PHOTOGRAPHY AND PHILOSOPHY

ESSAYS ON THE PENCIL OF NATURE

EDITED BY SCOTT WALDEN

Blackwell Publishing

Photography and Philosophy

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Photography and Philosophy

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Scott Walden
New York

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INTRODUCTION

Scott Walden

Photography received an enormous amount of critical attention during the 1970s and '80s. Roland Barthes provided a poignant meditation on the phenomenology of viewing photographs, and then a more analytical investigation into the nature of photographic meaning.[1] Susan Sontag undertook a sustained examination of the role of photography in the media, focusing especially on the limits of the medium in fostering ethical knowledge.[2] Allan Sekula worked to undermine the traditional idea that there is something especially truthful or objective about a photographic image, or that it carried a unique, context-invariant meaning.[3] And Joel Snyder argued against the modernist idea that there were principles of evaluation unique to photography, ones that set such evaluation apart from the evaluation of images generally.[4] Texts by these authors still constitute the canon in college courses devoted to photographic theory.

But much has changed since these books and articles were published. There have been developments in the philosophies of language and depiction which have advanced our understanding of text-meaning and image-meaning. Digital-imaging technology and the image-manipulation possibilities it affords have replaced the traditional negative-positive

[1] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Noonday Press, 1981); and Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977), and in excerpt form at pp. 521–33, in Vicki Goldberg, ed., *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981).

[2] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977).

[3] Allan Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983* (Halifax, NS: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984).

[4] Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen, "Photography, Vision, and Representation," *Critical Inquiry* 2 (1975).

process, raising new questions about the veracity of the medium. In the artworld, photography has changed from a marginal medium fighting for institutional respect to one that not only has its own department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but has become the darling of the avant-garde as well. And there has been an increase in our awareness of the need for specialized attention to ethical issues arising in professions that involve human subjects such as medicine and business, a development that raises the possibility of a similar need in the professional practice of photography. Given these developments the time is right for a re-investigation of the themes the pioneering critics introduced, and for a careful examination of the new issues that have arisen.

Most of the essays presented here are thus newly written for this collection, although in three instances I have chosen to reprint already published works that bring fresh perspectives to these issues or that have been especially influential on the other works in the collection. Kendall L. Walton's first contribution, "Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism," is one such reprint. Walton takes as his conceptual starting point the idea that photographs are produced by a *mechanical* process, one that bypasses the beliefs the photographer has about the scene before her. The photographer's belief that there is a tree in front of her, for example, operating in conjunction with her desire to take a picture of a tree, might cause her to point her camera straight ahead, but once she trips the shutter it is the optical-chemical (or, these days, optical-electronic) process that renders the image, not any aspect of the contents of her mind. With a handmade image such as a painting matters are different – the beliefs a painter has about the scene before him are directly involved in what gets rendered on the canvas.

Walton's second and most controversial idea is that the mechanical character of the photographic process makes photographs, quite literally, *transparent*. We see through them to their subject matter in the same way we see through windows to the things that lie on the other side. Handmade images such as paintings or drawings, because they have beliefs directly involved in their formative process, are, by contrast, opaque. We may *imagine* that they are transparent and that we see through them, but in fact we do not.

According to Walton, two additional features emerge from these twin claims of mechanicity and transparency. The first is that the transparent character of photographs places viewers in special *contact* with the things seen through them, and that from such contact arises value. If a photograph of Beethoven were discovered, we would literally see the great composer through it, and we would thereby be in special contact with him.

Such contact – and the value we associate with it – accounts for the media frenzy that most certainly would result. The second feature is that the mechanical-transparent character of the photographic process yields images that are especially helpful in enabling people to learn about the world by looking through them. This *epistemic advantage* accounts for the usefulness of photographs in journalistic, evidentiary, and scientific contexts.

Cynthia Freeland's contribution (chapter 2) focuses on Walton's contact and transparency theses. With regard to the former, Freeland investigates the extent to which photographs function like religious icons. Icons of holy figures are said to function not as representations of their subjects, but rather as *manifestations* of them and, as such, are said to afford special contact with those subjects. Furthermore, many icons are thought to have a special causal connection with their subjects, either having been rendered by someone who was actually in the presence of the holy figure or, in certain instances, having been rendered without human agency at all (by physical contact with the subject, or by divine agency). Perhaps the manifestation function of icons arises from these special causal connections, and perhaps such manifestation accounts for the sense of contact that icons are said to afford. Likewise, perhaps photographs in some sense manifest their subjects, and perhaps such manifestation arises from the mechanical character of the photographic process. If so, the analogy with icons might help us further to understand the sense of contact with the world that photographs seem to offer.

With regard to Walton's transparency thesis, Freeland notes that Walton distinguishes between seeing something directly in ordinary vision and seeing something indirectly by means of visual aids such as binoculars, telescopes, and photographs. Freeland suggests that it is typically the former kind of seeing that places us in contact with the things we see, and that the latter kind might not afford contact at all. Given this, she wonders whether there is a tension within Walton's position insofar as he is arguing that the transparency of photographs supports their capacity to convey a sense of contact with their subjects, even though the kind of seeing that occurs through them is indirect.

In chapter 3, Aaron Meskin and Jonathan Cohen refine a line of criticism of Walton's transparency thesis which they began in an earlier essay.[5] Contact with the world is an instance of seeing, they argue, only if such contact provides information about the visual properties of things (v-information) ***and*** information about the spatial locations of those

[5] Jonathan Cohen and Aaron Meskin, "On the Epistemic Value of Photographs," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62: 2 (Spring 2004): 197–210.

things in relation to the body of the viewer (e-information). While perceptual contact via a photograph might be a rich source of v-information, it is almost never a source of e-information. I can, for example, learn about the visible properties of the Eiffel Tower by looking at a photograph of it, but I cannot learn in what direction it lies relative to me by doing so (except, perhaps, in very unusual cases such as those in which my body is also depicted). Thus we do not see through photographs; they are not transparent.

Meskin and Cohen further argue that the special evidentiary status we accord individual photographs arises from the beliefs we have about photographs in general. As members of a society which regularly uses photographs in journalistic, evidentiary, and scientific contexts, we each develop the belief that photographs as a category are rich sources of v-information. Thus, when we encounter an object which we recognize as a photograph, we infer that it, as a member of this category, is a rich source of v-information. In contrast, as members of a society in which paintings and drawings are typically *not* used in contexts where v-information about things depicted is in demand, we each develop the belief that such images (again, as a category) are poor sources of such information. Thus, when we encounter an object which we recognize as a painting or a drawing – even one that aspires to photorealism – we tend to infer that it is not a rich source of v-information (even though, unbeknownst to us, it might be). Such background beliefs about these two broad categories of images, Meskin and Cohen suggest, in this way account for the special epistemic weight frequently accorded to photographs.

My own contribution (chapter 4) investigates the claims of veracity or objectivity that have been associated with photography since its invention, but that are these days regarded with suspicion. In exactly what senses might photographs be especially truthful or impartial in comparison to handmade images? Why is it that we continue to use photographic images in contexts that require these qualities (such as journalistic or evidentiary) notwithstanding the contemporary suspicions? And what bearing does the advent of digital imaging have on these issues?

I argue first of all that the notions of truth and objectivity must be detached from one another. Truth is a quality associated not with images themselves, but rather with the thoughts those images engender in the minds of their viewers. Objectivity is likewise not a quality belonging to the images themselves, but then again nor is it a quality belonging to the thoughts those images engender. Instead, objectivity is equivalent to Walton's notion of mechanicity and, as such, is a quality belonging to the *process* that begins with the original scene and ends in the formation of the image. I argue