

Rethinking the Aesthetics of Photography Through the Lens of the Philosophy of Technology

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to rethink the relationship between automatism and artistic agency in photography through the lens of the philosophy of technology. In critical response to the realist theories of photography that have been focused on the material condition of the medium, recent theoretical approaches have increasingly insisted on artistic agency. Against this turn towards fictional inventiveness and human-centred creativity, I argue that we should focus more, not less, on the technical dimension of photography in order to defend its aesthetic status. While my position aligns with the basic realist claim that photography operates independently of human intervention, I remain critical of their substantialist assumptions about medium and reality. Drawing on, what could be called, a relational and process-oriented philosophy of technology, I advocate for a different understanding of both reality and technical objects, namely as dynamic and open-ended rather than fixed entities. Consequently, this perspective allows us to locate agency at the very heart of photographic automatism and to interpret the aesthetic dimension of photography as a result of its techno-material nature.

1. Introduction: A New Theory of Photography?

In the first decades of the 21st century, several edited collections and academic journals,² on both the analytic and continental sides, attempted to relegate realist and ontological theories of

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² *Études photographiques*, 34, Spring 2016; *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 70/1, Winter 2012; *Critical Inquiry*, 38/4, Summer 2012; Elkins (2007), among others.

photography to history.³ Even though these publications brought together various strands of photographic theory, some more critical of realist arguments than others, the overall framing of these collections conveyed a sense that it was “time to move on”, from “trace-image” to “fiction-image” (Dubois 2016).

This development can be explained by the fact that, in the second half of the 20th century, the causal hypothesis had become so inflated and essentialised that it had reached its limits, while the emergence of digital photography, at the same time, seemed to fundamentally undermine photographic causality. In other words, notions such as indexicality, transparency, or punctum, which had been used to explain photography’s ability to capture reality through causal relations, came to appear as naïve misconceptions and mystifications of the medium – an idea that some critics traced back to the earliest 19th-century essays on photography (Barrett 1843; Eastlake 1857). In response to this development, by the turn of the century, critics proposed shifting the focus away from the mechanical aspects of the medium or its specificity – especially as the boundaries between different media had become increasingly blurred (Costello & Lopes 2012, p. 1–2) – towards artistic intention and the fictional dimension of photography, and thus towards human agency.

While it is undeniable that critics have rightly identified several important weaknesses in realist accounts and recognised the need for a renewal of photographic theory,⁴ I argue against the complete abandonment of the question of causality and the medium’s specificity. Instead, I propose that we should explore photography’s technicity more, not less, and re-articulate the question of causality and automatism through a different philosophical framework inspired by the philosophy of technology.

2. Automatism and Agency: A False Dichotomy

One of the main reasons a new theory of photography has become necessary is the persistent framing of photography in terms of a binary opposition between its mechanical nature and artistic intention. From Lady Eastlake’s notion of the “picturesque agent” to the most recent

³ Benjamin (2012), Bazin (1945), Barthes (1980), Krauss (1977), Kracauer (1960), Scruton (1981), Walton (1984) and others.

⁴ For an excellent overview of this subject see Pouillaude (2020).

journal issues, this tension endures. As Lopes rightly observed, in philosophy, both those who defend photography as art and those who deny it tend to share the same premise: that art cannot be an “obedience mechanism” (Lopes 2012, p. 855; Eastlake 1857). Generally speaking, this debate has been structured around the assumption that machines cannot be agents and that agency is a necessary condition for artistic production. Even though the editors of these various journal issues tried to avoid “reviving the older question by asking what is special about photography now” (Costello & Lopes 2012, p. 2), this very question continued to haunt their work like a shadow. This is perhaps an inevitable consequence of a dualistic framework, in which each extreme serves (even negatively) to define the other: art is *not* mechanical. But, contrary to the most common solution, namely rejecting the “zero-sum” relationship between automatism and agency (Costello & Phillips 2009), I argue that the dichotomy itself must be interrogated. Are automatism and agency in fact opposites at all?

Paradoxically, the only thinker who was truly sceptical about the artistic status of photography—Scruton (1981)—may have set the terms for nearly an entire generation of theorists. By attempting to refute Scruton, they have, in fact, often ended up reinforcing his central premise: that art is intentional. Nevertheless, there is nothing absolute or necessarily true in the claim that art is intentional, fictional, or expressive. Moreover, if we look closely, many realist or ontological accounts of photography do not explicitly reject photography as art, or its aesthetic dimension; instead, they often try to offer a different argument for its aesthetic value, beyond the more common artistic agency thesis. More importantly, these accounts still dare to ask how something mechanical or automatic can produce art. While it is true that this is a difficult and perhaps uncomfortable question, I argue that it must not be avoided.

This is not to say that notions such as indexicality, transparency or photography’s supposed grip on reality were not problematic or overused, often in dogmatic ways, as many critics have rightly pointed out. Maynard, for example, aptly summarises these tendencies as “reification, dualism, essentialism” (Maynard 1997, p. 15). Yet the opposing camp is not free of its own essentialist tendencies, summarised in Geimer’s (2018, p. 320) words as “‘construction’, ‘invention’, ‘subjectivity’”.⁵ It is also interesting that some critics not only challenge the theoretical argumentation of ontological approaches, but question the very idea of physical causality in photography, reducing it, for example, to a mere (illusory) reading of the image

⁵ My translation from French: “la ‘construction’, l’‘invention’, la ‘subjectivité’”.

(Gunthert 2016). This kind of reasoning sometimes stems from disciplinary divides and sometimes from conceptual confusion, as, for instance, when the empirical fact of causality seems conflated with the visual realism of the photographic image (Snyder 2016). While I generally support the idea that philosophy, art history and theory should engage in deeper dialogue when it comes to photography (Costello & Iversen 2012), such interdisciplinary exchanges must be carried out with an awareness of methodological differences. Without this, important arguments risk being misunderstood or losing their critical relevance.

Contrary to a common objection, I argue that the weakness of realist (or ontological or indexical) theories of photography lies *not* in their attention to the medium, but rather in their privileging of the image. As Maynard (1997) similarly pointed out, theorists tend to speak about *photographs*, not about *photography*, and even less about photography as a *technology*. Analytic philosophy of photography, in reality, is concerned with the epistemic value of the photographic image (as picture), which, within an empiricist framework, is supposed to guarantee (indirect) access to reality. On the more continental side, photographs are often treated as if their (material) genesis were immediately legible through visible traces, shifting the focus from the question of the medium to the reception of the image (as a trace). Thus, interestingly, those concerned with automatism and those concerned with agency in fact both privilege the image – which necessarily centres the discussion on the human element in photography, because the content of the image is what we, as humans, can engage with. The real problem, then, is not that we focused too much on the “material condition” (we, in fact, focused too much on the image), but rather that we did not focus enough (to recognise its aesthetic relevance). And contrary to the widespread belief that digitalisation has rendered the question of the medium’s nature obsolete, I argue that it has instead made this question impossible to avoid.

Furthermore, we could ask: is this recent shift towards the fictional a truly new approach? Not quite. If we look at the history of photography, we can see that despite its long-standing exclusion from the fine arts, photography’s artistic use was present from the very beginning. Kracauer identified this tension as a split between realist and formative tendencies in photography and noted that, as early as 1853, Sir William Newton had already proposed that photographic images could, and should, be altered in accordance with the principles of fine art (Kracauer 1960, p. 6). Moreover, the assumption that art should be modelled on the fictional inventiveness is itself a fairly traditional one, rooted in the concept of *mimesis* (as possible

worlds),⁶ reaching its modern height in the figure of the Romantic genius. Yet, contemporary art, with the help of photography itself, and different approaches in art theory have already demonstrated that this is not the whole story. While these latter approaches strive to think art without, or “relieved” of, artistic control (Costello & Iversen 2012, p. 687) and are more concerned with processes of selection, assemblage, and material transformation than with the invention of fictional worlds, the new wave of aesthetics of photography tends to return to more traditional conceptions of the creative process. Finally, if we add to that the fact that since the 1990s, with the proliferation of digital technologies – and even much prior to that – many theorists, for various reasons and from differing perspectives too numerous to detail here, have already critiqued photographic realism and its supposed access to reality, we understand that this is not a new perspective.⁷

Nevertheless, it should also be noted that a number of texts in these journals still prolong the realist tradition, attempting to account for the aesthetic and artistic dimensions of automatism. While I cannot go into the specific developments of these arguments here, a few key points relevant to my analysis should be noted. First, automatism is rightly recognised as a condition of contingency in photography, often in connection with surrealism, and as such, a condition for creation (parallel to mental automatism and the unconscious). Second, it is significant that in these analyses, theorists often quote artists (not only photographers) who, through automatism, express a kind of self-distance from their artistic intention, comparing it, for example, to a journey, “a paradoxical intention to abandon oneself to chance, to launch oneself into the unknown” (Iversen 2012, p. 807). Richter, who aspired to “paint as a camera”, remarked: “I’m not trying to imitate a photograph, I’m trying to make one” (Laxton 2012, p. 787). Also, in Wilson’s analysis of the photographic self-portrait, the possibility of a portrait without a mirror – and without complete artistic control – can arise only through photography as a technology that can capture without our intervention (Wilson (née Phillips) 2012). All this points to the importance of the work’s genesis, as though the photo-machine itself enables and reveals human creation. This suggests that automatism, in a certain way, supports agency, or even renders it artistic.

However, one further clarification is needed: how should we understand contingency or chance in this context? For example, for Lopes (2012, p. 858), we should distinguish chance as

⁶ See, for example, Pouillaude (2020), p. 171-172.

⁷ See, for example, Snyder & Allen (1975), Burgin (1982), Flusser (1986), Mitchell (1992), Maynard (1997), etc.

(objective) randomness and (subjective) happenstance. In the first sense, chance is understood as a physical phenomenon, such as that which science measures through probability. In the second sense, chance is the product of limited human knowledge. Yet, in both cases, chance may be unpredictable but remains within the domain of material nature: either as objective randomness or as apparent contingency arising from our inability to track all changes. As such, it is not itself conceived as a source of agency. Others, on the contrary, following the modern continental philosophical tradition, see chance or contingency, as opposed to necessity and determinism or to intended action, as a condition of freedom, creativity and agency. Consequently, these different philosophical traditions and ontological frameworks lead to different understandings of chance or contingency as a dimension of automatism.

In addition, many have invoked Aristotle's *automaton* as accident (something contingent), but few have noticed, as Maynard (2012, p. 731) did, its inherent ambiguity, namely, that automatism (self-action) simultaneously denotes both chance and mechanical regularity (the opposite of chance). I argue that this layered ambiguity within the *automaton* – which, as *self-action*, is also in a way autonomous – is more significant than a simple dichotomy between (human) agency and automatism (as chance). I also argue that this tension should be articulated through the Kantian conceptualisation of contingency as the spontaneity of nature and as something that enables its *non-intentional* agency that can be read as creative and as a model for artistic agency.

3. The Non-Human and Agential Machines

As we have seen, one way to aesthetically account for this somewhat paradoxical tension within automatism was to recognise that the mechanical nature of the medium is, in reality, the very condition through which the contingency of the world can intervene in photography. Classic street photography would likely hold little interest if its subject were not street life itself – often surprising and always contingent. In other words, both theorists and photographers came to understand early on that the mechanical character of the medium need not be an obstacle to creation; rather, the world, in some sense, creates itself through photography. But we may ask whether it is possible to go even further. I argue that a certain limitation of this argument lies in the fact that technology is still understood here solely in mechanical and deterministic terms, as is typically the case within our tradition.

However, certain philosophies of technology, particularly those inspired by the philosophy of becoming, as well as some posthumanist approaches, offer tools to deconstruct our conventional understanding of technology. They also allow us to question both our substantialist approach to photography and our anthropocentric preference for the image, thereby opening up the possibility of a new philosophical framework for the aesthetics of photography. In one sense, this approach remains indebted to realist and ontological theories of photography and their emphasis on the non-human element, albeit emerging from a very different theoretical background. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the social sciences and humanities have undergone a broader decentring of the human subject, in light of which some ontological perspectives on photography – with their early insistence on what lies beyond human control – may now appear almost avant-garde. For that reason, rather than shifting our focus towards human agency, I propose a more radical engagement with automatism, one that seeks to uncover the agency of machines themselves.

Up to this point, we have treated automatism and mechanism as synonymous. However, the key to understanding the position developed here is recognising that not everything within what Simondon calls “technical objects” is deterministic or mechanical. In his now well-known book *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, Simondon argues that technical objects also possess a genesis; their development is, in a certain sense, akin to that of living beings. A technical object is not simply a specific machine, but rather a trajectory of evolutionary development, “that of which there is genesis” (Simondon 2017 [1958], p. 26). This does not mean, of course, that technology emerges entirely autonomously, or that it is equivalent to living beings, let alone to humans. Rather, it allows us to understand that machines are not neutral, deterministic instruments that passively obey our commands or designs without resistance, but are instead products of an evolutionary process marked by “convergence and self-adaptation” (Simondon 2017, p. 26). Even if we adopt a more restricted understanding of genesis as an actual functioning of the technical individual, Simondon maintains that every machine adapts, through a margin of indeterminacy, to its environment, within the associated milieu generated through the process of “concretisation” of the technical object.⁸ All of this suggests that we can speak of a certain autonomy, and even agency, beyond human intention, on the part of automatism itself, and that technology is not pure instrumentality.

⁸ For a more detailed analysis of Simondon’s philosophy in the context of photography, see Simic (2027).

Still, some theorists have argued that although photographic automatism appears non-intentional, it is ultimately intentional in human terms, since behind every technology lies a human intention to design it for a specific use. They argue that this opposes, for instance, natural processes which are independent but are not typically described as “automatic” (Costello & Phillips, 2009). While it is undeniable that technology is largely invented by humans for defined purposes, technology cannot be reduced to those purposes, since many of the material and natural processes through which it operates occur without human intention. In this sense, Geimer reminds us of Heidegger’s well-known insight: when a tool breaks down, it becomes conspicuous (Heidegger 1993 [1927], p. 73; Geimer 2018, p. 72), in other words, its transparent functionality is called into question, revealing the machine’s material resistance. This can be illustrated by Kertész’s photograph analysed at the beginning of Geimer’s book, *Négatif sur verre brisé*, so named because the glass-plate negative was broken, thereby undermining the transparency of photographic representation through the techno-materiality of the medium itself and, paradoxically, adding to its aesthetic value. Geimer also notes that in the context of photography, the terms invention and discovery are often interchangeable. This is a consequence of the fact that many aspects of photographic technology stem from natural processes discovered largely by chance and prior to technology itself, as, for example, the photosensitivity of silver salts observed by Schulze in 1727 (Geimer 2018, p. 17-42). Moreover, the effects of strong sunlight on fabric or surfaces can also be considered photographic, even though they are not technological and are entirely non-intentional (Phillips 2009, p. 339). Yet, despite these examples showing us its non-intentional character, photography has long been institutionally defined, as Geimer points out, as the “intended image” – an anthropocentric view already formalised in a definition from 1903 (Davanne and Bucquet 1903, p. 9; Geimer 2018, p. 22) and seemingly continuing in the latest approaches to photography.

By contrast, Zylinska, a media and photography theorist who is also critical of realist approaches, nevertheless finds it important to focus more (not less) on the non-human and the techno-material dimension of photography. She concludes that “it is precisely in its nonhuman aspect that photography’s creative, or world-making, side can be identified” (2017, p. 9). But what does “creative” mean in this context? Zylinska is influenced by recent posthumanist philosophy, as well as by the philosophy of becoming. In both cases, the focus lies in conceiving reality, the medium and the image as spaces of transformation and ongoing processes. Although Zylinska does not explicitly reference Simondon, his philosophy of technology, and indeed, his

entire ontology of relation, is highly relevant here. His concept of individuation functions as a principle of reality that can be read as the ongoing genesis of being: not essence, but the becoming of things. Here, the techno-material embeddedness of the photographic medium, the partial independence and indeterminacy of the photographic process, and the agency of the non-human contribute to the aesthetic value of photography.

This is possible because, while the aesthetic tradition has long accepted the highly subjective and internalised nature of what we call aesthetic judgement, the philosophy of becoming has extended the aesthetic domain beyond mere subjectivity, aesthetic experience, and its provisional universality. Within this framework, the aesthetic is not simply a matter of subjective reception or of the “beautiful” but is rather a synonym for the ontological process of becoming. This is likely why Simondon sought to move beyond the contemplative aesthetic paradigm, arguing that every technical object could possess its own aesthetic epiphany once integrated into the material and/or human world (Simondon 2017). In other words, the aesthetic character of technical objects should be sought in their functioning, not (only) in their human use, or, in the case of photography, (only) in its images. Simondon further expanded this perspective in his (unfinished) work on technoaesthetics, the principal aim of which was to develop an aesthetics of technology, not merely about it (Simondon 1982). This is possible because no concretised technical object is entirely predetermined; put differently, every machine contains a contingent aspect, which in fact supports its functioning, makes it in a sense agential and (at least partly) creative and aesthetic.

Following this, technology reveals itself as part of the natural world, indeed, as part of life itself. This is important, for if we adhere to the Kantian distinction between nature as determinism, governed by necessity, and nature as life and spontaneity, governed by contingency, then within this paradigm technology aligns more closely with the latter than the former. Adding to this the fact that Kant’s aesthetics is also grounded in the paradigm of contingency, I would argue that this opens the way to account for “technical beauty” as analogous to natural beauty, even if doing so requires us to move beyond Kant’s own framework. In her book *Before Tomorrow: Epigenesis and Rationality*, Malabou suggests that, for Kant, life resists determination and self-organises without the transcendental (Malabou 2014). I argue that, on the aesthetic level, this spontaneity and independence of life is precisely what is perceived as natural beauty. If technical objects possess a comparable form of self-organising independence, what prevents us from recognising their functioning and their products – as with those of nature – as beautiful?

Moreover, a new generation of theorists and philosophers of technology has taken this idea even further by asserting that contingency is equally characteristic of computation (Fazi 2018), of recursivity (Hui 2019), and of the very plasticity of artificial intelligence through machine learning (Malabou 2017). While classical philosophy of technology concentrated on the material dimension of machines, these thinkers argue that software too, through incomputability, error, or its quasi-organic forms of organisation – in short, through its own contingency – is also in a state of becoming, and that there is a form of “life” even at the most abstract levels of machinic processes. Although I cannot explore the full scope of their arguments here,⁹ this insight is nonetheless crucial: it enables us to challenge, and indeed render obsolete, the notion of photographic technology as merely mechanically deterministic and fundamentally divorced from aesthetic or creative dimensions, at all levels. Consequently, it urges a rethinking of the aesthetics of photography, and invites us to recognise, as Hui (2019, p. 263) has suggested more broadly for all technology, that it still remains “all too human”.

4. Conclusion

Thus, rather than viewing photographic automatism as antithetical to agency and creation, we can now recognise that automatism, through its own contingency, ensures a kind of relative autonomy and (non-intentional) agency. Beyond the conventional frameworks, where automatism, as deterministic, simply brings the chance of the material world into photography, or where psychological automatism (as the unconscious) serves as a paradigm for understanding technological automatism as creative, we can now propose a third possibility: the spontaneity inherent to the camera's own automatism (self-action), its self-organisation. What, nevertheless, unites these three interpretations is the underlying hypothesis that automatism may, in each case, enable creation. The last one, pointing to a kind of technological autonomy, or its lifelike behaviour, demonstrates that this is made possible by the contingent nature of technological automatism itself. It is important to repeat that contingency here is not simply the opposite of regularity or order, but rather a kind of surplus or emergent spontaneity of the (technological) system, which continually adjusts to itself. Finally, if, as in Kantian-inspired aesthetics, the spontaneity of technology mirrors that of nature, then technology may paradoxically fulfil the

⁹ For a more detailed analysis of this aspect of my research, see Simic (2025).

very ideal of genius: that which creates in the image of nature itself. In photography, this means that we can dispense with human, intentional, artistic agency and still defend its creative potential.

This logic could be illustrated by two photographic projects in which artists deliberately employ highly automatised procedures or images to maximise spontaneity. In *The Camera is God*, Trent Parke photographed people waiting at a red light every day at the same hour and location. While this could have been just conventional street photography, Parke introduced a crucial twist: he used a shutter release firing continuously at high speed, mimicking surveillance cameras. Through this setup, the camera effectively became a god-like creator by virtue of its own automatism. Mishka Henner, in a parallel but distinct approach, used solely Google Street View images in his project *No Man's Land* – images neither taken by the artist himself nor intentionally framed, but rather produced through a highly automatised process, with cameras capturing scenes automatically. In both projects, automatism does not merely serve as a transducer for human agency, let alone as its obstruction; rather, automatism itself becomes (lifelike) agency, forming the core of the artistic project.

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