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Liz Wells is a Principal Lecturer in Media Arts in the Faculty of Arts, University of Plymouth.

Contributors: Michelle Henning, Patricia Holland, Martin Lister, Derrick Price, Anandi Ramamurthy, Liz Wells

Photography/Media and Cultural Studies

Cover photo: 'Portrait taken at Afro Hair and Beauty Show', 1998. Courtesy of Eileen Perrier and Autograph ABP

ISBN 0-415-30704X

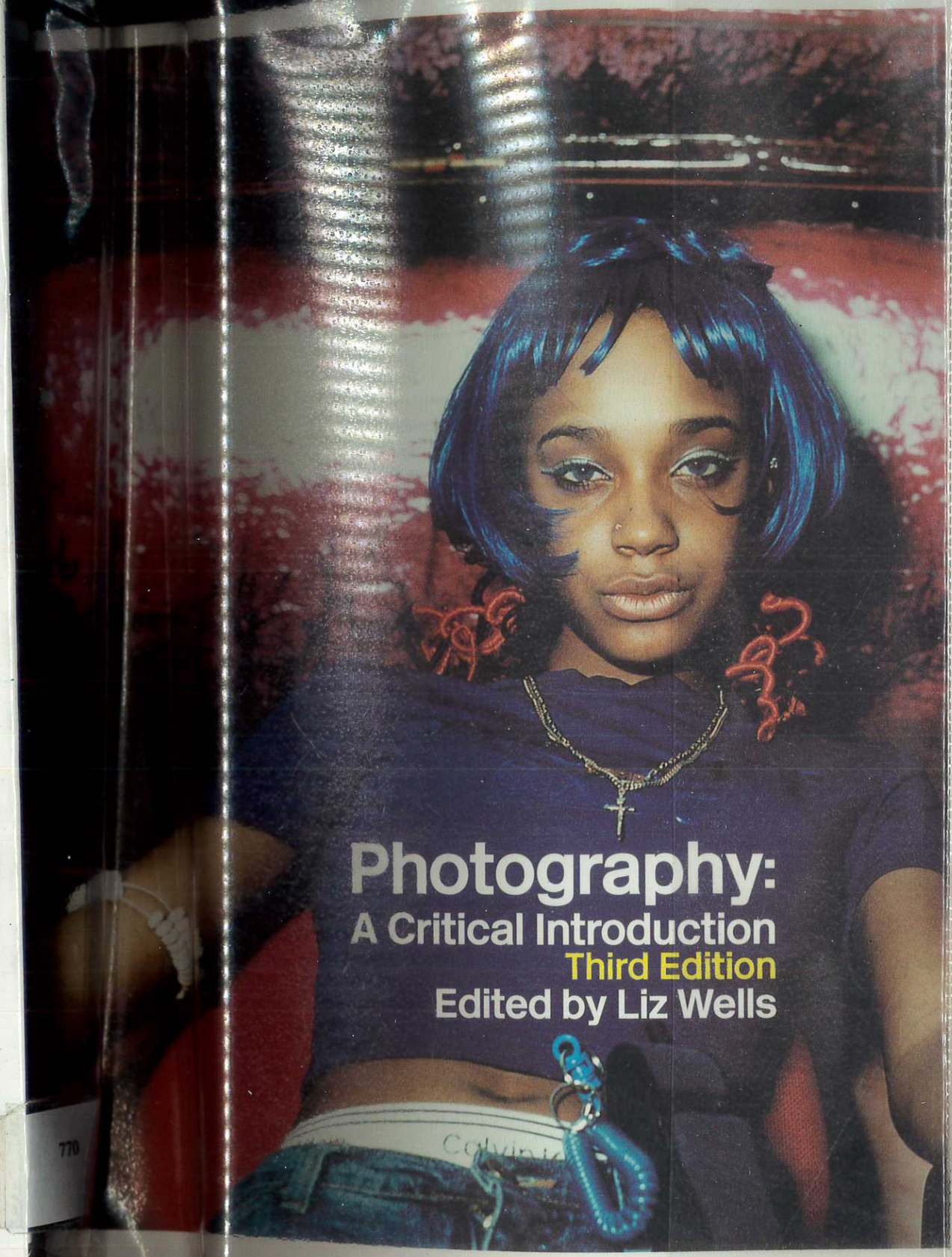
9 780415 307048

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE

29 West 35th Street
New York NY 10001

www.routledge.com
Printed in Great Britain



Photography:
A Critical Introduction
Third Edition
Edited by Liz Wells

In this account, photography is not so much concerned with the development of a new aesthetic as with the construction of new kinds of knowledge as the carrier of 'facts'. These facts are connected to new forms of communication for which there is a demand among all social groups; they are neither arcane nor specialist, but belong in the sphere of everyday life. In this respect, Eastlake is one of the first writers to argue that photography is a democratic means of representation and that the new facts will be available to everyone.

Photography does not merely transmit these facts, it creates them, but Eastlake sees photography as the 'sworn witness' of the appearance of things. This juridical phrase strikingly captures what, for many years, was considered to be the inevitable function of photography – that it showed the world without contrivance or prejudice. For Eastlake, such facts came from the recording without selection of whatever was before the lens. It is photography's inability to choose and select the objects within the frame that locates it in a factual world and prevents it from becoming art:

> Every form which is traced by light is the impress of one great moment, or one hour, or one age in the great passage of time. Though the faces of our children may not be modelled and rounded with that truth and beauty which art attains, yet *minor* things – the very shoes of the one, the inseparable toy of the other – are given with a strength of identity which art does not even seek.
>
> (Eastlake 1857: 94; emphasis in original)

The old hierarchies of art have broken down. Photography bears witness to the passage of time, but it cannot make statements as to the importance of things at any time, nor is it concerned with 'truth and beauty' or with teasing out what underlies appearances. Rather, it voraciously records anything in view; in other words it is firmly in the realm of the contingent.

Photography, then, is concerned with facts that are 'necessary', but may also be contingent, may draw our attention to what formerly went unnoticed or ignored. Writing within 15 years of its invention Eastlake points to the many social uses to which photography has already been put:

> photography has become a household word and a household want; it is used alike by art and science, by love, business and justice; is found in the most sumptuous saloon and the dingiest attic – in the solitude of the Highland cottage, and in the glare of the London gin palace – in the pocket of the detective, in the cell of the convict, in the folio of the painter and architect, among the papers and patterns of the mill owner and manufacturer and on the cold breast of the battle field.
>
> (Eastlake 1857: 81)

For Eastlake, photography is ubiquitous and classless; it is a popular means of communication. Of course, it was not true that people of all classes and conditions could commission photographs as a necessary 'household want' – she anticipates that state by several decades, during which time the use of photography was also spreading from its original practitioners (relatively affluent people who saw themselves as experimenters or hobbyists) to those who undertook it as a business and began to extend the repertoire of conventions of the 'correct' way to photograph people and scenes.

Eastlake's facts are produced, she claims, by a new form of communication, which she is unable to define very clearly. But for all her vagueness, she does identify an important constituent in the making of modernity: the rise of previously unknown forms of communication which had a dislocating effect on traditional technologies and practices. She is writing at an historical moment marked by a cluster of technical inventions and changes and she places photography at the centre of them. The notion that the camera should aspire to the status of the printing press – a mechanical tool which exercises no effect upon the medium which it supports – is here seriously challenged. For Eastlake calmly accepts that photography is not art, but hints at the displacing effect the medium will have on the old structures of art; photography, she says, bears witness to the passage of time, but it cannot select or order the relative importance of things at any time. It does not tease out what underlies appearances, but records voraciously whatever is in its view. By the first decade of the twentieth century the Pictorialists had all but retreated from the field and it was the qualities of straight photography that were subsequently prized. Moreover, modernism argued for a photography that was in opposition to the traditional claims of art.

The photograph as document

In Britain, as elsewhere, the idea of documentary has underpinned most photographic practices since the 1930s. The terminology is indicative: the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of 'documentary' is 'to document or record'. The simultaneous 'it was there' (the pro-photographic event) and 'I was there' (the photographer) effect of the photographic record of people and circumstances contributes to the authority of the photographic image. Photographic aesthetics commonly accord with the dominant modes and traditions of Western two-dimensional art, including perspective and the idea of a vanishing point. Indeed, as a number of critics have suggested, photography not only echoes post-Renaissance painterly conventions, but also achieves visual renderings of scenes and situations with what seems to be a higher degree of accuracy than was possible in painting. Photography can, in this respect, be seen as effectively substituting for the **representational** task previously accorded to painting. In addition, as **Walter Benjamin** argued in 1936, changes brought about by the introduction of mechanical means of reproduction which produced and circulated multiple copies of an image

WALTER BENJAMIN
(1892–1940) Born in Berlin, Benjamin studied philosophy and literature in a number of German universities. In the 1920s he met the playwright, Bertolt Brecht, who exercised a decisive influence on his work. Fleeing the Nazis in 1940, Benjamin found himself trapped in occupied France and committed suicide on the Spanish border. During the 1970s his work began to be translated into English and exercised a great critical influence. His critical essays on Brecht were published in English under the title *Understanding Brecht* in 1973. Benjamin was an influential figure in the exploration of the nature of modernity through essays such as his study of Baudelaire, published as *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1973). He is acclaimed as one of the major thinkers of the twentieth century, particularly for his historically situated interrogations of modern culture. Two highly important essays for the student of photography are 'A Short History of Photography' (1931) and 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936). The latter essay and 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' are frequently drawn upon in discussion of the cultural implications of new technological developments.

shifted attitudes to art (Benjamin 1936). Formerly unique objects, located in a particular place, lost their singularity as they became accessible to many people in diverse places. Lost too was the 'aura' that was attached to a work of Art which was now open to many different readings and interpretations. For Benjamin, photography was therefore inherently more democratic. Yet established attitudes persist. In Western art the artist is accorded the status of someone endowed with particular sensitivities and vision. That the photographer as artist, viewed as a special kind of seer, chose to make a particular photograph lends extra authority and credibility to the picture.

In the twentieth century, photography continued to be ascribed the task of 'realistically' reproducing impressions of actuality. Writing after the Second World War in Europe, German critic, **Siegfried Kracauer** and French critic, André Bazin, both stressed the ontological relation of the photograph to reality (Bazin 1967; Kracauer 1960). Walter Benjamin was among those who had disputed the efficacy of the photograph in this respect, arguing that the reproduction of the surface appearance of places tells us little about the sociopolitical circumstances which influence and circumscribe actual human experience (**Benjamin 1931**).

SIEGFRIED KRACAUER
(1889–1966) German critic, emigrated to America in 1941. His first major essay on photography was published in 1927 in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. The sub-title of his best known work *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* indicates his focus on images as sources of historical information. Benjamin's renowned 'Short History of Photography' (1931), along with his 'artworks' essay (1936), was, in effect, a response to Kracauer's 1927 essay.

WALTER BENJAMIN (1931)
'A Short History of Photography'
in (1979) **One Way Street,**
London: New Left Books.

The photograph, technically and aesthetically, has a unique and distinctive relation with that which is/was in front of the camera. Analogical theories of the photograph have been abandoned; we no longer believe that the photograph directly replicates circumstances. But it remains the case that, technologically, the chemically produced image is an indexical effect caused by a particular conjuncture of circumstances (including subject-matter, framing, light, characteristics of the lens, chemical properties and darkroom decisions). This basis in the observable lends a sense of authenticity to the photograph. Italian **semiotician**, Umberto Eco, has commented that the photograph reproduces the conditions of optical perception, but only some of them (see Eco in Burgin 1982). That the photograph appears iconic not only contributes an aura of authenticity, it also seems reassuringly familiar. The articulation of familiar-looking subjects through established aesthetic conventions further fuels realist notions associated with photography. Thus philosophical, technical and aesthetic issues – along with the role accorded to the artist – all feature within **ontological** debates relating to the photograph.

In recent years, developments in computer-based image production and the possibilities of digitisation and reworking of the photographic image have increasingly called into question the idea of documentary realism. The authority attributed to the photograph is at stake. That this has led to a reopening of debates about 'photographic truth' in itself shows that, in everyday parlance, photographs are still viewed as realistic.

See ch. 2 and 7 for further discussion.

Photography and the modern

Photography was born into a critical age, and much of the discussion of the medium has been concerned to define it and to distinguish it from other

practices. There has never, at any one time, been a single object, practice or form that is photography; rather, it has always consisted of different kinds of work and types of image which in turn served different material and social uses. Yet discussion of the nature of the medium has often been either reductionist – looking for an essence which transcends its social or aesthetic forms – or highly descriptive and not theorised.

Photography was a major carrier and shaper of **modernism**. Not only did it *dislocate* time and space, but it also undermined the linear structure of conventional narrative in a number of respects. These included access to visual information about the past carried by the photo, and detail over and above that normally noted by the human eye. Writing in 1931, Walter Benjamin proposed that the photograph records the 'optical unconscious',

> It is indeed a different nature that speaks to the camera from the one which addresses the eye; different above all in the sense that instead of a space worked through by a human consciousness there appears one which is affected unconsciously. It is possible, for example, however roughly, to describe the way somebody walks, but it is impossible to say anything about that fraction of a second when a person starts to walk. Photography with its various aids (lenses, enlargement) can reveal this moment. Photography makes aware for the first time the optical unconscious, just as psychoanalysis discloses the instinctual unconscious.
> (Benjamin 1972: 7)

Benjamin was writing at a time when the idea that photography offered a particular way of seeing took on particular emphasis; in the 1920s and 1930s both the putative political power of photography and its status as the most important modern form of communication were at their height. Modernism aimed to produce a new kind of world and new kinds of human beings to people it. The old world would be put under the spotlight of modern technology and the old evasions and concealments revealed. The photo-eye was seen as revelatory, dragging 'facts', however distasteful or deleterious to those in power, into the light of day. As a number of photographers in Europe and North America stressed, albeit somewhat differently, another of its functions was to show us the world as it had never been seen before. Photographers sought to offer new perceptions founded in an emphasis upon the formal 'geometry' of the image, both literally and metaphorically offering new angles of vision. The stress on form in photographic seeing typical of American modern photography parallels the stress on photography, and on cinematography, as a particular kind of vision in European art movements of the 1920s. Our vision will be changed because we can see the world from unfamiliar viewpoints, for instance, through a microscope, from the top of high buildings, from under the sea. Moreover, photography validated our experience of 'being there', which is not merely one of visiting an unfamiliar place,

but of capturing the authentic experience of a strange place. Photographs are records and documents which pin down the changing world of appearance. In this respect the close kinship between the still image and the movie is relevant; photography and film were both implicated in the modern stress on seeing as revelation. Indeed, artists and documentarians frequently used both media.

European modernism, with its contempt for the aesthetic forms of the past and its celebration of the machine, endorsed photography's claim to be the most important form of representation. Moholy-Nagy, writing in the 1920s, argued that now our vision will be corrected and the weight of the old cultural forms removed from our shoulders:

> Everyone will be compelled to see that which is optically true, is explicable in its own terms, is objective, before he can arrive at any possible subjective position. This will abolish that pictorial and imaginative association pattern which has remained unsuperseded for centuries and which has been stamped upon our vision by great individual painters.
>
> (Moholy-Nagy 1967: 28)

A world cleansed of traditional forms and hierarchies of values would be established, one in which we would be free to see clearly without the distorting aesthetics of the past. This new world had already been named by Paul Strand in describing American photographic practice, which he saw as indigenous, and viewed as being as revolutionary as the skyscraper. As he put it in a famous article in the last issue of *Camera Work*:

> America has been expressed in terms of America without the outside influence of Paris art schools or their dilute offspring here . . . [photography] found its highest esthetic achievement in America, where a small group of men and women worked with honest and sincere purpose, some instinctively and a few consciously, but without any background of photographic or graphic formulae much less any cut and dried ideas of what is Art and what isn't: this innocence was their real strength. Everything they wanted to say had to be worked out by their own experiments: it was born of actual living. In the same way the creators of our skyscrapers had to face the similar circumstances of no precedent and it was through that very necessity of evolving a new form, both in architecture and photography that the resulting expression was vitalised.
>
> (Strand 1917: 220)

Here, in a distinctively American formulation, photography is seen as having been developed outside history. Strand is claiming that a new frontier of

vision was established by hard work and a kind of innocence, that it was a product of human experience rather than of cultural inheritance.

The postmodern

Postmodernism is an important, and much contested philosophical term, which emerged in the mid 1980s. It is difficult to define, not least because it was applied to very many spheres of activity and disciplines. Briefly, writers on postmodernism postulated the idea that modernity had run its course, and was being replaced by new forms of social organisation with a transforming influence on many aspects of existence. Central to the growth of this kind of social formation was the development of information networks on a global scale which allowed capital, ideas, information and images to flow freely around the world, weakening national boundaries and profoundly changing the ways in which we experience the world.

Among the key concepts of postmodernism were the claims that we are at the 'end of history' and that as Jean-François Lyotard suggested, we are no longer governed by, so called, 'grand' or 'master' narratives – the underpinning framework of ideas by means of which we had formerly made sense of our existence. For instance, Marxism in emphasising class conflict as the dialectical motor of history, provides a material philosophical position which can be drawn upon to account for any number of sociopolitical phenomena or circumstances (Lyotard 1985). This critique was accompanied by the assertion that there has been a major shift in the nature of our identity. Eighteenth century 'Enlightenment' philosophy saw humans as stable, rational subjects. Postmodernism shares with modernism the idea that we are, on the contrary, 'decentered' subjects. The word 'subjects', here, is not really concerned with us as individuals, but refers to the ways in which we embody and act out the practices of our culture. Some postmodernist critics have argued that we are cut loose from the grand narratives provided by history, philosophy or science; so that we live in fragmented and volatile cultures. This view is supported by the postmodern idea that we inhabit a world of dislocated signs, a world in which the appearance of things has been separated from authentic originals.

Writing over a century earlier in 1859, the American jurist and writer, Oliver Wendell Holmes, had considered the power of photography to change our relationship to original, single and remarkable works:

> There is only one Coliseum or Pantheon; but how many millions of potential negatives have they shed – representatives of billions of pictures – since they were erected! Matter in large masses must always be fixed and dear; form is cheap and transportable. We have got the fruit of creation now and need not trouble ourselves with the core. Every conceivable object of Nature and Art will soon scale off its surface for us. We will hunt all curious, beautiful grand objects, as they hunt the

> cattle in South America, for their skins, and leave the carcasses as of little worth.
>
> (Holmes 1859: 60)

Holmes did conceive of some essential difference between originals and copies. Nevertheless, he realised that the mass trade in images would change our relationship to originals; making them, indeed, little more than the source of representation.

The postmodern is not concerned with the aura of authenticity. For example, in Las Vegas hotels are designed to reference places such as New York or Venice, featuring 'Coney Island' or 'The Grand Canal'. Superficially the resemblance is impressive in its grasp of iconography and semiotics, specifically, in understanding that, say, Paris, can be conjured up in a condensed way through copying traditional (kitsch) characteristics of Montmartre. Actual histories, geographies and human experiences are not only obscured, they are irrelevant, as these reconstructions are essentially décor for commercialism: gambling, shopping, eating and drinking. Indeed, communications increasingly featured what the French philosopher **Jean Baudrillard** called 'simulacra': copies for which there was no original.

JEAN BAUDRILLARD (b.1929) French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, has theorised across a very wide terrain of political, social and cultural life. In his early work he attempted to move Marxist thought away from a preoccupation with production and labour to a concern with consumption and culture. His later work looks at the production and exchange of signs in a spectacular society. His notions of the hyperreal and of the simulacrum are of great interest to those interested in theorising photography, and were among the core concepts of postmodernism.

In a world overwhelmed by signs, what status is there for photography's celebrated ability to reproduce the real appearance of things? Fredric Jameson argues that photography is:

> renouncing reference as such in order to elaborate an autonomous vision which has no external equivalent. Internal differentiation now stands as the mark and moment of a decisive displacement in which the older relationship of image to reference is superseded by an inner or interiorized one . . . the attention of the viewer is now engaged by a differential opposition within the image itself, so that he or she has little energy left over for intentness to that older 'likeness' or 'matching' operation which compared the image to some putative thing outside.
>
> (Jameson 1991: 179)

He is among a number of contemporary critics who argue that photography has given up attempting to provide depictions of things which have an autonomous existence outside the image and that we spectators no longer possess the psychic energy needed to compare the photograph with objects, persons or events in the world external to the frame of the camera. If a simulacrum is a copy for which there is no original; it is, as it were, a copy in its own right. Thus, in postmodernity it may be that the photograph has no referent in the wider world and can be understood or critiqued only in terms of its own internal aesthetic organisation. Yet, as Roland Barthes argued, the photograph is always and necessarily of something (Barthes 1984: 28).

Some photography does not traffic in multiple images but, rather, is constructed for the gallery. Cultural theorist, Rosalind Krauss, has described photography's relationship to the world of aesthetic distinction and judgement in the following terms:

> Within the aesthetic universe of differentiation – which is to say; 'this is good, this is bad, this, in its absolute originality, is different from that' – within this universe photography raises the specter of nondifferentiation at the level of qualitative difference and introduces instead the condition of a merely quantitative array of difference, as in series. The possibility of aesthetic difference is collapsed from within and the originality that is dependent on this idea of difference collapses with it.
>
> (Krauss 1981: 21)

Like Benjamin she is noting the loss of aura introduced by the mass reproducability of photographs, but here she draws attention to the impact of this inherent characteristic within the gallery and the art market. The 'collapse of difference' has had an enormous effect on painting and sculpture, for photography's failure of singularity undermined the very ground on which the aesthetic rules that validated originality was established. Multiple, reproducible, repetitive images destabilised the very notion of 'originality' and blurred the difference between original and copy. The 'great masters' approach to the analysis of images becomes increasingly irrelevant, for in the world of the simulacrum what is called into question is the originality of authorship, the uniqueness of the art object and the nature of self-expression.

Indeed, in a world wherein images, which appear increasingly mutable, circulate electronically, such issues may seem irrelevant. In chapter 7 we discuss digital technologies in detail, look at their impact on photography, and consider ways in which we can critically analyse them. Here, we merely want to note that we can now all see some of the effects of the ongoing digital revolution. Many of us receive photographs on e-mail, send them via mobile phones, store them in electronic archives, combine them with text to create brochures, or manipulate them to enhance their quality.

Photography has always been caught up in new technologies and played a central part in the making of the modern world. However, one feature of the digitisation of many parts of our life is that potential new technologies are discussed in detail long before they become an everyday reality. In terms of photography many people anticipated a loss of confidence in the medium because of the ease with which images could be seamlessly altered and presented as accurate records. That this does not appear to have happened is testimony to the complex ways in which we use and interpret photographs. Nevertheless, these technologies are having a decided impact on the nature of the medium and are changing the ways in which it is used in all spheres

of life. These changes continue to be made as the complex mix of technologies leads to the production of new products, stimulates new desires and evolves new forms of communication.

CONTEMPORARY DEBATES

What is theory?

> The role of any theory is to explain. But as recent critical debate has taught us, systems of discourse are themselves implicated in real social and political relationships of power. Explanations inevitably privilege one set of interests over others, and today few of those engaged in critical work would claim to speak from a neutral or objective place. Theoreticians now aspire less to the erection of alternative global systems and more to the questioning and challenging of existing patterns of cultural power. In the current climate, any smooth and unambiguous unity of theory is likely to arouse suspicion. The most insidious explanations are those which see no need to explain themselves.
>
> (Ferguson 1992: 5)

All discussions of photographs rest upon some notion of the nature of the photograph and how it acquires meaning. The issue is not whether theory is in play but, rather, whether theory is acknowledged. Two strands of theoretical discussion have featured in recent debates about photography: first, theoretical approaches premised on the relationship of the image to reality; second, those which stress the importance of the interpretation of the image by focusing upon the reading, rather than the taking, of photographic representations. In so far as there has been crossover between these two strands, this is found in the recent interest in the contexts and uses of photographs (whether chemical or digital).

'Theory' refers to a coherent set of understandings about a particular issue which have been, or potentially can be, appropriately verified. It emerges from the quest for explanation, offers a system of explanation and reflects specific intellectual and cultural circumstances. Theoretical developments occur within established paradigms, or manners of thinking, which frame and structure the academic imagination. On the whole, modern Western philosophy, from the eighteenth century onwards, has stressed rational thought and posited a distinction between subjective experience and the objective, observable or external. One consequence of this has been positivist approaches to research both in the sciences and the social sciences and, as we have already indicated, photography has been centrally implicated within the empirical as a recording tool. Positivism has not only influenced uses of photography; it has also framed attitudes towards the status of the photograph.

Academic interrogation of photography employs a range of different types of theoretical understandings: scientific, social scientific and aesthetic. Historically, there has been a marked difference between scientific expectations of theory, and the role of theory within the humanities. Debates within the social sciences have occupied an intellectual space which has drawn upon both scientific models *and* the humanities. In the early/mid-twentieth century literary criticism centred upon a canon of key texts deemed worthy of study. Similarly, art history was devoted to a core line of works of 'great' artists, and much time was given to discussion of their subject-matter, techniques, and the provenance of the image. The academic framework was one of sustaining a particular set of critical standards and, perhaps, extending the canon by advocating the inclusion of new or newly rediscovered works. A number of major exhibitions and publications on photography have taken this as their model, offering exposition of the work of selected photographers as 'masters' in the field. This approach, in literature, art history and aesthetic philosophy, has been critiqued for its esoteric basis. It has also been criticised for reflecting white, male interests and, indeed, for blinkering the academic from a range of potential alternative visual and other pleasures. For instance, within photography the fascination of domestic or popular imagery, in its own right as well as within social history, was long overlooked, largely because such images do not necessarily accord with the aesthetic expectations of the medium and because they tend to be anonymous.

A more systematic critical approach, associated with mainland European intellectual debates, penetrated the Anglo-American tradition in some areas of the humanities, especially philosophy and literary studies, in the 1970s. The parallel influence on visual studies came slightly later. This impact was most pronounced in the relatively new – and therefore receptive – discipline of film studies. But there was also a significant displacement of older, established preoccupations and methods within art history and criticism, from which emerged what has come to be termed *new art history*. Increasingly, methodologically more eclectic visual cultural studies have superseded the more limited focus of traditional art history and aesthetic philosophy.

Photography theory

One of the central difficulties in the establishment of photography theory, and of priorities within debates relating to the photographic image, is that photography lies at the cusp of the scientific, the social scientific and the humanities. Thus, contemporary ontological debates relating to the photograph are divergent. One approach centres on analysis of the rhetoric of the image in relation to looking, and the desire to look. This is premised on models of visual communication which draw upon linguistics and, in particular, **psychoanalysis**. This approach locates photographic imagery within broader **poststructuralist** concerns to understand meaning-producing processes.