



**Mikael Pettersson**

Though **philosophers** take **negative things** to be unpopular items to add to their ontology, we talk about them as if they are **causally efficacious**.  
But how can silences or holes be causally efficacious?

**Artists** use absences (silence, absences of letters, holes, photos of shadows [=absences of light], or absences of items one would expect [twin towers post 9/11]) often.

**Question:** Are absences causally efficacious such that one can take photographs of them?

**Aim here:** Investigate ways to answer the question & shed some light on the idea that photography is at base a causal medium.



**Richard Wollheim**

What we see in a photograph is in large part a matter of what engaged in the right way with the causal processes realized by the camera.

While paintings and their subjects stand in an intentional relation, the photographic relation is merely causal.



**Roger Scruton**

Photographs only depict those particulars which they are causally related to in an appropriate manner.



**Robert Hopkins**

It must be produced mechanically or automatically, i.e., be a belief-independent counterfactually dependent medium, **or**, perhaps, depend on the manipulation of a surface by light.

**Final question:** What are *sufficient* conditions for an image to be a photograph (as opposed to a realistic painting, say) **of something**?  
I have no full response, but a suggestion.

**Another response:** The expression 'being a photograph of' is vague.  
With respect to cases where perspectival dependence fails (as, also, in cases of photographs of photographs), our intuitions are not as firm as in clear cases.

**One response:** Such photographs are really **of the mirror**. They convey information about the object yet are not **of it**.  
This fits views on which **seeing objects** (and depicting them) requires being able to track their spatial relations.



This photograph of Picasso drawing a centaur with an electric light, is it a photo **of a centaur**? Not on the causal theory.

Not everything that causes a photograph (e.g., *pressing the shutter release button or a cat knocking over the camera and bringing about a photograph of the cat*) is part of what it is then **of**.

If on a causal theory something can only be part of a photograph's content if it has caused the latter in the right way, **what is this right way?**



**Way 3:** Photographs cannot be of absences of objects. Even if they may help cause the photograph, such absences don't have a look.

**Anticipated objection:** What if, using iterated mirrors, etc., one takes a photograph of an object such that perspectival dependence fails? Surely, the photograph is still of that object, but my view implies otherwise.  
If so, then **perspectival dependence** may not be a necessary condition after all.



(also Mikael Pettersson)

There is no centaur, so it can't be the cause of a photo.

Well, yes, photographs are **fictionally incompetent** like that.

I think that's fine. I do worry, however, that the causal theory rules out that pictures can be of real things that are causally inert... like shadows, which seem to be causally inert absences of light.

If so, then photos can convey the information that some thing or other is absent, but not by *being* of such absences.

**Way 2:** Photographs can be of shadows not because they cause them (for on a production view, they don't) just because the latter have a look (**rejects the counterfactual theory**).  
This yields a **pseudo-causal theory of photographic content**. On it, shadows don't function as what causes shadow-parts of photographs (SPP). Shadows, like SPP are caused by what casts the relevant shadow (by blocking light), but that thing need not be part of the photograph.

**Side remark:** "to cause", here, mean "to exert power on something so that it changes; to produce an effect" [**production view**].  
Unlike material objects, **shadows** don't reflect, absorb, block, or emit light. They can't act on photographs.

If photographing causally inert absences seems at least conceivable, should we have an **acausal theory of photographs**?

In the early days, people modeled thinking about photographs somewhat metaphorically on thinking about shadows.  
**More importantly:** many photographers focus on shadows as their primary subjects.

Denying that there are photos of absences seems implausible in the case of shadows.

**Suggestion:** Photographic content has a factual and a perspectival dimension. It counterfactually depends on both.

On the basis of this view, there are **three ways** to deal with absence photography.

**Way 1:** Since photographs counterfactually depend on shadows in both respects, they can be of shadows (**accepts the counterfactual theory**).  
Shadows (absences of light) are located, concrete entities with shape & size properties, so they afford perspectives & looks (the absent Eiffel tower, in contrast, doesn't have such a location, properties, or a look).

Such an **acausal theory** concerns the **content of photographs** [it is not the view that causation has nothing to do with how photographs come into being].  
According to it, **photographic content is not restricted to what causes an image**.

Paloma Atencia-Linares

Photographs are fictionally competent.

True, photographs can be used to represent **fictional entities**, but **not by photographic means!**

That depends on what all we count as photographic means (e.g., post-production techniques). I think a lot counts!

Gregory Currie

That photographic content is objective is a "bedrock belief regarding photography." Let's not give it up!

Should we really accept that what a photograph depicts is **not objective, but relative** to the photographer's thoughts (and, perhaps, those of different viewers)?

If we accept this view, the causal theory of photography looks very different from what it is typically taken to be.  
Typically, photography (as opposed to paintings, say) is taken to be a **merely** causal medium. To what a photograph depicts (as opposed to what a painting, say, depicts), all that matters is what causes it, not the intentions of the photographer or what they think they see (after they have pointed the camera somewhere, that is).  
On the view proposed, the difference between paintings and photographs collapses.

**Suggestion:** Understand **causation not as production**, but, with David Lewis, as counterfactual dependence. On this view, shadows in pictures are causally efficacious in the following sense: **Had the shadows not been there, the photograph would have looked different**.

How about the view that there are photographs of absences and that **absences can be causally efficacious**?

This solution seems **too easy**, is **controversial**, perhaps **unintuitive**.  
Also, if the acausal theory is true, nothing in the medium of photography itself seems to support our practice of treating them as evidence as to what goes on in the real world. Let's look for a less pricey solution!

Nāgārjuna, as we know, would disagree!

**Nobody** thinks that causal facts depend on our interest??? Umm...I do, though!

**Nobody** within the tradition of the metaphysics of causation thinks that causal facts depend on human-dependent norms or expectations!

Helen Beebe

**There are two problems with Modification 2!**

**Modification 2:** Absences that matter to photographic content are not of things that **used to be**, but of things that **we reasonably expected to be there**.  
This modification rules out irrelevant absences of the Eiffel tower and allows in relevant absences of crime suspects.

**Problem:** This, too, is too restrictive. If we use a photograph to show that a suspect was not near the crime scene, then their absence matters, but they may never have been at the scene at all.

To say that we take this **counterfactual statement** to be true is to say that we think that some features of the photograph counterfactually depend on the shadows. And this is just to say, on Lewis's view (as presented), that the shadow, while it doesn't produce anything, still makes a difference to the photograph and, as such, causes (relevant parts of) it.

David Lewis

**Modification 1:** Only those absences matter that concern where **something used to be**.

Can we be more specific about the kinds of absences that we think **do** matter to what's photographed?