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Impreciseness in Julia Margaret Cameron's Portrait Photographs

Mirjam Brusius

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Julia Margaret Cameron developed her approach to focus in her portraits of the 1860s, when photographic rules and terminology had just begun to be established. Cameron's notion of focus has been discussed largely from the perspective of whether her photographic style was deliberate. This article approaches her work by denying this dichotomy. It argues that Cameron's treatment of focus implies a critique of the photographic image, for it undermines one of the major photographic goals at this time: the rendering of a precise, sharp, accurate record. The truth of Cameron's images lies not in their precision but in the allusion they make to the sitters' characters by blurring their physical form. Impreciseness – the quality of being inexact, ambiguous, nebulous, even out-of-focus – encourages viewers to interact with the images while also revealing the photographic process.

Keywords: *Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–79), David Wilkie Wynfield (1837–87), Helmut Gernsheim (1913–95), Sir John Herschel (1792–1871), out-of-focus photography, nineteenth-century portrait photography, impreciseness*

In 1864, when Julia Margaret Cameron started her career as a photographer, she expressed, in a letter to Sir John Herschel, her desire to:

induce an ignorant public to believe in other than mere conventional topographic Photography – map making and skeleton rendering of feature and form without that roundness and fullness of force and feature that modelling of flesh and limb which the focus I use only can give tho' called and condemned as 'out of focus'.¹

She continued:

What is focus and who has a right to say what focus is the legitimate focus [. . .] My aspirations are to ennoble Photography and to secure for it the character and uses of High Art by combining the real and Ideal and sacrificing nothing of the Truth by all possible devotion to Poetry and beauty. [. . .] Your eye can best detect and your imagination conceive all that is to be done.

In this letter, Cameron identifies two pivotal issues: what was focus supposed to be, and who established photographic standards? Focus can be defined as the technical capacity of a lens simultaneously to render objects that are on different planes. In using the effect of depth of field or depth of focus, the depiction of the space in front or behind the focused image plane can be different in size, depending on the adjustment and the properties of the objective. Focus was something photographers aimed at in the 1850s, but a detailed terminology of photography was only then being formed.² Herschel himself had coined terms such as photography, positive and negative, but what we refer to as depth of field had not been discussed. The medium was not yet theoretically determined, and photographers still did not possess full technical control.

1 – Cameron to Sir John Herschel, 31 December 1864, quoted from Colin Ford, *The Herschel Album. An Album of Photographs by Julia Margaret Cameron Presented to Sir John Herschel*, Wokingham: Van Nostrand Reinhold for the National Portrait Gallery 1975, 140–1.

2 – Heinz Buddemeier, *Panorama – Diorama – Photographie. Entstehung und Wirkung neuer Medien im 19. Jahrhundert*, Munich: Fink 1970, 145.

Figure 1. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Sir John Frederick William Herschel*, albumen print, 1867. London, National Portrait Gallery, P201.

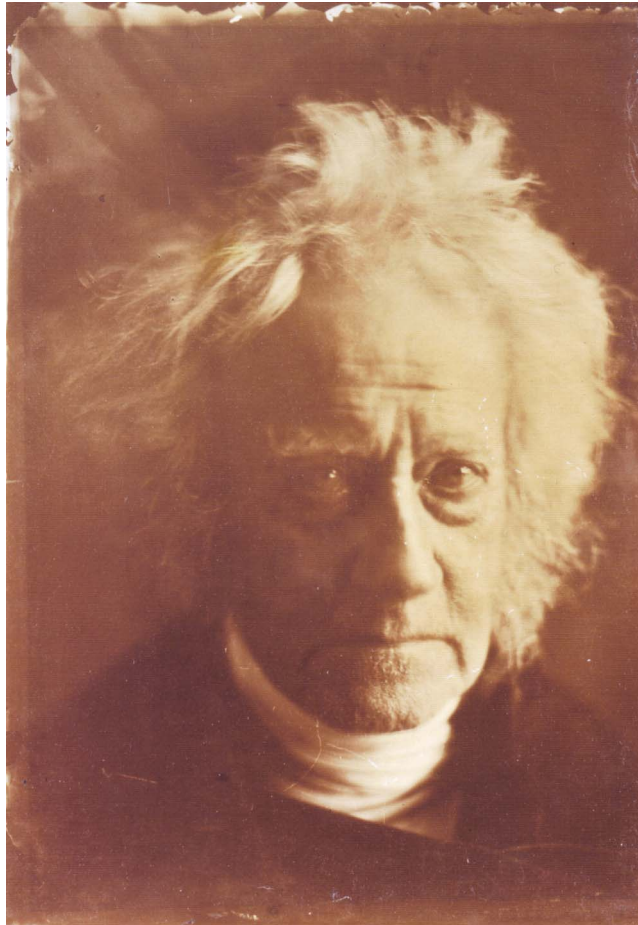
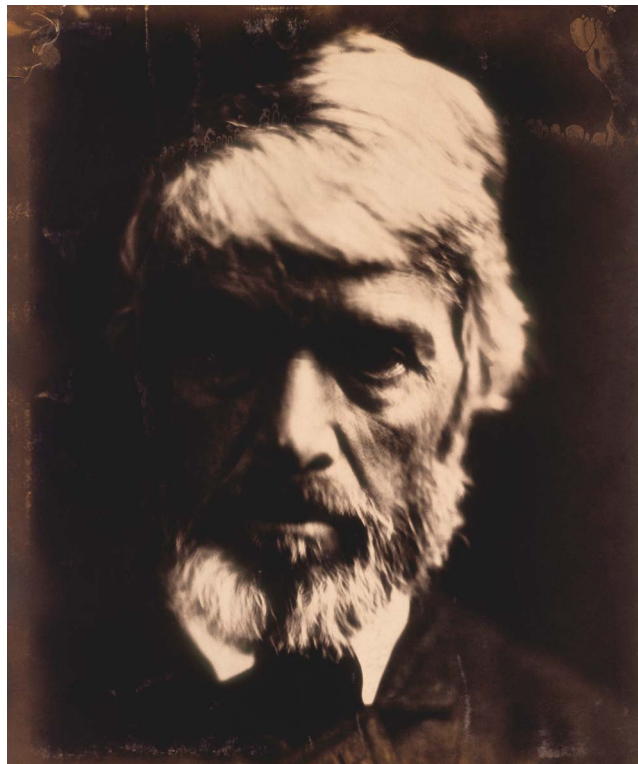


Figure 2. Julia Margaret Cameron, 'Carlyle like a rough block of Michel Angelo's sculpture', albumen print, 1867. National Media Museum/ SSPL (Herschel Album 1984-5017/2).



Herschel was Cameron's lifelong friend and was to admire her photographs precisely for the fact that they seemed to surpass the limits of photography.³ In 1867, when Cameron photographed Herschel, she stretched the notion of focus to the limit.⁴ One portrait depicts Herschel from head to shoulders, turning his head slightly to the left (figure 1). Half the head is lit by a strong light, rendering the hair as an amorphous white mass. The face appears three-dimensional, emerging relief-like from the background. This results from the precise depiction of the chin and the growing imprecision as the eye travels up the face, towards the forehead. The skin, the stubble of the beard and a scar on the chin are so close that they become haptic: yet everything seems remote.⁵ This preciseness is counteracted by the floating white stock at the neck. The visual presence of the chin is reduced towards the lips, the sagging corner of the mouth and the cheeks. The eyes are expressive, despite a reduction of sharpness revealed by the deep wrinkles below the tear sacs and in the section above the nose. The reflections to the right of the pupils give the gaze an ambiguous effect: attention is drawn to the eyes, but the viewer cannot engage with the sitter, for the reflections next to the pupils allude to the studio space, which is reflected in the pupils. The nose and forehead, where the wrinkles appear as if hastily applied, is also imprecise. The hair is an astonishing combination of precise and imprecise elements. On the one hand, we perceive nothing more than a massed form; on the other, single finely detailed strands define the other half of the head. It is striking that the photograph suggests neither a strong interest in the precise depiction of the sitter, nor a conscious use of impreciseness. Instead, Cameron appears to have aimed to capture an impression that could not be captured as a precise and clearly defined moment.

Although sharpness was a common aim among photographers and scientists, what was meant by the term was not at all clear. In connection with 'the microscopic examination of photographs', *Photographic Notes* printed extracts from an 1858 discussion that addressed sharpness as an undefined category.⁶ In a paper read at the South London Photographic Society in 1861, A. H. Wall asked directly: 'Sharpness – What is it?'. Wall observed that for him the term had become associated with hardness and flatness, 'with a dull monotonous surface cut up into paltry little sections by sharp outlines, and the unpleasant and unnatural obtrusiveness of minute details'. Assuming that sharpness was indeed what photographers sought, Wall wondered 'but what is the standard we are to set up for guide in this matter?', adding that the idea of taking photographs 'a little out of focus' could be considered.⁷ Wall's statement remained current some years later in a 'diffusion of focus controversy'.⁸ Cameron's questions clearly challenged the ideal of preciseness and, consequently, contemporary notions of photography.

Cameron had precursors in this thinking among early practitioners and writers on photography. Comparing the daguerreotype with the calotype in 1845, the photographer David Octavius Hill expressed his enthusiasm for the calotype and argued that it was precisely its impreciseness that gave it its mysterious beauty:

The rough and unequal texture throughout the paper is the main cause of the calotype failing in details before the Daguerreotype [...] and it is the very life of it. They look like the imperfect work of man and not the much diminished perfect work of God.⁹

In 1857 Elizabeth Eastlake had written in her influential *Quarterly Review* essay 'Photography': 'Mere broad light and shade [...] give artistic pleasure of a very high kind; it is only when greater precision and detail are superadded that the eye misses the further truths which should accompany the further finish'.¹⁰ Cameron also admired Sir David Brewster, who wrote in an 1867 letter to Antoine Claudet: 'I do not think sharp definition at all necessary; on the contrary, I think it is an evil'.¹¹ In Cameron's immediate circle, Sir William Newton also argued against precision.¹² Art should achieve effects of the sublime, no naturalism, even if realism was part of photography. Thus, we need to approach Cameron's work with this intellectual

3 – See Graham Smith and Mike Weaver, 'A Letter by Julia Margaret Cameron', *History of Photography* 27:1 (Spring 2003), 66.

4 – See Colin Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron. 19th Century Photographer of Genius*, London: National Portrait Gallery 2003, 46.

5 – Walter Benjamin defined aura as 'Ein sonderbares Gespinst von Raum und Zeit: einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag'. Walter Benjamin, 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie', in *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit. Drei Studien zur Kunstsoziologie*, Frankfurt (Main): Suhrkamp 1963, 57.

6 – *Photographic Notes. Journal of the Birmingham Photographic Society*, 3 (1858), 193.

7 – A. H. Wall, 'Sharpness – What is it?', *Humphrey's Journal of the Daguerreotype and Photographic Arts and the Sciences and Arts Appertaining to Heliography*, 13(1861–62), 94–6.

8 – *The British Journal of Photography*, 14:348 (4 January 1867), 2.

9 – Quoted in *Printed Light. The Scientific Art of William Henry Fox Talbot and David Octavius Hill with Robert Adamson*, ed. John Ward and Sara Stevenson, Edinburgh: Scottish National Portrait Gallery 1986, 50.

10 – Reprinted in *Photography: Essays & Images*, ed. Beaumont Newhall, New York: Museum of Modern Art, distributed by New York Graphic Society, Boston 1980, 81–95.

11 – Quoted in Mike Weaver, *Julia Margaret Cameron 1815–1879*, London: Herbert Press 1984, 139.

12 – Photographers should consider photographing out of focus, 'thereby giving a greater breadth of effect, and consequently more suggestive of the true character of nature'. Sir William Newton 1853 quoted in Julian Cox: "'To Startle the Eye with Wonder and Delight". The Photographs of Julia Margaret Cameron', in *Julia Margaret Cameron. The Complete Photographs*, Los Angeles: Thames and Hudson 2003, 50.

13 – *Macmillan's Magazine*, 33 (February 1876), 372.

14 – See Juliet Hacking, *Princes of Victorian Bohemia: Photographs by David Wilkie Wynfield*, London: National Portrait Gallery 2000.

15 – Cameron to William Michael Rossetti, 23 January 1866, quoted in Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 36.

16 – For Cameron's techniques and possible role-models, see Ford, *The Herschel Album*, 20; and Julian Cox and Colin Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron. The Complete Photographs*, Los Angeles: Thames and Hudson 2003, 46.

17 – M. H. Stephen Smith, quoted in Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 36.

18 – Anonymous, 'Fine Arts', *Illustrated London News*, 44 (19 March 1864). Quoted in Joanne Lukitsh, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, Rochester, NY: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House 1986, 13.

19 – See Colin Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron. A Critical Biography*, Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum 2003.

20 – Cameron to Herschel, 25 October 1858, quoted in Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 42. See also Ford, *The Herschel Album*, 18.

21 – See Smith and Weaver, 'A Letter', 66. On Michelangelo's *non-finito*, see Herbert von Einem, 'Unvollendetes und Unvollendbares im Werk Michelangelos', in *Das Unvollendete als künstlerische Form*, Bern and Munich: Francke 1959, 71; and Werner Koerte, 'Das Problem des Nonfinito bei Michelangelo', *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, 7 (1955), 293–302.

22 – Quoted from Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron. 19th Century Photographer of Genius*, 50. Alberta Gnugnoli considers the light to be responsible for the three-dimensional quality of the Carlyle portrait. Alberta Gnugnoli, 'Famous Men and Fair Ladies: Genius, Creativity and Beauty in the Portraits of Julia Margaret Cameron', in *Strange Sisters. Literature and Aesthetics in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford: Peter Lang 2009, 125–35.

23 – Julia Margaret Cameron, 'Annals of my Glass House' (1874), in Beaumont Newhall, *Photography: Essays and Images*, London: Secker & Warburg 1980, 137.

24 – On the notion of *Unschärfe*, see Bernd Hüppauf, 'Die Wiederkehr der Unschärfe', *Merkur*, 659 (March 2004), 211–19; and 'Zwischen Imitation und Simulation: Das unscharfe Bild', in *Bild und Einbildungskraft*, Munich: Fink 2006, 254–77.

context in mind. Furthermore, in a poem of September 1875 entitled 'On a Portrait', she urged the painter of the portrait to 'search the key note [. . . and] find the depths'.¹³

Cameron's style was also anticipated to some extent by the photographs of David Wilkie Wynfield.¹⁴ According to Cameron herself, her success was due to Wynfield: 'To my feelings about this beautiful photography I owed all my attempts and indeed consequently all my success'.¹⁵ In fact, when Cameron exhibited her work at the Photographic Society of London, a critic noticed that the pictures were made after 'Mr Wynfield's method'.¹⁶ M. H. Stephen Smith described Wynfield's style as follows: 'His method was to adjust the camera slightly out of focus, which softened and did away with the stereotyped hard look of the professional photography of the day. He also gave his plates a special preparation'.¹⁷ In respect to Wynfield, a critic praised the aesthetic qualities of the photographs, which looked like paintings and were close to human visual perception. It is curious that these qualities were observed long before art photographers turned them into an artistic programme.¹⁸

The assumption of the normality or otherwise of preciseness was also embedded in Cameron's everyday existence, for aberrations of vision were common in her family.¹⁹ According to another letter from Cameron to Herschel, her family members suffered from amblyopia ('lazy eye'): 'Very unaccountably it has happened that with every other child there has been some infirmity of vision'.²⁰ Cameron's oldest son may have had restricted vision in the left eye, whereas the third boy appears to have been astigmatic. The youngest son was blind in one eye. Although there is no evidence that Cameron herself had vision problems, the fact that several family members did suggests that focus may have had diverse connotations for her.

In Cameron's portrait of Thomas Carlyle, the head almost fills the picture (figure 2). Carlyle looks into the camera, something we can tell only by examining the left eye. The border between lightness and darkness is on the bridge of the nose. This border is not as clear in the beard and hair, but it is here that the degree of impreciseness is most apparent. Although the beard is close to the camera and the impreciseness is revealed through the depiction of individual hairs, Carlyle's magnificent head of hair is blurred and melted into an indefinable mass. Unlike the cheeks, the bridge and point of the nose hardly reveal the internal structure of the skin. Except for the facial structure, the rest of the head is like a rustic boss. This is enforced by Cameron's title, 'like a rough block of Michel Angelo's sculpture'.²¹ By comparing Carlyle's portrait with a block by Michelangelo, Cameron may have had in mind the idea that the sculptor's lack of finish made possible the visualisation of an idea. In the case of Cameron's portraits, we need to ask whether they would have gained, had they been 'completed' by the camera. Michelangelo's tension between the idea and the hand becomes for Cameron a tension between the idea and a machine. Cameron's Carlyle is similar in several respects to Michelangelo's sculptures: in the attempt to make the idea visible through materiality, the art work would have failed, because the idea would have exceeded the material. The hidden truth, which can only be perceived by its concealment, lies in suggestion. Carlyle described his photographic session as disastrous, but he considered a portrait 'worth a dozen biographies'.²² When Cameron took the photograph, Carlyle was mourning his wife's death. For Carlyle and for Cameron, the confrontation with the camera was a considerable challenge: 'When I have such men before my camera, my whole being should have endeavoured to do its duty towards them in recording faithfully the greatness of the inner as well as the features of the outer man'.²³ In her portrait of Carlyle, Cameron succeeded in rendering his vulnerability in addition to his strength and obstinacy. Imprecision permits ambiguity and makes visible Carlyle's complex and contradictory character.²⁴

In a frontal portrait Cameron made of Sir Henry Taylor in 1867 (figure 3), the head of the writer fills the major part of the image. Taylor grips his beard and hereby reveals his face. In this portrait almost nothing is in focus. Through the impreciseness, single dots and lines, which would be discrete and separate if in focus, are bunched to a single device. The wrinkles of Taylor's left eye, which is more illuminated than the right

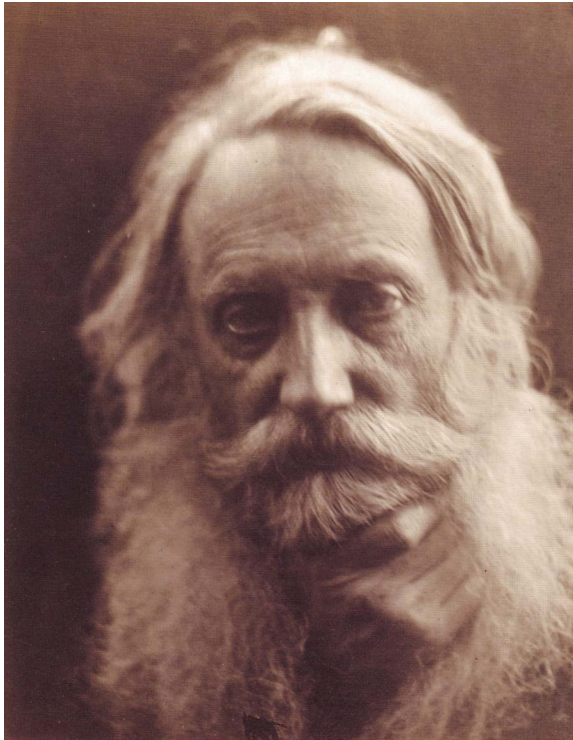


Figure 3. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Sir Henry Taylor*, albumen print, 1867. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 84.XM.443.9.

eye, and the bristly hair of his moustache gain in intensity. The effect of this photograph contradicts the belief of the pictorial photographer Willi Warstat, according to whom impreciseness (*'Unschärfe'*) needs to be used, to contract and simplify small and inessential details.²⁵ Cameron does exactly the opposite: through the 'contraction', the concentration of unsharp details like strands of hair, the imprecise parts of the photograph are not simplified but emphasised. Taylor's gaze is concealed and conveys the great age of the sitter. The concentration of features described above is enforced here; the use of impreciseness functions as a concentration of Taylor's features and his personality. The imprecision in Cameron's photographs lends the sitters an unusual and intense gaze. Cameron considered the eyes as windows of the soul. But her interest in human physiognomy even exceeded this idea. Her pursuit was grounded in an aesthetic concept, which was based on deliberate impreciseness.

Cameron's portraits in general are now renowned for their soft, unfocused quality. This is understandable if we consider them in the context of the experimental state of photography in the 1860s. On the other hand, if we consider the ideals of picture-making held by photographers and critics at the time, Cameron's practice appears surprising. Photography was typically driven by the aspiration to produce an exact picture, but Cameron's portraits do the opposite. The content of her photographs results from the freedom of a particular time, in which clarity was the exception and confusion the rule.²⁶

Twenty-five years earlier, the primary message of photography had been to demonstrate its operability.²⁷ Photographs were about photography, and the content of photographs seemed less important. Technical and terminological standards were only developing slowly. We need therefore to consider Cameron's attitude to focus within this context. The ideal of exactness was challenged even before it had a chance to establish itself.²⁸

As early as the 1850s, the first advocates of impreciseness appealed for a circumvention of the mechanism of the camera.²⁹ Photography was striving for preciseness and accuracy; this was exactly the reason why they had to be sacrificed and replaced by features that were more common in painting and drawing. Despite her critical awareness, Cameron's style was not a rejection of the goals of the time. In as much as sharpness had not been fully established and impreciseness was still a

25 – 'Indem sie das kleinste und unwesentliche Detail zusammenzieht und vereinfacht'. Willi Warstat, *Die künstlerische Photographie. Ihre Entwicklung, ihre Probleme, ihre Bedeutung*, Leipzig: B. G. Teubner 1913, 36.

26 – Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums*, Oxford: Berg 2001, 1–22.

27 – Peter Geimer, 'Photographie und was sie nicht gewesen ist: photogenic drawings 1834–1844', in *Wahrnehmung der Natur, Natur der Wahrnehmung*, Dresden: Verlag der Kunst 2001, 137.

28 – Bernd Busch, *Belichtete Welt. Eine Wahrnehmungsgeschichte der Fotografie*, Munich and Vienna: Hanser 1989, 300.

29 – Wolfgang Ullrich, 'Unschärfe, Antimodernismus und Avantgarde', in *Ordnungen der Sichtbarkeit. Fotografie in Wissenschaft, Kunst und Technologie*, Frankfurt (Main): Suhrkamp 2002, 384; and idem, *Geschichte der Unschärfe*, Berlin: Wagenbach 2002. See also Franz Schiffner, 'Zur Geschichte der künstlerischen Photographie', *Photographisches Centralblatt*, 3 (1898), 434–41 and 451–56; and Robert De la Sizeranne, 'Ist die Fotografie eine Kunst?' (1897) in *Theorie der Fotografie I, 1839–1912*, Munich: Schirmer Mosel 2006, 212–18.

30 – Peter Geimer, 'Was ist kein Bild? Zur Störung der Verweisung', in *Ordnungen der Sichtbarkeit*, 313–41.

31 – Buddemeier, *Panorama – Diorama – Photographie*, 46; and Charles Baudelaire's letter to his mother, quoted in Michel Schneider, *Baudelaire. Les années profondes*, Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1994, 13 and 14.

32 – Joanne Lukitsh identifies a change in meaning of the term 'out of focus' in the 1870s. Joanne Lukitsh, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, Rochester, NY: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House 1986, 67.

33 – Quoted in Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 46.

34 – Peter Henry Emerson, 'Mrs Julia Margaret Cameron', *Sun Artist*, 5 (1890), 36.

35 – Helmut Gernsheim, *Julia Margaret Cameron. Her Life and Photographic Work*, London: Fountain Press 1948, 21.

36 – Helmut Gernsheim, *Julia Margaret Cameron. Her Life and Photographic Work*, London: Fountain Press 1975, 70.

37 – Lindsay Smith challenges Gernsheim's position. Lindsay Smith, 'The Politics of Focus: Feminism and Photography Theory', in *New Feminist Discourses. Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, London: Routledge 1992, 238–62. See also, idem, 'Further Thoughts on the Politics of Focus', in *Gendered Territory: Photographs of Women by Julia Margaret Cameron*, Austin, TX: University of Texas 1996, 13–31.

common accompaniment of the photographic developing process, the nature of Cameron's imprecision cannot be easily defined. Her work can be situated between error and deliberate impreciseness used as a visual style.³⁰ Even before the critique of photographic detail became explicit, Cameron understood the value of omitting details in a photographic portrait. While she was concerned with establishing photography as a new form of art, the end of the nineteenth century generated movements whose aims were to understand photography in the tradition of painting or to make imprecise images that were meant to remind of human visual perception. Cameron's strategy did not anticipate the principles espoused by American, British and Austrian Pictorialists at the end of the nineteenth century. 'In' or 'out of focus' were not to be clearly established categories until the end of the nineteenth century, when they became parameters in determining whether photography would be an art.

The rejection of detail in the second half of the century mainly concerned photographic portraiture. The organic nature of the face appeared paralysed by the mechanic nature of the camera. Some physiognomic detail, which when perceived in reality appeared natural, turned out to be a mischief on the image.³¹ Cameron's portraits offer an opportunity to explore impreciseness and to draw conclusions with regard to the genre of portraiture.³²

Cameron's photographs were taken when photographers aimed to meet the standard of sharp images. The camera, however, would often fail in this attempt. Of one of her early photographs, Cameron said: it was done 'under circumstances of experiment – [. . .] no adjustment of light – every door & window closed, fire lit inside the room – ice & snow outside – 4 min[utes] sitting'.³³ Long exposures were one reason for the difficulty in fixing a sharp image. Nevertheless, it was not the only reason for impreciseness in Cameron's work.

To approach the question of focus, we have a considerable amount of material, consisting of the photographs, Cameron's own comments on the matter and knowledge about technical difficulties at the time. In brief, discussion of Cameron's photographs falls into two parties: one considered the impreciseness to be deliberate, whereas the other regarded it as accidental.

Cameron's first lens was a 'Jamin', made in Paris. Initiated by the photographer P. H. Emerson, an advocate of photographic impreciseness, which he called fuzziness and based on the idea of a mimesis of visual perception, the lens was later examined by the lens maker T. R. Dallmeyer. His examination resulted in the conclusion that Cameron would not have had the possibility of obtaining a sharp image with the kind of equipment she was using.³⁴ This argument, based on technical matters, was taken up during the Cameron revival in the twentieth century.

Helmut Gernsheim was first to claim that imprecision in Cameron's photographs was accidental. He based his argument on the technical equipment Cameron used and on her ineptitude in operating it. In the first edition of his book on Cameron, he considered Cameron's first photographs – with very few exceptions – to be failures, 'either altogether out of focus, or partly out of focus, or [. . .] unsharp, due to the sitter's movement. All copies show that the plates have been handled with extreme carelessness'.³⁵ He continued:

Mrs Cameron was so obsessed by the spiritual quality of her pictures that she paid too little attention to whether the image was sharp or not, whether the sitter had moved, or whether the plate was covered with blemishes. Even if she dropped and cracked the negative she would still make prints from it and boldly send them to exhibitions, when any other photographer would have discarded the picture. Lacking training, she had a complete disregard for technical perfection.³⁶

In fact, the opposite was the case, for Cameron paid considerable attention to whether the image was sharp. Gernsheim's statement is also tautological, for the 'spiritual quality' he mentions may have been the reason for Cameron's sympathy with technical imperfection: she would not want to render her sitter precisely to achieve 'spiritual quality', an act of imperfection in Gernsheim's view.³⁷ According

to Gernsheim, Cameron's question was merely an expression of ignorance towards technical perfection.³⁸ Cameron had in fact reported having problems with adjusting the focus with the camera, as is evident from her statement: 'My son, Harding [Hay Cameron], being on his Oxford vacation, helped me in the difficulty of focussing'.³⁹

Gernsheim agreed with the widely accepted view that Cameron pursued a style that had initially happened accidentally. Nevertheless, he argued that Cameron was convinced by her artistic talent and deliberately omitted focusing, while she failed to notice that precise photographs would have been technically impossible. For Gernsheim, Cameron's statement – 'That is to say that when focussing and coming to something which to my eye was very beautiful, I stopped there instead of screwing on the Lens to the more definite focus which all other Photographers insist upon' – is evidence of her lack of technical knowledge and naivety.⁴⁰ It would, however, also explain the different stages of impreciseness in her work that would consequently testify her attempts to focus the picture.

This paper argues that Cameron's quotation serves neither as an argument for an accidental blurriness nor as support for a controlled manner of focusing.⁴¹ Gernsheim may indeed have been correct to argue that a sharp image was technically impossible. But, most importantly, it should be noted that Cameron was conscious of the act of omission. For her, it was immaterial whether the camera rendered the service of focusing.

On the one hand, the focus question appears more intricate than scholars have seemed to claim; on the other, it appears less complex than one might assume. In order to embrace the problem, we need to adopt an attitude that does not seek precision within the artistic creative process. Instead, we must take an approach that draws no clear lines between aesthetics and techniques but accepts that the two can be complementary. Executing a focused photograph might have been impossible for Cameron, but what is most important is that she chose to use positively her own possible lack of knowledge *and* the limitations of the camera.

For Cameron, the lens of the camera was a living thing: 'it has come to me as a living thing, with voice and memory and creative vigour'.⁴² It is fallacious, therefore, to take too seriously the question of how much the camera was involved in the imprecision process. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile understanding which technical device would have made a sharp image possible when Cameron obtained new equipment in 1866.

If the lens was the initial reason for imprecision in Cameron's work, it may have been difficult for her to achieve a focused picture.⁴³ It is unclear whether she could have avoided 'error' when she obtained a Rapid Rectilinear lens by Dallmeyer.⁴⁴ Emerson certainly understood why Cameron handled even her new equipment as she did:

It was therefore impossible for Mrs Cameron to get what is technically known as the 'sharpest focus'. Still, having learnt from this experience, in after years she did not work with the sharpest focus obtainable with the Rapid Rectilinear Lens. Having produced out-of-focus results at first by accident, she was artistic enough, and so well advised, that she determined to imitate that effect; a determination fulfilled later on when she became possessed of an 18 by 22 Dallmeyer Rapid Rectilinear Lens – one of the triumphs of Photographic Optics.⁴⁵

Gernsheim remained convinced that Cameron's results had never been intentional. Nonetheless, in the revised edition of his monograph he acknowledged:

If we examine the portraits closely we find that the most important parts, i.e. the eyes, on which she focused, are usually best defined; receding parts, a hand or a book closer to the camera than the face, are unsharp, sometimes giving the picture the appearance of her having deliberately introduced a differential focus.⁴⁶

Cameron's new lens was suitable for 18 x 22-inch plates.⁴⁷ This enabled her to enlarge the sitter and to magnify the subject.⁴⁸ Consequently, the effect had been enforced. Exposure times were long, lasting between 3 and 7 minutes, but Cameron did not use headrests or special lighting. Sitting was therefore a challenge for the sitters.

38 – Gernsheim (1975), *Cameron*, 70. See also William Russell Young, 'The Soft-focus Lens and Anglo-American Pictorialism', PhD thesis, University of St Andrews 2008, 38.

39 – Cameron, 'Annals', 135.

40 – See Gernsheim (1975), *Cameron*, 70–76; and Young, 'The Soft-focus Lens', 38.

41 – See, for instance, Amanda Hopkinson, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, London: Virago 1986, 100.

42 – Cameron, 'Annals', 135.

43 – See Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 42.

44 – Gernsheim (1975), *Cameron*, 73; and Young, 'The Soft-focus Lens', 28.

45 – P.H. Emerson, 'Mrs Julia Margaret Cameron', *Sun Artists*, 5 (1890), 37. The issue of 'diffusion of focus' was discussed in 1866 in the *British Journal of Photography* and found a highlight in the announcement of Dallmeyer's new portrait lens on 21 December 1866 as it allowed a high resolution. See Weaver, *Cameron*, n. 70.

46 – Gernsheim (1975), *Cameron*, 71 and 73.

47 – Ibid., 73; and Young, 'The Soft-focus Lens', 28.

48 – Cox, "'To Startle the Eye with Wonder and Delight'", 63.

49 – Gernsheim (1975), *Cameron*, 71.

50 – *MacMillans' Magazine*, London (January 1866). Cited in Gernsheim (1975), *Cameron*, 64 and 69. See also Sylvia Wolf, *Julia Margaret Cameron's Women*, Chicago: Yale University Press 1998, 33.

51 – See Gernsheim (1975), *Cameron*, 71. Young's main argument is also based on technical details, when arguing against the idea that Cameron used impreciseness deliberately. In his chapter on Cameron, Young focuses on a detailed examination of the technical possibilities of Cameron's photographic equipment. See Young, 'The Soft-focus Lens', 39.

52 – Cox, "'To Startle the Eye with Wonder and Delight'", 50. Gibbs-Smith also argues that Cameron could have changed her technique had she not been satisfied with the results of her work. See Charles Harvard Gibbs-Smith et al., 'Mrs. Julia Margaret Cameron, Victorian Photographer', in *One Hundred Years of Photographic History. Essays in Honour of Beaumont Newhall*, Albuquerque 1975, 70–76. See also Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art 1964, 64, who regarded the effect as deliberate, and Wolf, *Cameron's Women*, 33.

53 – Gernsheim (1975), *Cameron*, 73.

54 – For a contrary view, see Young, 'The Soft-focus Lens', 39.

55 – *Ibid.*, 35 and 39.

56 – Regarding Cameron's early use of impreciseness, it seems unjustified that P. H. Emerson is called the father of artistic impreciseness; probably due to his theoretical work he published. This was also criticised in Wolfgang Kemp, *Theorie der Fotografie I, 1839–1912*, Munich: Schirmer Mosel 2006, 19–20. For Emerson's use of impreciseness, see Nancy Newhall, *P. H. Emerson. The Fight for Photography as a Fine Art*, New York: Aperture 1975; John Taylor, *The Old Order and the New. P.H. Emerson and Photography 1885–1895*, Munich: Prestel 2006; Mirjam Brusius, 'Die Schärfe der Unschärfe. Typologie eines Stilmittels in der frühen Photographie', MA thesis (Magisterarbeit) Humboldt-Universität Berlin 2007, 26–36.

57 – For gender aspects in the reception of Cameron's work, see Carol Armstrong, 'Cupid's Pencil of Light: Julia Margaret Cameron and the Maternalization of Photography', *October*, 76:1 (1996), 114–41; and Smith, 'The Politics of Focus', 238–62.

58 – Henry Herschel quoted in Gernsheim (1975), *Cameron*, 71; and Weaver, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 138.

For Gernsheim, the imprecision was typically caused by the long exposure times and the movement of the sitter.⁴⁹ The long focal length that Cameron required for the bigger plates reduced the depth of field – this was more pronounced the closer Cameron approached the sitter. Working with an open aperture would have been a necessity. Thus, Gernsheim believed that even the later pictures were not the result of a deliberate artistic intention. He believed that Cameron's later photographs were even technically improved; only in some cases, due to a certain impression in the face of the sitter that she wanted to capture, was she too impatient to focus. It was this 'improvement' – which never led to entirely precise images – that suggested to Gernsheim that when Cameron obtained her new equipment the possibility of achieving a precise image was much higher. Impreciseness, however, had already become her artistic hallmark. Some contemporaries recognised this: 'Mrs Cameron was the first person who had the wit to see that her mistakes were her success, and henceforward to make her Portraits systematically out of focus'.⁵⁰

If Cameron had had a clearly formulated interest in a technically more controlled way of obtaining 'unsharp' photographs, she could have obtained a Dallmeyer soft-focus lens, a lens that the lens-maker built in 1866 and which enabled extreme preciseness easily.⁵¹ Gernsheim's argument goes, once again, round in circles. As Julian Cox argues, Cameron could have changed her working methods as well as her equipment to achieve technical perfection, had she been displeased with the impreciseness: 'Had she been dissatisfied with the indeterminate, selective focus that she settled upon, she could have modified her equipment or sought an alternative method of working, but her choice was very consciously made'.⁵² Cameron did neither. Some prints suggest, as Gernsheim argued, she was still using her old camera when she bought the new ordinary but high-quality Dallmeyer lens.⁵³

Cameron had realised from the beginning that the strength of her work was based on her individual style and ignorance of conventions. Her idea was precisely not to achieve impreciseness with a special soft focus lens, which would have by no means served her aesthetic standards.⁵⁴ Rather, she wanted to use an ordinary lens and reveal the possibilities of manipulation of a typical camera. If the camera was 'a living thing', the message lay not only in the image, but also in the operability of the apparatus.

Statements claiming that Cameron refused to buy a soft focus lens and professional equipment or that lack of motivation to achieve a perfect picture are therefore circular; so too are those that claim that focusing was deliberate. None of these statements is incorrect; nor do they make sense as discrete arguments. What we are dealing with is the compound artistic intention of a photographer who swam against the tide. Cameron's attitude implies that she cared less about technical perfection than about the right moment. Taking this into account, it is questionable to regard her use of impreciseness as accidental. It is also inappropriate to neglect Cameron as a leader in imprecise and out-of-focus photography,⁵⁵ often ignored by advocates of a history of photography merely interested in a teleological historiography of the medium.⁵⁶ Approaches conveying the image of a technically ungifted woman who had to ask her male friend Herschel about focusing are only extremely positivistic and limited.⁵⁷ They fail to take account of ideas of artistic intention, ideas that are grounded in an interplay of technique and imagination, two components that might initially conflict and contradict each other but that can also enter into a dialogue.

Cameron's son described his mother's artistic goals clearly and precisely:

It is a mistake to suppose that my mother deliberately aimed at producing work slightly out of focus. What was looked for by her was to produce an artistic result, no matter by what means. She always acted according to her instinct; if the image of her sitter looked stronger and more characteristic out of focus, she reproduced it; but if she found that perfect clearness was desirable, she equally attained it.

'In photography, as in other art', he continues, 'the process is nothing, the final result everything'.⁵⁸

The fact that Cameron repeated numerous imprecise motifs appears to confirm that her goal was not to correct imprecision. The so-called ‘reverse prints’ provide examples of this practice. In 1867 Cameron photographed her favourite sitter, her niece Julia Jackson, for two series. These comprise laterally reversed prints from the negative as well as multiple prints and reverse prints of positives.⁵⁹ There are at least two negatives for the two series. In the first print of the second negative, the light comes from the right and illuminates the sitter’s face (figure 4).⁶⁰ The print reveals pores and wisps of hair. Cameron made a reverse print of this first positive (figure 5).

59 – See Wolf, *Cameron’s Women*, 70–4. Three works are known for which Cameron used this technique.

60 – Ibid., 74. Wolf identifies this print as the original print as the side with the emulsion of the paper and the one of the negative produced a sharp image when contacted.



Figure 4. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Julia Jackson*, albumen print, 1867. V&A Images/ Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 361-1981 or The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.



Figure 5. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Mrs Herbert Duckworth*, albumen print, 1867. London, National Portrait Gallery X18016.

Figure 6. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Stella*, albumen print, 1867. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, 964:0037:0133.



Consequently, the light comes from the left, Julia's face is less precise; the structure of the skin is no longer visible. Flaws like fingerprints and scratches are still visible, elements that confirm that this print is a copy of the first one. Cameron made two more reverse prints of this print. The precision of the first print decreases within this series: the facial features merge into another. The fixed, frontal gaze moves more and more into the interior of the sitter, until it is merely a trace of its original appearance. The more the image is reversed, the more the hair becomes an impression of hair. On the last reverse print, Julia is almost ghost-like (figure 6). Julia Jackson was Cameron's favourite sitter because she felt that all facets of her personality were mirrored in her photographs.⁶¹ This might apply especially to the last two of the four prints. At the same time, Cameron must have been disturbed by the harshness of the first print. The reverse prints have their own aesthetic, different from other works by Cameron. While the works described earlier are intriguing because of their strong contrast of preciseness and impreciseness, the photographs with a flat and homogeneous imprecision covering the entire image tend to lose their overall impression.⁶² Being a different technique, with qualities independent of the optical devices, the imprecise and nebulous character creates the impact of the 'reverse prints'.

Cameron became a member of the Photographic Society of London in 1864, and her work became controversial immediately. Judgements ranged from 'admirable, expressive and vigorous' to 'dreadfully opposed to photographic conventionalities and properties'.⁶³ Some critics admired the photographs for their originality but attributed this to ignorance of photographic conventions. Although Cameron won international prizes, the Photographic Society observed:

In these photographs, we conceive, Mrs Cameron does herself and the art she employs alike injustice. Slovenly manipulation may serve to cover want of precision in intention, but such lack and such mode of masking it are unworthy of commendation.⁶⁴

Although Cameron exhibited successfully at the Royal Photographic Society, a critic judged: 'Unfortunately her technical skill was not equal to her artistic ability, and many otherwise fine productions were marred by defects in photographic manipulation'.⁶⁵

61 – Wolf, *Cameron's Women*, 75.

62 – This could be observed when looking at the original prints where the loss of tonal value through fading reduced the contrast between preciseness and impreciseness and the image lost its original impression. Other works by Cameron, which had always been completely imprecise, do not have the same intensity as the works with more contrast.

63 – *Photographic Notes*, 9 (1864), 171.

Quoted in Gernsheim (1975), *Cameron*, 62.

Roddy Simpson provides an excellent selection of reviews reflecting the controversial reactions towards Cameron's work within the Photographic Society of Scotland. See Roddy Simpson, 'Julia Margaret Cameron and the Photographic Society of Scotland', *History of Photography*, 28:1 (Spring 2004), 86–7.

64 – *The Photographic Journal* (October 1865). Quoted in Gernsheim (1975), *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 63.

65 – Anonymous critique quoted in Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 84.

Philip Gilbert Hamerton, an important nineteenth-century critic, did not think photography was competitive with other forms of art. However, the type of photography that came closest to his ideal was Cameron's: 'Mrs Cameron deflated the obtrusiveness of photographic detail by putting her subjects out of focus, which gave them a massive breadth not unlike the gloom and obscurity of some old pictures'.⁶⁶ Other critics praised her chiaroscuro, and still others regarded it as liberating that photography could free itself from precision:

[Cameron's] productions are made 'out of focus' as the technical phrase is, and although sadly unconventional in the eyes of photographers, give us hope that something higher than mechanical success is attainable by the camera. Added clearness, the recent aim of operators, will no more give artistic aim to photography than added finish does to a picture, and, as with painters who have sacrificed all to finish, modern photographs are, artistically speaking, little more than diagrams; they are as such, mostly out of scale.⁶⁷

In a letter of 3 August 1862, written while he was visiting Cameron on the Isle of Wight, Lewis Carroll recalled:

In the evening Mrs Cameron and I had a mutual exhibition of photographs. Hers are all taken purposely out of focus – some are very picturesque – some merely hideous. However she talks of them as if they were triumphs in art. She wished she could have had some of my subjects to take out of focus – and I expressed an analogous wish with regard to some of her subjects. The next two or three days were very enjoyable, though very uneventful. I called on Mrs Cameron on Monday and told her I felt rather tempted to have my camera sent down here – there are so many pretty children about – but that it was too much trouble, and instead, I asked if she would photograph for me (in focus) the prettiest two.⁶⁸

Despite Carroll's respect for Cameron's work and his assumption that the imprecision was deliberate, these lines are astonishing. By asking Cameron to take photographs for him 'in focus' he reflects the oddness of impreciseness at the time, while also respecting that imprecision had become Cameron's style.

Dirt, dusk particles, fingerprints and hair on the photographic surfaces often contributed to Cameron's lack of clarity. When examining original prints, historians often face the problem of fading. This makes problematic assessments regarding the original appearance of the images.⁶⁹ In short, it is sometimes difficult to judge whether surface blemishes are original features or have been caused by time.

Prints in an album that Cameron presented to Herschel in 1864, 'with a grateful memory of 17 years of friendship', show scratches and blots caused by the application of the varnish.⁷⁰ Compared with these prints, other photographs by Cameron often seem clean. 'Annie, my first success' is a good example, for we can find three different prints from the same negative in the Herschel, Thackeray and Overstone Albums. The Herschel Album is particularly well preserved, and so we can assume that imperfections were caused by Cameron herself. Research for this article was therefore based as far as possible on prints in this album.⁷¹

Julian Cox has identified traces left by Cameron during her working procedure by meticulously examining a negative portrait of George Warde Norman.⁷² Cox observes that, judging from the fingerprint on the bottom lower-right corner, Cameron held the negative there. She spread the collodion clockwise, missing an area in the upper left corner. Small dots around the head area were caused by the preparation of the plate with degraded silver nitrate. After exposure, Cameron skipped parts of the upper left and right when developing the picture. Some dirt reached the coat of the sitter on the photograph; consequently the development became flawed. After having fixed the image, Cameron varnished the print, omitting two areas on the lower right. By the time this negative was made, Cameron had already gained photo-technical experience, and so it would have been easy for her to remove or avoid these errors. This was, however, not her primary concern: she accepted the visibility of traces of the working process rather than relinquish

66 – Philip Gilbert Hamerton, *Thoughts about Art*, London: Macmillan 1973, 64.

67 – Anonym, "Out of Focus", *Athenaeum*, 6 (1864), 779–80. Translation: *British Journal of Photography* 11:6 (1864), 261. See the counter-argument (ibid.): '[. . .] If the critic in question knew anything practically of photography he would not surely insinuate that photographs ought to be "out of focus" in order to be effective. If the principles he seems to advocate be true, surely we have no need of first class opticians to construct our objectives'. For a critique and reviews, see Lukitsh, *Julia Margaret Cameron*; Ford, *The Herschel Album*, 18 and 22; and Gernsheim, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 62.

68 – Lewis Carroll, Morton N Cohen and Roger Lancelyn Green, *The letters of Lewis Carroll*, Vol. 1 ca.1837–1885, London: Macmillan 1979, 66–7.

69 – Geimer, 'Was ist kein Bild?', 315. For fading, see Larry J. Schaaf, 'Introduction "Brief historical sketch"', in William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (1844), facsimile, New York: Kraus 1989, 38.

70 – Quoted in Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 46.

71 – 'The Herschel Album', National Media Museum, Bradford, UK, No. 1984–5017, reproduced in Ford, *The Herschel Album*. The Herschel Album contains a collection of collodion prints, the reproduction of which was difficult. The 'carbon prints' of Cameron's original negatives, which were made after 1870, were easier to produce as unwanted liquid remains could be removed. These prints, many of which are in the collections in the National Portrait Gallery and the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, seem 'flat' and 'perfect' and lose the impression the earlier prints have.

72 – See Cox, "'To Startle the Eye with Wonder and Delight'", 48.

Figure 7. Julia Margaret Cameron, *The Vision of Infant Samuel*, 1865, albumen silver print, 24.3 × 21.3 cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Overstone Album 84.XZ.186.87.



aesthetic qualities. It could be argued that the latter priority does not exclude the former. In opposition to Gernsheim's opinion that the 'carelessness with which Mrs. Cameron sometimes handled her pictures unfortunately does not add to our appreciation of them',⁷³ it may be asserted that those 'erroneous' prints are precisely the ones that are extraordinary and intriguing. The inscription of the photographic process gives the photographs their auratic quality – at least for the modern viewer. Had Cameron been dissatisfied, she would surely have avoided some of the 'errors' to please Herschel. Instead, she chose precisely these prints for his album.

Other prints show varnish that she had left on the glass plate as a result of her habit of experimenting during the development process. Also, the filmy, imprecise effect was sometimes caused by the deliberate separation of the paper from the negative in the printing frame. In many photographs the motif seems to merge with the material, as can be observed in *The Vision of Infant Samuel* of 1865 (figure 7).⁷⁴ Here, the border between the outline of the photographed objects and the photographic emulsion can barely be made out. We cannot tell whether it belongs to the materiality of the medium or to the referent. The photograph, however, does not lose aesthetic appeal but gains through the amalgamation of subject and photographic surface. Cameron had carefully manipulated *The Vision of Infant Samuel*. As Julian Cox observed, she evoked the dream-like condition of the child by brushing on the collodion in the upper part of the negative and scratching the glass.⁷⁵

Cameron was interested in outlines. This testifies to her comprehension and understanding of photography as a graphic art of expression. She scored lines on the negative and painted the collodion until the image satisfied her standards, acting as if she was a painter developing a study with further drawing. Despite her interest in the graphic arts, Cameron sought 'suggestion' instead of description, refusing the mere 'cartography' of facial features. The complexity and variety of the human face were to be modelled and shaped with the help of focus – for this reason Cameron compared her portraits with the work of a sculptor, a comparison that she, alongside the relief, found more appropriate than a comparison with a painter.⁷⁶

The ability of photography to influence this spatial arrangement and the visual depiction of space turned focusing ever since into one of the most striking characteristics of the technology. Thus, space in photography is defined by the distribution of focus and unfocused areas.⁷⁷ By focusing particular areas and leaving others unfocused, Emerson sought to understand this spatial aspect of photography as

73 – Gernsheim (1975), *Cameron*, 73.

74 – Illustrated in Cox and Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 53, figure 37.

75 – Cox, "To Startle the Eye with Wonder and Delight", 52. See *ibid.*, 54 for a critical approach of Cameron's manipulation in the contemporary photographic press.

76 – See Hopkinson, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 22.

77 – See Smith, 'The Politics of Focus', 238–62 (esp. 242); and Kirsten A. Hoving: 'Flashing thro' the Gloom: Julia Margaret Cameron's "Eccentricity"', *History of Photography*, 27:1 (Spring 2003), 45–59 (esp. 55).

mimesis of visual perception. Thus the distribution of preciseness and impreciseness is a matter of planes and space. He hereby took the spatial meaning of focus in photography and contemporary theories on visual perception into account.

When we look at Cameron's work, its connection with visual perception is not obvious. We need to ask whether Cameron worked with focus to create a photographic space that is related to our usual visual perception. Examination of the images confirms that this is not the case: like an anamorphosis in a geometrical space, the imprecise parts in the photograph seem to be detached from spatial order. The gaze of the observer is not stopped on the part of the image, where the body of the sitter is depicted, but is unusually directed. Our gaze moves over the surface of the image, the structure of which counteracts our viewing patterns and the familiar rules of geometrical perspective with features like concave backgrounds, especially when the focus is in the back of the picture. Cameron has not made a decision for the observer. Her photographs live of their own topology – the geometrical space is neglected. The sitter takes up most of the image; he or she is the subject of the image. The sitters' garments melt with the background, their faces step out of the image. The observer is irritated because Cameron's photographs create their own spatial order, which are by no means connected to human visual perception. Cameron's enhancement of the image space lends the photographs a structure like a relief. The photograph *Iago, Study from an Italian* of 1867 is one of the best examples of the relief-like structure as the face literally grows out of the image surface.⁷⁸ The facial features, most notably the chin, are shaped by the emphatic use of focus and appear like silhouettes against the soft, imprecise parts on the neck. It is indefinable where the body of the sitter can be placed in space in relation to his head. The body seems to drift in its own distant space.

With her photographs, Cameron met the desire of many people who were disappointed by the preciseness of photography when they came to photographic studios in order to obtain portraits of themselves or family members. In the studio, resemblance, likeness and accuracy could not easily replace the desire for expression. This expectation was to be a great challenge for photographers.⁷⁹ Cameron's statement that she stopped the negative when something beautiful caught her eye⁸⁰ explains better than anything else why her portraits feature a variety of different types of imprecision, why preciseness and impreciseness merge in their photographs and why both components can also appear without another. Focus was to be used like the stroke of a painter, the shadows of a draughtsman and, above all, like traces of the carving by a sculptor.

Georges Didi-Huberman has described the tension that exists between pleasure and discontent when viewing an image that depicts every detail, writing that an image that shows everything can cause disaffection because it makes it impossible to imagine what might be the content of the image.⁸¹ Such images leave no space for the imagination.

Cameron's impreciseness can be viewed in this context. It is the omission of detail that enables the viewer to understand the sitter's character.⁸² In essence, imprecision creates space that the observer can fill with his imagination.⁸³ Or, to put it slightly differently, Cameron's lack of clarity empowers the photograph as a mediator and reminds the observer of this role.⁸⁴

Cameron's impreciseness reduces the motif in favour of the autonomy of the photograph. This means that the visual devices do not depict anything but themselves. As Philippe Dubois observes:

Chacun sait en effet que plus le grain d'une épreuve est visible, plus l'image est floue et mal définie, plus les contours s'estompent, plus s'installe un trouble figuratif. Voir les grains implique une sorte de rapprochement du regard, comme si l'on agrandissait à l'excès la texture, comme si le regardeur se plongeait dans l'image, à ce point proche d'elle qu'il ne peut plus percevoir, au-delà d'un certain seuil, que la trame elle-même, le pointillisme pur, informe et aléatoire bien en deçà du motif.⁸⁵

78 – Illustrated in Ford, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 116.

79 – Buddemeier, *Panorama – Diorama – Photographie*, 87.

80 – See Gernsheim (1975), *Cameron*, 70–6.

81 – Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image. Question posée aux fins d'une histoire de l'art*, Paris: Les éditions de minuit 1990, 40.

82 – See Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens*, Munich: Fink 1976, 257; Wolfgang Iser, *Die Appellstruktur der Texte*, Konstanz: Universitätsverlag 1974; Hans Dieter Huber, 'Leerstelle, Unschärfe und Medium', in *Unschärferelation. Fotografie als Dimension der Malerei*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz 2000, 84–7; Christiane Kruse, 'Vera icon – oder die Leerstellen des Bildes', in *Quel Corps? Eine Frage der Repräsentation*, Munich: Fink 2002, 15–129 (esp. 105); and Ulrike Lehmann, 'Ästhetik der Absenz – ihre Rituale des Verbergens und der Verweigerung', in *Ästhetik der Absenz. Bilder zwischen Anwesenheit und Abwesenheit*, Munich: Klinckschardt und Biermann 1994, 42–73.

83 – Kruse, 'Vera icon', 121.

84 – See Friedrich Kittler, 'Signal-Rausch-Abstand', in *Materialität der Kommunikation*, Frankfurt (Main): Suhrkamp 1988, 342–59 (esp. 344); Michel Foucault, 'Message ou bruit', in *Dits et écrits*, Paris: Gallimard 1994, 557–60; and Sybille Krämer, 'Das Medium als Spur und als Apparat', in *Medien Computer Realität. Wirklichkeitsvorstellungen und Neue Medien*, Frankfurt (Main): Suhrkamp 1998, 73–94.

85 – Philippe Dubois: *L'acte photographique*. Paris: Editions Nathan 1990, 101; for

Antonioni's 'Blow up', see Peter Geimer, 'Blow Up', in *Der liebe Gott steckt im Detail. Mikrostrukturen des Wissens*, Munich: Fink 2003, 202. See Busch, *Belichtete Welt*, 302–4.

86 – See Andreas Haus, 'Fotografie und Wirklichkeit', *Fotogeschichte*, 2:5 (1982), 5–11.

87 – Benjamin, 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie', 52. Translation: 'The procedure itself caused the models to live, not *out of* the instant, but *into* it; during the long exposure they grew, as it were, into the image'. See also Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'empreinte*, Paris: Ed. du Centre Georges Pompidou 1997.

88 – For the hybrid nature of photography around 1850, see Jens Jäger, 'Das Wunder toter Nachahmung? Diskurse über Photographie um 1850', in *Von selbst. Autopoietische Verfahren in der Ästhetik des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin: Reimer 2006, 199–217 (esp. 205 and 210–16).

89 – See Jäger, 'Das Wunder toter Nachahmung?', 215.

90 – See Hermann Vogel's claim that the photographic plate was indifferent: 'Der Platte ist alles gleichgültig'. Hermann Vogel, *Die chemischen Wirkungen des Lichts und die Photographie in ihrer Anwendung in Kunst, Wissenschaft und Industrie*, Leipzig: Brockhaus 1874, 125. Quoted in Peter Geimer, "'Nicht von Menschenhand". Zur fotografischen Entbergung des Grabtuchs von Turin', in *Homo pictor*, Munich: Saur 2001, 156–72 (esp. 172).

The inscription of the photographic material had been an accompaniment of photography since its inception. The uncertainties in the early years of photography led to an awareness of the medium before the emphasis on the motif. Errors and imperfections being normal, photography was first of all photography.⁸⁶ In most cases, it was not even clear how to define what one saw: was it part of the object that was rendered or part of the photographic process? When viewing Cameron's photographs, we are presented with similar questions.

Benjamin's notion of aura emphasised the technical deficiency of early photographs due to their long exposure times: 'Das Verfahren selbst veranlasste die Modelle, nicht aus dem Augenblick heraus, sondern in ihn hinein zu leben; während der langen Dauer dieser Aufnahmen wuchsen sie gleichsam in das Bild hinein'.⁸⁷ Cameron used impreciseness to provide her sitter with traces of authenticity – a device that is inherent in the sitter and in the medium. She restricted the photograph's ability to create a mimetic image in favour of impreciseness. The portraits allude to the sitters, even though they do not depict them in entirety. In her work, photography results from an autopoietic procedure that depends on chance, on the one hand, and is the product of artistic inspiration, on the other.⁸⁸ Despite increasing control of the apparatus, surprise remained an important element in the process. This enabled it to become a wonderful, versatile medium. This might have been different had it been technically successful from the beginning.⁸⁹ Impreciseness is therefore a normative element in Cameron's photographs. At the same time, she presents a new kind of space, one that shows that the camera sees in its own way. Having understood that the reflection of reality cannot be achieved by photography, Cameron produced images that did not adhere to the standard of realism. She counteracted the apparent indifference of the photographic surface even before it succeeds in meeting the requirements to render reality.⁹⁰ Her photographs attest to the failure of photography objectively to depict reality. In Cameron's world, photography could become art only by giving up the requirement to depict absolutely the real world.