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Photograph of Old Faithful Geyser Erupting in Yellowstone National Park from Ansel Adams Photographs of National Parks and Monuments, compiled 1941 - 1942, documenting the period ca. 1933 – 1942 (image courtesy of Department of the Interior. National Park Service. Branch of Still and Motion Pictures)

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Contents

WILSON'S MULTI-STAGE ACCOUNT AND THE DILEMMA OF VIDEOGAME PHOTOGRAPHY

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Through her revision of Ansel Adams's analogy between classical music and fine-art photography, Dawn M. Wilson arrives at a compelling idea: we can identify photographs by asking if an image contains a 'photographic event' in its causal history. This test provides a basis to accommodate a broader range of photographic practices than previous philosophical accounts of photography have allowed. In her discussion of Adams's analogy, however, Wilson also makes it clear that accommodating first-order practice does not mean accepting every claim made by photographers as true. In this paper, I will argue that these competing tendencies are indicative of a tension in the 'multi-stage' account of photography that informs much of Wilson's work, including the test she derives from her revision of Adams's analogy. This tension, I will argue, is foregrounded by 'videogame photography': static images produced using videogames that have recently enjoyed increased popularity among photographers and photography institutions. Despite its increasing presence in the photographic art world, it is unclear whether videogame photography can be viewed as photography proper using Wilson's test, without substantially diluting the theoretical commitments of the multi-stage account. I will conclude, therefore, that videogame photography presents a dilemma for the account: it either compromises its theoretical rigour to accommodate videogame photography, or it rejects this artform, thereby compromising its ability to accommodate first-order practice.

1 Introduction

In her paper for this issue of *Debates in Aesthetics*, Dawn M. Wilson (2024) analyses and revises an analogy between photography and classical music proposed by photographer Ansel Adams. Perhaps the most compelling feature of Adams's analogy, strengthened and foregrounded by Wilson's revisions, is its open conception of the photographic medium. This is embodied by a claim Wilson makes towards the end of her paper: that we should move towards using the presence of a 'photographic event' in an image's causal history as the defining trait of photography. This claim potentially provides a basis for accommodating a broader range of photographic practices than previous philosophical accounts of photography have allowed. Simultaneously, however, Wilson makes clear that accommodating first-order practice does not mean that we should accept every claim made by photographers as true.

There is, therefore, potential for a tension to arise between two elements of Wilson's work: the desire to provide a philosophical account of photography that accommodates the varying practices of photographers themselves, and the need to maintain the philosophical rigour of that account by rejecting at least some claims made by photographers. I will argue that this tension is highlighted by 'videogame photography' which, for now, I will think of as static images created using videogame characters and environments that have recently enjoyed an increased presence in photographic exhibitions and art theory surrounding photography.[1] Despite videogame photography's rise in the photographic art world, I will argue that it is unclear whether Wilson's account can accommodate it without a substantial dilution of the account's theoretical commitments. Videogame photography, therefore, poses a dilemma for Wilson's account: it compromises either its theoretical rigour to

1 There is debate around what terms such as 'videogame photography' describe. The definition offered here should therefore be taken as a working one until I discuss these debates in section 3, at which point the exact definition of what I take videogame photography to describe will be clarified.

accept videogame photography or its ability to accommodate first-order practice by rejecting videogame photography. I conclude by suggesting that accepting either horn of this dilemma is unsatisfactory, and that future work inspired by the new theory needs to seek a more satisfactory way out of the dilemma.

I will begin by outlining Wilson's take on Adams's analogy, aiming to demonstrate how the tension outlined above arises in her work. Next, I will discuss some of the existing literature on videogame photography in order to situate the practices surrounding this artform and to highlight that no existing account provides a firm basis on which videogame imagery should be considered a form of photography. Finally, I will argue that, although it might seem that Wilson's account *could* provide a basis for viewing videogame photography as photography proper, it can only do so by compromising its theoretical commitments. However, rejecting videogame photography on this basis puts the account at odds with first-order practice, leading to the dilemma outlined above.

2 Adams's Analogy and the Multi-stage Account of Photography

Like many modernist photographers, Adams was a proponent of 'visualization'. According to his contemporary, Edward Weston, visualization is the idea that in the mind's eye "*the finished print must be created in full before the film is exposed*" (Weston 1980, 172, original emphasis) so that procedures can be implemented to ensure the printed image reflects the visualized image.

Wilson argues that visualization manifests itself in Adams's photographic theory through an analogy with classical music, wherein "the negative is the score, and prints are performances" (Wilson 2024, 20). Here, the photographer is akin to a composer crafting a negative reflecting their visualized image, which is then interpreted in prints, which constitute performances of the negative 'score'. On Adams's analogy, therefore, the materialisation of a visualized image within a negative and making prints from that negative are distinct creative achieve-

ments.

Wilson argues that Adams's analogy, by viewing the creation of a print as a separate task from the creation of a negative, "leads to the idea that, like performances, different prints can vary in their appreciable qualities" (2024, 21), meaning different prints can reinterpret the original visualization. Furthermore, Wilson argues that reinterpretation is not limited to the original photographer as "performances of the photographer's 'score' may include reinterpretations created by different artists" (2024, 22). As each print uniquely interprets the negative, there is nothing to stop different photographers from reinterpreting each other's negatives in their own prints, much as different musicians can reinterpret each other's scores.

Adams's view is, therefore, capable of accommodating multiple reinterpretations of photographic negatives by different artists. To gain full benefit from the open nature of Adams's analogy, however, Wilson argues that it requires revision. She contends that Adams holds what she calls a 'single-stage' view of photography, detracting from the accuracy of his analogy. The single-stage account of photography is opposed to what Wilson calls the 'multi-stage' account.[2]

The difference between these accounts concerns at which point an image comes into existence in the process of creating a photograph. As Wilson states in her paper 'Invisible Images and Indeterminacy':

> A single-stage account supposes that during exposure a photograph comes into existence. A multi-stage account supposes that, subsequent to the exposure stage, a further processing stage is necessary before a photograph exists. (Wilson 2021, 162)

2 In the literature influenced by single and multi-stage accounts, including the book-length studies by Diarmuid Costello (2018) and Dominic Lopes (2016), these accounts are sometimes referred to as the 'orthodox' and 'new' theories of photography. To maintain consistency with Wilson's article, here I will use her original terminology.

Stressing the necessity of further processes, such as chemical or digital processing, is central to the multi-stage account. The single-stage account does not reject these processes, but posits that they only reveal an invisible or 'latent' image that is created during the exposure—sometimes called the photographic event in Wilson's work (Phillips 2009, 337-338; Wilson 2021, 163). The multi-stage account, by contrast, argues that no image, latent or otherwise, exists after the photographic event. What is created at this point is what Wilson calls a 'register', chemically or digitally recorded information about the photographed scene (Wilson 2021, 163). The register has no visual qualities itself but can be used to create an image via subsequent processing.

In Adams's analogy, he posits that the negative takes the role of a score and prints made from that negative take the role of performances. This, for Wilson, betrays his belief in a single-stage view of photography. The idea of the negative as a score which is interpreted in the 'performances' of prints implies that no interpretative work is done to bring about the negative itself. This makes the undeveloped negative, at least conceptually, equivalent to a latent image recorded during the photographic event, which is merely revealed by subsequent development (Wilson 2024, 35-36).

However, as the multi-stage account argues, there is no image created at this point, only a register. As further processing is necessary to create an image from this register, even a negative one, Wilson argues that it is more accurate to view the register as analogous to a score:

> Therefore, the written score finds its proper analogy in the exposed but undeveloped plate or film. This does not mean that the written score is analogous to a latent image. Instead it is analogous to what I call the photographic 'register' in my multi-stage account of photography. (2024, 38)

One of the benefits of seeing the register, rather than the negative, as

equivalent to the score is that it allows Adams's analogy—which in its original version is only applicable to the negative-positive process—to be applied to photography which does not utilize negatives, including digital photography. In general, digital photography involves the creation of a RAW file—essentially a digital photographic register—which can then be processed into one or multiple images. Wilson argues that, on her revised analogy:

> A digital RAW file is a score that can be performed unlimited times and has the potential for expressive re-interpretations while still retaining all the original unprocessed data. Photo-electrical photography [therefore] fulfils Adams's analogy far better than photo-chemical photography. (2024, 39)

Adams's analogy, then, despite the alleged inaccuracies of its original formulation, is at its core well suited to account for new and emerging forms of photography. This openness regarding the photographic medium is expressed in a statement Wilson makes towards the end of her paper with regard to what images count as photographs:

> Rather than looking for an answer to the narrow question 'Is x a photograph?', perhaps we need an answer to a different kind of question: Is this a rendering from a photographic register? The result would produce two very broad categories: items with and without a photographic event in their causal history. (2024, 40)

I find this idea compelling, as it takes the expansive spirit of Adams's analogy and utilizes the multi-stage account to apply it broadly, creating a more accepting conception of what counts as photographic than that which has been held by philosophers employing the single-stage view. For example, Roger Scruton, a prominent advocate of the single-stage view, argues that:

> In characterizing the relation between the ideal photograph and its subject, one is characterizing not an intention but a causal process. (Scruton 1981, 579)

As the relationship between an ideal photograph and its subject are purely causal for Scruton, any kind of intentional handiwork performed after the registration of light during the photographic event cannot be seen as truly photographic. Clearly, this view excludes a vast body of photography where such practices are regularly employed. Wilson's view, by contrast, has no problem accommodating this kind of photography, as her view only requires that an image has a photographic event in its causal history to be considered photographic.

An advantage of Wilson's view over single-stage views like Scruton's, therefore, is that it provides a basis for accommodating a variety of photographic practices. However, Wilson also emphasizes that her position does not accept every claim made by photographers as true, a point she makes explicitly in her paper (Wilson 2024, 19) and is demonstrated by the fact that she views it as necessary to revise Adams's analogy because of his views on photographic aetiology. There is potential, then, for a tension to arise in Wilson's account when a claim is made by photographic practice that does not fit the account's conception of photography. This tension is between the desire to accommodate a range of photographic practices, and the desire to maintain the theoretical principles of the multi-stage account. This is foregrounded, I would argue, by an increasingly popular emerging artform: videogame photography.

3 Situating Videogame Photography

Static images of videogame characters and environments have long been shared among online communities. Recently, however, such images have found a place in the traditional art world, with prominent photography galleries featuring these images in exhibitions. For example, the exhibition *How to Win at Photography*, displayed at both

Fotomuseum Winterthur in 2021 and *The Photographer's Gallery* in 2022, prominently featured videogame images. Furthermore, several artists who produce such images refer to them explicitly as photography. For example, Justin Berry refers to his videogame images as "photographs taken from within video games" (Berry 2018) and Leo Sang describes his practice as using "video games as platforms for everyday photography" (Sang, n.d.). This introduction of videogame imagery into the established art world, specifically the *photographic* art world, has coincided with theoretical discussion of videogame imagery as a form of photography.

Videogame photography is a difficult concept to define due to the varying practices the term could describe, some of which do not involve image-making at all. For example, Cindy Poremba identifies two ways in which videogames and photography combine. The first of these is as a documentary practice in which players create images of videogame worlds "to commemorate their travels, obtain a visual record of enjoyable experiences, and show evidence of their experiences to friends and family" (Poremba 2007, 50). The second of these is as a ludic tool within some games, wherein photography, being for her "an inherently game-like practice" (Ibid., 53), is simulated at varying levels of complexity as a gameplay mechanic, but not necessarily as a means of producing images accessible outside the videogame.

Since Wilson's multi-stage account is concerned with photography as a process of image-making, I wish to focus on this form of videogame photography rather than games that simulate photography. However, this in itself is a broad category that requires further investigation.

One way to think of videogame photography as a process of image-making is simply as a subtype of what Winfried Gerling calls 'screen images': images of what is displayed on a screen, such as a TV, computer, or projector screen, produced using a real-world camera (Gerling 2018, 150). Certainly, some artistic videogame images do fit the description

of a screen image. Joan Pamboukes' series *Videogame Color Fields*, for example, is produced using a DSLR to photograph a screen outputting videogame graphics. I do not wish to focus too much on screen images here, however. They are generally conventionally produced photographs and easily accommodated by the multi-stage account.

What is more interesting to consider is videogame photography wherein software on the system running the game is used to create the image, rather than an external camera. As Sebastian Möring and Marco de Mutiis (2019) point out, images of this variety are generally produced using one of three methods, each of which progressively abstracts from restrictions imposed by the rules of the videogame in order to give the artist more creative freedom.[3]

The first of these methods utilizes 'photo modes'. A photo mode is a software tool built-in to certain videogames that allows players to "freeze the flow of the action and to effectively step out of the game in order to focus on the isolated act of photographing landscapes or character portraits" (Ibid., 78). An example of a photo mode comes from the game *Super Mario Odyssey* (2017). In the usual flow of gameplay, the player explores a 3D environment collecting resources in order to progress, a goal which is resisted by enemies that attempt to harm the player character. Using the photo mode, the player can freeze the flow of gameplay and create images of the frozen environment without the risk of losing the game.

Although photo modes afford greater creative freedom for image-making than that which is conventionally found in videogames, Möring and de Mutiis argue that even within these modes the restrictions imposed by the game's mechanics "still influences the scene (and scenery) which the player may photograph" (2019, 82), as the player can only access

3 Like Poremba, Möring and de Mutiis also discuss videogame photography as simulations of photography within videogames. Here, however, I focus exclusively on their discussion of videogame photography as image-making.

areas to use the photo mode if they have the skill to clear and reach the game's challenges. Furthermore, the creative choices the player can make while in the photo mode are largely dictated by the game, as it is the tools within the photo mode that the player uses to create their images. Perhaps because of these limitations, artists producing imagery from videogames often utilize a method even more abstracted from the source game: screenshotting. Within Möring and de Mutiis's work, 'screenshotting' describes the practice of creating a static image of a videogame scene using means external to the videogame itself, such as a camera pointed at the screen as in Gerling's screen-images, or via software on the system which is running the videogame but is not internal to the game itself (Ibid., 83). As I have already argued that images taken using an external camera are uninteresting for my current argument, I will take screenshots to exclusively mean images created using software internal to the system running the videogame, despite Möring and de Mutiis's inclusion of screen-images in this category. Screenshotting, on my account, is therefore a software process which is "(largely) independent from the source game" (Ibid.), as the means by which the image is produced exists independently from the game software, giving the player greater artistic control over the images she produces.

Möring and de Mutiis's final method of videogame photography combines screenshotting with modifying the game software itself by altering "core game parameters, intervening directly at a level of code manipulation" (Ibid., 84). By modifying the code of the game, artists can change the game's core mechanics so that they are more conducive to creative ends. For example, one could modify a game to remove restrictions on accessing certain areas within the game, making it possible for the artist to capture these areas. This practice of modifying games to make them more conducive to screenshotting, therefore, represents a complete subversion of the mechanics of the game to the creative aims of the player. Within this category, the player themselves dictates these mechanics in order to achieve their artistic ends.

4 The Multi-stage Account and Videogame Photography

The typology of methods presented by Möring and de Mutiis helps us identify the variety of image-making practices within videogame photography. However, I would argue that identifying cases of an image-making practice that utilizes videogames is all their approach can do. The key question left open is whether these practices are accurately described by the term *photography.* Following Wilson, one way to answer this question is by asking if the practices described by Möring and de Mutiis have a photographic event in their causal history. To see if this is the case, it is necessary to outline the process that underpins these methods.

All three of the methods described in the previous section involve using software, either internal or external to the source videogame, to create an image. To do so, graphical information stored temporarily in the computer system's video memory (known as VRAM), which is usually output directly to the screen connected to the system, is also recorded on the system's permanent storage. This graphical information is then processed so the system reads it as an image file.

It could be proposed that there are similarities here to Wilson's multi-stage account of the photographic process. Both the scene before a camera and the graphical information generated by a computer system are fleeting. To be preserved, a kind of recording stage is necessary, either in the form of a photographic event or a screenshot command. Neither of these records are appreciable images in and of themselves: extra processing is required for the information to be visually accessible.

On the basis that the screenshot command records information to be processed as a visual image, it could be argued that the issuing of a screenshot command bears a similarity to the photographic event. By extension, following Wilson's claim that categorizations of photographic images should focus on the question of whether X image has a photographic event in its causal history, it could be argued that screen-

shots, including videogame photography, do constitute a category of photography.

The problem with this argument, however, is that it suggests that a photographic event could occur without the action of light. This contradicts Wilson's own formulation of the photographic event, wherein the action of light in producing the register is consistently emphasized (Phillips 2009, 338; Wilson 2021, 163). Light is also emphasized in Paloma Atencia-Linares's account of 'photographic means', wherein the action of light is not only necessary to guarantee the photographic nature of the register, but also any subsequent processes of development in the darkroom (Atencia-Linares 2012, 21-22). Furthermore, image formation through the action of light has generally been seen as fundamental to the medium, and it was central to the thought of the pioneers of photographic technology (Daguerre 1980, 12; Niepce 1980, 5; Talbot 1980, 29).

The fact that removing light as an essential element of the photographic event contradicts preceding accounts is not on its own a convincing argument against doing so. However, I would suggest that a more convincing argument is that rejecting the necessity of the action of light broadens the idea of the photographic event beyond the point of being useful for identifying photographic images. Creating a spectrogram—an image that visually represents the frequencies in a piece of audio—involves a sonic recording followed by visual rendering from that recording. Would spectrograms, therefore, also be photographic? Doing so, I would argue, broadens 'photography' to the point of becoming a meaningless category.

It seems, then, that we need to retain light as an essential part of the photographic event if the term 'photography' is to retain its utility as a category. By extension, videogame photography would be inadmissible as a proper form of photography on Wilson's multi-stage account. However, this conclusion also presents a problem for the multi-stage

account.

As I argued in section 1, one of the benefits of the multi-stage account is that it provides a philosophical basis for accepting works as photographic that philosophers advocating the single-stage approach had rejected as such, even while theorists and practitioners of photography had readily accepted them. The problem that videogame photography presents to the multi-stage account, therefore, is that it seems to challenge the harmony the account has enjoyed with photographic practice. The multi-stage account as it exists cannot comfortably accommodate videogame photography, but in rejecting it, the account also rejects the claim made by a growing number of artists and institutions that videogame photography *just is* photography.

One response to this might be to argue that the institutions and artists who categorize videogame photography as photography proper are simply wrong to do so. Without an argument for what is gained when one categorizes these images as photography, there is not enough force behind the claim that videogame photography just is photography for the new theorist to view it as a serious challenge.

However, reasons *are* often offered for why this categorization is beneficial. Returning to Justin Berry's work, he says this about comparisons between his traditional and videogame photographs:

> Both the virtual photos and the physical one were taken while on a journey, both were captured in stages, combining dozens, or hundreds, of images for each picture. (Berry 2018)

For Berry, what defines his photography in both the real and virtual space is a particular process involving the gathering and combining of several images to create a complete work. For him, whether or not this involves a causal registration of light is irrelevant. Thus, categorizing videogame photography as photography proper is useful for Berry, as it

highlights what he sees as crucial to photographic practice outside of a causal registration of light.

Another suggestive aspect of Berry's work is that he often displays his videogame images alongside his traditional photographs, with no clear indication of which images are real and which are virtual. Displaying his work this way, with no evident dividing line between the real and the virtual, is a clear challenge to the audience to consider all the images on an equal footing, regardless of whether they are created by real or simulated light. The suggestion here is akin to a microcosm of a claim philosopher David Chalmers has put forward in a recent book: as simulations of real-world phenomena become increasingly sophisticated, the case for seeing the virtual as different in kind from the real becomes increasingly weak (Chalmers 2022). Berry's method of displaying his work takes this claim and applies it specifically to the distinction between the real and the virtual in photography. This, then, is a further way in which the categorization of videogame photography as photography proper is meant to be useful: as a theoretical challenge to a sharp distinction between the real and the virtual within photography.

One could disagree with any of these claims, and my aim is not to endorse them here. My purpose instead has been to demonstrate that, since proponents of videogame photography can provide reasons for the usefulness of its categorization as photography proper, the challenge remains for the multi-stage account to take seriously the idea that this new medium may be truly photographic.

Therefore, the dilemma videogame photography presents for the multi-stage account still stands. On the one hand, the account can maintain its theoretical rigor by rejecting videogame photography as true photography, on the basis that it does not involve recording via the action of light. However, this puts the multi-stage account at odds with first-order practice, a position the account had previously been able to avoid. On the other hand, abandoning the importance of light to the photographic

event compromises the multi-stage account's theoretical rigour and makes the account too permissive.

5 Conclusion

Wilson's multi-stage account has proven to be influential within philosophical writing on photography, and the paper she has presented here is demonstrative of why. By locating the defining feature of photography in the photographic event, rather than in strict notions of causality, as single-stage views like Scruton's suggest, Wilson's view is able to provide a theoretically principled way for philosophy to accommodate the claims of practicing photographers.

However, as I have argued, this strength of the multi-stage account faces a challenge from emerging artforms, such as videogame photography, that are increasingly accepted by the photographic art world, but do not seem to be easily accommodated by the theoretical commitments of the multi-stage account. Such artforms present a dilemma for the multi-stage account: it either compromises its theoretical rigour or it compromises its ability to neatly accommodate first-order practice. I would suggest that neither of these directions are palatable. Diluting the theoretical commitments of the multi-stage account leads to a free-for-all regarding what counts as a photograph, and rejecting emerging forms of 'photographic' practice puts the account in a similar position to the scepticism towards first-order practice that it sought to reject. I would argue, therefore, that future work on the multi-stage account should seek to find a more desirable way out of this dilemma, especially given that new technologies employed by photographers could lead to this dilemma being posed by an increasing number of artforms.

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