



DOCTORED

The Medicine of Photography in Nineteenth-Century America



Tanya Sheehan



EDUCATING “DOCTORS OF PHOTOGRAPHY”

Medical Models and the Institutionalization of Photographic Knowledge

In his sociological study *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* (1965), Pierre Bourdieu portrays photography as engaged in a process of legitimization that preoccupied its practitioners from the first decades of the twentieth century through the 1960s. Defining its primary social function as the integration of the family and class delineation, Bourdieu observes that the medium existed outside the sphere of cultural legitimacy occupied by the “fully consecrated arts such as theatre, painting, sculpture, literature and classical music.” Such practices, he explains, are “organized according to a particular type of system, developed and inculcated by the school, an institution specifically responsible for communicating knowledge, organized into a hierarchy, through a methodical organization of training and practice.”¹ During the period of Bourdieu’s study—or, as he puts it, “at the very moment when photographic activity is becoming easier and consequently less specific”—amateurs, artists, and commercial photographers all attempted to elevate photography’s status within the cultural sphere by

organizing themselves into distinct groups in which they could communicate to one another the rules of their activity, or the basis of its knowledge.² For those who practiced photography as a profession, this was no easy task. Not only were there significant disparities among photographers with regard to social status, income, business models, and actual practices—the local craftsman toiling in his darkroom, for example, as compared to the orchestrator of a high-fashion photo shoot—but they could not agree on what constituted success in the field of photography. According to Bourdieu’s collaborators, Luc Boltanski and Jean-Claude Chambordeon, these realities of the photographic profession stemmed from the fact that formal training was not legally required to gain access to it—neither “the possession of the most basic state diploma . . . nor attendance at a school, nor even apprenticeship with a photographer.”³ This, along with fears of an amateur threat, would become one of the few points of cohesion for the profession as it worked to legitimize its practices.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, or what we might call the initial period of photography’s professionalization and institutionalization in the United States, commercial portrait photographers similarly came together around the issue of education. This group faced not only a lack of strictly regulated, state-mandated instruction but quite often an absence of training in studio practices altogether. As the leaders of the Philadelphia photographic community would regularly observe between the 1860s and the 1880s, this state of affairs lay “at the root of all photographic ills.”⁴ It accounted for perceptions of portrait photographers as “dabsters” and “Cheap Johns,” as Henry Snelling once described the untrained men who filled the “photographic ranks,” rather than professionals with expert knowledge and specialized skills; it also attracted unrespectable patrons to their studios and thwarted public recognition of photography as a legitimate art or science.⁵ Like other tradesmen who sought to improve their public image and acquire cultural legitimacy in nineteenth-century America, commercial photographers thus called for the formalization of their education by means of national and local societies, trade literature, and schools.⁶ In this way they made valiant efforts to portray themselves as men of high social standing whose work warranted the rigorous preparation required of well-established professions.

As the few histories of early photographic education have shown, the models of organization and learning developed by American painters and sculptors became instrumental to those efforts as early as the 1840s, and remained so through the early decades of the twentieth century.⁷ Within the Philadelphia photographic community, however, comparisons to the institutional practices of the fine arts existed alongside frequent references to the professional activities of medical doctors. Contributing to medicine’s appeal for commercial photographers were the general resemblances between the professional histories of medicine and photography. Modern medical historians have consistently portrayed the period between 1830 and 1880 as one of crisis, as American medicine had degenerated into little more than a trade owing to a proliferation of rival sects and inadequate legal regulation of who was authorized to prescribe and heal. The poor state of medical education up to that time made practitioners of regular or “orthodox” medicine even more vulnerable to criticism of their abilities to cure disease and to attacks on their credibility as authorities on the human body. Through a series

as a typical middle-class studio patron, the mangy dog he brought into the operating room revealed his rural roots and ignorance of proper studio etiquette. Readers of the journal might have enjoyed what had become a common joke both within and outside photographic discourse. Made at the expense of unsophisticated rural Americans, such humor confirmed the unique ability of respectable city dwellers (the ideal consumers of *Arthur's*) to interpret social situations in modern life correctly; it also shows us that this group of readers imagined themselves to be the most appropriate clientele for Philadelphia's finest portrait studios. The city's photographic literature tells us, however, that studio patrons of *all* ages, origins, and social ranks persistently made connections between portrait photography and surgery throughout the nineteenth century, so much so that one photographer reportedly posted the following rule for visitors to his studio: "*Children should not be allowed to form an idea that to be photographed resembles a surgical operation.* The same remark is not inapplicable to adults."³ For many sitters, the *Arthur's* farmer included, this resemblance was encouraged by portrait photographers themselves through their professional rhetoric; even Philadelphia's preeminent daguerreotypists spoke of "operating" on sitters in their studios.

The term "operation" had a number of uses in nineteenth-century Philadelphia that informed its cultural work in the practices and discussions of studio portraiture. It described, for instance, varieties of mechanical and scientific labor, at the same time that it figured prominently in the field of "operative medicine," which included surgery and branches of dentistry whose procedures were based on manual manipulations of the body. Also culturally prevalent was the idea that an "operation" signified a "performance," a "production of an effect" aided by instrumentation, and an expression of "agency" or "action."⁴ Operations were defined, in other words, not only by the tools and methods they employed and the outcomes they produced but by the very fact that they constituted an assertion of power by an operator over the object of his manipulations. More recent uses of "operation" as a critical term suggest additional productive ways of interpreting its historical connotations. Michel Foucault, for example, sees "operations" as processes that are both subject to and expressions of disciplinary control; they embody forms of knowledge marked by order, discrete stages, internal conditions, and constituent elements that, taken together, make up a technology.⁵ Lev Manovich has further defined "operations" as particular conceptual procedures embedded in a technology that are simultaneously "general ways of working, ways of thinking, and ways of existing" in a given culture.⁶

This chapter mobilizes these meanings to understand how, and to what effect, operative medicine became widely associated with posing and photographing sitters in urban portrait studios. While many sitters had objected to the material similarities between photographic and medical operations on the basis of their often painful physical experiences of them since the 1840s, photographers constructed positive epistemological connections between portrait photography and surgery beginning in the 1860s, imagining the ways in which these technologies embodied similar ways of knowing the body in the wake of the Civil War. What was at stake in this discourse of operations was the professional character of the photographer, the particular relationship that portrait photography was to have to the middle class, and the contributions that both operator

and medium could make to the national project of (re)constructing physically and socially fit Americans.

CONSTRUCTING THE PAIN OF PORTRAITURE: PHOTOGRAPHY AS DENTISTRY

Of the countless complaints that Americans reportedly directed at the early practices of studio photography, comparisons to dentistry were among the most common; they were also the most troubling, yet often the most amusing, to commercial photographers.⁷ A satirical want ad published in the *Philadelphia Photographer*, which sought a "party who can sit for their portrait without incidentally comparing the operation to one very often performed in a dentist's apartments," suggests that it was the exceptional sitter who did *not* associate photography with dentistry.⁸ The perceived resemblance, as photographers understood it, represented in large part their patrons' reaction to "the 'thing' of all others that is looked upon with horror . . . [yet] one of the most necessary items of apparatus in the studio"—the posing stand and headrest.⁹ Throughout much of the nineteenth century, American photographers consistently employed posing apparatuses like the one shown in figure 13, which gripped the back of a sitter's head and neck like a vice, supported his spine, and kept him still during the exposure of the plate. According to photographic literature, sitters regularly objected to the anxiety, physical discomfort, and even pain they experienced when posing in such devices; it was on this basis that they likened photographers' posing apparatuses to the instruments of tooth extraction, which were popularly associated in the nineteenth century with physical torture, decapitation, and even death. One year before the publication of "Sitting for a Daguerreotype," for instance, *Arthur's* shared with its readers a "parody" titled "The Dentist's Chair," which describes in verse with comic overtones the experience of a typical patient in that "fearful seat":

'Tis a fearful thing for the listening ear,
Its ominous, rising squeak to hear—
To see come forth from the little drawer,
The weapons of torture, you've bargained for;
[The dentist] scrapes and he cuts, and bores awhile,
Then renews the attack with the horrid file.
No one, though ever so vile, could dare
To wish his worst foe in a dentist's chair.¹⁰

To imagine the experience of sitting before the camera in such terms was, of course, potentially damaging to the commercial success of portrait photography and its operators, since it suggested that both should be avoided at all costs. The very social group that photographers hoped to attract in large numbers to their studios—namely, the middle-class Americans who read "The Dentist's Chair"—would have been especially averse to a technology associated with bodily distress, given that anything from a minor ache to debilitating physical agony challenged notions of respectability. According to the



FIGURE 30 James Cremer, portrait of the Arms family, ca. 1865. Albumen print on *carte de visite* mount. Private collection.

photographic record shows that they generally did. In this way, the technical requirements of the portrait studio supported dominant anxieties associated with mixing different races within the American social body that found popular expression in the Civil War and Reconstruction periods.

A significant exception to the photographic segregation of blacks and whites was the practice of depicting white children with their black caretakers. Rather than express a utopian vision of racial equality, the black skin of the servants literally frames the bodies of these children, allowing them to perform their whiteness. In figure 31, the Philadelphia firm of W. L. Germon made an exposure “proper” to the African American subject, one that ensured that her blackness made visible the social superiority of the white family who commissioned the portrait.⁵⁹ Beyond this peculiar practice, however, the Philadelphia photographic community ascribed a particular urgency to photographic segregation, and indeed to the very practice of portrait photography, when it came to posing white babies. Since the whiteness of the child’s skin ideally functioned as a stable sign of social dominance, its exposure to light both in and outside the portrait studio was an operation that had to be handled with considerable care. Typically posed alone (or with their crudely concealed parents) and dressed in a sea of white clothing, white children were exposed to such a degree that their skin appeared unnaturally light, if not translucent, in the resulting picture. In a conventional *carte de visite* portrait such as figure 32, the child’s left arm is almost indistinguishable from her white dress, both of which function as alibis for the whiteness of her mother, who crouches behind the chair; for (albeit rare) material evidence that this photographer was especially concerned to



FIGURE 31 W. L. Germon, portrait of a servant with baby, ca. 1865. Albumen print on *carte de visite* mount. Private collection.

portray the child as “white,” we need only refer to the note he inscribed to her parents on the verso, which explains that the barely decipherable “spot on her face is in the paper”—that is, not inherent in the subject—and “the picture can be made without it.” In other cases where patrons insisted on a family portrait, as in figure 33, photographers could selectively expose areas of the print to light so as to avoid what one Philadelphia operator described as the “evil arising from difference in exposure.”⁶⁰ Despite such efforts to preserve—one might even say promote—the whiteness of each family member, however, studio photographers generally represented babies as glowing white objects that lacked the corporeal delineation of their darker parents.

With respect to the representation of white children, portrait studio practices in the second half of the nineteenth century thus seem to contradict writing on light and health from the same period, which typically warned parents that their children’s bodies were becoming *too* white, even cadaverous, as a result of insufficient light and air in American cities. Such warnings were common in Philadelphia in the 1870s, when public health officials pointed increasingly to the environmental factors that contributed to the city’s significant infant mortality rate.⁶¹ The few instances in which photography is explicitly mentioned within the literature of phototherapy, however, suggest otherwise. Their authors, in fact, envisioned a scenario in which the portrait studio could be seen as a therapeutic environment for white children by creating a distinction between studio lighting and its visible effects in photographic portraits; that is, they implicitly acknowledged that portraits of glowing white babies resulted *not* from depriving little ones of light but from exposing them to a considerable, and indeed a healthy, dose of the sun’s rays. In an article that was reprinted in several American treatises on phototherapy

and Dr. Sean McNamara. Addressing their potential new patient, actress-comedian Joan Rivers, Dr. Troy opens with a much-rehearsed invitation that sparks a witty exchange punctuated by moments of sentimentality:

CHRISTIAN TROY Tell me what you don't like about yourself.

JOAN RIVERS Are you kidding? Everything. My body's dropping so fast my gynecologist needs a hard hat. But seriously, I was sent to you by Barbara Busberger. She told me you're the best surgeons in Miami . . .

SEAN MCNAMARA So, what exactly . . .

RIVERS (*picking up a framed black-and-white photograph*) I wanna look like her. Joan Alexandra Molinsky. Born in Brooklyn, raised in Larchmont. Graduated from Barnard Phi Beta Kappa.

MCNAMARA (*looking at the portrait*) This is you?

RIVERS That's me. Unretouched. The face and the photograph. I want you to make me look just like that.

TROY Like a four-year-old girl?

RIVERS (*pointing to McNamara*) I think I want you to do the surgery.

MCNAMARA You haven't said what it is yet . . .

RIVERS (*after requiring the pair to sign a confidentiality agreement, she continues*) Okay. Here it is. I've always wanted to have a twin because I wanted to see what I would look like if I had never had plastic surgery. But I don't have a twin. I just have me. So I want you to put me back the way I would look if I had never been Joan Rivers.

TROY I'm confused. Are you asking us to do a complete makeover that would restore your natural appearance?

RIVERS Yes, yes. It'll be career Viagra. I mean, I can bring back all those jokes I used to do about myself before plastic surgery . . .

MCNAMARA Ms. Rivers, with all the work that you've had done it seems like a pretty extreme thing to do for the sake of your career.

RIVERS Well, it's not *just* my career. It's also my grandson, Cooper. We have the most amazing relationship. It's probably the most honest relationship I've ever had with anybody in my whole life. He loves me exactly the way I am.

MCNAMARA So why change?

RIVERS I'm a goddamn lie . . .

It is through the vintage photograph in this scene that *Nip/Tuck* explores its central ontological question: where does one locate truth and beauty in a world of lies? On the face of things, it would appear that both can be found in that portrait, which Rivers describes as if it were her "real" self. Within the picture frame, viewers see the face of a young girl—her smile subtle and sweet, her collared dress simple, her complexion soft and clear, her wavy, light-colored hair tamed by a single barrette. A shot of Rivers holding the photograph up to her face encourages us to recognize a striking contrast between this image of her past and what we observe of her body in the present (see fig. 42 a–c). Through this juxtaposition, the lines of Rivers's cheekbones and nose appear noticeably



FIGURE 42a–c Screen shots from *Nip/Tuck*, season 2, episode 29 (originally aired October 5, 2004, on FX).

angular; her forehead, eyes, and lips, apparently the result of various injections and lifts, seem capable of only the most forced expressions, while her hair, a combination of bleached blonde and browner tones, is arranged in an impossibly regular pattern of upturned waves. Significant changes in costume and makeup, accentuated by the predominance of the color red in her appearance at Troy and McNamara's office, further contribute to our perception of radical difference between the "real" four-year-old child and the surgically constructed woman. We would appear to be presented, then, with a rather naïve notion of the photographic portrait as an embodiment of the subject "as she was," and not as the highly constructed performance of that subject's identity that cultural historians of photography understand it to be. In the context of the scene, however, this idealization of photography as a truth-telling medium has its limits; as Rivers herself acknowledges, the vintage photograph, much like the human face, can be "retouched," or artistically manipulated, to produce a desired image that conforms to ideals of beauty. While she is probably mistaken in assuming that the photograph of young Joan Alexandra Molinsky has *not* been doctored, given the ubiquity of retouching practices since the 1870s, her commitment to seeing it as such supports a reading of her present face as "a goddamn lie."

Much like the participants on American reality makeover television, Rivers seeks to arrive at the "truth" embodied by the untouched photograph through highly artificial technological means. The irony of this scenario and its implications for photographic authority are underscored later in the episode when Troy and McNamara reveal a digital construction of what Rivers will look like after surgery provides her with a more aged appearance. Horrified by the wrinkled, sagging face staring back at her from the computer screen, Rivers decides not to go through with her extreme makeover, proclaiming that cosmetic surgery should be embraced as a "natural" evolutionary advancement. In this spectacular display of new media, obviously presented as a machine-made fantasy of what can/will be, Rivers and her doctors thus find another, and more compelling, truth *in the digital image*, rendering the vision of the analogue photographic portrait—as a marker of the real that initially framed the episode—ambivalent at best. Through this gesture, *Nip/Tuck* nevertheless poses a challenge to both the prophets and the critics of the digital revolution by imagining that analogue photography *and* digital imaging technologies can still connote truth in a hypermediated makeover culture; it is the operable body that lies, the show suggests, and not its medium of representation.

What the examples in this chapter suggest is precisely what many working photographers today acknowledge, implicitly or otherwise—that is, the need to rethink digital photographic authority in relation to contemporary medical culture. This book has sought to begin that process by recognizing the different ways in which the intersection of photography and medicine has constructed the cultural identity of both technologies in relation to the human body for more than 150 years; this, in turn, enables us to read medical models and metaphors as one of the many aspects of digital photographic culture that invokes the medium's chemical past. As the specific forms of the *medicine of photography* continue to evolve in twenty-first-century America, they thus remain indebted to, and at times haunted by, the legacy of Doctor Photo.

APPENDIX: PHILADELPHIA PHOTOGRAPHIC PERIODICALS, 1864–1890



The following periodicals are organized chronologically according to their earliest date of publication. With noted exceptions, they were all published in Philadelphia and distributed to other urban centers in the United States.

Philadelphia Photographer, 1864–88. Edited by Edward L. Wilson. Published in Philadelphia by Benerman and Wilson (1864–87) and in New York by Edward L. Wilson (1887–88).

The *Philadelphia Photographer* was the first photographic periodical published in Philadelphia and quickly became America's premier journal of its kind, an honor it held for the duration of its existence. It began as a monthly publication but was issued bimonthly between 1886 and 1888. From the start, the journal served as the official organ of the Philadelphia Photographic Society (est. 1862), and later of the National Photographic Association (est. 1868) and the Photographic Association of America (est. 1880), printing the proceedings of their meetings and conventions. In the 1870s the *Philadelphia Photographer* absorbed two other photographic periodicals, the *Photographic World* (1871–72) and the *Photographer's Friend* (published in Baltimore, 1871–74). When Wilson's partnership with Benerman ended in 1887, Wilson moved his editorial offices to New York and began publishing the *Philadelphia Photographer* himself. In 1889 the journal was replaced by *Wilson's Photographic Magazine*.

In the journal's first issue, Wilson described its aim as the education of novice and experienced photographers as well as the studio public. The articles in the *Philadelphia Photographer* addressed a range of technical, aesthetic, cultural, and entertaining aspects of photography. Their authors included Wilson himself, American commercial photographers, foreign correspondents, authorities on the fine arts and sciences, and occasionally amateurs and other members of the public.

Each issue began with an "actual" photographic specimen produced by a North American photographer, often a studio portrait, the technical and artistic merit of which was discussed in an editorial comment under the heading "Our Picture." The pages that followed contained primarily original contributions in the form of commissioned essays, letters to the editor, and regular columns, although the journal also reprinted excerpts from other photographic periodicals as well as from the local and scientific press. Each issue concluded with a section titled "Salad for the Photographer" or "Editor's Table,"