

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art  
Prof. Funkhouser  
4/15/05  
Scruton, "Photography and Representation"

\*Claim: Photography cannot represent anything. (And film is like photography in this regard.)

--Scruton does concede that paintings represent.

--Let's not get hung up on terminology, Scruton cautions:  
"Let us first dismiss the word 'representation'. Of course this word can be applied to photography. We wish to know whether there is some feature, suitably called representation, common to painting and photography." (359)

1

\*Paintings have an *intentional* relation to their subjects, photographs a *causal* one.

2

\*Distinguish: the intentional object of sight, the represented object, and the material object of sight. (360)

"...to understand a painting involves understanding thoughts. These thoughts are, in a sense, communicated by the painting." (361)

3

\*In this section Scruton argues against referential theories of pictorial representation, especially those that emphasize the analogy to language.

--He denies that there is a grammar, in painting, which generates meaning from the reference of smaller parts. (362, right column)

4

"...an aesthetic interest in the representational properties of a picture must also involve a kind of interest in the picture and not merely in the thing represented." (363)

--Distinguish being interested in the picture for its own sake, versus being interested in the picture for what it reveals about its subject.

5

\*Photography offers a glimpse of a person at a moment, whereas portraiture offers a more temporally extended rendering.

6

\*In determining "how to see" a photograph, considerations of the photographer's intentions are largely irrelevant. (It's like you're looking at the thing itself.)

--Three conclusions about photography (understood as photographs standing in a causal relation to their subjects):

“It follows, first, that the subject of the ideal photograph must exist; secondly, that it must appear roughly as it appears in the photograph; and thirdly, that its appearance in the photograph is its appearance at a particular moment of its existence.” (365)

“Of course I may take a photograph of a draped nude and call it *Venus*, but insofar as this can be understood as an exercise in fiction, it should not be thought of as a photographic representation of Venus but rather as the photograph of a representation of Venus.” (365)

--Also consider the Silenus example, right hand column of p. 365.

Consider:

“The photograph is a means to the end of seeing its subject; in painting, on the other hand, the subject is the means to the end of its own representation.” (366)

--Photographs don't represent, because they serve as surrogates.

7

\*Q: But can't one be interested in a photograph for its own sake?

--All the aesthetic (and emotional) properties of a photograph are directly derived from those of its subject(s).

“Can I have an aesthetic interest in the photograph of a dying soldier which is not also an aesthetic interest in the soldier's death?” (367)

8

\*In this section Scruton wonders what it would be like if (as is impossible!) we could look at a photograph to study the “manner of presentation”, rather than the subject itself.

--To the extent that a photographer manipulates her product to modify the manner of presentation, she is acting as a painter.

9

\*Photography is like a pointing of the finger, or the employment of a mirror, or the careful placement of a frame around a real-world scene.

10

[nothing]

11

\*In this section Scruton extends these points to the cinema.

“A cinematic record of an occurrence is not a representation of it, any more than a recording of a concert is a representation of its sound.” (371)

“And surely it is this too which makes photography incapable of being an erotic art, in that it presents us with the object of lust rather than a symbol of it: it therefore gratifies the fantasy of desire long before it has succeeded in understanding or expressing the fact of it. The medium of photography, one might say, is inherently pornographic.” (373)