

Photography

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The study of photography is a fast-changing and multifarious enquiry with philosophical significance in aesthetics, art, epistemology, ethics, semiotics and image-theory. The object of study is not simply “the photograph”, but a group of evolving practices: primarily the production, storage, distribution and viewing of photographic images. Photography is a family of technologies able to fulfil functions such as detection, reproduction, recording, depiction and “manifestation” (Maynard 1997, 2010) and these functions are realised in diverse processes, for example: camera-less photograms; negative-positive printing using paper, glass or film; video stills; and digital data recording. These are studied alongside processes that are not strictly photography but employ associated techniques, such as image-capture through virtual “ray-tracing”.

As a medium, or perhaps as a collection of media, photography is acutely responsive to technological developments in camera design and image distribution – innovations often driven by popular, commercial and scientific photography. In these contexts older methods of photographic production and viewing have been largely superseded by digital cameras and electronic display screens. In the art world, by comparison, production methods still reflect the full history of photography, with artists choosing to work with daguerreotype, cyanotype and salt-printing as readily as using “emulator” technology designed to simulate the effects of these techniques in digital post-processing.

Theory and Philosophy: Photography from two perspectives

In *Photography Theory and Art History*, an extensive body of writing about photography employs semiotics, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and cultural theory, particularly Marxism and Feminism. Writers with particular influence in this field include André Bazin, Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes (Kriebel 2007, Bate 2009, Bull 2010). In the *Philosophy of Photography*, a smaller body of literature addresses different concerns: pictorial representation, epistemic authority, scepticism regarding artistic agency and the ontology of photographs. In this field the views of Roger Scruton and Kendall Walton have generated extensive debate (Walden 2008). The limited extent of exchange between these two fields of study reflects the more generalized lack of contact between approaches often labelled “continental” and “analytic”. However, there is considerable potential for exploring areas of common interest: for example *Automatism and Agency* (Costello, Iversen and Snyder 2012) aims to open dialogue between these fields of study. In this collection of essays, theorists and philosophers

respond to a dualism that is central to both fields: the automatism of mechanical photographic apparatus and the agency of photographers creating art.

Stephen Bull (2010) has argued that the critical reception of photography is marked by several theoretical dualisms. Photography as a natural phenomenon is posited against photography as the product of cultural construction; the modernist idea of a pure medium-specific essence contends with post-modernist critique of the possibility that photography has an essential identity; the principle that photographs are objective documents of what lies in front of the camera stands against the view that photographs are governed, consciously or unconsciously, by the photographer's subjectivity. Along with others (Batchen 1997, Edwards 2006, Ritchin 2009), he recommends that these dualisms should be positively recognised as integral to the medium of photography (Bull 2010: 13, 186).

Costello and Phillips (2009) have suggested that contemporary debates in the philosophy of photography are shaped by foundational intuitions namely: that the photographic production process is, in some sense, "automatic"; that the resultant images are, in some sense, "realistic"; and that the realism of photographs, in some sense, depends on the automatism of the photographic process. These intuitions generate intractable problems when key concepts such as "automatism" and "agency", or "causation" and "intentionality", are construed in a "zero-sum" opposition. In one such opposition, discussed below, the realism of a photographic image is considered to rule out any capacity for fictional representation. Addressing the central philosophical problems requires clarification of how dualisms of this kind have become entrenched in the critical reception of photography and it remains an open question whether each dualism can indeed be positively recognised or otherwise needs to be contested. To this end, there is much to be gained from looking to the perspectives offered by both theory and philosophy.

Realism, Transparency and Pictorial Representation

The concerns that feature centrally in analytic aesthetics of photography arise from a particular framework of enquiry. Photography, as a relative newcomer of less than two hundred years' history, is held up to comparison against long-established forms of pictorial representation such as drawing and painting. An overriding objective for philosophers has been to determine whether or not images produced by photography are different in kind to pictures produced by drawing or painting. Difference in kind may provide a basis for claiming that photographs have distinctive aesthetic and artistic potential, but equally for claiming that photographs are deficient in qualities exemplified by those pictures traditionally acclaimed as art.

In many different forms, it has been suggested that photographs and hand-made pictures bear fundamentally different relationships to reality. Through the intentional

activity of a human agent, hand-made pictures can depict objects and events that are real or imagined. By comparison it is supposed that photographs are not dependent on the intentional activity of a human agent, but record only the appearance of real objects and events. When it is said that photographs are more “realistic” than other kinds of picture, this can mean that photographs are causally related to real objects at a moment in time, but also that a photographic image visually resembles those objects with great detail and accuracy. These two ideas feature separately or in combination in many accounts of photography. The comparison just sketched and the two ideas about “realism” that emerge from it need to be subjected to scrutiny.

According to Kendall Walton, realism is what makes photographs different in kind to hand-drawn pictures and photographic realism is in part explained by the property of “transparency” which photographs acquire in virtue of the mechanical photographic process. The metaphor of “transparency” has been commonly used to indicate a defining property of photographs, as well as an associated claim about the distinctive experience of viewing photographs. In general, the term suggests that a photographic image stands in a special relation to the world such that a person viewing the photograph is in some sense able to “see through” the photograph to view the photographed scene itself. Since the publication of “Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism”, transparency has become primarily associated with Walton’s specific thesis (Walton 1984).

Walton argues that transparency enables the viewer of a photograph to have genuine “perceptual contact” with the photographed objects – this contact is the same natural kind as seeing the world in a mirror or through a telescope. In order for a picture to be transparent, it must fulfil two necessary conditions: (i) the picture must be counterfactually dependent on the photographed scene entirely independently of the beliefs or intentional attitudes of the picture maker (Walton 2008: 100) and (ii) the structure for discriminating similarities and differences by means of the picture must correspond analogously to the structure of perceiving the world (Walton 2008: 107). Unlike either hand-made pictures, which fail the first condition, or mechanically generated descriptions, which fail the second condition, photographs are said to fulfil both necessary conditions for transparency and we literally “see through” photographs to the photographed objects. Walton does not claim that these are sufficient conditions for transparency and does not need to, as his aim is simply to provide the basis for a difference in kind between photographs and hand-made pictures that nonetheless puts photographs in the same category as mirrors and telescopes.

In epistemic debate, Walton’s transparency thesis has encountered substantial opposition (Warburton 1988, Cohen & Meskin 2004). In defence, Walton insists that transparency is a matter of object-perception rather than knowledge acquisition (Walton 2008: 113, 130) and that his project is not to analyse “seeing” in its ordinary sense, but, rather, to introduce an extended category of perceiving which includes both

seeing and “seeing-through-photographs” (Walton 2008: 111). Although the second condition of transparency is for “real similarity relations” between seeing the world and seeing the world through the photograph (Walton 2008: 107), Walton believes that even a “fuzzy and badly exposed snapshot” can put us in perceptual contact with the world (Walton 2008: 109). In this regard his account of photographic realism is not primarily concerned to show that photographs are more accurate and detailed sources of information than hand-drawn pictures; instead it is to defend the intuition that photographs provide a valuable experience of causal connection that hand-drawn pictures cannot offer.

Walton’s thesis is properly appreciated when understood in the context of his theory of art as “make-believe” (Walton 1990). We directly “see” the photograph and we indirectly “see” the photographed objects. But we can imagine, or “make-believe”, that our experience of indirectly seeing the object is an experience of directly seeing the object and in this way photographs can generate richly interesting fictions within “games” of make-believe (Walton 1990: 329-331). Thus although Walton claims that photographic realism delivers genuine perceptual contact with reality, he is not forced to claim that the viewer of a photograph is restricted to perceiving the real world. In this way, against accusations to the contrary from Noël Carroll and Gregory Currie, Walton has claimed that his transparency thesis does not preclude a photograph from being a representation (Walton 2008: 126). He confirms that “as Patrick Maynard puts it, a photograph may be a *photograph* of one thing, but a *depiction* of something else” (Walton 2008: 114).

Walton’s attempt to show that transparency is compatible with depiction will prove significant because in analytic aesthetics, pictorial representation is considered the most pressing challenge for photography. In a minimal sense it seems obvious that photography can produce representational images – photographic images typically have a striking visual resemblance to photographed objects, yet we can see an object in the photograph without being under any illusion that the photograph is that object. But if all photographs are representational in this minimal sense, the challenge that remains is to show how some photographs can sustain aesthetic interest. In “Photography and Representation”, an article that has sustained over thirty years of intense debate, Roger Scruton contends that photographs cannot be representational art because it is never possible to take aesthetic interest in a photograph *qua* representation (Scruton 1981). For Scruton, the principle that a photograph has a merely causal relation to real objects rules out any possibility that the artist could use the medium to express thoughts about the subject matter. Instead, when we view an image strictly with the understanding that it is a photograph, our interest is necessarily confined to the appearance of the photographed objects.

Dominic Lopes notes that Walton’s transparency thesis might be thought to give additional weight to Scruton’s sceptical argument if formulated as follows: “if seeing a

photograph is seeing the object photographed then any aesthetic interest taken in seeing the photograph as a photograph is an interest in seeing the photographed object" (Lopes 2003: 441-442), but he argues that this misconstrues transparency and he aims to show that a proper understanding of transparency can be the basis of aesthetic interest in photography. Lopes argues that "seeing an object through a photograph can arouse an interest not satisfied by seeing the same object face-to-face" (Lopes 2003: 442). On the one hand, seeing an object through a photograph makes it possible to see the object with greater clarity, accuracy and truthfulness than face-to-face seeing and, on the other hand, photographs can make it possible to see revelatory or unfamiliar features that we could not see face-to-face with the object. He claims that these two dimensions are the basis for a "documentary aesthetics" grounded in transparency (Lopes 2003: 445). However, Lopes's conclusion comes with a significant concession: he claims that both hand-made pictures and photographs are capable of being transparent pictures, so transparency offers no reason to think that photography offers a distinct kind of aesthetic experience (Lopes 2003: 446-7).

David Davies claims that an important aspect of Scruton's sceptical argument is not addressed by Lopes's analysis. He argues that it is not enough to establish that "seeing a subject through a photograph" differs from seeing the objects face-to-face. Scruton's argument requires that it must be possible to take an interest in both "the thought expressed about the subject" and the "manner in which this thought-content has been expressed through the manipulation of the medium" (Davies 2009: 348) in such a way that it is possible to recognise the artist's intentions correctly. Thus the challenge is to "explain how the photographer can embody in her photograph not only her way of viewing the subject, but *that* this is her way of viewing of the subject" (Davies 2009: 350). Davies uses ideas from Rudolf Arnheim and Henri Cartier-Bresson to construct a response. Nonetheless, against these and other critical replies, Scruton has recently reaffirmed his original view that representational art, properly understood, sets a demanding standard that photography is unable to meet (Scruton 2009).

Although few philosophers endorse Scruton's full-blooded denial of the possibility of photographic depiction, many have conceded that photography is inherently limited as a representational art form (e.g. Jones 1985: 374-375). Photographs, it is argued, are fictionally incompetent because they are incapable of depicting unreal, or imaginary, subject matter – or can merely achieve this through derivative means. Gregory Currie says he will argue that photographs "are capable of representing unreal things" (Currie 2008: 266) but in fact he argues that photographs are only capable of representing unreal subject matter by "use", in the same way that a pepper-pot can represent-by-use the position of a general in a battle. Currie denies that a photograph has the capacity to represent anything unreal by virtue of the process that went into its making. The process of producing a photograph means that it may only "represent-by-origin" the photographed source, determined by a causal relationship. By contrast a painting can "represent-by-origin" anything imagined by the painter. This illustrates how the

argument for a difference in kind between photographs and paintings can lead to the conclusion that photographs are an inferior species of picture. The idea that a photograph has the power to represent the real world is put in a zero-sum opposition with its power to represent anything unreal. Notably, Currie's conclusion fails to advance beyond Scruton's sceptical position, as Scruton is equally willing to accept that a photograph can represent only by use (Scruton 1981: 597).

In fact, the seemingly plausible idea that photographs are always representational in a minimal sense is precisely what stacks the deck against accepting photography as representational in any interesting sense. A minimal position takes for granted that any photograph is a representation insofar as it is guaranteed to have a representational subject. The subject of a photograph, it is supposed, is the photographed object – or whatever objects were in front of the camera when light from the scene was recorded. But we should be wary of a guarantee that seems unusually and implausibly strong. For example, Currie claims that a photograph acquires its representational subject just in virtue of its causal relation to the photographed objects, but this leads him to exclude the possibility that a photograph can have anything other than the photographed objects as its photographically represented subject. He states that:

Photographs are devices for producing representations by registering the presence of something – the source – that stands before the lens. That is the photographic means by which representation is achieved. A representation is photographic when it represents by photographic means, and such means confine us to the representation of the source. [...] The limit of photographic representation is what is in front of the camera (Currie 2008: 268-269).

A move of this kind opens the door for scepticism in the forms described above. However, resisting this move can be achieved by denying that the photographed objects are necessarily the "subject" of a photograph. As noted above, Maynard has argued that "what was photographed needs to be kept separate from what is thereby depicted" (Maynard 1997: 231); I have argued that photographs do not have a representational subject merely in virtue of having a causal relation to an object (Phillips 2009); and Peter Alward supports a distinction "between what might be called the pictorial object and the pictorial subject, that is, what a picture is of and what it is about" (Alward 2012: 13). It follows from taking this stand that one must reject the idea that every photograph is necessarily a representation, but this is not to deny that photographs are capable of being representations. Instead it leaves open the fresh possibility of explaining how some photographs are given a representational subject through the manner of their production. Paloma Atencia-Linares (2012) has argued that revising our understanding of the photographic means of production makes it possible to show that photographs are capable of depicting fictional entities.

Scepticism and the Mind-independence of photographs

Scruton's scepticism hinges on his view that photography is not a medium that permits an artist to express thoughts about a representational subject. However, scepticism about the aesthetic or artistic potential of photography does not solely rest on the question of whether a photograph can bear propositional content and whether it can be a representational art form. There are wider concerns raised by the general idea that photographs are inherently mind-independent. In the philosophy of art, the role of an artist's intentionality or agency plays a central role in discussions of the production and appreciation of art. Unlike pictures created through an agent-centred process of drawing or painting, photographs are products of a mechanical or otherwise automatic process that uses the causal action of light to register the appearance of objects without dependence on human intentional states of mind. The automatism of photography raises a host of problems which bring the artistic status of photographs into question. Difficulty arises when we seek a philosophical basis to establish whether a particular photograph counts as art, whether the photograph can rightly be attributed to a particular artist, whether it is possible to offer a correct interpretation of the work and whether there is reason to think that the creativity of the artist can be valued or admired.

Several of these problems are brought together in sharp focus by a device that recurs with frequency in philosophical debates about photography. It is *in principle possible*, this suggestion would have it, that the particular photograph that is being considered as a candidate for art status, for attribution to an author, for interpretation, or for evaluation, could equally have been produced by an accidental or erroneous operation of the camera mechanism and nonetheless exhibit the same properties as the image under consideration. This thought-experiment can afford to stipulate an otherwise implausible sequence of events: the photographer falls asleep just as a squirrel falls out of the tree and triggers the shutter release, and so on. The point is that it creates pressure to concede that every photograph that is the product of artistic agency could in principle have an accidental yet indistinguishable counterpart which is not the product of artistic agency. By comparison, a parallel thought-experiment which results in the accidental counterpart for a painting is easier to reject because, arguably, there can be no such thing as an accidental painting (Currie 1999: 287). A contrast of this kind is presented by Currie:

Paint distributed on a canvas in such a way as to resemble Durham Cathedral but caused by accidental spillage rather than by an intending agent is a fool's painting, and depicts nothing. [...] There can be an accidental photograph, as when the mechanism is unintentionally pressed, or connected to a tripwire with no notion of when and by what it will be triggered. In such a case we end up with an image – a representation – of something no one planned to represent (Currie 2008: 267).

In philosophical discussions of art, whenever the idea that photography is a mind-independent process is used to distinguish photographs from other kinds of image, it more often than not leads to treating photography as the inferior party. The power of arguments that appeal to an accidental counterpart, or that otherwise categorically divorce the photographer from the photograph, stems from willingness to believe that photographs are products of a process that is in essential respects mind-independent. Several philosophers have pointed out that the prevailing “folk psychology” of photography is as important as the facts about photography, perhaps even more so. Meskin and Cohen, Barbara Savedoff and others have claimed that the epistemic or aesthetic power of photographs are better explained in terms of properties that photographs are widely believed to possess, rather than properties that they actually possess (Savedoff 2000, Meskin & Cohen 2008: 76).

For example, Nigel Warburton argues that in the art world it is a matter of convention that a print of a photograph needs to be personally certified by the artist if it is to count as an authentic artwork:

Even if two prints were virtually (or even *actually*) indistinguishable only the one certified by the author would count as genuine or authentic. [...] Only by means of such quality control can we be absolutely certain that a particular print fully embodies the photographer's intentions. [...] The act of conferring status upon a print is one of the ways in which photographers overcome the expressive limitations of a process that is largely automated. [...] Uncertified prints [...] can never be reliable indicators of a photographer's intentions, or at least cannot be *known* to be reliable indicators (Warburton 1997: 134-135).

Warburton's analysis indicates that this existing convention stems from the view that it is necessary for artists to compensate for inherent limitations in the photographic process. It seems that a print which lacks supplementary artistic activity, in the form of some kind of certification, cannot grant reliable access to the artist's intentions for the purposes of authorial attribution, interpretation or evaluation. We might say that only certification can assure us that we are looking at the authentic artwork rather than an accidental counterpart.

The notion of an accidental counterpart can be rendered harmless by developing a more substantive conception of the production of photographs – one which makes the full causal history of production relevant to a comparison between two otherwise similar images. Doing so shows up the difference between cases where the photographer plays a salient role in the “photographic event” that defines the causal history of a photograph and cases where a photographer plays no role in this event. This approach makes it possible to reject the principle that mind-independence is a defining feature of all photographs (Phillips 2009b) and provides an opportunity to resist many of the sceptical anxieties about photographic art.

Unlike those who view mind-independence as an obstacle to photographic art, Savedoff is committed to the view that belief in the mind-independence of photographs explains the “documentary authority” of photographs that is responsible for their distinctive aesthetic power: our belief that photographs are documents of the real world and our belief that they accurately duplicate the appearance of objects in the real world are essential for photographs to transform our vision of reality (Savedoff 2000: 87-92). This intertwined pair of beliefs is recognisable as the notion of “realism” mentioned earlier in this discussion; however Savedoff has expressed concern that widespread loss of belief in the mind-independence of photographs may begin to spread because manipulated digital images, which lack documentary authority, can appear indistinguishable from actual photographs (Savedoff 2000: 185-209). Perhaps Savedoff should not be concerned. Lopes targets the two beliefs highlighted in Savedoff’s account as beliefs that may turn out to be inconsistent with the true nature of photography (Lopes 2008). This is significant because Lopes presents a principle for appreciation which, applied to photography, delivers a surprising conclusion: to date, appreciators of photographs may have been basing their judgements on inadequate appreciation of photographs. If so, it seems possible that rather than presenting a threat to the aesthetics of photography, a change of belief may be necessary for the proper appreciation of photographs.

The Art of Photographic Portraiture

Portraiture is only one of the examples discussed in the philosophical literature, but it has given rise to some of the most interesting and illuminating discussions. Scruton claims that “portraiture is not an art of the momentary, and its aim is not merely to capture fleeting appearances”; however, “if photography is understood in terms of a causal relation to its subject, it is thought of as revealing something momentary about its subject – how the subject looked at a particular moment” (Scruton 1981: 586-587). Scruton’s sceptical argument, already discussed, makes it inevitable that he will reject the possibility of photographic portraiture, but the point he raises here is still relevant for positions that defend photographic portraits as representational art (see Freeland 2007, Maynard 2007). The problem is not simply the familiar idea that a photograph can only represent the photographed object; after all, in portraiture it is desirable that the subject of the work be the sitter. Instead the temporal dimension of photography raises a specific new problem: the frozen image of a face at a moment in time is likely to be an inadequate portrayal of a person’s expressions or character because, as Arthur Danto notes, “we cannot see with the speed of the camera and what the camera accordingly shows may not be the way we look, where ‘looks’ are indexed to what is available to the unaided eye” (Danto 2008: 293). Accordingly, Danto argues that some photographic portraits are moral violations of the subject’s “right to control representations of oneself” because the appearance made possible with the camera and imposed by the photographer may not be one that the subject would willingly endorse. By contrast with the “stills” of this style, he claims that photographers may instead

choose to produce photographs in the style of “natural drawings” which take into account the expectations of the subject based on normal perception and require a negotiation between the photographer and the subject.

Richard Shustermann argues that the relationship between photographer and subject is in its own right the locus for aesthetic experience. By illuminating the significance of the performative process of posing for the photograph as a “soma-aesthetic” experience involving photographer and subject, Shustermann demonstrates the important truth that “there is more to photography than the photograph” (Shustermann 2012: 68). In my own study of self-portraits by photographers (Wilson 2012), I have argued that the automatism of photography makes it possible for artists to pose for self-portraits in ways that are unique in the history of the depictive arts – but these art works can properly be understood only if we are willing to recognise that the photographer’s perspective is central to the production of the image. All of these responses to the problem of portraiture share in common a clear sense that the production of a portrait ineliminably involves a relationship between the subject and the photographer, not just the subject and the camera. There may be a lesson here for all philosophy of photography.

See also Formalism (Chapter XX), Benjamin (Chapter XX), Postmodernism (Chapter XX), Fiction (Chapter XX), Pictorial Representation (Chapter XX), Style (Chapter XX), Film (Chapter XX).

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Further Reading

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