

BY NO MERE MEANS

ABSTRACT. Photographs are many things. The mechanical process by which photographs are generated ensures their factivity. The information they carry is independent of whatever a photographer might believe. We have faith in the veracity of photographs. And they are democratic. Anyone who has access to a camera has the means to image reality. But photographs are not just exemplar recordings. They can be so much more. Photographic art speaks to us and continuously inspires new personal realizations. But Scruton claims that to defend photography as art is to place in the hands of everyone the means to be an artist. I claim that is going too far. It does not follow from photography's democratic and factive virtues that photography is the means for everyone to be an artist. I argue that Scruton makes *mere means* of photography which leads to the impossibility of the kind of photographic experience that makes one an artist. But there are other means available. The photographic experience necessary to make anyone an artist is only possible by *maesthetic means*. If this is right, then *by no mere means* but *only maesthetic means* does photography make anyone an artist.

“In every experience we touch the world through some particular tentacle...”

John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934:214)

Photographs are objects of evaluation. Byrtynky's *China Recycling #8* makes discarded toys look like strawberry and bubblegum lollipops. Weston's *Pepper #35* is sarcous. Danto writes that Avedon's *Andy Warhol and the Factory Members* stripped Candy Darling of her dignity (Danto 2008:296). These pieces of photographic artwork call out to the viewer for judgement. They await a verdict. Emerson wrote that a picture “is not to command me, but I am to settle its claims to praise” (Emerson 1990:7). But according to Roger Scruton, photographs have little if nothing in their defense as art. For Scruton “Photography is democratic: it puts into the hand of everyman *the means* to be his own recorder. To defend its artistic pretensions is to make everyman an artist” (Scruton 1989:178, my emphasis). I argue it does not follow that photography makes everyone an artist. But rather than reject Scruton's claim outright, I will embrace two parts. Photography is democratic and makes a recorder of everyone. However, I

will show how Scruton makes *mere means* of photography which leads to the impossibility of the kind of photographic experience that makes one an artist. But there are other means available. It is by *maesthetic means* that photography makes one an artist. If this is right, then photography *by no mere means* can ever make anyone an artist.

1. DEMOCRATIC RECORDINGS

Direct democracy is a practice whereby a population of eligible members has the means to vote on policy decisions directly as opposed to voting through a representative. If by “photography is democratic” Scruton assumes a practice of direct democracy, then anyone who has access to a camera has the means to record reality. One need only look to the online photograph and video hosting service “Flickr” to appreciate the democratic virtues of photography. With more than 87 million registered members, Flickr sees over 3.5 million new photos uploaded daily (The Verge 2013). This makes photography’s Flickr constituency approximately four times larger than the number of eligible electors in the 2011 Canadian federal election (Elections Canada 2013).

Anyone with a camera has the means to take a picture. Not only that but viewing is also democratic. Viewers no longer rely on representatives such as the mass media to witness and pass judgement on local and global events or objects. Thus, one need not reject Scruton’s first claim. Photography is democratic. While this egalitarian aspect of photography is liberating it has also been a bane to photojournalists, celebrities, and governments. Cases of unethical use, doctoring, and the suppression of photographic images has placed the epistemic status of photographs at the very heart of their ontology.

2. EPISTEMIC STATUS

Lopes writes that our faith in the epistemic status of photographs stems from two beliefs. First, we believe that photographs are documents of their subjects. Second, we believe that photographs are duplicates of their subjects (Lopes 2008:217). Consider what Charles S. Peirce had to say:

Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature (Peirce 1894:§4).

This indexical quality of photography lends it a particular and perhaps peculiar power of representation. Cohen and Meskin would agree. A representation can convey two kinds of information. While photographs do not carry information about the “egocentric location of the representational object” they do have the power to “carry information about the visually accessible properties of the representational objects” (Cohen and Meskin 2004:204). Lopes articulates the dominant theory of photography in philosophy as “an image is a photograph that is a product of a representational process that ensures belief-independent counterfactual dependence” or BICD (Lopes 2012:864-5). In simpler terms, photographs “record details of a scene no matter what, if anything, the photographer believes about it” (Lopes 2012:865). Photographs are epistemically valuable because they are the result of a mechanical process which ensures they are BICD information carriers and allows an event or scene that occurred only once to be mechanically repeated to infinity (Barthes 2013:4). Automaticity gives photography its unsettling existential character. Photographs are recordings *extraordinaire*.

But Lopes is quick to point out that, “documentation does not imply duplication” (Lopes 2008:218). Hence, our faith in a photographic image’s representational powers may rest on a

conflation of our belief in photographs as exemplar recordings. Whether or not we are entitled to our confidence in the epistemic status of photographs is debatable. Nevertheless, it is clear from that theorists certainly “have the truth about how we think about photography” (Lopes 2008: 219). Thus, there is no need to reject Scruton’s second claim. Photographs are exemplar recordings and photography is the means to make everyone an exemplar recorder. But as we shall see, *by no mere means* does photography make anyone an artist.

3. MERE AND MAESTHETIC MEANS

There are mere means and then there are means that are media. Avoiding junk food becomes a mere means to a healthy body if one were happier to substitute dietary avoidance practices for three pills a day to produce the same effects. After a twelve hour flight, landing can be a welcome end to a tiresome journey. One would be happier if humans could just fold space and time. Hence, mere means are routine or mechanical when they can be substituted or conveniently put aside when their ends have been reached.

Yet, if one delights in a healthy diet or a flight just as much as one delights in its end, then the means are “taken up into the consequences produced and [remain] immanent in them” (Dewey 1934:214). A healthy diet remains immanent in a healthy body. A flight remains immanent in a journey. Such a means is one with its conveyance. It becomes its medium. Now extend this view by adding that mere means are not aesthetic but only media are aesthetic.

Terry Eagleton once wrote that “Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body” (Eagleton 1988:327). Before unpacking what that means, first consider that the term “aesthetic” comes from Greek *aisthēta* meaning ‘perceptible things’. In “Aristotle on Thinking”, Charles Kahn argues for two understandings of the word *aisthēta* (cited in Nussbaum and Rorty 1992:365). First, there are *aisthēta* as perceptible objects broadly understood to be things such as trees,

airplanes, cameras, and photographs. Second, there are aisthēta as objects of sense narrowly understood as colours, shapes, and sounds etc. Having distinguished these two aspects of aisthēta, let the term baisthēta stand for broad aisthēta and naisthēta for narrow aisthēta.

Now consider what it means for aesthetics to arise from a bodily dialogue. A body is a distinct material object made up of various parts. A distinct material object such as a photograph is made up of various parts. The parts of a photograph are its various baisthēta and naisthēta. Accordingly, “a discourse of the body” can refer to a photograph’s baisthēta and naisthēta in dialogue. What does it mean for baisthēta and naisthēta to be in dialogue? To be in dialogue is for baisthēta and naisthēta to remain immanent in the consequences produced. Simply put, baisthēta and naisthēta become one with their medium. Let *maesthetic means* stand for baisthēta and naisthēta that are born of a bodily dialogue.

4. MECHANICAL AND MAESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Before moving on it might be wise to quickly take stock. First, photography is democratic, as it puts in the hands of everyone the means to record reality. Second, photographs are exemplar recordings in virtue of their known or perceived epistemic status. Third, *mere means* are baisthēta and naisthēta that are not in dialogue which precludes them becoming one with their medium. Conversely, baisthēta and naisthēta in dialogue are *maesthetic means* in virtue of being one with their media. Now, extend this view one last time by adding that a *maesthetic experience* is only made possible through a body in dialogue, i.e., maesthetic means.

About now one might ask if every photographic experience constitutes a maesthetic photographic experience? Not so. In fact, most photographic experiences fail to be maesthetic in virtue of a photograph’s failure to be maesthetic. For baisthēta and naisthēta to be maesthetic means they must remain immanent in the consequences produced. Here one might ask how

exactly do baisthēta and naisthēta remain immanent? The answer is refreshingly democratic. A photographer must play the dual role of creator and viewer (Dewey 1934:208). No one may be left out. To create a maesthetic photograph, a photographer must simultaneously remain photographer and viewer throughout the entire duration of the photographic undertaking. If at any point a photographer makes mere means of either role, the resulting photograph is no more than an exemplar recording and the resulting experience is mechanical. The photographic artist is “a personal medium through which scenes and events have passed” (Dewey 1934:209). Baisthēta and naisthēta coalesce in the photographer. The photographic artist punctuates every aspect of a maesthetic experience.

Recall that for an image to be a photograph it must be BICD. Those qualities of a photograph to which BICD pertains are just baisthēta and naisthēta. Thus, not only are photographic baisthēta and naisthēta BICD, but according to Hopkins, “our experience of photographs is factive: it is guaranteed to reflect the facts” (Hopkins 2012:710). And of the many facts that a photographic experience reflects perhaps the most obvious and fundamental is the fact that one is experiencing a photograph. A hyper-realist painting surprises because what one took to be a photograph turned out to be a fake. One can hardly believe the trick because we believe only photographs are BICD. A photograph “says something that cannot be uttered as well or as completely in any other medium” (Dewey 1934:211). If we did not take photographs and our experiences of them to be BICD, we would hardly be surprised by hyperrealism.

But a maesthetic photographic experience is both the alpha and the omega of maesthetic photography. One look at Robert Wiles’ photograph of Evelyn McHale should convince (see figure 1). Printed by Life Magazine in 1947, the photograph was titled “The Most Beautiful Suicide” (Life.com 2014). Later this photograph would inspire Andy Warhol to include a

serigraph of the photograph in his Death and Disaster series (1962–1967). And forty years after its publication, Life.com editor Ben Cosgrove wondered “how a single photograph of a dead woman can feel so technically rich, visually compelling and — it must be said — so downright beautiful so many years after it was made” (Life.com 2014).

Schelling wrote that beauty “does not consist in the exclusion of certain realities, but the absolute including of all” (Schelling 1794: Letter XVIII). Maesthetic photographic experiences are just what a person needs to close the gap between certain realities, to engage with the present. Maesthetic photographs provide the jolt necessary to wake us up. A punctum shoots out from a photograph and disrupts one’s daydreaming. (Barthes 1981:27). Its source is the artist punctuated in every aspect of the work. Sometimes the punctum comes like a whisper; a small voice floating on the air that one just happens hear. One picks up on a fragment of a conversation. Sometimes the jolt is severe and one is drawn violently into the dialogue. When we are pressed to explain our attraction to a particular work it is no wonder that we so often use the common phrase “It speaks to me.”

Maesthetics tells “something to those who enjoy it about the nature of their own experience of the world” (Dewey 1934: 209). It is an invitation to be in dialogue with oneself. After all, what is it about you that felt the punctum, heard the dialogue, while another was deaf to it? The maesthetic photographic experience is an act of discovery. And a photograph can persist if it “can continuously inspire new personal realizations in experience” (Dewey 1934:213). Such works of art are universal precisely because they can be realized anew. Wiles’ photograph cannot carry on the same dialogue now that it had with viewers forty years ago. But it is no mere means. It still speaks.



Figure 1. Robert Wiles, Evelyn McHale *The Most Beautiful Suicide*. Printed in Life Magazine, May 1947.
http://www.codex99.com/photography/images/evelyn_1g.jpg

While perceptual organs under ordinary conditions usually work in tandem, as when someone plays the piano, a photograph is factivity taken to the extreme. Had I been a witness to McHale's suicide, my perceptual organs would have worked together to convey an experience of sight, sound, movement, and touch. As it is, I was not a witness to that event and so it is crucial to the photographic experience that the picture of McHale is BICD. The factivity of Wiles' photograph is not only fundamental but also intensified because it this specialization alone that must convey the perceptual information that was naturally available at the time of the photographic undertaking but is naturally unavailable to the viewer now.

Nevertheless, there is a difference in experience between maesthetic and mechanical photographs. It is true that all photographs are recordings. The quality of democratic recording which Scruton generalizes to all photographs is fundamental to any experience of a photograph. But not every car is an antique. Not every plane is a jumbo jet. Not every painting is a Da Vinci or Arcimboldo. And if so, why should we think that every photograph is just a mechanical recording? It seems redundant to say that a car cannot exist without wheels or that a painting ceases to be without colour. So too an image ceases to be a photograph if it is not BICD. No problem. These tautologies just highlight a particular specialization. A medium "always carries its referent with itself" (Barthes 1981:5). Photography's specialization is factivity. But to be more than just a recording, a photograph must be created in maesthetic experience.

Unsurprisingly then, most scientific photographs fail to be maesthetic photographs. Scientists must adhere to strict recording standards when photographing various phenomena. Factivity is essential. According to the particular needs of each scientist, obtaining an exemplar recording of the phenomenon in question can take several hours, days, or even years before anyone's eyes rest upon the resulting photograph. It is no wonder that technological

innovation in scientific equipment follows quickly on the heels of scientists' rapidly expanding needs. Outdated equipment is quickly substituted for state of the art and older techniques are bypassed. Scientific photographs are experienced without their *baisthēta* and *naisthēta* in dialogue. There is no time for maesthetic discourse. The faster and easier scientists can do their work the better.

Most non-scientific photographic experiences will also fail to be maesthetic photographic experiences. Flickr members take myriad photographs for myriad reasons. Sometimes images of a trip will end up in a photo album. Sometimes photographs confer bragging rights. But this is not to say that photographs taken for the memories or entertainment value should be any less accurate. Factivity here is just as important. Sometimes photographs are used as evidence so that one may cry out, "I was here!" Sometimes they are used as evidence of a crime scene. Photographs have the special epistemic status they do because "they are information carriers whose conditions of employment are easier to satisfy than other information carriers" (Cohen & Meskin 2004:206). In many cases it is easier, more effective and reliable if I just show you a photograph than describe a scene from the past.

As the examples suggest, while democratic, most photographic work and viewing is mechanical because most photographers and audiences make *mere means* of *baisthēta* and *naisthēta*. One might make mere means of a photograph's *baisthēta* and then its *naisthēta* but not take them up simultaneously. Another might only ever make mere means of a photograph's *naisthēta* and ignore its *baisthēta*. In fact, a person may even shun one or the other as inferior or irrelevant. But in all cases of mere means there is no medium, no maesthetics, and thus nothing by which anything can be conveyed. There can be no maesthetic dialogue, no maesthetic photographic experience. When a photograph is perceived in terms other than its medium it is

perceived mechanically. Barthes recalls the feeling one has about such photographs as of something “almost from training” (Barthes 1981:26).

Keeping everything in mind, the origin of Scruton’s claim that photography makes everyone an artist should be clear. Scruton’s view implies that there can only be mechanical photographic experiences. But that is false. The misunderstanding stems from making mere means of the photographer’s camera. By this *mere means* alone Scruton claims that photography makes anyone with a camera an artist. But as we have seen, while one photographic undertaking creates a maesthetic experience another precludes it. It is *by no mere means* but *only maesthetic means* that photography makes anyone an artist.

5. CONCLUSION

Scruton was right when he said that photography is democratic. He was also right when he said photography puts in the hands of everyone the means to be a recorder. It is also true that photographs are exemplar recordings in virtue of their point by point belief-independent counterfactual dependence. This factive quality is fundamental to any photographic experience. A photograph’s factivity is more trustworthy than most politicians. But just like democratic politicians to their constituents, photographs to their viewers “are suitors for his notice, petitioners to his faculties that they will come out and take possession” (Emerson 1990:7). Everyone will be called on to have a photographic experience. Photography does not discriminate. But Scruton was wrong when he said that photography makes anyone with a camera an artist. *By no mere means* can photography make anyone an artist.

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