

PHOTOGRAPHY AS A REPRESENTATIONAL ART

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FOR SOME aestheticians, photography's artistic status is still questionable. Can a single photograph be a great work of visual art comparable to any of the best paintings and sculptures? If one answers no, it is probably because one doubts whether photographers can be great artists. Owing to the mechanical and causal processes that produce a photographic image independently of the photographer's activity, some critics have regarded photographers as mere technicians who assist an otherwise automatic process by which nature 'draws its own image' upon a light-sensitive film. From this perspective, one may compare photographers to player-piano operators or to organ-grinders who simply press buttons or turn cranks to run musical mechanisms. Since photography is essentially mechanical, so it is thought, photographers cannot be artists any more than player piano operators or organ-grinders may be considered musicians.

It is now recognized that the making of a good photograph involves far more than pressing a camera's shutter release button, and that accomplished photographers exercise significant aesthetic judgement in relation to the subject-matter and composition of their photographs. Yet contemporary challenges to photography's status as an art persist in the old tradition. These are more subtle, but are similarly grounded in the alleged drawback of photography cited from its beginnings, namely, its dependency upon a causal, mechanical process through which one produces photographic images. For example, Roger Scruton asserts in his essay 'Photography and Representation',¹ *not* that photography fails to be an *art*, but that photography's mechanical nature prevents it from being an art of *representation*. An upshot of his view is that the photographic medium does not compare well with painting, sculpture and literature—all of which *are* representational arts—in its capacity to express insights about the world. In this essay, I shall critically discuss Scruton's position, and explain, contrary to his claims, how photography is an art of representation. My aim is to bring to light the aesthetic and artistic capacities of photography that account for its being a representational art.

Scruton's contention that photography is not a representational art is easily misunderstood. He does not assert that photographs do not contain images of things. His striking, often quoted remark that photography is not represen-

tation expresses a more subtle and thought-provoking position. Scruton maintains that whatever is artistic in photography does *not* stem from any characteristic *peculiar* to the photographic medium. That is, he does not believe that there are any *photographic* representations, as there are literary, dramatic, pictorial, and sculptural representations. According to Scruton, the aesthetic value of a photograph as a *representation* of something derives solely from the aesthetic qualities of the represented subject—qualities that exist in the subject *before* the making of the photograph. Moreover, he holds that a photograph's aesthetic value with respect to its *formal*, as opposed to representational, qualities does not issue from any peculiarity of photography as a medium.

To stress the distinctive qualities of photography in comparison with painting, Scruton bases his argument upon an analysis of an 'ideal photograph'—a photograph whose aesthetic features are fully explicable in terms of the causal relation between the photograph and what it represents. His account highlights the causal process through which light reflected from a visible object is focused upon a light-sensitive, chemically-coated film to impress the object's image upon the film. An ideal photograph provides a perfect copy of an object's appearance.

Scruton defines a representational art as one wherein it is possible to create art works in which we may take 'an aesthetic interest in representation'. By further specifying the characteristic qualities of this interest, he explains what qualities an art form must have if it is to be a representational art.

Following a tradition of aesthetic theory that considers an aesthetic interest to be a *disinterested* interest, Scruton maintains that an aesthetic interest is an interest in something for its own sake. Accordingly, he rejects the view that we can have an aesthetic interest in something if we take an interest in that thing as a surrogate for something else. Scruton is on firm ground here. For example, if one takes an interest solely in the formal relationships among an art work's perceptual properties, one has an interest in the art work for its own sake, since such formal relations do not by themselves extend one's aesthetic interest beyond the art work. However, an aesthetic (i.e., disinterested) interest in an art work's representational qualities will lead one beyond the art work, for one must note the relationship between the art work and what it represents. To appreciate an art work for its own sake, in this case, is to have an aesthetic interest in the art work's qualities in so far as they express an insight about or interpret what the art work represents.

According to Scruton, an aesthetic interest in representation is impossible with regard to an ideal photograph. Since an ideal photograph perfectly reproduces an object's visual appearance and merely duplicates what we see with the naked eye, he believes that an ideal photograph cannot say anything about its subject. That is, a mere copy of the subject's actual appearance cannot *interpret* the subject. So, if one were to take an aesthetic interest in an ideal photograph, this interest must limit itself to the photograph's formal qualities,

since it is alleged that an ideal photograph as a *representation* has no aesthetic properties uniquely its own.

Since an ideal photograph reflects an object's appearance without distortion, Scruton tends to believe that the aesthetic qualities of an ideal photograph simply mirror those of the object it represents. For example, he states, 'if one finds a photograph beautiful, it is because one finds something beautiful in its subject'² and adds, 'the emotional or "aesthetic" qualities of a photograph tend to derive directly from the qualities of what it "represents": if the photograph is sad, it is usually because its subject is sad; if the photograph is touching, it is because its subject is touching, and so on'.³ According to this view, a photograph's aesthetic value does not spring from any unique characteristic of the *photograph*, but derives from the aesthetic value of what the photograph represents. So, even if one were to have an aesthetic interest in an ideal photograph confined to a photograph's formal features, this interest would not direct itself upon any qualities of the photograph *unique* to photography as a medium.

Given an absolute visual congruency between an ideal photograph and the appearance of what it represents, it is difficult to imagine how one could dispute Scruton's claim that the aesthetic qualities of an ideal photograph only reiterate those of the objects it represents. Yet there is good reason to doubt this claim, for there are pronounced aesthetic differences between an ideal photograph and the objects it represents that even a perfect visual similarity between the two cannot nullify. These aesthetic differences are the consequence of a photograph's stationary character. Unlike the transient images we experience with the naked eye, a photograph, ideal or actual, captures and preserves the appearance of its subject. We can thus see more about an object by inspecting its photograph than is possible by perceiving it directly with the naked eye. This peculiarity of photography has been recognized from the time of its inception, when we learned from the first photographs of galloping horses how mistaken our previous beliefs about their movement had been. A stationary image provides an opportunity for visual review and study, and allows previously unnoticeable aspects of the subject to emerge. When such aspects come into conscious visual play, one will have an aesthetic experience of the represented subject different from a comparable experience of the subject with the naked eye. Since an ideal photograph and its subject do not always share the same aesthetic qualities, it is erroneous to believe that they are aesthetically interchangeable.

How does this aesthetic difference between ideal photographs and their subjects bear upon Scruton's claim that it is impossible to have an aesthetic interest in representation with regard to an ideal photograph? As previously noted, an aesthetic interest in representation must focus on the ideal photograph for its own sake and take into account what the photograph represents. Since the aesthetic differences between an object seen with the naked eye and by means of an ideal photograph result from the stationary aspect of the ideal photograph,

we may presume that an aesthetic interest in representation regarding an ideal photograph would involve an appreciation of this stationary aspect of the photograph as it aesthetically relates to what the photograph represents.

An aesthetic interest in representation as just described would be possible, for example, with regard to a close-up photograph of a stop-sign behind which looms a smoke-billowing factory. This image sets up a referential relationship within the photograph between the stop-sign's message and the factory's activity. Through such a juxtaposition, the photographer expresses a thought about the factory: he objects to the air pollution it causes. To appreciate fully the artistic power of the photographer's message, however, one must attend to the image's features that arise from the photographic medium *itself*. The photograph, by 'freezing' the image of the billowing smoke, metaphorically brings the process of pollution to a standstill, and makes it possible for the photographer to visually exemplify his thought about the factory. This kind of visual message would not be as strongly conveyed if one were simply to stand at the position where the photographer took the photograph and look at the factory, or stand at that position and look at the factory's reflection in a mirror the exact size of the photograph, for the smoke would continue to stream from the smoke stacks as usual. When we become interested in how the stillness of the photograph contributes to the power of the photographer's message, we take an aesthetic interest in the *representational* aspect of the photograph. Contrary to Scruton's central claim, then, an aesthetic interest in representation is possible even in reference to an *ideal* photograph.⁴

With respect to *actual* photographs, Scruton states that actual photography 'is the result of the attempt by photographers to pollute the ideal of their craft with the aims and methods of painting'.⁵ This remark suggests that any method that makes a photograph aesthetically interesting for its own sake as a *representation* will be a method of painting, and hence, its use will conflict with the true aims of photography as such. According to this line of thought, the way that photographs 'freeze' their subjects must curiously count as a method of painting, given the above photographic example.

To better understand Scruton's claim about actual photographic practice, one must clarify what the 'aims and methods of painting' actually are. It will not suffice to state that every method that makes a representation interesting for its own sake as an expression of a thought about its object is a method of painting. This simply defines matters such that photography cannot be a representational art. We need a general characterization of those methods through which representations can express thoughts about what they represent independently of the specific practices of either painting or photography.

Scruton emphasizes one general feature of representational art, namely, the capacity for *fiction* representation.⁶ He mentions that both painting *and* literature have this ability, and that both are thus representational arts. If we accept this characterization of painting and literature, the question remains whether the

capacity for fictive representation is a necessary condition for a representational art, or whether it is only a sufficient condition. If the latter is the case, then we have no basis for excluding photography from the set of representational arts. There may be other ways in which an art can be representational besides having the capacity for fictive representation.

On the basis of a revealing distinction between painting and photography, Scruton maintains that painting is capable of fictive representation whereas photography is not. He states, 'if a painting represents a subject, it does not follow that the subject exists nor, if it does exist, that the painting represents the subject as it is' (p. 103), and adds, 'if a photograph is a photograph of a subject, it follows that the subject exists . . . it also follows, though for different reasons, that the subject is, roughly, as it appears in the photograph'.⁷

We actually find two distinct differences between painting and photography stated above. The first is that paintings have a capacity for fictional representation, whereas photographs do not. The second is that images in paintings need not resemble the appearances of the objects they represent, whereas photographic images must do so. Scruton's case against photography as a representational art rests almost exclusively upon photography's incapacity for fictive representation, and does not depend significantly upon the second difference between painting and photography. Yet, as we shall see, this second distinction regarding resemblance and representation is more fundamental, and is, in fact, the true source of Scruton's insight about the limitations of photography as an artistic medium.

Scruton's distinctions between painting and photography are accurate and informative, but it remains unclear why photography's alleged incapacity for *fictive* representation entails that photographs cannot express thoughts about things that *do* exist. Photography's fictive incapacity only establishes a limitation in the subject-matter of photography in comparison with painting: paintings can refer either to what is possible or to what is actual; photographs can refer only to what is actual. To resolve the issue of whether photography is a representational art, however, we must compare like with like: we must compare a painting of an *actual* object that expresses *true* thoughts about the object with a photograph of the same subject. Only in this manner will it become clear whether painting and photography essentially differ from each other in terms of their capacity to express representational thoughts.

Consider an expressionist portrait of a person painted in spectral blues, yellows, and violets that accurately reveals the person's inner character. It is not at all clear how the capacity for fictive representation enters into an explanation of how this painting expresses a representational thought. What is central is how the painting departs from naturalistic representation, for it is the *contrast* between the object's actual appearance and its portrayed appearance that makes the painting interesting as the expression of a representational thought. If we reinterpret Scruton's discussion of ideal photographs along such lines, his main

point no longer directs us to photography's incapacity for fictive representation, but suggests rather a different relationship: that the more naturalistic a representational image is, the less capable is it of expressing a thought about what it represents.⁸ Scruton's notion of an ideal photograph and its alleged incapacity for the expression of a representational thought, in effect, defines one end of a continuum between naturalistic and non-naturalistic representation. The alleged limitations of photography are more informatively traced to photography's apparent inability to depart very far from naturalistic representation, as can an expressionist portrait.

When we list Scruton's reasons why photographs cannot express thoughts about what they represent, we initially find the previously cited argument concerning ideal photographs: a perfect copy of an object's appearance cannot express a thought about the object, since it can only replicate how the object looks. But we have already seen that a photograph of several objects may form a symbolic juxtaposition that acquires a further or enhanced meaning when 'frozen' by the photographic image. The example of the stop-sign/factory photograph holds for both ideal and actual photographs.

Scruton further maintains that painting is superior to photography as an expressive medium on the grounds that photographers cannot control detail in photographs, and that one needs 'a painterly approach to detail' to achieve the kind of image that can express a representational thought. Controlling detail in a photograph, however, is not a problem. A photographer may turn his lens slightly out of focus to minimize detail across the whole image, or employ lens filters and/or adjust the size of the lens aperture to control detail in selected parts of the photograph.

Scruton is correct in so far as photographers cannot control detail in the way that a painter can. For instance, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for a photographer to sustain a sharply focused image while reducing detail in a small corner of the photograph using lens, filter, and film variables alone. The kinds of photographic methods that allow control of detail are more 'global' and 'atmospheric' and usually range across the entire photographic image. Such effects, however, are extremely uniform and precisely controllable—controllable in a manner almost impossible to achieve in painting. What we find in actual photography is not a failure to control detail, but methods of controlling detail that contrast with, and have different visual effects from, the methods used in painting. The essential difference between painting and photography is thus not a matter of control vs. lack of control of detail. The issue concerns the *kinds* of control of detail photographic methods afford. To establish Scruton's claim, one must defend the position that photographic methods of controlling detail are not among the kinds required for the expression of thoughts about what an image represents.

Here it should be apparent that photography is a representational art. What is more precisely at issue is how photography's expressive capacity as a represen-

tational art compares with that of painting. To answer this, we need to consider the various ways photographs can express representational thoughts. One way already discussed is via 'freezing' the image of a moving object. There are other ways arising from the photographer's specific choice of film (e.g., colour, b/w, infra-red, coarse grained, fine grained, print, slide) and shooting techniques (e.g., time-exposure, under- or over-exposure, panning, telescoping). All of these photographic options allow the photographer to create images of objects that depart from our experience with the naked eye (or with the naked eye looking through a camera lens, or through a mirror). Photographic images produced using such options can have visual qualities that arise from unique aspects of photography as a medium. All of these options, in combination with the appropriate subject-matter, thereby make possible the photographic expression of representational thoughts.

Although Scruton's emphasis on fictive representation is not to the point, he expresses an important insight in his claim that there are limits to photography as a representational art. First of all, one must match the photographic techniques cited above with an appropriate subject-matter for the expression of a representational thought to be possible. Without a proper match, the result will be a photograph whose aesthetic value as a representation has little to do with any unique aspect of the photographic medium. And indeed, most photographs are of this sort—photographs whose aesthetic value derives almost exclusively from the (pre-existing) aesthetic value of what the photographs represent. Furthermore, photographic techniques are relatively few in number and apply to a wide range of subject-matters with only a narrow range of variation in aesthetic effect. This limits the kinds of thoughts a photographer can express about any given subject matter.

As photographic technology now exists, there are limited possibilities for creative expression in comparison to those available in painting. This fact alone, however, does not decide the issue of whether painting *by nature* offers the artist more expressive possibilities than does photography. The expressive possibilities available in photography (and in painting) heavily depend upon technological advances, and it is difficult to judge what kinds of photographic discoveries lie ahead that will move photography beyond its present linkage to naturalistic representation. At the moment, photography certainly stands at a disadvantage in comparison to other visual arts such as painting and sculpture. Is photography thereby only a minor art, or does it have a value not found in painting and sculpture?

It should be no surprise that an important difference between painting and photography resides in the causal relationship between the photograph and what it represents. Owing to this causal bond, photographic images, unlike paintings, for example, convey to us the actual *presence* of represented objects.⁹ Given the way we ordinarily view photographs, they present us with an object in a far more immediate and 'living' manner than do paintings. One might

describe this by saying that photographs, in contrast to paintings, 'manifest' to us the objects they represent. At the same time, however, photographs can interpret what they represent through the use of specific photographic techniques. Admittedly, there may be some sacrifice in expressive capability when choosing to use the photographic medium, but there is a corresponding gain in the vitality and sense of immediate presence that photographs afford.

With these notions of 'presence' and 'manifestation' in mind as distinctive of how objects appear to us in photographs, it is now possible to give a general statement of how photographic techniques work to achieve the expression of representational thoughts. Actual photographs express ideas about their subject in a fashion which, for lack of a better name, we may call 'masking'. In this manner, an object is manifested to us in the photograph, while, at the same time, certain visual qualities of the object are photographically filtered out from and/or other features are added to the object's appearance. We may compare our perception of an object through the resulting photographic image with our perception of a person who wears make-up or a mask. Some of the person's features are seen directly, as is the person, while other features are concealed and/or superimposed with other qualities to enhance an existing expression, or to create a new expression for the person.¹⁰ In short, the visual effects of photographic techniques used aesthetically to modify a subject's photographic appearance are akin to cosmetics—both alter the existing expressive qualities of a subject, both appear as features of the subject itself, and both do not impair the subject's visually manifesting itself to us.¹¹

Scruton's fundamental position that photography is not an art of representation is based upon taking a *single* way that an art can be representational—by having the capacity for fictive representation—as the essential way. By doing so, he is led to believe that the causal dimension of photography—a dimension primarily responsible for a photograph's referential, though not representational, aspect—prevents photography from being a representational art. But an art can be representational also by having the capacity to depart from naturalistic representation. Photography has this capacity, and is thus a representational art. And painting has both the capacity for fictive representation and the capacity to depart from naturalistic representation.

The causal process characteristic of photography—one allegedly responsible for the expressive limitations of the medium—is in fact a *positive* aspect of photography. As a consequence of this causal process, we experience the objects represented in photographs as immediately present to us, and as irrevocably charged with the atmosphere of the photographer's interpretative vision.

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REFERENCES

- ¹ Roger Scruton, 'Photography and Representation', *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (Spring 1981), 577-603. Reprinted in Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetic Understanding* (Methuen, 1983), pp 102-126. All page references will be to the latter.
- ² *The Aesthetic Understanding*, p 114.
- ³ *Ibid*, p. 115.
- ⁴ There are other examples. Any photograph that juxtaposes a person with an object that represents a person (e.g., a photo of someone standing next to a sculpture), creates an affinity between the two images absent in the 'live' presentation of the same things. Consider a photograph of a gallery owner posed like a sculpture next to some sculptures in his gallery. The gallery owner is 'frozen' by the photograph and appears totally motionless—as are the sculptures. Through such a juxtaposition, the gallery owner is made more into a motionless sculpture, and conversely, the sculptures are made more into living people. Such a photograph may express the (representational) thought that the gallery owner is at one with his work.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, p. 103.
- ⁶ Scruton states 'It follows, first, that the subject of an ideal photograph must exist, secondly, that it must appear roughly as it appears in the photograph, and thirdly, that its appearance in the photograph is its appearance at a particular moment of its existence.
- The first of those features is an immediate consequence of the fact that the relation between a photograph and its subject is a causal relation. If *a* is the cause of *b*, then the existence of *b* lacks that quality of "intentional inexistence" which is a characteristic of painting. The ideal photograph, therefore, is incapable of representing anything unreal; if a photograph is a photograph of a man, then there is some particular man of whom it is a photograph' (*The Aesthetic Understanding*, p 112).
- ⁷ *The Aesthetic Understanding*, p 103. These distinctions constitute Scruton's elaboration of what it means for a painting to stand 'in a certain "intentional" relation to a subject'. Rather than become entangled in the confusions surrounding the word 'intentional', I am focusing upon Scruton's explication of the term. I take the capacity for fictive representation to be the key feature of this explication.
- ⁸ This relationship would hold for a painting as well as for a photograph that perfectly copied the appearance of an object. That someone 'intentionally' put each dab of paint on the canvas would not cause the painting to express a representational thought. It is through the use of distortion in the image that representational thoughts are expressed, and not through sheer intention in the absence of an accompanying physical distortion in the image.
- ⁹ Patrick Maynard develops this idea in his essay 'The Secular Icon: Photography and the Functions of Images', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Winter 1983), pp 155-170.
- ¹⁰ In photographic portrait work, for example, a photographer may choose to use black and white film instead of colour film. The photographer can thereby eliminate incidental colour variations and emphasize the structural details of a person's face.
- ¹¹ Scruton states that if we are to have an aesthetic interest in representation with regard to a photograph, we must 'distract the spectators from the causal relation which is a distinguishing feature of photography'. According to the present, alternative account, this causal relation plays a central role in how we see photographs and does not interfere with the photograph's expressive aspect. The 'masking' effect peculiar to a photograph's mode of expression does not conflict with, and indeed depends upon, the causal relationship between the photograph and what it represents.