

Of medals and models: an archaeology of photographic competitions

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Anyone who practices or studies popular photography cannot help noticing the contemporary proliferation and ubiquity of photographic competitions and contests of all shapes, sizes and genres. It is a phenomenon that extends into the professional field, with a distinct, if shifting, border between major photographic prizes on the one hand, and on the other, the innumerable contests organised by photography magazines and other photographic institutions, the *locus classicus* being the 'monthly themed contest'. While it would be tempting to see this as part of the general gamification of culture, the amateur photographic *agon* pre-dates video games by close to a century.

In the first instance this paper asks how far back the practice of the amateur photographic contest goes, and when, where and how it first emerged. What were the conditions of this emergence, and what was it thought that photography contests were for? The short answer is that photographic contests of the type proliferating today were first seen in the early 1880s, organised by British amateur photographic societies and promoted and amplified by periodicals such as the *British Journal of Photography* as part of the wider social life and aesthetic *praxis* of the societies. If we need to identify a single individual responsible for their introduction, it would be the chemist-photographer-journalist Edward Dunmore, who ran photo studios in and around St Pancras and was an active member of the South London Photographic Society and the Photographic Club. The model of photography contests that he advocated in 1880 remains remarkably close to the model of today's contests.

The paper therefore addresses the theme of the conference by searching out the original model for today's amateur photography contests. But even models are based on models, and the paper recognises that the photographic contest as conceived by Dunmore was not *sui generis*, but instead a modification and adaptation of existing practices, specifically the tradition of photographic exhibitions, which stretched back to at least 1853 in Britain. At these exhibitions, awards of Gold, Silver and Bronze medals were made to the best work, which was considered to be 'in competition' as part of the exhibition. These protocols for photographic exhibitions were of course themselves *already* imitations of both the artistic and scientific societies, which awarded annual medals either for the best work, or the most important technological development in a given year. Photography, as art-science, fell between the two then, as it continues to do today, and this tension continues to define contemporary photographic competitions and their rules.

The paper also takes up the question of the model and photographic modelling in one further sense, by seeking to understand how photographic contests in the 1880s and also today serve to model for their participants and would-be winners certain genres, themes and styles, through an iterative process of exemplar and reward. A model in this sense is both a set of constraints and an enabler of work within a competitive eco-system that determines what counts as a 'good' photograph. Dona Schwartz observed many years ago

that 'Camera club photography is remarkable for its aesthetic continuity', and it could be argued that the continuity of the protocols of photographic contests is a major contributor to that formal and aesthetic stability.

For its primary research the paper draws on the methods of periodical studies, seeking in photographic journals and magazines the traces of past photographic practices, while trying to understand at the same time the function of photographic magazines more generally in establishing and disseminating photographic practices and knowledge. The paper is also informed by theories of play, drawing on classic accounts by Huizinga and Caillois that identify contest or competition as one of the key modalities of play. From this perspective it is vital to explore the wider ecology of play at work in the photographic societies of the 1880s, which goes well beyond photo contests, taking in 'popular' evenings with lantern shows, piano recitals, and the projection of grotesque and comic images.

The paper therefore builds and expands on the paper I delivered at PhotoMedia 2022, 'On Ludic Photography', and explores in depth one of the modalities of photographic play that I touched on two years ago.

P Buse, 'On Ludic Photography', *photographies* 14:3 (2021): 421-441.

R Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (New York: The Free Press, 1961)

J Huizinga [1938], *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Kettering, Ohio: Angelico Press, 2016)

D Schwartz, 'Camera Club Photo-Competitions: An Ethnographic Approach to the Analysis of a Visual Event', *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 21 (1987): 251-81.

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