



Automatism, Causality and Realism: Foundational Problems in the Philosophy of Photography

Diarmuid Costello and Dawn M. Phillips*

University of Warwick

Abstract

This article contains a survey of recent debates in the philosophy of photography, focusing on aesthetic and epistemic issues in particular. Starting from widespread notions about automatism, causality and realism in the theory of photography, the authors ask whether the *prima facie* tension between the epistemic and aesthetic embodied in oppositions such as automaticism and agency, causality and intentionality, realism and fictional competence is more than apparent. In this context, the article discusses recent work by Roger Scruton, Dominic Lopes, Kendall Walton, Gregory Currie, Jonathan Cohen and Aaron Meskin, Noël Carroll, and Patrick Maynard in some detail. Specific topics addressed include: aesthetic scepticism, transparency, imagination, perception, information, representation and depiction.

1. The Philosophy of Photography: Foundational Intuitions

The philosophy of photography is a relatively new area of philosophical investigation. It is still possible to count the philosophical monographs on photography on one hand, and the first anthology of philosophical essays on the topic in English appeared only this year.¹ Although there is a far larger canon of texts in art history and photography theory, to date these texts have had relatively little influence on philosophical treatments of photography.² As a result, the ‘philosophy of photography’ is a relatively untrammelled field, if at the cost of a rather narrow set of questions holding sway. These revolve for the most part around the correct specification of the respective roles of causality and intentionality in photography, and whether this does or does not distinguish photography in kind from other forms of depiction, or imbue it with a special, epistemically privileged, relation to the world. These core questions touch on other areas in philosophy, notably prior questions in the philosophy of perception, positions on which they often implicitly presuppose; but they also open onto broader ethical questions about the moral limits of depiction, just in case photography necessarily shows ‘real’ events.

Talk of *the* philosophy of photography implies a unified subject of enquiry, but two largely independent, if overlapping, sets of debates structure the field, one broadly epistemological, the other aesthetic. The present article addresses both: one question it raises is whether the *prima facie* tension between the two is more than apparent. At first blush photography's epistemic and aesthetic value certainly *seem* to be in competition: the more photography is said to be epistemically privileged, in virtue of being an objective, mind-independent record of the facts, the less capacity it seems to have for aesthetic value, for which mind-dependent fictional competence – at minimum, the capacity for intentionally representing fictional states of affairs or events – is assumed to be required, and vice versa. Our own view is that one chief desideratum for any comprehensive philosophy of photography is that it be able to do justice to both. To achieve this requires addressing the source of our conflicting ideas. Three widespread and contentious intuitions play a role in most discussions of photography:

- 1) The photographic process is, in some sense, automatic.
- 2) The resultant images are, in some sense, realistic.
- 3) The realism of photographs, in some sense, depends on the automatism of the photographic process.

In these formulations the term 'automatic' stands proxy for a variety of notions used to characterise the photographic process, such as: mechanical, mind-independent, agent-less, natural, causal, physical, unmediated. The term 'realistic' could be replaced by an equally large variety of terms, used to characterise the status of photographs, such as: authentic, faithful, objective, truthful, accurate. The task of selecting, clarifying and establishing the most appropriate terminology will form a major part of forthcoming work in the philosophy of photography, given that these intuitions underpin both the aesthetic and epistemic debates and, moreover, are likely to be responsible for the apparent tension between the two. The folk psychology that surrounds photography undoubtedly reinforces these intuitions; but this does not mean that folk psychology should be eliminated as philosophical accounts advance. Rather, as will become apparent, most philosophical theories attribute an ineliminable role to background beliefs about the photographic process in their final accounts of the epistemic or aesthetic significance of photographs. Whether the intuitions listed are jointly coherent and individually justified, and if not, why, are central problems that surface throughout this article, and will be treated explicitly in our concluding remarks.

To get off the ground, all theories of photography must suppose some conception of their object. Hence what constitutes photography as a distinct field of investigation remains a foundational question at this stage. Many philosophers continue to favour an essentialist view of photography, and focusing on the photographic *medium* tends to be the dominant

approach of those who want to specify what is distinctive about photography or, more often, photographs. A medium-specific approach assumes that the material means of production supply the necessary and sufficient conditions that are definitive of photographs. Though, as Jonathan Friday notes, definitions might equally be drawn by appeal to alternative pictorial kinds, such as style, subject matter, or, in his own version, Albertian and Keplerian paradigms.³ Nonetheless medium-specific approaches dominate because they suit the purposes of those who aim to show that, in virtue of being a *distinct* medium, photography has a distinct epistemic advantage, constitutes a distinct art form, or, equally, the purposes of sceptics who would deny that photography is an art, for similar reasons. This way of thinking is clearly visible in recent debates as to whether or not digital photography constitutes a *new* medium, when measured against some thesis about the essential nature of (analogue) photography to date.

Noël Carroll has argued that, even were we to succeed in specifying the essence of a given medium, this would lend no support to prescriptive claims that attempt to circumscribe its acceptable uses.⁴ Such claims lack normative force because on weak formulations they are trivial, and on strong formulations they fail to match up with, let alone determine, actual cases of success or failure in practice. Rather than trying to draw conclusions about the status of photography as an art or as a bearer of epistemic qualities by first examining the material, physical, ontological features of photographs, we should first examine the various uses to which photography is put, so as to discover which material or technological characteristics are significant, meritorious, essential or definitive of its 'medium'. This has the potential to produce a viable form of essentialism: essentialism without determinism.

Critics of philosophical essentialism may be minded to respond, on Wittgensteinian grounds, that we are mistaken to assume that there *must* be particular essential features common to all photographs; when we look at the differences between the many things we call photographs we realise that 'photograph' is a family resemblance concept.⁵ Photographs form a family group, with many overlapping sets of features, but there is no single set of features common to all the things we call photographs. Treated as a corrective, this response has merit: it is clear that many philosophers have based their definitions of photographs on too narrow a range of examples. Treated as a comprehensive rejection of essentialism, however, the response would be unwarranted. As Wittgenstein notes, it *is* sometimes legitimate to provide a definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, but only when this serves a particular purpose. Carroll and Wittgenstein would agree that we can, and often do, single out particular features of photographs in order to show that photographs which share those features have a special status or are distinguished from other forms of depiction. In this respect there may be viable forms of essentialism. From this perspective it is a genuinely open question whether or not a

comprehensive account of photography – one that does justice to both its epistemic and aesthetic significance – requires an essentialist treatment of photographs.

2. *Intentionality, Representation and Aesthetic Scepticism: Roger Scruton*

The largest area of debate in the philosophy of photography, to date, falls within aesthetics and the philosophy of art. Here it is a new arrival, with a far less established tradition of philosophical inquiry than even the philosophy of film, despite film being the younger medium by half a century, and despite philosophies of film frequently being grounded in theories of photography. Early work in the theory and philosophy of photography by Siegfried Kracauer, Rudolph Arnheim, André Bazin and Stanley Cavell was often little more than ground-laying exercises to motivate various ontologies of film. Mainstream debate in the philosophy of photography as an object worthy of independent study was largely initiated by Roger Scruton's 1981 sceptical challenge to the possibility of photographic art, even though this also had cinema as its primary target.

In 'Photography and Representation', Roger Scruton sets out what it means to be an *aesthetic* sceptic about photography. He argues that it is not possible to have aesthetic interest in a photograph *qua* photograph and concludes that, even if we do find photographs used in art, there can be no strictly photographic artworks. This conclusion reflects his uncompromising view that something can be an artwork only if it sustains aesthetic interest – an assumption that many artists since Duchamp and aestheticians since Danto have sought to refute. Nonetheless, philosophers of photography have been drawn to Scruton's paper because though few, if any, accept the sceptical thesis, all recognise that they are not dealing with a 'paper' sceptic.⁶

Scruton endorses the widely held view that aesthetic interest must be interest in an object for its own sake: hence photographic art, construed aesthetically, would require that a photograph could be the object of attention for its own, essential features. For Scruton a photograph's essential features are those that the logically 'ideal' photograph would possess. He stipulates that the ideal photograph stands in a causal rather than intentional relation to its subject. As such, the ideal photograph is essentially distinct from the ideal painting, which stands in an intentional relation to its subject. From this it is clear that Scruton's sceptical conclusion is reached on essentialist grounds.⁷

Scruton accepts that both paintings and photographs can be called 'representational' in the loose sense that the viewer can *see* the subject *in* the picture. In other words, the viewer can see *x as y* without believing that *x is y*. He also thinks that aesthetic interest in a picture must be aesthetic interest in the picture *qua* representation. However, Scruton thinks that in a strict, aesthetically relevant, sense of 'representation', photographs cannot be representational art. For Scruton, intentionality is

a necessary condition of representation: a picture is representational only when it communicates thoughts about a subject. His argument is that, in the case of paintings, we cannot understand how a painting represents its subject *without* invoking intentionality. The subject of a painting may be something that does not exist in reality. So we can only correctly understand the subject of the painting if we understand the *intentions* manifest in the painting. An ideal painting leads the spectator to recognise its subject insofar as its appearance is the successful realisation of the artist's intention. A painting achieves this because it is a complete expression of a thought. By contrast, an ideal photograph leads the spectator to recognise the subject insofar as its causally determined appearance is a record of how an actual object looked. In some cases, a photograph may seem to be representational – think of Edward Weston's photographs of peppers with the appearance of nudes – but such photographs do not, themselves, serve as representations. Rather, the pepper itself is used to represent a nude and the photograph merely conveys that representation. As such, the representational act takes place *prior* to the photograph being taken. As a consequence, a photograph can, at best, assist in the expression of a thought; it can never be its complete expression. A significant consequence of this argument is that, for Scruton, photographs are fictionally incompetent.

The fact that innumerable viewers respond to photographs with aesthetic interest does not defuse Scruton's scepticism. He recognises that a photograph may arouse aesthetic interest, but insists, in a manner that will appear dogmatic to anyone who is unwilling to grant his notion of the 'ideal photograph', that this is for reasons that are incidental to its being a photograph: a photograph that is enjoyed as a formal composition of shapes, lines and tonal contrasts is, in his terms, treated as an abstract picture and thereby not appreciated *qua* photograph. Alternatively, a photograph of a nude or a still life arrangement might seize and sustain our aesthetic interest, but, argues Scruton, this is only because the equivalent aesthetic interest would be generated if we were to view the nude or the still life directly. The interest we take in the photograph is merely derivative of the interest we take in its subject. The photograph is, at best, a *surrogate* for viewing the scene; it is therefore a mistake to treat it as though it were the source of aesthetic interest.

By offering this error theory, and underwriting it with his stipulative characterisation of the ideal photograph, Scruton insulates his position against counter-examples. Many critics have argued, against Scruton, that photographs can involve sufficient intentionality to count as representational art in his sense.⁸ Most responses of this type voice a shared, well-grounded intuition that our responses to great photographs are, to a large extent, an appreciation of the technical and stylistic contribution of photographers. Responding to any such argument or example, Scruton will argue in one of two ways: either, the image stands in a merely causal relation to its subject and our aesthetic interest is, in reality, only interest in the subject;

or, the image stands in an intentional relation to its subject, in which case the counter-example is not a genuine photograph, but rather a painting. At this point Scruton's scepticism becomes question-begging, because the 'logical ideal' he uses in order to preclude photography as art rules out in advance every feature of actual photographic practice and appreciation that would count against his view. Defeating this recalcitrant position on its own terms requires that we challenge the substantive philosophical distinction between causation and intentionality that underpins the account; in particular the assumption that causation and intentionality are a zero-sum relation.

Dominic Lopes has argued that Scruton's position has the potential to generate a stronger version of scepticism if combined with Kendall Walton's thesis that photographs are transparent.⁹ And it is this strengthened sceptical challenge that Lopes sets out to meet, by claiming that an aesthetic interest in a photograph *qua* photograph is an aesthetic interest in the photographed object *as it is seen through* the photograph. This is not equivalent to an aesthetic interest in the object viewed independently, and so offers the basis for an aesthetics of photography. Although Lopes may have provided the basis for an aesthetics of *transparent* pictures, the success of his account, as a response to Scruton, rests on whether he is correct to think that transparency is the essence of photographs.¹⁰ To assess this we need to consider Walton's account directly.

3. *Seeing through Photographs and Imagining Seeing: Kendall Walton*

Even more than Scruton, Kendall Walton's 'Transparent Pictures' (1984) has set the terms for contemporary debates about photography, in both aesthetics and epistemology. Despite proposing the counter-intuitive thesis that photographs are *transparent* – because we *see* objects through photographs – Walton's transparency thesis has proved remarkably resilient. Walton's claim is that when I look at my great grandmother's photograph *I see her through the photograph*. Suppose that my great grandmother's death preceded my birth: Walton is committed to claiming that I see through a photograph something I could not have seen in any other way. Granted, I only see her 'indirectly', through the photograph, but I see her nonetheless: seeing through photographs and seeing *simpliciter* constitute 'a single natural kind'. Walton warns explicitly against taking this claim metaphorically: 'I must warn against watering down this suggestion . . . My claim is that we *see*, quite literally, our dead relatives themselves when we look at photographs of them' ('Transparent Pictures' 251–2).

Nonetheless, it is important to grasp that this does not commit Walton to denying that photographs are pictures, as critics such as Gregory Currie and Noël Carroll claimed early on.¹¹ For Walton, seeing through photographs is not incompatible with photographs being representations. Photographs are *both*: one indirectly sees the object depicted through the photograph,

and one imagines seeing it directly. Indeed it is this *interaction between* actual, if indirect, seeing, and direct, but imagined, seeing – only the latter of which photography shares with other forms of depiction on Walton's account – that marks photography and film out:

Mechanical aids to vision don't necessarily involve *pictures* at all. Eyeglasses, mirrors, and telescopes don't give us pictures. To think of the camera as another tool of vision is to de-emphasize its role in producing pictures. Photographs are pictures to be sure, but not ordinary ones. They are pictures through which we see the world. ('Transparent Pictures' 252)

Hence when we say, pointing at a picture (or some area of a picture) that *that* is an *x*, even though we know that it is just a *picture of an x*, this will mean something different depending on whether we are looking at a painting or a photograph. Seeing a picture of an *x* involves imagining of one's seeing the picture that it is seeing what the picture is of, namely an *x*; with paintings it is *fictional* that we see *x*, with photographs it is *true*, at least in one respect: it is true that we see it indirectly, and fictional that we see it directly.

Moreover, because the transparency thesis does not entail denying that photographs are representations, Walton has no reason to deny, as Scruton does, that photographs can be art: instead he holds that photography is both a means of producing pictures and an aid to vision. This raises the worry that there may be some equivocation at the root of the transparency thesis between *photographs* and *photography*: that photographic technologies (including cameras) are aids to vision does not entail that their products, photographs, are – at least not in quite the same sense. It could be that photography in the broadest sense (as a technology for amplifying certain powers) is an aid to vision, while photographs, as one of its characteristic products, are frequently just a kind of picture: though clearly this will depend in part on what kind of photographic picture one has in mind (intuitions are likely to differ, for example, with respect to X-rays and nudes). Walton maintains, however, that photographs as such are aids to vision because, through photographs, we see the world, and not merely its depiction. Now, most commentators who do not grant that we see through photographs do grant that we see through the view-finders of our SLR cameras, even though what we thereby see is mediated by a series of lenses and mirrors. In this case, the reflected light from the object that I see through the camera is focused by the camera lens and reflected by a mirror before it reaches my eye. But when I look at the resulting photograph, it is the print's reflected light, not that of the objects seen in it, that reaches my eye.¹² Moreover, when I look *at* a photograph, rather *through* anything that is literally transparent (such as a viewfinder) I do not see what is located beyond it.

For reasons like these, Walton has always been aware that his thesis ran the risk of being rejected out of hand. To head this off, he offers a slippery

slope argument inviting detractors to spot a difference of kind, rather than degree, to halt the slide to the conclusion that we see through photographs. Are we willing to say we see things through spectacles, windows, telescopes? What about around blind road corners with the aid of convex mirrors, or from under water with periscopes? What about CCTV, live broadcast, recorded film? If we are ready to grant all this, why not also grant that we see through photographs? In fact, the majority of commentators have not been prepared to grant all this. All accept the first group as unproblematic, and most will (with certain caveats pertaining to the number of mirrors involved, and its effect on the mirrors' capacity to convey information about the location of the perceived object) accept the second. The problems really set in with the third: neither CCTV nor live broadcasts convey 'egocentric' information: that is, information about where the events shown are located relative to one's own position in space and time. Moreover, the slippery slope argument is arguably shown to be beside the point when Walton concedes, in an early reply to Martin, that *footprints* are transparent, in his sense, if death masks are too (and they are). At this point it becomes clear that Walton's conception of seeing is revisionist: nobody would typically say we *see* feet through their footprints. If this counts as 'seeing', why appeal to ordinary language considerations about what we would say about mirrors and telescopes? As Walton himself acknowledges, he is proposing 'something of a conceptual revision' (Martin; Walton, 'Looking again through Photographs' 805).¹³

On Walton's account, any claim to be in 'perceptual contact' with an object must fulfil two conditions. The first is that, to count as seeing, one's experience must depend causally and counterfactually on what is seen. To say that I see through photographs entails that my seeing is *naturally dependent* on what was in front of the camera when the photograph was taken; were that different what one sees in the photograph would be correspondingly different, irrespective of whether the photographer had noticed the difference. A painting, by contrast, would only be different had the painter noticed the difference, and intended to depict it. So painting depends in part on the mental states of the artist, whereas photography is *mind-independently* counterfactually dependent on what it depicts. Walton's second condition is the retention of 'real similarity relations'. Reading a computer-generated description of an object fulfils the natural counterfactual dependence condition, even though it does not constitute seeing the object described. More is therefore required, and the retention of real similarity relations allows Walton to rule out such cases: in a written description we are likely to mistake 'house' for 'horse', because these words look similar, whereas in a picture, as in life, we are likely to confuse a house with a barn, because these things look similar. Hence only pictures preserve real similarity relations. Greg Currie formalizes Walton's position as follows:

A mode of access to information about things counts as perceptual if and only if it (i) exhibits natural counter-factual dependence and (ii) preserves real similarity relations. Painting fails to satisfy (i) and mechanically generated descriptions fail to satisfy (ii) so neither is a perceptual mode of access. Photography satisfies both, so it is a perceptual mode of access. (Currie, 'Photography, Painting and Perception' 25)¹⁴

4. *Photography, Perception and Epistemic Privilege: Walton's Legacy*

Numerous objections have been raised to Walton's account. Besides worries about photography's failure to provide egocentric information, some have questioned whether what Walton calls transparency counts as seeing.¹⁵ Currie argues that it does not. What, asks Currie, prevents looking at a thermometer counting as *perceiving heat* on Walton's account, given that a thermometer is counterfactually mind independently dependent on temperature? The obvious response is that it fails to preserve real similarity relations, because the kinds of discriminatory errors we make are likely to differ with respect to perceiving the thermometer and perceiving heat. But Currie's reply is that no degree of perceptual similarity can give Walton what he needs, hence the thermometer should count for Walton. Imagine two clocks A and B, where B is remotely controlled by radio signals from A; had A been different so too would B and my perception of B. Do I then see A by seeing B? Am I 'seeing through' B to A? Is B transparent? We want to say no, but we cannot on Walton's account. Both Walton's conditions on seeing are fulfilled. Given this, the retention of real similarity relations cannot suffice to establish that naturally dependent modes of access to information about an object should count as perceptual. In fact, Currie argues, the overlap between seeing through photographs and seeing simpliciter is patchy at best – no greater than that between perceiving the thermometer and perceiving heat, as arguments about photography's failure to convey egocentric information show.¹⁶

Walton's response is to question whether provision of egocentric information – virtual simultaneity, sensitivity to change, temporal contiguity and knowledge of the causal chain, on Warburton's taxonomy – is a necessary condition on seeing. Currie and Carroll accept that we see through mirrors. Yet if we extend the chain of intervening mirrors sufficiently we will be at a loss egocentrically; hence egocentric information cannot be necessary to seeing.¹⁷ Moreover, many instances of genuine perception taken to preserve egocentric information actually depend on background information not given in perception itself – as when one knows the orientation of a mirror though one cannot see it, or knows one is seeing an object directly, though one cannot establish this perceptually. Hence, Walton argues, even if we can only infer (rather than see) where a rose reflected in a complex sequence of mirrors is located, in egocentric terms, that only shows that I do not see *where* it is, and not that I do not

see it. By analogy, I see through photographs even though photographs do not convey egocentric information about their depicta. The objection, Walton argues, assumes that the primary aim of perception is to gather information, when in fact photographs may satisfy a more basic need, to remain in *perceptual contact* with something or someone (particularly loved ones) regardless of whether we stand to learn anything thereby. What matters, for maintaining such contact, is that to perceive something is to have perceptual experiences caused in the right manner by that object.¹⁸

More recently, a debate about photography's 'epistemic privilege' relative to other forms of depiction has grown out of these earlier exchanges. Photographs in general, but not paintings in general, support counterfactuals about the appearance of whatever they depict. Had this looked different, its photograph would have differed accordingly. As a consequence, photographs are widely regarded as more reliable sources of evidence about their depicta. Jonathan Cohen and Aaron Meskin agree, but deny that this is because photographs are transparent. Their argument turns on what they call a 'non-doxastic' version of the objection that photographs fail to carry egocentric information. A 'doxastic' construal of this objection makes knowledge or beliefs about relative spatio-temporal location a necessary condition of seeing. Walton thinks this places the bar on seeing too high: as the example of seeing through a complex sequence of mirrors shows, one can see something in the absence of beliefs about where it is located. Cohen and Meskin agree, despite sharing Walton's critics' view that photographs are not transparent because they fail to convey egocentric information: Doxastic versions of this objection, however, confuse the conditions required for seeing with those required for *knowing that* one sees. The latter requires beliefs about relative location; but since one can see without knowing that one sees, mere seeing does not. Cohen and Meskin's task, therefore, is to reformulate the egocentric information objection in such a way that it allows for *beliefs* about the location of what one sees to be undermined, without this undermining seeing.

To this end, they reconceive visual experience informationally, following Fred Dretske, as a non-doxastic process that carries egocentric spatial information, where 'information carrying' is understood as 'a kind of (objective) probabilistic, counterfactual supporting relation between independent variables' (Cohen and Meskin, 'On the Epistemic Value of Photographs' 200). Take their own example: a thermometer carries information about body temperature if and only if there is an objective probabilistic correlation between the two. That is, the probability of the temperature being 37° conditional on the thermometer reading 37° is much higher than the probability of the temperature being 37° conditional on the thermometer not reading 37° (assuming the thermometer is well functioning, free from outside interference, and so on). Moreover, for this correlation to count as information-carrying, it must be support counterfactuals: if, contrary to fact, the body's temperature were different, the

thermometer would differ accordingly (Cohen and Meskin, 'Photographs as Evidence'). Crucially, for Cohen and Meskin's argument, such objective, probabilistic correlations hold *independently* of anyone's beliefs about the matter. Analogously, whether photographs carry egocentric information is a matter of the objective probabilistic relations they bear to their depicta, not a matter of what we are justified in believing or inferring about their depicta on their basis.

On this account, we do *not* see through photographs, because there is no objective, probabilistic, counterfactual-supporting relation between what is depicted and its depiction. There may be a *de facto* correlation (as would be the case were one to superimpose a photograph, a la René Magritte, over the window through which it was taken, and view it from the position the camera had occupied) but were I to move it to any other location, my egocentric relation to what it depicts would change without its depiction changing accordingly. Seeing the photograph therefore does not constitute seeing what it depicts; it fails to support the relevant counterfactuals. What distinguishes Cohen and Meskin's version of this objection from prior versions is that objective, probabilistic relations, or lack thereof, hold independently of beliefs about whether such information is carried. As a result, it is not undermined by Walton's cases of seeing in the absence of belief or knowledge of egocentric spatial location.

Why, Cohen and Meskin then ask, if photographs are *not* transparent are they nonetheless epistemically privileged? The fact that photographs carry information about the visual properties of their representational objects, but not about their egocentric location, is the source of their epistemic advantage: as 'spatially agnostic informants' they convey information about visual properties even when egocentric information is unavailable, whereas ordinary vision and genuine visual prostheses only carry visual information in virtue of carrying egocentric information. Photographs are thus 'undemanding' sources of visual information: they provide visual information even when egocentric information is unavailable. Though this is may also be true of some, even many, drawings and paintings – it is arguably true of most veridical still lives, landscapes and portraits for example that, had their subjects looked different, their depiction would have differed accordingly – viewers' divergent background beliefs about paintings and photographs make photographs as a general type or class 'salient' vehicles of such information in a way that paintings as a general type or class are not. For it is often *not* the case that had, contrary to fact, the subject of a painting looked different, the painting would have differed accordingly, and this being so impacts on viewer's general background beliefs about paintings and photographs as forms of depiction. As a consequence, the epistemic privilege of photographs, relative to other forms of depiction, is not an essential feature of photographs but, rather, contingent on the empirical history of its uses and our resultant divergent beliefs about paintings and photographs. Were those to change, the

widespread perception of its privilege would be open to revision. If this is correct, as access to digital photography (notably forms of post-production) becomes pervasive significant changes may be expected.

5. *Depiction and Detection: Patrick Maynard on Photography as Technology*

The fundamental goal of Patrick Maynard's work on photography is to shift attention from the question 'What is a Photograph?' to the question 'What is Photography?' Maynard's answer to the latter is that photography should be understood as a technology and, as such, a means of amplifying our natural capacities or powers. This is the topic of Maynard's book, *The Engine of Visualisation: Thinking through Photography*, which remains one of the most worked out philosophies of photography to date. In putting the stress on photography rather than the photograph, Maynard is taking his cue from photography's earliest pioneers, who similarly stressed the process over the product by presenting photography primarily as a way of *doing* something – initially, if confusedly, allowing nature to 'depict herself' through the agency of light. What Maynard takes up from these early accounts is their stress on photography as a process with a variety of scientific and artistic uses. On Maynard's account, pioneers such as Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, Henry Fox Talbot and Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre were right to regard photography primarily as a way of marking surfaces with light.¹⁹ More specifically, it is a technology for marking surfaces with a variety of overlapping and sometimes conflicting functions and uses. It is important to grasp that Maynard's concern is not technologies of photography, but photography *as* itself a technology. As a technology, we understand photography best by asking what it enables us to do. Before we can understand the nature of its products, we must understand the nature of the process itself.

So what does photography help us to do, according to Maynard? First and foremost, photography is a family of technologies for producing *images* – not pictures, since images need not depict – by marking surfaces with light. Maynard understands the notion of an 'image', somewhat technically, as a 'visual display marking', that is, a surface discontinuously marked for the sake not only of being seen but, in broadly Gricean spirit, being recognized as having been produced for that purpose. Images are the global physical states of such surfaces. Only *some* such images are pictures, and only some of those in turn are pictures of anything. The latter point is important: it signals Maynard's refusal to theorize photography primarily in terms of the relation 'photograph of –'. As a result, Maynard's account builds in no ground level commitments to realism, resemblance or even reference. Instead the idea of an image, in Maynard's technical sense, as opposed to a picture, is basic.

Putting this together, photography, construed as a 'family of imaging technologies', enables us to do a variety of things, pre-eminent among

which is to extend our powers of *depiction* and *detection*. In this respect, Maynard is arguably the first to address both the aesthetic and epistemological desiderata of a comprehensive theory of photography head on. On the topic of depiction Maynard essentially follows Walton: as a depictive technology, photography enhances our powers of imagining and visualizing. Like the pictorial arts more generally, when photography is employed as art (but not only when it is so employed) it amplifies our powers of visualisation. Maynard says little about what distinguishes photography's specific form of such enhancement, beyond the lack of evident 'facture' in most photographs. Indeed, for Maynard, what distinguishes photographic depiction is less how it depicts, than the way its 'depictive function' *interacts with* its 'detective function'. On this Walton and Maynard are in agreement: 'Photography might be most simply characterized as *the site of historically the most spectacular interaction of depictive and detective functions*' (120; Maynard's emphasis). Photography is the interaction of a depictive function with a prosthetic extension of our innate powers of visual detection by means of light.

In effect Maynard is here reprising, in his own terms, Walton's stress on photographs as both pictures through which we indirectly see the world and 'mandates to imagine' that we thereby see it directly. But Maynard has more to say about detection than Walton. Depiction and detection are in principle distinct; neither entails the other. Pure detection (detection without depiction) includes radioactive rays, light and other emissions, and some x-rays. It also includes the detection of various 'channel conditions' causally responsible for how the image looks (film speed, colour or black & white film stock, depth of field, focal length, shutter speed, point of view, and the like) that are not themselves depicted. Though these causal conditions *can* be depicted if they are incorporated in such a way as to 'prescribe imaginings', in Walton's sense – as when the camera is panned at a slow enough shutter speed to depict its own movement – they needn't be.²⁰ Pure depiction (depiction without detection), by contrast, includes all those photographs that depict *x* (Othello, King Kong, Xanadu, etc.) by photographing *y* (Olivier, a mechanical prop, a desert island etc). In none of these cases do we *detect* what such photographs *depict*.

Although in principle distinct, in practice depiction and detection generally interact. Most photographs are both channels for detecting various features of a given scene (relative illumination, etc.) *and* a way of depicting that scene. When they coincide, depiction and detection generally aid one another. Maynard cites photo-finish photography as an example of depiction aiding detection: the way such pictures look aids the extraction of the sought after information. Photo-finish pictures represent a temporally extended sequence of events as a strictly limited place (the finish line), rather than an extended space at a strictly limited time (that of exposure). However much the photograph may seem to *depict* the latter, what we *detect* from it is in fact the former: but the photograph makes this information

accessible by presenting it pictorially. It takes training to extract such information: we are better able to do so intuitively by treating the photo-finish image as though it were picture, imagining that our seeing the photograph is seeing of what it *seems* to depict, a group of horses galloping towards the finish line. For this reason the speed at which the film moves past the open slit shutter is artificially set to produce naturalistic looking images. Were the film to pass the gate quicker, this would in theory aid detection, since exaggerating extension in time should facilitate easier detection of very small temporal differences. But to the extent that this comes at the cost of prompting imaginings about what we are seeing that naturalistic images make possible – think, for example, of being able to read the numbers on the jockeys' shirts – the extraction of information becomes less intuitive. The same holds for various kinds of medical scanning, where we are primarily concerned to detect information about the health of otherwise of bones, skin tissue, etc, but its pictorial presentation aids its extraction.

The upshot, for Maynard, is that photo-technologies typically produce depictions by means of which we detect and – following Walton – indirectly see various things and events, thereby enhancing our powers of imagination and perception. In the medical case, photographic imaging technologies allow us to indirectly see inside a body by looking at a screen, while imagining of that indirect seeing that it is direct seeing of what the screen shows. In this way, the depictive function of photo-technologies amplifies our powers of imaginative visualisation, while their detective function amplifies our capacity to acquire knowledge perceptually. Thus, in a medical context, digital imaging is considered an aid, rather than a threat to detection – and hence as having an evidentiary pay off – because given the stringent background channel controls the variables may be manipulated to better facilitate extraction of the sought after information. In press photography, by contrast, where channel conditions cannot be externally monitored and controlled, the opposite holds, as recent high-profile sackings for doctored news photographs show. That said, the fact that the images of torture and humiliation at Abu Ghraib were exclusively digital did nothing to undermine their efficacy.²¹ This in itself tells us to be wary of pronouncing on the significance of digital photography *per se* for the epistemic value of photography: it depends on the uses of photographic imaging technologies at stake and, within those broad uses (scientific, artistic, journalistic, etc.) on the circumstances of a specific case.

6. Concluding Remarks: Challenges for the Philosophy of Photography

What one can say is that the advent of digital photography has given new life to what we have been calling the philosophy of photography's foundational intuitions. The oft-heard question as to whether the ease of undetectable manipulation renders digital 'photography' a *distinct* medium is,

for example, a new spin on the foundational thought that what distinguishes the relation between a photograph and the world from that of other pictures is that only the former is unmediated by human agency. While the millennialism that sometimes characterises debates about the manipulation of digital images may be guilty of overplaying the differences between digital and pre-digital photography, it nonetheless serves to highlight the importance of the folk-psychological beliefs underpinning our everyday conceptions of photography. It reminds us that neither the distinctive epistemic status of photographs nor the significance of photography in general may be wholly explained by *facts* about the medium in isolation from its history, notably, how its aetiology and mode of production have been popularly *understood*, both in general and for particular cases.²²

In view of this, we believe that some of the key challenges for the philosophy of photography remain: i) giving a satisfactory account of the automatism or mechanicity that is widely taken to be the distinctive basis of photography; ii) clarifying the relation between causation and intentionality in photography; and iii) explaining the realism of photographic images – their relation to what they are of – in a way that leaves room for fictional depiction. More generally, we believe that paying more attention to artistic uses of photography would give the philosophy of photography wider resources for addressing these issues than may be gleaned from focusing too narrowly on the most straightforward uses of the medium. But staying with the problems internal to the philosophy of photography that we have outlined, we conclude by highlighting an assumption that is hindering many investigations therein: that is, the idea that oppositions such as automatism and agency, causation and intentionality, realism and fictional competence stand in a zero sum relation – such that, for example, if a process is entirely causal it has zero intentionality.

The intuition that the photographic process is in some sense automatic is supposed to imply that the process takes place independently of human agency. It is *possible* for a photograph to be produced ‘automatically’ – if, say, a curtain blown by the wind knocks a Polaroid camera onto the floor and trips the shutter. The process in cases of ‘accidental photographs’ seems automatic precisely because it occurs without any human intervention or action: if any human agency were involved, the process would be only partly automatic. However, treating ‘automatism’ and ‘agency’ in general as a zero-sum opposition is incoherent. A process is only rightly called ‘automatic’ when it is designed to mimic or replace human agency with a mechanized alternative. A washing-machine is exemplary of an automatic process because, although the machine performs its function without the need for human intervention, that function is modelled on a human activity, and designed with human purposes in mind. By contrast, examples of processes that *are* entirely independent of human agency cannot properly be called ‘automatic’. The force of waves on a coastline will erode a cliff-face without any human intervention, but it would be bizarre to call this

process 'automatic'. Whatever characterisation of the photographic process we provide, we should recognise that, insofar as its 'automatism' depends on mechanical purposive design, it is not independent of human agency.²³

It may be conceded that the technological apparatus of photography owes its design to human purposes and is therefore an extension of human agency, yet the intuition that the photographic process is, in some sense, automatic, can be reformulated in a different way: with an appeal to the laws of nature rather than of technological design. Throughout the literature we find the idea that the photographic process is essentially causal. As a strong version of the intuition that the process is independent of human intervention, this implies that there is zero intentionality involved. Returning to the previous example shows why this move has *prima facie* plausibility: the sea eroding a cliff-face may not be 'automatic', but it is indeed an entirely *causal* process devoid of intentionality. With this kind of example in mind, the first intuition need not involve a problematic commitment to the idea that the *apparatus* itself is independent of human purposes; it can appeal to the *process* of photography as essentially natural.

Following the lead of Walton and Currie, recent work in the philosophy of photography has, by and large, treated the photographic process as one involving 'natural dependence', or, to give it its full titles, 'mind-independent counterfactual dependence' or 'objective, probabilistic, counterfactual dependency'. Doing so would appear to presuppose that 'natural dependence' accurately captures the role 'causation' plays in traditional accounts of the photographic process. But this move should be regarded with caution. Any notion that involves 'mind-independence' as a matter of definition will, necessarily, stand in a zero-sum relation to intentionality. Yet, 'mind-independent counterfactual dependence' is not a valid substitution term for 'causation', since the latter does *not* stand in a zero-sum opposition to intentionality.

'Manographs' such as paintings are considered paradigmatic of intentional processes, yet it is arguable that the expression of intentionality manifests itself *in* the causal process itself – and not somewhere external to it. By touching brush to the canvas, painters cause paint to be transferred.²⁴ But the application of paint is not a causal process that happens *in addition* to a thought – it is partly constitutive of, and partly constituted by, that thought. In Scruton in particular, one finds the idea that an (ideal) photograph stands in a causal relation to its subject while an (ideal) painting stands in an intentional relation. More generally, the idea that what differentiates photography and painting can be reduced to an antithesis between causality and intentionality continues to structure the entire field. Many commentators have pointed out that this underplays the intentional aspects of photography; what has gone largely unremarked is that it is equally inattentive to the causal processes involved in painting, and other manual arts, in virtue of their physical substrates. This allows a questionable opposition between causation and intentionality that

continues to generate basic problems for the philosophy of photography to go by unchallenged.

If this is right, and some version of the third foundational intuition canvassed above is correct, we should expect to find that we cannot provide a coherent account of the ‘realism’ of photographs whilst we remain confused about the nature of photography’s ‘automatism’. Most damagingly, understanding causation and intentionality as a zero-sum opposition sets up an intractable stand-off between realism and fictional competence, and a corresponding tension between the epistemic and aesthetic significance of photographs. But does the fact that a photograph, *considered causally*, is always and only of its source (those real concrete particulars that were before the camera at the time of exposure), *entail* that it cannot also be of something else, or that this source cannot be employed to represent something fictional? Zero sum conceptions of the relation between realism and fictional competence are committed to saying ‘yes’. We believe there is room for doubt.

Imagine a photograph that, putatively, depicts Pegasus. Since Pegasus does not exist we know either that the image has been manipulated in post-production or that it does not record what it appears to record, a winged horse – it might be a photograph of a maquette on a set or a real or stuffed horse that has been through the special effects workshop. If one understands depiction as Walton does, in terms of what one is prompted to imagine seeing when seeing a picture, it seems reasonable to say that we *imagine seeing* Pegasus – even while our background beliefs about photography will make us question whether we are *really seeing* Pegasus, or a gerrymandered horse, through the photograph. Here some terminology from Maynard and Currie will prove helpful. Maynard proposes we distinguish between ‘photograph of’ and ‘photographic picture of’. In so far as photographic images are necessarily caused by concrete, existing particulars they will always be of something real (minimally, perhaps, a light array). But while there can be no *photographs of* unreal, non-existent, imaginary, general, abstract or immaterial things, this does not entail that there cannot be a *photographic pictures of* such things. One can imagine photographic depictions of the virtues, for example.

Similarly, while sceptical about photography’s *suitability* as a fictional medium, by comparison to film, Greg Currie also does not rule it out. In virtue of sharing a photographic substrate, both photography and film necessarily ‘represent by origin’ only their source. Both can, however, also ‘represent by use’ something that is not their source (as is the case whenever an actor is used to represent some character). But if the source is resistant to being used in a particular way, this can result in ‘representational dissonance’. While it is *easier* for film to mitigate this, by engaging its audience in imaginatively rich narrative experiences, photography can still represent by use; it is just more difficult to achieve this seamlessly. So photographs need not *only* represent their source; they may use that source

to represent something else, including fictional characters, and can do so more or less well.²⁵ Hence intuitions about photographic realism, which piggy-back off beliefs about the causal nature of the medium *need not* rule out fictional competence. Indeed, to the extent that the dominant ways in which film and photography have been used to date are contingent historical facts about those media, the extent to which we are likely to experience psychological resistance to fictional photography may be open to revision. Here philosophers would do well to look at uses of the medium by contemporary artists.

The fate of all three oppositions is internally related; weaken the grip of one, and that of the others weakens accordingly. If we are to get beyond the impasse these oppositions represent, to address more substantive questions about photography, its philosophy will need to give a persuasive and coherent account of its foundational intuitions. A first step will be to loosen the grip of the 'either/or' thinking that has been associated with these intuitions to date.

Short Biographies

Diarmuid Costello is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick, Co-Director of the 3 year AHRC research project 'Aesthetics after Photography' and Vice President & Chair of the British Society of Aesthetics. He has published on a variety of aesthetic theorists from Kant to Danto in both the analytic and continental traditions, in journals such as the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *Critical Inquiry* and *Rivista di Estetica*. He is co-editor of *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers* (Berg, 2007) and *The Life and Death of Images: Ethics and Aesthetics* (Tate/Cornell, 2008). He is currently working on two broader projects: 'Photography as a Medium' and 'Aesthetics after Modernism'.

Dawn M. Phillips is Research Fellow on the three year AHRC research project, *Aesthetics after Photography*, co-hosted by the departments of Philosophy at the University of Warwick and Art History & Theory at the University of Essex. Before joining Warwick, Dawn was a Fellow in Philosophy at St Anne's College, Oxford, and previously held Lectureships at the University of Southampton, University College Cork and University of Kent. Her Ph.D. (Durham) was on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein, and she has published on logical analysis, clarity and the 'say-show distinction'. She increasingly also works in aesthetics and the philosophy of photography and her current work focuses on aesthetic scepticism, the causal provenance of photographs, and analogies between the ontology of musical works and photographs.

Notes

* Correspondence address: University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, United Kingdom. Email: diarmuid.costello@warwick.ac.uk, dawn.phillips@warwick.ac.uk.

¹ See, for example, Maynard; Friday, *Aesthetics and Photography*; Walden, ed., *Photography and Philosophy*.

² For an overview see: Elkins; Wells, ed., *Photography Reader*; Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays in Photography*. Influential earlier texts include Sontag; Burgin. Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes are foundational for this tradition. See Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', *One Way Street*, London: Verso, 1979 and 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 1969. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*; 'The Photographic Message' and 'the Rhetoric of the Image', in *Image, Music, Text*.

³ Friday, 'Photography and the Representation of Vision' 351–2.

⁴ Carroll, 'Medium Specificity Arguments and the Self-Consciously Invented Arts: Film, Video and Photography', in *Theorising the Moving Image* 12. See also 'Specificity of Media in the Arts'.

⁵ Wittgenstein §§66–7.

⁶ For an earlier example of aesthetic scepticism, see Eastlake 'Photography' *Quarterly Review*, April 1857, reprinted in Newhall, ed., *Photography* 81–95.

⁷ Note, however, that Scruton is not a medium-specific essentialist. His characterisation of the essential features of a photograph is functional: an ideal photograph is defined as an image that stands in a merely causal relation to its subject. This places no restrictions on physical features of the medium.

⁸ Brook; Wicks; King; Warburton, 'Individual Style in Photographic Art'; Davies.

⁹ Lopes, 'Aesthetics of Photographic Transparency'.

¹⁰ For more on this claim, see Lopes, *Understanding Pictures* 179–93.

¹¹ Walton, 'On Pictures and Photographs' 68.

¹² For an argument to this effect, see Gaut §2.4.

¹³ Walton is even more insistent on this point in his 'Postscripts to TRANSPARENT PICTURES': 'My project is theory construction, not conceptual or linguistic analysis'. See Walton, *Marvellous Images* 111.

¹⁴ Currie, 'Photography, Painting and Perception' 25. In fact, Walton does *not* view his two necessary conditions as jointly sufficient for perception, but this is otherwise an elegant summary of why painting and mechanically generated descriptions fail Walton's test.

¹⁵ See, for example: Martin; Warburton, 'Seeing through'; Currie, 'Photography, Painting and Perception'; *Image and Mind* 48–78; Carroll, *Theorising the Moving Image* 49–74; Friday, 'Transparency and the Photographic Image'.

¹⁶ Warburton ('Seeing through') was the first to set out these difficulties. See also Friday's reply ('Transparency and the Photographic Image').

¹⁷ To this Currie responds that we *normally* see through mirrors, but once egocentric information is lost we no longer do.

¹⁸ Walton's emphasis on perceptual contact here is reminiscent of André Bazin on photographic realism in 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image'. See Bazin. Realism, as Bazin understands it, does not entail resemblance (since things may be recorded in ways that render them unrecognisable). Indeed, what Bazin calls 'true realism' is neither a matter of how something looks, nor of replicating appearances; it is, Bazin believes, a product of the psychological significance the aetiology of film and photography has for us. In virtue of our knowledge of how photographs are made (namely, by automatically registering their subject's reflected light) we treat photographs as 'closer' to their objects. Something like this thought lies behind the doubts many have expressed about photography's fictional competence.

¹⁹ These sources are collected in Newhall.

²⁰ For an overview of Walton's account of pictures as props in games of make believe that serve to 'prescribe imaginings' see *Mimesis as Make Believe* ch. 1.

²¹ See Gunthert.

²² Barbara Savedoff argues that our perception of digital photography will radically and irreversibly change the status of all photographs. See ch. 5 of *Transforming Images*. Walton expresses a similar view in 'Postscripts to TRANSPARENT PICTURES'. Scott Walden argues, to the contrary, that changes in our folk psychology caused by digital photography will not transform the way *pre*-digital photography is viewed and appreciated. See 'Truth in Photography' in Walden, ed., *Photography and Philosophy*.

²³ The leading dissenter from the view that photography is distinguished from the manual arts in virtue of its automatism or mechanicity is Joel Snyder. See Snyder and Allen; Snyder.

²⁴ A similar example appears in Lackey; and is used by Carroll to put pressure on Bazin's stress on photography's *unique* automatism, in Carroll, *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory*.

²⁵ Currie, 'Pictures of King Arthur'.

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