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Photography and Causation: Responding to Scruton's Scepticism

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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.

Roger Scruton, 'The Photographic Surrogate', 1989 p.178.

According to Roger Scruton, it is not possible for photographs to be representational art.¹ To be a work of art, a photograph would have to sustain aesthetic interest in the photograph *qua* photograph. The only worthwhile potential for aesthetic interest of this kind, he believes, is if we could treat photographs as representational art; but, Scruton argues, the medium of photography is inherently disqualified from this role.

If we allow Scruton's specification of the 'ideal photograph', along with his account of understanding representational art, then his argument is robust. Most responses to Scruton's Scepticism are versions of the claim that Scruton disregards the extent to which intentionality features in photography – or, at least, in some kinds of photograph. Even if these responses offer appealing or compelling reasons to consider photography an art form, they do not shake Scruton's position because they cannot force him to give up his notion of the ideal photograph. My approach is to argue that Scruton has misconstrued the role of causation in his discussion of photography. This exposes a flaw in his account of the ideal photograph and, moreover, a serious flaw in his account of how it is possible to take interest in an ideal photograph. I can highlight what is radical in my approach by the following suggestion: although Scruton insists that the ideal photograph is defined by its '*merely* causal' provenance, in fact he fails to take the causal provenance of photographs seriously enough.

In section 2, I examine Scruton's specification of the ideal photograph and in section 3, his account of the interest that we can take in an ideal photograph. In these sections I argue that, by underestimating the causal provenance of photographs, Scruton has generated an inaccurate account of both the 'subject' of a photograph and the 'medium' of photography and this allows him to specify an overly restricted conception of how we might take interest in an ideal photograph. In section 4, I offer a substantive account of how we should understand the causal provenance of photographs. We must replace Scruton's talk of the 'medium' with an accurate understanding of the photographic process, if we are to discuss the

potential of photography to be a distinctive art form.ⁱⁱ On my account, Scruton's ideal photograph does not count as a photograph at all.

The present paper is not a rebuttal of Scruton's overall sceptical stance – I don't imagine that he will be moved to recant. Rather, I aim to expose some significant problems with the argument that he uses to justify his sceptical thesis and thus show that a new argument will be needed if he intends to defend that thesis. I am willing to admit that, strictly speaking, I offer a response to Scruton's Sceptical Argument, rather than a response to Scruton's Scepticism.

(2)

A painting is a painting *of* something and a photograph is a photograph *of* something. Scruton insists, rightly, that there is a fundamental difference between these cases, a difference that he explains by saying that a painting stands in an intentional relation to its subject, whereas a photograph stands in a merely causal relation to its subject.ⁱⁱⁱ Many philosophers take issue with this rigid opposition but there is no need to pursue this debate here. Keeping in mind that Scruton is specifically concerned with the logical fictions of 'ideal painting' and 'ideal photograph'; for his account, the dichotomy made in terms of 'intentional vs. causal' is straightforwardly definitive.

In characterizing the relation between the ideal photograph and its subject, one is characterizing not an intention but a causal process, and while there is, as a rule, an intentional act involved, this is not an essential part of the photographic relation. ('Photography and Representation', p.121)

Of course it is not necessary to define the subject of a photograph in terms of this causal process, for the subject could be identified in some other way. But the fact remains that when we say that x is a photograph of y we *are* referring to this causal relation, and it is in terms of the causal relation that the subject of the photograph is normally understood. Let us at least say that the subject is so defined for my logical ideal of photography: that premise is all that my argument requires. ('Photography and Representation', p.131)

Nonetheless, if we examine his account of an ideal photograph, we find that his definition is flawed and must be revised or rejected. In the rest of this section, I argue that Scruton is wrong to claim that *an ideal photograph stands in a merely causal relation to its subject*. He is not wrong to specify that an ideal photograph comes about through a process that is 'merely causal'; but, once he has done so, he is wrong to talk about it having a 'subject'. As I shall demonstrate, he employs this spurious terminology only because he

equivocates between the 'subject' of a painting and the 'subject' of a photograph.

The equivocation first features in the opening move of Scruton's argument. He starts by noting that:

A photograph has in common with a painting the property by which the painting represents the world, the property of sharing, in some sense, the appearance of its subject ('Photography and Representation' p.119).

By this, Scruton means that the material object of sight has visual properties which lead the spectator to see the subject *in* the picture, without leading the spectator to think that the picture *is* the subject. Scruton claims that, as pictures, photographs and paintings share this much and, in this minimal sense, both can be called 'representational'. However, even if a painting and a photograph were to have exactly the same representational subject – imagine a painter and a photographer working side-by-side in front of a waterfall – Scruton will go on to say that only the painting counts as representational art. He draws the distinction between the two categories by arguing that the medium of painting makes it possible for our interest in a painting to be an interest in the representation, not just an interest in the represented subject. By contrast, the medium of photography cannot achieve this extra step: there can be no interest in the representation over and above an interest in the represented subject. For Scruton, this entails that only painting is a *representational art*.^{iv}

According to Scruton, if we are to take interest in a representation, it is not enough simply to identify the subject, or notice properties of the subject; rather we must attend to a particular way of seeing the subject – a way of seeing the subject made possible only through recognising the artist's intentional use of the medium. It is not enough to see that the represented subject is a waterfall; we must also be able to grasp the artist's thoughts about the waterfall.^v In grasping those thoughts, we take an interest in the way that the thoughts are made perceptible to us through the medium and this is how the medium creates an interest in the representation itself that is separate from our interest in the represented subject.

The disparity between the medium of painting and the medium of photography rests on whether a medium can do more than merely establish a relation between a picture and its subject. Scruton writes that a painting stands in an intentional relation to its subject and, furthermore, that the medium of painting can be transparent to human intentions – it makes human intentions perceptible. In viewing the picture, we do not just see the represented subject; we are invited to make sense of the artist's thoughts about the subject and, thus, to appreciate the role of the medium in conveying those thoughts. In contrast, a photograph stands in a merely

causal relation to its subject and, furthermore, the medium of photography is not transparent to human intentions. In viewing the photograph we can recognise properties of the subject, insofar as it reproduces the appearance of the subject, but nothing in the medium can make the thoughts of the photographer perceptible to us. The medium is transparent only to the appearance of the represented subject.^{vi}

I can now elaborate my objection. Scruton takes it that, in his opening move, he has neutrally characterised the common ground between paintings and photographs – namely that there is a sense in which both types of picture are representations of their subject-matter.^{vii} The principle that painting is an intentional medium, but photography is not, is supposed to be a factor that arrives after the common ground has been established and serves to separate these types of picture-making into distinct categories: the aesthetically significant category of genuine representation in the former case and ‘representation’ in name-only in the latter case. In fact, I suggest, the supposedly neutral characterisation of pictures, which leads to the idea that a photograph has a subject, is a framework that only makes sense for intentional objects. With painting, there is a reasonable route from the idea that the painting is a picture that represents a subject, to saying that it stands in an intentional relation to its subject. If we also start with the idea that the photograph is a picture that ‘represents’ a subject, then it apparently makes sense to explain that the photograph is related to its subject by a causal relation. If, instead, the starting point is genuinely the idea that the photographic relation is merely causal, then we would not find ourselves wondering how to explain any relation between the photograph and its ‘subject’. This would be the same mistake as thinking that a line of debris washed up on a beach is a picture that stands in a relation to a subject: namely the tide.^{viii}

Unlike the tide-line on a beach, most photographs are deliberately produced. Scruton claims that the mere involvement of an intentional act is not an essential part of the photographic relation (p.121) and that deliberate creation of an image does not make the image itself a vehicle of representational thought (p.141). Both points are correct, but the fact that he appeals to a subject at all means that his account is not sufficiently strict. If an ideal photograph stands in an entirely causal relation to the photographed objects, then it is like a tide-line on a beach. If an ideal photograph has a subject, then, in some respect, the relation is not merely causal.

In the following passage, Scruton indicates that the term ‘represents’ does not genuinely apply to photographs. My point is that he should be equally reticent about the term ‘subject’:

The ideal photograph, as I mentioned earlier, stands in a causal relation to its subject and ‘represents’ its subject by reproducing its

appearance. In understanding something as an ideal photograph, we understand it as exemplifying this causal process, a process which originates in the subject 'represented' and which has as its end point the production of a copy of an appearance ('Photography and Representation' p.130).

I certainly agree with Scruton that there is a significant difference between 'painting of x' and 'photograph of x'. But we cannot establish the difference by assuming that each is a picture with a representational subject, then pointing to a difference in the way that each picture relates to its subject. If something is a painting of x, then x is the subject of that painting. If something is a photograph of x, then x is not (or at least, not necessarily) the subject of that photograph.

Scruton is entitled to claim that a photograph stands in a merely causal relation to some particular group of real objects, but he goes further than that. He assumes that, necessarily, those objects are the *subject* of the photograph, a move which apparently licences him to say that a photograph stands in a merely causal relation to a subject. In the following passage we can see this assumption at work:

A photograph is caused by its subject, and causality is a material relation. Hence the subject of the photograph must exist, and if a photograph is of a man, there is *some particular man* of whom it is a photograph ('The Photographic Surrogate' p.174).

Against Scruton, I propose that the objects causally involved in the production of a photograph are not, just in virtue of their role in the photographic process, the subject matter of the photograph. Rather, photographed objects are elements involved in the photographic process that constitute part of the causal provenance of a photograph. It is possible for those objects to be the subject, but it is also possible for something else to be the subject. It is even possible that the photograph has no subject at all.

Consider an illustration: (fig.1). Ordinarily we might call this a picture of a toy horse on a wall; primarily because, in some sense, the image resembles the visual appearance of a toy horse on a wall. But resemblance, for now, is irrelevant.^{ix} If we reflect *strictly* in terms of a causal relation, we are not entitled to assume that the toy horse (or any other photographed object) is the subject of the photograph. Even if numerous objects are similarly causally related to the photograph, this does not mean that a toy horse, wall, church, road, and lamp post, taken in combination, count as the subject of the photograph. Strictly, we should only assume that a toy horse, a wall, a road, a church, a lamp post (and many other objects) were elements in the photographic event that led to the final appearance of the

photograph. But this is like saying that yellow ochre, a stiff-tipped sable brush and a palate knife were elements in the process that led to the final appearance of a particular painting. That these elements were part of the medium of production is not held to determine that they are the subject of the work. We would not insist that the painting must be a painting *of* yellow ochre and a stiff-tipped sable brush. Of course, the painting might, as it happens, be a painting of yellow ochre (think of Lichtenstein's paintings of giant brushstrokes), but the subject matter is nonetheless independent of the medium.

Central to Scruton's account of the artistic merit of the medium is the principle that the subject of a painting need not be some particular, existing thing: the subject of a painting may be fictional. For Scruton, fictional competence is the most important feature of representational art.^x By contrast, photography is held to be fictionally incompetent because the subject of a photograph is, necessarily, some particular thing that exists. On my account, Scruton is no longer entitled to draw a contrast along these lines. Although everything he says about the fictional competence of painting still stands, he is not in a position to insist on the literal truth of a photograph. Of course, this point does not serve as an argument to say that photography can be fictionally competent – only that Scruton is not entitled to his original claim. By saying that this photograph may have a subject other than one, or all, of the photographed objects, it may seem that I am smuggling in the idea that intentionality plays a role in the production of photographs. In fact I agree that a role for intentionality is essential if a photograph has a subject at all, and believe that establishing the role of intentionality will show that it is possible for photographs to have subjects other than the photographed objects. However, I have not attempted to justify these claims here. I am merely saying that, insofar as a photograph has a subject, then the subject is not determined solely by the causal relation. On my account it remains a possibility that a photograph does not have a subject at all.

Scruton should, of course, view my 'objection' thus far as a welcome contribution to his argument. Although I may have revealed a flaw in his definition of the 'ideal photograph', everything I have said seems to confirm his view that a photograph is an unsuitable object for aesthetic interest. If, as seems possible, an ideal photograph might have no subject at all, then this might make the sceptical position even stronger. However, this turns out not to be true. The separation of medium from subject matter, as we have seen, is an important consideration for Scruton:

To understand art is to be familiar with the constraints imposed by the medium and to be able to separate that which is due to the medium from that which is due to the man ('Photography and Representation' p.123).

If we are to judge photography in light of this demand, we need to be sure that we properly understand the medium.^{xi} By regarding the photographed objects as subject-matter, it has been possible for Scruton to overlook their proper role as constituent elements in the photographic process. In sections 3 and 4, I elaborate this claim and explain why it changes the scope of the interest that we can take in photographs.

(3)

The logical fiction of the ideal photograph is designed to capture ‘what is distinctive in the photographic relation and in our interest in it’ (p.120). Scruton believes that whenever we take an interest in a photograph, our viewing experience is overwhelmingly influenced by our knowledge that there is a (merely) causal relation between the photograph and its subject. As he puts it:

One’s attitude is made practical by the knowledge of the causal relation between photograph and object. (‘Photography and Representation’ p.131)

In looking at a photograph, therefore, we know that we see something which actually occurred, *as* it occurred. This fact dominates our response to the picture, which becomes in consequence transparent to its subject (‘The Photographic Surrogate’ p.175).

For Scruton, awareness of the causal relation can never provide a positive basis for taking aesthetic interest in a photograph as representational art. He insists, rightly, that interest we take in an ideal photograph must be dominated by our knowledge of its merely causal provenance, but he is committed to the principle that such knowledge cannot make a positive contribution. We see this commitment in the following argument:

By its very nature, photography can ‘represent’ only through resemblance. It is only because a photograph acts as a visual reminder of its subject that we are tempted to say that it represents its subject. If it were not for this resemblance, it would be impossible to see from the photograph how the subject appeared, except by means of scientific knowledge that would be irrelevant to any interest in the visual aspect of the photograph (‘Photography and Representation’ p.133).

Consider (Fig. 2). We cannot understand what this is a photograph of purely by its visual appearance. Although some areas of the photograph share the appearance of recognisable objects, the long blur across the middle of the photograph does not. It is easy to imagine that more extreme examples would be completely unrecognisable. Scruton worries that ‘scientific knowledge’ might be thought to provide a means to identify the subject of a photograph and enable the viewer to take interest in its appearance, in cases where the visual properties of the photograph are not sufficient. He points out that using inferential reasoning as the basis for understanding a representational subject cannot be a worthy concept of representation:

Why not say that any causal relation which allows us to infer the nature of the cause from the properties of the effect provides us with a representation of the cause in the effect? Such a concept of representation would be uninteresting indeed (op. cit.)

Scruton specifies that our interest in a represented subject must be interest in its visual properties – we must be presented with a way of seeing it, not merely a way of thinking about it – hence he must rule out the possibility that we could take interest in the subject by inferential reasoning. With this argument, Scruton pushes through a significant additional requirement that is not directly entailed by the causal relation: the ideal photograph must share a visual appearance with its subject. However, once he has established that there must be identity of appearance between photograph and subject, Scruton is able to argue that our interest in the ideal photograph cannot be separated from our interest in the appearance of the subject.^{xii}

By specifying that the ideal photograph must share visual appearance with its subject, Scruton deliberately rules out of consideration the broader category of photographs whose appearance does not present immediately recognisable photographed objects (e.g. Fig. 2). This firmly establishes a double standard: ‘the ideal painting has no particular need for an identity of appearance with its subject’ (p.124); but the ideal photograph must have identity of appearance with its subject: where ‘subject’ is, only and necessarily, the photographed objects. Scruton’s argument assumes that, in the absence of being able to visually identify the subject, the subject of a photograph could be established through knowledge of the causal process. My objection is that this rests on an assumption I have already contested: it is wrong to think that the causal relation determines the subject of a photograph.

I believe that it is sometimes desirable to use ‘scientific knowledge’, or reasoning from the properties of an effect, to learn what a photograph is a photograph of and that learning what it is a photograph of can help us to appreciate the photographer’s intentional use of the medium. But this is because learning the things a photograph is a ‘photograph of’ does not

reveal what things it is a 'picture of'. In the case of Fig. 2, a viewer who knows that the image was produced by photographing a moving train may be in a position to infer that the blur effect must have been caused by a long exposure. This is quite different to concluding, as Scruton's viewer must do, that the subject of the photograph must be a train.

Scruton constructed the problem that justifies his additional requirement precisely because he is committed to claiming that the relation 'photograph of' determines the subject. In doing so he misconstrues the potential relevance of understanding the causal process. Scientific knowledge does not tell us what is the represented 'subject' of a causal relation, otherwise, as mentioned above, this would imply that we could treat the tide as the representational 'subject' of the line of debris washed onto the shore. By assuming that the medium of photography determines the subject of a photograph by a causal relation, Scruton has overlooked the possibility that knowledge of the causal process grants us insight into the medium of a photograph, rather than its subject matter. The significance of this idea will become more apparent if I provide an alternative to set against the photographic medium as it appears in Scruton's account.

Throughout his discussion, Scruton chooses to work with an extremely minimal characterisation of the photographic medium. In fact, if his definition of the ideal photograph can be considered the whole story, then his notion of the medium is defined entirely in terms of two considerations: an ideal photograph has a causal relation to its subject and identity of appearance with its subject. For his purposes Scruton has no need to discriminate between different stages of the photographic process. On his account it makes no difference whether the recording medium is collodion on glass, celluloid film or an electronic sensor. Nor does anything hinge, for him, on whether the visual object is a paper print, transparent slide, or digital image.

More importantly, I take it that Scruton shares a widely held misconception about the medium of photography: namely that everything in front of the camera apparatus constitutes subject matter and everything inside or involving the camera apparatus constitutes the photographic medium. This notion typically goes hand-in-hand with an over-simplified story of the photographic process:

- i) an event of some kind takes place in front of the camera (sometimes called the 'pro-filmic event') e.g. a bird flies in front of a waterfall;
- ii) the camera takes a photograph of the pro-filmic event;
- iii) copies of the photograph are printed;
- iv) the appearance of the photograph leads the viewer to learn about the appearance of the pro-filmic event.

The main idea is that the photograph stands in a causal relation to what is called the 'pro-filmic' event and that there is equivalence between the appearance of the pro-filmic event and the appearance of the photograph. Against this over-simplified conception, I now offer an alternative way to understand the photographic process and use it to elucidate the peculiarly distinctive nature of photographs.

(4)

Photography is a relatively new topic for discussion in mainstream philosophy of art, and, to date, debate has been dominated by over-simplified characterisations of photography and photographs. Sometimes 'the photograph' is used interchangeably to stand for the material substance that underwent change on exposure to light, and also for the visual object that is offered for view. The fact that these may sometimes be one and the same object should not obscure our understanding that they represent quite different stages in a multi-stage process. In the following account, my aim is to elucidate the relevant complexity of the photographic process and to replace Scruton's notion of the 'ideal photograph' with a clear notion of 'photograph' worthy of debate in the philosophy of art and aesthetics. If we are to consider the potential for photographs to be art (representational or otherwise) we cannot start with the idea of an object that 'stands in a causal relation to its subject and 'represents' that subject by reproducing its appearance' (p.130). On my account, an object defined in these terms would not count as a photograph.

To begin, I can disentangle some terms. By 'photography' I mean a group of practices that includes creating, storing and displaying photographs. By 'photographic process' I mean a distinctive multi-stage process that necessarily includes the occurrence of a photographic event and the material production of photographic images. By 'photograph' I mean a visual image whose relevant causal history necessarily includes a photographic event. The term that plays the vital role is 'photographic event' and I will spend some time elaborating this idea in detail. I leave on one side, for now, any reference to the 'medium of photography'.

As a preliminary to the photographic event, the photographic apparatus (henceforth 'the camera') is set up in the presence of some ordinary state of affairs.^{xiii} Examples of such ordinary states of affairs might be a beach, with surf waves on the sand and clouds in the sky; a family group seated around a table; or a street where a toy horse is standing on a wall.

The camera's photosensitive surface can be thought of as a two-dimensional area, a 'screen', though in fact it has depth (e.g. chemical layers, photon sensors). Light reaching the screen may be reflected off objects, emitted directly from light sources, or both. The light is usually directed

through an aperture and by a series of lenses and mirrors. The light reaching the screen forms a 'light image' – a changeable visible array of light of different wavelengths. A light image of this kind is what we are able to view by standing inside a camera obscura. Properties of the light image, such as brightness and sharpness, are determined by the camera optics; a filter will allow only selected wavelengths to reach the screen. The size, shape and pattern of the array is determined by optics according to whether a wide or narrow cone of light reaches the screen, but also by the camera position in relation to the objects and light sources.

The light image is a visible object and is available for viewers to examine – it can appear indiscernible from a photograph that is viewed with the aid of a slide projector or electronic 'data projector'.^{xiv} Imagine a light image created by a camera obscura aimed at an open book. The light image could appear perfectly still and it would be possible to read the writing on the pages of the book, just the same as a projected photograph. But a light image is not a photograph because it changes in real time according to changes in the state of affairs. If the page is turned, or the light source is moved, the light image will change. The properties a light image shares with photographs are not enough to put it in the same category as photographs. Rather, in Scruton's sense, it is in broadly the same category as mirror images and the 'image' produced by holding up an empty frame. And that is my whole point. A light image may be focussed to visually resemble the appearance of a scene (to human eyes) and stands in a merely causal relation to that scene. I believe that Scruton's ideal photograph is nothing more than an image of this kind.

Photographs (along with television and cinema) are in a different category because they have a distinctive causal history: one that requires a particular kind of event. The formation of a light image is a necessary stage, but it is not, by itself, a photograph. All of the preliminary stages described could have taken place and yet it would still not be possible for a photograph to be produced. The crucial stage of the relevant causal chain is the photographic event – the recording of the light image.

A photographic event occurs when a photosensitive surface is exposed to the light and a recording of the light image takes place. The photographic event is *the recording of the light image*. It is important to recognise that in this description 'a recording' is not the same as 'a record'. The record (an object such as a negative) is the result of the recording process. I emphasise this point in order to stress that the photographic event is not itself a photograph. Indeed, even when the photographic event is complete, the result is not necessarily immediately a photograph. The record left by recording the light image is not necessarily a visual image. It may have to undergo further processes to fix and develop the recording material before a visual image is produced.^{xv} The fact that, ordinarily, these processes are

automated in modern cameras, should not lead us to overlook the significance they have as distinct stages in a complex process.

In general, the duration of the photographic event corresponds to the period of time the photosensitive surface is exposed to light (misleadingly this is often called the exposure time ‘of the photograph’).^{xvi} Different lengths of exposure time will produce significantly different records. Any photosensitive surface responds to light within certain thresholds: too little time (underexposure) will mean that little, if any, of the light image gets recorded, too much time (overexposure) will mean that the recording will be continually overwritten until all detail is lost. But if the light image is moving rather than static, exposure time determines more than just the total amount of light; it also determines the distribution pattern: a brief exposure time will limit how much the light image moves in relation to the screen during the recording process; a long exposure time will allow considerable movement. Movement of the light image during the photographic event can be caused by the motion of objects, the light source, or the camera itself. Hence the effects visible in Fig. 2 are not effects that could be seen in a light image – they are only possible as the consequence of a photographic event.

Consider, then, that many factors determine the appearance of the light image and many further factors determine how properties of the light image are recorded – together these factors constitute the photographic event. It is a highly distinctive phenomenon and, crucially, the objects and light sources along with the photographic apparatus are all ineliminable elements of one and the same event - the photographic event.

This is far from being the end of the story; in fact it is just the beginning. The photographic event is the definitive event in the causal production of a photograph. Recall the over-simplified story of the causal history at the end of section 3. Alongside that, I now offer an alternative account:

- i) A light image is formed, using objects and light sources in an ordinary state of affairs.
- ii) A photographic event occurs. No photograph yet exists.
- iii) The information recorded and stored undergoes a process to create a visual image (the photograph) or several such images.
- iv) The appearance of the photograph leads the viewer to learn about the photographic event.

Notice, however, that the appearance of the photograph does not lead the viewer to learn about the *appearance* of the photographic event. The photographic event does not have relevant visual properties – it is not a visual event.^{xvii} This contrasts significantly with any version of the original causal story which is concerned to establish that the photograph shares an appearance with the pro-filmic event.

Information recorded during the photographic event can be processed in different ways to result in any number of images – even ones with very different material properties. These photographs are not unified by sharing visual resemblance with and a causal relation to a ‘pro-filmic event’. Nor should we think that they are copies of ‘the original photograph’ that was taken, because there exists none such ‘photograph’. Rather they share in common a causal relation to one and the same photographic event. The photographic event is not, itself, a photograph. The final step in the multi-stage photographic process is the creation of the visual image and in this step there is further potential for a variety of factors to significantly affect the appearance of the final image. A photograph printed on cibachrome paper will have very different visual properties to a photograph installed on a light-box. A wallet-sized photograph will differ in its impact to a photograph projected onto the front of a building. These can be called copies of the *same photograph* precisely insofar as they have a causal history to the same photographic event – but the experience for the viewer of each may dramatically differ and, importantly, be influenced by knowledge of the material factors involved in production.

My overall message is that appreciating a photograph qua photograph requires understanding that it has a distinctive causal provenance: to appreciate that its visual properties are causally dependent on properties of objects and light sources that went into creating the light image, factors involved in the photographic event and further material characteristics gained during its processing into a visual object.

My reader should be quick to point out that the stages I have described can happen entirely by natural processes: strong sunlight, over time, may bleach a wooden panel, leaving the pattern of an overlaid fabric marked in dark relief. Is this a photograph? Yes, certainly; and an example of this kind is relevantly similar to the tide-line of debris left on a beach. Importantly, if we ask what it is a ‘photograph of’, we should properly say that it is just as much a photograph of the sunlight as a photograph of the fabric pattern. ‘Photograph of’ picks out a causal relation to the objects and light sources that were causally responsible for the light image. Being a photograph of these things does not entail visual resemblance. Most importantly, even when the photographic process causes visual resemblance, this does not suffice to make the photograph a picture. If a process causes an image to visually resemble the objects and sources causally responsible for its appearance, this does not mean that the image has a subject.

The question of photography as a representational art should be reopened. Scruton talked about the ‘medium’ of photography and I have said little about this in my own account. We need to understand the photographic process if we want to understand its potential as a medium for art, or other purposes. Scruton argued, wrongly, that the medium necessarily constrains the subject matter of photographs. I argue that the medium

consists of highly distinctive materials and processes: objects and light sources that contribute to the creation of the light image and are included in the photographic event. The photographic image stands in a merely causal relation to those objects, but this does not entail that they must be the subject of our interest when we view a photograph. There is a merely causal relation when a brush transfers paint to the canvas, but we don't insist that, for that reason, our interest in paintings is an interest in paintbrushes. The photographic event is central to the medium of photography and with open minds we should investigate the idea that this distinctive causal phenomenon – just like the brushstroke – can be mastered and creatively exploited by skilled artists. Considering, anew, whether photography may be a medium that is transparent to human intentionality, we can ask whether some photographs are pictures and, of those pictures, (including some with fictional subjects) some are masterpieces that sustain aesthetic interest as representational art. If a photograph represents a subject, it does so because it stands in an intentional relation to the subject – but the causal relation places no constraints on what a photograph may depict. Understanding this should be the first step towards investigating the question of photography as a representational art.

I think it is possible to establish that many photographs are truly remarkable works of art and that the experience of viewing them demands and rewards a sophisticated imaginative response; but I will defend this view elsewhere. I have offered the present account to demonstrate that when we ask the question what it is to take an interest in a photograph *qua* photograph, we must work with a proper understanding of photography, photographs and the photographic process.

(5)

I have argued that Scruton's Sceptical argument is flawed in two significant respects: he is not entitled to the idea that an ideal photograph has a subject and he is not entitled to the restriction he places on how we might take an interest in the ideal photograph: namely that we may only take interest in photographs that visually resemble the photographed objects. Both of these flaws share, as a root, Scruton's underestimation of the causal provenance of photographs and the extent to which the nature of the photographic process makes photography a distinctive 'medium'. My own suggestions are, if anything, more extreme than Scruton's original position: it is possible that a photograph does *not* have a subject at all and the interest we take in photographs *must* involve an appreciation of their causal provenance. An important consequence is that when we re-open the question of photographs as representational art, we must include photographs which do not share their visual appearance with photographed objects.

My positive account does not meet the rich and demanding theory of aesthetic understanding that Scruton offers in his wider work – nor does it attempt to do so. If anything, the account I have offered is likely to give Scruton fresh reasons to want to see photography excluded from the pantheon of art. But, if my account carries force, it will convince him that he cannot continue to use his original reasons.^{xviii}

ⁱ I take Scruton to be implicitly committed to the claim that photography is a genuine art form only if it is a representational art form; and to the strong thesis that photography is not a genuine art form at all. One remark in ‘The Photographic Surrogate’ seems to imply a weaker thesis: ‘[photography] may be an art, but, if so, it is not an art of depiction’ (p.174), which would mean that he does not have that commitment. However, in context, the remark seems to be playing a dialectical role and the overwhelming import of Scruton’s essays points to a stronger thesis – albeit unstated. The epigraph bears out this interpretation.

ⁱⁱ In sections 2 and 3, I follow Scruton by talking about the ‘medium’ of photography. In section 4, I change to talking about the photographic process.

ⁱⁱⁱ According to Scruton, a ‘*merely* causal’ relation is one ‘that [is] not characterized in terms of any thought, intention, or other mental act’ (‘Photography and Representation’ p.121). Unless otherwise indicated, essays appear in Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetic Understanding: Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture*, (South Bend, Indiana: St Augustine’s Press, 1983, 1998).

^{iv} Scruton’s category of representational art would extend to any form of depiction where the picture stands in an intentional relation to its subject matter – including drawing, etching and print-making.

^v A representational work of art must express thoughts about its subject and an interest in the work should involve an understanding of those thoughts (‘Representation in Music’ p.72).

^{vi} ‘One might say that the medium in photography has lost all importance: it can present us with what we see, but it cannot tell us how to see it’ (‘Photography and Representation’ p.133).

^{vii} He reiterates this notion as follows: ‘in both cases, it seems, the important part of representation lies in the fact that the spectator can see the subject in the picture’ (‘Photography and Representation’ p.121).

^{viii} This is true even when the shape of the tide-line visually resembles the shape of the waves.

^{ix} Scruton specifies visual resemblance in his definition of the ideal photograph, but not as an immediate consequence of the causal process. I criticise his separate justification in section 3.

^x ‘For unless it were possible to represent imaginary things, representation could hardly be very important to us. It is important because it enables the presentation of scenes and characters toward which we have only contemplative attitudes: scenes and characters which, being unreal, allow our practical natures to remain unengaged’ (‘Photography and Representation’ p.127). ‘Fictional representation is not merely an important form of representational art but in fact the primary form of it, the form through which the aesthetic understanding finds its principal mode of expression’ (Ibid. p.132).

^{xi} In 'Representation as Music', Scruton writes 'Representation requires a medium, and is understood only when the distinction between subject and medium has been recognized' (p.71).

^{xii} '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' ('Photography and Representation' p.134).

^{xiii} By using 'camera' as shorthand for photographic apparatus I wish to avoid confusion by noting that photographic apparatus comes in a huge range of forms, including the 'camera-less' apparatus used for creating photograms. On my account a photogram counts as a photograph.

^{xiv} This is true of general cases. I don't want to rule out the idea that an x-ray is a species of light image; or to exclude the case of light images that are too faint or too small for detection by ordinary sighted human beings.

^{xv} When the silver salts on a photosensitive film surface react to light, this change leaves a record. The photographic event ends when the photosensitive surface ceases to be exposed to a light image. At this point, when dealing with photographic film, the record is not permanent (further exposure to light will distort the record). The record is stabilised by chemical fixatives, then chemically developed to produce a visible image. In the case of digital cameras, the electric charge produced by the sensor reacting to light becomes a stable record only when digitised data from the electronic sensor is 'saved' as a coded file. A further process is required to turn the file into a visible image.

^{xvi} Unusual cases include astronomical photography, where what appears to be a single photograph is the end result of multiple exposure times; and strip-technique photography, where a single exposure time is recorded across multiple sections of a photosensitive area.

^{xvii} The photosensitive surface may undergo a visible change during the recording process, but it is the event of the recording that is relevant – not any appearance.

^{xviii} My thanks to the audience of the Durham conference in honour of Roger Scruton and my colleagues on the AHRC Project *Aesthetics After Photography*. I am grateful for written comments from Diarmuid Costello, Ian Ground, Robert Hopkins, Lambert Wiesing and David Davies.