

Experiencing photographs *qua* photographs: what's so special about them?

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### **Abstract**

Merely rhetorically, and answering in the negative, Kendall Walton has asked: "Isn't photography just another method people have of making pictures, one that merely uses different tools and materials – cameras, photosensitive paper, darkroom equipment, rather than canvas, paint, and brushes? And don't the results differ only contingently and in degree, not fundamentally, from pictures of other kinds?"

Contra Walton and others, I wish to defend in this article a resounding "Yes" as being the correct answer to these questions. It is a widely shared view that photographs are somehow special and that they fundamentally differ from hand-made pictures like paintings, both from a phenomenological point of view (in the way we experience them), and an epistemic point of view (since they are supposed to have a different – greater – epistemic value than paintings, giving us a privileged access to the world). In what follows, I shall reject almost the totality of these claims, and as a consequence there will remain little difference left between photographs and paintings. As we shall see, 'photographs are always partly paintings' – a claim that is true not only of retouched digital photographs but of all photographs, including traditional ones made using photosensitive film and development techniques.

### **Keywords**

photography, painting, phenomenology, metaphysics, digital photography, perception

## 1. Introduction

Merely rhetorically, and answering in the negative, Kendall Walton (1997, p.67-68) has asked: "Isn't photography just another method people have of making pictures, one that merely uses different tools and materials – cameras, photosensitive paper, darkroom equipment, rather than canvas, paint, and brushes? And don't the results differ only contingently and in degree, not fundamentally, from pictures of other kinds?"

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## 2. Perception of Pictures

Let me start with something that has nothing to do with photography, but that concerns ordinary perception. Suppose you see a bottle of beer on a table in front of you, and forget about sceptical scenarios (hallucinations, Descartes' evil demons, and the like). According to many standard ontologies, you see the bottle of beer because there *is* a bottle of beer in front of you, and your perception is somehow caused by the bottle (along with other factors concerning light, your eyes, your optic nerve, and so on). *Eliminativism* is a metaphysical theory that comes in many different varieties<sup>1</sup> but all of them have in common the claim that entities like bottles of beer do *not* exist. According to eliminativism, there only are fundamental components *arranged bottle-of-beer-wise*. The nature of these fundamental components is subject to controversy and varies from one version of eliminativism to another (particles, properties, or other) – for our current purposes let us simply call them "atoms". The central claim of eliminativism is then that atoms arranged bottle-of-beer-wise can do all the metaphysical work bottles of beer can do, and consequently bottles of beer can be eliminated from our ontology without any loss of explanatory power. For instance, bottles of beer can be bought and sold, they can be used as weights on a paperback book on a windy day, or they can occupy a rather well-delimited spatio-temporal region in your fridge – but atoms arranged bottle-of-beer-wise can do all of that too. No need then to postulate extra entities – namely, bottles of beer – in one's ontology.

Furthermore, eliminativists typically claim that their view is *not* contrary to common sense and that it actually is a rather intuitive one. This is where an objection concerning ordinary perception comes into the picture. Indeed, on the one hand eliminativists say that there are no bottles of beer, but on the other hand they want to say that we see them even when we are not under an evil demon's influence or hallucinating – a seeming contradiction. The correct reply to this worry, nicely put by Merricks (2001, p.8-9), is the simple but significant claim that our experience is the same whether there is a bottle of beer in front of us or whether there are atoms arranged bottle-of-beer-wise. Thus, the phenomenal character of our experience is neutral with respect to the eliminativist's metaphysical claim. Our experience is caused, in short, by light reflected by a bottle of beer, and since atoms arranged bottle-of-beer-wise reflect light in the same way bottles of beer do, our experience is qualitatively the same in both cases. The fact that we have non-hallucinatory perceptions as of bottles of beer thus cannot be used as an argument against eliminativism. The general idea here is that our sensory experiences can be accounted for in terms of more basic and genuinely fundamental (and existing) entities – atoms arranged *x*-wise – and so there is no need to postulate a further entity – *x*.

In this article, I am not interested in eliminativism, but I am interested in what the situation described above teaches us about phenomenology. What it teaches us is that phenomenology comes apart from epistemology or metaphysics. Whether we know that there are (or aren't) bottles of beer or whether there are any (or not) just does not matter for what our experience is like. Beliefs we have about what there is and how things are, are irrelevant to what we see (perceive, in general) in a purely qualitative and phenomenal sense. The eliminativist's response to the objection above illustrates this point nicely, I think. Beliefs do not intervene in what we see.

Now we can talk about photographs. A first, simple, and perhaps even trivial, claim I want to put on the table is the following: photographs and paintings are both pictures, and are both experienced in the particular way in which pictures are, but there is no significant difference in our visual experience when we look at a photograph or at a painting. What we see is simply a picture. Whether a picture is a sharp photograph or a hyper-realistic painting, or whether it is a digitally manipulated heavily retouched<sup>2</sup> photograph or an impressionist painting, our visual experience is the same – indeed, these cases can sometimes be for the viewer visually (that is, phenomenally) indistinguishable. The point here is not to say that we can make mistakes – although we can – and take a photograph to be a painting, or a painting to be a photograph, rather what I want to highlight here is the fact that our visual experiences *qua* phenomenal visual experiences are of the same kind: they are visual experiences *of pictures*. This simple fact shows us that, here again, our phenomenology

comes apart from what we *know* about the picture (especially, the way it was produced) or from the way the picture *is* (its metaphysical nature).

What I want to do here is to clearly distinguish between phenomenological issues on the one hand, and epistemic and metaphysical ones on the other. This is not always the case, as for instance Robert Hopkins and Mikael Pettersson, independently and recently, put it :

[Traditional<sup>3</sup>] photographs have an epistemic status that 'handmade' pictures such as drawings, paintings, and etchings do not. Both photographs and handmade pictures can be sources of knowledge, but photographs offer us a way of finding out about the world that is more secure than that offered by handmade pictures [...]. [T]his epistemological difference is accompanied by a difference in phenomenology: we experience photographs differently from other pictures. They seem to put us in a relation to their objects that is somehow more intimate, more direct, than that in which we stand to the objects handmade pictures depict. [...] What we see in traditional photographs is, of necessity, true to how things were when the photograph was taken. [...] It is this that explains traditional photography's special epistemic status and the special experience it instils. (Hopkins (forthcoming))

[...] more than whether photographs actually provide epistemic access to what they are of, it is viewers' beliefs that they do so that matter for the phenomenology of photography. (Pettersson (2011, p.191))

The link between phenomenology and epistemology is obvious in both citations. Both Hopkins and Pettersson mention the *influence* one's beliefs allegedly have on one's phenomenal experience when perceiving a photograph. But, as I tried to show above, it is a mistake to 'mix' the two issues in this way. What we see (that is, what the phenomenal character of our visual experience is like) is one thing, and what we *believe* to be the case about what we see is another. Perhaps I am insisting too much on the trivial, and perhaps I am not interpreting the citations above in a charitable way. But perhaps once we do make the conceptual distinction between phenomenology, epistemology and metaphysics more precisely, we have a better starting point for the discussion concerning the alleged differences between photographs and paintings – namely, we learn that it is *not* a phenomenological affair, but an epistemic and metaphysical one, which are the claims I will turn my attention to in what follows.

### 3. Photographs and Reality

The difference between paintings and photographs is that, typically, in the case of photographs, when we know that we are looking at a photograph, we have a piece of knowledge about a metaphysical truth that we don't have in the case of paintings. More precisely, the relevant epistemic situation is that we know how the picture was produced, and this gives us access to a simple but important metaphysical truth: *there was something*. This is a claim that is widely shared by virtually everyone, including Walton, Hopkins, Pettersson, and many others. Indeed, given the way photographs are made, it is necessary that, so to speak, at the beginning of the causal process that leads to the existence of a photograph there has been something that has been photographed – in short, something that reflected light which was then recorded by a camera.

Now, what I want to insist on is how poor and weak this claim is. Let us start by having a look at these three photographs I took of a bottle of beer:



*Photo 1 : a photograph of a bottle of beer, f/29, 1sec, 28mm*



*Photo 2 : a photograph of a bottle of beer, f/3, 1/160, 16mm*



*Photo 3 : a photograph of a bottle of beer, f/8, 1/80, 36mm*

These three photographs are photographs of the same subject, in the same light conditions, taken at (almost) the same time – they are photographs of 'the same metaphysical reality'. All three photographs are such that we have the piece of knowledge about the metaphysical truth that everyone agrees on: there was something. The weakness of this claim is most obviously apparent in Photo1 where the 'something' is unrecognizable (due to a long exposure and a shaking hand), but Photo2 and Photo3 illustrate the claim I want to make as well, namely, the claim that in the case of a photograph, when we know that we are looking at a photograph, we know that there was something that has been photographed but we do *not* know *how* this something was. *Sometimes*, we do not even know *what* this something was, as in the case of Photo1, but this is only a matter of degree: it is because we know so little about how it was that we are not even able to see what it was. *Always*, we do not know *how* the something was, for the simple reason, illustrated by Photo2 and Photo3, that the entities that have been photographed are never pictorially represented (depicted, shown, visually given to us, ...) as they are 'in the world'. Indeed, as a matter of necessity, in any normal process of creation of a photograph, there are steps where some features of the entities represented are altered or even 'erased' and replaced by other apparent features. All three photographs above, for instance, 'misrepresent' the colors of what they are photographs of, since they are black and white; Photo2 'misrepresents' the entities located in the background by representing them as being blurred, due to a shallow

depth of field; both Photo2 and Photo3 'misrepresent' the shape of the bottle (as is most apparent in the case of Photo2, but Photo3 is actually deformed as well) due to the choice of a particular focal length; also, all photographs always represent what they are photographs of only from a certain angle; and so on.

An important thing to note is that all of these 'misrepresentations' are due only to a *normal* use of *traditional and standard* photographic techniques: aperture, shutter speed, angle of view, focus, focal length. Photo2, for instance, is thus no less normal than Photo3, and Photo1, relevantly, is no less normal than the other two – it would simply be entirely arbitrary to claim the contrary. No 'special effects' have been used here, only standard settings on a standard camera<sup>4</sup>.

Now, what we see here is that even normal photographs, using standard settings and photographic techniques, tell us in principle very little about the 'true properties' of what they are photographs of. The shape of the bottle, for instance, is 'misrepresented' in all three photographs above (and similarly for colors, sharpness, etc.). Thus, again, since we know that we are looking at photographs and not at paintings, we know that there was something that was photographed, but we do not know how it was – for instance, by looking at the photograph of the bottle, we do not see what was its true shape. We can perhaps guess it, or even calculate it if we knew all of the settings, the distance at which the photograph was taken, and if we knew the equations that allow such a calculation, but even if something like this were at least partly possible, this would *not* be a normal way to interact with photographs (and it would definitely not work very well in the case of colors or of a blurred background).

A photograph does not give us the world. It gives us a pictorial representation which in normal and standard cases *misrepresents* the world, in a more-or-less interesting way. A photograph tells us *that* there was a world, and in some cases (but not always – see Photo1) partly tells us how the world approximately was. The latter is often true of paintings as well, and only the former metaphysical claim constitutes a principled difference between paintings and photographs, since it *can* (but does not have to) be false in the case of paintings.

#### **4. Photographs and Photographers**

Perhaps then, as many have claimed<sup>5</sup>, the difference between photographs and paintings comes not from the resulting picture, but from the way it was produced, in the sense that photographs are made mechanically without human intervention, while paintings are necessarily subject to human intentions, beliefs, and interventions? In Benovsky (2011), I argued at length that this is incorrect, so let me here only quickly focus on the main point: it is *not possible not to take decisions* when one takes a photograph. Any time a photograph is made, a decision has to be made at the very least about aperture, shutter speed, focal length, exposure, and usually, many other settings. These decisions can be either

purposefully, consciously, and manually taken by the photographer herself, or they can be taken by the engineers who programmed the automatic mode of the camera which a Sunday snapshotter can use in order to avoid taking these decisions by herself – but in any case, human decisions and human interventions are unavoidable.

These decisions make a big difference to the resulting picture, as Photo1, Photo2, and Photo3 illustrate. Indeed, the differences between these three pictures are entirely due to my decisions. Big aperture can be chosen to create a shallow depth of field, resulting in a blurred background. Long exposure time can be used to produce photographs like Photo1. A wide angle lens (short focal length) can be chosen to produce deformations like in Photo2. And so on. These tools, as well as many others, are the standard tools the photographer is meant to use to produce a picture accordingly to how *she wants* to represent the metaphysical reality in front of the camera, and *not* to how the reality *is*. In the same way painters can (and often do) give us a pictorial representation of the world accordingly to how they want us to see it, photographers use the various settings and techniques at their disposal to make us see the world the way they want to show it.

Keeping this in mind, we see here again how weak the epistemic and metaphysical claim is. Indeed, in the case of photographs the claim "There was something" is necessarily true, while it is only contingent in the case of paintings, but that's about the only principled difference between these two types of pictures, and as we have seen above it is not a big one. In both cases, the entities that are pictorially represented are only given to us after some human decisions have been made to represent them in such-and-such a way.

## **5. Photographs and (Post-)Production**

Furthermore, both digital and traditional photographs require a certain amount of 'post-production steps' where either a RAW file is converted into a final image file or a negative is developed to produce a final picture on photographic paper. These manipulations, digital or chemical, are necessary to any process of production of a photograph – without them no photograph would simply exist. Indeed, after the shutter has been pressed, there only is a negative or a RAW file, but these are not photographs – yet. Additional steps need to be taken in order to make a photograph come into existence. These steps can be done quickly inside the body of a camera (like in a Polaroid camera, or in most compact automatic digital cameras), or manually later (in a darkroom, or on a computer), but this practical difference does not constitute a principled difference. However these steps are taken, they have to be taken, and here again they involve human decisions (as before, either the photographer's own or somebody else's).

Minimally, these are decisions about contrast, colors, and brightness – which are decisions that *have* to be taken in order to produce any photograph at all – but they can also

be decisions concerning more sophisticated techniques in order to produce a particular effect (like a sepia effect, for instance), or to chemically or digitally manipulate the negative or the RAW file to produce a retouched photograph. Such retouches can be small and light, or they can be heavy instruments used by the photographer to finish her work – that is, to achieve better her goal of showing us the world the way she wants us to see it. Partly then, these manipulations are necessary – they are an essential part of any normal process of creation of a photograph. Partly, they are contingent and the photographer can choose to take such additional steps or she can choose not to. How much of such steps can be taken before the resulting picture ceases to be a photograph and becomes a painting is a vague matter – an issue I discuss in detail in Benovsky (manuscript) – but way before we reach that limit, we are in a position to see that the mere existence of any normal photograph requires *some* amount of post-production techniques and human decisions, and that in most normal and standard cases the amount of chemical or digital manipulation goes well beyond these minimal necessary steps. As before, we see here again how human intervention plays a crucial role in the coming into existence of photographs and in the way the resulting picture is – namely, in a way that tells us not how the world is, but rather how the photographer wants us to see it.

## **6. Photographs are always partly Paintings**

What stems from the preceding sections, I hope, is a clear picture of the nature of photographs and of the way we produce them, experience them, and interact with them, which is such that the following claim is now obvious: *photographs are always partly paintings*.

The photographer deals with a metaphysical reality in front of her camera (and the difference between her and a painter concerns the fact that this is necessary for her and only contingent for the painter), and uses the various photographic tools and techniques at her disposal to create a pictorial representation of that reality. These tools are such that they *require* her to take important decisions. Thus, even if she wanted to, she could never 'just' represent reality – rather, she always necessarily has to misrepresent it, and by taking such-and-such a decision rather than another, she then shows us the world, again, not as it is but as she decided to show it. Photo1, Photo2, and Photo3 are examples of such decision-taking processes. Thus, not only photographs are always partly paintings, but photographers are always partly painters – even those who limit themselves to the strict (and necessary) minimum when it comes to post-production.

What all of this shows us is how small the principled difference between photographs and paintings is<sup>6</sup>. Of course, they are pictures produced using different tools (in a narrow sense, a painting is made using *paint* and is, in this sense, trivially different from a photograph), and

the epistemic and metaphysical claim "(We know that) there was something" is only contingent in the case of paintings. Furthermore, when it comes to paintings, a change in the reality will only make a difference for the painting if it also makes a difference in how the painter sees the reality, while in the case of photographs, a change in the reality will make a difference for the photograph even if, say, it goes unnoticed by the photographer – provided that the change is big enough to be visually noticeable on the resulting picture.

Despite these differences, we have seen that, first, there is no phenomenological difference between these two types of pictures – that is, there is no difference in the qualitative experiences we have of them – and, second, the metaphysical claim is a weak one. The weakness of this claim, I suppose, will become more and more obvious and significant with the evolution of digital photography, where the easiness with which digital manipulation during production and post-production stages will make photographers become even more painters than they already are<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Van Inwagen (1990), Heller (2008), or Merricks (2001).

<sup>2</sup> I will have more to say about digital manipulation below.

<sup>3</sup> In Hopkins' view, *digital* photographs are different in this respect – they are closer to paintings than traditional photographs made by using photosensitive film. In my view, which I will develop below, I will treat both types of photographs in the same way. I insist on equal treatment also in Benovsky (2011) and Benovsky (manuscript).

<sup>4</sup> Namely, the Canon EOS 7D, the lens used here being the Canon EF-S 10-22. The fact that this is a digital camera is irrelevant here, since the very same settings (and results) are standard on traditional film cameras as well.

<sup>5</sup> "[...] the relation between a photograph and its subject is a *causal* relation. If a is the cause of b, then the existence of b is *sufficient* for the existence of a." Scruton (1981, p.588, my italics).

"[...] photographs are things, whose state – i.e. the configuration of marks on their surfaces – depends, as Walton points out, *belief-independently* and counterfactually on visible features of what they are photographs of." Pettersson (2011, p.190, my italics)

"[...] by a *mechanical reproduction in the making of which man plays no part*. The solution is not to be found in the result achieved but in the way of achieving it. [...] For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man." (Bazin (1960, p.7)

"Traditional photography, in contrast [with hand-made pictures], involves a causal chain free from the influence of people's beliefs and experiences [...]." (Hopkins (forthcoming))

"Photography overcame subjectivity in a way undreamed of by painting, one which does not so much defeat the act of painting as escape it altogether: by automatism, by *removing the human agent from the act of reproduction*." Stanley Cavell, (1971, p.23, my italics)

<sup>6</sup> To make it clear: the claim here is *not* that photographs and paintings are the same thing, and that they can be identified. The claim is that the difference between them is smaller than what we might have thought.

<sup>7</sup> I would like to thank Rob Hopkins, Lynda Gaudemard, Mikael Pettersson, Gianfranco Soldati, and an anonymous referee of this journal for interesting discussions and comments that helped me think about the issues I raise in this paper.