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COVERS, CONCRETENESS, AND CRAFT
A REPLY TO PETTERSSON, CAMPION AND GIUPPONI

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Mikael Pettersson raises concerns about absent light because traditional theories suppose that a photograph is a causal trace of light and there can be no causal trace where there is no light. I explain how a multi-stage account can handle these concerns. Pettersson explores the music-photography analogy by considering cover versions in music but wonders whether every rendering of a register must count as a photograph. To evaluate examples, I claim that we need contextual information, which may include artist testimony. However, Ben Campion argues that a dilemma arises if this methodological principle is applied to videogame photography, a practice which involves making images from screenshots of computer-generated scenes. Artist testimony may tell us that such work is photography, but this claim conflicts with my theoretical commitments. I argue that the dilemma will seem plausible only if videogame 'photography' is affiliated with a single-stage account. Affiliation with the concreteness of a multi-stage account is far from plausible, so my commitments can be preserved. In her case study of Renaissance intarsia, Claudia Giupponi successfully appeals to artistic testimony to show how the music-photography analogy can extend to another artform. To support her position, I query the distinction she draws between art and craft and recommend that she accept the account of craft and creativity offered by Ansel Adams.

1 Pettersson on Absences and Covers

Asking “Is light *necessary* for producing a photograph?” (2024, 88), Pettersson answers “I think it is not,” seemingly at odds with Campion, who defends light as essential for photography. Conciliation is possible. When he says that the ‘photographic event’, at the heart of the multi-stage account, should make room for darkness as well as light, Pettersson is arguing that a photographic event needs to be understood counterfactually in terms of photosensitivity, rather than limited to the causal effects of light alone. As he puts it:

> ...maybe Wilson’s notion of a photographic event should not be understood as its having to involve light, or a registration of a ‘light-image’; maybe it could also involve the registration of a ‘darkness-image’. The production of the envisioned absolutely dark photo is still *sensitive* to light: had light been in the scene, it would have shown up in the photo. The photo is sensitive to the absence of light, and not, for instance, of sound. It records darkness, but it cannot record silence. (2024, 89)

I agree. To register the attendance of school pupils, I might put a tick for an attendee and a cross for an absentee, but I could instead leave the box empty for an absentee. If a photosensitive surface does not causally register absence of light by undergoing material change, it can nonetheless counterfactually register absence of light by failing to undergo change. If this is correct, I assume the respondents concur that light is essential for photography insofar as a photographic event depends on light sensitivity.

Counterfactual analysis implies that material properties are always relevant to understanding the registration of light and darkness during a photographic event. Construed this way, concretely rather than abstractly, a photographic event is a time-constrained interaction between some particular array, typically consisting of visible light or other wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation channeled from a scene, and some particular photosensitive surface. This has broader implications than Pettersson himself notes, because photography is not limited to the visible light spectrum. A visually dark optical array may fail to register on one type of film stock, but on a surface with different sensitivity – for example infrared film – the same array and exposure time may yet result in a register that can be rendered as an image. Temperature and humidity can affect outcomes. Moreover, given different concrete circumstances, objects visibly reflected in an array may not register. Thanks to slow optics, long exposure times and emulsion with low sensitivity, Eugène Atget's photographs of Paris show motionless streets and buildings. People, horses and carriages in motion are ghostly apparitions, or entirely absent from the picture, although they were present in the optical image during the photographic event. On a multi-stage account, an image invites viewers to take interest in the photographic event as well as the photographed scene. To understand a photographic event concretely, the testimony of the photographer is at times a necessary guide to the production process.

Pettersson's contemplations on presence and absence underline that photography is characterized both causally and counterfactually. When I conceived the notion of a photographic event, I had in mind that photography is concerned to record – or, as I now prefer to say, register – the presence and absence of light, typically as a differentiated pattern, during some specific time interval. Limiting cases are the registration of undifferentiated light and undifferentiated dark. If the former oversaturates a photosensitive surface and the latter has no causal effect, this information may have minimal utility for producing an image, but both registers carry counterfactual information that may have other utility. As Pettersson put it: "had light been in the scene it would have shown up in the photo" (2024, 89). The same is true for darkness. A rendering from the register can still tell us something about the photographic event, even if no scene is depicted.

On a traditional view, where causation is necessary and sufficient for depiction, a photographic image can depict a photographed scene irrespective of any visual resemblance, though it can depict only those objects that leave a causal trace. Even when an additional requirement for visual resemblance is satisfied, Pettersson notes that this traditional account still faces two questions: how much is a photograph required to 'look like' the scene to count as a depiction? And how can a photograph depict something that leaves no causal trace, such as a fictional object or the absence of an object? These difficulties lead Pettersson to favour a multi-stage account. Indeed, my account rebuts the idea that a photographic image is a causal 'imprint' of the photographed scene, so denies the traditional view of photographic depiction (Wilson 2022). It can deal with fictions and, granted a photographic event that is sensitive to the presence and absence of light, as Pettersson advocates, it can also deal with absences. I will elaborate further.

Pettersson is curious whether there is any equivalent to 'situated silences' (2024, 93) in photography, so I have a suggestion. When black specks appear on a positive print, they correspond to gaps between grains in the negative image, which in turn correspond to an absence of light during the initial photographic event. As Adams states, "it should be pointed out that the dark 'grain' specks visible in the print are actually the spaces between the grains of the negative; since negative grains withhold light during printing, they appear white in the print" (1981, 19). Pettersson has drawn several parallels between sound and vision, so it is fitting to note that, in photographic terms, visible grain in a developed image is known as 'noise'. Ironically, in the corresponding positive print, it should be considered 'silence'.

This seemingly trivial point has deeper significance. When a camera shutter opens but light is absent from a region of the optical array, no sensitivity specks will form on the chemical register. If the register is chemically developed and fixed, that region will rinse clear. Regions where light was registered develop dense silver grains, visible as black clusters in a negative image. This is why, for the negative-positive process in which Adams and Weston were masters of their craft, the absence of light is vital to producing fine art. In the darkroom, a negative is used as a stencil to project an array onto a photosensitive surface, and areas of the stencil that occlude light are necessary to give the final print its representational features. When the register is developed, those areas where light was absent, because occluded by the stencil, show up on the positive print as bright areas and highlights that correspond to objects that were present in the photographed scene. This situation sets up an argument supporting the multi-stage account.

On a traditional view, all representation strictly requires a causal imprint of objects that emit or reflect light, making absent light a philosophical problem, as Pettersson indicates. For Adams and Weston, occlusion of light during a photographic event is essential to their darkroom art. If a traditional causal theory were correct and every photographic image strictly depicts whichever photographed objects leave a causal trace, then every Adams fine art photograph would be a depiction of light emitted by his darkroom enlarger, partially occluded by a negative. If instead we recognize that his fine art prints are depictions of mountains, trees and rivers, the causal theory is implausible. Thanks to the occluding properties of the negative, some light is absent during the darkroom photographic event and precisely that absence enabled Adams to create expressive pictures of landscapes. A multi-stage account of photography, I argue, can handle the apparent problem of absent light. It also licenses photographic depiction.

There is more to a photographic picture than a causal trace, because further rendering stages contribute properties to any visual image. However, Pettersson asks how ‘far away’ (2024, 90) from the register can the rendered image be and still count as the same work? He is prompted to raise this question because musical covers pose ontological problems without simple answers. Art photography is in the same position but no worse for it, as we shall see.

In chemical photography, the multi-stage account delivers a stringent answer: a photographic register has precisely one rendering. This is when exposed film is developed and fixed to produce a negative, or when paper exposed in the darkroom is developed and fixed to produce a print. Once the photographic register has been rendered, it cannot be restored to its previous state. This limitation clashes with the generous spirit of Adams's analogy. Its musical equivalent would be a written score that could be performed only once, but this odd outcome is not a reductio if we follow where it leads. Firstly, I concluded that photo-electrical photography is the true heir to Adams's analogy, because a digital register is a score that can be performed multiple times. Secondly, I suggest that darkroom photography is analogous to musical 'sampling' because it uses an initial performance, the negative photograph, to create a new performance, the printed photograph. The initial performance can be sampled anew every time the negative is projected from an enlarger or contact printed. Arguably, all of Adams's fine art is creative sampling, although not every print that samples a work counts as a performance of the artwork. Adams is explicit that many photographs produced in the workflow do not count as fine art prints: work prints are rehearsals, not performances. For him, a print is fine art only when it expressively renders a visualisation: it must be a creative performance, not merely a compliant performance.

Pettersson's question about covers concerns authenticity. Edward Weston believed that an authentic print had to exactly match his visualisation; Brett Weston believed that only he could authentically print his own work. For these artists, an authentic photograph would be a performance that complies with the score, but their ideal for compliance would have to go even further than this: strict 'compliance' would limit performances to a single authorized interpretation. Although compliance with a score is important for classical performances, other types of music can be appreciated without considering compliance conditions. This is why a wider range of analogies should be explored. My multi-stage account shows that a register, or score, produced during the photographic event is not the entire locus of a photographic artwork. It is not even a photograph (Wilson 2023). Insisting too strongly on compliance with the register risks restoring the single-stage idea that the artwork is a photograph created at the moment of exposure. We can afford to downplay what Adams tells us about the score, because his idea that prints are expressive performances is the most fruitful aspect of his analogy. Authentic and inauthentic rendering is sometimes beside the point. I think there is no determinate answer to Pettersson's question, for music or for photography, instead there is a methodological challenge for philosophers to understand visualisation and many other types of photographic art practice, so that examples can be discussed case by case.

The single-stage conception of photography makes it easy for philosophers, theorists, and critics to undervalue the testimony of practitioners: if an image were in fact causally 'captured' at the moment of exposure, intentionality would have to be entirely peripheral to that causal stage, irrespective of what artists claim. Reconceiving the process as multi-stage grants that artistic intentionality can be integral at every stage: before, during and after the photographic event. There can also be deliberate choices to remove intentionality from the process and this too can have aesthetic significance. In my article, I argued that knowledgeable testimony from photography practitioners is valuable for understanding their creative contributions throughout the production process and consequently is relevant to critically appreciating their art.

2 Campion's Dilemma

I did not explore whether artist testimony bears on ontological or definitional questions about what counts as a photograph because I set aside that debate. Campion is drawn to the questions I set aside. He surveys emerging types of ‘videogame photography’ and asks, “whether these practices are accurately described by the term *photography*.” (2024, 59) He initially claims that these can, at most, be categorized as virtual or simulated photography, distinct from physical or real photography; but then considers whether artist testimony offers good reason to collapse the distinction. This would explode ‘photography’ as an ontological category and perhaps make any definition meaningless.

Pettersson is also concerned about a kind of category explosion. In his discussion of musical covers, he worries that every sampling of an image rendered from a register might count as a photograph, no matter how the visual display is produced. Moreover, this could imply that all images that sample a photographic image and likewise all ‘covers’ of a photographic image might have to count as the ‘same’ photograph, even if they have entirely different visual properties. These would be problems if the occurrence of a photographic event in an artefact’s causal history were sufficient for it to be a photograph, or for different items to count as the same photograph, but I will allay this concern.

Campion attributes to me the idea that we can ‘test’ whether an image is a photograph “by asking if an image contains a ‘photographic event’ in its causal history” (2024, 49), and that this may be “the defining trait of photography” (2024, 50). This is not to say that a photographic event is both necessary and sufficient. He notes that “the necessity of further processes, such as chemical or digital processing, is central to the multi-stage account” (Campion 2024, 53). The mistaken notion that a photographic event alone could be sufficient underpins the traditional supposition that an invisible latent image created during exposure is identical with the visible image created during development. I have refuted this supposition elsewhere, as Campion discusses. Pettersson’s concern that every ‘cover’ rendered from a register must count as the same photograph can be dispelled the same way. There can never be any rendering from a register that is identical with a 'photograph' created during exposure, no matter what its visible properties. Images acquire visual properties during the rendering process, and sometimes it will be visually evident that two images share a photographic event in their causal history; sometimes only contextual information will reveal this fact (see Wilson 2012, 105-7). Informed testimony from the photographer is often exactly what we need. Its value can be illustrated in Pettersson's own example, a photograph from the series *After Walker Evans*. Sherrie Levine can direct aesthetic appreciation to multiple layers of photographic events subversively embedded in the causal history of this art object, despite her image visually resembling other straightforward reproductions of Walker Evans's well-known photograph.

Pettersson and Campion both target a narrow question: 'does *x* count as a photograph?' I sought to make room for a different question: 'is *x* a rendering from a photographic register?' as this is better suited for appreciating photographic art and attributing credit to artists. However, according to Campion, my theory and methodology generate a dilemma. On one hand, if the multi-stage view is correct, light registration during a photographic event is essential for photography. Campion is willing to defend this position and rightly assumes I will do the same. On the other hand, he suggests, respecting first-order practice obliges me to defer to videogame artists who classify their work as photography, even without light registration. Campion thinks this is where I face a problem: if I want to defend my theoretical commitment to the multi-stage account, then it appears I must give up my methodological commitment to artist testimony. I will respond in depth to both horns of this dilemma.

Firstly, the theoretical horn. Campion assumes that the notion of a photographic event will preserve the distinction between virtual/simulated and physical/real photography. He claims 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" (2024, 60). I agree but prefer a different argument. When Campion defends the multi-stage account, he puts too much emphasis on a simplified notion of the photographic event and construes the registration of light too abstractly. A full defence must consider interrelated, complex stages that are construed concretely.

According to Campion, a register is "chemically or digitally recorded information about the photographed scene" (2024, 53). On my account, complexity and concreteness should be added. A register directly takes information from a light array, typically consisting of a light image optically channelled onto a surface, and it only indirectly takes information from the scene. A light array must be formed before information can be registered and every light image has material properties such as shape, size and sharpness that will concretely constrain the photographic event. Campion overlooks this prior stage when he isolates the photographic event as "the defining trait of photography" (2024, 50). Simplification leaves Campion's position too close to a single-stage account and deprives him of a line of analysis that he could use to justify the distinction between real and simulated photography.

The multi-stage account says that a photographic event is necessary to produce a photographic register and that it is necessary to render the register before a photographic image can exist. Campion entertains the idea that videogame 'photography' might parallel the multi-stage account in all key respects, to the extent that only the action of light in the photographic event sets them apart. He reports that, "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" (2024, 59). He does not endorse this argument because he is convinced that the action of light in the photographic event is a decisive difference. But in so doing he makes the difference too slight. If, instead, the photographic event is construed as complex and concrete, it has no plausible resemblance to videogame screenshotting.

If videogame 'photography' is measured against the multi-stage account, we should ask what performs the role of the light array? Could the illuminated videogame screen be equivalent to an optical light image? Perhaps light is channelled from the world of the game onto the screen, not conceived of as an Albertian window but, rather, the wall of a camera obscura, or the ground glass of a large format camera. Perhaps screenshotting 'captures' a 2D image that is projected onto the screen, reflecting visual properties of a virtual '3D' world. But what would be the equivalent of the photosensitive surface or sensor, that registers light from the light array? The viewing screen cannot perform this role. Smartphone screens and electronic viewfinders display images of an external scene that guide a photographer in photographing the scene. But a photographic event is not registration of a display screen; it is registration of the light array on a sensor located inside the camera. Screenshotting, as Campion describes, saves graphical information which can be rendered to produce an image of the scene. But this simply means computer data is recorded; there is no array and no sensor. All the complex, concrete circumstances of a photographic event are missing, not only the light.

I defend the multi-stage account by fully emphasising all its stages, rendering as well as registration, and by attending to material constraints such as the light array, photosensitive surface, and time interval. The intermediary role of an optical light image and the materiality of a sensor reveal that a photographic image is highly mediated. Under full analysis, the problem with videogame photography is not just that it lacks a real photographic event, but that it lacks other necessary stages as well. By construing the photographic event too abstractly, Campion allows that virtual photography, with simulated light, can seem relevantly similar to physical photography, with real light, which creates pressure to collapse the distinction between the two. But when the multi-stage account is construed concretely the distinction does not risk collapse. If the distinction withstands pressure, the category of what counts as photography will not meaninglessly explode.

Now to the second, methodological, horn of the dilemma. Campion reports that some videogame artists testify that their work is photography, and it is exhibited on the walls of photography galleries. He canvasses these views as possible reasons to collapse the distinction between simulated and real photography. I suggest that videogame artists are likely to be working with a single-stage conception of photography, where a screenshot is considered a kind of ‘image capture’ that produces a virtual photograph of a virtual world. Videogame artists may describe capturing an image of a virtual scene just as a photographer describes capturing an image of a physical scene. But in neither case is an image truly ‘captured’. Authoritative photographers, including Adams and Weston, erroneously assumed a single-stage view of photography. It would be unsurprising to find videogame image-makers doing the same if they look to traditional photography as a model for their art practice.

What if, instead, these artists were to consider a multi-stage conception of photography, where the photographic event is construed concretely not abstractly? They might agree that their production process lacks too many relevant features to count as photography. It would not be enough to substitute real light for simulated light and suppose that everything else stays the same, because the absence of a timed interaction between the material properties of a light array and some particular photosensitive surface would become unavoidably evident.

I argued that the testimony of photographers extends aesthetic interest to the photographic event, so appreciation is not limited to the photographic image and its relation to the photographed scene. Objects, light sources, apertures, lenses and the photosensitive surface can all be concrete factors in a photographic event without necessarily appearing in the visible image. The camera might be hand-held or on a tripod; the shutter might be triggered manually or by a timer. Specifying the photographic event in its fullest sense includes specifying the scene, the camera apparatus and, in some cases, the photographer's own body. Taking interest in the photographic event rather than solely the photographic image makes these factors aesthetically relevant even when they do not appear in the image.

Artists who describe their work as 'videogame photography' offer knowledgeable testimony about their artistic intent and steps taken to realize it. This is relevant to critically appreciating their art and may include factors that do not appear in the image. But they cannot offer testimony that enables the viewer to take aesthetic interest in the occurrence of a photographic event and the role that such an event has played in the multi-stage production of the image. Their accounts may help us take interest in another kind of production process, but their work does not fall into the category of an item that has been rendered from a photographic register.

The task for philosophy is to make phenomena perspicuous and to dispel areas of stubborn perplexity, rather than dictate first order practice. But if a philosophical account is sufficiently compelling it should stimulate or challenge artistic reflection and activity. I would be curious to know how videogame art might develop if artists were to reject the single-stage account of photography and accept a multi-stage perspective. Renderings from a digital register are open-ended, but registration is concrete. Light is essential, as are the material and temporal constraints imposed by an optical array, sensor, and other determinants of a photographic event.

Adams's composer-performer analogy insists that the production of a fine art photograph cannot be reduced to a photographic event, nor can it be reduced to the visual image because the two are interdependent: the photographic event is how the visualisation of an expressive print is registered in a ‘score’ and the expressive rendering of that score as an image is a performance of the visualisation. Adams invoked this analogy to establish the credentials of fine art photography. Photographers initially exhibited work on the walls of galleries dedicated to paintings, prints, and drawings. Adams deliberately avoided using the word ‘photographs’ in his first published work; instead, he used the term ‘prints’. Eventually, when photography gained exhibition status in photography galleries it had no need to align itself with prints and painterly pictorialism. For Adams, the parallel with music helped him to reimagine the fine art status of photography independent from comparison with paintings. A century later, if digital artists who start with a blank canvas are like painters, then videogame artists are certainly more like photographers. They encounter a virtual world and use features of that world to produce their images. Their craft and creativity go beyond merely screenshotting a video game, and it is right for artists to describe their production methods in ways that show where credit is due. However, the comparison with photography is less plausible than Campion allows.

When Ansel Adams tells us that his prints are musical performances, his claim should be taken seriously because it provides insight into his art practice, but it does not justify redefining the ontological category of musical performances. The same applies when Justin Berry says that his landscape images of virtual worlds are photographs; his claim should be taken seriously to appreciate his new media art practice, but it is not a reason to redefine photography.

3 Giupponi on Renaissance Intarsia

Giupponi offers a surprising and fascinating extension of the music-photography analogy into a discussion of Renaissance intarsia, and I am convinced by her main argument. It fits particularly well with the spirit of Adam’s analogy but also applies the methodological principles that I promote in my article: namely taking seriously the testimony of practitioners. By arguing that these works are the product of interdependent acts of 'composition' and 'performance', rather than a single-authored sub-genre of paintings, she delivers the kind of outcome that I hope to achieve: a better understanding of creative achievements and assignment of credit to practitioners who are otherwise overlooked.

Giupponi seeks "to put aside the possibility that intarsia is a craft" (2024, 68), perhaps implicitly treating art and craft as exclusive categories. However, Aaron Ridley (1998, Ch.2) clarifies that Collingwood did not consider art and craft to be exclusive categories of object. When craft technique is entirely instrumental the result is mere craft, but craft technique can also be a feature of expressive art. It is possible to appreciate the craft aspect of an artwork as well as its art aspect, although what makes it art is always more than instrumental technique. Collingwood says little about photography in *The Principles of Art*, but his overall view, I believe, is compatible with much that Ansel Adams says about his 'expressive' or 'creative' fine art photography.

The relation between craft and art is an overarching theme for Adams. In one introduction he writes, "I shall attempt in these books to suggest the importance of craft and its relation to creativity in photography." (Adams 2003a, ix) and further underlines his point: "Do not lose sight of the essential importance of *craft*; every worthwhile human endeavour depends on the highest levels of concentration and mastery of basic tools." (Adams 2003a, xiii, original emphasis) These remarks would be trivial if Adams were merely claiming that craft technique is important for art. This might appear to be his claim when he states, for example, that, "As with other creative processes, understanding craft and controlling the materials are vital to the quality of the final result" (Adams 2003b, 9). But Adams does go further, because he claims that visualisation, the defining 'emotional-mental' condition of his fine art photography, can only be achieved when a threshold of excellence in craft is attained. He says that ‘True freedom in concept and visualisation demands a refined craft” (Adams 2002, xiii). Here, he is not simply saying that craft is the technical basis for any art; he is saying that an artist needs to become a master of the craft to be capable of artistic expression at all. In his *Autobiography* he presents this challenge using the music-photography analogy:

> Musicians practice constantly; most photographers do not practice enough. The siren call of the hobby obscures the necessary exactions of art. It is easy to take a photograph, but it is harder to make a masterpiece in photography than in any other art medium. (Adams 1985, 279)

It does not follow that excellence in a craft is by itself an artistic achievement, because the former is possible without the latter. Recall that Adams draws a categorical distinction between functional photography and fine art photography. Technical craft is the dominant feature of functional photography, whereas ‘creative-intuitive forces’ must dominate in fine art. Hence, for fine art, “Visualization is the underlying objective; the craft and technical aspects, while important in themselves, should always be subservient to the expressive concepts of the photographer – necessary but not dominant” (Adams 2002, ix). I venture that Collingwood would approve.

In my article, I claimed that the multi-stage account has a methodological benefit because it licenses taking seriously the knowledgeable testimony of photographers. The relation between craft and creativity is important in this regard, because a photographer describing visualisation will at the same time have to describe the technical craft involved in producing a photograph. Sceptics about fine art photography were wrong to suppose that knowledgeable testimony should be limited to craft and not extended to creativity. In his writing and photography, Adams provides good reasons to go beyond this assumption.

Giupponi could embrace the relation between craft and creativity that we find in Adams, and in Ridley's reading of Collingwood. By doing so, she no longer needs to develop "a full argument that intarsia is not a craft" (2024, 68) but can still argue that intarsia is an independent artform.

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