

## *FAUXTOGRAPHY: THE INTIMATE RELATION BETWEEN PHOTOGRAPHY, FALSIFICATION AND DECEPTION*

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### ABSTRACT

This article investigates the central role of falsification in photography, examining its philosophical, technical, and ethical dimensions. Building on the New Theory of Photography and Nelson Goodman's framework on autographic art, the study conceptualises photography as a three-stage process – shooting, development, and final destination – where authenticity is determined by the author's control over each phase. The analysis further explores the ontological relationship between photograph and referent, highlighting the inherent subjectivity of framing and the illusion of photographic truth. Finally, the paper addresses the boundaries of authenticity and forgery, emphasising how unauthorised posthumous prints or digital reproductions constitute fakes. These interrelated dimensions reveal photography as a medium simultaneously characterised by realism and vulnerability to deception, challenging its traditional status as a language of truth.

**Keywords:** Photography, falsification, autographic art, realism

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This article examines a central theme: the concept of the fake in photography. The analysis unfolds across several dimensions – authenticity, falsification, and forgery; the relationship between the photographic image and what it represents, and thus between photography, reality, truth and representation; and finally, the boundary between what can and cannot be regarded as a photograph. The paper argues that photography, long considered the language of truth, in fact maintains an intrinsic connection with falsification, deception, and illusion.

### PREMISE

From its very beginnings, nearly two centuries ago, photography has revealed itself as a distinctive mode of representation, characterised by linguistic and technical features that set it apart from other image-produc-



ing media such as painting, engraving and printing. This distinctiveness has given rise to an ongoing and multifaceted debate around themes that were crucial from the outset: the artistic status of photography, its peculiar realism and documentary value, its supposed detachment from mental processes, and the unique relationship between the photographic sign and its referent<sup>1</sup>. These issues remain today at the very core of philosophical reflection on photographic languages.

Until recently, the vast majority of philosophical accounts of photography – often referred to as the orthodox theory of photography – were grounded in several fundamental assumptions: the complete mind-independence of the photographic medium, its non-artistic nature, and the single-stage structure of the photographic process<sup>2</sup>.

Since the late 2000s, however, a new philosophical approach has emerged: the so-called *New Theory of Photography*<sup>3</sup>. This theoretical framework offers a radically different understanding of the medium, questioning its supposed objectivity, re-evaluating the subjective role of the photographer, reconsidering its artistic dimension, and seeking to reconcile the epistemic and aesthetic functions of photography. This shift has also been facilitated by a deeper technical and theoretical investigation of the photographic process, which many of these new theories now conceptualise as multi-stage rather than instantaneous<sup>4</sup>.

My own research aligns with the methodological premises and core principles of the New Theory of Photography, while seeking to contribute new elements to the ongoing debate. In particular, I argue that the study of photographic fakes and forgeries – an area still relatively underexplored – can offer valuable insights and help to expand our understanding of the broader philosophical issues that underpin the medium.

## PHOTOGRAPHY AS AN AUTOGRAPHIC ART IN THREE STAGES

To analyse the concept of the fake in photography in its various dimensions, I will combine the multi-stage account of the photographic process, as theorised in the New Theory of Photography, with select aspects of Nelson Goodman's theories on art, particularly those outlined in *Languages of Art*<sup>5</sup> and in *Ways of World-making*<sup>6</sup>. While Goodman considers a variety of artistic languages in *Languages of Art*, including painting, sculpture and graphics, photography is notably absent. It remains uncertain whether this omission reflects his view of photography as marginal within the arts or whether he sought to avoid engaging a complex is-

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. D. Costello, *On Photography: A Philosophical Inquiry*, Routledge, London 2018, chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. D. Costello, *On Photography*, cit., chapter 1; A. Bazin, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, transl. by H. Gray, in "Film Quarterly", 13/4, 1960, pp. 4-9; R. Scruton, *Photography and Representation*, in "Critical Inquiry", 7/3, 1981, pp. 577-603.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. D. Costello, *On Photography*, cit., chapter 2; D. Costello, D. M. Phillips, *Automatism, Causality and Realism: Foundational Problems in the Philosophy of Photography*, in "Philosophy Compass", 4/1, 2009, pp. 1-21; D. Costello, *What's So New about the "New" Theory of Photography?*, in "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", 75/4, 2017, pp. 439-452; D. Costello, *Whither Photography Theory: Replies to Abell and Atencia-Linares*, in "Aisthesis. Pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico", 11/2, 2018, pp. 230-234; C. Abell, *Out with the Old? The New Theory of Photography*, in "Aisthesis. Pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico", 11/2, 2018, pp. 208-216; P. Atencia-Linares, *Fiction, Nonfiction, and Deceptive Photographic Representation*, in "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", 70/1, 2012, pp. 19-30; P. Atencia-Linares, *Why Grey Is the New Black*, in "Aisthesis. Pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico", 11/2, 2018, pp. 216-226; D. M. Lopes, *The Four Arts of Photography: An Essay in Philosophy*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden (MA) 2016; D. M. Lopes, *Go Social: Replies to Catharine Abell and Paloma Atencia-Linares*, in "Aisthesis. Pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico", 11/2, 2018, pp. 227-229; D. M. Phillips, *Photography and Causation: Responding to Scruton's Scepticism*, in "The British Journal of Aesthetics", 49/4, 2009, pp. 327-340; D. M. Phillips, *Fixing the Image: Re-thinking the "Mind-independence" of Photographs*, in "The Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics", 6/2, 2009, pp. 1-22; D. M. Wilson, *Invisible Images and Indeterminacy: Why We Need a Multi-stage Account of Photography*, in "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", 79/2, 2021, pp. 161-174.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. D. M. Wilson, *Invisible Images and Indeterminacy*, cit.

<sup>5</sup> N. Goodman, *Languages of Art*, Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis 1968.

<sup>6</sup> N. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 1978.

sue from a conventionalist perspective. What is certain, however, is that Goodman provides the theoretical tools necessary to apply his philosophical framework to a rigorous analysis of photographic language.

Following Goodman's theories, I think that photography can be considered as a *three-stage autographic art of which the last one is multiple*. Before explaining this statement, it is necessary to speak briefly about the distinction Goodman makes between *autographic* and *allographic* arts. This is a distinction about the authenticity of a work of art. It should be specified that we are not referring to those cases in which a fake is produced by an x subject in the style of a given author. We are referring, instead, to proper copies of existing works. It is known and accepted that a painting or a sculpture can be forged, while any copies of a novel or of the scores of a symphony are as authentic as the original. Goodman then suggests calling *autographic* those art forms (painting, sculpture, etc.) in which even the most exact copy of a work does not count as authentic, and the other forms of art as *allographic* (music, literature, etc.). For example, two scores of Beethoven's Egmont are equally authentic, because they are characterised by «sameness of spelling»<sup>7</sup>, that is, the same sequence of letters (or notes), spaces and punctuation (or pauses), regardless of whether these are written with different characters, styles or colours. This is a sufficient and necessary condition of authenticity for the allographic arts, whose main feature is the presence of a notational system. By contrast, the only way to determine the authenticity of a sculpture or a painting is its authorship, because these types of art do not have a notational system.

Photography, lacking a notational system<sup>8</sup>, is thus an autographic art: the authenticity of its *tokens* can only be measured on the basis of the discriminating point of its *paternity* during the photographic process, in each of its three stages<sup>9</sup>.

These stages correspond, in my view, to the theoretical phases of the photographic process: *shooting*, *development*, and *final destination*. The photograph itself emerges only at the conclusion of this process; intermediate outputs – such as photographic events, negatives, or RAW files – do not yet constitute a photograph<sup>10</sup>. These stages were identified through extensive study of photographic language and technique, both analogue and digital, as well as its historical evolution.

Photography unfolds as a process beginning with framing – or, arguably, with the idea in the photographer's mind – and ending with the final photograph (digital file, slide, or print). Within this process, steps characterised by a strong degree of automaticity interact with steps in which the photographer's intentionality plays a decisive role.

In the mind of the photographer who thinks, plans and imagines, with a more or less accurate degree of precision, the final photograph, lies the beginning, the preliminary stage, which initiates the first phase and thus the whole process<sup>11</sup>. Immediately thereafter, the action focuses on the camera, the main instrument

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. N. Goodman, *Languages of Art*, cit., p. 115.

<sup>8</sup> I do not think that the computer code underlying digital photographs can be considered as a notational system in the same way as a musical score or an alphabet, mainly because it is not its function (it's more like a "hidden structure"). No photographer uses the code of a digital photo to reproduce it or work on it, as a stable reference, because digital photographs, as well as analogue ones, are considered images rather than files by people who make them.

<sup>9</sup> It should be clarified – a point to which I will return repeatedly throughout this paper – that the term "photography" is not used here to encompass every possible photographic practice. Rather, I refer to those forms of photography that are both the most widespread and the closest to our ordinary understanding of the medium: situations in which an author intentionally uses a camera to create a photograph. Consequently, my analysis excludes highly automated forms of image production in which authorial agency is minimal or virtually absent, such as certain types of scientific photography or speed-camera photographs.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. D. M. Wilson, *Invisible Images and Indeterminacy*, cit.

<sup>11</sup> At this point, one might object that many photographers – particularly those specialising in street photography – do not plan their images in advance, but rather "find" them while wandering with their camera, capturing moments almost randomly

of the *shooting phase*. Through it, the photographer frames the chosen portion of the scene, organising its lines, geometric construction, points of attention and arrangement of planes, thanks to the freedom of intervention and expression that is allowed by the instrument. At this point, the shot causes light reflected by the scene to be registered on the photosensitive surface. What is produced at the end of the exposure is not yet a photograph, but what Dawn Wilson calls a *photographic register*<sup>12</sup>: in analogue photography, traditionally identified with the latent image (but the concept of latent image, as Wilson says, is not totally correct, because we don't have an image yet), and in digital photography with the raw information recorded by the sensor<sup>13</sup>. The formation of this register marks the conclusion of the shooting phase and provides the material basis upon which the subsequent stages of development and final realisation operate. Now, *development* can begin: in the darkroom or on the computer (or in the camera itself), it allows the photographic register to become visible and, in case, to be further modified. With the negative or processed image file (jpeg, tiff or other image formats), development is concluded.

Finally, the third and final stage of the photographic process concerns the *final destination of the image*. This stage often influences the entire process, beginning with the design of the photograph itself<sup>14</sup>: from the developed image (negative, slide, or file), visible by transparency (viewer, projector, or monitor), to images presented on opaque surfaces (prints on paper) or via screens and other digital media (for example, online publication). While for traditional photography printing – especially from negatives – was nearly unavoidable, digital photographs may remain exclusively online.

Crucially, this final stage is characterised by a principle of multiplicity<sup>15</sup>: a single photographic token can yield multiple authentic copies without any being considered fakes, provided they adhere to the author's parameters of control. In other words, the photographer retains the ability to produce numerous legitimate reproductions of the same work, each maintaining the authenticity established by the creative process, as long as this reproduction remains within the boundaries of authorial control that I will outline shortly.

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and without premeditation. While this is a widespread belief, I do not share it, and I make this claim both as a professional photographer and as a scholar. I am convinced that even the most “spontaneous” photography – those images that appear casual and minimally linked to the author's prior intention – requires a thorough intellectual preparation. This preparation may not be tied to the single photograph itself, but rather to a broader conception of composition, theme, lighting, and style. Thus, even when a photographer sets out with a camera around their neck, seeking to capture fleeting moments within the flow of life, they must have a clear understanding of what they aim to discover and preserve through their lens. For it is nearly impossible to find that which one does not seek.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. D. M. Wilson, *Invisible Images and Indeterminacy*, cit., pp. 163-164.

<sup>13</sup> It's important to consider that also the raw digital information that is the result of the first interaction between the light and the camera's sensor and processor is not an image. The image that we can usually see on the camera monitor is just a preview and does not correspond, at this moment, to a proper image file, but only a set of digital information needed to later construct the actual photograph (the raw file, that can have a different format depending on camera brand). To have an image file we have to transform the raw file into a proper image file, using dedicated software or letting the camera itself do it for us (that's what happens when we shoot directly in jpeg format, for example).

<sup>14</sup> By this, I do not mean that the photographer must always know precisely, at the moment of shooting, what the final outcome of the image will be (although this is often the case). What I do mean, however, is that different intended final destinations necessarily imply different approaches to the shot. For instance, if I know that my photograph is destined to be printed as a poster, it must be taken with a specific type of camera, at a particular size and resolution—requirements that would not apply to an image intended for publication on a social media platform.

<sup>15</sup> This claim should not be interpreted in an excessively rigid or normative manner. Certain exceptions do exist, most notably daguerreotypes and Polaroids, which are characterised by their uniqueness and resistance to reproduction. Nevertheless, within the broader history of photographic practice, these remain exceptional cases, standing in contrast to the predominantly reproducible character of photography as a medium.

## AUTHENTICITY AND FORGERY IN PHOTOGRAPHY

For a photograph to be considered the artistic work of a particular author, that photographer must exercise control over each stage of its production<sup>16</sup>. It is not necessary that they personally carry out every stage – for instance, many photographers, both historically and today, have never printed their own photographs. What is crucial, however, is that no stage is undertaken without the photographer's knowledge and oversight. For example, if individual X prints on his own initiative a negative by Ansel Adams, and presents the final result as *a photograph by Ansel Adams*, then he has produced a fake. In order to avoid this, it must be indicated as *his print from a negative by Ansel Adams*: the result will be a photograph that bears the mark, in its productive process, of both the authors. Let us now apply this vision to a real situation: the two posthumous retrospectives of Garry Winogrand at MoMA. In the first one (1988) MoMA's Director of Photography John Szarkowski (Winogrand's friend and supporter) included some photos that came from the 6,600 rolls of unedited work Winogrand left after his death (some rolls were processed but "unproofed", other rolls were unprocessed and "unproofed"). In the second retrospective that debuted at SFMOMA in 2013 and reached the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2014, the curator Leo Rubinfien included many more pictures taken from this body of work: 164 of the 400 of the exhibition. The question is: can we consider these photos as Winogrand's photographs? My answer is that we should not. We should consider these photos as prints made by X of some Winogrand's negatives. And if this point of view may seem too restrictive and normative, let's think about some arguments. The first important thing is that Winogrand never saw most of these photographs. Of these 250,000 photographs, which ones would he have selected and sent to the editors? Would he have kept them that way or would he have cropped them? We will never know even though he most likely would have made different choices from those of the two curators. Moreover, we should consider the question of how he would print them: would he have lightened the shadows? Or maybe would he have emphasised one subject over another, manipulating the light in the darkroom? The relationship between the negative (or raw file) and the photograph is more or less that between a preparatory drawing and the painting: both – the negative and the drawing – are an intermediate stage to arrive at the final work, and thus are not considered by the author as objects to be exhibited. Pushing this parallel to its extreme, let us pose a question: would we ever have someone finish a preparatory drawing by Leonardo and then exhibit it as an original Leonardo painting? Of course not (unless Leonardo himself wanted it). Maybe if we have only the preparatory drawing and not the finished painting there is an authorial reason. Or maybe not, but we can't be the ones to resolve the doubts.

To support my thesis there are some details regarding the two retrospectives. First of all, Szarkowski's opinion after seeing the contact sheets of the posthumous rolls. Frustrated and disappointed, he included very few of these photos in the exhibition, claiming they did not live up to Winogrand's previous production (probably if he had seen all the photos that Winogrand took in life and not only those that the author chose he would have been equally disappointed). «He compared Winogrand's late-life photographic frenzy to the sputtering that an overheated car engine continues to make after the ignition has been turned off.

<sup>16</sup> For an interesting paper about photography and authenticity, cfr. N. Warburton, *Authentic Photographs*, in "The British Journal of Aesthetics", 37/2, 1997, pp. 129-137. For a study about photography, authenticity and Goodman's distinction between autographic and allographic arts applied to photography, cfr. Y. Qian, *On Authenticity in Photography*, in "Bulletin of the Graduate Division of Letters, Arts and Sciences of Waseda University", 66, 2021, pp. 771-784.



“To expose film is not quite to photograph”<sup>17</sup>, Mr. Szarkowski, who died in 2007, said. How can an artist evaluate his photographs, correct his working methods and present what best expresses his vision, if he has never proofed his negatives?<sup>18</sup>»

About the second retrospective, curator Rubinfiel had a different opinion about Winogrand’s posthumous photos, including many more pictures than Szarkowski. But doubts about the authorial value of these images remained. In fact, the prints made from posthumous negatives have not been sold in the art market. In the exhibition, they were identified by size, printed on 14 x 17 inch paper, larger than Winogrand’s favourite 11 by 14, so they stood out. It is clear that even Rubinfiel, while exhibiting these posthumous prints, knew that they could not be equated with the original prints made when the author was alive, either from an exhibition or a commercial point of view.

Obviously, this reasoning can be applied in the same way to digital photography, which, as noted earlier, does not present substantial differences from analogue photography in terms of language (although it does exhibit significant differences regarding the technical process and working method). If we take Szarkowski’s statement cited a few lines above – a phrase that, in its simplicity, encapsulates the essence of my view on photography – and attempt to adapt it to digital photography, it would read something like: *to expose the sensor to light is not quite to photograph*. Indeed, particularly in digital photography, where the possibilities for post-shoot intervention are virtually limitless, a photograph can only be said to exist at the conclusion of the three-stage photographic process discussed in the previous section. And, once again, the authenticity of a photograph can only be determined if none of the three stages is completed without the author’s oversight. A concrete example can illustrate this point. Suppose someone finds a memory card containing a thousand digital negatives<sup>19</sup> by a well-known contemporary photographer, such as Steve McCurry. These are unpublished photographs, never printed or released, on which McCurry has never made any notes. The only thing certain is that he took them. Now, if that person were to select a few images they liked, modify them in post-production, and print them – even if reproducing as faithfully as possible McCurry’s iconic style – and present them as unpublished McCurry photographs, they would certainly be producing a forgery. They would also be producing a forgery if they chose not to alter the images at all and printed them in their raw state. This is because they would be appropriating the second and third stages of the photographic process entirely excluding McCurry, not only committing an unethical act but also violating copyright and potentially harming the photographer’s reputation. Would McCurry have selected those images? Would he have left them as they were, or modified them in post-production? And if so, in what way? These are all questions to which no one but the author can respond<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> This observation resonates strongly with Dawn Wilson’s distinction between the photographic event and the photograph. Although expressed in a less philosophical vocabulary, Szarkowski’s claim similarly suggests that exposure alone is not sufficient for the existence of a photograph (see footnote n.12).

<sup>18</sup> A. Lubow, *Looking at Photos the Master Never Saw: When Images Come to Life After Death*, in “The New York Times”, 3 July 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/06/arts/design/when-images-come-to-life-after-death.html> (last accessed on 14 July 2026).

<sup>19</sup> The term *digital negative* is sometimes used descriptively to refer to RAW files, while Digital Negative (DNG) properly denotes a specific open RAW file format developed by Adobe. Like other RAW files, DNG files contain largely unprocessed data captured by a camera’s image sensor, rather than a fully rendered image. The designation digital negative derives from its structural analogy with the analogue photographic negative: both preserve the information captured during exposure in a form that requires further processing before a final image is produced.

<sup>20</sup> The issues discussed here are not limited to the case of Winogrand. Comparable questions concerning authorship, authenticity, and authorial control arise in other celebrated posthumous photographic archives, such as those of Vivian Maier or *The Mexican Suitcase*, containing negatives by Robert Capa, Gerda Taro and Chim (David Seymour). Owing to space limitations, however, these cases cannot be examined in detail here.

I believe it is interesting, at this point, to further support my thesis by opening a small window onto the art market, where, for several decades now, photography has played a role that is no longer marginal. I find this perspective valuable not because the art market has any direct connection with philosophical thought on art, but rather because I believe that, often within this market, certain economic questions constitute a concrete end point – usually without being consciously acknowledged – of important theoretical starting points. This is, for example, the case with the topic we are addressing here.

The status and value of a photographic print can vary significantly depending both on when it is produced and on who produces or authorises it. A *vintage print* is generally understood as a print produced relatively close in time to the creation of the negative, rather than simply as a print made personally by the photographer. Importantly, however, a print can be considered a vintage print only insofar as its production falls within the photographer's authorisation and authorial control. This temporal proximity, combined with the presumption of the photographer's involvement or control, is one of the reasons why *vintage prints* generally command the highest prices on the photographic market: they are regarded as the prints most likely to reflect the photographer's intentions and the form in which the image was originally conceived as a finished work. By contrast, a *later print* is produced at a later date and may be made either by the photographer themselves or by an authorised printer, assistant, or other designated party. Within this category, however, the degree of authorial involvement remains significant: a later print made personally by the photographer, or under their direct supervision or authorisation, will generally carry greater value and a stronger connection to the photographer's artistic intentions than one produced by an authorised third party without their direct involvement. Although later prints generally command lower prices than vintage prints because of their greater temporal distance from the original negative, the photographer's continued involvement can substantially affect their status and market value. These categories should be distinguished from *posthumous prints*, which are produced after the photographer's death. Such prints may be authorised and produced under the direction of the photographer's estate, in which case they are often described as *estate prints*. Such prints may be fully legitimate and authorised, even though the photographer is no longer able to exercise direct control over their production. *Posthumous* or *estate prints* generally occupy a lower position in the market hierarchy than both vintage prints and later prints produced during the photographer's lifetime, particularly when the latter were made or supervised by the photographer themselves. This difference reflects, at least in part, the greater uncertainty surrounding the photographer's intentions and their direct control over the final form of the image<sup>21</sup>. Finally, prints produced by an unrelated third party without the photographer's knowledge or authorisation constitute a different category altogether: unauthorised prints, which may be considered forgeries depending on the circumstances and the conventions of the relevant photographic market.

These distinctions are important because the terminology used by the photographic market does not, in itself, determine the degree of authorial control involved in the production of a print. Rather, the market's hierarchy of value seems to reflect, at least implicitly, the extent to which a print can be connected to the photographer's intentions and control. From the perspective developed here, what matters is precisely the degree of authorial control exercised at each stage of the photographic process, including the production of the final print.

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that the photographic market does not follow such a rigid hierarchy. The value of a photographic print is determined by a wide range of factors, including the photographer, the image, the date and circumstances of production, the printing process, the edition, provenance, condition, rarity, and the degree of authorial involvement. The distinctions outlined here should therefore be understood as general tendencies rather than as fixed rules governing market value.

These examples discussed above seem to confirm, at a more concrete and factual level, the key points of my theory: that photography is an art that does not end with the act of shooting, but rather for which the shot constitutes only one step in the artistic process; and that photography is an autographic art, meaning that the authenticity of a photograph can be assessed on the basis of the degree of authorial control exercised at each stage of the process<sup>22</sup>, including the final one, namely the print (or the final destination, as I prefer to call it).

## ANOTHER TYPE OF FALSIFICATION: PHOTOGRAPHIC REALISM AND THE ILLUSION OF PHOTOGRAPHIC TRUTH

The other main aspect in analysing the concept of the fake in photography is the relationship between a photograph and what it represents. Every photograph establishes a particular ontological relation with the photographed object: it attests to the photographed object's physical presence at the moment of photographic registration, since the object had to be present before the lens for that particular image to be produced. This feature, which I will elaborate on shortly, does not, however, guarantee that the photographic representation is faithful to the photographed object. The object photographed certainly existed at the time of the shot, but it is not certain that it resembled its photographic depiction in the eyes of those present. This characteristic is crucial for understanding the specificity of photographic language and for exploring the relationship between photography, reality, and truth in representation. The ontological link that photography inherently has with reality does not imply that photography conveys the truth about reality<sup>23</sup>. Rather than representing reality as it is, photography captures the photographer's gaze upon it – a perspective that is never objective and always partial. This begins with the very first decision the photographer makes: the framing. Framing entails not only the choice of what to depict, but also, and perhaps more significantly, the deliberate exclusion of what is left outside the frame. Thus, without delving into further technical considerations that would reveal countless other ways in which the photographer can convey a version of reality markedly different from what they actually see<sup>24</sup>, it is easy to understand how even the simple act of framing constitutes a moment of extreme subjectivity. Marking the difference between what

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<sup>22</sup> It should be clarified, one more time, that my theory is not intended to apply to those forms of photography that are structurally detached from any notion of authorship and are instead conceived as automatic means of recording light, such as speed-camera photographs. These cases fall outside the framework discussed here, which is concerned with photography as an intentional representational practice.

<sup>23</sup> In this context, Wilson's distinction between the *photographed object* and the *subject* of a photograph proves particularly useful. The former belongs to the causal provenance of the image, while the latter concerns what the photograph represents. A photographed object, therefore, should not be automatically identified with the subject of the photograph, since representation depends on the author's choices throughout the photographic process. (see D. M. Phillips, *Photography and Causation*, cit.). Building on this distinction, one might even speculate about a possible way of categorising photographs according to their degree of authorial intervention. Very tentatively, the greater the correspondence between the photographed object and the photographic subject, the more mind-independent and mechanically determined the image appears to be; conversely, the greater the divergence between the photographed object and what the photograph ultimately represents, the more mind-dependent and authorially shaped the image becomes. At one extreme, one might place highly automated images such as speed-camera photographs, where there is virtually no representational intention beyond the literal registration of the referent; at the other, photographs in which authorial choices substantially transform the representational significance of the photographed object. Such a proposal, however, immediately raises a number of methodological difficulties, not least the challenge of establishing reliable and intersubjectively acceptable criteria for measuring the distance between photographed object and photographic subject. The distinction itself inevitably involves interpretative and context-dependent judgments. For this reason, the present suggestion should be regarded merely as a preliminary intuition and a possible avenue for future research rather than a fully developed theoretical claim.

<sup>24</sup> For example: the distortion and stretching of planes caused by wide-angle lenses; the perspective compression and blurring of telephoto lenses; and so on.



we see and what we choose to communicate through the image is a deliberate and inherently non-objective decision. A photograph is therefore never a mirror of reality; rather, it represents the vision of reality of a particular author, which may differ considerably from that of another photographer facing the same scene.

To clarify this complex issue, we must consider what a photograph is and what is required to produce one.

As discussed, photography is a three-stage autographic art, the last of which is multiple. These stages form a unitary process through which photographs are produced; photographs are identifiable images constituting the final result of this process.

To provide a more concise definition, one might attempt to identify the fundamental elements necessary to produce a photograph. The challenge lies in avoiding either a definition that is too rigid or one too broad to be useful. I have identified five essential elements: the first two pertain to the instrumental apparatus, the last three are external: the photosensitive element, the darkroom/camera, light, the photographer, and the presence of the object to be photographed<sup>25</sup>. This framework arises from an extensive study of photographic history and technique, recognising the wide variety of experiments and innovations in the medium. It is neither perfect nor exhaustive, but it provides a basis for analysis of this particular and fascinating representational art.

1. THE PHOTSENSITIVE ELEMENT: this is the first element to consider due to its theoretical, technical, and historical significance. Photography was born when someone had the intuition of combining the studies on the sensitivity to light of some materials with other studies on dark rooms, so as to create lasting images *drawn* by the light reflected by objects<sup>26</sup>. Whether bitumen (as in Niépce), silver halides, or a digital sensor, the photosensitive element is necessary to capture the design created by light. Without it, photography cannot exist. This is a necessary condition, albeit not sufficient.

2. THE DARKROOM / THE CAMERA: The invention of the darkroom predates photography, but its adaptation for photographic purposes led directly to the development of the camera. The passage of light through the camera is not incidental: while the photosensitive element can be caused to register the effects of light directly without a camera, such results cannot, in my view, be considered photographs. Removing the camera eliminates the shooting phase and all the creative decisions associated with it. Just as an unprinted negative or an unprocessed digital file is not a photograph, an image created without a camera belongs to another category – perhaps a *photogenic image*. For instance, early experiments like Man Ray's *rayographs* impress objects' shadows directly onto photosensitive surfaces. Despite their aesthetic similarity to photographs, categorising them as such would render the definition of photography overly permissive and risk including almost any image of light on a surface<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> I think this method of definition is easier to apply than an aesthetic one. It's less ambiguous because it does not depend on the aesthetic characteristics of an image and therefore on the perceptive subjectivity of the observer: it's focused on the process of creating the photograph rather than the relationship between the image itself and the viewer. I also think that this method is in line with the New Theory analysis approach, and will allow me to engage with the challenge that Diarmuid Costello has specifically posed in the second chapter of his book *On Photography* (D. Costello, *On photography*, cit., pp. 84-96), namely whether it is possible to defend a permissive or restrictive definition of photograph.

<sup>26</sup> The expression deliberately echoes Talbot's early characterisation of photography as images «formed or depicted by the agency of Light alone» (cfr. W. H. F. Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*, Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, London 1844, Introduction).

<sup>27</sup> The very fact that Man Ray called these images *rayographs* and not *photographs* shows us how, probably, even the great master felt the need to find a separate name for a technique that was not totally assimilable to the photographic process. The *rayographs* seem to be more similar to a footprint on the sand than to a photograph, both from an aesthetic and an intuitive point of view. In all these cases the object creates its impression directly with its body. What's missing is an *intermediary image creator*, that in the case of photography is the camera itself.

3. **LIGHT:** Light is central to photography, as indicated by the etymology of the term itself. Without it, the photosensitive element cannot be impressed. Light is also the primary external factor influencing the final image. The interaction between light and the photographed object on the one hand and light and the sensitive surface on the other largely determines the outcome. Photographers must orchestrate the relationship between the image in their mind, the observed scene, and the intended photograph. Many creative decisions, especially during shooting, are shaped by light (e.g. exposure, aperture settings, the overall illumination of the subject, etc.) and directly affect the resulting photograph.

4. **THE PHOTOGRAPHER:** The term *photographer* refers not only to the professional figure but broadly to the author of the image. While the registration of light on the photosensitive element is a physical and chemical process, and camera components are mechanical or electronic, these elements alone do not constitute the photographic process. All mechanical components must be guided by the author, who directs their interaction through the creative workflow according to a conceptual design, adapted across all stages of production. Some photographs involve higher degrees of mechanisation, such as those taken by robotic devices, satellites, or large-scale commercial operations<sup>28</sup> which often utilise only part of the process, typically the shooting phase. Yet mechanisation does not make photography inherently mechanical. Like other artistic languages, it accommodates varying balances of creative and mechanical intervention. Photography, emerging during the Industrial Revolution, uses mechanical tools but remains fundamentally an art in the hands and mind of humans. The shutter click merely captures the instantaneous act of a mechanism serving the author's intention; the photographer seeks in the world only what has already been conceived in the mind.

5. **THE PRESENCE OF THE OBJECT TO BE PHOTOGRAPHED:** I decided to add this entry as the last one of the list, not because it has a lesser theoretical importance than the others, but rather as it introduces issues that will be central to the next chapter: the referential relationship between the photograph and what is represented.

It is evident, even from an intuitive point of view, that the *photographic sign* has a particular and unique relationship with its referent, within the scenario of representational arts. This aspect, which has inspired many different theories (such as the transparency of K. Walton),<sup>29</sup> is due to the fact that the photograph of an object *x* is the result of a process that starts with a photographic registration directly related to the light reflected by the object *x* itself. Therefore, there is a need for the *presence of the object to be represented*, at the very moment of the shot. Here lies another feature of photography, as well as one other intrinsic element characterising it. Photography, as mentioned before, is an art *in praesentia*. A photograph of a chair, for example, can only be taken if that chair is in front of the camera at the moment of the register. If someone described that particular chair to me, I could make a drawing, a painting, even a sculpture of it, but I couldn't take a photograph of it.

Having established these concepts, I would like to turn to a final topic, closely related to the interplay between photography, reality, truth, illusion and representation: photographic realism. The notion of real-

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<sup>28</sup> With this term I refer to consumer photography, started by Eastman in 1888, which is widely connected to the birth of the digital, to the extent that it became a mass phenomenon. It goes without saying that the definitions and categories I have discussed cannot be applied, without being adapted, to photographs taken with a smartphone from a group of people on holiday, for example, or to the complex relationship between photography and A.I. A further study of this phenomenon would be needed in order to clarify these aspects.

<sup>29</sup> Cfr. K. L. Walton, *Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism*, in "Critical Inquiry", 11/2, 1984, pp. 246-277.

ism in the arts has been explored by philosophers, critics, and artists, yielding numerous definitions. Some evaluate realism by the degree of similarity between a work and reality, while others, such as Goodman, understand it as relative to habitual representational norms within a given historical and cultural context: realism depends

[...] upon how stereotyped the mode of representation is, upon how commonplace the labels and their uses have become. Realism is relative, determined by the current system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time. [...] This relativity is obscured by our tendency to omit specifying a frame of reference when it is our own. [...] Realism is a matter not of any constant or absolute relationship between a picture and its object but of a relationship between the system of representation employed in the picture and the standard system.<sup>30</sup>

Accordingly, Goodman argues that the degree of realism of an *artistic token* depends on how closely its *world-version* corresponds to the standard one – that is, on how closely it aligns with what social, collective, and communicative norms have established as the *real world*: «realistic representation, in brief, depends not upon imitation or illusion or information, but upon inculcation»<sup>31</sup>.

As Benovsky<sup>32</sup> points out in his 2011 article, realism in photography has traditionally been understood in two senses:

- The first emphasises accuracy and representational fidelity: due to the mechanical nature of the photographic process, the photograph necessarily depicts the object as it exists in reality. Taken to its extreme, this view regards photographs not as representations but as substitutes for reality itself<sup>33</sup>.
- The second emphasises the ontological relationship between photograph and referent: the critical point is not how accurately the object is depicted, but that it existed before the lens at the moment of register. This *in praesentia* property renders photographic images inherently realistic, forming the basis for Walton's theory of transparency and subsequent studies<sup>34</sup>.

While I find the second interpretation more conceptually compelling, I do not fully accept either. Realism is a property – sometimes considered a strength, sometimes a limitation – long associated with photography. Whether intrinsic or attributed, this question demands careful analysis, which, once again, draws on Goodman's framework.

Shifts in standard can occur rather rapidly. The very effectiveness that may attend judicious departure from a traditional system of representation sometimes inclines us at least temporarily to install the newer mode as standard. We then speak of an artist's having achieved a new degree of realism, or having found new means for the realistic rendering of (say) light or motion. What happens here is something like the 'discovery' that not the earth but the sun is 'really fixed'. Advantages of a new frame of reference, partly because of their novelty, encourage its enthronement on some occasions in place of the customary frame.<sup>35</sup>

Photography, introduced over 150 years ago, exemplifies this: its mechanical procedures, photogenic dynamics, and ontological specificity established it as a new standard for realism. Despite early tech-

<sup>30</sup> Cfr. N. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, cit., pp. 36-38.

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. Ivi, p. 38.

<sup>32</sup> Cfr. J. Benovsky, *Three Kinds of Realism About Photographs*, in "The Journal of Speculative Philosophy", 25/4, 2011, pp. 375-395.

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. Scruton's thesis: R. Scruton, *Photography and Representation*, cit.; J. Benovsky, *Three Kinds of Realism About Photographs*, cit.

<sup>34</sup> Cfr. J. Benovsky, *Three Kinds of Realism About Photographs*, cit.

<sup>35</sup> Cfr. N. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, cit. pp. 37-38.

nical limitations (e.g., colour absence, long exposures, immobile subjects), photography became the benchmark for representing reality, profoundly influencing other media. From that moment onwards, every realism assessment was based on this new unit of measurement. Photography had created new worlds, united by the same transpositional language, and reality started being based on them. Painting, once dominant, adapted by moving toward more expressive styles, later confronting photography again through hyperrealism<sup>36</sup>.

In conclusion, photography constitutes a sui generis representational language, defined by a unique relationship with its referent. Its perceived realism emerges from its ability to create worlds governed by specific linguistic and expressive conventions, establishing photography as a standard system of reference. In this sense, photography – and its descendant media, notably cinema – have shaped, and continue to shape, the collective understanding of reality.

## CONCLUSION

At the heart of photography lies a tension between reality and representation, a tension that reveals the intimate connection between the medium and falsification. As this paper has shown, understanding the *fake* in photography requires attention to three interdependent dimensions. First, the photographic process itself, understood as a three-stage autographic art, demonstrates that a photograph emerges only when shooting, development, and final destination are completed under the author's control. Second, the ontological relationship between the photograph and its referent establishes its inherent realism: a photograph testifies to the existence of the photographed object, even while leaving open the possibility that the representation diverges from perception or expectation. Third, the question of authenticity and forgery shows that any deviation from the author's oversight – whether in the manipulation of posthumous prints, digital files, or unauthorised reproductions – transforms a potential artwork into a fake, exposing the medium's intrinsic vulnerability to deception.

These three dimensions are not separate; they are mutually constitutive. The process gives photography its autographic authority, its realism gives it epistemic weight, and the risk of falsification reveals its ethical, economic and legal boundaries. Together, they illuminate why photography, often celebrated as the language of truth, is inseparable from illusion, deception, and the possibility of counterfeit.

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<sup>36</sup> Above all (but not limited to) the visual ones. I believe it is possible to find a certain parallelism and mutual influence between the birth of photography and the development of realist and naturalist movements born in France and Italy between the nineteenth and twentieth century. What we know for sure is that, for example, two absolute protagonists of this literary scene had in-depth and prolonged contact with the world and the language of photography. Flaubert was the author, with his friend Du Camp, of one of the first travel photographic reports, as well as Giovanni Verga was an excellent photographer. All of them probably took creative inspiration from the stylistic features of the language of photography to devise their own writing styles.

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