The Platonic Photographer

The Role of Political Portraiture and the Task of the Photographer as Author

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Introduction: The Portraitist’s Dilemma

I really wanted to show everyone a sense of intimacy with these people. We all see pictures of them on podiums making illustrious speeches, or defiant speeches, but we very rarely get close, we very rarely get to look into their eyes and say “who is this person?” I am not really talking about politics. I am talking about strength of character here.

Platon Antoniou, interviewed by Blake Eskin (Antoniou 2009)

In September 2009, a staff photographer for the New Yorker, Platon Antoniou, set up a small makeshift portrait studio just outside the United Nations building’s green room, in order to photograph as many as possible of the heads of state who were due to address the General Assembly. Some cooperated, perhaps remembering him from previous portrait sittings, as did British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, whilst others flatly refused, even with hostility. This was the case with French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who took one look at the photographer’s makeshift setup and reportedly exclaimed “Je déteste le photo!” (“I hate photography”) before storming off with his retinue (Antoniou 2009). However, 110 heads of state did indeed cooperate in some form or another, leading to a portfolio of photographic portraits which is unmatched in both its attempted global significance and its characteristic snapshot of the political landscape. The portraits were printed in the New Yorker; 50 of them are included in an interactive portfolio on the magazine’s Web site. Only the portrait of U.S. President Barack Obama is not from this session, the President having declined the opportunity to sit again. Reflecting the fashion for commentary in creative production (such as director’s commentaries on DVDs), Antoniou’s commentaries for the images relate to the moment the photograph was taken, and
rarely step beyond this to discuss creative process, as in his interview with Blake Eskin above.

Antoniou’s motivation and outward honesty notwithstanding, it is difficult not to see the portfolio as a terrific example of the serial presentation of the political persona, a genre of photography which reaches back as far as the daguerreotype process in the 1840s and 1850s, having some of its best exemplars in early portraits of U.S. President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of State Daniel Webster. It is Webster’s in particular, by Southworth and Hawes, which is often held up to be the best example of what Richard Brilliant has described as the political portrait’s “extraordinary concurrence of self-representation, artistic interpretation, and viewer expectation” (Brilliant 1997:56). Like Webster’s daguerreotype, Antoniou’s images appear full of character, as we would expect them to be, and this is not achieved through a mere transcription, but through the technical intervention of the photographer and addressed to the viewer, to us. The portraitist’s role, it seems, is to engage with the viewer in an illustration of character, if not an actual investigation or attempt to “look into their eyes” and “get close.”

Yet despite this, what is startling about the portfolio is the manner in which Antoniou evacuates or empties out character, empties out biography even, either willingly or perhaps unwittingly. For example, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi becomes, in Antoniou’s commentary, simply an actor enjoying a part he knows how to play very well. His is a performance for the camera made seemingly in spite of, rather than in concert with, the creative will of the portraitist, and Antoniou’s exclamation “Berlusconi was incredible!” may refer as much to Antoniou’s joy as an audience for the Italian’s performance as to his role as a conveyor of it to others. At best there is no sense of Antoniou’s getting to the real person (except to offer suspicions that the performance is in fact the real Berlusconi). At worst it resembles what Brilliant suggests is the portrait as a “battlefield, documenting the struggle for dominance between the artist’s conception and the sitter’s will,” with Antoniou’s minimal commentary acting as a petition for surrender (Brilliant 1997:31).

Why should Antoniou find himself in this position? It is perhaps best understood if we state it as a dilemma which exists in all portraits (not just photographic portraits, but these express it with specific acuity), and which relates to the role of
the image as a “likeness.” Firstly, a portrait must be an accurate enough likeness in order to be readable, legible, as a text. As Alan Trachtenberg suggests, this was the principal expectation from the earliest days of photographic portraits, since physiognomy is something we all practice every day, and was particularly popular then: the face was already always a sign (Trachtenberg 2000:5).

Secondly, however, this legibility requires knowledge—of the person represented, but more generally an ability to make judgements about the sitter, their dress, etc., as well as at least some knowledge of the photographic process. Whilst the portraitist may have specific knowledge of the sitter, such as their occupation or temperament, the portraitist cannot guarantee that this is what will be conveyed, and even then that this knowledge is any greater than that of viewers, who will come to their own conclusions. The portraitist can only invite the viewer to “fill out and complete the projective work” (Halliwell 2002:120). Furthermore, few people still ascribe to any theory of physiognomy by which facial features represent the inner self of the subject, and fewer would suggest that any portrait captures the sitter in totality. Portraits ultimately only ever reveal the materiality of their creation, and photographic portraits in particular can ever reveal to any degree of certainty only the physical conditions of exposure (and even this is the subject of much debate). Ultimately, however, the portraitist’s dilemma is finally compounded by the sign function of the portrait itself, and the certainty that it will be read, it wants to be read, and it promises intelligibility even if this promise is not delivered on. For Brilliant, it is this sign function normally held by the face which is substituted by the photograph because of the latter’s uncanny accuracy (Brilliant 1997:40).

Thus we are presented with a peculiarly Platonic problem in this example of political portraiture created by Platon Antoniou. And it is the thoughts of his namesake on which we will depend in order to explore the dilemma that the political photographic portrait presents within the history of the medium. Even then, the dilemma may be difficult to resolve. Monroe Beardsley has observed that it is dangerous to assume that Plato had or developed a systematic approach to art; that this is made further problematic by the philosopher’s own shifting use of key terms; that there are many differing interpretations to be offered that explore concepts emerging from opposing translations; and that Plato himself may never
have sought to resolve or reconcile different views he held at different times (Beardsley 1975:31–32). This characterizes much of the intellectual tradition of Platonism and its interlocutors, and should be recognized before we apply Plato’s concepts to the photograph as an artwork, technical image, or simply as a likeness. Although we approach the subject from the position of critical art history as opposed to classical scholarship, we can nevertheless draw out some Platonic observations on the portraitist’s dilemma, and in particular the mimetic role of the photograph as political portrait. The prompt here is the relationship the portrait of a politician has to knowledge—ours and that of the portraitist. Our exploration is driven by a curiosity about the hope or expectation we have that the portrait will be a genuine likeness (eikōn), and will present by virtue of its accuracy an opportunity to know the individual, and not the image (phantasma) which it undoubtedly is (Beardsley 1975:36).

**Photography and the Psychological Portrait**

The first question we might ask is this: Is it unexpected for Antoniou to reject psychological depth (by practice if not by intention) in his portraits of famous political persons?

In fact, his reluctance mirrors the distance and estrangement of the portraitists charted by Max Kozloff in his survey of twentieth-century photography portraiture (Kozloff 2007). Ranging his study from small-town studio portraitists such as Richard Samuel Roberts, through social investigations by August Sander, to artists such as Diane Arbus, Kozloff concludes that all portraitists share the position of “estranger” to their environment, no matter how close it is to them. Roberts, Sander, et al. were all “simultaneously involved with and yet dissociated from the world they depicted. Their affiliations with it were interestingly compromised” (Kozloff 2007:178). Whether it is recording the banality of small-town life and its inconsequences (Roberts, or Mike Disfarmer) or the infiltration of a social class or subculture (Arbus), the portraitist always feels like a double agent.

In contemporary art photography, the role of the portrait in exploring psychological depth or the interiority of the sitter has been rejected by some of the medium’s key practitioners, perhaps most famously by the artist Thomas Ruff. Trained as a photographer under the great partnership of architectural
photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher (who also taught Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth), Ruff's approach appears to be greatly influenced by their photographs of industrial architecture, which is reduced through serial photographs to emanations of form in their repetition of water towers, mining headframes, or gas tanks. Together, the Becher photographs reach something close to an illustration of Platonic Ideal forms, in that the differences between examples, often very few and subtle, seem to present them as imperfect copies of a constant Ideal. The gas tanks are *eidôla*—images of the Ideal form (Beardsley 1975:35). It is this relationship, between the photographic image and the subject-as-*eidôlon*, which Ruff explores in his own architectural photographs, in that they similarly reduce buildings and courtyards to walls that screen the true purposeful identity of the housing or business location.

Ruff took the same approach to portraiture, perhaps his most famous artworks, in which he exploits technical competence and high production values to produce images which simultaneously negate the individuality of the sitter. Each portrait untitled, the works clearly manifest Ruff's stated denial of psychological depth in portraits (Behrman 2003:33). Added to this is a confrontational approach to the process of photography, such as through very large-scale printing, so that every facial blemish is visible, or else masked through the use of soft focus. Together with a stripped-away background, replaced with pure white or monotone, Ruff's portraits seem to be responding to Trachtenberg's observation that “sophisticated looking at photographs now wants the inscription within the image of signs of its making, marks of its being a photograph after all and not a timeless truth” (Trachtenberg 2000:2).

Ruff’s approach, however, is hardly unique, and perhaps reflects the same kind of anger detectable in one of Walker Evans’s most striking images from his travels across the United States in the mid-1930s. Known for his delicately balanced and lyrical style, Evans became one of the leading figures in American photography in the 1930s, during the period of the New Deal, travelling across the southern states either on assignment for *Fortune* magazine or for the newly formed Farm Security Administration (FSA). Along with colleagues such as Arthur Rothstein, Ben Shahn, and Dorothea Lange, he was given detailed instructions on the kinds and types of photographs he was meant to take, in order to provide material for the
government’s New Deal propaganda (Dyer 2005:15). Whilst on assignment, he photographed the window display of a local portrait photographer, and the result—cropped to exclude all but the central display of 225 sample portraits, overlaid with the word “Studio” from the shop window—became *Penny Picture Display, Savannah, Georgia* (1936). According to the Museum of Modern Art, the work represents Evans’s affinity with the “plainspoken vernacular of ordinary photographers” (Museum of Modern Art 2004:157.). However, Richard Brilliant detects a pernicious animosity toward – perhaps even a second distancing from—the small-town photographer, which ultimately leads to the work’s becoming a predicate by the photographer alone:

> The word ‘Studio’ spread across the front expresses Evans’ disregard for the integrity of the pictures as portraits, but not as objects of representation... When Evans photographed them he changed their character as one-time portraits, robbing them of their identity and their names.

Brilliant 1997:54

The removal of the portrait’s name means that it ceases to function as a portrait at all and instead becomes, in a different analysis, mimetic of the portrait as an Ideal. In a similar manner, it is the rending of names from the portraits in Ruff’s work which allows them into the gallery as a work of art (Grennan 2003:24). They are freed from the attachment to a particular identity, and freed for their purpose as artistic statements.

For Trachtenberg, the dissociation of the artist as photographer from the portrait as a carrier of meaning was also precipitated by the theoretical explorations of the gallery and the academy in the 1970s and 1980s; an effect of postmodern debates and postmodern practices. For example, in practice it is undoubtedly the photography of Cindy Sherman which has done the most to reconfigure our approach to the portrait as a carrier of inner meaning. Sherman’s work, like that of Barbara Kruger, Jo Spence, and Annie Sprinkle after her, serves to recapitulate and dismantle the codes of advertising, commercial portraiture, and pornography and relay them back to us, in a manner no less effective than the critical writings of John Berger, Laura Mulvey, and Judith Williamson (Berger 1972;
Mulvey 1975; Williamson 1985). That the public gaze is sexualised as male in the public sphere is difficult to dispute, but this work, like Sherman’s photographic self-portraits, reveals the craft of photography which must be mastered, and this is a craft of appearances.

Whilst Sherman has, on occasion, also refused to engage in any psychological or critical subtext to her staged self-portraits, in which she plays the role of a female archetype (a film actress in a scene, a photographic model, a victim of sexual abuse), she has nonetheless invested them with a studied performance. In a series from 2000–2003 which explicitly addresses the small-town studio portrait, Sherman portrays an array of suburban housewives and mistresses, shot against a monotone background, playing off the surface masquerade constructed from hair dye, fake tan, and cosmetic surgery, so that the archetype is an aging woman whom the artist describes as “still hot in her mind” (Ewing and Hirschdirdfer 2008:112–113).

Monotone is an almost constant signifier within the studio portrait, whether pure white or (more rarely) black, shaded to a particular colour, or appropriately neutral and even scientific. Most often as a screen or coving stretched behind the sitter, sometimes backlit to bleach out in exposure, it has the twin effect of concentrating signification onto the face, yet at the same time often signifying by itself how the personality of the subject can barely be contained. This is the conclusion Brilliant draws from his analysis of Albrecht Dürer’s portrait of Philip Melancthon (1526), in which the artist places the theologian’s head against the sky, suggesting great intelligence (Brilliant 1975:75). However, in another analysis, it also suggests the mind’s proximity to God, and given Melancthon’s theology the emergence of an independent mind. This disposition of blank space within the portrait is certainly echoed in the work of Nadar and Julia Margaret Cameron in the nineteenth century, and by photographers such as Irving Penn and Richard Avedon in the twentieth. Nadar’s most famous portraits, of Sarah Bernhardt and Charles Baudelaire, strip the environment bare in order to focus attention on the creative mind revealed in the face. Bernhardt’s portrait (1865) is the furthest the actress could be from the staged character portraits of her which sold in their thousands, photographed as she is by Nadar emerging almost without adornment from a luxurious velvet robe that lifts off the background.
Max Kozloff recounts in his survey how Penn surfaced in the Peruvian town of Cuzco in order to shoot one of his most famous assignments for *Vogue*. Depicting local inhabitants against a portable grey backdrop, the images recall ethnographic studies of the nineteenth century. Penn apparently seemed “unconcerned” with the attachment of his works to this cultural history of visual colonialism and, demonstrating a startling lack of intellectual curiosity about his subjects, presented them merely as exotica (Kozloff 2007:192). Yet it is Avedon’s use of the sheer, brilliant white background in his portraiture which seldom fails to stop critics in their tracks, primarily because of Avedon’s oft-quoted disavowal (like Ruff after him) of any capacity of photography to reveal any interiority, any psychological depth: “Surface is all you’ve got” (Sobieszek 1999:136).

Avedon’s words are so disarming perhaps because his portraits of the famous, developed as an extension of his work as a fashion photographer, often appear to capture the character of the sitter so well, earning him praise for studies of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor (apparently achieved through subterfuge) and Ezra Pound (a stolen moment appears to capture the poet in ecstasy) (Kozloff 2007:194). Avedon, like Penn before him, often transported his studio setup around his subjects’ homes and places of work, perhaps most famously for his project *In the American West* (1985), extracting the individual from their surroundings and thus verging on a serious investigation of humanity. However, Avedon’s own recognition of his role as “*mimétikos*,” as someone who imitates, empties out any connection with the Ideal that these subjects share, since he reminds us that the photograph is always a mistaken identity (Belfiore 1984:125). We never get to the real person since the “surface is all you’ve got.”

**White-Out: Reading into the Political Portrait**

Given the tendency of high-profile photographers to back away from interiority or psychological depth in their portraits, we can ask a new question of Antoniou’s work, and of the political portrait more generally: Does the role of the photographer *matter* in the political portrait, where psychological depth might be all-important?

Antoniou’s choice of a white background for many of his images carries more significance than simply as a nod to Avedon, Penn, or the codes of fashion photography. It connects his images with both Renaissance portraiture and the new
technologies of the state. For example Norbert Schneider, in his survey of Renaissance portraiture, locates the emergence of the psychological portrait in the work of Lorenzo Lotto, and in particular his *Man Before a White Curtain* (1508). This would be remarkable enough, given Lotto’s subordinate career in the shadow of Giorgione or Titian, were it not for the stark composition and the disposition of the portrait’s elements: the bust of the man is portrayed in three-quarters profile, with extraordinary photorealist accuracy, against a white damask curtain drawn almost fully behind him. The composition easily prefigures the style of Antoniou, Avedon, and perhaps Ruff most of all, but its similarity to (of all things) the modern passport photograph perhaps teaches us the most about how important the background is in the portrait.

Modern passport photographs have undergone a change few may have noticed in recent years (certainly in the UK). Ten or twenty years ago, passport photographs could be produced at high-street portraitists and in coin-operated photobooths, with some degree of choice of background and aspect. Since then we have seen the requirement to remove not only our smile but spectacles and other adornments, since they are assumed to cover or hide our “real” face, the face that provides legal, biological, or social information for use by the state. Similarly, if one casts one’s mind back, we might remember the blue or orange curtain which could be drawn across the background of the photograph. Like the damask curtain in Lotto’s painting, this curtain’s texture, and its proximity to the sitter, often made it appear to merge with the sitter on the surface of the image, denying three-dimensional space (and perhaps therefore denying interiority). In the intervening years, the curtain too has been removed in favour of the pure white background now required for most state photographs. This is likely to have happened so that they can be read by machines, reminding us of the image’s relationship to measurement in Socrates’ *Ideal City*, in which measurement counteracts the potential for images to deceive:

> Measuring, counting, and weighing have happily been discovered to help us out of these difficulties, and to ensure that we should not be guided by apparent differences of size, quantity and heaviness, but by calculations of number, measurement, and weight.

*Republic* 10.602d, trans. Lee
But this change is no less significant because the curtain in the passport photograph, like that in Lotto’s sixteenth-century portrait, is behind the sitter. The white background now appears to guarantee access to the real in photography, in a reverse transfer of significance from state photograph to the aesthetic portrait. At the same time, the curtain is suggested as veiling, or hiding, some aspect of intelligible character, personality, or quality which would otherwise be discernible. The significance of the curtain for Schneider is exactly so: it is pulled back enough to reveal a symbolic candle, suggesting for him a clear message about the character of Lotto’s sitter (“And the light shineth in darkness,” John 1, 5). But also it stands as an example of the emergence of the psychological portrait because of the ambiguity it creates:

Reference to the ‘psychological’ portrait here should not be understood in the modern sense of the epithet. The visual medium chosen by Lotto to portray mental states was less one of analytical disclosure than its opposite: enigma.

Schneider 1994:67

The curtain comes to represent enigma in the passport photograph, so its removal (in favour of white space in Antoniou) suggests exactly the reverse direction from what we see in Lotto. It will guarantee analytical disclosure, as if to say “there is no deceit here, no attempt to conceal, everything to be read is legible on its face, since the background has disappeared.” And in this case, it appears to have done so literally. Unlike the use of backgrounds in Nadar and Penn, the illuminated white background of Avedon and Antonio ceases to exist and becomes empty space. However, whereas for Avedon the white space signalled only surface (the background is still a screen, still merges with the sitter), for Antoniou it is a void which is instrumental in reaching the person behind the politician; an analytical disclosure reliant upon just this ambiguity of surface and transparency. The halo or vignetting of this white space—a process performed after the shoot—serves only to accentuate this: the space is empty of signification and can be freely manipulated.

The Portraits of Power series is representative of Antoniou’s distinctive studio style, albeit transported in practice from the studio to the United Nations building. Antoniou was born in London in 1968, and spent much of his early childhood in...
Athens before returning to the UK, eventually enrolling in art school at Central St Martins to read Fine Art and later Graphic Design. After some time spent trying to get work at UK Vogue, he was eventually accepted into the prestigious Fine Art Photography Masters programme at the Royal College of Art, from where he graduated in 1992. Eschewing the theoretical approach to photography which was emerging in London at that time (photography scholarship was heavily influenced by what had become known as the “New Photography” [Webster 1980]), Antoniou nevertheless found work at Vogue, The Face, Arena, and eventually George, Esquire, and the New Yorker in the United States, where he moved in 1998. Antoniou’s work is praised by Esquire’s director of photography Nancy Iacoi as “making his subjects look iconic” while at the same time bringing a “unique intimacy between the subject and viewer” (Kostaki 2003:61). Indeed it was for Esquire in 2000 that Antoniou produced one of his defining images: a colour photograph of outgoing U.S. President Bill Clinton, hands resting on his knees, looking down at the camera whilst the end of his sky-blue tie rests libidinously on his crotch.

Antoniou’s distrust of theoretical or critical approaches to photography in favour of praxis is exemplified in the written commentaries he provides in Platon’s Republic, his first monograph of collected commissions (Antoniou 2004). These betray lack or emptying out of knowledge in order to make the human encounter appear more important, by bringing each photograph and its circumstances to the same level. The difficulty with this approach, however, is that the commentary rarely explores the subject on any biographical level, probably because it is difficult or impossible for the photographer to have sufficient knowledge to allow the viewer to “read into” the portrait. “Reading into” a portrait is Richard Brilliant’s account of how the ambiguities of likeness are a fertile ground for projecting identification, particularly where there is an historical ambiguity or misrecognition (as in a disputed likeness in painting or sculpture). “Reading into” is fundamental to the process of “reading out” from a portrait all the desired qualities which the viewer admires in the real person (Brilliant 1997:80). What this entails is for viewers to invest in the portrait as a likeness, even in the midst of historical or technical ambiguity, in order for it to stand metonymically for the sitter’s values or qualities. Put another way, in the context of Antoniou’s work the ambiguity of the white background is essential for his portraits to produce a sense of connection or
mimesis of the “truth” of the person depicted. However, without Antoniou’s knowledge (in the form of biographical information, for example), this promise remains unfulfilled, because the photographer either does not know or shies away from providing it.

This leads to some peculiar situations in *Plato’s Republic*, which prefigure the awkwardness of the *Portraits of Power* commentaries. The portrait of Senator Edward Kennedy, for example, is accompanied by a commentary largely about his makeup artist, who had worked for “nearly every president since JFK,” whereas any serious discussion of the larger-than-life representative of one of the United States’ most famous political dynasties is reduced to a description of the “sad vulnerable quality in his face” (Antoniou 2004:n.p.). A more startling omission is evident in the comparison between two of the public faces of U.S. conservatism. The photographs of neo-Nazi skinheads in North Carolina is accompanied by an evocative description of the fearful photographer’s edgy encounter with them, framed by an ethical riposte from Antoniou that it is important to record and document these groups as much as any other. By comparison, Antoniou’s portrait of Republican Senator Jesse Helms (also from North Carolina) is accompanied by the briefest of accounts:

The congressman was very frail. This was his last active day before retiring. He was one of the longest serving senators in US history.


Helms was a notable hard-line conservative, who was at one point instrumental in what came to be known as the “culture wars,” campaigning against the provision of funding for healthcare research into AIDS, or funding from the National Endowment for the Arts to artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe (Meyer 2003). There may have been other reasons why the commentary is so short, but this does not diminish the starkness of the comparison. The reason for this disparity may be one of many: Antoniou, perhaps knowing of Helms’s substantial public image, may not have felt it necessary to add anything further than the simplest of comments; or the session itself may have been unremarkable or the sitter unapproachable; or (perhaps as a consequence of both of these reasons) Antoniou may have found the prospect of providing any depth to his comments objectionable. For instance, the resulting impression of the neo-Nazis is perhaps adequately critical, perhaps even necessarily
sensational. But it is hard to imagine a less engaging ethical or biographical note than that on the Senator, who arguably had greater agency, reach, and impact in conservative politics than many in his lifetime.

Perhaps the reason for this difference lies in the fact that Helms is named, whereas his fellow Carolinians are not. To shoot a political portrait is to do so in the knowledge that the portrait will signify specific things for any viewer who has knowledge of the subject, and political portraits invite an emphasis on biography more than do those of celebrities. This is perhaps because, as some cognitive research has suggested, there is a high degree of consequentiality in the lives of politicians, and in our relationships to them. This is one of the factors in the emergence of theories such as “flashbulb memory,” which has been used to account for the fact that so many people who were alive at the time have detailed answers to the question: “where were you when you heard Kennedy was assassinated?” (Brown and Kulik 1977:77; Sutton 2009:47–48). The lives of politicians are significant because they mean something to us, not merely in an aspirational or sensational way, but in a biological way. Politicians may make decisions which affect our ability to earn money, protect and support our family, speak our mind, or be socially and practically mobile. They may also make decisions which prove wrong, change their minds, or demonstrate failings or frailty, all of which may necessarily have consequences for us. For this reason alone, the political portrait invites a biographical reading more than any other, since in the lines on a politician’s face there simply seems to be more for us to read.

Knowing that his portraits will undoubtedly be made intelligible by interested viewers, based on the principle of consequentiality, may account to some extent for Antoniou’s stepping back from biographical detail or investigation in the Portraits of Power commentaries. He may know very well about the life and impact of Evo Morales (Bolivia), Gordon Brown, Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), or Muammar al-Qaddafi (Libya), but feels he need do no more than relay his encounter to the knowledgeable viewer. So the encounter with Qaddafi yields a story of the intimidating circumstances of his arrival—close enough to the arrival of the U.S. President to raise security concerns—and provide for an otherwise disarming interview between awestruck photographer and awesome subject. Alternatively, his encounter with Morales leaves Antoniou speechless, to the extent that his tale is
about the photograph, as he problematically renders Morales as the spectacular, exotic Other “coming out of darkness”; whilst Mugabe’s skin is described as shiny or waxy, or made of glass, to the extent that its “blue, icy” quality becomes metonymic of nefarious and unseen acts and deeds. In Antoniou’s photograph and its attendant commentary, Mugabe’s skin becomes a canvas for the viewer.

On the other hand, Antoniou continues to express a desire to connect with his sitters, most effectively illustrated in his commentary on the portraits of Gordon Brown and Irish Taoiseach Brian Cowen, both of whom demonstrate an avuncular quality in the narrative if not actually in the image. The commentary on Brown is tragic-comic, as it appears to trump reports of the British Prime Minister as socially difficult, whilst the commentary on Cowen is illustrative of the roles of both photographer and the politician as wilful “estrangers” who meet by circumstance:

I know nothing about his life, he knows nothing about mine, and yet there is an intimacy between us, in this crazy situation with all these world leaders wandering around.

(Antoniou 2009; commentary for Brian Cowen)

The black and white portraits in the series have a particular quality to their production that recalls the photorealist painting of Chuck Close. This is especially so with the portraits of Brown, Jacob Zuma (South Africa), and Benjamin Netanyahu (Israel), which echo in composition Close’s Self-portrait of 1968. That painting was in turn based upon a black and white photograph of Close, shot from below his eyeline and framing him against a pure white background. Close’s photo-mechanical approach involves scaling up the photograph to an immense size and transferring it to canvas by hand, or by using application techniques that emphasize both the automatism of photography and its requirement for human action. The philosopher Kendall Walton chose the Close self-portrait to illustrate his thesis on the nature of the photograph and its transparency. The painting, for Walton, does this because it looks like a photograph, but when its true nature is revealed, “we feel somehow less ‘in contact with’ Close when we learn that the portrayal of him is not photographic” (Walton 1984:255).

Whilst this reading of it neglects the commentary Close’s painting clearly makes about the requirement of human intervention in all aspects of photography, it
nonetheless illustrates for us the ways in which photography is assumed to put us in contact with the person depicted. In so doing, photography achieves “contact” in a manner more akin to the religious icon, wherein the image is a manifestation, rather than an accurate depiction, and where causation is acheiropoietic (meaning “not made by hands” and thus the direct action of God), and channelled through the artist and their production. This is the conclusion reached by both Trachtenberg and Cynthia Freeland, who alight on the portrait as “manifestation” via the work of Patrick Maynard (Maynard 1997; Trachtenberg 2000:10; Freeland 2010:48).

The confluence of Walton’s approach and that of Maynard et al. is in the sense of contact that Walton suggests we get from the photograph. Later scholars, such as Scott Walden, have argued that despite the myriad forms of manipulation which a photographic can undergo, this contact still remains in the form of an “information channel” which is subject to degradation, counteracted by a belief in aspects of the photograph’s depiction as “warranted” (Walden 2005:271). However, whilst Walton and Walden base their arguments on an ocular phenomenon of the photographic image—we see through photographs to the world beyond—their reasoning relies heavily on an acheiropoietic reading of manifestation, wherein the sitter provides the causation of the portrait independent of the portraitist’s decision-making or mental state (Freeland 2010:57). This means that a likeness can look dramatically different from the person manifested (indeed, icons should be seen as expressions, rather than representations), since it is governed by an emotional connection rather than by its correspondence with its prototype. This makes the relationship between the interested viewer and the political portrait tendentious, and the situation of the portraitist a precarious one.

**A Truth Impossible to Bear**

In this final section, we can now address Plato’s philosophy directly by restating the portraitist’s dilemma as a new question: Does the photographer produce a portrait as the acheiropoeitic imitation (eikōn) of the sitter, here a politician, at the expense of the their intermediary role as an artist, or does the photographer offer a portrait from a particular point of view, and thus provide a deceptive imitation that provides little but surface information (phantasma)?
This precarious situation refers of course to Socrates’ dialogue in Republic 10, and his accusation of anyone engaged in representation as being “a long way removed from truth ... and able to reproduce everything because it has little grasp of anything” (10.598b, trans. Lee). After all, Socrates suggests, if such a person “really knew about the things he represented, he would devote himself to them entirely and not to their representations” (10.599b, trans. Lee). As Eva Schaper points out, this book of the Republic brings into focus Plato’s multivalent approach to the arts in general, and poetry in particular, which appears at various stages in the Apology, Gorgias, Sophist, Phaedrus, and (particularly for Schaper) the Ion. At stake is the romantic figure of the artist as suffering from divine inspiration, which raises his work above the level of mere technical competence, but which denies him access to the “really real” of Ideal forms (Schaper 1968:34). From the Ion, Schaper draws out a teleology of the romantic heritage, “whenever art is praised for saying something instead of talking about it,” which serves to explain how Plato was taken up by the Romantics in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Schaper 1968:36). For this, Schaper draws upon a speech Plato gives to Socrates in his dialogue with the rhapsode Ion, in which the philosopher describes the divine inspiration that seizes these poets who in turn inspire others, creating a chain with the Muse at its head. Socrates likens the poet to priests in a fuguelike state,

so the lyric poets are not in their right mind when they are composing their beautiful strains: but when falling under the power of music and metre they are inspired and possessed; like Bacchic maidens who draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysus but not when they are in their right mind. And the soul of the lyric poet does the same, as they themselves say; for they tell us that they bring songs from honeyed fountains, culling them out of the gardens and dells of the Muses; they, like the bees, winging their way from flower to flower. And this is true. For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him: when he has not attained to this state, he is powerless and is unable to utter his oracles.
Schaper's interpretation of this passage is that Plato hereby assigns the poet a “special position outside knowledge,” which leads to the Romantic notion that the artist becomes the “guardian and trustee of feeling.” However, it underlines the deep suspicion of the poet in Plato, which reaches its pivotal moment in Republic 10, since if the poet is beyond reason, and can communicate feeling and expression without true knowledge, “the very force of his emotions by which he is swept opens for him direct access to the emotions of others. He becomes an artist in emotional infection” (Schaper 1968:38).

For Schaper, the Ion, and especially Republic 10, set up a significant tension among three distinct roles for the poet which have been drawn out by scholars ever since. Either the poet is in a fuguelike state, from which images emanate acheiropoietically, or the poet is able to produce emotions which are without true knowledge and are thus wholly deceptive, or (perhaps the most attractive in the visual arts) the poet is especially sensitive to feeling and emotion as truth (a “winged thing” harvesting fruit from the garden of the Muse, pollinating as it goes).

Schaper certainly uses the Ion to suggest a potential separation in Plato’s philosophy of the higher arts from craft as tekhnē, leading to the possibility that Plato is prescient of the ways in which this would happen under the Romantics or even as part of European Modernism. This approach is resisted by others, such as Suzanne Stern-Gillet (2004), who point to the same passage as suggestive of the poet’s being subject to the whim of the Muse. Relating this to the principle earlier developed in the Ion of the poet as lodestone, which cannot help but point to the Muse (as a magnet cannot help but point north), any inspiration is beyond the intention of the artist. Artistic pollination, in this regard, is interpreted as a much more random and aleatory process (Stern-Gillet 2004:174).

Stephen Halliwell, on the other hand, does note how Plato’s frequent use of irony suggests that the attack is a specific challenge for others to come to the poet’s defence on the basis of meaning and value (Halliwell 2002:138). However, we might ask if it is appropriate at all to develop a critique of the portraitist, particularly the photographer, that is predicated on the Romantic notion of the artist. This is especially problematic when dealing with a named portrait: an artist who removes the name from a portrait might give themselves the opportunity to gain access to
universal concepts or Ideal Forms, according to Schaper’s reading. However, as Beardsley suggests, drawing on Plato’s Laws, an imitation will always be read in relation to the viewer’s knowledge of the subject, and measured on correctness in order to establish value (Beardsley 1975:46). This is undoubtedly the case with the named portrait, for which knowledge of the sitter (by way of biography, including consequentiality) becomes the ruler against which the image is measured.

Put another way, at first glance the photographer is deceiving us, whether cognitively or otherwise. Whilst it is unlikely that a photograph is ever taken to be the actual person in the flesh (Walton’s “contact” still relies upon the photograph’s being understood cognitively as a photograph), it is easy to forget its role as a versatile imitation. This is suggested by Elizabeth Belfiore’s reading of mimêtikos as the focus of Plato’s opprobrium in Republic 10, when she notes the fact that “Plato calls the imitator both an imitator of eidôla (sounds or shapes), at 10.600e, for example, and a maker of eidôla, at 10.599a” (Belfiore 1984:124). This allows Belfiore to draw a distinction between “imitation with knowledge” made by craftsmen for use value, and “versatile imitation” which is predicated on the mistaken identity caused by its mimesis of real emotions and feelings. A photographer in our study might at first glance be understood as a maker of shapes, due to the technical manufacture of the image, but they might also be considered an imitator of sounds and shapes, not just because they present an imitation of a person which is mistaken for the real thing (“contact”), but even if any kind of personal connection is perceived, it is with something that is already a performance or imitation: the politician.

In dealing with the complexity of various meanings that Plato ascribed to mimēsis, Beardsley notes how the notion of the politician as people’s representative suggests that much more is at stake when we consider the role of mimesis as a performance of the people’s will (Beardsley 1975:34). This suggestion has the unfortunate sideeffect of placing the portraitist in the position of the rhapsode in relation to the politician as poet, depending on one’s interpretation of Plato’s criticism. Certainly, if one subscribed to the popular idea of the politician as lacking in true character or dealing merely with surface appearances which are mistaken for the truth, then one might be sympathetic with this account. It identifies the portraitist as being in collusion with such a deception, a terrible suspicion which
might lead to the photographer disowning the photograph or its apparent psychological depth. The photographer is simply one link in the lodestone chain, always further removed from the truth by one degree than the sitter. Perhaps then it does indeed help to think of the photographer in terms of the poet/rhapsode, as engaged in a performance, rather than in relation to the painter. By the time Plato reaches his special admonition of the imitator in *Republic* 10, the role of the poet and the painter are virtually interchangeable, such as when Socrates slips easily from poets to painters in his discussion of the imitation of craftsmen, for example: “the poet can use words and phrases as a medium to paint a picture of any craftsman” (10.601a, trans. Lee). The implication in this discussion is clear, the poet is at one remove from the craftsman, whose work can be measured against “quality, beauty and fitness” (10.601d, trans. Lee), whereas the imitation cannot. But we are prompted to respond to this by the nature of the relationship between photographer and sitter as a battleground, a compromise, or better still a contract. This is indicated in the history of honorific portraiture, from which the traditions of both lofty painted portraits as well as small-town photographic portraits emerged. Here, we must remember, the photograph is always the result of some kind of concord or agreement, even if it is for services rendered by the portraitist, and even if it rests in the unspoken intimacy of lovers. It is also prompted by the attention Plato gives to the role of craftsmen and subsequent interpretations of *tekhnē* as a success word, “which can only denote a rational and cognitive activity” (Stern-Gillet 2004:187).

For Stern-Gillet, Plato is unhelpfully praised for separating *tekhnē* from art in a hierarchy that places it below, rather than above, divine inspiration. Instead, she draws a useful justification model that employs, as a guiding principle, its relationship to function (use) as the Ideal Form:

> From the evidence of *Phaedrus, Protagoras*, and *Gorgias*, we may infer that an activity ranks as a τέχνη if: (1) it aims at truth; (2) it embodies general principles on the nature of its subject-matter or defining activity; (3) it derives from such principles standards of excellence; (4) it is concerned with the good of its object or recipient; (5) it can give a rational account of itself; and (6) it can be imparted by teaching.
Its concern for the truth rather than appearances, from a position of knowledge rather than opinion, places this reading of tekhnē on the higher level ethically, and closer to calculations performed by reason rather than appearance. All the practical aspects of photography fit this reading, since it can be imparted by teaching, can give a rational account (i.e. the manufacture of a photograph can be discerned from the image by the trained eye), and it generally corresponds to its subject matter. After all, as the history of portraits of Lincoln demonstrates, photography is intimately tied to the public perception of modern politicians and their ability to represent the will of the people. Similarly, it would be an unusual portrait which was not concerned with the “good of its object or recipient,” either where the portrait attempts to show the subject in their best light (which may also lean closer to deception, of course), or where the portrait attempts to provide a lesson for the subject or recipient, as in caricature. Similarly, it would be an unusual portrait which did not attempt to pass on, for the benefit of the recipient, some form of knowledge about the sitter, whether named or not.

We have seen how the removal of the name from the portrait is an act of distancing the photograph from the problem of surface appearances. This is perhaps because identity is already a performance on one level (as we saw with Sherman), and an imperfect copy of the Ideal on another. If Antoniou were to remove the names of his sitters, it might also be able to reach this sense of the real, and it might achieve a level of truth adequate to Stern-Gillet’s justification of tekhnē. However, to do so, to rend the name from the political portrait, might prevent any of the communicative, educative value intended by the New Yorker, in the first instance, and perhaps even by the politician as well. This is why it is more useful to consider Antoniou as a performer, contracted to produce a particular likeness. If he diverged from his trademark style he might not be awarded commissions or be able to sell his work. In addition, the starkness of these portraits, necessary in order to signify direct access (nothing hidden), might be exactly what is appealing to a magazine. To diverge from this too far might be to offer too much surface. This is perhaps why the signs of production (in particular the halo or vignette) encroach on the sitter, as if to say: “everything else was as you see it.”
In this respect, we might ask finally what a portraitist such as Antonio knows, if his commentaries demonstrate an absence of biography and of critical opinion on the political positions of his subjects. We might say, because of his situation vis-à-vis the magazine, that his knowledge is that of presentation and performance, and his particular craft is the production (in the theatrical as well as the visual sense of the word) of the political portrait. This sometimes presents him with encounters in which he is unhappily complicit in the production of a political identity. Perhaps after all this is the case in his experiencing the deliberate and mannered gestures of Muammar al-Qadaffi, or observing the contrast between the dour Gordon Brown of popular opinion and the image which is produced and which, no matter how relaxed Brown's smile, can never subvert the myth already created. Similarly, the commentaries on Berlusconi and Mugabe (as with Helms) demonstrate a flinching or squinting in the face of a political presence, and suggest something more telling of the relationship between portraitist and sitter: the portraitist, rather than being a link in a chain to the Muse, or producing acheiropoietic images of a subject which reveals itself, is actually a partner in the politician's craft of representation. This is the truth of the photograph as political portrait, but it is a truth that may be impossible to bear.

**Bibliography**


