Some years ago Ted Cohen published an essay entitled “What’s Special About Photography?”¹ This question, it seems to me, represents a conception of what is sought and how to arrive at it that has tended to predominate in philosophical and theoretical writing about photographic art. The conception starts from the rather obvious premise that the concern of photographic aesthetics is photographic art. The next step is to invoke the belief, held widely at least since Lessing and much reinforced by Clement Greenberg,² that the nature of the medium in which works of art are made determines the proper ends of the fine arts. Accordingly, the next premise is that the fine arts are properly conceived of as being composed of distinct media of differing aesthetic value. The aim of aesthetics, then, is to explore the valuable distinctiveness of each medium. On this line of reasoning, if the advent of photography constitutes the birth of a new art, then there must be something “special” or valuably distinctive about the photographic medium. If, as its British co-inventor thought, photography is just a new means of pursuing the ends of painting,³ then it is not a new art, but merely a new means of doing what painters have done for a long time. The thought that photographic art is continuous with, and should not be treated separately from, the other pictorial arts has remained a regularly defended position in theoretical debates about photography ever since.⁴ So too has the alternative, namely, that photography is valuably distinctive from the other pictorial media and is therefore an independent art form. According to this view, if there is a distinct art of photography, a distinct medium for aesthetic investigation, then there must be something valuably distinctive about photography.⁵ Hence the question: “What’s special about photography?”

Comparing photography with other pictorial media is a perfectly reasonable way to go about unearthing insights into its aesthetic significance. Indeed, by the end of this paper I will have offered, in outline at least, an account of what I think is valuably distinctive about photography. For the moment, what interests me about this conception of the problem facing the aesthetic inquirer is the system of pictorial kinds upon which it rests: that is, the implicit assumption that the pictorial arts are best investigated philosophically by the division of the phenomena to be explained according to the medium of production. Dividing up the phenomena this way establishes a number of distinct categories that together form something of a system of kinds in terms with which aesthetic inquiry is conducted. Obviously, it is not the only system of pictorial kinds capable of serving as the foundations of aesthetic inquiry, for one could as fruitfully build a pictorial aesthetics upon distinctions among pictorial kinds drawn on the basis of subject matter or genre. Alternatively, one might do the same thing with periodic, art historical, or critical categories of pictorial kind. Another, less populated, system of pictorial kinds is that composed of the distinction between figurative and nonfigurative pictures. There are no doubt many more ways of distinguishing pictorial kinds. Most of these constitute ways of sorting pictures of more or less use to the aesthetic inquirer. If philosophers and theorists interested in photographic art have tended to employ the system of kinds defined by the medium of production, it is no doubt because this system best served the ends of their inquiry.
The understanding gained through such inquiry can, of course, be brought to bear upon aesthetic issues arising from reflections employing a different system of pictorial kinds. Indeed, sometimes reflection upon the nature of a pictorial kind in one system can assist one to avoid confusions that would otherwise be generated by inquiry based upon another system of kinds.

Whether or not this is obviously true, one of my aims in what follows is to illustrate this claim. To this end I propose to consider a logical distinction between two kinds of picture I believe can be fruitfully brought to bear upon the question of the valuable distinctiveness of photography. The two pictorial kinds are probably not the only members of their system of kinds, but they are the only two I will concern myself with. I will call the two kinds “Albertian” and “Keplerian” pictures, borrowing these names from a notable study of Dutch art by Svetlana Alpers, though my own account of the distinction differs from Alpers’s in a number of significant ways. Associating the pictorial kinds with Alberti and Kepler is, I must stress, a matter of convenience only. What I will call an Albertian picture, for example, is a conception of what a picture is that can be traced back to, but is not identical with, that advanced by Alberti. In both cases, however, explore the nature of the pictorial kinds in terms of some aspects of these two very different thinkers’ writings, but only because they provide material from which the two conceptions can be conveniently distilled. I must also emphasize that in doing this we are distilling abstract conceptions of pictorial kinds. Considering these is a conceptual matter to be sharply distinguished from, but nevertheless related to, the role such conceptions have played in the production of actual pictures. To mark this difference, I will speak of Albertian and Keplerian pictures when referring to the abstract conceptions of these pictorial kinds, and of an Albertian or Keplerian mode of picturing when referring to manifestations of these pictorial kinds that emerge from within a rich intentional and cultural context. Pictorial kinds are a conceptual matter, but modes of picturing are a practical matter involving the greater or lesser use of such conceptions in the actual intentionally and culturally rich context of the making of a picture. It follows that the distinction between Albertian and Keplerian pictures is one of kind, but the distinction between Albertian and Keplerian modes of picturing is (typically) more a matter of degree, with some actual pictures being systematically ambiguous between the two kinds. This last possibility need not concern us, however.

II

The first conception of a picture I will consider is by far the more familiar of the two. In fact, what I will call an Albertian picture is so deeply ingrained in our thinking about pictorial art that it can come as a surprise that a striking alternative exists. We will come to the alternative shortly. First, the Albertian picture, of which there are two distinct elements. The first is a geometrical definition of the picture surface, the basis of which long predates Alberti. This is the most obvious element in Alberti’s definition of a picture. He writes:

A picture [is] the intersection of the visual pyramid at a given distance, with a fixed center and a certain position of light, represented by art with lines and colors on a given surface.

The geometrical element of the definition is the identification of a picture as a surface intersecting the visual pyramid at some distance with a fixed center. The visual pyramid, you will recall, is a representation of the visual field in which it is imagined that a pyramid extends from the eye to enclose the visible world. Holders of Albertian pictures are assumed to take up the position of the eye point at the apex of the visual pyramid. The eye of the beholder of the Albertian picture is therefore always outside and to the front of the picture surface looking into the world depicted. Indeed, Alberti regularly refers to the picture surface as a window. He writes, for example, of the picture plane that it must be constructed “just as though this surface . . . were transparent and like glass.” Later
he writes of how he contrives to regard a picture “as an open window through which the subject painted is seen.”

This points to the second element of Alberti’s definition—what we might call the intentional element. In his definition of a picture quoted above, the intentional element is hinted at in the words “represented by art.” For Alberti, a picture is the representation of a world as it is seen from outside, as if through a window. In other words, the geometrical elements of his account of a picture are but “the first foundations of the art” of painting. Upon these foundations, Alberti argues, the three representational skills of the art are employed. These are, first, circumspection (or the drawing of the objects to be depicted); second, lighting and shadowing; and finally, the creation of a historia. Something needs to be said about this final element, as it is essential to the conception of an Albertian picture.

“Composition” is a reasonably apt translation for Alberti’s notion of historia. For technically it involves the selection and placement of the subject matter of the picture, but there is more to the notion of historia than mere composition. To see why, consider Alberti’s claims regarding what a painter needs in order to achieve greatness in her or his art. He writes:

I want the painter, as far as able, to be learned in all the liberal arts, but I wish him above all to have a good knowledge of geometry....N e x t i t will be of advantage if they take pleasure in poets and orators. . . . Literary men... will be of great assistance in preparing the composition of a historia, and the great virtue of this consists primarily in its invention.

The historia of a picture, then, is the pictorial narration of the inventions of the literary arts; or in other words, the illustration of poetic and sacred texts, and real events in the manner of a pictorial analogue to the orator’s narration of events. Now the significance of this is that an Albertian picture is, as he suggests, a window; but it is a window onto a fictional or imaginatively transformed world. Here is where art combines with geometry, as the inventive mind of the artist creates symbolically rich fictional or rhetorical worlds characterized by, for example, beauty and harmony. On the basis of this account of Alberti’s thinking about painting, we can extract a still quite contemporary conception of a figurative picture: a marked surface composed and constituted in relation to a supposed viewing point set some distance from the surface, which stands to its subject matter as a sort of window through which we view an analogue world represented by the artist in accord with an intentional meaning. In what follows, this is what I will mean by an Albertian picture.

The Keplerian picture is a rather different kind of object. Unlike Alberti, Kepler had neither a theory of pictures nor explicit aesthetic concerns. Indeed, it is in his study of the eye conceived of as an optical mechanism that Kepler articulates an alternative to the Albertian conception of a picture. For this reason I will reverse the procedure employed in explaining Albertian pictures. That is, I will start with a general characterization of Keplerian pictures and then draw the connection to Kepler’s use of the concept of a picture in his visual theory.

The visual pyramid is again our best means to an initial characterization of a Keplerian picture. If an Albertian picture is such as to reside at some distance from the apex of the pyramid, the Keplerian picture represents the world from the apex. At the apex of the visual pyramid is the eye and visual experience. Suppose, therefore, someone sets out to paint what she or he sees, quite literally to put onto a flat surface the world just as it appears in her or his visual field. Such a picture would not be a window through which to view an analogue world. Rather, it would represent the one and only real world being seen by someone whose visual field is circumscribed by the picture frame. So whereas the frame of the Albertian picture encloses a fictional or imaginatively transformed world, the frame of the Keplerian picture represents the frame of the visual field and thereby encloses a representation of the world seen, or more simply, a representation of vision.

Further clarification of what it means for a picture to “represent vision” is provided by analogy with the cinematic representation of a character’s visual experience by means of the technique of “subjective camera.” Hitchcock is an example of an acknowledged master of this most common of film techniques. In virtually all his films, he employed subjective camera to pro-
duce scenes representing the dramatic space of the film seen through the eyes of a fictional character within the drama. For example, in the classic *Rear Window* the technique is used to represent the visual experience of L. B. Jefferies (James Stewart) as he looks through the viewfinder of his camera into the windows of his neighbors.\(^{16}\) In the context of the fiction film, the technique of subjective camera is a narrative device. That is, it is one of the ways the film medium can be employed to tell a story, to communicate visually what the prose writer describes when she or he characterizes a fictional character’s visual experience. If a filmmaker produced an entire fiction film employing subjective camera to continually represent the visual experience of one character in the drama, both the implicit but unseen character and the dramatic space represented would be fictional.\(^{17}\) It is of course just as possible to make a wholly fictional still picture in the Keplerian mode. The conception of a Keplerian picture, however, denotes a representation of the seeing of the one and only real world. The one whose vision is represented by a Keplerian picture may be fictional, but the world they are represented as seeing is not a fictional world. To represent visual experience of the real world is a quite different task than that of representing a fictional or rhetorical world enclosed within a frame functioning as a window upon it. And, I am inclined to add, viewing examples of pictures in each of these pictorial modes is a quite different activity involving different interpretative strategies.

I will have reason to return to the question of what kind of intentional meaning is possible with Keplerian pictures and how a spectator grasps it. Before doing so, however, I want to digress briefly and consider some historical context useful for drawing out the central features of a Keplerian picture. It is in this detour into the history of science that the connection to Kepler will be made. The relevance of this moment in the history of visual theory will quickly become apparent as we proceed.

In the history of visual theory Kepler is famous for his vindication of intromissionism, thus ending a centuries old puzzle about how visual contact with the world is effected.\(^{18}\) Intromissionism is the name given to visual theories that suppose vision is brought about by something from the world coming to the eye, rather than the extramissionist assumption that we see because visual rays shoot out from the eye. Before Kepler, intromissionists tended to suppose objects in the world gave off an endless stream of images that float through the air toward the eye. The problem such theories had always faced was explaining how these *eidolons* or *simulacra* get into the visual faculties. Lacking sufficient knowledge of the nature of light and the refraction of lenses, intromissionists before Kepler had to suppose that *eidolons* or *simulacra* somehow shrink in size and slip intact into the eye. With his knowledge of lenses, experience of *camera obscura* devices, and a bit of crude anatomical dissection, Kepler was able to make the decisive breakthrough. The eye, he argued, does not *receive* images from the world; rather, it is a device for *making* pictures out of reflected light. How Kepler arrived at this breakthrough is worth recalling.

Kepler’s vindication of intromissionism follows directly from his explanation of an anomalous astronomical phenomenon that he and Tycho Brahe first noticed. When observing a solar eclipse in the only safe way available to them, by means of some sort of *camera obscura*, they observed that the diameter of the moon was smaller than normal. On the assumption that the moon neither changes its real size nor its distance from the earth during solar eclipses, the explanation of the phenomenon, Kepler explained, must be found in the means of observation.\(^{19}\) The artifice of observing the moon with a pinhole camera, indeed the very construction of the human eye, distorts the appearance of some external phenomena viewed by these means. To study and measure these distortions, Kepler first needed to explain how the eye worked. It is here that he articulates a conception of a picture quite different to that of Alberti, for in Kepler’s account of what a properly functioning eye does, and its connection to vision, we find him concluding: “Thus vision is brought about by a picture of the thing seen being formed on the concave surface of the retina.”\(^{20}\) Now it is pretty clear that Kepler misidentifies the cause of vision in a particularly significant sense. That is, qua the object of physiological investigation, the eye is not a picture-making mechanism, and pictures in the eye are the cause of nothing. If you like, Kepler confused the efficient cause of vision—what as a scientist he should have been...
interested in—with a formal cause, or a feature of that which brings about vision. So what causes vision is the irradiation of the retina according to certain optical principles, and that array of light has the form of a picture. It makes perfect sense to suppose the pattern of irradiation is a picture, but not to suppose that vision is caused by the formation of a picture.

It is also worth drawing attention to Kepler’s use of the word “picture” (pictura) in relation to what is formed on the retina. The Latin word pictura means painting. In choosing this word to characterize what is formed on the retina, Kepler is emphasizing the productive nature of the optical mechanism. So he speaks of the retina being “painted” (pingitur) by the “tiny brushes” (pencilli) of rays of light. Just as the Albertian painter represents a world analogous to, but different from, the real world, optical mechanisms such as eyes and camera obscura represent the one and only world, but do so in a manner necessarily (but measurably) distorting of, or divergent from, the way things really are. Despite Kepler’s occasional denials that he had any interest in explaining what seeing is, we are clearly teetering on the edge of representationalist visual theory. Representationalism, in short, is a style of visual theory supposing that we see objects in the world in virtue of conscious awareness of a mental representation of some sort or other. Locke, who formulated one of the earliest versions of the theory, conceives of the mental representations we are aware of as at least closely analogous to pictures. Even if it is a theory now largely out of favor, representationalism has been deeply embedded in the history of philosophical and scientific thinking about vision since Kepler. For if the eye is conceived of as constructing a picture of the world, and in doing so brings about a necessarily distorted vision, then the distinction between represented appearance and real world that theory trades upon is clearly implied. This is important for reasons that will soon be apparent.

The thought that painters might set about rendering their retinal images on canvas is an unhelpful and ultimately absurd suggestion. What Kepler did, however, was introduce the idea that retinal images are pictures, thereby providing something of a metaphorical model of the Keplerian picture’s representation of vision. For just as the picture in the eye represents the world to the mind, and therefore the visual experience of the eye’s possessor, the Keplerian picture represents the visual experience of someone within the world pictured. Although not depicted, this person is symbolically present and therefore represented by the Keplerian picture as the implicit locus of the represented visual experience of the world. From the thought that visual experience is, or results from, a picturing of the world to a conscious mind, we can extract a conception of a picture as the representation of someone’s (perhaps the artist’s) visual experience of the real world. Indeed, we have all we need to define a Keplerian picture:

X is a Keplerian picture if and only if X is a marked surface representing the visual experience of a nondepicted but implicitly present perceiver looking upon a portion of the real world.

Such a conception of a picture has for a long time inspired pictorial artists to pursue a mode of picturing quite distinct from that associated with Albertian pictures.

It is worth emphasizing some of the differences. First, the frame of a Keplerian picture occludes those bits of the real world outside the visual field, but the frame of an Albertian picture encloses a fictional or imaginatively transformed world. Stanley Cavell alludes to just such a distinction between the roles played by the frames of Albertian and Keplerian pictures:

You can always ask of, of an area photographed, what lies adjacent to that area, beyond the frame. This generally makes no sense asked of painting. . . . The world of a painting is not continuous with the world of its frame; at its frame, a world finds its limits. We might say: A painting is a world; a photograph is of the world.

If all paintings were pictures in the Albertian mode, and all photographs were pictures in the Keplerian mode, then Cavell’s description of the different kinds of frame associated with each pictorial kind would be perfectly correct. As we will soon see, the media kinds Cavell compares in this passage cannot be identified with the categories of Albertian and Keplerian picture, but that does nothing to undermine the distinction between the different kinds of picture frame.
Secondly, the notion of the “viewer” of a Keplerian picture is ambiguous between the person looking at the picture (on the wall) and the representationally implied person whose viewing of the world is represented. The viewer of the Albertian picture, by contrast, could only be the person looking at the picture. This is important because, as a consequence, the Albertian picture is naturally treated as a window upon an imaginatively represented world. The Keplerian picture is also viewed from outside, but since what is viewed is someone’s viewing, it is through the eye of another, and not through a window. The Keplerian picture, if you like, is symbolically an object in the world it represents, whereas the Albertian picture encloses a fictionalized world, a one-way window to be looked through from the outside only. What significance this has for the spectator will be considered shortly.

I want first to briefly note the long history of aesthetic deprecation of pictures made in the Keplerian mode. That something like the Keplerian conception of a picture has exerted an influence over painters is amply illustrated by Svetlana Alpers in her aforementioned study of seventeenth-century Dutch art. Moreover, that something like the Keplerian conception of a picture has been the subject of some scorn is illustrated by the dismissive attitude of many artists and critics, not only toward (something like) the general conception but also toward painting in the Keplerian mode. No less authorities than Leonardo, Michelangelo, Poussin, and Reynolds were dismissive to various degrees of pictorial art in the Keplerian mode. Poussin, in a similar vein, distinguishes two ways of seeing, “aspectival” and “perspectival,” and hence two ways of picturing the world. Aspectival pictures are identified with the eye’s “natural reception” of the world’s appearance. Perspectival pictures represent the world after “the office of [imaginative] reason” has been applied to mere natural appearance. Poussin’s notion of aspectival picturing is clearly very closely related to what I am calling Keplerian picturing. Now Poussin probably had a certain kind of seventeenth-century Dutch painting in mind when he dismissed aspectival pictures as a “mere . . . natural operation.” Michelangelo makes much the same point as Poussin, but aims it explicitly at painting in Flanders:

Flemish painting . . . is done without reason or art, without symmetry or proportion, without skilful choice or boldness, and, finally, without substance or vigour.

Indeed, Michelangelo goes on to dismiss the art of Northern Europe as not “true painting” because all it does is represent near-arbitrarily selected scenes from the world just as they appear to the eye, rendered “without reason or art.” Although I will not pursue the matter, it is worth noting that such reasons as these for dismissing the aesthetic possibilities of pictures in the Keplerian mode are substantially the same as those aimed against the possibility of photographic art familiar from past decades.

The criticism, in a nutshell, is that Keplerian pictures lack intentional meaning. In other words, they are neutral reproductions of a brute visual fact, not the product of a rational process of representing the world with the intentional significance of a historia. As I have already suggested, this criticism has often been aimed at Dutch painting of the seventeenth century, with its sharply different focus to most Italian painting. The observational neutrality of much (though not all) Dutch painting of the period has been its distinguishing mark among art historians for a very long time now. The representation of uninterpreted seeing in such painting suggested to some a mode of picturing without reason or style—that is, for many critics of the aesthetic possibility of Keplerian picturing, observational neutrality does not constitute an intentional meaning. Therefore, there is no coun-
terpart to an Albertian historia, the fictionalized or rhetoricized composition of subject matter displaying the narrative inventiveness of the painter. Here we can see what the criticism amounts to. To represent vision is to employ a mode of representation that, by the standards of pictures that do not represent vision, has no means of aesthetic significance.

Judging pictures in the Keplerian mode according to standards relevant to the pictures in the Albertian mode is the high road to confusion. To suppose pictures in the Keplerian mode lack intentional meaning is one of the errors such judgment generates. Another error it sometimes leads to, often as a step along the way to falling into the former confusion, is to suppose that Keplerian pictures are means of seeing rather than representations of vision. 31 I will start with this latter confusion. The error originates in a certain sort of reasoning about Keplerian pictures that goes like this. If a Keplerian picture represents vision, then the spectator who looks upon an actual picture in this mode will be looking at a representation of the real world as it would appear to anyone placed in the position of the symbolic viewer internal to the picture. As spectators of such pictures, what we see is a representation of the real world as it appears in ordinary perception. Even these claims require qualification, but if you conceive of vision operating along the lines suggested by representationalist visual theory, then the argument continues to a rather odd conclusion. That is, in looking at a Keplerian picture the viewer is, in a more or less diminished sense, actually seeing the world. For if we see the world by means of mental representations caused by the eye’s picturing of the world upon the retina, those pictures made in the Keplerian mode that are sufficiently like retinal pictures constitute means of seeing the world (in some sense or other). 32 If a painting represents the world as the eye does, then both picture the world to the mind such as to bring about visual experience of the world.

Abandon representationalism, or the idea that vision is awareness of a representation of any sort, and the temptation to think of pictures in the Keplerian mode as means to vision vanishes. Nevertheless, a picture in the Keplerian mode may be such as to invite and succeed at getting us imaginatively to adopt the position of the one whose vision is represented. Consider this comment by one noted historian of Dutch painting of the seventeenth century: “We live in the picture, we walk about in it, we look into its depths, we are tempted to raise our heads to look at the sky.” 33 That is, some pictures in the Keplerian mode are such that in imaginatively adopting the position of the person whose visual experience is represented, we use the vocabulary of visual perception to characterize our understanding of the picture. One might put the point this way: Pictures in the Keplerian mode are often such that what we do and say in response to them illustrates the extent to which we imaginatively place ourselves in the position of the implicit and symbolically present person whose visual experience is represented by the picture. This is one of the ways spectators might treat a picture in the Keplerian mode as if it were a means of seeing. Of course, to be treated as a means of seeing is not the same thing as being a means of seeing.

The claim that Keplerian pictures lack intentional meaning is another misconception often found where Keplerian pictures are thought of as means of seeing rather than representations of vision. This misconception often arises as follows. Since the picture in the eye is supposed to give us the appearance of the world according to optical principles, the appearance of the world represented in the Keplerian mode is determined by optical principles. Therefore, the picture must be neutral with regard to how the world might be seen by an actual person. Pictures in the Keplerian mode are, that is, representations of brute uninterpreted visual appearance and therefore are not the product of imaginative thought and judgment. If they have a meaning, it is because the world is a meaningful place and representations of visual experience of it will typically communicate that meaning. But the meaning is possessed by the objects depicted rather than by the picture itself, the latter being just the vehicle for manifesting the appearance of an independently meaningful world. Whatever meaning may be associated with such a picture is a function of the symbolic significance of the objects depicted—the meaning of which is possessed independently of the picture—and therefore not a meaning the picture uniquely
possesses. Indeed, a Keplerian picture, like a retinal image, is literally meaningless until a conscious mind perceptually encounters a meaningful world by means of such pictures. Again, if we discard such representationalist thinking, we come to see that the observational neutrality associated with, for example, Dutch painting of the seventeenth century is a choice and not a necessity. Artists interested in making pictures in the Keplerian mode might choose, as some Dutch masters did, to represent vision of the world with almost scientific objectivity, but there are other options for picturing in the Keplerian mode. To take but three examples, there are good grounds for supposing that a good deal of surrealist and impressionist painting is Keplerian in the sense of representing visual awareness of the real world. More specifically, Casper David Friedrich’s *The Large Enclosure, Near Dresden* (1832) is said to represent the seeing of the flood-plain, but from a position no one could adopt without the means of flying above the earth’s surface.

The possibility of very different ways of picturing vision provides a clue to the source of a Keplerian picture’s intentional meaning. Indeed, in this possibility we find the Keplerian picture’s unique counterpart to the Albertian *historia*. I will call this counterpart to Albertian *historia* the Keplerian picture’s “visual perspective.” A Keplerian picture does not merely represent vision; it does so together with a manner of seeing—a way in which the world is represented as being seen. The representation of observationally neutral vision, or the surrealist representation of disrupted vision or the impressionist representation of vision constructed of chromatic variation, constitute visual perspectives, or ways in which the seeing of the world is construed. Such visual perspectives, together with the subject matter the perspective is upon, with all the rich possibilities for symbolic meaning available in the composition of a picture in the Keplerian mode, constitute its intentional meaning. One might put the point this way: Pictures constructed in the Keplerian mode are made by artists within a broad intentional and cultural context, and these give rise to differing conceptions of how vision ought to be represented. Different ways of conceiving of vision imply different ways of representing it, or what is the same thing, different visual perspectives. Representing both the what and the how of vision is a different kind of intentional meaning to that associated with Albertian picturing, but it is nonetheless intentional meaning pictorially represented.

Before turning to photography we need a better understanding of what a “visual perspective” is, and why such a property is both aesthetically important and unique to Keplerian pictures. The visual perspective of a picture in the Keplerian mode is always the product of the artist’s conception of how vision ought to be represented. Sometimes, as in the case of the impressionists and surrealists, this manifests itself in a picture representing visual experience of the world rather different from ordinary perceptual experience. Representing vision in these ways requires considerable imagination and results in quite distinctive visual perspectives. A more common way of establishing a visual perspective involves representing what is sometimes called “expressive perception.” This is a species of ordinary perception, and as such, a visual phenomenon that can be explained independently of pictures. I will come to the phenomenon shortly; first, our reason for exploring it should be underlined. As we will see, expressive perception involves seeing the world under an aspect, and this amounts to a way of seeing the world. The representation of such ways of seeing constitutes a significant and common means of establishing the visual perspective of a picture in the Keplerian mode. To unpack what is being claimed here, we must start with the notion of expressive perception.

There are two kinds of expressive perception. The first involves the projection of the perceiver’s psychological states onto the objects of their visual experience. Winning the lottery, falling in love, or having one’s love spurned are events typically accompanied by powerful psychological states influencing how we see what we see. Something of this notion of expressive perception is implicit when our understanding of what is seen is influenced by our psychological states, such that those states “color our world.” We project onto the world an aspect corresponding to powerful psychological states, and we see the world accordingly. The second sort of expressive perception involves seeing the world
under an aspect suggested to understanding by features of the objects of visual experience. Richard Wollheim gives a lyrical description of such expressive perception:

We are driving along, say, a country road, not far, we know, from the coast, and, turning a corner, we suddenly see stretched ahead of us hard rocky land broken up by fingers of water, there are low flying birds, and a solitary tower or cottage is the only sign of habitation. Or we have fallen upon a river scene in the heart of a countryside of fields and small villages and woods: there are tall poplars and water meadows, and broken fences subside into the sedge. In each case a mood of loneliness and despair, finely shaded to match the differences between the two landscapes, creeps over us.

Here the idea is that the landscapes are seen under an aspect of loneliness and despair because features of the landscapes evoke these moods. Now expressive perception, like ordinary seeing, is a cognitive competence. Therefore, the finely shaded moods of loneliness and despair we attribute to the scenes reflect a visual understanding of the landscapes that are not easily characterized or communicated to another without recourse to figurative and metaphorical language. For since landscapes do not literally have moods, attributions of such moods to unconscious matter must be metaphorical. That is, the landscapes suggest to understanding an aspect coloring vision of the scenes in ways typically characterized by means of metaphors such as “mood of loneliness and despair.” Consequently, expressive perception of this sort is also a projection of an aspect onto the world (or what is the same thing, an instance of seeing the world under an aspect), but now the aspect is suggested by features of the world rather than being the product of powerful psychological states. Such cognitive engagement with the world “gilds and stains” our perception with the expressive properties its features suggest.

The engagement of expressive perception is, of course, one of the central aims of all the arts, including those activities and artifacts ordinarily called “craft” and “design.” Pictures in the Keplerian mode, however, are uniquely capable of engaging a spectator’s expressive perception by representing the engaged expressive perception of an implicit perceiver symbolically present to the scene depicted. That is, an artist interested in Keplerian picturing might seek to represent vision of the world with a visual perspective approximating to the coloring of the world with expressive meaning characteristic of expressive perception. I will call such visual perspectives “expressive perspectives.” Now it should be clear that making a picture in the Keplerian mode representing expressive perception of the world is a task requiring great skill and imaginative use of the materials of the medium. Indeed, establishing a visual perspective of this sort means depicting that bit of the world serving as the object of the visual experience represented such that we can infer the visual understanding exhibited in the representation of expressive perception.

Now is the point to return to Cohen’s question with which we started: What’s special about photography? I want briefly to suggest before closing that part of the answer is that photography is a particularly powerful medium for representing vision in the fashion of Keplerian pictures, and that its power in this regard is a function of the extraordinary range of subtle and potent expressive perspectives the medium is capable of producing. In the first place, it should be clear the photographic medium is ideally suited to the making of pictures in the Keplerian mode. To speak of “the eye of the camera” may be a cliche, but in the light of our consideration of the nature of Keplerian pictures, it is nevertheless particularly apt. This is not to say a photographer cannot conceive of her or his art along Albertian lines and seek to employ the medium according to a more Albertian conception of a picture. The history of photographic art certainly contains notable instances of photographers working in such a way. Nevertheless, the history of photographic art is primarily a history of picturing in the Keplerian mode, and this is in part a function of the nature of the medium. This is an interpretative claim I do not have the space to justify here. However, on the assumption that some photographic art is in the Keplerian mode, I will limit my argument to what I take to be valuably distinctive about that photographic art.

What the very best photography in the Keplerian mode achieves is an interesting and
arresting representation of visual experience and visual understanding of the world. For, in the hands of a skilled artist, photography can be an extremely expressive medium of picturing. Indeed, as André Bazin and many others since have noted, even the most amateur contents of the family album frequently have a powerful expressive effect.38 This suggests the photographic medium is particularly adept at producing an expressive effect that, I suspect, is very often properly thought of as an expressive perspective. By which I mean, when we struggle to characterize the particular manner in which a photograph represents visual experience and understanding, we reach for just the kind of metaphorical and figurative descriptions characteristic of the identification of expressive qualities. When critics speak, for example, of Mapplethorpe’s erotic eye, or Cartier-Bresson’s whimsical vision, they are appealing to the vocabulary of expressiveness to characterize the seeing of the world represented in these artist’s photographs. These expressive visual perspectives contribute to establishing the intentional meaning of such photography, and are certainly an important element in the establishment of the Keplerian alternative to Albertian pictorial art.

The possibility of constructing pictures with an aesthetically interesting expressive visual perspective upon the world is, of course, not a possibility exclusive to the photographic medium. How then could all our reflections on the two kinds of picture, and the expressive perspective possible with Keplerian pictures, be capable of indicating what is valuably distinctive about the photographic medium? Certainly the valuable distinctiveness of photography cannot be identified with the medium’s capacity to represent vision, or to do so with an aesthetically captivating expressive perspective. Rather, what is special about photography lies in the medium’s extraordinary power to do this with both a subtlety and a potency not obviously available to the painter.39 Perhaps the explanation of this power lies in the near identity of the optical principles governing the formation of the photographic image and those governing the formation of retinal images. Or perhaps it is far more a matter of convention that we take photography to be such a powerful means of representing expressively charged vision. Whatever the explanation,40 photographic artists, with their careful attention to the materials and techniques of the medium, have exploited these powerful means of representing vision to create pictures that capture and sustain aesthetic interest in virtue of, among other things, the expressive perspectives they display. It is in reflecting upon the photographer’s exploitation of these means of representing vision, carefully exploring how they are employed to create pictures with captivating expressive perspectives, that we will, I suggest, discover the valuable distinctiveness of the medium.41

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3. Cf. Henry Fox Talbot, The Pencil of Nature. This work appeared in six installments between 1844 and 1866. A facsimile of the entire work was produced in 1969 under the editorship of Beaumont Newhall.
6. Neither of the two categories of picture I will consider could be said to extend to, for example, trompe l’œil pictures.
7. Svetlana Alpers, The Art of Describing (University of Chicago Press, 1983). Despite my merely having borrowed Alpers’s terms, rather than adopting her account of the distinction, it remains the case that this paper owes an intellectual debt to Alpers’s fine study. Richard Wollheim is another theorist interested in a conception of a picture closely related to that I will call a Keplerian picture. Cf. Wollheim’s discussion of Casper David Friedrich in Painting as an Art (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), chap. 3.
8. For reasons that will be apparent by the end of this paper, many of the paintings of Magritte are studies in such
ambiguity. A fine example from photography of such an ambiguous picture is Ken Josephson’s Postcard Visit, Stockholm, Sweden (1967).

9. It is sometimes said that artificial perspective was a discovery of the Renaissance. Far closer to the truth, however, is that it was a recovery and adaptation of a technique known to Plato. Cf. John Hyman, The Imitation of Nature (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).


11. Ibid., p. 48.


13. Ibid., p. 59.


16. An even better example might be the representation of the visual experience of “Scottie” suffering from his fear of heights in Vertigo.

17. An example of such extreme use of subjective camera is Robert Montgomery’s 1947 film The Lady in the Lake. For a discussion of the point of view shot in cinema with some relevance to the argument of this paper, see Murray Smith, “Imagining From the Inside” in Film Theory and Philosophy, ed. Richard Allen and Murray Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 412–430.


19. Johannes Kepler, Ad Vitellionem Paralipomena, first published in 1604. For example, Kepler writes: “As long as the diameters of the luminaries and the extent of their solar eclipses are noted as fundamental by astronomers... some deception of vision arises partly from the artifice of observing... and partly from vision itself... and thus the origins of errors in vision must be sought in the confusion and function of the eye.” Quoted in Alpers, The Art of Describing, p. 34.

20. Ibid., p. 34.


23. The distinction between what is represented and what is depicted is a familiar one. A Keplerian picture depicts objects, scenes, etc. in the real world, but represents (a nondepicted) someone’s visual experience of the (depicted) real world. Wollheim discusses the distinction between depiction and representation in Painting as an Art, as does Walton in Mimesis as Make-Believe.

24. This is not a fully satisfactory definition, since a Keplerian picture could in principle depict the one whose visual experience is represented by including in the picture the normally implicit perceiver’s reflection in a mirror—for example, Parmigianino’s Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror. For the purposes of the argument that follows, however, we need not correct this flaw.

25. Pictures made in the Albertian mode may, however, symbolically imply (and hence represent) someone or something beyond the frame of the picture. Unlike the concept of a Keplerian picture, there is nothing in the concept of an Albertian picture that necessarily implies anything beyond the frame.


32. Kendall Walton appeals to representationalist visual theory in support of his argument that the viewers of photographs literally see through them to the objects they depict. He writes, for example, “I don’t mind allowing that we see photographed objects only indirectly... One is reminded of the familiar claim that we see directly only our own sense-data or images on our retinas. What I would object to is the suggestion that that indirect seeing... is not really seeing, that all we actually see are sense-data or images or photographs.” Ibid., p. 253.


34. Indeed, Richard Wollheim notes that the earth’s curvature as it appears in vision from such heights is represented in the painting. See Richard Wollheim, Painting as an Art, chap. 3.

35. Wittgenstein’s later Philosophical Investigations, Part II, section xi is the locus classicus for the notion of aspect-perception.

36. Richard Wollheim, Painting as an Art, p. 81. It is worth noting that Wollheim uses two to illustrate his description of these experiences.

37. Indeed, a good deal of nineteenth-century photo-
graphic art is clearly created in the Albertian mode. Henry Fox Talbot, Peter Emerson, Gustave Rejlander, Henry Peach Robinson, Roger Fenton, Lady Hawarden, and Fred Holland Day are just a few notable names from the history of photography who pursued a more or less Albertian mode of photographic picturing.


39. In this respect we should recall that photography is a distinctly technological medium among the other fine arts. One sense in which this is so follows from the large amount of scientific knowledge and machinery necessary for the invention and use of the medium. The more important sense of technology relevant to photography, however, concerns the relation between technology and increase in our capacity to do things. Patrick Maynard develops this latter line of thought about photography as a technology in *The Engine of Visualization* (Cornell University Press, 1997).

40. My own view is that the truth of the matter lies between these positions and remains to be fully explained.

41. In preparing this paper, I have benefited from the comments of a number of people. Particular thanks go to Patrick Maynard, Gregory Currie, Gordon Graham, and the other participants at a one-day seminar on aesthetics and technology organized under the aegis of the Center for Philosophy, Technology, and Society at Aberdeen University in the Spring of 1999. Further acknowledgment is owed to an anonymous referee whose helpful comments were of great assistance.