

	Open College of the Arts		
	Tutor report		

Student name	Keith Greenough	Student number	416177
Course/Module	Visual Studies 1	Assignment number	5

Dear Keith

Many thanks for your patience in waiting for the return of your essay – have so much on at the moment, it's unbelievable. I thought that this was a really strong essay showing good solid reading into photographic and related theory, and with a clear focus on the theme of identity/the portrait within photography.

I thought that your introductory paragraph drawing on Richard Brilliant helped to set out the topic, and it is interesting that his emphasis is on the way in which the portrait 'speaks' to the viewer. The fact that his emphasis is on them rather than the expectations of the sitter is quite telling. Certainly the early attraction of photography was precisely its ability to record in a non-judgmental and unselective manner. As you point out, this did mean that photography could usefully be used to classify and produce quasi-scientific outcomes. In a way that mirrored the fine art/science divide which was a characteristic of photographic priorities in the nineteenth century.

Your distinction between the administrative and commercial functions of photographic likenesses produced an interesting discussion. It's so interesting in the early days of photography that any manipulation was a very controversial issue. There was a British photographer Henry Peach Robinson who used early methods of cutting and constructing photographs from a range of negatives and this was treated with a great deal of hostility. It seems that even very early on, viewers latched on to the fact that the real asset of photography was precisely its supposed 'truthfulness' and reliability.

One of the ironies of digital photography and the spread of images via the internet has resulted in a loss of sensitivity to the quality of good photography. I find with my fine art students that when illustrating essays they often insert really quite poor quality images lifted from the internet, seemingly in the belief that such an illustration in some ways 'stands in' for the original, high quality image. It's such a noticeable trend that I do think there is something behind this.

The notion of photography producing an idealized self is interesting in that the image 'mirrors' back to us a version which we would prefer, and this of course does raise the possibility of exactly what truth or reality is being presented, once we allow for reality to be something other than a (mere) visual likeness.

Your commentary on the use of portrait photographs as a means of social identification linked nicely to the issues around the manipulation of the digital photograph, and how 'likeness' becomes something up for debate. This is especially so if a photograph is accompanied by text – its context is crucial in driving our understanding of what it might mean. Of course the use of the photographic portrait as an aspirational image is not new – as you suggest, early painted portraits frequently put their subjects in the best possible light, and they were shown surrounded with items which usually suggested that they were 'upwardly mobile'. You particularly highlight this in your discussion of how painted portraits paid great attention to aspects such as pose, background, accessories and so on, all as part of building an persona for the sitter and placing them in the social and intellectual strata to which they felt they belonged.

As you rightly say a portrait is a collaboration between artist/photographer and sitter, and it has been argued that in fact a portrait tells us as much about its maker as it does about its subject, in that it embodies the former's taste, concerns, ambitions, and so on.

I thought the section which you illustrated with the two photographs of Churchill was very interesting – highlighting the disjunction between how he wished to be seen, and how the public wished to see him. This also tied in neatly with your discussion of the cult of personality which of course photography so strongly underpins. This then moved into your analysis of the portrait studio which offered its sitters false props, and thus produced false photographic 'stories'. I thought this was fascinating! This really is a sign of a sign, of a sign ...! And of course Facebook has further encouraged people to be both image conscious, but I also think not very discerning in image choice (hence my comment about my own students and their selection of poor quality photographic reproductions.) Moreover a single individual can make themselves into many types – they can 'perform' versions of themselves, particularly via the web.

I thought the illustrations in Fig. 5 were hilarious – and it is interesting how these inconsistencies weren't a problem at the time. Clearly the wish to produce aspirational portraits overcame any issues of believable props and settings.

Sander's work is very interesting I think, and is particularly worthy of attention given what was to happen in Germany under the Nazis and their invented systems of classification by racial type. Your quote by him was a good example of how he conceived of portraiture – the individual standing in for the whole. As you say, his quasi-scientific approach gave these photographs credibility which was certainly part of eugenics. The way in which such photographs seem to 'classify' whole groups of people clearly links to your

next theme of stereotyping.

I think that to an extent we are less trusting of photographs in general, but probably this is restricted to those of us who are involved in the cultural study – on the whole I believe that the photographic image still carries an aura of authority, and that this is borne out by its increasing use in the media – both print, digital and particularly on television. If we think of TV news programmes, for example, there is much more ‘location’ reporting than there used to be, and I think the purpose of this goes beyond the ability to spend more money on such programmes. I think it is clear that seeing a reporter speaking on site is believed to be more effective in transmitting a story and ‘making it real’ to viewers.

So overall a well written essay, backed up with excellent visual examples and a solid bibliography. Well done.

I wish you well with your other course, and hope that you continue to enjoy any further OCA courses which you undertake. It’s been good working with you.

All best
Pauline

Tutor name:	Dr Pauline Rose
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Next assignment due	N/A