Pictures and their surfaces

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Aesthetics is often characterised as disconnected from moral, political or generally practical concerns—one reason why aesthetic notions are now regarded as unsuited to ground a comprehensive philosophy of the arts, where those connections are evidently in place. We should not waste time arguing that all art is aesthetic in nature. But we can restore some significance to the art/aesthetic connection by recognising that aesthetic activity is a form of social activity, that aesthetic artefacts are things which manifest the thoughts, feelings and actions of makers. Just as microscopes, telescopes and, according to some, photographs extend our perceptual reach, so these artefacts extend our capacity for intellectual, emotional and bodily connection with others. One task is then to understand the many and varied ways of ‘making manifest’ that are available in the arts; another is to understand the ways these thoughts, feelings and actions are processed at different cognitive levels by audiences, with sometimes little or no consciousness of the processes involved.

In contemplating this latter task we may hope that the science of social cognition has things to tell us. I will point to some ideas that may help, as well as to the scarcity of evidence that they do. Throughout I focus on pictures, a category which quickly divides into sub-kinds with very different explanatory requirements. My overarching concern is with the artistic distinctness of photographs, cinematic images and other ‘mechanical’ pictures on the one hand, and paintings, drawings and generally ‘hand-made’ images on the other. This distinction has generated other speculations I’ll discuss, notably the idea that photographs do, and paintings do not, enable us to see the things they are of—from which we get the placement of photographs alongside telescopes and other ‘aids to vision’.

Section 1 briefly sketches some art historical and art theoretic context for the discussion. Section 2 distinguishes between two kinds of depictive marks and two ways that marks can be related to what is depicted. Section 3 uses the case of mosaic depiction to broaden our understanding of the kinds of marks that can be artistically significant. Section 4 asks whether work in the empirical sciences of mind can deepen our understanding of the artistic relevance of the marked surface. Section 5 introduces the central claim: it is a quite general fact about painting that engagement with it requires attention to the marked surface as a record of activity, something that is not true of photographs or cinematic images. Section 6 explains and responds to three objections to the claim. Section 7 argues that, the claim notwithstanding, there are ways in which photographs and cinematic images function as registers of bodily activity. Section 8 considers two things which have been said about photography which an advocate of the central claim need not endorse, while seeing how that claim may seem to support them.

1 This paper originated from workshop presentations in Paris and Turin. My thanks go to Jerome Pelletier and Alberto Voltolini for inviting me to those events and for their comments then and later. My thanks also go to the audiences on both occasions for their comments and to audiences at the universities of Leeds, Edinburgh and Miami where developing versions have been presented.
1. **Brushwork**

David Rosand, in his 1981 essay *Titian and the eloquence of the brush*, asks

Must we dissociate the mimetic impulse of the stroke from its self-expression? Or can we in fact legitimately claim meaning for the brushwork itself - that is, for *l'arte*, the art itself? To put it another way, is there a meaning initiating in the artist, a meaning that may itself be mediated by the imitated subject matter but that resides essentially in the visible traces of the painter's gesture, a meaning in which we hear his own voice?\(^2\)

I want to take up the idea of ‘claiming meaning for the brushwork itself.’ Whether this is strictly a matter of meaning I am not sure; ‘significance’ might be a better term. The idea that brushwork is significant because it is the visible trace of the painter’s gesture will be my starting point. It will turn out that the story is more complicated; visible brushwork is sometimes significant exactly because of its absence, as where traces of the painter’s gesture have been significantly effaced. And brushwork is one of a larger group of techniques which have a role in relating the viewer to the process of artistic production. I’ll argue that the capacity of painting, drawing and some other media to register, on a surface, the activity of the artist is part of what separates them as artistic media from photography and film.\(^3\)

This registration is by means of placing marks on the surface. Such marks are capable of having a complex and special interest for us when they are depictive marks. They point in two directions: forward, to the scene depicted, and backwards, to the activity of the artist. They are both depictive marks and *traces* of intentional activity with, as Rosand says, an affective as well as a mimetic (representational) function. There are even cases where we are invited to see the two functions as fused. Philip Sohm says ‘Not only did Titian represent Marsyas’ flayed body, he enacted it across the painting’s surface. Paint no longer represents things, it embodies them as well.’\(^4\) Pictures like this instantiate this duality in highly salient ways; others seek to efface it. For others again the duality simply does not arise, as we shall see.

In painting, these marks are made by brushwork, the proper use of which has occupied a good deal of art-related discourse and art-world rhetoric. Sohm, in his book on *pittoresco*, notes that commentators on painting in the seventeenth century struggled with the problem. The view from earlier times seems to have been that the painter should be “a master of his medium and display that mastery by subduing it”, rendering invisible the physical act of painting, at least at ordinary viewing distances. Brushwork had some admitted interest as the record of creativity, but “as form, it was considered to be unfinished or chaotic, acceptable if concealed in a sketchbook or muted by distance”.\(^5\) Titian’s later work, with its insistence of the place of brushwork—and finger marks—in the finished product, was especially problematic for commentators such as Vasari. An uncompromising proponent of Titian’s approach was Marco Boschini; in his *La Carta del Navegar Pittoresco* (1660) he attacked Vasari:

> You say that [Titian’s Adonis, his Venus and his Europa], are made with stylish strokes, with gross sketchiness and openly… You say that these paintings have an effect which

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\(^2\) (Rosand 1981, 95).

\(^3\) Throughout I will have traditional photography in mind though the arguments apply to digital photography as well. The manipulability of such images does not bring anything essentially new to the discussion; various forms of manipulation are possible in traditional photography and here as elsewhere in the literature I confine myself to relatively ‘pure’ forms of (unmanipulated) image-making.

\(^4\) (Sohm 2007, 97; Hopkins 2010, sec. 3).

\(^5\) (Sohm 1991, 27)
cannot be seen from nearby but can only be enjoyed from a distance, and you praise that effect…. Don’t you understand that these strokes are everything, and that all the rest is nothing? That this artificial sketchiness is worth much more than the laborious, meager and dry style that the diligent painter uses.6

Here and elsewhere Boschini is overly combative in his approach to the issue of the visibility of strokes or marks, and unwilling, apparently, to see the evidence of Vasari’s own sensitivity to Titian’s later work. 7 Fortunately I don’t need to defend the view that strokes are ‘everything’. My concern is rather with the idea that the heirs to Titian (and Delacroix, as we shall see) have available to them options which are not only aesthetically rich—an uncontroversial opinion these days—but revelatory of what is and always was distinctive about painting and drawing, whether or not the options are taken up in any particular case.

I will note two much more recent contributions to the debate over marks. The theme of the dual status of marks is notably developed in Richard Wollheim’s philosophy of painting. Many things that would not interest us if we saw them interest us as depicted because of the way the marks support the depiction. Wollheim said that a precondition for this sort of interest in representations is twofoldness: the capacity we have to attend simultaneously to what is represented in the picture and to the marks which support the representation.8 We see, if we attend at the right distance, both what is represented and how it is that the marks constitute the representation. We may, he says, marvel at the skill and imagination exercised in achieving this representational effect with these marks. Some of what Wollheim has claimed about the extent and explanatory power of twofoldness has been questioned, and I won’t rely here on those claims.9 But he has drawn attention to a vital distinction, in painting, drawing and other depictive forms, between the surface as the locus of depictive properties and as the locus of marks, intentionally applied. Acknowledging this, I will proceed along a related path, but in my own way.

Finally, David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese note that ‘observers sometimes feel a form of somatic response to vigorous handling of the artistic medium and to visual evidence of the movement of the hand more generally’.10 They argue for an approach to this phenomenon that connects aesthetics and neuroscience via an explanation of this feeling in terms of the activation of brain areas in the observer. I turn briefly to this suggestion in Section 4.

For all the historical and scientific interest of this topic my concern is primarily normative. A given picture may be experienced in different ways, including ways which are ill informed, which reflect inattention or the effects of perception-disturbing drugs. The differences I am interested in here are differences between the kinds of experiences pictures merit, which are appropriate to the kinds of pictures they are. There is no single best way to experience any picture. But good ways have things in common, as do bad ways. Certainly, paintings and photographs do not merit the same responses and I aim to say why that is. I am concerned here only with depictive pictures: pictures that represent, and do so in depictive or pictorial ways. I don’t see it as my role to define depiction here.

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6 See Sohm, ibid. For parallel debates concerning sculpture see Mangone (2016)
7 Sohm (ibid.) quotes Vasari: ‘Often artists best express their ideas with a few strokes in sketches, suddenly being born from inspiration. Conversely labour and excessive diligence, by an artist who knows not when to take his hand off the work, often deprives it of strength and character.’
8 (Wollheim 1980, 213-224).
10 Freedberg & Gallese 2007, p.201-2.
2. Two kinds of marks

Not all the marks visible on a depictive surface contribute to the representation, at least in the sense of ‘helping to determine what is represented and how it is represented as being’. Dom Lopes makes a distinction between design and surface. Design properties are those ‘in virtue of which a picture depicts what it does’. But these are just a proper subset of the picture’s surface properties and non-design surface properties are ones the picture possesses in virtue of it having marks of, for example, age or wear, or which are due to the texture of the canvas. Given our concerns, it will be helpful to speak directly about marks rather than properties, so let us distinguish between design surface marks and non-design surface marks, or merely surface marks. It looks as if surface marks divide neatly into design and merely surface marks and that merely surface marks have no or at least very little artistic interest. In the next section I will argue that we need a more complex taxonomy of marks.

Design marks in painting vary greatly, particularly in the extent to which their status as manually applied marks is made salient. Some are thickly impasted, while others have no obvious depth or irregularity. Some produce shapes and colours which do not correspond precisely to the shapes and colours of the subject as it is represented, while others are worked together to produce smooth areas of colour, with the surface of the whole approximating (as we would now say) to the condition of a conventional, well taken photograph. Indeed it is now common to have the experience that one cannot tell just by looking whether one is confronted with a superrealist painting or a photograph.

With late Titian and other painters where the action of marking is highly salient, the marked surface is notable for a failure of what I will call transparency. I use this term, despite a potential for confusion which I will acknowledge in a moment, because I take the idea from a thesis with this name in the philosophy of perception. In the formulation I depend on, visual perception is said to be transparent in that any aspect of perceptual experience we choose to focus on will turn out to be a feature of the world as visual perception represents it as being. On this view properties of experience we might otherwise be tempted to think of as “purely phenomenological” turn out to be accounted for in representational terms. How might a picture be transparent in something like this sense? By being such that any variation in its appearance across its surface in any direction represents a variation in how the depicted object is represented as appearing, in a corresponding direction as seen from the perspective of the picture. The design of the picture, in all its detail, corresponds to the appearance the subject is represented as having. The depictive work in such a picture is representational, without residue. Perhaps only a few pictures are absolutely transparent;

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12 It is clear that this is meant to include all those visible properties of the picture which contribute to the determination of the object depicted and its depicted properties.
13 The idea goes back to Moore, who used the term “Diaphanous” (Moore, 1922). Jackson (2003) uses the same term. For complex reasons Jackson thinks that understanding sensory qualities this way shows the failure of his influential knowledge argument against physicalism; he now holds, with Lewis and Nemirof, that what Mary gains when she leaves the room is not factual knowledge but abilities.
14 Jackson says “The redness of sensings of red is the putative redness of what is seen; when vision is blurred, what is seen appears to be blurred; the location quality of a sound is the putative location of the sound; the experience of movement is the experience of something putatively moving; and so on” (2003, p.257). Or as Mike Martin puts it, concerning a subject who sees, or seems to see the blue of the ocean, “The phenomenological character of his experience is determined by how the experience represents the environment to be” (2002, p.385).
15 This formulation is consistent with the idea that a picture may misrepresent its subject.
perhaps we can set the standard of transparency so high that none are. But many pictures
approximate this condition, or have significant parts which do, or seem to
be intended to approximate it, or approximate it for privileged viewers or
conditions of viewing. By contrast there are pictures which do not merely fail to be transparent but which flout the condition. Compare the work of
two artists well known for their very public disagreement on the topic of
design marks: Ingres and Delacroix. Ingres’ portrait of Princesse Albert de Broglie (1851-
3, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) is
such that there are, so far as design marks go, no variations in colour, shape, texture or grain other than those
which are understood to correspond to variations in the visible
properties of what is depicted, as seen from the perspective defined
by the picture itself. A Delacroix such as Landscape with Rocks,
Augerville, (1854, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) is very different, with a much
looser relation between the details of the surface and the details of the visible features the scene
is represented as possessing. And that looser relation is evidently the intended one.

I said that “transparency” is apt to be confusing in this context. This is because the term has
already been used to label a supposed property of certain pictures, notably photographs: the
property of enabling us to see the things they are of. I will discuss this idea in the final section.

3. A wider class of marks
The free brushwork we find with Titian, Delacroix and others is one notable kind of violation
of transparency. But it is important that we not confine our thoughts about transparency to
marks like these. Good examples from a wider class come to mind when we consider a
depictive form very neglected in these discussions: mosaic work. Here we have a form of
depiction where transparency is impossible, in practice if not in theory, because of the visible
joins between the tesserae; the interest of the medium is in seeing how the limitations of a
building-block approach to depiction are exploited to create a richly twofold experience. With
unicoloured tesserae the image has an appearance superficially similar to that of a modern
digital image where the pixels are discernable. But aesthetically these are quite different forms.
Each tessera’s colour and position in a mosaic pattern represents a choice implemented by the
hand of the artist, something not true in the case of a digital image. In what ways if any do mosaics manifest or record the activity of the artist? Not in the way that
a brush or pencil stroke might; the joins between tesserae are not what Rostand called “the
visible traces of the [maker’s] gesture”, those traces often being said to generate imagined
recreations in the viewer of the movement itself, something I will discuss in the next section.
But let’s not allow enthusiasm for what is now called ‘embodied cognition’ to crowd out other,
more reflective ways of relating the viewer to the activity manifested in an image. Any
worthwhile experience of a work of art will involve cognitive activity at various levels
including conscious, reflective thought, which can be expected to modulate and guide the
operation of perceptual and simulative mechanisms. Some knowledge of the process of mosaic

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16 The debate between Ingres and Delacroix had much to do with the visibility of ‘touch’, advocated by Delacroix
and decried by Ingres who said “Touch even though it is very skilled, must not be apparent: otherwise it prevents
illusion and locks everything. Instead of the represented object, it makes the way of doing [procédé] visible;
instead of thought, it denounces the hand” (quoted in Georges Roque, Neo-Impressionism Touch and Facture, this volume, ms p.5).
17 The artist may have control over the level of pixilation.
construction (the more the better no doubt) allows us to see the resulting pattern as the upshot of decisions and actions that require manual skills of various kinds as well as such things as delicacy of depiction and expressive poignancy (Portrait of a Woman, and Boxer with Rooster, both in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, first century AD), and, occasionally, recognition of the medium’s capacity for amusing self-reference (Unswept Room, Musei Vaticani, second century AD). With mosaic, each tessera-placement is a discriminable act of artistic choice and each tessera in its place records both the nature of the choice, the size, shape and colour of the tessera and its position, and the skill that is manifested in that choice and in its implementation as seen in the context of the whole. Mosaic surfaces are replete with information about artistic choices and actions. While that information is unlikely to call forth sympathetic recapitulations of the artist’s movement in the way that brush strokes sometimes do, it is available to the suitably informed viewer and plays significantly in appreciation of the work.¹⁸

Mosaics have an additional interest in that they pose a challenge to the distinction between design and merely surface marks described in Section 4. Take, for example, the Hunters mosaic from the Great Palace at Constantinople, about the fifth century AD. In Hunters, one may see how the placement of tesserae and the joins between them create a repeating quasi-circular pattern on the background. But the pattern is not, I think, to be taken as depictive in content: we are not to see the figures as standing against a patterned wall, any more than we are to see the figures as having segmented skin and clothing. The joins in a depictive mosaic serve to superimpose a pattern on the depiction, even where the pattern is not as recurrent and obvious as with the background of Hunters. The marks created by joins between tesserae are not in Lopes’ sense design marks since they don’t contribute to the representation of properties of depicted objects. In the terms so far advanced they are therefore surface marks. But this is intuitively wrong. They are not like the texture of canvas or foxing in a drawing. They do contribute to the design (broadly understood) of the work, though not to its depictive features. Thus we need either a new, more inclusive definition of design marks, or a new tripartite distinction between depictive design, surface and non-depictive design. Either would help us capture what is so fascinating about the medium of mosaics: that it is an art with design features that sometimes float free of and sometimes interact unpredictably with properly representational features.

4. Marks and movement
I have drawn attention to those marks which serve as ‘visible trace[s] of the painter’s gesture’. ¹⁸

¹⁸ Rug making is similarly productive of twofoldness and provides a record of the artists actions—the placement of a thread; like mosaic work, it does not record the artist’s movement in the way that painting and drawing can. There is also tapestry and stained glass work to consider.
It is generally agreed that we have a tendency to experience muscle activation, feelings of unbalance and even body-part specific discomfort in response to works of visual art. For example, the viewer of Bellini’s *Virgin with the Standing Child, Embracing his Mother*, (São Paulo Museum of Art), in which the orientation of the Virgin’s head seems distinctly uncomfortable, is likely to have a sense as of their own head being held at an awkward angle. That seems to me an important part of the phenomenology of a confrontation with this picture and one which could be put aside as aesthetically irrelevant only through dogmatic insistence that such things have no place in a ‘purely visual’ aesthetic. I take it we have escaped from such confining theories of pictorial art.  

David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese have suggested that works which engage the viewer in this bodily way do so by triggering neural activity in areas associated with motor planning. They also distinguish between responses to the depictive content of the picture, as with the Bellini, and responses to the marks which implement that content, noting the way these marks provoke a sense in the viewer as of undertaking the movements productive of those marks. It is that second kind of response which is our special focus here.

Freedberg and Gallese suggest that the activity of mirror neurons is crucial in this process, and claims on behalf of the explanatory power of mirror neurons are controversial. But there is a prior question: are the facts about underlying mechanisms, whatever they are, helpful for understanding aesthetic preference and aesthetic judgement? Why not concentrate instead on the relation between the phenomenology of bodily engagement with pictures and the aesthetic preferences and judgements to which that phenomenology gives rise? Isn’t the aesthetic, after all, part of the manifest image, not the scientific image? Here are two reasons for not confining ourselves to phenomenology.

First, we would in that case rely very heavily on the viewer’s intuitive sense of that relation to understand how our bodily and other responses to marks contribute to the artistic judgements we make. But people are rather poor at knowing the bases of their own judgements. We are more likely to think a statement true or to think we will solve a logic problem if it is presented in easy to read font. People whose judgements are affected in this way do not think of these factors as reasons for their decisions. There is evidence that the affect we feel (positive or negative) when we experience a situation “isn’t tied to the representations that produce it” (Carruthers 2011: 136); people rate their satisfaction with their lives more positively on sunny days than on dull ones, failing to segregate the affect associated with genuine life satisfaction from that due to the weather. In the aesthetic domain there is considerable evidence that the

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20 Freedberg and Gallese (2007, p.202): “The marks on the painting or sculpture are the visible traces of goal-directed movements; hence, they are capable of activating the relevant motor areas in the observer’s brain.”
21 See e.g. (Hickok 2014) for an accessible attempt to deflate the explanatory role of mirror neurons. Much of the criticism of Freedberg and Gallese (e.g. Casati and Pignocchi 2007, 410; Kesner & Horáček 2017) points out that there is a good deal in our response to art which cannot be explained in their terms—something they readily agree with. Much of the criticism on offer focuses on our responses to depictive content and not on our responses to the visible traces of the artist’s activity and does not transfer from the one case to the other (see e.g. Gallagher, 2011).
22 (Reber and Schwarz 1999; Alter, Oppenheimer, Epley and Eyre (2007)).
23 See Schwarz & Clore 1983. People are able, it seems, to make the segregation if the state of the weather is drawn to their attention.
reasons people give for their choices are in fact post hoc rationalization of those choices. Focusing instead on the underlying neural representations involved in bodily responses may give us a better (though no doubt imperfect) sense of how bodily response really affects judgement; it is at the very least an additional source of evidence we should not ignore. Secondly, the phenomenology of bodily response to pictures and other art objects varies a good deal in intensity and is sometimes something we are barely aware of. It’s a coherent thought that motoric responses, as registered in brain activity, influence our preferences for and judgements about works of art even when we have no consciousness of them. We cannot find out whether that is true by focusing on phenomenology.

What evidence do we have for a connection between motor activity in the brain and aesthetic judgement? At present not much. A plausible starting assumption is that one of the things underlying a sense of felt connection with a picture is the ability to engage in implicit or imagined movement while viewing, where the movement corresponds to the movement that produced (or perhaps merely seems to have produced) the visible marks. Circumstances that interfered with that implicit mirroring of movement would then tend to reduce liking for the picture and might affect judgement of its artistic qualities. Working with this assumption Helmut Leder and colleagues presented subjects with similar pictures where one was produced with a pointillistic ‘dotting’ movement and the other in a back-and-forth hatching style. Subjects were asked to rate the pictures while themselves performing one or other of these movements. Because real movement and simulated movement depend on overlapping brain areas and thus compete for resources, the capacity to simulate a movement is likely to be compromised by really performing a contrary movement. It was predicted that subjects looking at a dot painting and performing a hatching (i.e. contrary) movement would have their tendency to mentally simulate the dotting compromised and that this suppression of sympathetic movement would decrease aesthetic pleasure. Leder did in fact find a tendency (not a strong one) for people performing the contrary movement to rate the picture lower than did those who were performing the concordant movement and whose simulation would have been preserved or enhanced. Ticini and colleagues found a similarly modest effect in a related experiment, but the effect reported by Leder’s group was not found in an attempted replication.

I’ve suggested that the possibility that motor processes contribute both to the experience and to the appraisal of pictures is one that aestheticians should attend to. That the data is indecisive won’t halt progress in this essay. It is enough for now to say that the surfaces of paintings and drawings are of legitimate interest to us not merely for what they represent but in virtue of being the sites of the artistic activity which produced those representations, and I think we can take that for granted. The critical vocabulary that has been shaped by the later work of Titian, the contrasting styles of Ingres and Delacroix, and much in the subsequent history of artistic style would have to be written off as confused if that were denied.

5. Aesthetic surfaces: paintings and photographs
Let us put the distinction between design and surface to one side, and make an adjustment to terminology. I want to talk about the ‘surface’ of a picture not by way of contrast with design but as the site of design: the place where the painter makes the marks which constitute the

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24 (Lopes, 2014).
25 Artistic preference and artistic judgement may pull in different directions, as when we prefer a work that we acknowledge is inferior; but in many situations preference and judgement will be coherent.
26 (Leder, Bär, & Topolinski, 2012).
27 (Ticini, Rachman, Pelletier & Dubal, 2014; McLean, Want and Dyson, 2015).
design. That surface—paper, canvas or whatever it is—is what we attend to when we view a painting as a painting. If we don’t view it as a painting but as, say, simply a way of accessing the appearance of some represented object that interests us, we still see the surface, but we attend to what is represented and not to how representation is achieved. The conclusion I offer is that representational paintings have aesthetically significant surfaces in virtue of the facts that (i) it is the engagement of the artist with that surface which makes this a representation; (ii) that surface is a record of that engagement; (iii) a properly aesthetic engagement with the work requires attending to that surface as such a record.

You may say that I am not entitled to this conclusion because, as we have agreed, only some paintings (the non-transparent ones) have the kinds of marks which draw attention to the activity of the artist; transparent paintings are in this respect no different from conventional photographs. That would be the wrong conclusion. All paintings have aesthetically interesting surfaces, because their surfaces are always records of aesthetically interesting choices and activity.28 With a transparent painting, we have a surface where the painter has chosen to efface (or avoid making) marks which have any visible features other than those that contribute directly to the determination of what is depicted. That activity of effacement makes the surface a focus of aesthetic attention.29 Photographs do not arise by any such processes of effacement or avoidance; they simply do not have the kinds of surface interest that paintings have.

This does not mean that a photographic positive and a film image projected on a screen lack surfaces. One may touch the photograph or the screen and trace with one’s finger the outlines of shapes, distinguishing hues and colours as one goes. But these surfaces do not have the relation to the activity of the image-maker that surface marks have in the case of painting. Those colours and shapes are not records of the artist’s activity in the way that colours and shapes are in painting. The painter places marks on the canvas; the photographer arranges objects in space and in relation to a camera in such a way that those shapes and colours will appear as downstream causal consequences of this activity. Of course a photographer may choose to intervene by making painterly marks on the surface of the photograph. But this moves us from a discussion of photography itself to mixed media of various kinds, which are not my concern here.

These differences between paintings and photographs need not be visible. As noted above, paintings may have transparent surfaces much as a conventional photograph does, and a pair of pictures, one a photograph and one a painting, may look the same. But even in this case there remains the difference that the painting’s surface is a site of (in this case largely effaced) artistic activity whereas the photograph is a product of activity that is directed at the things represented. My claim is that the viewer’s awareness of this difference creates two quite different artistic experiences, even where the pictures themselves have exactly the same looks. The painting encourages attention both to what is represented (its intensional content) and to the surface marks which are its material underpinning. The photograph focuses us on those things and events which were the focus of the artist’s attention in producing the picture. Note that those things and events are not exclusively the things and events photographed; they include also things and events involved in the process of photographing. The camera itself is one of these

28 I don’t mean that all paintings have aesthetically valuable surfaces, only that any aesthetic interest we take in a painting should focus on, among other things, its marked surface. Some paintings—mine for example—are not worth taking an aesthetic interest in.

29 I take it that an absence of activity of a certain sort may be evident on a surface, as with the absence of sunburn on the skin under a wrist watch. It is another, more difficult question whether such an absence can literally be seen. I don’t take a view on that here. For an argument in favour of seeing absences see Farennikova (2013).
things, and we will return to the relation between the camera and the body in Section 7.

6. Three objections
I’ll consider three reasons for doubting this conclusion in full generality, the last two of them arising in situations where photographs fail to be transparent. Here is the first. Sometimes the depiction of objects or their shadows, in photographs and film images, attains a kind of abstract status which makes it advantageous to see them as forming a striking geometric pattern on the image. Does this mean that these images have, after all, surfaces of artistic interest? It does not. We should not confuse an interest in the two-dimensional pattern of an image with an interest in the image surface. If we attend to the abstract pattern of a photograph or cinema image we are not attending to qualities of its surface but to the way that objects in space are arranged, often in creative and surprising ways, to create that abstract pattern. Our response to the abstract pattern of a depictive painting may be partly constituted by such thoughts, but it is also and centrally a feature of the design imposed by the artist on the worked surface.30

The second reason, and one of two salient ways that photographs violate transparency, is that photographs sometimes have a visible graininess which reveals something about the underlying mechanics of the photographic process and fails to correspond to anything represented. Occasionally film draws attention to this. In the final shot from Bergman’s A Passion, we have a case where the blowing up of the shot makes the grain of the film stock more and more evident to the point where one can no longer identify representational elements of the scene; the image decomposes into its nondepictive parts.31 But while the pattern of grains in such an image is non-depictive it is the material from which the picture’s overall visible pattern is composed. The pattern of shapes and colours (including here black and white) that we identify in the photograph supervenes on the pattern of grains; fix all the facts about how it is with grain and you thereby fix the facts about how it is with colour and shape.

Should we say, in that case, that photographs where the grain is visible are like paintings in respect of having aesthetically significant surfaces? We need first to be careful about what we are comparing. The grain of the photograph, visible or not, constitutes a level of structure within the picture that does not line up with the pattern of representing shapes and colour which we find in both painting and photography. It does line up with something in the case of painting, for paint consists ultimately of particles in suspension which are visible under magnification. The facts about the distribution of these particles constitute a supervenience base for the facts about shapes and colours we focus on when we see a painting: fix the facts about the particles and their distribution and you fix the facts about colours and shapes. The particles in paint are not normally visible to the naked eye and it would be unusual to make

30 Many thanks here to Berys Gaut who saved me from confusion.
31 (Currie 2010).
them visible. But it could be done; one might paint a picture that is to be seen through a magnifying device, or simply use paint with more visible particles. That might have some artistic interest, but it tells us nothing about the interest we normally ascribe to the colours and shapes of a painting. When we compare the properties and interests of painting and photography we must compare things that occupy the same level of structure. It would be a mistake to draw conclusions about the similarities or differences between painting and photography by comparing the grain of photographs with the colours and shapes we normally focus on in painting. If we want a comparison for photographic grain it will be found in the particles of paint. Would such a comparison illuminate our discussion?

It is true that the presence of a visible grain in a photograph may be the result of the photographer’s choice (with regard, for example, to film stock) and that such a choice may be aesthetically relevant. It might also be argued that this kind of interest is never or almost never a feature of painting, a medium which does not exploit the potential for visibility in grain (I’ll assume that, for the sake of the argument). Still, the admitted interest of grain in photography does nothing to support the idea that the surface of the photograph is aesthetically interesting in the way that of a painting is. For while the grain may be visible on the photograph’s surface, it is not made visible by the physical action of the photographer on that surface; its appearance is merely a downstream effect of prior, and perhaps aesthetically interesting choices with regard to film stock, shutter speed and other matters.

Finally, blurring is a property of photographs which may be thought to generate interest in the picture surface. Do blurred photographs, such as Robert Capa’s photograph of a soldier struggling ashore on D-day at Omaha beach, represent their subjects as blurred? We noted earlier that according to the doctrine of the transparency of perception, whatever we focus on in perceptual experience turns out to be a feature of how the world is represented in that experience. Frank Jackson includes blurred vision in this characterization: ‘when vision is blurred, what is seen appears to be blurred’.  

As A. D. Smith notes, this seems wrong:

When an object looks blurred, we typically have no problem detecting this blurriness. Such blurriness is not, however, and is not taken to be, even by totally naïve subjects, a feature or apparent feature of the object seen. … Blurriness is not a way that things in the world themselves seem to be. It is, however, a feature of experience of which we are usually aware when it is there. The Transparency Thesis is therefore false.

The same holds, I think, for photographs. Neither in vision nor in photographic representation is blurring taken for a way things seem to be. Blurring in photographs, being non-representational, violates transparency. Does that mean that photographs like Capa’s are pictures which do draw attention to their surfaces in the ways that paintings do? I say not. The blurring in Capa’s picture draws attention to the fact of (presumably uncontrolled) movement of the camera at the instant when the shot was taken. The blurring certainly is artistically relevant, though it may be unintentional, and so is to be attended to. But attending to it focuses

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32 (Jackson 2013, 257).
33 (Smith 2008, 201). Smith distinguishes blurring from fuzziness, a respectable property of external objects.
34 It might be argued that in some photographs blurring and fuzziness could not be distinguished. All I need to assume here is that in a photograph (like Capa’s) where the blurring is recognisable, that blurring is not taken to be a feature of the scene depicted.
us on the instability of the relations between the photographer and the worldly object—a soldier in water—which is its subject. In other cases blurring indicates that the object photographed was moving at a rate incompatible with the shutter speed. Again, our attention is drawn to the relation between the photographic act and the photographed subject, not the surface.

There is more to be said about blurring, and that will come in the next section.

7. The Camera and the body

I have put much emphasis on these surface-differences between painting and photography because the idea of the worked surface in painting is vital for understanding the role of paintings as social objects: objects which connect human subjects. In face to face situations people imitate each other’s postures and expressions, move in step and, below the threshold of observable behavior, recapitulate each other’s movements through the production of motor representations concordant with what is observed. Paintings and drawings are among the many kinds of objects which extend our capacity to respond in these ways, allowing us to feel an embodied connection with people distant in time and place. They do so in two ways already distinguished. They do this, first and rather obviously, by making available to us images of people doing things which call forth our sympathetic motor responses, as with the Bellini depiction of the Christ child holding the Virgin’s head at an awkward angle. That way has not been the focus of our concern here. We have been concerned instead with the ways in which paintings and drawings provide us with surfaces which manifest the activity of the artist who has made the depiction. Photographs and cinematic images do facilitate interpersonal connection in the first of these ways: they show us images of people doing things, just as paintings do, and cinematic images which depict movement in time may do this superbly well. But photographs do not have available to them the second way.

We should not conclude from this that photographs lack all capacity to connect the viewer with the physical activity of the maker. There are various ways for a photograph to do this. Blurring is one of them. Although attention to blurring is not attention to surface, it is attention to a feature of the work that generates, or may generate, the kind of sympathetic, imagined movement that brush marks on the surface of a painting can create. The enduring popularity of Capa’s image is surely something to do with its capacity to provide a vivid sense of the movement of the artist and my own vague sense is one of unbalanced movement in response to it. Empirical work may even show that inner motor representations consistent with ‘holding a camera in an unsteady way’ accompany seeing pictures like this.

Because photography is a static art we would not expect it to provide many kinds of opportunities for this kind of mental recapitulation. What do we find when we turn to film images? Is there anything in what is made visible in film which achieves effects comparable to the effects of the marked surface in painting, mosaic work and the other depictive arts? The best and most obvious candidate (given the discussion of Capa’s picture) is camera movement through the duration of the shot. There are difficulties here to do with the powerful and complex technologies that support camera movement and prevent it having the very direct relation to movement of an artist’s body that painterly marks have. Still, there are occasions on which camera movement creates a strong impression of the physical presence and activity of an agent. In Renoir’s Rules of the Game the complex, exploratory movements of the camera are a surrogate for, if not a trace of, the corresponding movements of an agent. But if this is the closest that film comes to achieving the effects of painterly marks it is one which focuses us on the relation between the camera and the space represented in the film image, and not on the surface of the resulting image.
In cases like this, where we sense agency in the movement of the camera, who is the agent in question? We should not think of this as a character in the pro-filmic world, an invisible companion to the other characters, spying on them un-noticed. Renoir’s camera produces a much more amiable effect than this. Nor, it seems to me, should we think of this as a real extra-filmic presence such as that of the camera operator. We do better to think of this as a somewhat shadowy and indeterminate filmic narrator, described by George Wilson as a ‘minimal narrating agency’. Wilson, I think would argue that such a narrating agent is present in almost all movies and indeed in almost all fictional narratives. I do not go anywhere near this far. But the case for such a narrator, and for their close connection with the camera, is strong in the case of Rules of the Game and some other filmic narratives.

8. Consequences

All pictures, photographs included, have surfaces. When we see a picture of any kind we see its surface, and we attend to the things represented by means of seeing marks on that surface. But handmade images encourage attention to their surfaces as surfaces: as physical locations where artistic activity has taken place and where traces of that activity are registered. Photographs do not do that.

We should not see in this any support for what Dom Lopes has called the equivalence thesis: that ‘any interest we take in photographs, when we view them as photographs, is wholly an interest in the actual objects that were photographed and not an interest in the photographs themselves’, a view he attributes to Roger Scruton and which seems to lead to the thought that there is no artistic or aesthetic interest in photographic representation itself. Scruton encourages this attribution when he says that ‘if there is such a thing as a cinematic masterpiece it will be so because… it is in the first place a dramatic masterpiece’. In response, Lopes points out that we may very well have an ‘an interest in the scene as it is seen through the photograph’, and hence an interest in the photograph itself. The argument I have given suggests that a good deal of the artistic interest of a photograph is in what it reveals about its own process of making—something which clearly bears on what is represented but which does not have the subject of the photograph as its focus. Relevant facts include skill in composition by arrangement of objects before the camera, lighting, or simply the capacity to grasp the decisive moment. So I join with Lopes in rejecting the equivalence thesis. But this much is true; that whatever is of interest in a photograph does not include—as it does so importantly in painting—an interest in the way in which the representational marks on the picture’s surface support the representational properties of the painting. That is such an important aspect of the aesthetics of pictures that one may understand the attractions of the thought that, without that relationship between marks and representation in place, the aesthetics of pictures would be a null topic—while recognizing on reflection that the thought is not correct.

Scruton suggests at one point that a photograph is like a frame around an object: it presents the

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35 (Wilson 2011, 112-3).
36 (Currie 2010, 4.5).
37 Rules of the Game is notable for the sustained presence of this narrating agency; in many films we sense such a presence only at certain moments.
39 Scruton ibid, p.577.
40 Lopes ibid., p.445, my emphasis. Lopes has a number of arguments against the equivalence thesis. See also Currie (1995, sec. 2.9).
object rather than representing it.\textsuperscript{41} Framing generally preserves the visibility of what is framed and Kendall Walton argues that photographs are ‘transparent’ pictures, ones we ‘see through’ to what they are of. On this view a photograph of Queen Victoria lets us literally see Queen Victoria. Being transparent, they are like windows and telescopes: aids to seeing.\textsuperscript{42} Paintings and drawings are not transparent. I emphasize again that Walton’s transparency is not the same property as the kind of transparency I have been discussing and which derives from a theory of ‘the transparency of perception’.

In support of this view Walton argues that seeing things directly and seeing photographs of them share distinctive patterns of counterfactual dependence and perceptual error. These arguments, even on a favourable reading, don’t establish the transparency of photographs; they point to features that seeing photographs of things have in common with seeing things directly. Since there are things these processes don’t have in common, a judgement on transparency will depend on weighting the similarities and the differences, and one is likely to give heavier weight to the similarities if one finds intuitive appeal in the idea of (Waltonian) transparency.\textsuperscript{43} Indeed, there is something about photographs that encourages the idea that that the object represented is made directly available to us in a way that a painting cannot match and the argument of this essay offers an account of what the something is. Because they are not the sites of artistic activity, the surfaces of photographs lack the salience enjoyed by paintings, so their surfaces do not compete with their subjects for our interest and attention. We might even say that their lack of surface salience gives us the impression of ‘seeing through them’ to their subjects. But lack of salience does not really support the idea of transparency in Walton’s sense. What is made salient need not be literally shown. That photographs make their objects salient in ways that paintings don’t is no argument for the thesis that photographs literally show us their objects.

Bibliography


\textsuperscript{41} Scruton ibid, p.589.

\textsuperscript{42} (Walton 1984).

\textsuperscript{43} Reactions to this idea have tended to be of two kinds. One is to deny that photographs are transparent; see Currie (1995, sec. 2.6). The other is to argue that all depictions are transparent; see Lopes (1996, ch.9). For further generalization see Yetter-Chappel (2017).

