

FRAMING THE DEBATE, FOCUSING THE LENS: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON PHILOSOPHY AND PHOTOGRAPHY

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BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND THEORY

The title of this focus draws on two terms native to the language of photography, each of which carries a broader theoretical resonance. The frame reminds us that every photographic image is the result of an act of selection – a deliberate choice of what to include and what to exclude, of what is rendered visible and what is consigned to the space beyond the picture's edge. The lens, in turn, evokes the dual capacity of the photographic medium: to reveal what the naked eye cannot perceive, and simultaneously to prompt critical reflection on the nature of what it represents and on the non-neutrality of the medium itself. Together, these two vantage points articulate the editorial intent of the present collection: in what follows, we take as our primary point of reference the theory as it has been developed within philosophy without, however, losing sight of its broader interdisciplinary resonance.

It is precisely the ubiquity of the photographic image in contemporary experience that makes such boundary-setting both necessary and difficult. Photography saturates everyday life to a degree that renders it nearly invisible as an object of sustained theoretical attention. The need becomes all the more pressing to identify the critical perspectives that are currently emerging – perspectives that engage seriously with photography and interrogate its multiple dimensions: aesthetic, epistemological, political, and ethical.

The theorisation of photography has long been entangled in questions of origin and essence. Writing at the turn of the millennium, Geoffrey Batchen challenged the field to move beyond its preoccupation with the photographic act and to engage instead with the temporal and ontological complexities that define photography as a representational system¹. In James Elkins' volume, contributions continued to orbit the question of what digitalisation had done to the medium's identity². Observing photography's

¹ G. Batchen, *Burning with desire: The conception of photography*, Mit Press, Cambridge MA 1999.

² J. Elkins, *Photography Theory*, Routledge Abingdon, New York-London 2006.



rapid expansion across mobile and networked platforms, Kelsey and Stimson³ argued that debates over indexicality had run their course, proposing instead that photography was reorienting itself around the fabric of everyday social connection.

This selection of interventions on photography at the threshold among visual representation, origin and technical specificity exposes a recurring dead end: photography theory has struggled to release its hold on medium-specificity as the ground of its legitimacy. Yet the question this generates – what purpose can theory serve once photography’s privileged status has dissolved? – already contains a flawed premise, one that grounds photography’s theoretical value in its ontological exceptionalism and thereby forecloses engagement with the complexity of its actual social and material existence.

The present focus proceeds from a different assumption. Rather than defending or mourning a lost ontological essence, the contributions gathered here suspend the historical passage from analogue to digital and, acknowledging the hybrid nature of the medium, approach photography as an embedded cultural and epistemic practice – one whose significance is inseparable from a body of knowledge that runs deep and emerges constantly through the contexts in which images are produced, circulated, valued, and exchanged. Can a discourse on philosophy and photography move beyond ontological essentialism and medium-specificity as its organising framework – and if so, what replaces them? In what ways do photographs participate in the construction of knowledge and modes of seeing, rather than merely recording a pre-given reality? What remains of the photograph’s status as index, trace, and document once its embeddedness in social practices, institutions, and conventions is taken seriously? What new theoretical tools are required to address the challenges posed by digital circulation, AI-generated imagery, social media, and algorithmic image production?

The contributions collected here are therefore offered as preliminary points of departure.

What is referred to throughout this focus as “theory of photography” is conceived in the broadest possible sense of that expression. The boundaries between photography theory and philosophy of photography are not treated here as fixed disciplinary frontiers. While it is true that not every theoretical problem is philosophical in nature, the philosophical dimensions of photographic inquiry – its ontological, epistemological, and aesthetic stakes – are understood to be in continuous dialogue with the historical, sociological, and cultural frameworks that constitute photography theory more broadly. The aim of this focus is precisely to enhance that dialogue, and to develop a more inclusive critical vocabulary capable of addressing a vast array of challenges posed by historical and contemporary photographic cultures.

PHOTOGRAPHY, KNOWLEDGE, AND THE OBSERVER

For at least three decades, philosophical inquiry into the nature of the photographic image has drawn attention to the historical function of observation and to the role of photography in the formation of historically specific modes of seeing⁴. Photographs do not merely record the world; they participate in the construction of the ways in which the world is seen and known⁵. The historiography of photography has demonstrated that pictures exceed the representation of physical reality: understood from the outset

³ R. Kelsey, B. Stimson (ed. by), *The Meaning of Photography*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 2008.

⁴ J. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA 1990.

⁵ J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin Books, London 1972.

as instruments that extend visual perception beyond the capacities of the naked eye, their apparent automaticity enables them to generate new objects of knowledge while sustaining a charge of realism and naturalism⁶. This latter dynamic assumes an evident socio-political dimension in those cases where photographic images are deployed to construct or assign identities to the subjects they represent.⁷

Photographs are technical images⁸, the products of multilayered and historically situated knowledge. Studies situated at the intersection of art and science have productively problematised key concepts such as objectivity, perception, and visualisation, shifting the terms of analysis from iconographic description to the epistemological conditions embedded in the medium itself⁹. Because a photograph can be conceived to faithfully depict a state of affairs, it can be read as a copy of its referent – a logic that extends naturally to the conception of photographs as documents whose evidentiary value lies in their capacity to attest to a fact¹⁰. Photographic images function simultaneously as index and evidence across a wide range of fields of application¹¹. The status of the photograph as trace and index has been further elaborated through attention to the material conditions of image production and use: understood as material objects embedded in social practices, photographs carry values and meanings that are irreducible to their visual content alone¹².

THE SOCIAL LIFE AND ARCHIVAL CONDITION OF PHOTOGRAPHS

A renewed focus on the social biography of photographs became possible with the recognition of the photographic image not merely as a visual representation but as a physical object with a history¹³. Photographs are not static; they are active, mobile, and exchangeable objects that accumulate layers of social meaning and historical significance as they pass through different contexts of circulation and use¹⁴. Through their biographies, photographs enter into diverse social spaces and participate in different systems of exchange, conservation, and collection in the service of heterogeneous institutions¹⁵. These concerns extend naturally

⁶ A. Scharf, *Art and Photography*, Allen Lane, London 1968; M. Braun, *Picturing Time. The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1992; J. Snyder, *Visualization and Visibility*, in C. A. Jones, P. Galison (ed. by), *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, Routledge, New York-London 1998, pp. 379-397; L. Bertelli, *Osservazioni sull'inconscio ottico*, in "aut aut", 372, 2016, pp. 133-156; S. Hillnhütter, S. Klammer, F. Tietjen (ed. by), *Hybrid Photography. Intermedial Practices in Science and Humanities*, Routledge, New York-London 2023.

⁷ E. Edwards, *The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination, 1885-1918*, Duke University Press, Durham-London 2012; C. Pinney, *Seven Theses on Photography*, in "Thesis Eleven", 113/1, 2012, pp. 141-156; J. Ellenbogen, *Reasoned and Unreasoned Images. The Photography of Bertillon, Galton, and Marey*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park (PA) 2012; A. Gilardi, *Wanted! Storia, tecnica ed estetica della fotografia criminale, segnaletica e giudiziaria* (1978), Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2003; S. Romani, *The Photographic Portraits of Carl Durheim. Wunschbilder between Projection and Identification*, tesi di dottorato, Universität zu Köln 2022.

⁸ H. Bredekamp, V. Dünkel, B. Schneider (ed. by), *The Technical Image. A History of Styles in Scientific Imagery* (2008), University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2015.

⁹ L. Daston, P. Galison, *Objectivity*, Zone Books, New York 2007; J. Tucker, *Nature Exposed. Photography as Eyewitness in Victorian Science*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2013; K. Wilder, *Photography and Science*, Reaktion Books, London 2009; W. Ernst, *Chronopoetics. The Temporal Being and Operativity of Technological Media*, Rowman & Littlefield, London-New York 2016.

¹⁰ S. Sontag, *On Photography*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1977.

¹¹ R. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA)-London 1985; A. Sekula, *The Body and the Archive*, in "October", 39, 1986, pp. 3-64; H. Wolf (hrsg. v.), *Zeigen und/oder Beweisen? Die Fotografie als Kulturtechnik und Medium des Wissens*, De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2016.

¹² P. Bourdieu, *Photography. A Middle-brow Art* (1965), Polity Press, Cambridge 1990; W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1994.

¹³ J. M. Schwartz, "We Make Our Tools and Our Tools Make Us". Lessons from *Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomats*, in "Archivaria", 40, 1995, pp. 40-74.

¹⁴ E. Edwards, *Material Beings. Objecthood and Ethnographic Photographs*, in "Visual Studies", 17/1, 2002, pp. 67-75;

C. Pinney, *Seven Theses on Photography*, in "Thesis Eleven", 113/1, 2012, pp. 141-156.

¹⁵ C. Caraffa (ed. by), *Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History*, Deutscher Kunstverlag, Berlin-München 2011.

to the question of archival practice. The archive can be understood as a particular intersection of theories, processes, and languages grounded in what has been called *inscriptional praxis* – a set of interpretive acts that alter both the physical form and the meaning of the materials they organize¹⁶. Attention to archival practice foregrounds the interpretive dimensions of preservation and collection, contributing to an ongoing and necessary dialogue about the significance of photographic images within broader socio-cultural contexts: specifically, the material entanglement of photography with other nineteenth-century media – print, drawing, the stereoscope – has been shown to shape the conception of photographic archives, complicating any notion of an autonomous and self-contained visual record¹⁷.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS

The four essays gathered in this focus engage with these questions from distinct but complementary perspectives. Taken together, these contributions do not converge on a single thesis or method: as if we were standing in front of a prism, it is the multifarious possibility of contemplating the same object from different viewpoints that illuminates the complexity and gradation of photography and its theoretical implications. What they share is a commitment to taking photography seriously as an object of critical and philosophical inquiry – and a recognition that such inquiry, at this historical moment, must be as open, rigorous, and transdisciplinary as the phenomenon it seeks to understand.

Dawn Wilson (University of Hull) re-examines the causal relationship between the event and the photographic image through the conceptual lens of representational temporality, interrogating how photographs construct, rather than simply record, their temporal referents. Tomáš Dvořák (FAMU Prague) offers a genealogical reflection on the nature of photography by focusing on the medium itself, reinterpreting its processual character in relation to its instrumental functions and its malleability across different contexts of application. Federica Muzzarelli (University of Bologna) proposes a methodological framework for rereading early photography through the prism of gender studies and feminist criticism, recovering in the process the pioneering vision of Julia Margaret Cameron. Finally, Filippo Tommasoli examines the perennial tension between the reality captured by the camera and the claimed authenticity of the photographic image, exploring the boundaries of that tension through the conceptual frameworks of falsification and illusion.

Wilson's essay engages precisely with the difficulty of moving beyond originary moments toward the temporal and ontological convolutions that define photography as a representational system. Her multi-stage account decouples the photographic image from a fixed moment of creation and reframes it as the outcome of a processual, temporally extended practice. Her engagement with Barthes, Bazin, and Walton is critically concerned with how indexicality and ontological essence have dominated photography theory. She exemplifies the turn toward photography's embedded nature in broader aesthetic and epistemological questions, and her comparison with painting implicitly addresses the relation between photography theory and the philosophy of other visual arts.

Muzzarelli's contribution reflects on the social biography of photographs and the capacity of photographic images to function as active agents carrying layers of social meaning and historical significance. Her feminist

¹⁶ T. Serena, *The Words of the Photo Archive*, in C. Caraffa (ed. by), *Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History*, Deutscher Kunstverlag, Berlin-München 2011, pp. 57-72.

¹⁷ N. Leonardi, S. Natale (ed. by), *Photography and Other Media in the Nineteenth Century*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park (PA) 2018.

methodology also directly engages a transdisciplinary perspective that addresses the political, ethical, aesthetic, and epistemological dimensions of photography. Her recovery of Cameron is a concrete instance of what it means to move beyond questions of origin and essence toward the embeddedness of photography in social and gendered experience. The essay points toward the construction of identity through photographic images and toward the significance of archival and critical practices: Cameron's images, as Muzzarelli shows, have been variously preserved, marginalised, and reinterpreted by successive institutions and critical traditions.

Dvořák's contribution directly engages with the moulding paradigm, recapitulating and deepening the critique of essentialism and medium-specificity. His attention to digitalisation, AI, and algorithmic image-making addresses the ubiquitous presence of the digital image. The essay rejects essentialist models of photography and proposes instead accounts that foreground process, temporality, and variability. The contribution illuminates the processual structure of photography, showing how moulding and modulation coexist across practices that extend before, during, and after the shutter.

Tommasoli's essay connects directly to the discussion of photography's status as trace and index, its evidentiary value, and the question of authenticity and forgery. His treatment of photography as a social and institutional practice – where the art market's valuation of prints reflects deeper philosophical questions about authorship – also resonates with the perspective on photography as material objects embedded in social practices. His engagement with Goodman on realism echoes the epistemological stakes of photographic representation, and his attention to digital photography and the possibilities of falsification in post-production dialogues with the contemporary challenges posed by digital circulation and AI. His essay interrogates the conditions under which a photograph can be said to capture reality, challenging single-stage, essentialist models of the medium.

The contributions form a coherent and mutually reinforcing set of perspectives on central questions. Wilson dismantles the single-stage imprint model from a philosophical perspective, while Dvořák rethinks the moulding paradigm from a media-theoretical one; both foreground process and variability against ontological essentialism. Muzzarelli extends this critique into the domain of gender and social history, showing how the dominant conventions of photographic realism and technical competence have functioned as instruments of exclusion, and recovering an alternative, feminist genealogy of photographic practice. Tommasoli triangulates across authenticity, forgery, and realism, using Goodman's framework to connect photographic authenticity to authorial control and photographic realism to historically and culturally variable standards of representation.

The focus thus moves from the impasse of ontological essentialism toward a richer, more socially and philosophically nuanced account of photography: one that is attentive to its processual nature, its gendered histories, its archival and institutional lives, and its complex, always mediated relation to reality.

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