The Old Question of Anthropology and Photography: Redefining the Photographic Act and Record

The notion that a photograph shows us 'what we would have seen had we been there ourselves' has to be qualified to the point of absurdity.

Snyder and Allen, 1975

1 Exhibitionary Discourse

The production of photography in the Andaman Islands in the nineteenth century took place at a time when vision played a major role in the emerging science of anthropology. The idea that empirical methods of observation and experiment, based on visual inspections, are of great importance to the development of science, remained influential in the development of scientific photographic techniques in the late nineteenth century. The mechanics of conducting anthropological investigations heavily relied on the delivery of such visual data from the field. The emergent belief in the capability of the photographic medium to render objective transcription of scientific data resulted in the development of the application of photography for anthropological studies. The intensified interest in the Andamanese was, in effect, manifested by the various photographic techniques applied in collecting ethnographic data from the islands. Significantly, the Andamans witnessed the application of all the developed

photographic techniques of the time. First, the usefulness of the photographic medium for craniological racial studies was offered by F. Galton in his presentation of the composite photography of eight male Andamanese skulls at the meeting of the BAAS in 1881. The early photographs, obtained by the Andaman Committee during the survey of the islands prior to their second colonisation, 'visually confirmed' the racial affinity of the indigenous people. Subsequent photographic practices undertaken by E.H. Man delivered very systematic visual records of the people. The images produced by Man 'recorded' not only the physical characteristics of the indigenous people but also various aspects of their existence, their daily activities, tools, artefacts and architecture. Finally, the photographic medium, as applied by M.V. Portman, attempted to, on a grand scale, visually transcribe ethnographic information from the field. The procedure aimed at delivering readily extractable scientific facts which could be utilised by anthropologists pursuing studies of these 'most primitive' people.

The advancement of early anthropology, its research methods, and the development and application of the photographic medium in anthropology, was mirrored in the 'scientific' activities of the colonial apparatus on the Andaman Islands. This is reflected in the information that came back from the islands. The vast and various collections of photographs from the Andaman Islands well illustrate the advancement of the medium for anthropological purposes.

As we know, the photographs produced in the Andamans were created for specific reasons and destined for a small group of specialists. But once produced, they were donated to learned societies and museums. This was a decisive factor in their future reception. They came to operate within the public domain of museums and societies. As much as they operated within these boundaries in the nineteenth century they function today within the sphere of public viewing. The photographers' decision to donate them to the public had significant consequences marked by the development of the exhibitionary discourse. The nineteenth century saw the development of an exhibitionary complex which brought together disciplines and techniques of display and translated them into 'exhibitionary forms, which in simultaneously ordering objects for public inspection and ordering the public that inspected, were to have a profound and lasting influence on the subsequent development of museums, art galleries, expositions, and department stores' (Bennett 2006: 61). When discussing the exhibitionary complex, T. Bennett observes that its peculiarity lies in the incorporation of principles of the Panopticon and those of the panorama. These served to regulate the crowd by rendering it visible to itself to the point at which the crowd becomes the ultimate spectacle. What is important is that the viewing of objects, artefacts, or photographs in this case, was transferred from the earlier settings of limited and privileged access to open and public viewing, as emphasised by Bennett:

The formation of the exhibitionary complex involved a break with both [private ownership and restricted access] in effecting the transfer of significant quantities of cultural and scientific property from private into public ownership where they were housed within institutions administered by the state for the benefit of an extended general public.

Bennett 2006: 73

It is also worth mentioning that the exhibitionary complex was characterised by the emergence of a historicised framework for the display of human artefacts. The evolutionary approach to displaying human and animal specimens was widely adopted in the nineteenth century. Again, Bennett argues that:

Yet, in the context of late-nineteenth-century imperialism, it was arguably the employment of anthropology within the exhibitionary complex which proved most central to its ideological functioning. For it played the crucial role of connecting the histories of Western nations and civilizations to those of other peoples, but only by separating the two in providing for an interrupted continuity in the order of peoples and races – one in which 'primitive peoples' dropped out of history altogether in order to occupy a twilight zone between nature and culture.

Bennett 2006: 77

We know that the Andamanese and the photographs that were taken of them served such purposes. Their human remains and photographs were displayed within an evolutionary series to represent and illustrate the progress of Western societies. The Andamanese stage of development was therein shown as a stage in history long surpassed by Western peoples.

Importantly, Andamanese photography, once included within the museums' boundaries, lost its original purpose. Photographs of the Andamanese began to operate within the exhibitionary complex and their uses were shaped by the changing exhibitionary discourse. Today, they remain positioned within specific zones of access, viewing and consumption. They form series of artefacts, photographs that can be judged by their current appearance. If we do not have immediate access to the context of their production, then what we are left with? Are we left with disturbing images that form a residue of practices we cannot fully apprehend without conducting a thorough historical investigation? What does it mean for us to look at the images today?

As a result of the exhibitionary complex, we are increasingly confronted with photographic images such as the Andamanese photographs, created over one hundred years ago, which as such could be defined as historical photographs. The explosion of research and activities concentrating on colonial photography is evident. The dissemination of historical photography is additionally facilitated by the development of digital technologies and their application in the display and transmission of such

images by institutions ready to capitalise on the process. Anthropological colonial photography, which can be defined as yet another capitalistic product of the British Empire, continues to influence the existing markets of science and art. The various historical photographic collections, scattered in different museums, institutions and private collections, attract funds designed for their 'enhancement'. In effect, the postcolonial critique and discourse of nineteenth century photography successfully managed to reassess itself and semantically revaluate the historical images. It seems that any discussion on colonial photography today should reflect the changes which took place in our understanding of the visual in general. Such changes occurred in relation to the deeper and more radical processes concerning vision in particular, which emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century in the context of the development of the media and new visual techniques. In this process, of great significance are the shifts taking place on the ontological plane of photography and the conversion of photographs, previously understood as commodities burdened with the physicality of their existence, into virtual, elusive goods, easily accessible and deprived of their physicality, materiality, historicity and ontological anchorage in time with all its consequences. Symptomatic here is the decline of the spatiotemporal aspects of the visual inspection of the original images and the accompanying loss of control over the very act of viewing. Although such remarks may aim at explaining current processes of understanding the photographic medium, they do not offer an explanation for the fundamental

question of the nature of the photographic record. To address such elementary questions we need to examine the very nature of the photographic act itself, in general and abstract terms, and in the context of historicism. To understand the attractiveness of the photographic medium for early anthropology we need to examine selected aspects related to the issues of photographic depiction and realism, the transparency of the photographic image and the problem of the ontology and epistemology of the photographic record. This will enable us to logically establish and define the act of photographing, and reassess the question of objectivity of the photographic record.

I will present some selected investigations into the nature of photographic images in order to establish what it is that we see when we look at a photograph at present. Our current understanding of historical, anthropological photographs, that is our current experience of them, does not always come together with our prior knowledge of their anthropological context. This we achieve through the study of images and their historical production. We do not see the anthropological knowledge embedded in photographs, nor can we spot the ethnographic details they are supposed to convey. That is why, first, we need to look at the photographs as images. It is the placing of the photographs within a particular discourse, within the mode of their production, that enables us to uncover their context within nineteenth century anthropology. So far, the proper establishment of the photographic records, as defined by their discursive contexts within scientific

positivism and nineteenth century anthropology, allow us not only to understand the nature of anthropological photography but also to explain that such photography was perceived to be relevant for the science of anthropology in conveying visual information from the field. Furthermore, we need to understand our correct recognition of the actual and current status of historical photographs and how they function in the present. As noted earlier, historical photographs are first and foremost photographic images. Our initial, first and current contact with such images is not burdened with the context of their production nor it is self-evident for what purposes such images were produced. This is why we ought to aim at analysing the photographic medium in a particular way that would allow us to contrast our current understanding of such photographs with the notion of photography presented in the photographic practices within anthropology during the nineteenth century – to contrast current and historical receptions, although as we know, the photographic medium is entirely contingent. I do not need now to discuss the way anthropological photographs were constructed and subject to the conventions of the discourse of nineteenth century anthropology and scientific positivism as much as they were to factors relating to process, style and technical procedures and limitations and indeed, the etiquette of nineteenth century photography. What we need now is to look at the 'surface' of the images, that is, analyse them in the context of their contemporary reception by invoking matters of aesthetics and affectivity, and essentially asking why they still appeal to us today as

photographs. We ought to remember that such a position is as constructed within exhibitionary discourses as much as reception in the nineteenth century was determined by scientific and anthropological discourses.

From the moment of its invention, photography provoked countless discussions on the nature of the photographic process and record, its status, its relation to the arts, its uses and application, and the consequences of adopting the new method for production of images. When addressing the Royal Society in London on 31 January 1839, W.H. Fox Talbot, in his paper 'Photogenic Drawing', suggested possible applications of the photographic medium.[1] Significantly, they included the scientific application of the medium, alongside the recording of landscapes, plants, buildings, sculptures and so on. He explained the accuracy of the new process in imitating the real objects although he called such produced images representations. Fox Talbot developed the 'preserving process' for images produced by light and thus solved the problem of their permanence. Perhaps the most striking application of the medium suggested by him was the 'art of fixing a shadow':

> The most transitory of things, a shadow, the proverbial emblem of all that is fleeting and momentary, may be fettered by the spells of our '*natural magic*', and may be fixed for ever in the position which it seemed only destined for a single instant to occupy. (…) Such is the fact, that we may receive on paper the fleeting shadow, arrest it there and in the space of a single minute fix it there so firmly as to be no more capable of change, even if thrown back into the sunbeam from which it derived its origin.
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> Fox Talbot (cited in Harrison et al 1998: 252)

The idea of 'arresting the shadow' seems to well illustrate the capabilities of the medium as understood at the time, the fact that photography offered the means of recording or rather fixing subtle, minute appearances. Two opposing, contrasting qualities, the elusive shadow and the fixed image, both produced by light: the first understood as a manifestation of nature, the second as the effect and proof of the value of inductive methods of science. One could almost assume that as the shadow is confirmation of the existence of the real physical object then the photograph confirms the real existence of the physical reality 'reflected' in the image.

It may be argued that, from its beginnings, the ability of photography to record with minute precision the external appearances of objects contributed to the development of photographic imagery based on the principles of traditional vision defined by perspective. Pierre Bourdieu traces the development of photography based on the logic of ordinary vision to the social uses that were assigned to the medium at the time of its invention:

> (…) because the social use of photography makes a selection, from the field of the possible uses of photography, structured according to the categories that organize the ordinary vision of the world, the photographic image can be seen as the precise and objective reproduction of reality.
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> Bourdieu 1999: 163-164

The problem of the photographic depiction of the world in alignment with the laws of perspective, on the one hand, led to photography being

conceived of as a medium capable of producing realistic and objective records. On the other hand, it initiated the consideration of photography as yet another means of producing pictorial representations, alongside other branches of art. The ability of the camera to automate the process of recording likenesses influenced the development of various painting techniques and stimulated discussions on the status of the new technique and its relation to the art of drawing and painting. In effect, such discussions concentrated on the aesthetics of the photographic medium and its status as a representational art. The dominant theoretical approach to photography and painting tended to underline the dissimilarities in creating pictures by the two techniques, which resulted in their significant differences. Thus paintings and photographs required different methods of interpretation. The prevalent notion explained that photography, by its mechanical and chemical nature, confirmed the connection of photographic images with real objects whichhad to exist in order to be depicted. If painters could depict whatever they wanted, photographers had to record what already existed. Snyder and Allen, in their article published in 1975 in *Critical Inquiry* entitled 'Photography, Vision, and Representation', note that despite the fact that modern critics believe the photographic process should be the starting point for criticism, they 'have had very little to say about what the process is, how it works, and what it does and doesn't guarantee' (Snyder & Allen 1975: 148). They also explain that aside from the process of mechanism, two models of how photography works have been postulated. The first, which

they call the 'visual' model, stresses the supposed similarity between the camera and the eye as optical systems, and explains that a photograph shows us what we would have seen if we had been there ourselves. The second they call the 'mechanical' model. This model stresses the necessary and mechanical connection between what we see in a photograph and what was in front of the camera. According to this model, a photograph may not show us a scene as we ourselves would have seen it, but it is a reliable index of what was (Snyder & Allen 1975: 149). Snyder and Allen analysed the photographic process and showed that the notion that physical objects themselves print their image by means of the optical and chemical action of light is entirely wrong.[2] They rejected the camera-eye analogy, and explained that the processes of seeing and of photography are incommensurate. Snyder and Allen successfully demonstrated what photography, in relation to the processes of seeing, really is, and how we should treat the photographic record. They also established the possibility of analysis of photographs based on the representations embodied in them.

The longstanding discussion regarding the status of photography was controversially overtaken by R. Scruton with the publication of his paper 'Photography and Representation'. Scruton claims that photography is not representational because it cannot be intentional. He bases his arguments on an analysis of the 'ideal painting' and 'ideal photograph', two logical ideal fictions. The first analysed quality of such abstract forms was their relation to the subject. The painting represents the subject although this does not

require nor guarantee that the subject exists, and if it exists, it does not mean that the painting represents it as it is. Such ideal painting stands in intentional relation to the subject in effect of the representational act of the artist. The ideal photograph is a photograph of a subject which exists, and the image shows the subject as it is. The relation between the photograph and the subject is then causal and not intentional. The process of representation is defined by Scruton as the process of expressing a thought about the subject, so that '*x* represents *y* is true only if *x* expresses a thought about *y*'. This means that the causal relation, present in photographs, cannot be sufficient for representation. The understanding of representational painting involves the understanding of thoughts communicated by the painting. It is our understanding of the painting and not the independent properties of the subject that determines what we see. According to Scruton: 'It is precisely when we have the communication of thoughts about a subject that the concept of representation becomes applicable' (Scruton 1981: 581). Representational art can only exist when there is an aesthetic interest which has representation as its object. Such an aesthetic interest in painting is an interest in it for its own sake; it is the painting that is the object of attention and not the picture as a surrogate for its subject. The photograph stands in causal relation to its subject and reproduces its appearance. The photograph then is the production of a copy of the subject's appearance, and for the viewer, 'from studying a photograph, he may come to know how something

looked in the same way he might know it if he had actually seen it' (Scruton 1981: 588).

Scruton defines looking at photographs as a substitute for looking at the things themselves. The consequence of the causal relation between the photograph and its subject is the requirement that the subject of the ideal photograph must exist. It follows that the subject must appear roughly as it appears in the photograph, and that its appearance in the photograph is its appearance at a particular moment of its existence. According to Scruton:

> In looking at an ideal photograph, we know that we are seeing something which actually occurred and seeing it as it appeared. Typically, therefore, our attitude toward photography will be one of curiosity, not curiosity about the photograph but rather about its subject. The photograph addresses itself to our desire for knowledge of the world, knowledge of how things look or seem. The photograph is a means to the end of seeing its subject; in painting, on the other hand, the subject is the means to the end of its own representation. The photograph is transparent to its subject, and if it holds our interest it does so because it acts as a surrogate for the represented thing. Thus if one finds a photograph beautiful, it is because one finds something beautiful in its subject. A painting may be beautiful, on the other hand, even when it represents an ugly thing.
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> Scruton 1981: 590

Ideal photography, according to Scruton, does not allow the photographer to exercise control over the image as in other representational arts, say painting. If this occurs then the photographer becomes a painter and 'the photograph has been reduced to a kind of frame around which he paints' (Scruton 1981: 594). Scruton defines the history of the art of photography as an attempt to turn a mere simulacrum into the expression of a representational thought. He rejects the possibility of producing, through

the means of photography, narrative scenes with representational meanings, as any such processes of representation must have been effected before taking the photographs: the resulting images are merely photographs *of representations*.

Such an understanding of photography must then lead directly to the rejection of any aesthetic interest in the photograph itself; such qualities derive not from the image but from its subject and are based on the causal relation between the two. J. Friday, discussing documentary photography and commenting on Scruton's observations, asks if photographs represent the real world by providing visual simulacra of the appearance of real objects, then are we not in some sense seeing real horror and suffering when we look at documentary photographs? If this is the case then 'surely aesthetic interest and attention directed to such photography would be impossible; or if possible, morally corrupt; at the very least inappropriate' (Friday 2000: 367). This problem of aesthetic interest has significant consequences for our understanding of photography. If early anthropological photographs could be defined as visual simulacra of the real objects then they would fulfil the requirements of science in delivering facts and allowing us to view the external reality as it existed. If sustained, the alleged transparency of such photographic images would, in effect, have ensured the delivery of cognitive ethnographic data by the photographic process and explained its application in anthropology.

We have arrived at a definition of photography which, in Scruton's view, equates the photographs with images produced by mirrors. The relations governing photographs and their subjects are causal and as such insufficient for the representational status of photography. This in turn prevents the conceiving of photography as capable of provoking aesthetic interest. Being the mere visual simulacra of real objects, photographs cannot represent anything that does not actually exist; they are transparent and fictionally incompetent. Scruton exercised his arguments on two logical fictions, ideal photography and ideal painting, and, as observed by N. Warburton, Scruton's critics have typically replied that Scruton has misrepresented what actual photography is like, as he puts it:

> *Actual* photography involves all kinds of intentional input in terms of choice of camera, film, shutter speed, aperture and so on; it also involves choices of subject matter, framing and numerous other aesthetically relevant matters. The result, they claim, is that although perhaps fictionally incompetent, photography involves so many aesthetically relevant choices that it is perverse for Scruton to maintain that photographic representation is impossible and of less aesthetic relevance than representation in painting.
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> Warburton 1996: 389

In massing his attack on Scruton's vision of photography, Warburton characterised the above critical responses as weak and proposed his own response based on the concept of individual style in photography. In his opinion, a strong response to Scruton's claims must take into account the fact that photographic artists create individual style through a number of techniques, 'predominant among which is the selection of particular

photographs as part of their artistic output' (Warburton 1996: 395). This demonstrates that photography has the capacity to embody important and aesthetically relevant intentions. He defines individual style as a distinctive pattern of human intentions communicated through works of art and revealing an apparent underlying artistic personality. Photographic style is achieved only in part through the manner of taking photographs. It can be influenced by a distinctive pattern of choices of subject matter and of image. To uncover individual style, then, we must look at a series of images by the same photographer; in painting, such style can be achieved and demonstrated within an individual work. In discerning individual style in the photographic art of particular artists we must concentrate on the artists' conscious selection of images as representative of their distinctive style. It is the very possibility of individual style in photographic art that enables us to uncover aesthetically valid intentions in photographs. Thus, as Warburton puts it, '(Scruton's) focus on photography's alleged lack of representational potential appears simply beside the point' (Warburton 1996: 396).

Scruton claims that we look at photographs in order to gain knowledge about how real objects appear; we do not seek to encounter other sensual experiences. Photographs for Scruton possess only qualities that were possessed by the photographed objects themselves. Equally, photographs evoke emotions possessed by and evoked by the subjects recorded in the photographic image. This is because of the lack of any manner of representation in photography, Scruton argues. The actual

reasons for looking at photographs are discussed in another critical account of Scruton's article. W. King analyses such reasons and observes that the reason for looking at photographs to gain knowledge about their subjects can only apply to one reason for looking at photographs made as records. He calls this a cognitive reason. King distinguishes examples of other reasons for looking at photographs which do not concern their subjects. This can be demonstrated by looking at photographs in order to learn about photographic processes, for example. In his analysis of reasons for looking at photographs, Scruton excluded the aesthetic reason simply because the nature of photography and its status as simulacra of real objects meant, for him, that such an aesthetic interest related to the subject and not the record of it. King, by analysing several photographs, observes that we can have aesthetic reasons for looking at photographs, reasons about purely abstract features of photographs. King also notes that photographs may elicit a non-formal interest that would involve an interest in the ways of representing the subject:

> Contrary to Scruton, can one distinguish yet another type consisting of *remarks about the manner of representing the subject*? These remarks must be about observable features of the photograph which are controlled by the photographer, hence, are caused by the photographer, not by the subject.
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> King 1992: 261

King analyses several photographs by such artists as Klein, Adams and Gibson.[3] His examination concludes that 'the photographer

systematically becomes an additional causal agent of the photograph', hence, 'the result, while an approximation of visual reality, is not a copy, nor is it intended to be' (King 1992: 263). It follows then that an attention to details in a photograph may be attention to the manner of representing the subject and not attention to the subject itself. King concludes that 'it can be attention to a quality possessed by the photograph that is *not* possessed by the subject' thus 'some photographs can be interesting in one way that paintings can be, namely, aesthetically interesting by virtue of the manner of representation' (King 1992: 264).

For the sake of the argument I will consider now the extreme, that is the aesthetic interest in documentary photography. I do not want however to confuse anthropological photography with the documentary genre of the medium. What I aim for at present is to ascertain the very possibility of an aesthetic interest in photography. J. Friday, discussing the status of documentary photography, argues that such photography, often depicting disturbing scenes, can be understood as art when it manages to aesthetically transform the human evils it depicts into valuable meaning. Such photographs achieve this through possessing some aesthetic qualities drawing attention to that more general meaning. It is the aesthetic qualities that effect the transfiguration of a particular horrifying event into a more general moral truth (Friday 2000: 371). Friday concentrates on the question of whether photographs representing horrific events can, as is the case in painting, be regarded as images evoking aesthetic interest, thus functioning

as works of art. Friday contrasts the two interests that may be present in looking at images: the aesthetic interest and 'demonic curiosity'. The aesthetic interest relates to the consciousness directed toward those qualities of an object in virtue of which it is a work of art. This includes such properties as representation, expressiveness, form, composition, beauty, symbolic meaning, style, novelty, and the sublime. As Friday observes, 'when such properties capture and absorb attention, such that the only reasons for this interest constitute descriptions of those properties, the attention is distinctively aesthetic' (Friday 200: 366). Contrasted with such attention is demonic curiosity, essentially a pornographic stare at another person's suffering. While aesthetic attention is structured by tradition and understanding, demonic curiosity is structured by pathological impulse. There are other significant differences, as Friday explains:

> Another important difference is that aesthetic attention is directed to works of art for *their own* sake, but demonic curiosity is directed toward representational objects (like photographs and films) as a result of, for the sake of, and as means to the subject matter. More simply, aesthetic attention concerns itself with, for example, the *representation* of some subject matter, demonic curiosity concerns itself with the *subject matter* alone. Demonic curiosity, therefore, focuses attention upon the photograph only as a (perhaps *ersatz*) means to encountering the subject matter.
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> Friday 2000: 366

It is clear that if Scruton's definition of photography is to be sustained then the only attention to photographs depicting disturbing scenes would need to be attention directed by demonic curiosity. Photography, in order to evoke the aesthetic interest, would need to transfigure the scenes it depicts.

Friday, by analysing photographs by Robert Capa depicting war scenes, notes that photography is capable of exhibiting representational meaning not possessed by the real events represented in a photograph, and provides the source for an aesthetic interest that is not reducible to the interest in those events. Therefore, photography can capture 'an interest that is distinct from an interest in the subject matter' (Friday 2000: 367). This is sufficient to counter Scruton's conclusion that an aesthetic interest in a documentary photograph is as difficult and inappropriate as such interest in real events of suffering and horror. Discussing the matter of indifference to the reality of the objects and events represented as the requirement for an aesthetic interest in representation, Friday notes that in fact it is not an essential element of an aesthetic attention, although 'only those photographs that do in fact "say more" than "this is what happened" are appropriately attended to for their own sake. For without something over and above the depicted horror to direct attention toward, the attempt to contemplate such pictures as aesthetic objects will collapse into something at least akin to demonic curiosity' (Friday 2000: 369).

In demonstrating how disturbing photographs can evoke an aesthetic interest Friday analyses several eminent documentary photographs: Nick Ut's *Accidental Napalm Attack* (1972), Don McCullin's *Shell-shocked Soldier* (1968) and Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936). He notes that Ut's photograph must have some important aesthetic properties which allow it to have meaning beyond being merely a visual index of the horrifying event it

depicts. These aesthetic qualities effect then the transfiguration of a horrifying particular event into a more general moral truth (Friday 2000: 371). Such disturbing photographs may provide valid moral insights. As Friday explains:

> (...) when a documentary photographer creates pictures possessing aesthetic qualities that draw attention away from the particularity of the suffering represented, directing it instead toward a meaning distinct from what is documented, we can begin to discern an art of documentary photography. As spectators, we attend to these qualities and thereby effect an imaginative transfiguration of particular evil into moral truth and insight. The art of documentary photography, therefore, requires an artist who can transfigure human suffering and a spectator who can redeem this suffering, and their own attention to it, by grasping important moral insights.
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> Friday 2000: 375

It is clear then that Scruton's definition of photography cannot be sustained. His critics demonstrate that photographic representation is not only possible but can be the intrinsic quality of the medium. When we look at photographs we do not simply see the subject depicted, but also observe other properties. This will become much clearer when I analyse some other aspects of photographic depiction.

2 Transparency Redefined

The causal relation of photographs and their mechanical connections to the objects they depict, or the 'mechanical model', as defined by Snyder

and Allen, provide yet more grounds for the development of the transparency thesis proposed by Kendall Walton. According to Walton, 'the invention of the camera gave us not just a new method of making pictures and not just pictures of a new kind: it gave us a new way of seeing' (Walton 1984: 251). Walton describes photography as a 'supremely realistic medium', and claims that photography is an especially versatile aid to vision:

> With the assistance of the camera, we can see not only around corners and what is distant or small; we can also see into the past. We see long deceased ancestors when we look at dusty snapshots of them. (...) Photographs are *transparent*. We see the world *through* them.
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> Walton 1984: 251

Walton's concept of seeing underlined the mechanical aspects of the process. To see an object is to have visual experiences which are caused by it in a mechanical manner, hence, his statement that 'objects cause their photographs and the visual experiences of viewers mechanically; so we see the objects through the photographs' (Walton 1984: 261). In short, Walton believes that there are similarities between the way visual experiences are provided by photographs and real objects. Photographic images are factually dependent on the scenes they depict, and this dependence is not mediated by the intentional states of any intermediary agents.

Such claims of photographic transparency have been aired before, as expressed by R. Barthes and A. Bazin for example, and have a long tradition. The transparency thesis is of great interest and significance to

aestheticians and their explorations of the aesthetic properties of photography. As we recall, an aesthetic interest in an object is an interest for its own sake, therefore, such an aesthetic interest in a photograph, for example, would need to be directed to the photograph itself. It cannot be directed beyond the image itself and cannot concern the subject of the photograph. If Walton's claims were to be sustained and photographs were transparent, so we can see objects through them, then our interest in photographs could not be described as an aesthetic interest in the pictures themselves. We have seen that such claims of photographic transparency provided for Scruton the basis for his claim that photography is not a representational art.[4]

Walton's transparency thesis provoked numerous responses. Warburton criticises it by emphasising distinctions between ordinary seeing and seeing objects through photographs. Friday, however, does not think this critique adequate as a refutation of Walton' claims. Instead, he suggests his own criticism based on the analysis of two types of causal theory, representationalist and realist. In Friday's view, 'the intuition that we can quite literally see through photographs is the result of confusing an attitude towards what is seen with a 'new way of seeing". To say that a photograph is transparent is to characterize the attitude we have to the causally produced picture we see' (Friday 1996: 40). Scott Walden in his article 'Objectivity in Photography' defends Walton's idea that the lack of mental-state involvement in the formation of photographic images is a quality that sets

them apart from handmade images. Walden argues that the viewers' knowledge of the objective character of the photographic process provides them with a special warrant for the acceptance of first-order perceptual beliefs formed as a result of viewing photographic images.[5] Walden does not qualify the photographers' involvement during the photographic process as primary mental-state involvements, thus, as he explains:

> (…) a viewer of a typical photograph forms first-order perceptual beliefs about various features of the original scene, and at the same time possesses a second-order belief that those perceptual beliefs were formed on the basis of an image that was formed without primary mental-state involvement.
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> Walden 2005: 271

Walton's transparency thesis did not convince many, and its critique, provided by J. Cohen and A. Meskin, is yet another voice on the subject. We recall that Walton claimed that photographs are like other transparent visual prostheses, such as mirrors, telescopes or microscopes. To reject his claims would require the presenting of differences between photography and such visual prostheses. Cohen and Meskin aim then at rejecting Walton's transparency thesis by explaining the difference between seeing objects in photographs and seeing objects in mirrors or through other visual aids.[6] As the authors note, the usual line of rejecting the transparency thesis involves defining the seeing of an object in such a way that it includes the representation of information about a spatial relation between the one who sees and the seen object, 'a necessary requirement for x's seeing y is that x

represents information about the spatial relations between x and y' (Cohen & Meskin 2004: 198). This requirement in the process of seeing in particular has been proposed by Carroll and Currie.[7] Cohen and Meskin propose the dropping of this requirement, as it does not lead to a convincing rejection of Walton's transparency thesis. Instead, retaining Currie's and Carroll's insights that spatial information is the key to resisting transparency, they propose the development of a model of egocentric spatial information that does not place doxastic requirements (requirements about what the agent believes or knows) on seeing. Thus, they propose:

> (…) that neither belief nor knowledge about the egocentric spatial location of an object is a necessary condition for seeing it, but instead that what is essential is that the relevant visual experience is produced by a process that carries egocentric spatial information about the object. That is, x sees y through a visual process z only if z carries information about the egocentric location of y with respect to x.
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> Cohen and Meskin 2004: 201

By defining the process of seeing in such a way, they state that mirrors are transparent in Walton's sense because they carry egocentric spatial information about the objects perceived (information about the spatial and temporal relations between the object seen and ourselves); photographs are not transparent 'insofar as the visual process of looking at photographs fails to carry egocentric spatial information about their depicta' (Cohen and Meskin 2004: 201). In other words, neither knowledge nor belief about the location of the object is necessary for ordinary seeing; what is essential to seeing is that the relevant visual experience is produced by a process that

carries information about the egocentric spatial information of the perceived object.

Cohen and Meskin also address the question of the epistemic value of photographs; why are photographs epistemically special in a way that other sorts of depictive representations are not? In answering the question, they define photographs as spatially agnostic informants, that is photographs convey information about the visually accessible properties of the representational object without conveying information about the egocentric location of the representational object:

> Photographs are epistemically valuable because they constitute a relatively undemanding source of information about the visually accessible properties of objects – one that works even when we lack information about egocentric location.
> Cohen and Meskin 2004: 204

Cohen and Meskin then developed a definition of seeing whereby an object is seen only if our contact with that object comes through a process that is a reliable source of egocentric spatial information. It is because photographs never provide such information that we do not see through them.

So far, I have been discussing matters related to photographic transparency and the ability of photographs to evoke aesthetic attention – the aesthetic context now is not what it was in the nineteenth century. This, I assumed, would help us understand the photographic medium and ascertain the nature of the photographic image. I have been trying to present a view

according to which I have, if only partially, been able to revoke the notion that photographs are transparent and fictionally incompetent. But this is a complicated task and the weight of the presented arguments can be disputed. That is why I propose to adopt a view developed and expressed by Dominic McIver Lopes, which is a compromise between the two opposite positions. In short, Lopes accepts that when looking at photographs we literally see the objects they are of, and that seeing photographs as photographs engages aesthetic interests that are not engaged by seeing the objects they are of.[8] Although at first Lopes' thesis may seem incompatible, when correctly understood it provides a plausible solution to our problem, and allows us to move forward to analysing the photographic process, or simply photography, as consisting of the photographic act and the photographic record. Moreover, Lopes' analysis discusses the claims of both Scruton and Walton, thus providing a comprehensive response on the subject.

Defending Walton's transparency thesis, Lopes notes that transparency is sometimes confused with illusion. Seeing through a photograph happens simultaneously with seeing the photographic surface itself and, as emphasised by Lopes, 'is consistent with the belief that what is before one's eyes is a photograph, not the photographed object. Photographic transparency is not photographic invisibility' (Lopes 2003: 440). Another misunderstanding is caused by confusing transparency with photographic accuracy. According to Lopes, photographs, in one sense, are

accurate because they carry information by means of the causal process. But they may also be inaccurate since they may cause one to have false beliefs about the photographed objects. He also highlights the mistake of thinking that transparency rules out the photographer's interventions or the role of photographic conventions in the photographic process. Lopes develops his thesis by showing that seeing an object through a photograph is not identical to seeing the object face-to-face, and this has its consequences:

> The transparency claim shows only that the interest one may properly take in seeing a photograph as a photograph is necessarily identical to the interest one may properly take in *seeing the photographed object through the photograph.* It does not show that interest to be necessarily identical to any interest one may have in seeing the object face-to-face.
>
> Lopes 2003: 441

This allows Lopes to state that if seeing an object through a photograph is not identical to seeing the object face-to-face then an interest in seeing the object through a photograph may not be satisfied by seeing the same object face-to-face. He lists several factors that set seeing an object through a photograph apart from seeing the object face-to-face. This, as well as other factors, includes seeing properties in the photographed object which are not normally revealed when we see the same objects face-to-face; second, photographic seeing through bridges the spatial and temporal distances; third, seeing through photographs decontextualises; fourth, the camera may intrude upon or disturb what it photographs, thus the presence

of the camera is an essential part of the context in which we see photographically; finally, seeing through photographs is always twofold, it melds seeing the photographed object and its properties with seeing the photograph itself and its properties (Lopes 2003: 443). Having in mind the transformation caused by the above-listed factors, Lopes argues that:

> Photographs can promote clear seeing, foregrounding features of objects that are difficult to discern face-to-face. In some cases they are able to do this because they show objects removed from their temporal and environmental contexts, when these contexts make some properties of objects difficult to discern. In other cases, the absence of the object is crucial: for example, we might notice features of a very dangerous or disturbing object that we could not notice in the presence of danger or disturbance. Finally, features of the photographic surface can be used to highlight features of the photographed object. (…) In addition, photographs afford revelatory, transformative, defamiliarizing, or confessional seeing when they show us objects as having properties that they could not be seen to have face-to-face.
>
> Lopes 2003: 444

To summarise, Lopes redefines the transparency of photographic images and observes that our interest in seeing objects through photographs is not identical to the interest we have in seeing the objects face-to-face. Lopes brings to our attention the changes in some properties of objects that can take place in effect of different factors intrinsic to the photographic medium. This allows Lopes to underline that any aesthetic interest in a photograph is not an interest in the scene or objects depicted but in the scene or objects as seen through photographs. Our aesthetic interest in a photograph 'is an interest in the photograph as it enables seeing through. It is an interest that photographs can foster and satisfy and face-to-face seeing

cannot' (Lopes 2003: 445). Photographs then, when seen as photographs, engage a genuine aesthetic interest. Lopes successfully demonstrates the falseness of Scruton's claim that our interest in photographs is limited to an interest in the actual objects depicted, and allows for an aesthetic interest in photographs which, although transparent, do not show the depicted objects as we would have seen them in face-to-face inspection.

3 Contingency of Perception

I have been examining the question of the photographic record, its transparency and the possibility of an aesthetic interest in photographs. My investigations have concentrated on the aspects of visual inspection of photographs, and as such were concerned with what we see when we look at a photograph. To conclude my examinations I will briefly reflect on the problem of perception and its historicity. This is why we need to address the widely discussed matter of the transformation of perception thesis. According to the thesis, modernity is characterised by a new kind of perception. It claims that the faculty of perception changed some time around the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in relation to photography and cinema.[9] As observed by Noël Carroll:

> Modernity, in other words, brings forth a new kind of perceiver, one of whose major modes is exemplified by the Baudelairean *flaneur* who is, according to Crary, "a mobile consumer of a ceaseless succession of illusory commodity-like images". Wandering through the rapidly expanding cities of late-nineteenth – and twentieth-century modernity, these ambulatory observers are constantly shifting their attention

from one thing to another – from one event, scene, sensation, spectacle, or product to the next.

Carroll 2001: 13

Crary, in his work *Techniques of the Observer*, notes that problems concerned with vision, attention and those related to the possibility of controlling visual/sensual experiences were widely discussed in the nineteenth century, and underwent rapid development.[10] Crary demonstrates how historical transformations in ideas about vision were inseparable from a larger reshaping of subjectivity that concerned not optical experiences but processes of modernisation and rationalisation. As he says in the *Suspensions of Perception*:

One of the most important nineteenth-century developments in the history of perception was the relatively sudden emergence of models of subjective vision in a wide range of disciplines during the period 1810–1840. Dominant discourses and practices of vision, within the space of a few decades, effectively broke with a classical regime of visuality and grounded the truth of vision in the density and materiality of the body. One of the consequences of this shift was that the functioning of vision became dependent on the complex and contingent physiological makeup of the observer, rendering vision faulty, unreliable, and, it was sometimes argued, arbitrary.

Crary 2001: 12[11]

Crary continues his argument by stating that the emergence of the idea of subjective vision was the condition for the historical emergence of notions of autonomous vision. The determining of vision as lying in the body allowed then for the development of techniques aimed at its controlling and stimulating. This had its consequences, as stated by Crary:

> The disintegration of an indisputable distinction between interior and exterior becomes a condition for the emergence of spectacular modernizing culture and for a dramatic expansion of the possibilities of aesthetic experience. The relocation of perception (as well as processes and functions previously assumed to be "mental") in the thickness of the body was a precondition for the instrumentalizing of human vision as a component of machinic arrangements; but it also stands behind the astonishing burst of visual invention and experimentation in European art in the second half of the nineteenth century.
>
> Crary 2001: 13

The problem of attention, in the nineteenth century, becomes a fundamentally new object within the modernisation of subjectivity. Crary argues that 'part of the cultural logic of capitalism demands that we accept as *natural* switching our attention rapidly from one thing to another' (Crary 2001: 30). But is this enough to postulate the changes in our perception, taking place at some deeper level?

The modernity thesis has been criticised on several occasions.[12] N. Carroll notes that the postulated changes in perception cannot take place on evolutionary grounds. Such changes in the faculty of perception reflect changes concerned with attention which occurred 'as a result of the situation of modernity, not as a result of the process of natural selection' (Carroll 2001: 13). It is often claimed that the modern city bombarded people with things they wanted to see, resulting in a specific mode of attention switching. Carroll rejects such claims, stating that the human perceptual apparatus, at the level of anatomical and physiological structure, is constantly in motion, and even if the modern city gave us more to scan, the faculty of perception was already calibrated for rapid attention shifting, it only engaged the faculty

of perception further in a long-familiar activity (Carroll 2001: 14). The idea that human vision changes over history was also challenged by Arthur Danton in his article 'Seeing and Showing', wherein he establishes that perception is cognitively impenetrable, and as such does not have a history. The idea that we see pictures differently is an obvious one but it is usually claimed that the differences are not the effect of changes occurring in the faculty of perception. They might be the effects of the conceptual content of perception, differences in conceptual backgrounds and enculturation.

Carroll also emphasises the consequences of adopting the modernity thesis. If such changes occurred, as claimed by its proponents, then the thesis would contradict some long established, influenced and accepted beliefs. As Carroll puts it:

> There can be little doubt that, at least most of the time, authors like Crary believe that the modernity thesis contradicts "a persistent, and most often unexamined, Kantian prejudice that perceptual and cognitive capacities are ahistorical; that is, they are unchanging and permanent, and most significantly independent of an external social/technological milieu that is in constant flux".
>
> Carroll 2001: 13

We may not succeed in determining whether the postulated plasticity of eye and the historicity of perception is the effect of some changes in the faculty of our perception which occurred some time in the nineteenth century. But we need to agree that people do see the same things differently at the level of conceptual content of perception, which could be the effects of differences in conceptual backgrounds and enculturation. Evaluations of pictures and photographs include all sorts of mental processes. Some of

them expose the historical contingency of our experiences. Others reflect differences at the level of the semiotics of images, their connotations and denotations, which are often culturally determined.

The problem of evaluating pictures and their different readings can be regarded as a fundamental intrinsic value of photographs. We experience this problem each time we look at photographic images. It is often our assumption, whether conscious or not, of the logical continuity of events taking place in the real world, before as well as after the act of photographing, that forces us to assign available meanings to a particular photograph. It seems that our assigning of meanings stems from our desire to place a particular photograph, persistently understood as the recorded fraction of the *past-present*, within that continuity fictionally constructed by the viewer in the very specific and *present-present* act of looking at photographs. Otherwise, they remain meaningless objects without histories. To assign a meaning is to interpret. To interpret is to speak, whether to yourself or to others. To speak is to re-invent and re-create, to construct again the world and histories. This re-invention can only be executed within the process of interpreting a particular image, a photograph. The process itself is always taking place in the viewer's very specific *present-present* act with all its consequences. To this extent, such constructed images can only exist while they are being viewed. Each time we look at a photograph, we re-engage ourselves, and we construct the image again, and again, through the process of reading it and speaking about it. Thus ambiguous photographs

can only exist during and within that process. If taken outside, they remain meaningless objects without histories. Our personal construction of meaning is partly achieved through and is dependent on the photographer's act. Again, we are confronted with the impediment of time. We remain unable to escape the notion of time locked in a photograph by the very act of capturing the image – photographing – which itself relies and depends on time. We look at the captured fracture of the *past-present* through another's conception of then the *present-present* during the act of taking the photo. We ignore the fact of being removed from the setting, act and time of detaining the frame, being instead faced with the context of viewing the finished photograph. For there is an ontological gap impossible to bridge. In effect, what we see is not the *past-present* nor is it the act of someone else's construction of the then *present-present*, but an autonomous entity that belongs to our reality. In consequence, a photograph can only be understood in terms of its own internal aesthetic organisation. A photograph derives *from* rather than being *of.* There cannot be logical continuity of meaning or expression within a photograph. Obviously, some meanings of images may be and are distorted in the sense that they might have already been subjected to previous readings, thus meanings have been assigned and recorded. This can take the form of a caption, note, or so-called history of the image, and so on. In constructing the act of assigning meaning, photographs often provide the basis for a historical analysis and support diverse claims. Theories defending the idea of the referential properties of

the photographic image exploit the concept of its indexical nature. Such views employ a historical application of the medium to provide not only answers to how things used to exist but also how they were seen and recorded. This is achieved by presupposing that the reality, being an external entity, is available for an objective confirmation through an act of photography.

Our aesthetic evaluation of photographs also depends on our intellectual equipment. In other words, our aesthetic experience is historically contingent. B. Rosebury recently aired such a claim, for example.[13] Rosebury maintains that 'each of us is situated at a unique point in space and time from which we imagine a personal and collective history, and our enjoyment of any object of aesthetic attention is capable of being influenced by associations, that is, by our locating it within some part of that imagined history' (Rosebury 2000: 77). Our own and unique anchorage in personal and collective history affects the process of contemplation of works of arts. The idea may seem straightforward but in fact it may also conflict with some beliefs which 'dispose us to exclude associations from the realm of aesthetics' (Rosebury 2000: 73). Among such beliefs Rosebury lists Kant's claim that aesthetic judgment is disinterested, formalist doctrines of the sufficiency of form for aesthetic experience and the autonomy of aesthetic emotion from the emotions of historical life, and, the commonsense reflection that the work of art we are contemplating must be enjoyed and valued for what it is, and not for some other arbitrary reason. Rosebury attempts to

reconcile these arguments. He aims at emphasising that such personal associations may in fact enhance rather then diminish the value of works of art we contemplate. As he puts it:

> The human aesthetic life, like (for example) the human sexual life, has as its motive force an appetite which for its own purposes selects, combines, and assigns value to elements of the contingency that surrounds us at a given time. The person for whom we feel sexual desire, and *a fortiori* the person with whom we fall in love, is constituted to our imagination, at least in part, by a confection of his or her social, cultural, and other historically contingent attributes and not merely by ahistorical properties of body and soul. The aesthetic faculty, I believe, is characterised by a similar rapacious openness, capacity for synthesis, and need for the authenticity of spontaneity. In contemplating a work of art, as in loving or desiring another person, we focus intently upon a single object, but its value to us is enhanced, rather than diminished, by our seeing it from and through and in the light of the imagination which for each of us is given content by our personal and collective 'history'.
>
> Rosebury 2000: 88

This claim Rosebury makes seems to well characterise and confirm the role of our own personal settings in the contemplation of works of art. The fact partly explains the differences which occur at the level of conceptual evaluation of images, leaving aside the issue of whether there are any changes in the faculty of perception at an anatomical level.

I started my investigation into the photographic medium by explaining and rejecting the camera-eye analogy. I rejected Scruton's claim of the transparency of photography and ascertained that an aesthetic interest in photographs is possible. I have redefined the transparency thesis proposed by Walton. This has enabled me to conclude that photographs, although transparent, do not show the depicted objects as we would have seen them in face-to-face inspection, and as such they engage a genuine aesthetic

interest. I have also examined the issue of historicity of perception, concluding that our contemplation of images is personally unique and historically contingent. All this allows us to determine the nature of the photographic record in relation to what we see when we look at a given photograph. We now need to establish what cognitive and moral values can be distinguished in the photographs which are the object of my investigation. An examination of the photographic act and record will enable us to determine what, if any, historical values are embodied in the photographs. All this will permit us to reassess the nineteenth century photographs we are studying and their historicism.

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[1] The title of Fox Talbot's paper was 'Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing, or, The Process by Which Natural Objects May Be Made to Delineate Themselves without the Aid of the Artist's Pencil'.

[2] Such a claim was made by Rudolf Arnheim and others critics of photography. Snyder and Allen concluded: 'It is the light reflected by the objects and refracted by the lens which is the agent in the process, not "the physical objects themselves. These "physical objects' do not have a single "image" – "their image"- but, rather, the camera can manipulate the reflected light to create an infinite number of images. For details see: Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen, 'Photography, Vision, and Representation', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 2, No.1, 1975, 143-169.

[3] For details of the works analysed see William L. King 'Scruton and Reasons for Looking at Photographs', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 1992, 258-265.

[4] For a discussion on Walton's thesis and its reference to Scruton's claim see for example: Cohen and Meskin 2004; Friday 1996; Lopes 2003; Walden 2005 and Warburton 1988.

[5] For details see: Scott Walden 'Objectivity in Photography' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 45, No. 3, July 2005, 258-272.

[6] For details see: Jonathan Cohen and Aaron Meskin 'On the Epistemic Value of Photographs' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 62: 2, Spring 2004, 197-210.

[7] For details see: Noël Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, Cambridge University Press, 1996; Gregory Currie, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

[8] For details see: Dominic Mclver Lopes 'The Aesthetics of Photographic Transparency', *Mind*, Vol. 112, No. 447, July 2003, 433-448.

[9] Proponents of the thesis include, among other authors, Walter Benjamin and his publication "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1969; and Jonathan Crary and his publication

Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century, MIT Press 1992.

[10] For details see: Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, MIT Press: 1992.

[11] For details see: Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, MIT Press: 2001.

[12] See for example: Arthur C. Danto 'Seeing and Showing', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59: 1, Winter 2001, pp. 1-9; and Noël Carroll 'Modernity and the Plasticity of Perception', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59: 1, Winter 2001, pp. 11-17.

[13] For details see: Brian Rosebury: 'The Historical Contingency of Aesthetic Experience', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 40, No. 1, January 2000, pp. 73-88.