

METHODOLOGY OF ANALYSIS

How to analyse a photograph critically

“criticism is informed discourse about art to increase understanding and appreciation of art”

- Describing ~ **FORM** ~ What is here? What am I looking at?
- Interpreting ~ **MEANING** ~ What is it about?
- Evaluating ~ **JUDGEMENT** ~ How good is it?
- Theorizing ~ **CONTEXT** ~ Is it art? How does it relate to the history and theory of photography, art and culture?

Describing photographs ~ FORM

- A data-gathering process...listing of facts...basic information on which understanding is build
- Descriptive information can be obtained from two sources...internal and external
- **INTERNAL**...what can be seen in the photograph by attending to subject-matter, form, medium and style
- SUBJECT-MATTER...explain and characterise what appears to be present within the photograph...the obvious and not so obvious...be specific, precise, accurate.
- FORM...how the subject-matter is presented...how the visual elements in a picture is *formally* composed, arranged and constructed...such as relationship between line, shape, form, tone, contrast, colour, texture, light, space, angle, viewpoint...use specific photographic language in your description such as...shot sizes...framing & focussing...angles & perspective.. composition & rule of 1/3...space & foreground/ mid-ground/ background... aperture to control depth of field & area of sharpness...shutter speed to control a sense of movement...use of lighting; natural/ artificial...chiaroscuro; light & shadows...b/w tonal range...contrast of colour...

Describing photographs ~ FORM

- MEDIUM...refers to what the photograph is made of...b/w or colour...digital or film (what size and film format used)...prints size, dimensions...how is it presented...mounted, framed... characteristics of the camera used and any other technical information about how the picture was made, including how the photographer photographs
- STYLE...indicates a resemblance among diverse art objects and photographs from an artist, movement, time period, or geographical location. To consider a photographer's style is to attend to what subjects he/she chooses to photograph, how the medium of photography is used, and how the picture is formally arranged.
- Attending to style or genre can be more interpretive than descriptive and labelling photographs can be problematic when determining work eg. 'realistic' or 'fictional' or 'straight' or 'manipulated' or 'documentary' or 'fashion'
- **EXTERNAL**...consider the photograph's casual environment including the context in which it was made eg. information about the photographer who made it, the times during which it was made, and the social milieu from which it emerged...using external sources like biographical books, monograms, history books, press releases, articles, interview with artist

Interpreting photographs ~ MEANING

- Interpretation occurs whenever attention and discussion move beyond mere information, to matters of meaning
- To interpret a photograph is to tell someone else what you understand about a photograph, especially what you think a photograph is about and what it represents.
- Photographs are not self-evident, impartial or truthful, neither are they innocent, free of insinuations and devoid of prejudices, nor are they simple mirrors of reality.
- People's knowledge, beliefs, values and attitudes – heavily influenced by their culture – are reflected both in the photographs they take and how they 'read' and interpret images
- Each photograph embodies a particular way of seeing and showing the world
- Photographers make choices not only about what to photograph but also about how to capture an image on film
- You must interpret photographs in order to make it clear just what these inflections are
- There is no 'right' way to interpret. All interpretation is subjective, however there are several approaches and strategies you can choose to use. **See case study on Dorothea Lange for different analytical methods and enquires**

Interpreting photographs cont...

- What does a photograph represent? How is meaning formed?
- One way of understanding interpretation is to think of all photographs as metaphors in need of being deciphered
- Visual metaphors have two levels of meaning: the literal (what is shown) and what is implied (what is suggested)
- SEMIOTIC READING...Roland Barthes (French philosopher) was a semiotician who investigated how culture signifies, or express meaning, and he paid particular attention to how photographs signify.
- A photographed still-life arrangement may *denote* (show) flowers in a vase on a wooden table; it may *connote* (suggest, imply) peace, tranquility, and delightfulness of the simple
- These connotations may be conveyed by the use of lighting, colours and the absence of superfluous objects
- A fashion photograph may denote a model wearing a coat and a hat but may connote flair, sophistication, and daring by the look and pose of the model and the setting (*mis-en-scene*)
- To look at the photographs and to see only flowers in a vase on a table or a hat and a coat on a woman, and not recognise what they express is to miss the point of the images

Evaluating photographs ~ JUDGEMENT

- If you deem a work 'good', 'interesting' or 'poor' and 'bad' you must be able to explain why
- Critical judgements, like interpretations, are statements that need reasons in their support
- Both are arguments that require evidence
- Critical judgements have three aspects: *appraisals* (good or bad) that are based on *reasons* that are founded in *criteria*
- Criteria are usually based in definitions of art and in aesthetic theories of what art should be (see following slides on Theory)
- You could base your judgment on aesthetic criteria, how it represents reality or a sense of abstraction, fiction and fantasy

Theorizing photographs ~ CONTEXT

Issues of theory overlap with issues of critical judgement because criteria for judging art are closely linked to theories of art and aesthetic theory - what one believes a photograph *is* or should be, and how it should best be considered

Theory...Pictorialism

Pictorialism...from the 1880s and onwards photographers strived for photography to be art by trying to make pictures that resembled paintings e.g. manipulating images in the darkroom, scratching and marking their prints to imitate the texture of canvas, using soft focus, blurred and fuzzy imagery based on allegorical subject matter, including religious scenes



Clarence H. White, *Morning*, 1908, Photogravure print

Theory...Straight Photography and Realism



Walker Evans, *Hale Country*, 1936

Straight Photography...were photographers who believed in the intrinsic qualities of the photographic medium and its ability to provide accurate and descriptive records of the visual world. These photographers strove to make pictures that were 'photographic' rather than 'painterly', they did not want to treat photography as a kind of monochrome painting (see Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Paul Strand, Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans). They abhorred handwork and soft focus and championed crisp focus with a wide depth-of-field

Realism... (closely associated with 'straight photography') photography grew up with claims of having a special relationship to reality, and its premise, that the camera's ability to record objectively the actual world as it appears in front of the lens was unquestioned. This supposed veracity of the photographic image has been challenged by critics as the photographer's subjectivity (how he or she sees the world and chooses to photograph it) and the implosion of digital technology challenges this notion opening up many new possibilities for both interpretation and manipulation. A belief in the trustworthiness of the photograph is also fostered by the news media who rely on photographs to show the truth of what took place

Theory...Modernism

Modernism...in art and photography is a small part of a much larger era known as *modernity*, temporally ranging from the Enlightenment (about 1687 to 1789) to the present. Early modernity is characterised intellectually by a belief that science could save the world and that, through reason, a foundation of universal truths could be established. Modernity imbue all aspects of society and are apparent in its cultural forms including fiction, architecture, painting, popular culture, photography



Ansel Adams, Yosemite, 1934

Modernism in photography ... (as in painting and sculpture) is a particular way of seeing the world from new perspectives thanks to the advancement of science and technology in the early 20th century which furnished further social and cultural developments. Modernism in art hold a belief in the individual genius of the artist, a desire for originality, a thirst for the new, and reverence for the precious, unique art object. It is an emphasis on object rather than subject, and form rather than content

Theory...Formalism

Formalism...is an aesthetic theory of the 20th century and is closely associated with modernism. Modernist photographers insist on the autonomy of art – art for art's sake – and on the primacy of abstract form rather than references to the physical or social world. Formalism and modernism gave rise to concern for the individuality of media, the uniqueness of a medium, and the distinct visual contributions different types of media could make



Edward Weston, *Dunes, Death Valley*, 1938



Imogen Cunningham, *Two Callas Lillies*, 1925

Theory...Postmodernism

Postmodernism vs Modernism...postmodernist see all kinds of things as text, including photographs, and insist that all texts need to be read critically. For postmodernists a text is different from modernists' notion of a work. A work is singular, speaking in one voice, that of the author, which leads the reader to look for one meaning. For postmodernists many readings (interpretations and understandings) of a text or a work of art are desirable - no single reading can be conclusive or complete.

Postmodernism and Walter Benjamin...

In the 1930s, cultural theorists, Walter Benjamin wrote two essays on photography that are frequently cited by current critics. In these essays Benjamin stressed aspects of the photographic medium different from those that modernist photographers, like Paul Strand and Edward Weston were advocating. While they heralded the honesty of the medium and the infinite detail of the negative and the beautiful photographic print, Benjamin pointed out, that unlike the painting, the photograph is infinitely reproducible



Jeff Wall, *Insomnia*, 1994

Theory...Postmodernism continued

Postmodernism and photography...while reproduction is photography's main contribution to postmodernist practice, a photograph is also readily adaptable; it can be blown up, cropped, blurred, used in newspapers, in a book, on a billboard. Other formal devices used by postmodernists practitioners are seriality, repetition, appropriation, simulation or pastiche (which is opposite to principles of modernity: the autonomy, self-referentiality and transcendence of the unique and precious work of art.)



Sam Taylor-Wood, *Soliloquy I*, 1998

Art does not exist on its own, outside society, or can be understood only in relation to its own formalist characteristics, as modernists would believe. Those embracing postmodernist art generally recognise that art exemplifies the political, cultural, and psychological experience of a society; they are aware of and make reference to the previously hidden agendas of the art market and its relation to art museums, dealers and critics; they are willing to borrow widely from the past, they have returned to the figurative in art; they embrace subject and content over object and form, and they represent a plurality of styles.

Theory...Marxism

Marxist cultural theory...sees ideology as a system of representations, including images, myths, beliefs, which exist in a society at a certain historical time and have a role within the society, and these representations act on men and woman by a process that escapes them. Photographer and theorist, Victor Burgin is interested in determining how these representations affects what is represented. Burgin credits the women's movement for critically examining how women are represented and exposing the detrimental consequences of those representations

Allan Sekula criticises photographic postmodernism as a 'cynical and self-referential mannerism' and he embraces a critical social documentary in both his photography and writing. Sekula is arguing for political understanding of the corruption of capitalism, and then radical change. Mere compassion, through art photography, is not enough, and he insists that 'the expressionist-liberalism of the find-a-bum school of concerned photography' is not a solution.



Victor Burgin, *Life Demands a Little Give and Take*, 1974

Theory...Marxism continued

Concerned documentary...in the tradition of Lewis Hine, W. Eugene Smith and Sebastio Salgado is based on assumptions that the photograph represents a one-to-one correspondence with reality, which is nearly accurate and adequate, and that the photographic image is capable of conveying information objectively. Traditional documentary believes the viewer to be a receptive subject taking in the objective information of the world through the photograph



Sebastio Salgado, *Famine in Sahel, Mali*, 1985

Marxism and postmodernism...reject these assumptions as naïve and posit that traditional, humanistic, concerned photography makes social comments that merely evoke sympathy rather than encourage resistance. Further, photography deals with surface appearances (the photograph is only a document with chemical traces of light and shadows), and surfaces obscure rather than reveal the actual complex social relations that underlie appearances.

Theory...Feminism

Feminist theory...is concerned with how woman are represented. What is central to feminist theory explains cultural theorist, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'is the recognition that woman does not speak herself: rather, she is spoken for and all that that implies: looked at, imagined, mystified and objectified.' Feminist art-historian, Griselda Pollock makes a related point about women's position in fine art: 'Representing creativity as masculine and circulating Woman as the beautiful image for the desiring male gaze, High Culture systematically denies knowledge of woman as producers of culture and meaning.'

Sex and Gender...two key ideas propel feminist theory...sex is different from gender, and feminism is instrumental. Sex refers to the physical features that make us female or male, and gender to the cultural ideas of what it is to be a man or a woman. Gender is how a culture expects and tries to ensure that men act a certain way and woman another, or a gay man this way and a lesbian that way.



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled film-still*, 1977

Theory...Feminism continued

Genders are political constructions...usually in a hierarchically order: Power, usually male, would have it be that it is better to be male than female, masculine than feminine, 'straight' than 'queer.'



Nan Goldin, *Nan and Brian in bed, New York City, 1983*

Feminism is instrumental...in that to be a feminist is a political choice, a choice toward action to resist and to change the status quo. One is not born a feminist, but rather one chooses to become one. All women are not feminists, and all women do not make feminist art; nor do all feminists make feminist art.

Theory...Feminism continued

Fashion and the female...fashion imagery constructs the female as different, as other, and therefore estranges and oppresses her by making her the voyeuristic object of the male gaze. When fashion imagery is presented for women, the female viewer must project her own sexual identity as existing by and for the eyes of men. Women in fashion images are presented as ritual objects and as commodities.



Helmut Newton, *Raquel Big Nude*, 1981



Jemima Stehli, *Strip No 4 Curator*, 1999

A summary of what you could look at in a photograph

Do not try and ask every question of every photograph, some of the questions will not be appropriate and do not think that these questions are the only ones you can ask!

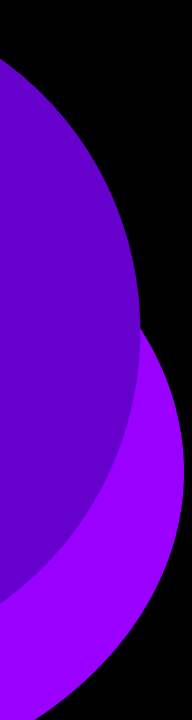
- Describe what is both inside and outside of the photograph...formal qualities and context of its making
- What is the theme/ concept/ background/ narrative?
- What is the range of meanings and interpretations a viewer might get from the photograph?
- Is it realistic/ abstracted/ surreal?
- Is it dealing with personal issues/ circumstance?
- Is it making a statement/ commentary...political/ social/ cultural?
- What do you think was the photographer's intention?
- Does the photograph have an emotional or physical impact?
- What emotions, feelings, opinions are conveyed?
- How does it make you, the viewer feel?
- How does the photograph do this?
- What are its limitations?

A summary of questions...continued

- If captions are used, how does it change your reading or understanding of the image?
- What do we know about the subject-matter of the image?
- Does the photograph reveal things other than the main subject? E.g. a fashion photograph can also reveal the status of woman in a culture
- How does the photograph relate to other historical evidence?
- How does the photograph compare with others made by the same photographer? Or to other images made in the same period or of the same genre by other artists?
- How does the photograph relate to visual representation in general, and in particular to the history and theory of photography, arts and culture
- How has the image been used...printed page, exhibition...?
- Audience...for whom was it made...viewer, reader, social groups?
- How does this work compare to yours?
- What are the similarities...differences...links...connections?

Some issues and possible questions

- Issues in Street or Documentary Photography: Analyse the theory of Cartier-Bresson's 'decisive moment' and the documentary aesthetics that a photograph should not be manipulated, so that its authenticity, veracity and sense of realism can be maintained. Is it possible for photography to capture moments in time objectively and truthfully? What is the relationship between photography and realism? How can photography bear witness to the ways of life and events of the world? Investigate also, issues of Voyeurism and the nature of observation and intervention in documentary photography
- Issues in War Photography: How can photography represent the realities or truth of war? What ethical and moral issues are involved in photographs of death?
- Issues in Fashion Photography: representation of the female body and the male gaze. Clothes, perfection, or sex? What is the relationship between reality and fantasy in fashion photography?
- Issues in Portraiture: does a portrait tell us more about the person portrayed or the photographer? Can personality and identity be expressed in a portrait?
- Issues in Landscape Photography: Romantic or idyllic representation of nature vs culture and the man-made world. What is beauty in landscape photography? What affect does humans have on the landscape? How does people control, interact and construct the environment in which they live?

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- Go to powerpoint: [personal study + essay structure + Harvard referencing system](#) if you need help with structuring your essay and how to use quotations
 - See [case study: Dorothea Lange](#) for an example of how to analyse an image using different analytical methods and enquiries