a given distance, with a fixed centre and a certain position of light, represented by art with lines and colours on a given surface.[11]

The geometrical element of the definition is the identification of a picture as a surface intersecting the visual pyramid at some distance with a fixed centre. The visual pyramid is a representation of the visual field in which it is imagined that a pyramid extends from the eye to enclose the visible world (see Figure I.1). Beholders of Albertian pictures are assumed to take up the position of the eye point at the apex of the visual pyramid of which the picture is a section. The theory of artificial perspective for which Alberti is most famous obviously depends on this conception of a picture, for that theory is just a method of projection ensuring that all the points on the picture surface correspond to all, and only, those points on the three-dimensional array visible from the apex of the visual pyramid. The eye of the beholder of the Albertian picture is therefore always outside and to the front of the picture surface looking into the world depicted. Indeed, Alberti regu-



I.1 Visual pyramid

larly refers to the picture surface as a window. He writes, for example, of the picture plane that it must be constructed 'just as though this surface ... were transparent and like glass'.[12] Later, he writes of how he contrives to regard a picture 'as an open window through which the subject painted is seen'.[13]

This points to the second element of Alberti's definition – what we might call the intentional element. In his definition of a picture quoted above, the intentional element is hinted at in the words 'represented by art'. For Alberti, a picture is the representation of a world as it is seen from outside, as if through a window. In other words, the geometrical elements of his account of a picture are but 'the first foundations of the art' of painting.[14] Upon these foundations, Alberti argues, the three representational skills of the art are employed. These are, first, circumspection (or the drawing of the objects to be depicted); second, lighting and shadowing; and, finally, the creation of a *historia*. Something needs to be said about this final element, as it is essential to the conception of an Albertian picture.

'Composition' is a reasonably apt translation for Alberti's notion of *historia*, for, technically, it involves the selection and placement of the subject matter of the picture. However, there is more to the notion of *historia* than mere composition. To see why, consider Alberti's claims regarding what a painter needs in order to achieve greatness in their art. He writes:

> I want the painter, as far as able, to be learned in all the liberal arts, but I wish him above all to have a good knowledge of geometry. ... Next it will be of advantage if they take pleasure in poets and orators ... . Literary men ... will be of great assistance in preparing the composition of a *historia*, and the great virtue of this consists primarily in its invention.[15]

The *historia* of a picture, then, is the pictorial narration of the inventions of the literary arts or, in other words, the illustration of poetic and sacred texts, and real events in the manner of a pictorial analogue to the orator's narration of events. Now the significance of this is that an Albertian picture is, as he suggests, a window, but it is a window on to a fictional or rhetorical world. Here is where art combines with geometry, as the inventive mind of the artist creates symbolically rich fictional or rhetorical worlds characterized by, for example, beauty and harmony. On the basis of this account of Alberti's thinking about painting we can extract a still quite contemporary conception of a figurative picture: a marked surface composed and constituted in relation to a supposed viewing point set at some distance from the surface, which stands to its subject matter as a sort of window through which we view an analogue world represented by the artist in accord with an intentional meaning. In what follows this is what I will mean by an Albertian picture.

III

The Keplerian picture is a rather different kind of object. Unlike Alberti, Kepler had neither a theory of pictures nor explicit aesthetic concerns. Indeed, it is in his study of the eye conceived of as an optical mechanism that Kepler articulates an alternative to the Albertian conception of a picture. For this reason, I will reverse the procedure employed in explaining Albertian pictures – that is, I will start with a general characterization of Keplerian pictures and then draw the connection to Kepler's use of the concept of a picture in his visual theory.

The visual pyramid is again our best means to an initial characterization of a Keplerian picture. If an Albertian picture resides at some distance from the apex of the pyramid, the Keplerian picture represents the world from the apex. At the apex of the visual pyramid is the eye and visual experience. Suppose, therefore, someone sets out to paint what she sees – quite literally to put on to a flat surface the world just as it appears in her field of vision. Such a picture would not be a window through which to view an analogue world. Rather, it would represent the one and only real world being seen by someone whose visual field is circumscribed by the picture frame. So whereas the frame of the Albertian picture encloses a fictional or imaginatively transformed world, the frame of the Keplerian picture represents the frame of the visual field and thereby encloses a representation of the world seen or, more simply, a representation of vision.[16]

Further clarification of what it means for a picture to 'represent vision' is provided by analogy with the cinematic representation of a character's visual experience by means of the technique of 'subjective camera'. Alfred Hitchcock is an example of an acknowledged master of this most common of film techniques. In virtually all his films he employed subjective camera to produce scenes representing the dramatic space of the film seen through the eyes of a fictional character within the drama. For example, in the classic *Rear Window*, the technique is used to represent the visual experience of L. B. Jefferies (James Stewart) as he looks through the viewfinder of his camera into the windows of his neighbours.[17] In the context of the fiction film, the technique of subjective camera is a narrative device – that is, it is one of the ways in which the film medium can be employed to tell a story, to communicate visually what the prose writer describes when they characterize a fictional character's visual experience. If a film-maker produced an entire fiction film employing subjective camera to continually represent the visual experience of one character in the drama, both the implicit but unseen character and the dramatic space represented would be fictional.[18] It is, of course, just as possible to make a wholly fictional still picture in the Keplerian mode. The conception of a Keplerian picture, however, denotes a representation of the seeing of the one and only real world. The one whose vision is represented by a Keplerian picture may be fictional, but the world they are represented as seeing is not a fictional world. To represent visual experience of the real world is a quite different task to that of representing a fictional or rhetorical world enclosed within a frame functioning as a window upon it. And, I am inclined to add, viewing examples of pictures in each of these pictorial modes is a quite different activity involving different interpretative strategies.

Before discussing what kind of intentional meaning is possible with Keplerian pictures and how a spectator grasps it, I want to digress briefly and consider some historical context useful for drawing out the central features of a Keplerian picture. It is in this detour into the history of science that the connection to Kepler will be made and the relevance of this moment in the history of visual theory will quickly become apparent.

In the history of visual theory Kepler is famous for his vindication of intromissionism, thus ending a centuries-old puzzle about how visual contact with the world is effected.[19] Intromissionism is the name given to visual theories which suppose that vision is brought about by something from the world coming to the eye, rather than the extramissionist assumption that we see because visual rays shoot out from the eye. Before Kepler, intromissionists tended to suppose that objects in the world gave off an endless stream of images that float through the air towards the eye. However, the problem that such theories had always encountered was explaining how these *eidolon* or *simulacra* enter the visual faculties. Lacking sufficient knowledge of the nature of light and the refraction of lenses, intromissionists before Kepler had to suppose that *eidolon* or *simulacra* somehow shrink in size and slip

intact into the eye. With his knowledge of lenses, experience of camera obscura devices and some crude anatomical dissection, Kepler was able to make the decisive breakthrough. The eye, he argued, does not *receive* images from the world; rather, it is a device for *making* pictures out of reflected light. How Kepler arrived at this breakthrough is worth recounting.

Kepler's vindication of intromissionism follows directly from his explanation of an anomalous astronomical phenomenon that he and Tycho Brahe first noticed. When observing a solar eclipse in the only safe way available to them – by means of some sort of camera obscura – they observed that the diameter of the moon was smaller than normal. On the assumption that the moon neither changes its real size nor its distance from the earth during solar eclipses, the explanation of the phenomenon, Kepler explained, must be found in the means of observation.[20] The artifice of observing the moon with a pinhole camera – indeed, the very construction of the human eye – distorts the appearance of some external phenomena viewed by this means. To study and measure these distortions Kepler first needed to explain how the eye worked. It is here that he articulates a conception of a picture quite different to that of Alberti. For in Kepler's account of what a properly functioning eye does, and its connection to vision, we find him concluding: 'Thus vision is brought about by a picture of the thing seen being formed on the concave surface of the retina.'[21] Now, it is pretty clear that Kepler misidentifies the cause of vision in a particularly significant sense. That is, *qua* the object of physiological investigation, the eye is not a picture-making mechanism, and pictures in the eye are the cause of nothing. If you like, Kepler confused the efficient cause of vision – which, as a scientist, he should have been interested in – with a formal cause, or a feature of that which brings about vision. So what causes vision is the irradiation of the retina according to certain optical principles, and that array of light has the form of a picture. It makes perfect sense to suppose that the pattern of irradiation is a picture, but not to suppose that vision is caused by the formation of a picture.

It is also worth drawing attention to Kepler's use of the word 'picture' (*pictura*) in relation to what is formed on the retina. The Latin word *pictura* means painting. In choosing this word to characterize what is formed on the retina, Kepler is emphasizing the productive nature of the optical mechanism, so he speaks of the retina being 'painted' (*pingitur*) by the 'tiny brushes' (*pencilli*) of rays of light. Just as the Albertian painter represents a world analogous to, but different from, the real world, optical mechanisms, like eyes and the camera obscura devices, represent the one and only world, but do so in a manner that necessarily (but measurably) distorts, or is divergent from, the way things really are. Despite Kepler's occasional denials that he has any interest in explaining what seeing is, we are clearly teetering on the edge of representationalist visual theory – namely, a style of visual theory supposing that we see objects in the world by virtue of conscious awareness of some sort of mental representation. Locke, who

formulated one of the earliest versions of the theory, conceives of the mental representations that we are aware of as at least closely analogous to pictures.[22] Even if it is a theory now largely out of favour, representationalism has been deeply embedded in the history of philosophical and scientific thinking about vision since Kepler.[23] For, if the eye is conceived of as constructing a picture of the world, and, in doing so, brings about a necessarily distorted vision, then the distinction between represented appearance and the real world that theory trades upon is clearly implied. This is important for reasons that will soon be apparent.

The thought that a painter might set about rendering their retinal images on canvas is an unhelpful, and ultimately absurd, suggestion. What Kepler did, however, was introduce the idea that retinal images are *pictures*, thereby providing something of a metaphorical model of the Keplerian picture's representation of vision. For just as the picture in the eye represents the world to the mind, and therefore the visual experience of the eye's possessor, the Keplerian picture represents the visual experience of someone within the world pictured. Although not depicted, this person is symbolically present and therefore represented by the Keplerian picture as the implicit locus of the represented visual experience of the world.[24] From the thought that visual experience is, or results from, a picturing of the world to a conscious mind we can extract a conception of a picture as the representation of someone's (perhaps the artist's) visual experience of the real world. Indeed, we have all we need in order to define a Keplerian picture:

> X is a Keplerian picture if and only if X is a marked surface representing the visual experience of a non-depicted but implicitly present perceiver looking upon a portion of the real world.[25]

For a long time, such a conception of a picture has inspired pictorial artists to pursue a mode of picturing quite distinct from that associated with Albertian pictures.

It is worth emphasizing some of the differences. First, the frame of a Keplerian picture occludes those bits of the real world outside the visual field, but the frame of an Albertian picture encloses a fictional or imaginatively transformed world.[26] Stanley Cavell alludes to just such a distinction between the roles played by the frames of Albertian and Keplerian pictures:

> You can always ask of, of an area photographed, what lies adjacent to that area, beyond the frame. This generally makes no sense asked of painting... . The world of a painting is not continuous with the world of its frame; at its frame, a world finds its limits. We might say: A painting *is a world*; a photograph is *of the world*.[27]

If all paintings were pictures in the Albertian mode, and all photographs were pictures in the Keplerian mode, then Cavell's description of the differ-