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The real challenge for an aesthetics of photography

1 Introduction

In his 1983 article, 'Photography and Representation', Roger Scruton presented a powerful and provocative sceptical position. For most people interested in the aesthetics of photography, this paper represents an important challenge and, over the last twenty years, the many responses have created a rich body of literature.¹ I shall not attempt to survey this literature here, but will focus on the best available response: Dominic Lopes' 2003 article, 'The Aesthetics of Photographic Transparency'. Lopes provides a particularly clear formulation of Scruton's original argument and sets out a strengthened version of the sceptical position, in order to argue that even the strengthened position can be defeated. I find Lopes' argument convincing, as far as it goes; but I shall argue that he does not go far enough. Lopes successfully meets the sceptical challenge he sets up, but does not appreciate that a deeper challenge deserves to be addressed.

In section 2, I outline Lopes' analysis of Scruton's argument and his account of the strengthened sceptical position. In section 3, I outline Lopes' response to the sceptic, the position he calls: 'an aesthetics of photographic transparency' and explain that this position fails to meet, or even recognise, the real challenge for an aesthetics of photography. In section 4, I introduce a proposal for how this challenge might be met.

2 What, according to Lopes, is the sceptical challenge?

A sceptic regarding photography is one who claims that seeing a photograph as a photograph does not engage aesthetic interest. The sceptic may concede that there is widespread aesthetic appreciation of photographs, but will argue that this is not truly an appreciation of photographs *qua* photographs; it is merely an aesthetic interest in ancillary features of photographs, features that many photographs may have, but that are not essential to a photograph *per se*.

Scruton's sceptical position is multifaceted and his article includes a number of startling claims: that a photograph does not represent; that a photograph is merely a surrogate for the photographed object; that we do not have aesthetic interest in a photograph *qua* photograph and that photography is in some sense inherently pornographic. Critics have discussed and disputed these views at length, but Lopes is right to point out that many critics have overlooked the sophistication of Scruton's argument and so have failed to fully defeat his sceptical position. According to Lopes, the main conclusion of Scruton's argument is what Lopes calls the 'equivalence thesis':

¹ For example King (1992), Currie (1991), Friday (1996), Walton (1997) and Warburton (1996).

Any interest that we take in photographs, when we view them as photographs, is wholly an interest in the actual objects that were photographed and not an interest in the photographs themselves. (Lopes 2003 p.434)

The basis for this sceptical conclusion is an argument for the thesis that a photograph is not a representation; but Lopes is careful to show that Scruton builds two separate arguments upon this foundation, both of which are independently used to support the equivalence thesis. Lopes calls these the 'object argument' and the 'style argument'.² Lopes claims that critics of Scruton have successfully defeated the style argument, but have failed to adequately address the object argument.³

The 'object argument' puts emphasis on the idea that the photograph itself, the photograph *qua* photograph, cannot be the object of aesthetic interest. As Lopes puts it, "photographs may serve as conduits for aesthetic interest, but they cannot be objects of aesthetic interest in their own right, as long as they are seen as photographs" (Lopes 2003 p.435). I have elaborated this point in the following analysis of Scruton's argument:⁴

- P1) To have aesthetic interest in something is to have interest in it for its own sake. (The photograph itself must be the object of aesthetic interest.)
- P2) There are three types of interest we might have in a picture: A) interest in the picture as an abstract composition; B) interest in the picture insofar as it reveals properties of its subject; C) interest in the picture itself.
- P4) Concerning (A): we can have interest in a photograph as an abstract composition - but we can have this type of interest in anything.
- P5) Concerning (B): we can have interest in a photograph insofar as it reveals properties of its subject - but this kind of interest is derivative, our aesthetic interest is interest in the subject rather than the photograph.
- P6) Concerning (C): to have interest in the photograph itself would require us to have interest in a photograph as a representation.
- P7) A photograph is not a representation.
- C) We do not have interest in a photograph for its own sake. Our interest in a photograph is only interest in the subject.

² Lopes 2003 pp.435-6.

³ Lopes 2003 pp.436-7.

⁴ This analysis does not present Scruton's argument in its entirety, but highlights the part that Lopes calls the 'object argument'.

It should be apparent from this summary that the non-representation thesis is used to rule out the possibility that the photograph itself can be the object of aesthetic interest, which then leaves room only for the equivalence thesis.

Much of the critical attention directed at Scruton's position has focused on the non-representation thesis⁵ - a thesis that Scruton defends in considerable detail in his article. However, Lopes feels that the non-representation thesis should not be seen as the primary concern for someone who wishes to tackle scepticism. This is because Scruton's view that photographs are non-representational has been superseded by the view that photographs are transparent.⁶ So, while Scruton can be seen as building from the non-representation thesis, via the object argument to the equivalence thesis; Lopes suggests that a stronger version of scepticism can be seen as building from the transparency thesis, via the object argument to the equivalence thesis.

The thesis of photographic transparency, championed by Kendall Walton, is the claim that "when one sees a photograph as a photograph one literally sees the photographed object" (Lopes 2003 p.441). The revised position of the sceptic is that, if we accept the Transparency thesis, we must accept the Equivalence thesis.⁷ If it is true that when we look at a photograph we literally see the photographed object, then it seems necessarily true that our aesthetic interest is, in fact, interest in the photographed object, not the photograph. This is the position that, for Lopes, presents the strongest sceptical challenge: we must show how we can accept the Transparency thesis but deny the Equivalence thesis. Thus, for him, meeting this challenge will mean showing that the following two claims are consistent and true:

(TT) The Transparency thesis: when looking at a photograph we literally see the objects they are of.

(NET) The Non-Equivalence thesis: seeing photographs as photographs engages aesthetic interests that are not engaged by seeing the objects they are of.

It is important to note that Lopes simply takes for granted the truth of (TT), secure in the knowledge that this claim is accepted, indeed supported, by the sceptic. This tells us that, for him, the real challenge is to establish the truth of (NET).

⁵ See, for example, King, Currie and Friday.

⁶ Lopes believes that the logical relationship between transparency and non-representation is that transparency entails non-representation (in Scruton's sense), but non-representation does not entail transparency. (Lopes 2003 p.441).

⁷ We can see a precursor to this idea in Scruton's original argument: "the photograph is transparent to its subject and if it holds our interest it does so because it acts as a surrogate for the thing which it shows". Walton has a position that is more extreme than Scruton because he emphasises that a photograph is not a surrogate for the photographed object, rather, it provides real perceptual access to the object.

3 What is the real challenge for an aesthetics of photography?

Having set up his account of the sceptical challenge, Lopes argues that it can be met. He starts by rejecting the idea that Transparency entails Equivalence; a rejection that takes the form of arguing that (TT) and (NET) are in fact consistent:

Seeing an object through a photograph is not identical to seeing it face-to-face. The transparency claim shows only that the interest one may properly take in seeing a photograph as a photograph is necessarily identical to the interest one may take in *seeing the photographed object through the photograph*. It does not show that interest to be necessarily identical to any interest one may have in seeing the object face-to-face. (Lopes 2003 p.441 – original emphasis)

I find this claim perfectly compelling, but Lopes recognises that this forms only part of a complete response to the sceptic. Having asserted that (TT) and (NET) are consistent, Lopes is confident that an aesthetics of photographic transparency is possible, but his next task is to show that (TT) and (NET) are both true. He claims that “a photographic aesthetics grounded in transparency is viable if seeing something through a photograph may arouse an interest not satisfied by seeing the same object face-to-face opens up” (Lopes 2003 p.442). Lopes lists various features of photographs which meet this requirement. His list, which is not exhaustive, contains the following items: seeing through a photograph reveals hidden details of the object that are fixed in a moment of time; seeing through a photograph obtains in the absence of the object; seeing through a photograph decontextualises the object; seeing through a photograph involves the object’s being in the presence of the camera; seeing through a photograph melds seeing the properties of the photograph with seeing the properties of the scene.⁸ According to Lopes, all of these items are examples of taking interest specifically in the transparency of photographs, but there remains one further task: to show that this interest is aesthetic interest.

Lopes undertakes a relatively demanding form of this task, by assuming that “an interest is aesthetic only if its satisfaction requires possession of an aesthetic concept” (Lopes 2003 p.444). He argues that there are two clusters of aesthetic concepts which are applicable to photography: the first cluster, described as ‘clear seeing’, involves concepts such as authenticity, accuracy and truthfulness; the second, described as ‘revelatory seeing’, involves concepts such as transformation and defamiliarisation. Lopes believes that an appeal to concepts of this type will establish that our interest in photographs, *qua* transparent to their objects, is aesthetic interest. Undoubtedly the brevity of his account presents an open invitation for critics to raise objections, so more would need to be said, but, nonetheless, the overall shape of the argument strikes me as plausible.

⁸ Lopes 2003 pp.442-3.

Lopes is content to draw a modest conclusion: “photographs engage genuine aesthetic interest when seen as photographs” (Lopes 2003 p.446). However, I feel that we should be disappointed by the modesty of this conclusion. Lopes’ account certainly seems right, as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. Lopes is aware that he could seek a more ambitious conclusion – to establish that photography offers a distinct kind of aesthetic experience or distinct kind of art form – but he seems inclined to reject this project:

The next step would be to show that photographic seeing through satisfies some aesthetic interests not satisfied by seeing through any other kind of picture. Yet nothing encourages us to discount the possibility that the ambitious enterprise is doomed to failure because seeing through some hand-made picture will do as well as seeing through any photograph. (Lopes 2003 pp.446-7).

The doubt arises because Lopes has built his case for an aesthetics of photography on a thesis about ‘transparency’, while (rightly) not believing that photographs are the only transparent art form. So if he is correct that transparency is the essential or definitive feature in virtue of which photographs can engage our aesthetic interest, he is correct, too, to think that photography is not a unique art form. But I think that we should at least be prepared to explore features of photographs that may be more essential or fundamental to them than transparency is.

Lopes believes that the real strength of Scruton’s sceptical position lies in the ‘object argument’ – the idea that a photograph *qua* photograph cannot be the object of aesthetic interest. Lopes assumes, again rightly, that finding a way to confront this sceptical argument requires us first to provide a proper account of the essence of photography – to identify those features of photographs that are essential to appreciating a photograph as a photograph – and then to show that we can take an aesthetic interest in those features. Achieving this will establish that the photograph itself is indeed the object of aesthetic interest. Where Lopes may go wrong, though, is in insisting that the transparency thesis identifies the definitive feature of photographs.⁹ This insistence has two consequences. The first, as we have seen, is that Lopes is compelled to conclude that photography may not be a unique art form – an outcome that I find unsatisfying, although he is happy to accept it and others may be inclined to agree. But the second consequence is more serious: it is that the position that Lopes has established remains vulnerable to challenge from a deeper form of scepticism. For the sceptic may insist that transparency

⁹ Lopes makes this stance very explicit: “the assumption, shared with the Scrutonian sceptic, is that proper appreciation of a photograph is appreciation of the photograph for what it is. The transparency thesis divulges what photographs are, namely instruments for seeing through” (Lopes 2003 p.442). Elsewhere he re-states the same point: “an interest in a photograph as a photograph is an interest in it as a vehicle for seeing through it to the photographed scene” (Lopes 2003, p.445).

is not the definitive feature of photography – indeed that the transparency of photographs is ancillary to, or is a side-effect of, something more basic to them, namely, their status as the products of a purely causal process.

Lopes does acknowledge that “photographs stand, by definition, in a *causal* relation to objects photographed” and that “understanding a photograph as a photograph necessarily involves knowing that it is the product of a *causal* process originating in the photographed subject” (Lopes 2003 p.438 – my emphasis).¹⁰ But after making this statement, he turns his attention to the idea that a photograph is transparent to the photographed object and focuses on transparency for the rest of the article. In doing so, he appears uncritically to adopt a policy introduced by Kendall Walton, a policy of replacing the notion of ‘causation’ with the notion of ‘belief independent counter-factual dependence’. A photograph is transparent – in Walton’s and Lopes’s sense – insofar as we literally see the photographed object. Walton states that such ‘seeing’ is a form of indirect perception that is to be understood as follows: “seeing requires an experience whose content is counterfactually dependent upon visual properties of what is seen and independent of the perceiver’s beliefs” (Lopes 2003 p.439). And I suspect that this move already puts some distance between a characterisation of photography that is available to a hard-line sceptic and the characterisation that forms the basis of Lopes’ anti-sceptical position. The hard-line sceptic could insist, after all, that when we view a photograph as a photograph, we must appreciate that it is *merely* the causal product of a photo-chemical, or equivalent mechanical, process. And it does not seem to me that Lopes can take it for granted that the same sceptic would be happy to treat this characterisation as interchangeable with the view that a photograph provides a counterfactually dependent ‘vehicle for seeing through’ that is ‘independent of the perceiver’s beliefs’. The latter view already seems to have shifted the ground in favour of an anti-sceptical position.

I suggest, then, that Lopes’s aesthetics of transparency is still vulnerable to a further challenge from the sceptic. And this, in the end, is because he and the sceptic in fact share a crucial assumption, namely, that the causal provenance of a photograph – its causal provenance alone – cannot be regarded as a virtue: being the product of a causal process cannot, on its own, be the basis of our aesthetic interest. Only when a photograph also has other features (the features that, added together, comprise transparency) can the photograph sustain aesthetic interest.¹¹ Yet if we return to Scruton we see that

¹⁰ Earlier he notes that, for Scruton, “understanding a photograph as a photograph involves knowing [...] that it is a *causal* trace of [an] object” (Lopes 2003 p.434 – my emphasis).

¹¹ Walton argues that there are two necessary conditions for photographic transparency: natural-dependence and the preservation of patterns of similarity. He introduces the second because he does not want to have to say that mechanically produced descriptions are transparent. By making the transparency thesis the basis of his aesthetics of photography, Lopes has demonstrated that a photograph can engage aesthetic interest in virtue of its having both of these features: natural-dependence and similarity preservation. The bigger

he puts much more emphasis on causation than Lopes acknowledges – indeed that he characterises the photograph as *merely* the product of a causal process. And it is this characterisation that a defender of the aesthetic merits of photography must be prepared to confront.

In my view, therefore, Lopes is successful in demonstrating that seeing a photograph *as a transparent picture* can engage our aesthetic interest. But he has not shown, what a response to the real heart of Scruton's challenge would have to show, that seeing a photograph *as a transparent picture whose transparency derives from its being the (mere) product of a causal process* can engage our aesthetic interest. And such a response, if it could be mounted, would license an altogether less modest conclusion than Lopes's. For the demonstration that photographs (perhaps seen as transparent pictures) can engage our aesthetic interest *in virtue* of their causal provenance really would take us quite a long way towards a genuinely and distinctively photographic aesthetic. I believe that this challenge can be met.

4 How can this challenge be met?

The real challenge for an aesthetics of photography consists of two tasks. The first is to establish that the truly definitive features of a photograph arise from its being the causal product of a purely mechanical, photo-chemical process. The second is to establish that these features can belong to recognisably aesthetic categories. We do not need to establish that there are novel aesthetic categories which appeared only with the emergence of photography – although this may turn out to be possible. We need only to show that the definitive features of photographs can fit well-established aesthetic categories, such as the sublime or the tragic.

I hope that I can establish the first point through a reasonably straightforward idea. If we are willing to accept that something as a photograph which only has the feature of being the causal product of a mechanical photo-chemical process, then the idea that this feature is definitive should seem plausible. I think that this idea is acceptable because we can make sense of an 'accidental photograph' – a photograph that is taken when a camera falls out of a bag and hits the ground.¹² If we agree that every photograph is essentially the product of a causal process, there is, of course, no need to claim that every photograph is aesthetically interesting in virtue of having this feature. An adequate response to the sceptic is to show that it is possible for some photographs to sustain aesthetic interest solely in virtue of this essential feature. It is to be expected that this will be plausible for some photographs and not for others. One way of putting this point is that, being merely the causal product of a photo-chemical process is not, typically, sufficient to generate aesthetic interest. But, in certain cases, it is possible for

challenge is to show that photographs can have aesthetic interest solely in virtue of one feature: namely that they are the products of a purely causal mechanism.

¹² If you have concerns about issues such as processing or printing the film, then make the camera in the example a Polaroid.

this feature alone to sustain aesthetic interest and, in those particular instances, it is appropriate to say that this feature of the photograph provides sufficient grounds for that aesthetic interest.

Let us then consider how this feature may be characterised under the aesthetic category of the sublime. A photograph is caused by a portion of the world at some particular moment. As the product of a causal process, a photograph is ineluctably past tense. Furthermore the image has a finite limit, a frame that cuts off anything the limit of the photograph, yet we can be certain that at the moment the photograph was taken the part of the world, of which this is a portion, extended beyond the frame. Scruton makes much of the idea that even if some details of a photograph are within the control of the photographer, it is always the case that there will be details that lie outside her control. In his eyes this detracts from the aesthetic significance of the photograph. My point is that we could happily conceive of a photograph where every detail lies outside the photographer's control, yet nonetheless every one of those details could pierce us in an aesthetically significant way.¹³ When we appreciate this feature of a photograph, some photographs are capable of overwhelming us with a sense of excess; we are unable to wholly comprehend the magnitude of the detail available to us. The detail in a photograph exceeds our apprehension, both in terms of what is presented within the frame and what lies outside the frame. There are true but unknowable answers to an indefinite (perhaps infinite) number of questions about the world that we can ask. Experiencing a photograph as a photograph presents us with a recognisable aesthetic category – it provides an experience of the sublime: an experience of that which exceeds apprehension and overwhelms us.

This argument has demonstrated that, even if a sceptic were to play their strongest card – insisting that a photograph may be merely the product of a causal process – I believe that it is still possible to think that such an object can have aesthetic interest precisely in virtue of its being so understood. This conclusion may bring with it hope of a further benefit. Recall that Lopes thinks that photographs are not the only transparent art-medium so photography is not a unique art form. In my view, although photography is not the only art-form that is dependent upon a causal process, it is the only art-form that can engage aesthetic interest purely in virtue of its being wholly the product of a photo-chemical causal process. An adequate response to the sceptic does not need to establish that photography satisfies aesthetic interests that nothing else does. An adequate response could establish that there can be photographs which sustain aesthetic interest in virtue of being merely the causal product of a photo-chemical process, and that nothing else does. I

¹³ Barthes strikes me as right when he claims that aesthetically interesting photographs typically have a punctum that pierces us. But I think that one of the features of a photograph's being merely a causal product is that in principle every detail of photograph could serve as a 'punctum' in Barthes' sense.

think that we could be prepared to accept a contingent, temporally limited, claim here. I am not saying that photography is the only possible wholly causal art form – but just that at present it is the only one we have developed and appreciate. If the position defended here succeeds, then it indicates that photography offers a unique aesthetic experience, insofar as it is the only wholly causal art medium.¹⁴

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¹⁴ An extract from this unpublished article was published in Neill and Ridley (eds.) *Arguing About Art* (3rd Edition) London: Routledge, 2007.