



УДК 7.01+7.038.53:77

<https://doi.org/10.23939/shv2024.02.007>

КРИТИЧНЕ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ ПОГЛЯДІВ РОДЖЕРА СКРУТОНА НА ФОТОГРАФІЮ

Віктор Добко

Львівський національний університет імені Івана Франка

ORCID: 0009-0005-9476-6000

Viktor.Dobko@lnu.edu.ua

(Отримано: 12.07.2024. Прийнято: 24.09.2024)

© Добко В., 2024

Метою статті є критичне дослідження аргументів Роджера Скрутона щодо неможливості визнання фотографії мистецтвом через її механічний характер. Філософ стверджує, що фотографія є лише репродукцією реальності, яка не містить творчої інтенціональності, характерної для традиційних мистецьких форм, як-от живопис чи театр. У роботі здійснено аналіз поглядів дослідника у контексті сучасних філософських дискусій про природу мистецтва та фотографії. Методологія дослідження передбачає порівняльний аналіз ідей Р. Скрутона, а також філософів Стенлі Кавела, Кендала Волтона і Жана Бодріяра. Висновки статті вказують на те, що інтенціональність, творчий підхід фотографів та взаємодія глядачів з фотографією можуть надавати їй мистецьку цінність. Досліджено також вплив цифрових технологій на сучасне мистецтво, зокрема на фотографію, що розширює межі традиційного розуміння мистецтва.

Ключові слова: Роджер Скрутон, фотографія, мистецтво, естетика, інтенціональність, цифрове мистецтво, філософія фотографії.

CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF ROGER SCRUTON'S VIEWS ON PHOTOGRAPHY

Viktor Dobko

Ivan Franko National University of Lviv

ORCID: 0009-0005-9476-6000

Viktor.Dobko@lnu.edu.ua

(Received: 12.07.2024. Accepted: 24.09.2024)

This article critically examines Roger Scruton's arguments against recognizing photography as art due to its mechanical nature. Scruton claims that photography is merely a reproduction of reality, lacking the creative intentionality found in traditional art forms like painting or theatre. The paper analyzes Scruton's views within the context of contemporary philosophical discussions on the nature of art and photography. The research methodology includes a comparative analysis of Scruton's ideas and those of philosophers such as Stanley Cavell, Kendall Walton, and Jean Baudrillard. The findings suggest that intentionality, the creative approach of photographers, and viewer interaction can confer artistic value to photography. The study also explores the impact of digital technologies on contemporary art, particularly photography, which expands the boundaries of traditional art perceptions.

Key words: Roger Scruton, photography, art, aesthetics, intentionality, digital art, philosophy of photography.

Introduction: Scruton's Perspective on Photography

The advent of photography in the 19th century marked a significant shift in the landscape of visual

representation, prompting ongoing debates about its status as an art form. Unlike traditional arts such as painting or sculpture, which have long been revered for their expressive and interpretative capabilities, photogra-

phy was initially perceived as a mere mechanical reproduction of reality. This perception has persisted, leading to divergent views among philosophers and art critics regarding its artistic value.

Roger Scruton, a prominent figure in contemporary philosophy, has been a vocal critic of categorizing photography as an art form. He argues that photography's inherent nature as a mechanical process, devoid of intentional artistic input, disqualifies it from being considered alongside traditional art forms. According to Scruton, "photographs are not representations but surrogates for the things they depict" [Scruton, 1990/1998: 174], suggesting that photography merely captures what exists without expressing any interpretative vision. For Scruton, the absence of intentional transformation in photography prevents it from being considered art. As he further notes: "The photograph shows what was there, but does not express what was intended" [Scruton, 1990/1998: 176].

He contrasts photography with painting, emphasizing that the latter involves a creative transformation of reality through the artist's interpretative vision. In my opinion, this perspective overlooks the unique ways in which photography can engage with reality and still produce an artistic experience. As Scruton puts it: "The ideal painting stands in a certain intentional relation to a subject... while the photographic relation is merely causal" [Scruton, 1997: 579]. This distinction, according to Scruton, underlies the fundamental difference between photography and other forms of art.

Scruton's perspective has been critiqued by philosophers such as Dawn Phillips and David Davies, who argue that he underestimates the role of causality, intentionality, and creative input in photography. Phillips, in particular, challenges Scruton's position by arguing that he "misconstrued the role of causation in his discussion of photography, especially when dismissing the photographer's creative input" [Phillips, 2009: 328].

Historical and Philosophical Context

To fully grasp Scruton's arguments, it is essential to understand the historical and philosophical background of photography and art. Art, according to various definitions, can be understood either as a skillful practice or as a domain of culture involving the creation of aesthetic objects. The origins of photographic representation can be traced back to early experiments with light and shadow, culminating in the invention of the camera in the 19th century. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle laid the groundwork for discussions on mimesis and representation, which continue to influence contemporary debates on photography and art. As Plato famously stated: "Art is imitation, and that's the right sort of

mimesis" [Plato, 1941: 71], while Aristotle provided a more detailed analysis, suggesting that "Art not only imitates nature but also completes its deficiencies" [Aristotle, 1902: 24].

The historical context of photography is crucial for understanding its development and its impact on visual culture. Early photographers like Nicéphore Niépce and Louis Daguerre pioneered techniques that allowed for the capture of images through chemical processes. These early experiments laid the foundation for the development of photography as a medium. As Duganne et al. point out: "The invention of the camera was not just a technological breakthrough; it was a cultural event that redefined how people viewed the world and themselves" [Duganne et al., 2020: 15]. The Pictorialist movement, led by figures such as Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen, sought to elevate photography to the status of fine art by emphasizing its expressive capabilities. These photographers employed techniques like soft focus and manipulated printing processes to create images that resembled paintings, thereby challenging the notion that photography was purely mechanical [Duganne et al., 2020: 89].

Philosophically, the concept of mimesis, or imitation, has been central to discussions about art and representation. Plato's skepticism about the value of mimetic art, as expressed in his work *The Republic*, contrasts with Aristotle's more appreciative view in *Poetics*, where he argues that art can provide valuable insights into the human experience. These foundational debates set the stage for contemporary discussions about the nature and value of photographic representation. The 20th century saw further philosophical developments that influenced the perception of photography. The rise of phenomenology, with philosophers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, emphasized the embodied experience of perceiving art, including photography. Merleau-Ponty's exploration of perception and the body's role in experiencing the world provided a framework for understanding how photographs can evoke aesthetic and emotional responses. His assertion that "The perception of the photograph is an embodied experience" [Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 240] highlights the interactive and interpretative nature of viewing photographs.

Scruton's Critique of Photography

Roger Scruton asserts that photography is fundamentally tied to the objects it depicts, unlike painting, which involves a creative interpretation by the artist. According to Scruton, photographs are transparent representations that do not carry the intentional artistic input characteristic of traditional art forms. He argues that "the mechanical nature of photography precludes it

from being considered an art form in the same way as painting or theatre” [Scruton, 1997: 580]. However, this viewpoint overlooks the nuanced ways in which photographers engage with their subjects and exercise creative control over their images. Scruton’s critique of photography must also be placed within this broader philosophical framework, where notions of representation and intentionality have long been debated. In *The Photographic Surrogate* [Scruton, 1990/1998], Scruton asserts that photography lacks the depth of intentionality found in painting or sculpture. However, critics like David Davies argue that “Scruton’s scepticism about photography’s capacity as an art form is rooted in his misunderstanding of what it means for an image to represent something intentionally” [Davies, 2009: 343].

Scruton’s definition of art involves the creation of aesthetic objects that engage the viewer’s judgment. He contends that for an object to be considered art, it must be intentionally crafted to provoke an aesthetic experience. Photography, in his view, fails to meet this criterion because it merely captures reality without the same level of intentionality [Scruton, 1997: 581]. For example, Scruton differentiates between a painted portrait and a photographic portrait. In the former, the artist’s brushstrokes, color choices, and compositional decisions all reflect a deliberate attempt to convey not just the appearance but also the essence of the subject. In contrast, Scruton argues that a photographic portrait simply reproduces the subject’s appearance without such layers of meaning and interpretation [Scruton, 1997: 582].

Rubinstein, in *Fragmentation of the Photographic Image in the Digital Age*, challenges Scruton’s view by arguing that “the digital photograph, far from being a mere mechanical reproduction, is a dynamic object, subject to endless reinterpretation and manipulation” [Rubinstein, 2015: 67]. This perspective highlights the creative potential of digital photography, where the photographer’s intention plays a crucial role in the final image.

Scruton contrasts photography with painting, emphasizing that paintings are the result of an artist’s interpretative vision, whereas photographs are direct reproductions of the world. He argues that this distinction disqualifies photography from being an art form, as it lacks the creative transformation found in painting. In illustrating his point, Scruton often refers to the work of classic painters like Rembrandt and Vermeer, whose paintings are celebrated for their expressive use of light, shadow, and composition. These elements are not merely technical aspects but integral parts of the artist’s creative vision. For instance, Rembrandt’s use of chiaroscuro – the dramatic contrast between light and dark – imbues his

portraits with a sense of depth and emotional intensity that goes beyond mere representation [Scruton, 1997: 584]. Even when photographers attempt to introduce artistic elements into their work, such as through staging or post-processing, Scruton argues that these efforts remain fundamentally different from the inherent creativity of painting. He suggests that any artistic value in a photograph derives from factors external to the photographic process itself, such as the subject matter or the context in which the photograph is viewed [Scruton, 1997: 585]. This perspective fails to recognize the subtle ways in which photographers manipulate these elements to create artistic works.

While Scruton dismisses photography as an art form, he holds cinema in higher regard. In *Beauty*, Scruton notes that cinema can achieve aesthetic beauty through the interplay of visual composition, narrative, and time. He argues that “Cinema can achieve beauty in ways that photography cannot, because it combines time, movement, and narrative in a manner that engages the emotions” [Scruton, 2009: 103]. This stands in stark contrast to his views on photography, which he sees as limited by its static nature. Comparing Scruton’s perspective on photography and cinema, it becomes evident that his critique of photography rests on a limited understanding of its potential for emotional and intellectual engagement.

The Artistic Potential of Photography

Despite Scruton’s arguments, many photographers and philosophers assert that photography is indeed a form of art. Photography’s artistic potential can be seen through its intentionality, creativity, and viewer interaction. Intentionality plays a crucial role in defining photography as an art form. Photographers make deliberate choices in framing, composition, and timing, which reflect their creative vision. For example, Ansel Adams’ iconic landscape photographs of Yosemite National Park are renowned for their meticulous composition and dramatic use of light. Adams’ intention to capture the majesty and grandeur of the natural world is evident in every aspect of his work. Adams himself emphasized the importance of visualization in photography: “You don’t take a photograph, you make it” [Auer & Auer, 1985: 2]. This underscores the artistic process involved in capturing the perfect moment, as Adams meticulously planned and visualized his photographs before even setting up his camera.

Similarly, street photographers like Henri Cartier-Bresson demonstrate the intentionality behind capturing “decisive moments”. Cartier-Bresson’s photograph “Behind the Gare Saint-Lazare” is a prime example of this approach, where the perfect alignment of the

elements within the frame creates a visually striking and thought-provoking image. Cartier-Bresson's ability to anticipate and capture such moments underscores the creative and intentional nature of his photographic practice. As Cartier-Bresson famously stated, "To photograph is to hold one's breath, when all faculties converge to capture fleeting reality. It's at that precise moment that mastering an image becomes a great physical and intellectual joy" [Durden, 2013: 42]. This quote emphasizes the blend of physical skill and intellectual foresight involved in capturing decisive moments in photography.

Scruton's critique also fails to account for the viewer's role in interpreting and deriving meaning from photographs. Photographs can engage viewers in deep aesthetic and emotional ways similar to traditional art forms. Barthes' concept of the punctum in *Camera Lucida* provides a useful framework for understanding the viewer's interaction with photographs. Barthes describes the punctum as "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" [Barthes, 1981: 27]. The punctum is an element within a photograph that "pierces" the viewer, evoking a personal and emotional response. This idea highlights the capacity of photographs to engage viewers on a profound level, challenging the notion that photography lacks the ability to provoke aesthetic experiences.

In the digital age, the fragmentation of the photographic image has led to new philosophical debates. Rubinstein discusses how the nature of photography has been transformed by digital technology, which "destabilizes the notion of a photograph as a fixed and stable representation of reality" [Rubinstein, 2015: 55]. This view challenges Scruton's assertion that photography is merely a mechanical process, suggesting instead that the digital manipulation of images introduces a new layer of intentionality and creativity. As Rubinstein notes, "In the digital era, the photograph is no longer a singular object but a flow of data that can be continuously altered, reinterpreted, and remade" [Ibid.: 63]. This perspective aligns with the idea that photography, especially in its digital form, can be as creative and interpretative as any traditional art form.

Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives

Contemporary philosophers and art theorists, including Stanley Cavell and Kendall Walton, provide counterarguments to Scruton's views. Cavell, for example, emphasizes the role of the photographer's intention and the viewer's experience in constituting photographic art. Walton introduces the concept of "transparency" in photography, suggesting that the medium's ability to present reality does not diminish its

artistic potential but rather enhances its unique form of representation.

Stanley Cavell argues that photography, like other art forms, involves the artist's intention and the audience's interpretation. Cavell's philosophy challenges Scruton's views by emphasizing the creative choices and intentions of the photographer. He states: "Photography overcame subjectivity in a way undreamed of by painting, a way that could not satisfy painting, one which does not so much defeat the act of painting as escape it altogether: by automatism, by removing the human agent from the task of reproduction" [Cavell, 1979: 24]. Cavell's concept of automatism, where the photographic process captures reality automatically, does not preclude artistic input. He argues that the photographer's intention is evident in the selection of subject matter, framing, and moment of capture [Ibid.: 103]. This intentionality is crucial in constituting the photograph as an art object. For example, the work of photographer Diane Arbus, known for her portraits of marginalized individuals, reflects a deliberate and thoughtful engagement with her subjects. Arbus' intention to highlight the humanity and individuality of her subjects is evident in her photographs, underscoring the artistic potential of the medium.

Walton's concept of transparency posits that photographs, by presenting a transparent view of reality, offer a unique artistic experience. Walton argues that the medium's transparency enhances its ability to convey the photographer's vision, allowing viewers to see the world through the photographer's eyes. "A photograph is transparent; we see the world through it" [Walton, 1984: 22]. Walton's theory challenges the idea that the mechanical nature of photography diminishes its artistic value. He contends that the transparency of photographs, which allows viewers to perceive the world indirectly through the image, adds to their aesthetic richness. For instance, the photographs of Sebastião Salgado, who documents social and environmental issues, provide viewers with a powerful and intimate view of distant realities. Salgado's work demonstrates how the transparency of photography can be harnessed to create deeply moving and impactful art.

Dawn Phillips directly challenges Scruton's assertion that photography is merely a causal process devoid of creativity. She argues that Scruton "disregards the extent to which intentionality features in photography" [Phillips, 2009: 327]. By focusing solely on the mechanical nature of the medium, Scruton overlooks the photographer's role in framing, composing, and manipulating the elements of a scene to convey artistic meaning. According to Phillips, photography is not simply about capturing reality but about how that reality is presented through the photographer's vision.

Similarly, David Davies critiques Scruton's notion of photography as inscrutable, arguing that "the inscrutability of photographs is not a product of their causal origin, but rather of Scruton's narrow interpretation of what art should be" [Davies, 2009: 346]. Davies emphasizes that photography, like other art forms, involves a relationship between the creator's intentions and the viewer's interpretation, thus allowing for an aesthetic experience that transcends mere replication.

Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, as presented in *Simulacra and Simulation*, explores how the line between reality and representation becomes blurred in contemporary society. Baudrillard argues that in the age of hyperreality, images and simulations no longer represent reality but create their own reality. This idea challenges traditional notions of art and representation, suggesting that photography's ability to replicate and manipulate reality can be an artistic strength rather than a limitation. As Baudrillard notes, "the simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true" [Baudrillard 1994: 1]. This reflects a critical shift in understanding images and representations, where the boundary between the real and the simulated becomes indistinguishable, resulting in what Baudrillard terms "hyperreality" [Ibid: 2].

The rise of digital photography and new media further complicates the debate. Digital manipulation tools allow photographers to alter and enhance images in ways that challenge the boundaries between photography and other art forms. For example, the work of contemporary artist Cindy Sherman, who uses digital techniques to create elaborate self-portraits, demonstrates the artistic possibilities enabled by digital technology. As Audry discusses in *Art in the Age of Machine Learning*, the intersection of photography and artificial intelligence introduces entirely new modes of creation, where "the boundaries between the artist, the tool, and the audience become increasingly porous" [Audry, 2021: 125]. This reflects a significant shift in how we understand the role of the artist in the digital age.

As Miller notes in *Contemporary Photography and Theory: Concepts and Debates*, "The interaction between technology and photography has led to new forms of artistic expression that challenge the traditional boundaries of art" [Miller, 2019: 83]. This interaction is evident in the way digital photography, coupled with advanced editing software, allows artists to create images that blend reality and fiction, thereby expanding the creative potential of the medium.

Conclusion: Broader Implications for Art Theory

The debate over the artistic status of photography has broader implications for art theory. The evolution of artistic definitions, the impact of technology on art forms, and the emergence of new media all influence contemporary understandings of art. Artistic definitions have evolved over time, reflecting changes in cultural and technological contexts. The inclusion of photography in the realm of fine arts signifies a broader acceptance of diverse artistic expressions. The rise of conceptual art, where the idea behind the work takes precedence over traditional aesthetic criteria, parallels the growing recognition of photography's artistic value. Artists like Marcel Duchamp, with his readymades, challenged conventional definitions of art and opened the door for non-traditional mediums to be considered art. Similarly, the acceptance of photography as an art form reflects an expanded understanding of what constitutes artistic creativity and expression.

Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* provides a critical lens for understanding the broader implications of Scruton's views in the context of technological advancements. Benjamin argues that with the rise of mechanical reproduction, the "aura" of art – the unique presence and authenticity of the work – begins to wither. "That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art" [Benjamin, 2008: 23]. This concept is particularly relevant to photography and digital art, where endless replication challenges the notion of originality.

As digital technologies and artificial intelligence advance, the line between art and mechanical reproduction becomes even more blurred. AI-generated images, for example, call into question traditional notions of authorship and creativity. In Benjamin's terms, the "aura" of the artwork is further eroded in the digital age, raising new questions about the role of the human artist in the creation of art. "The aura of the work of art decays in the age of its technological reproducibility" [Ibid.: 22].

The impact of technology on art forms is a critical factor in contemporary art theory. Innovations such as digital manipulation, high-resolution imaging, and instant sharing platforms like Instagram have transformed how photography is created, viewed, and disseminated. These technological advancements have democratized the medium, allowing a wider range of individuals to engage in photographic art. The rise of smartphone photography, for instance, has enabled millions of people to experiment with artistic expression through their cameras, further blurring the lines between professional and amateur art [Auer & Auer, 1985: 654]. The emergence of new media, including digital art, video art, and inter-

active installations, has expanded the boundaries of what is considered art. Contemporary artists often incorporate photography into multimedia installations, creating immersive experiences that engage multiple senses. The work of artist Bill Viola, known for his video installations, exemplifies this trend. Viola's installations often include photographic elements that interact with video and sound, creating a holistic artistic experience that transcends traditional media boundaries [Ibid.: 574].

ЖИТЕПАТЯ/REFERENCES

- Aristotle. (1902). *Poetics* (S. H. Butcher, Trans.). New York: Macmillan and Co.
- Audry, S. (2021). *Art in the Age of Machine learning*. Cambridge: MIT Press. URL: <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12832.001.0001>
- Auer, M., & Auer, M. (1985). *A History of Photography: From 1839 to the present*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Barthes, R. (1981). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (R. Howard, Trans.). New York: Hill and Wang.
- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation* (S. F. Glaser, Trans.). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. URL: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9904>
- Benjamin, W. (2008). *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Cavell, S. (1979). *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Enlarged ed.). Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Davies, D. (2009). *Scruton on the Inscrutability of Photographs*. *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 49 (4), 341–355.
- Duganne, E., Diack, H., & Weissman, T. (2020). *Global Photography: A Critical History*. New York and London: Routledge. URL: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003085485>
- Durden, M. (2013). *Fifty Key Writers on Photography*. New York and London: Routledge. URL: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203074954>
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of Perception* (C. Smith, Trans.). New York and London: Routledge.
- Miller, S. (2019). *Contemporary Photography and Theory: Concepts and Debates*. New York and London: Routledge. URL: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003085072>
- Phillips, D. M. (2009). *Photography and Causation: Responding to Scruton's Scepticism*. *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 49 (4), 327–340. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayp036>
- Plato. (1941). *The Republic* (B. Jowett, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rubinstein, D. (2013). How Photography Changed Philosophy. *Photographies*, 6 (2), 123–140.
- Rubinstein, D. (2015). Fragmentation of the Photographic Image in the Digital Age. *Photographies*, 8 (2), 67–80.
- Scruton, R. (1997). Photography and representation. In *The aesthetic understanding: Essays in the philosophy of art and culture*, 572–588. Carcanet Press.
- Scruton, R. (1990/1998). *The Photographic Surrogate*. In *Philosopher on Dover Beach*, 173–178. South Bend: St. Augustine Press.
- Scruton, R. (2009). *Beauty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199229758.001.0001>
- Walton, K. L. (1984). *Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism*. In *Critical Inquiry*, 11 (2), 246–277. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.