

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88525-6 - Realism, Photography, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction

Daniel A. Novak

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: “detestable introductions”*

These portraits [photographs] seen beforehand are detestable introductions, only less disadvantageous than a description given by an ardent friend to one who is neither a friend nor ardent.

George Eliot, *Letters*¹

In 1850, Charles Dickens wrote an essay entitled “The Ghost of Art” for his newly formed journal *Household Words*. In the essay, the narrator encounters a man who reminds him of almost every portrait he has ever seen – both generic portraits (“Number one hundred and forty-two portrait of a gentleman”) and figures from literature, history, and the bible: “the Vicar of Wakefield, Alfred the Great, Gil Blas, Charles the Second, Joseph and his Bretheren, the Fairy Queen, Tom Jones.” As it turns out, the man is an artist’s model, but it isn’t necessarily his face that is so recognizable. Instead, the man’s body has been pictorially dismembered and his parts dispersed and recombined with other bodies to create countless pictorial “monstrosities”: “Do you know what my points are? . . . My throat and my legs . . . When I don’t set for a head, I mostly sets for a throat and a pair of legs . . . Then, take and stick my legs and throat on to another man’s body, and you’ll make a reg’lar monster.”² While Dickens’s satire is explicitly about bad painting, the image of mechanically “taking” the model’s parts and the suggestion that these parts can be removed over and over again conjure the art of photography more than painting.³ In fact, the technique and the body he describes had an important place in Victorian photographic practice, discussions of photography in Victorian literary journalism, and finally in Victorian fiction. In other words, paradoxically, this impossible literary and pictorial body-in-pieces, this fictional and grotesque composite is, I argue, central both to a Victorian technology of realism and to the Victorian realist novel.

This link between Dickens’s fictional model and Victorian photography is best exemplified by a technique performed and theorized most extensively by two photographers in England: art photographers Oscar Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson. In the 1850s, “art photography” was associated with a single technique called “composition photography,” in which figures were transposed from one scene to another, bodies from different images juxtaposed in new (and often compromising) contexts,



Figure 1. Henry Peach Robinson: studies for *Bringing Home the May* (1862)

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Figure 2. Oscar Gustav Rejlander: study for *The Two Ways of Life* (c. 1857)

and single bodies even sutured together from different models (figs. 1–2). As Robinson argues: “It is sometimes necessary to print a single figure from two negatives: Ophelia is an example of this kind. The head was taken from one model, and the figure from another.”⁴ In such cases, the photographic body and its private identity were torn apart: made abstract, anonymous, exchangeable, and endlessly divisible.⁵ Using the technology of “realism,” these photographers produced new and fictional bodies – what I am calling *novel* bodies – that existed only in a photographic space, in photographic fictions.⁶ In other words, the technology of realism produced what appears to be its opposite: the non-existent, the fictional, and the abstract.⁷

In making this claim, I take seriously both the often bizarre images associated with photography in Victorian writing and the equally strange techniques and theories of Victorian photographers.⁸ For example, returning to the quotation above, in her letter doubting the merits of photography Eliot associates photography with inaccuracy and distortion. In offering only a false choice between two “less disadvantageous” forms of representation – between providing an inevitably inaccurate likeness of oneself or submitting to an intentionally distorted description – Eliot ultimately links photography with a suspect form of fictionality. Rather than offering faithful likenesses, photographic realism and fiction are only “less disadvantageous” likenesses of each other. In other words, Eliot

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suggests that not only are photographic introductions “detestable,” but also that they are “detestable” because they are fictional. As I show in this (hopefully not) “detestable introduction” and in this book as a whole, Eliot is hardly alone in associating photography with the distortions of literary fiction. While critics have most often argued that the Victorians trusted the objectivity of photography, I argue that for many Victorian writers, far from capturing particularity and individuality, technologies of realism rendered its subjects at once dismembered and disembodied.

Key to my understanding of a Victorian photographic imaginary and of what the Victorians meant by “photographic realism” is that within the discourse of photography the kind of manipulation I described above was seen not as anomalous or incidental to the project of realism but as absolutely *essential* to it. In the face of the perceived shortcomings of ordinary photographs, photographic fictions were seen as a solution to a widespread desire for “realistic” representations. Run-of-the-mill family photographs were aesthetic failures – looking very much like Dickens’s grotesque “ghost of art”: “the figure as wooden as a figure head,” a contemporary wrote of one such picture, “the limbs *perfect dissected members*, that might be dead bones in Ezekiel coming oddly together” (emphasis added).⁹ In the face of visual dissolution, art photography set out to restore aesthetic unity, and in the process it produced realism itself as a photographic fiction. As Robinson asserts: “I maintain that I can get nearer to the truth . . . with several negatives than with one.”¹⁰ In other words, Rejlander and Robinson blur the boundary between realism and fiction not only by using photography to represent scenes and encounters that never occurred. Going further, they argue that such photographic fictions are both *more* realistic and more *photographic*. As Rejlander puts it,

I never see a photograph containing many persons in which they do not all look like a series of distinct figures, that won’t mass together, and this effect appears to me to be unavoidable . . . In photographing groups I should prefer to produce the figures singly, or by twos or threes, and combine them in printing afterwards, which can be done satisfactorily . . . without any violation of pictorial truth.¹¹

For Rejlander, by failing to achieve “pictorial truth,” the photograph failed to capture truth itself. This perceived need to make the photograph “realistic” through a form of photographic fiction stemmed from a widespread conviction that the photograph could not represent individuality, particularity, and even the temporal moment – what Roland Barthes calls the “that-has-been-there” of the photograph.¹²

This very lack of coherence and particularity enabled – required, even – the superaddition of narrative, as the photographic body came increasingly to be described in linguistic and narrative terms. The value of composition photography, one Victorian critic argued, resided in the “thought it embodies . . . All else is no more to the picture than words – regarded simply

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as words – are to the poem or essay.”¹³ In this analogy and in the theory and practice of art photography, the photographic body acts as a form of abstract linguistic raw material (“simply as words”) evacuated of specific meaning, context, or origin – making possible the composition and writing of photographic narrative. As an admirer of Rejlander described one of his composition photographs, “[it is] as good as a new novel.”¹⁴ The tautology (“new novel”) is symptomatic of photography’s task both to replicate and to create. Or rather, in Victorian photography, replication is pressed into the service of fictional creation; the abstract bodies and body-parts of art photography remain forever new, forever able to be transformed into something else.

At the same time, if the photograph was being described as a novel, Victorian literature echoed the practice, theory, and culture of Victorian photography. Essays on photography in a number of Victorian journals, including Dickens’s journals *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, represented photography as a process that dismembered the body, while also producing a photographic economy of interchangeable bodies and subjects. For example, in an article from *Household Words* entitled “A Counterfeit Presentment,” a photographer threatens a literary celebrity who is reluctant to have his picture taken by arguing that he can merely substitute a picture of another person under his name: “[Y]ou are aware . . . that, when a demand reaches a certain height it must be supplied . . . I don’t want to do anything offensive but, knowing your objection to sit for a photograph, I have been compelled to look amongst my stock for something like you . . .”¹⁵ Hardly a “likeness,” the photograph offers “the lineaments of a church warden mixed with those of the professional burglar, but whether the church warden turned burglar or the burglar turned church warden, it was impossible to determine” (72). But while scholars such as John Tagg (*The Burden of Representation*) have approached the camera as an apparatus of the state, *Realism, Photography, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* seeks to get inside such political critiques by asking how, if photography in effect makes every-body the same, can it possibly carry out the social control with which it is credited?¹⁶ Thus, while a variety of critics have powerfully addressed how photography’s association with realism helped to define criminality, gender identity, and even national identity, the fact that the Victorians thought of photography as a medium with the potential to *efface* particularity and individuality severely complicates our understanding of realism’s political mobilization.¹⁷ I argue that if the technology of realism produces racial and sexual identity, it does so only by radically redefining it. Dickens’s “ghost of art,” then, resembles the Victorian photographic body not only in being dismembered and reproduced, but also in his spectral identity – his ghostly ability to become anyone or no one.

And it is in the Victorian novel, I argue, that we find these photographic models, these “novel bodies” – figures whose bodies are often merely a combination of interchangeable pieces or who are composite, abstract, and

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spectral types. In a way, this book asks a fairly simple question: What if we read these figures not as violations of a realist aesthetic but as *photographic* figures – as the spectral models of the photographic studio or Dickens’s “ghost of art”? What if we read photography and its interchangeable subjects as a “model” for how we read character and identity in the realist novel? At the most basic level critics have argued that nineteenth-century literary realism aspired to the condition of the photograph.¹⁸ By considering the new and strange bodies produced by photographic art as the site of an expanded language and aesthetic of photography, *Realism, Photography, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* redefines what “photographic realism” meant for the Victorians and changes our definition of and expectations for literary realism.¹⁹

Recent work on Victorian photography and literature, such as Jennifer Green-Lewis’s *Framing the Victorians* (1996), Nancy Armstrong’s *Fiction in the Age of Photography* (1999), and Kate Flint’s *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (2000), has reinvigorated critical interest in literary realism.²⁰ Armstrong for example describes a highly nuanced relation between realism and fiction yet still argues that fiction and photography participated in an epistemological project devoted to the presentation of a so-called real world. But whereas Armstrong focuses on the way in which photography defined what would be “real” for literary fiction, the chapters that follow, by contrast, show how photography set the standard for what was *not* real. Photographic fictions, I argue, defined and produced the impossible and the abstract.²¹

Reading key instances in Dickens, Eliot, and Wilde, I argue that it is precisely those aspects of Victorian literary realism that seem out of place – the grotesque and the typological – that are essential aspects of a Victorian *photographic* aesthetic.²² In analyzing how the domains of literature and photography participate in and produce a similar aesthetic, I am not suggesting a causal relationship of “influence” or adaptation. Rather, I am attempting to do two related things: First, I am presenting this relationship as a dialectical one, in which each domain transformed the other by figuring its processes in the language of the other discipline.²³ Second, in the course of this project, I present such a rhetorical interdisciplinarity as both an historical fact and a theoretical principle. I trace the ways in which the Victorians *already* read photography as a form of literary fiction and literary fiction as a form of photographic representation. In other words, rather than imposing an interdisciplinary frame on a set of discrete practices, this book will offer a faithful image of the Victorian practice of interdisciplinary thinking and reading.

As I pointed out above, nineteenth-century photographers and theorists figured the photographic body as a form of abstract linguistic material that made possible the writing of photographic narratives. In turn, Victorian novelists and critics appeal to the photograph both to critique and celebrate

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the "realist" novel. For example, while George Eliot famously compared Dickens's descriptive style to a photograph (a "sun picture"), she also faults him for a "transcendent unreality" when he moves from descriptions of the body and speech to emotion. At the same time, while Eliot is most often thought of as a pioneer of literary and psychological realism (the very realism she accuses Dickens's photographic style of being unable to represent), since its publication her novel *Daniel Deronda* has seemed to violate Eliot's own realist aesthetic because of *Deronda*'s insubstantiality. Echoing the reaction of many critics, Henry James commented that *Deronda* is "not embodied."²⁴ Yet, as I argue, read in the context of Victorian photographic history and discourse, both the Dickensian grotesque and Eliot's disembodied Jewish type are *photographic* and photographically "realistic." In other words, while these figures are often exiled from the confines of the realist novel, we find these impossible bodies of Victorian fiction in the photographic studio.²⁵

Moreover, the discussion of fragmentation and totality, parts and wholes that photography provoked in nineteenth-century writers and photographers is also important for how we think of the novel-form in the age of photography. Photography provided a particularly contentious field for an old debate about the relationship between an ethics of realism and an ethics of form; in other words, the dilemma photography made acutely visible was the disjunction between "realistic" representation and coherent artistic structure.²⁶ Read through the discourse and history of photography I trace in this book, photography both fragmented the world into disconnected pieces, and also made those pieces interchangeable and abstract – neither of which seem at first to recommend it as an artistic or literary medium. George Eliot and G. H. Lewes critique excessive "photographic" realism as (in Lewes's words) "detailism," or in Eliot's terms, an indiscriminate realism without "selection" or form.²⁷ Yet, if as Eliot argues, a true realism must have both "selection" and "invention," the capacity to arrange details "by an inventive combination," photography was best adapted to produce the kind of realism Eliot outlines – selecting, recombining, and creating new wholes.²⁸ And, it is precisely the abstract nature of photographic representation – its tendency to homogenize details and identities – that makes possible the fictional bodies and narratives of composition photography. It was photography's powers of abstraction that enabled it to produce both a more coherent form and a more "realistic" one. Ironically, then, what for Eliot seemed to be the danger of photography turns out to be the enabling condition of a certain kind of literary narrative.

In thinking through both the language the Victorians used to describe the effects of photographic reproduction and its relationship to literary form, I have found Marx's account of labor power and the "homogenization" or "abstraction" of labor in *Capital* (and elsewhere) useful. Like Dickens's "ghost of art" and the photographic model, Marx's laboring body and body-parts are interchangeable with all other laboring bodies,

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achieving a “phantom-like objectivity.”²⁹ Defining labor-power as “human labour in the abstract,” Marx argues that the laborer’s only task is to reproduce him/herself as an abstract quantity of “homogeneous” labor-power (*Capital*, 166). But Marx also figures the process of production in terms that resemble both Dickens’s image of pictorial composition and the processes of composition photography: “[A]ll these *membra disjecta* come together for the first time in the hand that binds them into one mechanical whole” (*Capital*, 462). Economic, pictorial, and photographic production, then, demand (and produce) a body that is infinitely divisible, reproducible, and abstract or “homogeneous.”

But, what one might call Marx’s aesthetics of commodity production and the aesthetics of composition photography can also be thought of as a homology for the novel-form and its effort to combine its parts into a coherent whole. The realist novel and photography, I argue, shared a common dilemma (a preponderance of details without form) while also sharing a common solution to this excess of detail in the mechanisms of abstraction.³⁰ In defining the novel in terms of an aesthetic of abstraction, I follow Lukács’s theorization of realism as a form in which each “descriptive detail is both *individual* and *typical*,” Terry Eagleton’s definition of realism as an “aesthetic ideology of ‘type’ and ‘totality,’” and Michael McKeon’s theorization of the novel-form as a “simple abstraction” of a variety of novelistic practices.³¹ In my focus on the way in which the novel produces its own totality as a form, I am most often engaged with Lukács’s Marxist–Hegelian narrative theory (*Theory of the Novel*, *Studies in European Realism*, and *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*) as well as his reading of the politics of totality in *History and Class Consciousness*.³² But I also rely on a host of other narrative theorists in order to describe the relationship between the reader and novelistic totality, specifically the reader’s role in producing the text *as* a text.³³

More specifically, I argue for a link between technological and literary abstraction in a number of ways and on a number of levels: First, the Victorian novel often offers figures who are collections of “abstract” and interchangeable parts, or whose identities and bodies are spectral, interchangeable, and abstract. Second, at a larger level, I argue that the novel stages its own totality as a form by making its parts the abstract components of a combined and coherent textual body. Third, I argue that novelistic totality depends on a reader’s “abstraction” or forgetting of both the techniques of literary composition and the process of reading itself. Extending Nicholas Dames’s analysis of the central place of forgetting in the nineteenth-century novel, I argue that it is our amnesia that enables us to transform the fragmented narrative we read into the *novel* we re-member.³⁴ What I am describing as an aesthetics of photographic fiction, then, refers both to the representation of bodies *in* fiction and the production of the textual body *of* fiction.

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While this book is indebted to the rich and diverse body of theoretical work done on photography and visibility from Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer to Roland Barthes, John Berger, Susan Sontag, Jonathan Crary, and W. J. T. Mitchell, its aim is not to apply, echo, or even refute other theories of the photograph. Instead of analyzing the ontology or the epistemology of the photograph *as such*, I base a theory of the photograph on specific discourses and practices of *Victorian* photography. Moreover, while my focus will often be on the language that surrounds particular photographs rather than the specific photographs themselves, I argue that photographic discourse is intimately linked to photographic practice and the historical conditions of photographic production and reception.

None of this is meant to suggest that the Victorians *never* figured photography in terms of accurate historical reality. As scholars such as Armstrong, Jennifer Green-Lewis, and Helen Groth have most recently made clear, a certain Victorian faith in the photographic image is registered in multiple contexts, from a concern with social control to a hankering for nostalgia.³⁵ Only recently have critics such as Jennifer Tucker begun to attend to the ways in which the “objective” status of the photograph was a result of a long and complex process of debate and negotiation.³⁶ This study takes Tucker’s project to historicize photographic objectivity in a different direction by tracing and positing a widespread discourse and aesthetic of photographic fiction. In doing so, *Realism, Photography, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* recovers a critical aspect of Victorian visual aesthetics that is essential for understanding the complex interrelation of fiction, photography, and realism.

THE OTHER VICTORIAN PHOTOGRAPHIC CULTURE

As an anonymous superimposition of Christ’s head on a leaf taken in the year of photography’s “invention” shows (fig. 3 [1839]), photographic fiction and photographic realism emerge at the same moment.³⁷ While the daguerreotype (an unreproducible, direct positive on silver-plated copper) did not allow for such artful transpositions, with the roughly simultaneous development of the calotype (a paper print from a paper negative) Henry Fox Talbot introduced the possibility of photographic fiction. Talbot’s invention of the negative/positive process introduced photography as we know it today – the mechanically reproducible image. With the introduction of glass negatives, made possible through the invention of collodion in 1851 (a compound to coat the glass with a film to hold the light-sensitive chemicals), photography fulfilled its industrial promise. Beginning what Anne McCauley calls the “industrial madness” of photography,³⁸ the glass negative allowed for cheaper formats, greater efficiency, and wider circulation. Studios came to resemble factories, using unskilled labor to cut and mount mass-produced prints, in order to keep up with demand.

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Figure 3. Anon: Christ's head on a leaf (1839)

The popularization of the *carte-de-visite* (a photograph pasted on a card the size of a visiting card) in 1851 by the French photographer André Disdéri, not only enabled a domestic trade in images among individuals of all classes, but also created a vast international market for celebrity photographs. In 1866 Disdéri claimed to have 65,000 portraits of celebrities. In London, the “*carte craze*” began in 1860, with J. E. Mayall’s “Royal Album,” containing photographs of the royal family. Enthralled by the marketability of these photographs, an article from *Once A Week* notes that “[h]er Majesty’s portraits, which Mr. Mayall alone has taken, sold by the 100,000.”³⁹ The rapid sale of Prince Albert’s *carte* after his death was even more impressive. As participation in a photographic economy became a patriotic duty, it also became the medium for a profession of national, civic, and familial belonging. Friends began to exchange their *cartes* as a general practice, but albums would often contain images from a variety of different genres and depicting a wide array of subjects: images of family members, domestic and foreign celebrities, ethnographic photographs, and copies of famous paintings and other works of art. Sometimes, as in the collage in figure 4, individuals crowded this motley collection into the same page. At the height of their popularity, 300 to 400,000,000 *cartes* a year