FACE BEST

FORWARD

I would like to dedicate this book to my
friend of many years, Paddy Summerfield
(1947–2024). He was one of the truly
great originals of British photography.

BEST FACE FORWARD

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPH   **GERRY BADGER**

PREFACE

It is no great secret that a fundamental influence upon my appreciation of photography was John Szarkowski's 1973 introduction to the Museum of Modern Art photography collection, *Looking at Photographs*. In that book, Szarkowski chose one hundred pictures from the collection and wrote one-page, several-paragraph essays about each – concise, sardonic, fiercely intelligent meditations on whatever aspect of the medium each picture suggested. It was a brilliant course in the basics for anyone with more than a passing interest in the medium, particularly aspiring photographers – one hundred short, sharp lessons drawn from great photographs, explained by a teacher who really knew what he was talking about, because he was an excellent photographer in his own right.

I have always liked that format, which is a standard catalogue design by which museums introduce the pearls of their collections, often used for drawings and paintings. Honing in on just one image at a time both concentrates the mind and sharpens the appreciation. Others have used it, in different ways, some better than others. Szarkowski's essays, deft and opinionated, escaped the dry art-historical information that often accompanies such publications, and demonstrated how effective the format could be in the hands of the right curator.

Here I am differing from my original inspiration in two fundamental ways. Firstly, Szarkowski's book ranged over all of photography, from the medium's inception to then contemporary works, covering all the medium's genres, although he was something of a purist and had a clear preference for straight photography. I have selected a particular theme and genre, the photographic portrait, in order to establish more dialogue between both images and texts, establishing a continuous, related narrative.

Secondly, Szarkowski followed the standard art-historical procedure of arranging the images more or less in chronological order. My chosen examples range over the medium's history, but are not presented chronologically, but rather in terms of how pictures from different eras can reference and complement each other in the lessons they give. But like him, I have selected very well-known photographs by well-known photographers together with lesser-known but no less superb pictures by lesser-known photographers – the criterion for inclusion being an image's quality and the lesson it might teach us. I make no apologies for choosing images for my own selfish purposes.

By mixing the old and the new, the famous with the less known, nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century images together, I am also scratching an itch I have. I find, somewhat to my dismay, that too many young photographers I talk to have no interest in nineteenth-century photography – or even much twentieth-century photography for that matter – because they are completely wrapped up in the "latest thing". But of all media, photography is most immune to the chimera of "progress". There are vested interests which promote the supposedly new and innovative, but in essence there are only good photographs and bad photographs, photographers who deploy the medium with "grace" (a favourite Szarkowski word), abiding curiosity, and intelligence – and those who do not.

BEST FACE FORWARD: THE RISE AND RISE OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT

"I feel certain that the largest part of photographs ever taken, or ever to be taken, is, and will continue to be, portraits. This is not only true, it is also necessary."
Ben Maddow[1]

"A portrait is not a likeness. The moment an emotion or a fact is transformed into a photograph it is no longer a fact but an opinion. There is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth."
Richard Avedon[2]

Consider Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* or the Rembrandt self-portrait in Kenwood House, London. We witness the profound skill of two of the greatest painters in conjuring from brush and pigment the endlessly beguiling mysteries of the human face. We have two masterly visual philosophers to explore the largely immutable and terrible question of our mortality. We have two iconic images from which mousemats and other eminently saleable items of merchandise can be manufactured, two iconic objects upon which tourists can turn their backs in order to include them in their own smartphone "selfies".

But also consider this. What if, as well as the paintings, we had photographs of La Gioconda or Rembrandt van Rijn? No matter how highly we might rank the paintings in the pantheon of the world's art – at the very pinnacle surely – and no matter how competent or inept the hypothetical photographs might be, the camera must always beat the painter's hand and eye in one respect.

No matter how skilful, intelligent, insightful, or cunning the vision of either Leonardo or Rembrandt, the painted portrait is an interpretation. No matter how diligent or wilful the artist was in his attempt to create an accurate physical likeness, the painted

1 Ben Maddow, Faces: *A Narrative History of the Portrait in Photography*, Boston 1977, p. 16.
2 Richard Avedon, Foreword to Richard Avedon, *In the American West*, London and New York 1985, n.p.

portrait is an approximation. To be sure, we can be reasonably certain, perhaps even 99.9 per cent certain, that La Gioconda or Rembrandt "looked" like that. We can also contend that in matters of artistry, aesthetics, psychological insight – indeed any way you might like to cut it – the painting must be judged superior. But compared with the photograph, the painting, superior or not, is a fiction. The photograph is blessed, or in some eyes tainted, with the whiff of reality.

Surely though, as Richard Avedon, one of the greatest of photographic portraitists, indicates above, is not the photograph also a fiction, an interpretation? Indeed – Avedon is elucidating the fundamental paradox of photography. He declares that all photographs are accurate, but that none are the truth. Photography, in short, is both objective and subjective, unlike painting, which can only be subjective. Painting's subjectivity derives from the painter, photography's subjectivity from the photographer. Photography, however, has that additional element of objectivity, deriving from the camera.

A photograph is the product of both art and science. Indeed, in its early days, photography was known as the half art, half science, the science being regarded as more important than the art. Photography's pioneers were astonished at and appreciative of the fact that a graphic image could be a self-made trace of actuality. A photographic portrait is literally a spectral trace of a human being.

Thus if we had a photograph of either La Gioconda or Rembrandt, we would, so to speak, have *them*. We would be looking directly at them, at a particular moment in time in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, as if we had walked into a room and met them. The visual contact is startlingly direct, because the camera would have frozen them in time, and we would be looking, not at an iconic, antique cultural artifice, as in the case of the painting, but at an actual trace of a long-dead human being. Only preserved human corpses, such as Egyptian mummies, or Pompeiian body casts (in themselves displaced interpretations), bring us into such direct contact with departed souls; but such relics preserve the dead, exhibiting, to varying degrees, the degradations or ravages of death. The photograph, in essence, preserves the living. It is a trace of life, not death.

That is quite something if one thinks about it. As I would contend, a photograph of Rembrandt – even one, or even better a series that mirrored his self-portraits and followed him throughout life –

would be quite something, despite the glories of the paintings. I quote Roland Barthes on this point, which I have done before, but make no apologies for doing so again, because he makes a point that needs reiterating constantly. In his magisterial meditation upon the essential melancholy of the medium, *Camera Lucida*, Barthes wrote of the camera's apparent capacity to record unbridled reality, to reproduce an objective reality: "this is a strictly scandalous effect. Always the photograph astonishes me, with an astonishment which ensures and renews itself inexhaustibly."[3] He concludes that photography is "a *magic*, not an art."[4]

Barthes' remarks need constant reiteration because, in this age where the photograph is everywhere, and everyone, from seven to seventy, is a photographer, the photographic image has become so commonplace, even banal, that it is all too easy to overlook its "magic". And yet, observing both young and not-so-young, in all kinds of places and situations, avidly taking their selfies, it is clear that, subconsciously or not, the medium retains an aura of the uncanny.

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It was John Szarkowski who said that there were more photographs in the world than bricks. He might have qualified it by declaring that there were more photographic portraits in the world than bricks.

When I was growing up in Scotland, too many decades ago, there was an often-heard phrase in the local Dundee dialect. "She taks a bra' photie" – She takes a good photograph. It did not mean that the person referred to was necessarily a photographer, it meant that the subject of a particular photograph had been presented to particular advantage. Indeed, the maker of the remark was possibly indicating – possibly ruefully – that the subject of the portrait usually "took" a good photograph – in other words, that the camera "liked" her and that photographs of her tended to show her to advantage. In that period, when every household had its family snapshot albums and the Kodak Brownie or Instamatic was ubiquitous, the world seemed divided into those whom the camera "liked" and those it didn't.

Today, if anyone said "she takes a good photograph", it would mean most likely that she was both photographer and subject, and that the aphorism would be more accurately rephrased as "she takes a good selfie." And that the instrument deployed to take these photographic self-portraits would not be a camera but the

3 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, New York 1981, p. 88.
4 Ibid. Author's italics.

photographic component of a mobile phone. There are more mobile phones in the world than people – not all of them "smartphones" with built-in cameras – but spend five minutes at any tourist attraction or public event and a plethora of mobile phones in owners' hands will be seen taking self-portraits of their owners.

A couple of years ago, I was sitting in the Great Court of the British Museum, waiting to meet my daughter. Sitting on a bench next to me was someone who was clearly a tourist. I watched with fascination, tinged with a degree of horror and awe, as she took no interest whatsoever in the spectacular architecture of the space, but used her smartphone to take selfie after selfie for at least twenty minutes, only stopping to touch up her make-up. She was still doing it when my daughter arrived and we went to get lunch and to view the exhibition we had come to see.

The extraordinary thing about this performance – and that is the appropriate word – was the degree of obsession involved, the fierce, unremitting concentration. Before turning to herself as a subject, she may have been giving similar attention to the architecture of the Great Court, but I suspect not. Just as those turning their back on the *Mona Lisa* or *The Birth of Venus* to include them in their selfies have little interest in them as works of art rather than just another item on their tourist "bucket list".

I recount this tale not to criticise the woman – although I personally found the whole episode profoundly disturbing – but to contend that the talismanic function of photography remains as vital as ever. In an era when consumerism might be society's primary's solace, and in an increasingly technological world, a virtual world even, where competing realities vie with each other, our personal identity, both individual and tribal, becomes an important issue. In a world where our grasp on reality frequently seems tenuous, photography has an important role to play. There are many examples, but I shall only mention the extraordinary events at Washington's Capitol on 6 January 2020. People deluded by conspiracy theories and false information on social media nevertheless took constant time out from their insurrectionary activities to take selfies and other photographs, as if to make sure that what was happening was real.

Descartes defined human existence in the famous dictum "I think, therefore I am." This might be replaced in this new millennium by a contemporary equivalent – "I photograph, therefore I am," or more precisely, "I take selfies, therefore I am."

That at least would seem marginally better than "I shop, therefore I am." It confirms one of the core faculties of the photographic medium, William Henry Fox Talbot's "art of fixing a shadow" in relation to the human face.

Because early photography was relatively insensitive to light, the first photographs tended to be of inanimate objects, although it was not long before photographers turned to the human visage, and in certain instances to the human body, chiefly female. There was money to be made from people's likenesses. So early professional photography, as opposed to that by amateurs, was largely devoted to the portrait. The first photographic process, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre's daguerreotype, was mainly a portrait vehicle. Indeed, many painters of miniature portraits turned to the new medium to "daguerreotype" their clients rather than paint them. Photography was quicker and more cost-effective – and, lest we forget, had that priceless asset of being an almost exact simulacrum of nature, with all its wonders, but also with all its flaws.

Photography, however, did not simply produce a wondrous likeness, it democratised the portrait likeness. Prior to the medium's invention, to have one's face immortalised cost serious money. Leonardo and Rembrandt charged high fees. And although the cost trickled down, through lesser-regarded painters to portrait miniaturists (art had a size complex even then), it was only from the nobility to the merchant and professional classes. Even the first daguerreotypes were relatively expensive, and it took thirty or forty years, through the ambrotype to the tintype, then the first "snapshot" cameras, for photography to become theoretically available to all. When the lower classes had access to their own self-image and the ability to paste it in a "family album", thus beginning the long march to "posting" it on social media, which also has taken the relatively private circulation of early self-images into a much more public arena, with all the distinctly unsocial dangers that might entail.

So, to return to our initial reflection, we do not have a photo-graphic portrait of Leonardo or Rembrandt, but we have one of Edgar Degas, to name a painter of comparable stature. We do not have Jane Austen, but we have Alfred Tennyson. Such images represent the introductory era of the celebrity portrait. Indeed, the advent of photography perhaps represents the moment when the notion of celebrity itself changed exponentially.

5 Jean Sagne, 'All Kinds of Portraits: The Photographer's Studio', in Michel Frizot (ed.), *New History of Photography*, Cologne 1994, p. 106.

Prior to the photographic age, who saw the likenesses of society's prominent individuals? Painted portraits were limited to a small circle of the subject's peers, except for engravings, and here too circulation was strictly limited, if not in theory. Initially, photography did not alter this situation. The daguerreotype was a unique, "one-off" image, and had a short era of success, precisely because of this limitation. The Englishman William Henry Fox Talbot's introduction of the photographic negative, with its priceless faculty for producing a theoretically endless number of photographic "prints", laid the foundation for all modern photography up to the development of the digital file.

It was the Frenchman André Adolph-Eugène Disdéri's invention in 1854, however, which dramatically increased society's demand for the photographic portrait. Disdéri developed a method of making eight small images on one whole-plate glass negative, thus effectively producing eight portraits for the price of one. In conjunction with this, he also patented the *carte de visite*, a 6.4 × 10 cm card upon which the eighth-plate pictures could be mounted, with suitable information about the portrait subject on the verso. The *carte* was nevertheless slow to gain widespread acceptance until 1859, when Disdéri published images of the French Emperor Napoleon III in the format.

From then on, much like daguerreotype mania, and indeed "selfie" mania, Europe was subject to *carte de visite* mania. The aspiring middle classes could not only have their own portraits made for a readily affordable sum but also purchase and collect portraits of their favourite celebrities. For the first time, faithfully accurate images of society's leaders were widely distributed, and the era of celebrity truly began.

> Photography thus supplanted engraving and lithography as the most common means by which famous people's faces became known…. For very little cost, it was now possible to acquire a collection of likenesses of the famous (or infamous). The brisk sale of such portraits became a stampede as members of the public started flocking to the photographers' studios.[5]

The earlier examples of photographic portrait in this book are therefore generally of celebrities. However, they were blessed with a slightly different measure and type of fame from that which attends today's celebrity, and there were far fewer people "famous

for being famous" – although notoriety, just as it does today, could yield a certain vicarious fame. But the Victorian Age was an age of achievement, a serious age, and considered itself so. Celebrity was not gained in the main for frivolous reasons. Victorians were praised for their achievements in science, in industry, in politics, in the arts, and even in the Church. These were the celebrities of the Victorian era, rewarded their status for true achievement, not for publishing photographs of their bottom. Scientists and men of letters (and it was almost exclusively men) were lionised through the photographic portrait to an extent today's leaders in their equivalent fields might envy.

There were, of course, no television or film or sports stars in the Victorian era, and only a smattering of popular music stars, primarily because the still photograph, with its limitations as well as its wonders, was the only way of spreading the message other than the printed word (also limited) and personal appearance. The photograph, itself in its infancy, was an important factor in the development of another new art, the art of publicity.

It is fascinating to see how certain individuals realised from almost the beginning how the camera might be utilised as a personal publicity tool. This was especially true for women, who had a much more vicarious status in society than men. A woman's perceived position in the scheme of things was much more shadowy than that of men. The solidity, the "thereness" of the photographic image, could make women more visible, more substantial. The "art of fixing a shadow" could help in bringing women out of the shadows. Certain women were extremely astute at grasping this, and so adept at utilising the camera that they might be considered almost as joint authors with the photographers who made their portrait images available to the world. Victorian photographic technology did not exactly permit "selfies", but there were those who exhibited the rudiments of a "selfie" mentality.

Sarah Bernhardt, for example, the greatest female actor of her age and one of the first celebrity "stars", exploited the "publicity shot" throughout her lengthy career. It begins with the wonderful portraits of her taken by the leading Parisian portrait photographer of the 1860s, Nadar, when Bernhardt was around 20. The images exhibit a potent mix of soulfulness with a hint of smouldering sexuality. Bernhardt's mother was a courtesan, and women who trod the boards in the nineteenth century were regarded as little more than prostitutes. Nadar and Bernhardt play

deftly with this notion. She has wrapped a North African burnoose around her body, enveloping it almost completely, but tantalisingly leaving one shoulder bare. Outside the plethora of pornographic and nude photographs made around the time, these portraits are amongst the most erotic of Victorian and French Second Empire photographs. Indeed, they are more profoundly erotic than the most blatantly sexual imagery. Bernhardt and Nadar clearly realised that covering up was infinitely more beguiling than revealing all.

Sexuality, or at least the right to express it as part, though not all, of a woman's identity, is also at issue in the portraits taken by another prominent Parisian photographer, Pierre-Louis Pierson, of the Second Empire society beauty the Contessa di Castiglione. Even more than the Nadar/Bernhardt portraits, this was a clear collaboration, a joint authorship, and was much more personal in nature rather than a matter of business. The Contessa was quite a woman, as they say. She was briefly the mistress of Napoleon III himself, and an apparent spy for the Italian unification movement, the Risorgimento, through the simple expediency of passing on the French emperor's pillow talk to the movement's centre in Turin. She was known for her love of masked balls and costume parties, but then in later life (that is to say, her forties), when she felt her looks to be fading, she shut herself away in her Place Vendôme apartment, seemingly venturing out only after dark, swathed in veils, as the story has it.

Clearly, her self-image was crucial, and the many photographs she made with Pierson might be considered the spiritual and artistic predecessors, not only of photographic artists like Claude Cahun, Pierre Molinier, or Cindy Sherman, but of that tourist in the British Museum and all today's selfie-takers.

Employing Pierre-Louis Pierson as the camera operator, and directing almost every aspect of the images, the Contessa initiated a series of tableaux-portraits, dressing up in her favourite costumes – sometimes squeezing into them when she had "grown out" of them – and performing little scenarios. She even had photographs made of her bare legs and feet, a somewhat transgressive enterprise for a "respectable" nineteenth-century aristocrat. As she got older and put on weight, she would mark up proof prints to show Pierson where he should retouch the glass-plate negatives and "take" the weight off her. She is an almost direct link to not only selfie culture, but also the manipulative magic of Photoshop.

And in the United States, ex-slave and prominent anti-slavery campaigner and statesman Frederick Douglass became one of the most photographed persons in nineteenth-century America – utilising photography alongside his writings to carefully foster his image. Douglass certainly controlled the various photographers who pictured him, choosing a minimal background, his clothing, and a sober demeanour to carefully foster his image. As a Black American, Douglass projected a deliberately serious persona to counter the clichéd caricature of the feckless African American that existed at the time in American society – and still does to an unfortunate extent.

But this impulse, not only to be photographed but to control and direct the making of the photograph, goes right back to the very beginning of photography. One of the three inventors of photography, Hippolyte Bayard, took a number of self-portraits, the most famous of which was a protest against the fact that the photographic process he had invented had been ignored by the French government in favour of the daguerreotype.

Bayard made a self-portrait depicting himself as a drowned man, to which he added a text complaining that the person in the picture had committed suicide because his great invention had been ignored by the French government. The image introduces a number of nominal "firsts" for the medium, but most notably the first deliberate photographic fiction and portrait as a propaganda tool.

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It could be suggested, for purposes of discussion, that there are two basic categories of portrait. The first is where the subject is known to the photographer and a specific group of people viewing it. This group can be extremely broad, as in the celebrity portrait, where the subject is a cultural icon. Or it can be extremely narrow, as in the snapshot portrait, where the subject is known only to friends and family. They might be termed the public and private portrait, for even celebrities make snapshots for their immediate circle. However, since the advent of the internet and the digital phone camera, the situation has perhaps grown more complex. Social media has created a hybrid, a personal image, even a self-portrait which attracts a wider audience than simply friends and family after it is posted on one of the many social media websites.

The second broad group is where the subject of the portrait is unknown to the photographer prior to the taking of the image, the

anonymous or social portrait if you like. This is a wide category, ranging from the street photograph to documentation of social groups, and also ranging from portraits taken with the subject's consent, whether given freely or reluctantly, to the so-called candid portrait, where the subject is wholly unaware that their image has been taken, or "stolen", as some would have it.

In broad terms, in the case of the celebrity portrait, or the known person, one tends to read biography; in the case of the social portrait, the unknown person, one tends to read sociology. In the celebrity portrait we acknowledge the individual, in the social portrait we study a type.

Paul Strand's *Blind Woman* of 1916 is perhaps the definitive example of the candid portrait – the veritable symbol of the genre – as the subject clearly would seem to be unaware that she was being photographed because she is blind. But more than that, this stolen image reminds us forcefully that so much portraiture of unknown people is of those who are different in terms of class, race, religion, and other societal dividing lines.

This tendency began soon after photography's invention. It should be remembered that the photographic medium was invented more or less simultaneously by the world's leading colonial powers, namely Great Britain and France, who between them had invaded and colonised large parts of the world. Colonialism was an act of acquisition on all kinds of levels. And in conjunction with the acquisition of riches – the primary motive – the acquisition of knowledge was also an important aspect, potentially justifying a more benign side to the enterprise. "Bringing civilisation to the less civilised" was the usual racist way of framing it.

It is perhaps going too far to say that photography was invented specifically as part of the colonial enterprise, but it was an important support tool, as it was to the scientific and industrial activities which defined the middle of the nineteenth century. Photography was termed the "half art, half science", and in its first few decades, the science was deemed somewhat more important than the art.

In an era when much science depended heavily upon empirical observation, the miraculous access afforded to reality provided by photography was used by the industrial and scientific powers to collect and classify the world, and this included people. Instead of photographing their own class – the function of the portrait studio and celebrity portrait for public sale – this was generally a matter of upper- and middle-class photographers photographing the lower