

# The Authenticity of Representation and Visual Distortion: Rodchenko's Use of Perspectives in Photographic Portraits

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In his essay *The Paths of Contemporary Photography*, Aleksandr Rodchenko advocates the use of the modern and industrialized perspectives “from the bottom up” and “top down” in photography works to create a new vision that is faithful to the modern people's visual experiences.<sup>1</sup> The artist has highlighted the relationship between the use of these severely skewed angles and the attainment of authenticity for multiple times. This paper aims to examine the effects of the defamiliarizing perspectives on the authenticity of Rodchenko's photographic portraits through the analysis of *Pioneer with a Bugle* (Fig. 1), a portrait of a Soviet socialist Pioneer produced in 1930. In this work, the artist's experimentation with the extremely low viewpoint amplifies the formal distortion and spatial limitation of photography. How does the use of perspective negotiate the two seemingly paradoxical artistic characteristics, authenticity, and distortion? What are the implications of applying this type of experimental viewpoint in a photographic portrait with a strong ideological undertone? This essay will attempt to answer these questions in the following paragraphs.

Many writings on Rodchenko's photography, either by the artist himself or art historians, have discussed how his iconic technique of taking photographs from the bottom-up or top-down is not only an artistic innovation but also an approach to the realness of representation in different aspects. In an article demonstrating his purpose of deploying unusual viewpoints, Rodchenko argues that this type of perspective is the most suitable for documenting the real because they manifest the true visual experiences of an urban resident living contemporary life.<sup>2</sup> The bottom-up or top-down perspectives stand for the new vision rooted in industrialized modern life, where pedestrians have to

frequently look up and down to capture the city's view due to the construction of multi-storey buildings. Another reason Rodchenko prefers the extremely high and low shooting positions is that they help to address the issue of posing and unnaturalness in conventional portraits with mid-level viewpoints.<sup>3</sup> Taking photographs from unusual and unexpected positions stimulates people to get rid of their habitual mode of posing, allowing the photographer to capture their “natural mode,” according to Todd Cronan's analysis of Rodchenko's writings.<sup>4</sup>

While Rodchenko and Todd Cronan focus on how the perspective improves the naturalness of the vision and the human subject being photographed, this essay aims to supplement their discussions by analysing how Rodchenko's utilization of the defamiliarizing perspectives adds to the photograph's authenticity by revealing the distortion inherent in the medium of photography, exemplified by *Pioneer with a Bugle*. The connotation of authenticity here designates the photograph's frankness about its “suspicion of fakery.”<sup>5</sup> Rodchenko's use of the bottom-up perspective in this work exaggerates the image's formal distortion and spatial limitation, avoiding constituting an integral and distinguishable vision of the subject figure. In this way, the photograph breaks what Tom Gunning coins as photography's “truth claim,”<sup>6</sup> the idea that photography is an accurate representation of the photographed object's physical appearance because of its indexicality and iconicity.<sup>7</sup> This illusion of objectivity has been maintained and utilized in conventional photographic portraits, which adopt mid-level perspectives to present an easily readable picture of the human figure that is natural to the eyes. Rodchenko's unsettling abstract and largely skewed vision of the bugler,

1 Aleksandr Rodchenko, “The Paths of Contemporary Photography” in *Rodchenko*, ed. Gerhard Steidl and Peter MacGill (Göttingen: Steidl; New York: Pace/MacGill Gallery, 2012), 2–8.

2 Rodchenko, “The Paths of Contemporary Photography,” 4.

3 Rodchenko, “Paths of Contemporary Photography,” 5.

4 Todd Cronan, “Rodchenko's Photographic Communism,” in *Photography and Failure: One Medium's Entanglement with Flops, Underdogs, and Disappointments*, ed. Kris Belden-Adams (London: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017), 33–34.

5 Tom Gunning, “What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs,” in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, ed. Karen Redrobe Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 39.

6 Gunning, “What's the Point,” 39.

7 According to Gunning, photography's indexicality is assumed as the objective “physical relation between the object photographed and the image finally created.” See Gunning, 39–42.

on the other hand, deliberately transgresses this paradigm of photographic portraits.

This contrast is well manifested when juxtaposing *Pioneer with a Bugle* with Semyon Fridlyand's *Kirghiz Cavalry Fighter* (1937) (Fig. 2), another photographic portrait created in the 1930s. The viewpoint in the latter work is positioned slightly lower than mid-level and to the left of the central point, presenting a view of the young man's face that is somewhere between front and profile. Despite the image's intensely narrow cropping, the traditional three-quarter perspective preserves an intact view of the soldier's face and guides the viewer's attention to it. It also allows a legible representation of the soldier's appearance and identity. All the physical features that are necessary to constitute the identity of a steadfast and allegiant socialist fighter, including the man's determined eyes, his frowning brows, and the tip of the five-point star badge on his cotton cap, are shown. Conversely, Rodchenko's bottom-up viewpoint in *Pioneer with a Bugle* flattens the subject figure to the degree of being undistinguishable. The Pioneer's elongated eyes, nostrils, and lips pack together on the bugler's head, which is squeezed into an uneven ellipse. The bugle's mouthpiece protrudes from the boy's clenched lips, further disrupting the audience's view and making it impossible to imagine the pioneer's countenance. In addition to the extreme abstraction, the image highlights the spatial limitation of the camera by cropping the bugle and the flag in the background abruptly. Compared with *Kirghiz Cavalry Fighter*, Rodchenko's undistinguishable and fragmented work voluntarily gives up being a valid visual identification of the bugler. Its intentional abstraction repudiates the fake naturalness and objectivity in traditional portraiture and reveals the possible photographic distortions despite the medium's indexicality.

The representations of human figures that have been rendered legible and "objective" in photographic portraits with conventional frontal or three-quarter viewpoints, like Fridlyand's *Kirghiz Cavalry Fighter*, provide visual evidence that verifies the presence of a communist ideal that meets the increasing ideological requirement of art during the Stalinist period. As Rodchenko's extreme perspective abstracts the representation of the bugler and prevents viewers from falling into the illusion of "truthfulness" confirmed by photography's indexicality, it also means that the work does not create a socialist persona that is legible, "truthful," compelling, and appropriate, failing to accomplish the political mission that portraits of socialist figures are burdened with. According to Peter Galassi, although the *Pioneer* series manifest the artist's efforts to "remake himself and his work in the image of Stalinism" in terms of its theme and content, art critics still accused the photographs of stylistically deviating from ideological

paradigms.<sup>8</sup> The attack was not limited to the Soviet art circle. In 1932, workers' criticism of the photographs was published by *Proletarskoe Foto*.<sup>9</sup> Based on the fact that the radical perspectives that deform the socialist Pioneers' appearances have been adopted throughout the creation of the *Pioneer* series, we could infer that this type of perspective was a significant stylistic component that leads to the criticism. The viewpoint's deviation from the middle symbolically demonstrates how the work departed from the Soviet society's expected image of socialist figures in the 1930s.

Rodchenko's *Pioneer with a Bugle*, with its twisting perspective, achieves a certain degree of authenticity by acknowledging the inescapable distortion and incompleteness of photography as a mediated representation, as the aforementioned arguments suggest. Yet it is worth noting that to achieve the defamiliarizing effect of this extremely low viewpoint, the photographer is still imprisoned by the dilemma of posing towering over photography's "truthfulness." In a crowd of scouts, the shooting position that is nearly right below the subject figure's chin would be difficult to attain organically. To acquire this bottom-up perspective, Rodchenko probably had to squat beneath the bugler, hold the camera close to the youngster's face, and ask the boy to keep playing the bugle regardless of what he was doing. In other words, the photograph that strives to get rid of "fakery" is still as staged as a conventional portrait, like *Kirghiz Cavalry Fighter*.

With an extremely low viewpoint, *Pioneer with a Bugle* exhibits a disturbingly abstract and fragmented representation of the Pioneer bugler, which radically departs from the clearly distinguishable and seemingly natural vision of the subject figure in traditional photographic portraits. This experimental approach not only brings provocative visual effects but also challenges the idea that considers photographic portraits as an objective visual record of the appearance and identity of the human figure. In this way, the photograph manifests its relative authenticity, which lies in its honesty about its nature as a biased and limited representation, avoiding the illusion of truthfulness embedded in the representation of constructed human identities. This authenticity of bold frankness and transgression is unavoidably at odds with the propagandist function of photographic portraits, which is to serve as visual evidence for the formation of political role models, despite the photograph's socialist subject. Thus, this work embodies two layers of paradox: its relative authenticity in comparison to prior works and the photography medium's unobtainable truthfulness; its efforts to create a communist ideology statement and its failure to construct the appropriate socialist ideal.

8 Peter Galassi, "Rodchenko and Photography's Revolution," in *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, ed. Magdalena Dabrowski, Leah Dickerman, and Peter Galassi (Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 126.

9 Alexander Rodtschenko et al., *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 309–310.

## Figures



**Figure 1**  
Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Pioneer with a Bugle*, 1930.  
Gelatin silver print, 23.5 × 18 cm. New York, Museum of Modern Arts (moma.org).



**Figure 2**  
Semyon Fridlyand, *Kirghiz Cavalry Fighter*, 1937.  
Vintage gelatin silver print, 41.9 × 27.9 cm. New York, Nailya Alexander Gallery.

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