

# What are you looking at?

Lewis Carroll's photographs and the paradoxes of perception

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The main thing history tells us about Lewis Carroll (and what history tells us, it usually does so with a tone of authority) is that his work belongs to the realm of children; it was written for children, it is about children, and, for many, it is specifically about Carroll's ambiguous relationship with children and/or with his own childhood. Carroll's work has generally been confined to that field, and even though historical categories can often be reductive, it is nonetheless true that the largest part of Carroll's work was intended for children, or as Gilles Deleuze puts it, may have been written "on behalf of children"<sup>1</sup>. Carroll's masterpieces, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871), are intimately connected to childhood—literally and historically.

If he lived today, Charles L. Dodgson (Lewis Carroll was a pseudonym), would probably be accused of dilettantism. Let's say that he was primarily a mathematician and a geometrician interested in the work of Euclid, who played a part in the nineteenth-century debate surrounding the development of the non-Euclidean geometries. A clergyman who lived most of his life in an apartment of Christ Church College, in Oxford, where he taught mathematics for about twenty-five years. As a member of that intellectual milieu, he took part in social and sometimes political matters, publishing, often anonymously, several pamphlets and articles. Dodgson also engaged in art criticism and wrote numerous, relatively short articles on painting, photography, or architecture. With John Ruskin, whom he admired early on and met with on several occasions, he shared a desire for art to engage, through discourse, with all other disciplines and human affairs. Like the famous critic, Dodgson was sympathetic to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood with whom he shared a belief that representations of children conveyed a sense of purity and virtue, and that strange, impossible creatures could speak about the human condition.

In all these fields, the interest of Dodgson's work is not crucial (it is often the wit and humour, the obliqueness with which he expresses himself that supersedes his ideas), but becomes more evident once it is read in relation to the larger corpus of his literary work—his poems, stories and novels. It is in those texts, somewhere behind the "carrollian" nonsense

or within the nonsensical movement generated through the rhythmic quality of his prose, that one can find a romanticism—and to some extent a philosophy—of a different kind.<sup>2</sup> The box of Romanticism remains a perplexing one; what it contains is rather miscellaneous. Shall we remove from it what Apollinaire calls the “prettiness” of Romanticism, the idealism of the Wagnerian absolute work of art, and the somewhat incomplete and misleading (or mislead) idea that the truth of the world is embodied in Nature and revealed to us through representation? We would end up with a strange thing that may look, from a certain angle, either like a medieval icon or like the sort of crystalline formation dear to the Surrealists. Such definition of romanticism is, in itself, extremely specific and only fragments of the work of Dodgson, or Carroll (or, for that matter, the work of any of the so-called Romantics) eventually fit in. It may nonetheless be appropriate for the one side of his asymmetrical personality that strangely intersects with Ruskin’s theoretical framework, as well as with Pre-Raphaelitism, and that side is photography.

There is a duality within photography itself that makes it difficult to address the nature of the photographic image. From the beginning, it was understood both as a scientific document (a recording) and as the result of an artistic process (a composition). It is perhaps this ambiguous status of photography—half art, half science—that drove Dodgson’s interest for the medium, but was, in any case, the only artistic endeavour that he acknowledged publicly. He began as a photographer in the early nineteenth century, taking pictures of his relatives, colleagues, and friends often accompanied by their children. The most famous—and strangely controversial—of his photographs remain the portraits he made of children, especially those of little girls.<sup>3</sup> Looking at Carroll’s pictures of his little child-friends (let’s refer to him through his pseudonym since the photographs have generally been associated to his chosen name) may generate a mixed sentiment of fascination and discomfort and place one in a state of anxiety, as if something was about to break, or had just happened.

From Roland Barthes, we learn that there can be two kinds of photography. On the one hand, there is photography as a means of recording facts, situations, events, that is, to present us with something that “has been” and that never will be. Such photographic images speak to us about death, about time removed from the bodies of loved ones, and about the flash of insanity that crosses one’s mind when facing realism in its most original and absolute form. On the other hand, there is what he calls a more tempered and generalized photography (and for him film belongs to the latter category) that includes all attempts to submit the photographic image to the rules of art—to aesthetic or empirical habits. For him, the

result is then bound to remain an illusion devoid of any real essence.<sup>4</sup> Barthes position is not concerned with the idea that there may be something devious—something voyeuristic—in the premises of Modernity itself which has to do with the primacy given to vision in the perception of what we call reality. Our encounter with the photographic image is filtered through specific concepts of space and time—Cartesian space and the linearity of historical time. One of the characteristics associated with such concepts is the definition of a specific “ideal” point of view, which has led to settle the observer outside of the work, or to be more precise, in front of it, that is, in a position reciprocal to the vanishing point implied in the “construction” of illusionist, perspective space. This displacement involved a new distance in an entirely visual relationship between the observer and the work. It is the slight distance—and the angle that it generates—which ultimately problematizes notions such as the human understanding of reality in relation to the realm of ideas, the place of the individual within the collective, or the truth value given to language versus the immediacy of day to day experience.

With photography, the surface of the image acts as a mirror; the mirror-image is fixed, immobilized, frozen in time and made transportable.<sup>5</sup> The representation is no longer constructed by the artist directly on the surface, but appears through optical reflections. As one looks at it, one is actually being looked at, straight in the eyes, by the person who, some time before, stood still and stared right into the lens of the camera. Hence, one is bound to be projected behind the image, invited to witness the event that took place between the photographer and the photographed, and hence, one simultaneously becomes a viewer, a voyeur, a witness, or an accomplice. One enters an interstitial space, or else, generates that space<sup>6</sup> through his or her specific position in relation to the work. In that sense, not only does photography stop time, it also sets time in motion again—it reverses and distorts time—in the same way historical perspective makes the past acquire a status of eternity.

In *The Pre-Raphaelite Camera*, Micheal Bartram analyzes the connections between early Victorian photography and the Pre-Raphaelite movement. According to Bartram, the influence between painting and photography was reciprocal. To some extent, it is true that Pre-Raphaelite paintings very often look just like photographs. In some cases, the painters were actually using photography as a basis for their work — they were technically painting from photographs or on top of photographs. But, Bartram insists, many photographs of the time also look like paintings by Millais or Rossetti, or like Ruskinian studies. He bases this proximity on how most of these early photographs were composed like painted tableaux, and on the importance of a certain agreement between photographer and

model, in the case of portraits, due to the necessity of the stillness of the pose. Pointing to the similarities that can be noticed between the two media in the choice of themes and the general aesthetic quality of the work, Bartram also recognises the fundamental differences between photography and painting— the different process tied to the production of each kind of image but, mostly, the change in their relation to time. Nevertheless, he believes that “in the era before the snapshot . . . early photography draws nearer to painting.” Hence, Pre-Raphaelitism may be understood to have had a strong influence on early instances of photography (like, for example, the work of Julia Margaret Cameron). Yet the connection between Pre-Raphaelite painting and photography seems to happen at a different and more indirect level in the case of Carroll’s portraits. The allusion can no longer be expressed primarily in terms of technical or even thematic concerns, but instead, refers to Pre-Raphaelitism as an idea.

According to the Pre-Raphaelites, the academic tradition in painting was filled with mistakes, the origin of which could be traced back to Raphael. Consequently, they proposed to go backwards and to revisit more “primitive” themes dear to early Renaissance painters. As reactionary as it may appear, there seems to be something else behind that position. Pre-Raphaelitism could be two-fold and carrying a certain dose of irony. First, the idea to go backwards in time, to obliterate a period of three hundred years (and to use the name of the artist who you hold responsible for the vapidness of academic painting, preceded by the prefix -*pre*) implies a certain critical commentary on the concept inherited from the Enlightenment that time follows the linearity of history. Another feature of the Pre-Raphaelite movement was to address contemporary subjects, to render a more “natural,” everyday reality. They chose to do so under the disguise—the “dress”—of early Renaissance allegories. I would say that such a deceptive apparatus was most probably intentional, and that it somehow explains the “look” of the paintings—the somewhat unpleasant kitsch. The excess of realism makes the painted surface act as a photographic image or a distorting mirror. Millais’ *Ophelia* was one of the first three paintings that served to define Pre-Raphaelitism. It depicts, in an extremely realistic manner, a woman floating in shallow water. She appears to be dead. One can almost see, behind the painting, a real woman (Millais’s wife?) entering the water and posing for the painter, or staying there just long enough to be photographed. The painting suggests the process of a *mise-en-scene*, it somehow evokes the idea of a mock-up, a make-believe. We do not really know, or wish to know, if or how the setting took place in reality, but we can perceive an intrinsic temporal conflict. Millais’ painting is saying: “Look, I am a nineteenth-century woman painted in the state of re-enacting a theme from the past.”



John Everett Millais, *Ophelia* (1851–2)

In a very similar way, Carroll's photographs touch upon the uncertainty of appearances. They say, with the disobedient tone of an eight-year-old: "Don't be fooled, I am just a nineteenth-century child dressed up as a Russian." The photographic image represents what we call "reality" in its most accurate, precise, and objective manner. But as soon as it does—as soon as it records a specific situation or fragment of a situation—that same situation no longer exists. From that instant on, it will be transformed. On the other hand, because the photographic image emulates reality, when we look at it, we force the past and present—life and death—to coincide. It is that coincidence that is referred to by Barthes as the hallucinatory nature of our encounter with photography.

The particularity of Carroll's photographs is that children participated in the process of making the images. Some of the pictures involved sophisticated costumes that Carroll himself would order specifically for the little girl to be photographed in. Though some were shot in open air with natural light, most sessions actually took place in his studio. The child could hide behind a dressing screen and put on the chosen outfit. The space of the studio was also filled with different pieces of furniture and objects that would serve as props or background. It seems likely that a child would spontaneously engage in the game of pretending to be someone



Lewis Carroll, *Xie Kitchin* (around 1875)

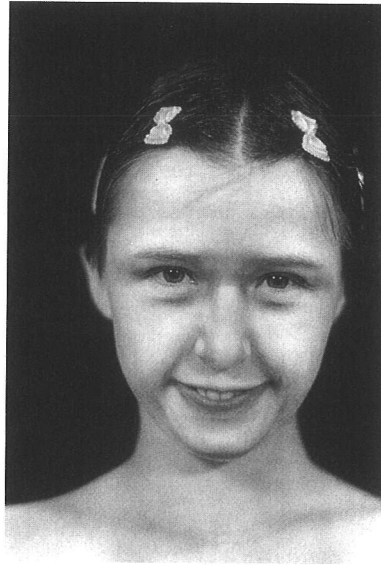
else, or to feign sleep or boredom. The photograph of Mary Millais, daughter of the Pre-Raphaelite painter, shows the young child wearing a night dress sitting in the corner of a room, her leg stretching on the thick carpet while her head leans against the wall. The corner of the room somehow seems to dissolve. The thickness and the texture of the carpet makes it appear like grass. She looks at the camera, but it is almost impossible to qualify her gaze. Does it portray sadness, or defiance, or does it rather have something of the emptiness behind the eyes of someone who is day-dreaming? What is most intriguing is how Carroll apparently managed to make the children conscious that they were engaging in a process of falsification: "Let's pretend that you are day-dreaming..." But were they actually aware? And if so, to what extent? Can one measure the level of consciousness involved in one's own behaviours and actions, when recalled from childhood memories, or, to some degree, in every day experience? Carroll's photographic images convey an idea of childhood (in the sense of a disposition rather than a state of being) that is many sided. They address the hallucinatory nature of perception or the way children tend to make reality and fiction coincide, but at the same time, and this may seem contradictory, the images reveal the sort of disarming lucidity proper to childhood. They also speak about childhood in terms of the



Lewis Carroll, *Mary Millais* (1875)

openness of a child-like mind, to accept the co-existence of antagonistic notions, almost as if engaging in the process of a game.

We may never really get to the actual nature of the game process involved in Carroll's photographic experiments.<sup>8</sup> In a game, the rules are predetermined. They make sense only within the boundaries of the game itself. The players are aware of these rules, which they have to accept in order to play. Removed from their initial context, the rules of a game often seem absurd, while from within, for the players, they make sense according to a specific logic. One does not necessarily wish to play, but for some reason it seems difficult not to participate in the strange game—the oscillating movement—which Lewis Carroll's photographs induce in our minds. Such movement of oscillation is similar to one's state of mind confronting a paradox. Faced with the actual co-existence of antagonistic notions that a paradox constitutes, one's mind is set in motion, going back and forth between the two opposites that make sense, simultaneously, like the immobile travel of Zeno's arrow. Carroll was an admirer, hunter, and literary creator of paradoxes. As we observe Carroll's photographs of little girls, we vacillate between the impression of getting at something, while at the same time, remaining excluded, out of the game, only a witness. If Carroll's intention was to convey truth, purity,



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled* (1975)

and perfection through his photographs of children, he may have failed admirably. On the other hand, if his aim was to speak about the paradoxical nature of the photographic image, some may call him a genius.

More than a century after Carroll and the Pre-Raphaelites, Cindy Sherman's photographic reconstruction of historical paintings or imaginary film-stills somehow recall the Pre-Raphaelite ruse. The difference is that with Sherman, the traces implied in the making-up of the photographic installation are explicit. Her work is concerned more with showing the gaps, the mis-adjustments, and problems involved in the process, than with the resulting image as a perfect make-believe. In that sense, Sherman's intentions are more directly expressed. In the late twentieth century her work addresses the notion of the simulacrum; Sherman's photographs say: "this image is a mock-up." Unlike the romantic Carroll or Millais, she can no longer be concerned with truth or exactitude. Paradoxically, her work is, in a sense, more transparent; it speaks much more directly about the ongoing problem of communication and participation.



## Notes

- 1 See Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 4.
- 2 Octavio Paz expresses this idea of a romanticism that is not merely nostalgic of the past or a reactionary attitude against the Industrial Revolution and the modern scientific mind-set, but a romanticism that is trying to reconcile the *mythos* and the *logos*. According to Paz, such movements as Romanticism and Surrealism are visions of the world that can travel underground, through history, and reappear when they are least expected. Octavio Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973) chapter 8, especially 154–55.
- 3 Dodgson took many pictures of little girls, often in elaborate costumes but also nude or semi-nude. These photographs were given more attention since the early 1990's, in the controversy around the retrospective exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs and the censure imposed by the American authorities to the art world (and especially to photography) concerning child pornography. On the presence of child nudity in photography and the context of reception of such artistic endeavours in various epochs, see Susan H. Edwards, "Pretty Babies, Art, Erotica or Kiddie porn?," *History of Photography*, Vol. 18, I, (Spring 1994): 38–46.
- 4 See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida, Notes on Photography*, (New York: Hill and Wang 1981).
- 5 See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Fontana, 1992).
- 6 The word 'space' is used here in terms of time-space fragments, or else in terms of an imaginary space, rather than in reference to the notion of space as homogenous and stable.
- 7 Micheal Bartram, *The Pre-Raphaelite Camera, Aspects of Victorian Photography* (London: Wedenfield and Nicolson 1985), 11.
- 8 Various attempts to analyse Carroll's photographs have been made. Freudian interpretations abound, some of which accuse the artist of perversity, others, more delicate, explain Carroll's work as a photographer as the means he might have chosen to deal with his intense and repressed desire for little girls. See, for an example of psychoanalytical interpretation, George Dimock, "Childhood's End: Lewis Carroll and the image of the rat," *Word & Image* 8:3 (1992). See also, for a position that dismisses a Freudian interpretation, Morton N. Cohen, *Lewis Carroll's photographs of nude children* (Philadelphia: The Rosenbach Foundation, 1978).