

# UNFIT TO PRINT: CONTRA MAG UIDHIR ON THE ONTOLOGY OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTWORKS

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According to the orthodox view, photographic artworks are abstract objects. This view, however, has recently been challenged by Christy Mag Uidhir. In his article 'Photographic Art: An Ontology Fit to Print', he argues in favour of a nominalist construal of photographic artworks. My goal is to show that Mag Uidhir's argument is unpersuasive.

## I. INTRODUCTION

What sort of things are photographic artworks?<sup>1</sup> Are they *abstracta*, like numbers, properties, and sets? *Concreta*, like tables, people, and mental representations? Or entities of some other kind? According to the view accepted by an overwhelming majority of theorists, including Gregory Currie, Jerrold Levinson, Guy Rohrbaugh, Amie Thomasson, Richard Wollheim, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, photographic artworks are *abstracta*. This view, however, has recently been contested by Christy Mag Uidhir. In his article 'Photographic Art: An Ontology Fit to Print',<sup>2</sup> he argues that photographic artworks are to be construed as *concreta*.

My aim in what follows is to defend the orthodox, abstractionist view against Mag Uidhir's attack. I begin with a formulation of Mag Uidhir's argument (Section II). I then argue that his substantiation of one of the premises of this argument is unsatisfactory (Section III). Finally, I show that there is a good reason to reject this premise (Section IV).

## II. MAG UIDHIR'S ARGUMENT

Mag Uidhir's argument in favour of identifying photographic artworks with concrete entities can be formulated as follows:

- (1) 'Being a photographic artwork entails being a photograph.'<sup>3</sup>
- (2) 'Being a photograph entails being a print.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, 'a photographic artwork' denotes a *repeatable* photographic artwork, or a photographic artwork that can be fully appreciated through several distinct instances of this work, none of which is identical to the work itself.

<sup>2</sup> Christy Mag Uidhir, 'Photographic Art: An Ontology Fit to Print', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2012): 31–42.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

(3) Being a print entails being a concrete entity.

(4) Being a photographic artwork therefore entails being a concrete entity.

The argument is valid. Premise (1) seems true. While not all photographs are photographic artworks, all photographic artworks – at least, of the kind examined in this article – are photographs. And the truth of premise (3) is beyond doubt. A print is a particular material (physical) thing, and any material thing is concrete. The crux of the argument is clearly premise (2). Is this premise true?

### III. MAG UIDHIR'S DEFENCE OF PREMISE (2)

Mag Uidhir offers three arguments in favour of (2). His first argument is as follows. If we abandon (2), we 'must somehow find a coherent way to predicate photographic conventions and practices on something other than photography's printmaking genealogy'.<sup>5</sup> But we cannot find such a way. So (2) cannot be rejected.

The second argument offered by Mag Uidhir is this:

Basic print ontology [...] is nominalist – the works of printmaking (that is, the products of printmaking forms, processes, or techniques) are concrete, individual, and distinct prints. So, given that photography is a form of printmaking, no less so than other printmaking forms (for example, intaglio, lithography, relief printing, aquatint, silkscreen, sugar lift, gum printing, and the like), *being a photograph entails being a print*. Just as a lithograph is the print product for lithography, a photograph is the print product for photography (that is, the print product of photographic processes).<sup>6</sup>

Alternatively, this argument can be presented in the following way. If a process is a form of printmaking, then the result of this process is a print of a certain kind. Therefore, since photography is a form of printmaking, the result of photography is a print of a certain kind, namely, a photographic print. Meanwhile, the result of photography is a photograph. So a photograph is a photographic print.

Mag Uidhir's third argument is as follows. If we reject (2), we must 'construct a rather daunting sort of error theory that explains how the vast majority of the relevant folk (that is, artists, photographers, printmakers, buyers, brokers, insurers, collectors, museum curators, gallery owners, and so on) have all been the unwitting victims of a massive reference failure of such unprecedented scale and altogether devastating impact, not only for substantial parts of the worlds of art and printmaking, but also for the world of photography as a whole'.<sup>7</sup> In other words, abandoning (2) requires that we provide an error theory that would explain why sentences like:

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 35.

- (a) I framed Robert Mapplethorpe's photograph *Parrot Tulips* and hung it on the wall.
- (b) John presented his friend with Alfred Stieglitz's photograph *The Steerage* in a black frame.
- (c) I would like you to mail me this photograph.
- (d) Mary should change the photograph in her passport.

seem to us to be capable of being literally true but are, in fact, incapable of that. However, we cannot, or do not want to, provide such a theory. Therefore, we should not reject (2).<sup>8</sup>

None of Mag Uidhir's arguments, however, stands up to criticism. According to the first argument, we cannot 'find a coherent way to predicate photographic conventions and practices'<sup>9</sup> on anything 'other than photography's printmaking genealogy'.<sup>10</sup> But I think we can find such a way. We can predicate our photographic conventions and practices on the *abstracta*-making genealogy. That is, we can say that what grounds our photographic conventions and practices is the practice of creating photographic *abstracta*. Similarly, we might add, our musical conventions and practices are grounded in the practice of creating musical *abstracta* (Beethoven's Symphony No. 5), our conventions and practices related to fiction are grounded in the practice of creating literary *abstracta* (*Pride and Prejudice*) and abstract fictional characters (Sherlock Holmes), and our practices and conventions concerned with car models are grounded in the practice of creating car model types (the Ford Mustang).

One might object that this response involves a false assumption – that at least some abstract objects are creatable. Is this objection persuasive? Since the assumption does not seem to be at odds with common sense and is widely endorsed by a considerable number of philosophers,<sup>11</sup> it is not *prima facie* false. So the objection can be successful only if it provides a satisfactory *argument* demonstrating the falsity of the assumption. Can such an argument be provided?

<sup>8</sup> Put otherwise, if (2) is false, then we have to explain why we tend to speak in the way we do (for instance, why we say 'Photography X is on my wall' and not 'Photographic print of X is on my wall').

<sup>9</sup> Mag Uidhir, 'Photographic Art', 35.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Ben Caplan and Carl Matheson, 'Can a Musical Work Be Created?', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 44 (2004): 113–34; Jerrold Levinson, 'Indication, Abstraction, and Individuation', in *Art and Abstract Objects*, ed. Christy Mag Uidhir (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 49–61; Amie Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Robert Howell, 'Types, Indicated and Initiated', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42 (2002): 105–27; Guy Rohrbaugh, 'Artworks as Historical Individuals', *European Journal of Philosophy* 11 (2003): 177–205; Lee Walters, 'Repeatable Artworks as Created Types', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 53 (2013): 461–77.



In the philosophical literature, there are two common arguments against the possibility of creating *abstracta*.<sup>12</sup> One of the arguments is that abstract objects cannot be created because they exist at all times. According to the second argument, it is impossible to create abstract objects, since they cannot stand in causal relations. Although at first blush, the arguments may seem persuasive, neither of them, in fact, stands up to criticism. Both arguments are based on particular assumptions: The first argument assumes that *abstracta* exist at all times; the second argument assumes that *abstracta* cannot stand in causal relations. However, as has been shown by a number of philosophers, including Ben Caplan, Carl Matheson, and Lee Walters, there are no satisfactory arguments that could support these assumptions.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, there is good reason to believe that the assumptions are false. Consider the singleton whose sole member is the Eiffel Tower. If this singleton has always existed, then, since the Eiffel Tower has not always existed, there was a time when the singleton existed, but the tower did not exist. However, this consequence is implausible. If an object is contained in an existent set, then this object exists – qua a member of the set. Consequently, there could be no time when the singleton containing the Eiffel Tower existed without the tower itself. Thus, the singleton containing the Eiffel Tower has not always existed. Meanwhile, a singleton is a set, and, as is generally agreed, sets are abstract objects. So the assumption of the first argument – that *abstracta* exist at all times – is false.

Using the singleton containing the Eiffel Tower, we can also demonstrate the falsity of the second argument's assumption – that *abstracta* cannot stand in causal relations. Suppose that the singleton containing the Eiffel Tower was not caused to exist by anything. Then it either came into existence without any cause or has always existed. As has been shown earlier, the latter option cannot be accepted. But the former option is also problematic. If it is true, then the singleton's coming into existence did not have any cause and, hence, was purely accidental. However, this consequence appears implausible. It seems bizarre to claim that the singleton containing the Eiffel Tower is a purely accidental

<sup>12</sup> Both arguments are examined, from various angles, in a number of philosophical works. For a defence of the arguments, see, for example, Julian Dodd, 'Musical Works as Eternal Types', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40 (2000): 424–40; 'Defending Musical Platonism', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42 (2002): 380–402. For a critique of the arguments and of their defence by Dodd, see, for example, Caplan and Matheson, 'Can a Musical Work Be Created?'; and Walters, 'Repeatable Artworks'.

<sup>13</sup> See Caplan and Matheson, 'Can a Musical Work Be Created?'; and Walters, 'Repeatable Artworks'. A detailed examination of potential reasons in favour of the claim that *abstracta* cannot stand in causal relations and the claim that *abstracta* exist at all times is beyond the scope of this article. For such an examination, see Caplan and Matheson, 'Can a Musical Work Be Created?'; and Walters, 'Repeatable Artworks'.

object – an object that could have come into existence at any moment, even at the moment of the Big Bang, without a sufficient reason. The natural view is that this singleton came into existence when its constitutive element – the Eiffel Tower – came into existence.

So neither option is satisfactory. But then our supposition that the singleton containing the Eiffel Tower was not caused to exist by anything is itself unsatisfactory. As a result, given that a singleton is an abstract object, at least some *abstracta* can stand in causal relations, and so the assumption of the second argument is false.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, both arguments against the creatability of *abstracta* involve questionable assumptions and, hence, fail to succeed in showing that *abstracta* cannot be created. Meanwhile, to my knowledge, there are no other arguments that could succeed in that. So the objection to my response to Mag Uidhir's first argument is based on an unsubstantiated claim – that *abstracta* cannot be created – and, hence, can be disregarded.

Let us now turn to an examination of Mag Uidhir's second argument. This argument assumes that photography is a printmaking process. But why must we accept this assumption? Why can't we assume instead that photography is not *just* a printmaking process but rather a complex process constituted by the printmaking process *and* the process of creating a photograph, where a photograph is understood as an abstract entity of some kind (say, a photographic type)? Meanwhile, if we treat photography this way, then the conclusion of Mag Uidhir's argument – that a photograph is a photographic print – does not follow. In order for it to follow, photography must result in an entity of one kind – the print. However, if photography is constituted by the printmaking process *and* the process of creating an abstract photograph, then photography

<sup>14</sup> Additionally, as Caplan and Matheson note, the second argument's assumption is false *if* a counterfactual analysis of causation – such as the one advocated by David Lewis – is true. According to this analysis, *x* is caused to come into existence by *y* just in case *x* counterfactually depends on *y*, or, in other words, just in case it is true that if *y* had not come into existence, then *x* would not have come into existence. It is uncontroversial that the singleton containing the Eiffel Tower counterfactually depends on the creative activity of those who built the Eiffel Tower: had it not been for this activity, the Eiffel Tower would not have been created and, hence, the singleton containing this tower would not have come into existence. So if the counterfactual account of causation is true, the singleton containing the Eiffel Tower was caused to come into existence by the activity of the creators of this tower. Meanwhile, this singleton is an abstract object. As a result, if the counterfactual account of causation is true, at least some *abstracta* can stand in causal relations. See David Lewis, 'Causation', *Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1973): 556–67; 'Causation as Influence', *Journal of Philosophy* 97 (2000): 182–97; Caplan and Matheson, 'Can a Musical Work Be Created?', 122–23.

results in entities of two distinct kinds – namely, the print and the abstract photograph.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, Mag Uidhir's second argument assumes that photography results in a print of a certain kind. But, again, there seems to be no compelling reason to accept this assumption. At the same time, nothing stops us from adopting another assumption – that photography results in an abstract object of some kind (say, a photographic type), which comes into existence as a result of producing a print of this object. Meanwhile, if this assumption is true, then Mag Uidhir's argument is invalid. As already mentioned, the conclusion of this argument follows from the premises only if the sole result of photography is a print. However, if photography, being a printmaking process, produces a print of a certain kind and thereby gives rise to a particular abstract entity, then photography cannot be said to result just in a print.

According to Mag Uidhir's third argument, if we reject (2), we have to offer an error theory that would explain why certain sentences (for example, (a)–(d)) seem to us to be capable of being literally true but are, in fact, incapable of that. However, if we *accept* (2), we face an analogous difficulty: we have to provide an error theory that would explain why it seems to us that certain other sentences, for instance,

(e) There is a particular number of prints of *The Steerage*.

(f) *The Steerage* is a photograph taken by Alfred Stieglitz in June 1907, when he was sailing on the *Kaiser Wilhelm II* to Europe.

(g) This photograph is currently exhibited at Tate Modern (London) and the Museum of Photographic Art (San Diego, CA).

(h) I have the same photograph in both of my passports.

can be literally true, even though in reality it is impossible for them to be literally true. Thus, as regards the necessity of providing an error theory that explains why some sentences appear to us to be capable of being literally true but are actually incapable of that, both proponents and opponents of (2) are in the same position. But if this is the case, then Mag Uidhir's third argument gives no reason to favour (2) over its denial.

Thus, none of Mag Uidhir's arguments is persuasive. And, as far as I am aware, there are no other potentially plausible arguments that could support (2). So there seems to be no real reason to accept it.

<sup>15</sup> Note that in this case the print and photograph cannot be the same object, since they have different ontological statuses: The print is a *concretum*; the photograph is an *abstractum*.



## IV. AGAINST PREMISE (2)

At the same time, there is, I think, a good reason against (2). The reason can be presented in the form of the following argument:

(5) If (2) is true, then titles of photographic artworks (hereafter: 'photographic titles') – that is, expressions such as 'The Tetons and the Snake River', 'Shooting the Apple', 'The Steerage', 'In Glacier National Park', 'Child Crying, New Jersey', 'Tulips', and so on – refer to particular prints.

(6) However, photographic titles do not refer to particular prints.

(7) So (2) is false.

The argument is valid. So to demonstrate its soundness, it is sufficient to substantiate the premises. Let us first substantiate premise (5).

According to our standard linguistic practice, photographic titles, being a kind of proper name, normally refer to particular photographic artworks (regardless of whether the latter are considered to be prints, *abstracta* of some kind, or something else). Thus, 'The Tetons and the Snake River' refers to the photographic artwork *The Tetons and the Snake River*, 'Shooting the Apple' refers to the photographic artwork *Shooting the Apple*, 'The Steerage' refers to the photographic artwork *The Steerage*, and so on. But if this is so, then, since photographic artworks are photographs, photographic titles refer to particular photographs. Meanwhile, according to (2), photographs are prints. So if (2) is true, then photographic titles refer to particular prints, and, hence, (5) is true.

One might object that the argument falsely assumes that photographic artworks are photographs. However, this objection fails. There seems to be no real reason to claim that photographic artworks are not photographs. Surely, not every photograph is an artwork (consider, for instance, a typical passport photo). But every photographic artwork – at least of the kind examined in this article – is either constituted by or identical to a photograph. Furthermore, the thesis that photographic artworks are not photographs implies that being a photographic artwork does not entail being a photograph. However, this implication is incompatible with premise (1) of Mag Uidhir's argument ('Being a photographic artwork entails being a photograph'). As a result, the objection being discussed is unavailable to a proponent of this argument.

Another potential objection is to reject the premise that photographic titles refer to particular photographic artworks. However, like the previous objection, this objection is unconvincing. A photographic title is, doubtless, a proper name, and proper names are semantically definite. So it is undeniable that each

photographic title refers to a *particular* entity, and not to *any* entity or a *number* of entities of some kind. The objection, therefore, could work only if it implies a rejection of the thesis that photographic titles refer to particular *photographic artworks*. But there seems to be no non-question-begging reason to reject this thesis. Furthermore, what would a photographic title refer to if the thesis were rejected? It might be suggested that such a title could refer to a set or mereological sum of photographic prints of a particular kind. However, this suggestion is seriously at odds with our standard usage of photographic titles, since we do not normally use such titles to refer to sets or mereological sums of photographic prints. Thus, when we say 'John has seen *The Steerage*', we do not mean that John has seen a set or mereological sum of the prints of *The Steerage* (surely, he could have seen *The Steerage* without having seen such a set or sum). Likewise, when we say '*The Tetons and the Snake River* depicts a river', we do not mean that a set or mereological sum of the prints of *The Tetons and the Snake River* depicts a river. As a result, a set or mereological sum of photographic prints of a particular kind cannot serve as the referent of a photographic title. Meanwhile, there seems to be no other potentially plausible candidate that could serve as such referent if the thesis that photographic titles refer to particular photographic artworks is rejected.

Let us now turn to a substantiation of premise (6). Suppose this premise is false. Then each photographic title refers to a particular print. But now, given that there may be more than one print of a photographic artwork, a natural question arises: Why does a photographic title refer to this, and not to some other, print? For instance, why does 'The Tetons and the Snake River' refer to print A, and not to print B, assuming that B is relevantly similar to A?<sup>16</sup> One could say that 'The Tetons and the Snake River' refers solely to print A because A has all the experienceable properties that must be experienced to properly appreciate *The Tetons and the Snake River*. However, this explanation fails, since nothing stops us from supposing that B also has all the properties that bear upon the appreciation of *The Tetons and the Snake River*. Alternatively, one could try to explain why the 'The Tetons and the Snake River' refers solely to print A by saying that A is the first print of *The Tetons and the Snake River* to come into existence. But this explanation is also unsatisfactory. First of all, it depends on the assumption that A is produced before B. However, this assumption can be rejected in favour of the assumption that A and B are produced simultaneously. Furthermore, according to the explanation being

<sup>16</sup> The notion of relevant similarity can be defined as follows: 'Two prints are relevantly similar to each other if and only if they share all constitutive appreciable properties in common in virtue of sharing a causal history.' Mag Uidhir, 'Photographic Art', 33.



analysed, what explains the fact that *A*, and not *B*, is the referent of 'The Tetons and the Snake River' is a particular purely temporal and/or logical difference in the order of coming into existence between *A* and *B*. But why is such a difference sufficient to explain this fact? Presumably, whether an entity is the referent of 'The Tetons and the Snake River' depends solely on what *artistic* properties this entity has. However, neither the temporal nor the logical property of being created after or before some other print is *in itself* an artistic property. (To see this, imagine that *A* and *B* are correctly produced in the same way and in the same relevant cultural-historical context but at different times. In this case, *A* and *B* differ in the temporal and logical properties related to the order of *As* and *Bs* coming into existence. However, there is no reason to ascribe different artistic properties to *A* and *B*.) So the explanation being discussed could be rejected based on the fact that the mere temporal and/or logical difference in the order of coming into existence between *A* and *B* does not really explain why *A*, and not *B*, is the referent of 'The Tetons and the Snake River'.

Thus, neither explanation can be accepted. And there seems to be no other potentially acceptable explanation of why a photographic title refers to this print and not some other. Meanwhile, without such an explanation, the thesis that photographic titles refer to particular prints is ungrounded and, hence, can be rejected.

Another consideration against the thesis that photographic titles refer to particular prints is that if this thesis is true, then a substantial part of our true discourse about photographic artworks is false. To see this, consider, for instance, the following sentences:

- (i) *The Steerage* can be exhibited at several art galleries at the same time.
- (j) *The Tetons and the Snake River* was taken in 1942 in northwest Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park.
- (k) *Shooting the Apple* was printed more than once.
- (l) An original 1970 print of *The Tetons and the Snake River* was sold by the Ansel Adams Gallery.

Each of these sentences is true. However, if photographic titles denote particular photographic prints, the sentences are false. A particular print of *The Steerage* cannot be exhibited at several art galleries at the same time. No print of *The Tetons and the Snake River* was, in fact, taken in 1942 in northwest Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park. It is false that some particular print of *Shooting the Apple* (as opposed to *Shooting the Apple* itself) was printed more than once. Finally, it is not

the case that an original 1970 print of the print of *The Tetons and the Snake River* was sold by the Ansel Adams Gallery (rather, an original 1970 print of *The Tetons and the Snake River* was sold by this gallery).

A final reason against the thesis that photographic titles denote particular photographic prints is that in certain possible situations this thesis is incompatible with the intuitive truth values of some sentences containing photographic titles. Here is one such situation. Suppose that photographic titles denote particular photographic prints. Then, among the relevantly similar prints of *Child Crying, New Jersey*, there must be a print that is the referent of 'Child Crying, New Jersey'. Imagine now that someone takes this print and incinerates it (while leaving the other prints of *Child Crying, New Jersey* intact). In this case, the following sentences must be true:

- (m) *Child Crying, New Jersey* does not exist.
- (n) Someone destroyed *Child Crying, New Jersey*.
- (o) *Child Crying, New Jersey* was incinerated.
- (p) *Child Crying, New Jersey* underwent a change.

This result, however, is highly counterintuitive. The destruction of one print does not seem to be sufficient for any change or destruction of the work it is a print of, provided that there are other relevantly similar prints left. So, *prima facie*, none of the sentences (m)–(p) is true.

Thus, there are at least three considerations against the thesis that photographic titles refer to particular photographic prints. First, if this thesis is true, then there is no principled way to explain why a particular print, and not some other relevantly similar print, is the referent of a given photographic title. Second, the thesis that photographic titles refer to particular photographic prints entails that a significant part of our factually true discourse about photographs is false. Third, in certain possible situations, this thesis is incompatible with the intuitive truth values of some sentences that involve photographic titles. In light of these considerations, we are entitled to conclude that (6) is true: photographic titles do not refer to particular photographic prints.

## V. CONCLUSION

Our analysis has shown that (2) is false. This result, if correct, means that Mag Uidhir's argument involves a false premise and, hence, cannot be accepted. The unacceptability of this argument does not mean of course that photographic artworks cannot be concrete. For, it may well be the case that there is a sound

argument in favour of a concretist construal of the ontology of such works. But I am not aware of such an argument. I am therefore inclined to think that concretism about photographic artworks is untenable.

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