

Lost in Space

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Photography and Philosophy: Essays on the Pencil of Nature edited by **Scott Walden, Malden, MA:** Blackwell Publishing, 2008, 325 pp., 32 b. & w. illus., £55.00

This book should carry a warning label. Despite the appearance of the words ‘the Pencil of Nature’ on its cover, along with a reproduction of plate XIV from William Henry Fox Talbot’s famous 1844–46 book of that name, *Photography and Philosophy* offers no discussion whatsoever of either Talbot’s book or his photograph. Nor is there any mention in its pages of Vilém Flusser’s *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983), Henri van Lier’s *Philosophy of Photography* (1983) or Norton Batkin’s *Photography and Philosophy* (1990), the three previous works purporting to be about the relationship of these two practices. In similar fashion, the work on photography of Charles Sanders Peirce and Roland Barthes is barely mentioned and that of Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida not at all. So, despite its title, this is not in fact a book about what philosophy has had to say about photography or about what photography might have to say to the discipline of philosophy. It is instead a book about what one particular group of analytical philosophers have to say to each other about issues of importance to them; namely, photography’s relationship to truth, objectivity and realism.

Edited by Scott Walden, *Photography and Philosophy* consists of thirteen essays, plus an introduction, and is ultimately derived from a conference on aesthetics held in Newfoundland, Canada, in 2002. Most of the essays were written for this volume but a number are reprints of already published works that, according to Walden, ‘have been especially influential’ (2). Indeed, a 1983 essay by Roger Scruton, ‘Photography and representation’, would seem to be a key text, having drawn responses from a number of other contributors. Scruton’s work as a public intellectual is devoted to defending traditional values and privileges, including such exemplars of inequality as the English monarchy and fox hunting. His views on art may be viewed as similarly anachronistic, privileging intention and therefore willed representation as necessary to aesthetic experience and finding, through a careful process of

logical argument, that photography offers neither.

Sadly for Scruton, the art world is driven by the logic of capital rather than by that of philosophy and the market long ago decided that photographs are indeed artistic, offering the dual satisfactions of an elevating aesthetic experience and a useful return on one’s investment. This decision and these satisfactions have a history of course, and that history would certainly be worth tracing. However, Scruton’s mode of argument conveniently ignores the complications of historical analysis, including any reflection on the history that produced his own entirely romantic views of art and aesthetic experience. This allows him to insist instead on certain ahistorical metaphysical foundations, in particular a ‘reality’ that preexists and is separable from all acts of representation. And perhaps it is this that he is ultimately seeking to defend in this essay, along with certain social values that he would like to think are similarly *a priori*.

Scruton avoids an engagement with the histories of art and taste, but also with the history of photography. This is a pity, if only because he might find much to discuss there. Talbot’s plate XIV from *The Pencil of Nature*, for example, prompted some interesting debate in the nineteenth century about the nature of photographic representation. Titled *The Ladder* and issued in May 1845, this was the only plate in the book that featured human figures, with their careful arrangement lending, Talbot tells us, ‘a great air of reality’ to his picture. An examination of this photograph led the critic for the *Athenaeum* ‘to reflect on the truth to nature observed by Rembrandt in the disposition of his lights and shadows’. But this reviewer also complained that ‘the face of the boy is distorted, from the circumstance of its being so very near the edge of the field of view’. Some time later, in November 1860, following a talk by a Mr Rothwell ‘On the apparently incorrect Perspective of Photographic Pictures’, a painter and photographer named Henry Collen recalled advising Talbot on the making of this same picture, suggesting that he elevate his camera position to avoid creating awkward perspectival distortions in the final composition. But Talbot had his own ideas about such advice, as recounted in a letter to his fellow natural philosopher and friend John Herschel written in October 1847: ‘it is however a pity that artists should object to the convergence of vertical parallel lines, since it is founded in nature and only violates the conventional rules of Art.’¹ For Talbot and his critics, photography, it seems, has a reality peculiar to itself, partaking equally of nature

and culture, while not quite adhering to the truths of either.

Elsewhere in *The Pencil of Nature* we can also find Talbot addressing another issue of interest to Scruton and his colleagues. In the text accompanying plate XX, a photogenic drawing negative of a piece of lace, Talbot explains that his photograph depicts the black lace as if it were white, but that this is ‘perfectly allowable’ as the object is ‘only to exhibit the pattern with accuracy’.² In the language of Barthes, we are being told that photography offers a truth to presence, but not necessarily a truth to appearance.³ It is a sophisticated thought, with many ramifications for photography’s ‘realism’. How unfortunate that no one in *Photography and Philosophy* dares to take on, or even acknowledge, the contribution of either Talbot or Barthes to our understanding of photography.

Some scholars in this volume do, however, want to take issue with Scruton’s various propositions about the mechanistic nature of the camera-derived image. Most of them nevertheless retain his general philosophical framework. Anxious to offer the appearance of a science, the essays in *Photography and Philosophy* tend to proceed methodically, with a minimum of rhetorical flourish or literary affectation, pausing to define each term or proposition before moving on to the next, sometimes even relying on mathematical notations or formulae to make a point. When a conclusion is finally reached, it often seems as if it had been prescribed from the very beginning. In another reprinted essay, for example, Kendall L. Walton investigates the nature of photography’s realism. He wonders why we regard photographs as realistic when they obviously do not look like the things they represent (for a start, photographs are still images of a moving world, are often monochrome, are flat, and so on). Why, then, is a photograph of Abraham Lincoln considered to be a more realistic representation than a painting of the same man made from life? Walton proposes that photographs are privileged because we believe ‘they are pictures through which we see the world’ (24) and that they therefore differ essentially from paintings (even when the two look indistinguishable). Stressing the perceptual contact with the world that photographs allow, Walton argues that ‘the structure of the enterprise of perceiving bears important analogies to the structure of reality’ (46), analogies shared by photographs. Accordingly, he concludes that ‘it is this – photography’s transparency – which is most distinctively photographic and which constitutes

the most important justification for speaking of “photographic realism” (49).

Cynthia Freeland returns to Walton’s essay in her discussion of the relationship of photographs and religious icons. She begins by distinguishing two senses of realism, dividing depictive transparency claims from what she calls manifestation or ‘contact claims’. Icons would often seem to depend on this second type of representational function, and in this capacity they share some qualities with photographs. Listing what she regards as four key features of icons, Freeland subjects them to ‘rational analysis’ (59) and concludes that contact involves a psychological, and thus ‘fictional’ (67), component, a component she says is conceded by Walton (through his stress on ‘belief’ as an element of the photographic experience) but often overlooked by his critics. Freeland makes frequent reference to the work of Patrick Maynard in her essay and he too contributes to this volume, offering a close analysis of the pictorial composition of one of his own snapshots. Investigating the way photographs are thought to articulate particular understandings of space and time, he measures these understandings against ‘the human scale of perceptual experience’ (193). This leads him from ‘optical and numerical facts’ (196) to what he calls ‘issues of undeniable meaning’ (196), such as the way we experience a photograph as something made by someone in order to shape our perception; ‘this can carry the intellectual, psychological, moral, and other values that we ascribe to mental actions generally’ (209). Thus, he concludes, photographs can ‘fully become works of art’ (209).

Although obsessed with art, and with whether photographs qualify as such, the contributors to *Photography and Philosophy* show little interest in or knowledge of the history of photography or indeed of academic art history, and make few references outside their own cosy circle of like-minded scholars. The same sort of criticism might well be made, of course, of those scholars who self-identify as historians of photography, dependent as most are on a steady diet of quotations from Peirce, Benjamin and Barthes, the very scholars so studiously ignored in this book. Certainly it is striking how very few photo-historians make reference to the kind of work gathered in *Photography and Philosophy*. It is as if the two fields of inquiry exist in parallel universes. What is interesting to think about, then, is why these two discourses – aesthetics and art history – apparently have so little to say to each other, even when they are discussing the same thing.

Perhaps the main reason for this lack of communication is that the philosophers gathered in *Photography and Philosophy* are searching for what they take to be universal and objective truths, truths underwritten by cognitive science and measured against what Maynard calls 'basic life values' (187). It is on this basis that Walton could describe his own inquiry as 'entangled in some of the deepest problems philosophy has to offer' (48). Historians, on the other hand, tend to take for granted that meaning is relative and evolving, something determined by context and mediated by the interests and perspectives of the historian. For them, truth is therefore always going to be a contested category. This view of history is itself historical, being very much informed by developments in philosophy over the past fifty years, and especially by that branch of continental philosophy which art historians like to identify with postmodernism. No doubt this kind of philosophy, and the relativism of its value systems, is anathema to the contributors to *Photography and Philosophy*. However, until they are prepared to address and refute its arguments, and thereby drag themselves into the present, their work will remain stuck in its own little universe, of limited interest to critical art historians or even, one suspects, to other philosophers.

Notes

- 1 For more on this debate, see Larry Schaaf, *Sun Pictures: Catalogue Nineteen*, New York, 2009, 16–17.
- 2 Talbot's text can be found in Mike Weaver, ed., *Henry Fox Talbot: Selected Texts and Bibliography*, Oxford, 1992, 100–1.
- 3 Barthes elaborates this idea in his *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, 1981.