

LOOKING

Topic The philosopher of art Kendall Walton believes that photographs have a property he calls ‘transparency’. He believes that when you look at a photograph of an object you are literally looking at that object. The photograph is ‘transparent’ because you see right through it to the object itself. If we talk of seeing objects through binoculars and glasses, why not say that we can see them through photographs?

Dominic McIver Lopes goes one step further and argues that when we look at a drawing or a painting of someone, we are literally seeing that person. When you look at, say, Leonardo’s Mona Lisa, you are not seeing a depiction of Lisa del Giocondo but Lisa del Giocondo herself!

This lesson addresses these ideas through the story of Perseus and Medusa.

Props A drawing of Medusa and a mirror

Action 1 Tell the story of Perseus of Medusa. In brief, Perseus was told that the only way he could save his mother from being forced to marry King Polydectes – a man whom she didn’t love – was by decapitating Medusa and bringing Polydectes the head.

For the sake of his mother he embarked on this perilous mission knowing full well the legend of the serpent-haired Medusa: whoever looked her in the eye was petrified by her ugliness and turned instantly to stone.

Present a drawing of Medusa.

- *Question 1* If Perseus looked at a drawing of Medusa, would he turn to stone?
 - When he looks at a drawing of Medusa, is he looking at her?
 - Is she present in her portraits?

Action 2 Pretend that you have a photograph of Medusa in your pocket which you are reluctant to show the class lest they calcify.

- *Question 2* If Perseus looked at a photograph of Medusa, would he turn to stone?
 - When he looks at a photograph of Medusa, is he looking at her?
 - ‘He can’t possibly be looking at her because in the photograph she is only 5cm tall but in real life she is over 5ft tall.’ Is this a good argument?
 - Is she present in her selfies?

Action 3 Hold up a mirror to the class.

- *Question 3* If Perseus looked at the reflection of Medusa, would he turn to stone?
 - When he looks at the reflection of Medusa, is he looking at her?
 - Is she present in her reflection?

You can explore the audio analogue of the mirror question by discussing echoes: if you hear the echo of a person's voice, have you heard the person's voice? If you hear both the voice and the echo, have you heard two sounds or one? Do the answers offered here equate to the answer given in the case of looking at a visual reflection? If not, what's the difference? To further explore the similarities or differences, you can ask whether listening to a recording of a person's voice constitutes listening to the person's voice. Again, if the answer here does not equate to the answer given in the corresponding question regarding the photograph, why not? What's the difference?

Action 4 Finally, using the mirror to experiment with, you can explore the implications of answering 'no' to the previous questions by asking –

- *Question 4* Have you ever seen your face?
 - Is it possible for Medusa to turn herself to stone?
 - Is it possible for an eye to see itself?