

Photography

Tyler Holbrook

Apalachian State University

Photography as a medium for visual art is decidedly less certain than painting or sculpture. The latter have their roots in representation and in rendering things that otherwise would not exist whereas photography seems to be a photographic reproduction or catalogue of something that certainly, at some point, existed in the form it takes in the photograph. Kendall Walton argues that photographs are transparent and non-representational, and I believe that he confirms Roger Scruton's argument in his essay "Photography is not art" that photographs lack aesthetic values.

The differences between painting and photography are manifold but chief among them are differences in intention and execution. Scruton says that in painting, "properties of the medium influence not only what is seen in the picture but also the way it is seen." (Scruton 90) The artistic intention and execution of the portrayal of facial features, posture or body positions do in large part dictate our reaction to the painting and to the figure portrayed in the painting whether we view him as arrogant or demure or joyful. The artist controls that with his brushstrokes and does not rely on the attitude of his subject since his subject may not even exist. Oliver Cromwell once said to the portrait painter Peter Lely, "Remark all these roughnesses, pimples, warts, and everything as you see me; otherwise I will never pay a farthing for it." Statements like these only make sense spoken to a painter and highlight the unique reliance on execution and intention in painting and other forms of representational art that does not exist in photography.

Kendall Walton's idea of photographs as transparent and non-representational

Photography

is based on the inherent and unavoidable realism in photography, realism to the point where there cannot be photographs of fictional things in trivial ways. Walton says, “A photograph is always a photograph of something which actually exists.” (Walton 78) That statement is the lynchpin of this entire argument and expresses the fundamental difference between photography and other modes of visual art so that photography is not quite art. Walton argues that in viewing a photograph, the viewer does not “see” the photograph but sees through the photograph and sees the things portrayed. This at first seems counterintuitive; I know a picture of my dead grandfather is not actually my dead grandfather. Of course it cannot be, since he’s long dead. But I do in a sense see him, as he once existed.

In viewing photographs we often do not hesitate to present counterfactual states of affairs as existing in the present tense so that in viewing the picture of my grandfather I might reasonably say “he is smiling” when in fact he isn’t currently smiling, he’s buried. This, then, might mean that my seeing my grandfather is an indirect seeing but it nevertheless is more similar to seeing him through my glasses or a mirror than any pretense I would make at ‘seeing’ him in a painting. Walton highlights the importance of recognizing this indirect sight when he says that a major problem in writing on photography is “failure to recognize and distinguish clearly between the special kind of seeing which actually occurs and the ordinary kind of seeing which only fictionally takes place, between a viewer’s really seeing something through a photograph and his fictionally seeing something directly.” (Walton 81) Both of these kinds of seeing take place when one views a photograph, and they take place simultaneously but fulfill very different cognitive obligations in the viewing process, the same way that “one hears both a bell and the sound it makes.” (Walton 80) We are looking at photographs but we are still actually seeing the things photographed, if indirectly. These two types of sight are very similar, if not identical, and because both take place together a photograph cannot ‘represent’

Photography

something since any time we look at any photograph that is pretending to be a representation, we cannot help but actually see the thing the picture attempts to represent, therefore collapsing the representation into the represented.

The objection could be raised that a photograph often doesn't look much at all like the actual scene – a black and white photo of my grandfather is not proof that he was a black and white man and I know that he was in fact as full of color as anything else. Against this Walton rightly maintains that “Seeing directly and seeing with photographic assistance are different modes of perception.” (Walton 82) These differences aside, it would be folly to deny that distortions in perceptions prevent true seeing of an object – here Walton gives the example of funhouse mirrors and microscopes. Those involve definite distortions of perception but nevertheless qualify as actual seeing of the things presented.

Photography is always of something that did at one point exist, thus it is a temporal medium in the way that painting is not. Scruton says “...it is a characteristic of photography that, being understood in terms of a causal relation to the subject, it is thought of as revealing something momentary about its subject – how the subject looked at a particular moment.” (Scruton 91) All photographs ever taken (and photos are taken, not made) can be traced back to a moment in time when the things in the photograph existed in reality just as they are portrayed in the picture. Thus when someone sees a photograph, it can also be said that they are “seeing” that moment in time when the things in reality lined up just as they do in the photograph. This is the same phenomenon as one would experience watching a slightly delayed broadcast of a live sporting event; the viewers, if asked, “did you see the game last night?” would likely reply in the affirmative without the qualification, “No, I did not see the game, but I did watch a slightly delayed live broadcast representation of it on my television screen.” Also, when I am walking to class and someone says, “Do you see that dog over there?” If I do in fact see the dog, I say yes

Photography

rather than “no, I can only see the lenses of my glasses, but through them I see a representation of the dog. What I actually see is a brownish blur on a blurry green background.” Glasses, television broadcasts (live or not) and photographs are all aids to seeing actual real temporal things. Walton says, “The invention of the camera gave us a new method of making pictures and not just pictures of a new kind: It gave us a new way of seeing.” (Walton 78)

If through photographs one is actually seeing the thing photographed and not a representation, then, as Roger Scruton posits, any aesthetic properties or values a photograph may have are not actually aesthetic properties of that work but instead aesthetic properties or values of the scene that was photographed. Because photographs are temporal things, Scruton is right when he says, “In characterizing the relation between the ideal photograph and its subject, one is characterizing not an intention but a causal process.” (Scruton 90) The ramifications of this are that the intentions of someone wishing to shoot an aesthetically pleasing photograph lie not in the taking of the photograph but in the selection of the thing or things to be photographed. It is impossible to take a picture of something that is not physically there and the real art in photography is in composing or discovering a scene, that scene containing the desired or relevant aesthetic properties, and capturing the scene by means of the mechanical camera process. The picture then is “a means of access to the subject (the subject being the scene or composition) [parentheses added] and [the picture] is therefore dispensable to the extent that there is better means to hand (say, the subject itself).” (Scruton 90)

There can be no aesthetic value in a photograph that does not exist in the object itself, in either an equal or heightened degree. Photographs, surely, can serve to jar us from daily monotony and present, in an easily digestible and accessible medium and in locales that engender an aesthetic state of mind, things that we would not otherwise have recognized as aesthetically valuable. An old stone house that one

Photography

passes everyday on the way to work or school but never really looks at might be rendered in stunning detail with a camera and made part of a photo series for display in local galleries, but those photos are not an enhancement of the aesthetic value of the mansion but rather a pointing out, like Roger Scruton's metaphorical finger that serves only to focus on something we had not stopped to look at before, but which if we had looked at in that same aesthetic state of mind, we would have recognized as equally or more worthy of value than the photographs of it.

All this can be said to be a direct result of the causal or mechanical process that results in the production of a photographic image. As a result of this mechanical process, "the formative intelligence of the photographer does not play a significant role in the generation of the image." This argument implies that because we cannot see the role played by the artist's intelligence in forming a representational image, we cannot "legitimately take the representational context of the image to be a proper subject of artistic interest." (Davies 341) David Davies presents this argument, one popularized by Roger Scruton, with the intention of disproving it. He claims that understanding a photograph requires "not merely knowledge of the mechanical process whereby an image is produced but also the kind of intentional activity that circumscribes this mechanical process." (Davies 346) Davies quotes Fox Talbot, "photography is indeed the 'pencil of nature' and it is the photographer who directs and sharpens the pencil." (Davies 346) By this analogy, though, Davies fails to recognize who guides the pencil in its shading. Surely the photographer points his camera and opens and closes the shutter but he is not the one who determines what it is he is framing. He has an enormous multitude of things to choose from, of places to direct his camera, but he does not have the free will to choose anything he could possibly imagine and capture it in his lens. The claim that the photographer "directs and sharpens" is weak and trivial and does nothing if not confirm the fact that photography is purely mechanical process that does not yield subjects of aesthetic

interest.

If I placed a beautiful golden goblet in the corner of a darkened room and then, after assembling an audience, cast a bright light into the corner, surely it would not seem that the light was what had made the goblet beautiful; rather the light was just an aid to proper seeing of the goblet. Yet the light is vitally necessary to the appreciation of the goblet, and perhaps even the angle or quantity of lighting affects to what degree I find the object beautiful but the potential for beauty or aesthetic value lies undeniably in the goblet, and not in the light. Without the goblet and with all the light in the world the corner would still be just a corner. But with the goblet and no light at all, the goblet would still have all that potential for beauty, however unrealized.

Similarly, imagine a world of nothingness where there was only unending midnight black in all directions and not a single thing else. Into this imaginary alternate universe a photographer and a painter are sent, each equipped in accordance with his chosen medium and both considered equally talented by their respective peers. It would seem, intuitively, that while the painter could sit in the black all day and paint picture after picture of things he drew from his imagination, the photographer would be at a loss for what to photograph as no matter what the level of his talent, he cannot produce anything at all worth seeing without there first being that same thing worth seeing already out in the world where it can be seen by anyone who happens to be in the right place.

No amount of artistic skill will allow for the creation of something of which to take pictures of the same way no amount of culinary skill can produce the necessary ingredients. Photography relies on the cooperation and assistance of the outside world to provide those subjects for documenting and the fact of that reliance seems to reveal a weakness in the medium – that it cannot create what does not already exist. Creation is the crux of art, creativity. Photography appears unable to do any

creating at all but rather just rearranging things already present in perhaps eye-catching ways that seem pleasing but are nothing more than that and are not imbued with any real originality, at least not in the same way as painting or any other representational art form.

These examples and thought-experiments exhibit the important intuitive difference between painting and photography in a way that reveals what Kendall Walton describes as the “jolt” we feel when we recognize this difference, the sort of feeling one gets upon learning that Chuck Close’s *Self Portrait* is in fact a self portrait and not a photograph, (Walton 82), the feeling that prompts this discussion of the nature of photography and aesthetics.

So while I will grant to photography can highlight aesthetic properties of an object, it itself does not and can not create any new aesthetic qualities or endow an object with aesthetic properties merely by means of the mechanical photographic process. Any thing photographed had before it was photographed the same potential for beauty or the opposite and a photograph can do nothing more than affect the realization of that potential. Photographs cannot create beauty and they cannot add to the aesthetic properties of an object nor can they create new aesthetic properties. The photograph is like a floodlight or a drawn curtain, serving only to draw attention towards or away from certain already extant properties of the object portrayed.

References

- Cromwell, Oliver. [Oxford Quotes](http://askoxford.com). 2010. 13 December 2010 <askoxford.com>.
- Davies, David. "Scruton on the Inscrutability of Photographs." [British Journal of Aesthetics](#) 49.4 (2009): 341-355.
- Scruton, Roger. "Why Photography is Not Art." n.d. 89-94.
- Walton, Kendall. "Transparent Pictures." Goldblatt, David and Lee Brown.

Photography

Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2005. 76-83.