

Photorealism and the 'air' of truth

Understanding Gregory Thielker and Gerhard Richter's use of
photography as source material for painting, through Roland Barthes'
concept of 'air'

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Abstract:

In this paper, I will be studying Photorealism as a contemporary art movement by exploring the interactive relationship between photography and painting as two different forms of visual arts. I have carried out this investigation first by studying photorealism as a 20th-21st century art movement in which photography as a form of visual arts is integrated within the painting process to produce a Photorealistic painting. In the first section I will be looking at the contemporary Photorealist Gregory Thielker's *Under the Unminding sky* series in which photographs are used as models to create these paintings, followed by Gerhard Richter's Photorealism and Over-painted Photographs; who also uses photographs as a major tool for his artistic practice. I will be exploring how a photograph is utilized through out the painting process, and the way it reflects on the painter's emotional and intellectual aspects .

The investigation of both painters will be carried out by looking at these paintings through the French literary theorist and philosopher Ronald Barthes lens, in which he mainly demonstrates in *Camera Lucida*. My analysis is based on his perception of the nature and essence of photography theories, along with an analysis of portraiture from a philosophical perspective by Professor and Chair Cynthia Freeland in her essay *Portraits in Painting and Photography*. Both investigations carry out Barthes essential 'air' which will show how this concept of 'air' can be used to understand how both artists use photography as a source material.

I argue that a painter who uses photographs as an aiding tool to his/her creative painting practices finds the literal precise reality through their mechanical accurate depiction of the real, yet finds them lacking the essence or 'air'. This essence will become visible in the final piece by the collaboration of both the accurate mechanical reality mean of expressiveness (the photograph) with the physical translation of the emotional and intellectual experiences by the human hand.

Keywords:

Photorealism, Hyperrealism, Over-painted Photographs, Studium, "Air".

Introduction:

With all the new introductions to new materials and techniques and with the enormous evolvement of digital technology in creating art, more inspirational experiences along with an infinite number of inventive traditional and digital techniques allowed artists to intrigue their motives and intentions in unlimited possible directions. In this regard, I will be exploring how has been utilized by contemporary painters to become part of their artistic experience in the 20th and the 21st century, which lead to the establishment of a new art movement called photorealism. I want to focus on Gregory Thielker's abstract Hyperrealism and Gerard Richter's over-painted photographs and Photorealism. I aim to explore how the artist sees his reference photographs whether he shoots them or collects them, and the difference between photographs and Photorealistic paintings through Ronald Barthes lens in *Camera Lucida* (1980).

There has always been an intimate relationship between photography and painting, and this relationship has been growing increasingly until today with the invention of digital cameras and High Definition photographs. Photography has also played a significant role in the reinvention of representational and nonrepresentational contemporary painting, resulting in increasing the number of artists adopting photography techniques. Digitalization of photography allowed photographers and artists to manipulate their photos by using a variety of simple to complex techniques provided widely by accessible soft wares. This crucial evolution influenced artists working in different forms of media to create a new distinctive characteristics of contemporary art, and allowed a new understanding of the interactions between photography and painting.

Converting photographs into paintings: from digital to traditional

Into the interpretive realities of the painter when shooting a scene.

Photography, which is a form of visual art, has become an inspirational tool under artists' hands in their creative practices over the nineteenth and the twentieth century. Many painters and sculptors used photographs as a source material and as an aid in their creation of art. Furthermore, in the 20th century, photographs has been utilized to create realistic paintings; resulting in the establishment of a new art movement; Photorealism followed by Hyperrealism. Photorealism is an art movement that involves a precise depiction of a photograph through paint, print making or sculpture. Encyclopedia Britannica definition of Photorealism:

Photorealism also called Super-realism, American art movement that began in the 1960s, taking photography as its inspiration. Photo-realist painters created highly illusionistic images that referred not to nature but to the reproduced image. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013)

Hyperrealism is an art movement that is considered an advancement of Photorealism in which a high-resolution photograph is used as a reference for the artist. It has developed in the United States and Europe since the early 2000s. Photorealists use photographs either taken by themselves or collected from any other sources like newspapers, magazines or advertisements as a direct source material for paintings. What distinguishes Photorealism from other painting styles is its accuracy in depicting details of the subject so the final product maintains the look and feel of the source photograph.

Photographs depict an unchangeable frozen reality; they are a hard copy of a memorial moment in time. The human memory is unable to document all visual details exactly the way a photo does. They also carry out meanings that remind us of the past, a still reality that will reminds us of a specific moment in the future. However, as all photographs document a moment in time, not all of them are able to bring up the past and restore these memories. In Camera Lucida Barthes says that photographs confirm the existence of a moment in the past, yet not necessarily brings it up. 'The photograph does not bring up the past, the effect it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I see has indeed existed' (Barthes, 1980, p. 82). The Photorealistic painting differs from photography for it is a reproduction of reality accompanied with the artist's emotional and intellectual visual experience. The painter's creativity goes beyond this extremely precise reproduction of reality. I suggest that this creative experience differs from photography, as the artist awakens this existence of the past by representing this particular moment in his/her own way. The capability of a human hand to use a traditional painting medium to construct such an impressive rendition of the physical reality, also distinguishes photography from photorealistic painting.

Gregory Thielker is a Photorealist and a Hyperrealist whose paintings are composed from hundreds of photographs taken by him or collected from other sources. The first thing comes to the viewer's mind while contemplating a Photorealistic painting is the accuracy of the detailed work, and the skill level the artist exhibits in achieving a painting that is undistinguishable from a photograph. In his *Under the Unminding Sky* collection 2005-2010, he was able to create his own photographs intellectually before shooting them by his camera while living the real experience and exploring the sensation of seeing from a car while driving in the rain. Thielker explains:

I use water on the windshield to create a shifting lens for the way we see the environment: it both highlights and obscures our viewing. Perspectives slip and compress, while shapes and colors merge into one another. (Thielker, G. 2010)

As a painter, Thielker creates an initial intellectual painting using his organic camera; his eyes. By focusing on the water on the windshield and paying attention to relationships between surface and depth, Thielker utilizes his artistic maturity with the 21st century digitalization and captures the scenery that he creates in his mind using a digital camera. Afterwards, this digital visionary snapshot of a moment in time is transformed into an oil painting, taking into consideration the artistic qualities of the medium, which plays a significant role in the construction of the painting. Thielker emphasis on detail and the subjects depicted is accompanied by pictorial elements to create the illusion of the reality. He creates and does not imitate this natural scenery in the traditional way of painting; Thielker explains 'These images are born out of real experience and have a close relationship with the medium of painting: its fluidity, transparency, and capacity for layering, mixing, and blending' (Thielker, G. 2008-2010)

Thielker's paintings are created based on photographs which depict reality very precisely, however, this accurate rendering is chosen by the artist himself, his final piece is his creation and he can manipulate the effects in the way he sees is right. The final piece holds an emotional experience accompanied by an intellectual ability that clearly differs from the photograph itself. Liar Levy points out in his essay *The Question of Photographic Meaning in Ronald Barthes' Camera Lucida* that 'Barthes always treated photographs as reproductions of the real'. (Levy, L. 2009). In *The Photographic message* (1961) Barthes suggests: 'What does the photograph transmit? By definition, the scene itself, the literal reality' (Barthes, R. 1978, pp. 16-17). Although photographs are considered an accurate representation of reality in the way they imitate all visual details of the real world, Barthes finds that photographs that represent people sometimes fail to carry out the real essence of the person they depict, which he calls the 'air'. Regardless of their accuracy of representing reality, some photographs lack truthfulness of the subject they depict. In this regard, when Barthes looked up for this essence in photographs while he was looking for his mother's essence 'air' in a group of her photos after she passed away, he struggles to find one that really captured her true self. Finally, Barthes finds the right picture that contained the essence of his mother, the Winter Garden photograph, which he describes as 'a sentiment as certain as

remembrance' (Barthes, 1980, p70). Barthes sees his mother in this particular photograph although she was still a child, he also remarks on some of his mother's pictures: 'It was not she, and yet it was no one else. I would have recognized her among thousands of other women, yet I did not "find" her.' (Barthes, 1980, p. 66).



Fig. 1. *Complete Stop* (2008) oil on canvas



Fig. 2. *Vortex* (2008) oil on canvas

Fig. 1. *Complete Stop* (2008) and Fig. 2. *Vortex* (www.gregorythielker.com, 2008) are two Hyperrealistic paintings from the series entitled *Under the Unminding Sky* (Thielker, G. 2008-2010). These abstract paintings reflect the beauty of the complex formation of irregular water drops on a car windshield under a rainy sky. Fig. 1 *Complete Stop* shows cars blocked out in traffic during a rainstorm. The gloomy grey sky contrasting the brightness of the distorted car lights accomplished with a variety of tones to create rough textures in the foreground, along with the vibrancy of the irregularity of the rain droplets on the windshield is amazingly portrayed by the artist. He focuses on the fluidity of the water and the medium of painting, he is able to create a sophisticated yet transparent visual experience. The final result differs from its source by its medium, support and most importantly its essence 'air'. In an introduction to an interview with Thielker, one online blogger said, 'Greg's ability to mimic life with a masterful command of refraction and light makes it look like you're his passenger on a rainy day running errands about town. (Curt, 2009). Another review by the founder of *My Modern Met blog* who was explaining the reason why she loves Thielker's paintings wrote: 'He can transport us into another time and place. When we look at his paintings, Thielker wants us to experience those moments when we're driving in our car on a cold and rainy day'(Alice, 2008). Fig. 2 *Vortex* is Thielker's favorite painting; it took him five months to complete this abstract painting and too much effort to achieve the glazes of the surface layering. He said: 'It's been my most ambitious painting- close to 4 x 6 feet- and it's the most abstract image that I have done in this driving series. I took many photos and combined several to create the image' (Thielker to Curt, 2009)

Barthes also distinguishes photography from painting, he sees that photography is a mechanical process depicting detailed reality, unlike painting, which is a human process that depicts what the artist chooses to depict. Levy points out Barthes explanations in his essay *The Rhetoric of the Image* about the inability of a photograph to interfere within the depicted object, suggesting that its function stops right after it captures the scene: 'while the painter does not necessarily reproduce everything he sees in his painting, the photographer copies the real without discrimination'(Liar Levy, 2009). Barthes also claims: 'the photograph, although it can choose its subject, its point of view and its angle, cannot intervene within the object' (Barthes, R. 1978 p.43).

Cynthia Freeland studied portraiture both in photography and painting in her article *Portraits in painting and photography* (2007). She explored the power of an artist to reveal the psychological characterization of the essence in portraiture; seeing that this power is revealed in the artist's capability to control the painting process skillfully by paying attention to the subject. By studying works by Rembrandt, she looks into the emotional revelation of the essential 'air' as Roland Barthes defines it, pointing out that Rembrandt's portrait of fur trader Nicolaes Ruts contained this essence or unique 'air'. Freeland comes up to conclude that despite photography's transparency and its ability to capture reality, some photographs of people are unsuccessful at portraying their inner states. The photorealist sees beyond reality in the photo, which is revealed later in his paintings, an essence that a camera as a machine can seldom produce. This is what we see in Thielker's abstract paintings, an ability that allows his audience to interact with his paintings as if they are going through his experience when he was sitting behind the windshield.

Over-painted Photography: Gerhard Richter

Gerhard Richter is a German visual artist who also adopted Photorealistic techniques in his artwork by using amateur photographs along with photos from journals and advertisements. When working from a photograph, Richter projects the photo onto canvas, then he traces the image and paints it, he might then blur the paint with a soft brush or squeegee depending on its subject. Although these representational depictions are based on photographic images, he describes this creative process in his famous statement 'I'm not trying to imitate a photograph; I'm trying to make one?' (Elger, D. 2009, p. 52). Richter's creative approaches in the interaction between painting and photography lead him to great success and fame. He used several interactive techniques and multi-step processes of representation in his layered works. In 1986, Richter developed an interesting technique, which is painting over photographs, and in which the resulting image is neither a photograph nor a painting. For Richter, a photograph is a medium for painting. In a case study done by Hilde van Gelder and Helen Westgeest, they came up with multi-mediating pictures terminology for this kind of artworks. (Gelder, H. & Westgeest, H. 2010) The first attempt recorded for his over painted photograph is *Untitled (23.3.86)* (www.gerhard-richter.com, 1986) which shows an abstract painting in which the photograph beneath is completely hidden under the over painted layers.



Fig. 3. *Ohne Titel (23.3.86)*, Oil on colour photograph (www.gerhard-richter.com, 1986)

Later in his further attempts, Richter worked on some parts of the photograph leaving other areas untouched. He sees that reality cannot be represented, neither in photographs nor in painting, he sees the essence of a painting is hidden in its physical nature, and not in the rendition of real life. This is why Richter showed more interest in abstract painting. He chose whatever subjects he liked, forgetting all painting rules and theories:

Stags, aircraft, kings, secretaries. Not having to invent anything anymore, forgetting everything you meant by painting – color, composition, space – and all the things you previously knew and thought. Suddenly, none of this was a prior necessity for art. (Storr, 2002, p.42.)

Barthes points out that photography gives us an uncoded direct literal message, in which the meaning of it either refers directly to the specific subject or is symbolic meaning that the message implies or suggests another meaning. On the contrary, Richter finds that photographs lack style, composition and judgment (Richter to Schön, 1972). Furthermore, Barthes distinguishes photography from all other forms of representational art, like cinema, drawing and painting. He sees that these representational forms of art translate the referent of the subject into a coded secondary language. In this regards, Richter believes in the painting medium as a real mean of creating art, 'painting always has reality: you can touch the paint; it has presence' (Richter to Storsve, 1991). Richter as a photorealist forgets all about the photograph when he works from one as a reference, 'When I paint from a photograph, conscious thinking is eliminated'. (Richter, G. 1995, p.30) his final production is a new creation; in which he finds reality and truth within its physical subject. Richter does not try to imitate a photo, as he explains further in an interview: 'Later you realize that you can't represent reality at all – that what you make represents nothing but itself, and therefore is itself reality' (Richter to Schön, 1972)

One of Richter's interesting Photorealistic works is *Woman with Umbrella* (1964) which shows an image of Jaclyn Kennedy crying after the assassination of her husband. In this photorealist painting, Richter use oil paint on canvas to replicate the reportage photograph captured by paparazzi. Then the artist use his popular blurring technique to gives the painting a technological smooth effect rather than an artistic one. The result is a dramatic blurry Photorealistic painting, represented with a title that is neutral, or at least does not reflect the seriousness of the real situation; *Woman with Umbrella*. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes points out to the obvious meaning of a photograph as studium, which is the element in the photograph that arouses interest in the perceiver, this element is emphasized through the cultural knowledge and background of the viewer. Barthes describes Studium: 'It has the extension of a field, which I perceive quite familiarly as a consequenc of my knowledge, my culture' (Barthes, 1980, pp. 25-26)

We can see that Richter manipulation to the *Woman with Umbrella* (1964) in terms of the title and blurring effects influences its studium. Obviously, the reference reportage photo carry out a clear cultural context, which is employed to provoke a culturally conditioned response in the perceiver. However, Richter deemphasizes this association in his final piece by giving it a general title. I see that the painting's title demonstrates Richter's keenness of concealing the source of the photograph, at the same time isolating its content from its culture. Richter's focus is on the painting technique and outcome rather than the accurate rendering of the photograph.



Fig. 4. *Woman with Umbrella*, (1964), Oil on canvas (www.gerhard-richter.com, 1964)

He distinguishes the process followed when painting from life and from a photograph, pointing out that through life painting he manipulates the scenery based on his personal perception of seeing things and his own experience, while when he paints from a photograph, he abandons all painting rules and starts to paint freely. Richter also adopted another painting style using photographs which is Over-painting Photography technique. In this techniques he uses the squeegee based on the stickiness of the oil paint, in which the medium is applied as a film of paint on the photograph creating several multi-shaped openings onto underlying layers. In so doing, the artist indicated that he is 'practicing photography by other means, I'm not producing paintings that remind you of a photograph but producing photographs' (Dietmar Elger, 2009, p. 52). This means that Richter has the artistic photographic eye, which has been utilized to attain a well-composed successful piece of art. Interestingly the artist use of the squeegee demonstrate an ability of skillful control on this "magic wand" yet leave some accidental outcomes and effects to take place within this creative work.

In Fig(5) *Ohne Titel* (www.gerhard-richter.com, 2005) the squeegee effect achieved a snake-like skin illusion effect in terms of color and texture, a level of depth is accomplished through the high contrast level between the dullness and low focus of the background part of the picture with the vibrant and high focus level of the paint layer in the foreground.



Fig.5. *Ohne Titel* (9. Febr. '05), Oil on color photograph (www.gerhard-richter.com, 2005)

Richter combined his painting technical ability with his deep knowledge and understanding of the two media to produce his over-painted photographs, which means that he was able utilizing his painting skills with his photographic skills and liberate himself from the common rules of painting.

Conclusion:

With the aid of photography and digital cameras, Thielker and Richter found their ways in adopting and developing new paintings techniques in their creative practices. Thielker obtained his desire to create paintings born out of his own personal experience with the aid of photography, which in Barthes theories are reproductions of reality and seldom carry out the essential 'air'. By taking the painting medium qualities into consideration while constructing his reference photographs and his actual Photorealistic paintings, he successfully achieved a special essence within his artworks. Richter's boldness and spontaneity in creating his Photorealism, weather a Photorealistic painting or an over-painted photograph has taken the Photorealism into a new level. He courageously abandoned all rules and theories of painting from a photograph to find reality and truthfulness in the painting medium. The capability of an artist to evoke emotions, arouse intellectual curiosity or inspirations in the viewer is fundamental in art. Thielker and Richter succeeded to utilize photography in their traditional painting experiences, regardless of their painting styles. Both felt the necessity of maintaining the traditional form of painting in order to preserve their essence 'air'. 'The emotional and intellectual aspects of the ways we experience art are essentially a matter of how effectively an artwork can elicit a response from us. (Wands, B. 2006).

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