so much as a method of identifying different moments and shifting terms of reference relating to photography as an Art practice. Attention is paid to current forms of work and to themes which feature frequently in contemporary practice including questions of gender, ethnicity and identity. The principal concern is to trace the shifting terms of debate as to the status of the photograph as Art and to map historical changes in the situation of the photographic within the museum and art gallery.

- Chapter 7 explores photography and digital imaging. New means of electronic and digital imaging are emerging within societies that are undergoing significant economic, technological and political change. How can these developments be understood? How are these technologies being used? What effect will they have on the historically established practices of photography? The chapter is based on two key ideas. First, amidst dramatic developments in electronic communications and digital image technologies, it no longer seems possible to take the cultural dominance of the photographic for granted. Second, given that the photographic image has shaped the way the world is seen and represented, it is clear that the history of photographic codes, practices and uses will contribute to shaping new media.

Given the very contemporary nature of this chapter it is, inevitably, more speculative than other sections of the book. The range of relevant further reading references is also more restricted, certainly in relation to cultural theory and digitalisation. However, as is clearly argued in the chapter, old debates persist through new technological developments. The unease associated with the idea of manipulation of the image indicates the extent to which, in terms of commonsense ideologies, the photograph is viewed as relating directly and unproblematically to (what is conceptualised as) external reality. It is suggested that the introduction of (relatively) cheap and accessible photo-manipulation software programs has brought discussion of realism once again into central focus.

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CHAPTER 1

Thinking about photography

Debates, historically and now

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11 **Introduction**
12 **Aesthetics and technologies**
The impact of new technologies
Art or technology?
The photograph as document
Photography and the modern
The postmodern
22 **Contemporary debates**
What is theory?
Photography theory
Critical reflections on realism
Reading the image
Photography reconsidered
Theory, criticism, practice
Case study: Image analysis: the example of Migrant Mother
45 **Histories of photography**
Which founding father?
The photograph as image
History in focus
53 **Photography and social history**
Social history and photography
The photograph as testament
Categorical photography
Institutions and contexts
The museum
The archive
61 **Bibliography**

A knowledge of photography is just as important as that of the alphabet. The illiterate of the future will be ignorant of the use of camera and pen alike.

László Moholy-Nagy 1923

Thinking about photography

Debates, historically and now

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces and discusses key writings on photography. The references are to relatively recent publications, and to current debates about photography; however, these books often refer back to earlier writings, so a history of changing ideas can be discerned. This history focuses on photography itself as well as considering photography alongside art history and theory, and cultural history and theory more generally.

The chapter is in four sections: Aesthetics and technologies, Contemporary debates, Histories of photography, and Photography and social history. The principal aim is to locate writings about photography both in terms of its own history, as a specific medium and set of practices, and in relation to broader historical, theoretical and political considerations. Thus we introduce and consider some of the different approaches – and difficulties – which emerge in relation to the project of theorising photography.

E.H. Carr has observed that history is a construct consequent upon the questions asked by the historian (Carr 1964). Thus, he suggests, histories tell us as much about the historian as about the period or subject under interrogation. Furthermore, the historian's selection and organisation of material is to some extent predetermined by the purpose and intellectual parameters

of any particular project. Such parameters reflect the interests of the historian, who nearly always has to take account of institutional constraints (for instance, the expectation that a publication will be made from research findings within a set period of time). Projects are also framed by underpinning ideological and political assumptions and priorities.

Such observations are obviously pertinent when considering the history of photography. They are also relevant to investigating ways in which photography has been implicated in the construction of history. As the French cultural critic, Roland Barthes, has pointed out, the nineteenth century gave us both history and photography. He distinguishes between *history* which he describes as 'memory fabricated according to positive formulas', and *the photograph* defined as 'but fugitive testimony' (Barthes 1984: 93). It is attitudes to photography, its contexts, usages and critiques of its nature that we explore in this chapter.

AESTHETICS AND TECHNOLOGIES

The impact of new technologies

Photography emerged as part of a cluster of technical inventions and innovations around the middle of the nineteenth century (including inventions in the electrical industries and new discoveries in optics and chemistry). Hailed as a great technological invention it immediately became the subject of debates concerning its **aesthetic** status and social uses.

The excitement generated by the announcement, or marketing, of innovations tends to distract us from the fact that technologies are researched and developed in human societies. New machinery is normally presented as the agent of social change, not as the outcome of a desire for such change, i.e. as a cause rather than a consequence of culture. However, it can be argued that particular cultures invest in and develop new machines and technologies in order to satisfy previously foreseen social needs. Photography is one such example. A number of theorists have identified precursors of photography in the late eighteenth century. For instance, an expanding middle-class demand for portraiture which outstripped available (painted) means led to the development of the mechanical Physiognotrace[1] and to the practice of silhouette cutting (Freund 1980). Geoffrey Batchen also points out that photography had been a 'widespread social imperative' long before Daguerre and Fox Talbot's official announcements in 1839. He lists twenty-four names of people who had 'felt the hitherto strange and unfamiliar desire to have images formed by light spontaneously fix themselves' from as early as 1782 (Batchen 1990: 9). Since most of the necessary elements of technological knowledge were in place well before 1839, the significant question is not so much who invented photography but rather why it became an active field of research and discovery at that particular point in time (Punt 1995).

[1] For definitions see Gordon Baldwin (1991) *Looking at Photographs: A Guide to Technical Terms*, California: The J Paul Getty Museum and London: British Museum Press.

Once a technology exists, it may become adapted and introduced into social use in a variety of both foreseen and unforeseen ways. As cultural theorist Raymond Williams has argued, there is nothing in a technology itself which determines its cultural location or usage (Williams 1974). If technology is viewed as determining cultural uses, much remains to be explained. Not the least of this is the extent to which people subvert technologies and resist or invent new uses which had never originally been intended or envisaged. In addition, new technologies become incorporated within established relations of production and consumption, contributing to articulating – but not causing – shifts and changes in such relations and patterns of behaviour.

Art or technology?

Central to the nineteenth-century debate about the nature of photography as a new technology was the question as to how far it could be considered as Art. It was celebrated for its putative ability to produce accurate images of what was in front of its lens; images which were seen as being mechanically produced and thus free of the selective discriminations of the human eye and hand. On precisely the same grounds, the medium was often regarded as falling outside the realm of art, as its assumed power of accurate, dispassionate recording appeared to displace the artist's compositional creativity.

Writing on the Salon of 1859, the French poet Charles Baudelaire attacked those who confused photography with art and were excited by the new discovery, seeing in it the possibility of the exact delineation of nature. Fox Talbot had defined photography as 'the pencil of nature'. Indeed, in referring to his images as photogenic *drawing*, he seems to have been claiming photography to be just as much a useful art as it was a chemistry. But some caution is appropriate, as drawing was perceived differently then. If drawing was viewed as primarily functional, rather than creative, then Talbot was welcoming the photograph as a substitute for the informational sketch. Indeed, debates concerning the status of photography as art took place in periodicals throughout the nineteenth century. The French journal, *La Lumière*, published writings on photography both as a science and as an art.[2] Baudelaire linked 'the invasion of photography and the great industrial madness of today' and asserted that 'if photography is allowed to deputize for art in some of art's activities, it will not be long before it has supplanted or corrupted art altogether' (Baudelaire 1859: 297). In his view photography's only function was to support intellectual enquiry:

> Photography must, therefore, return to its true duty which is that of handmaid of the arts and sciences, but their very humble handmaid, like printing and shorthand, which have neither created nor supplemented literature. Let photography quickly enrich the traveller's album and restore to his eyes the precision his memory may lack; let it adorn the library of the naturalist, magnify

[2] Lemagny and Rouille (1987: 44) point out that the subtitle for the journal was 'Review of photography: fine arts-heliography-sciences, non-political magazine published every Saturday'.

> microscopic insects, even strengthen, with a few facts, the hypotheses of the astronomer; let it, in short, be the secretary and record-keeper of whomsoever needs absolute material accuracy for professional reasons.
>
> (Baudelaire 1859: 297)

'Absolute material accuracy' was seen as the hallmark of photography, because most people at the time accepted that the medium rendered a complete and faithful image of its subjects. Moreover, the nineteenth-century desire to explore, record and catalogue human experience, both home and abroad, encouraged people to emphasise photography as a method of naturalistic documentation. Baudelaire, who was among the more prominent French critics of the time, not only accepts its veracity but adds: 'if once it be allowed to impinge on the sphere of the intangible and the imaginary, on anything that has value solely because man adds something to it from his soul, then woe betide us!' (1859: 297). Here he is opposing industry (seen as mechanical, soulless and repetitive) with art, which he considered to be the most important sphere of existential life. Thus Baudelaire is evoking the irrational, the spiritual and the imaginary as an antidote to the positivist interest in measurement and statistical accuracy which, as we have noted, characterised much nineteenth-century investigation. From this point of view the mechanical nature of the camera militated against its use for anything other than mundane purposes.

Photographers responded to criticisms of this kind in two main ways: either they accepted that photography was something different from Art and sought to discover what the intrinsic properties of the medium were; or they pointed out that photography was more than a mechanical form of image-making, that it could be worked on and contrived so as to produce pictures which in some ways resembled paintings. 'Pictorial' photography, from the 1850s onwards, sought to overcome the problems of photography by careful arrangement of all the elements of the composition and by reducing the signifiers of technological production within the photograph. For example, they ensured that the image was out of focus, slightly blurred and fuzzy; they made pictures of allegorical subjects, including religious scenes; and those who worked with the gum bichromate process scratched and marked their prints in an effort to imitate something of the appearance of a canvas.

See chapter 6 for discussion of Pictorialism as a specific photographic movement.

In the other camp were those photographers who celebrated the qualities of **straight photography** and did not want to treat the medium as a kind of monochrome painting. They were interested in photography's ability to provide apparently accurate records of the visual world and tried to give their images the formal status and finish of paintings while concentrating their attention on its intrinsic qualities.

straight photography
Emphasis upon direct documentary typical of the Modern period in American photography.

Most of these photographs were displayed on gallery walls – this was a world of exhibition salons, juries, competitions and medals. In the journals of the time (which already included the *British Journal of Photography*), tips about technique coexisted with articles on the rules of composition. If the photographs aspired to be Art, their makers aspired to be artists, and they emulated the characteristic institutions of the art world. However, away from the salon, in the high streets of most towns, jobbing photographers earned a living by making simple photographic portraits of people, many of whom could not have afforded any other record of their own appearance. This did not please the painters:

> The cheap portrait painter, whose efforts were principally devoted to giving a strongly marked diagram of the face, in the shortest possible time and at the lowest possible price, has been to a great extent superseded. Even those who are better entitled to take the rank of artists have been greatly interfered with. The rapidity of execution, dispensing with the fatigue and trouble of rigorous sittings, together with the supposed certainty of accuracy in likeness in photography, incline many persons to try their luck in Daguerreotype, a Talbotype, Heliotype, or some method of sun or light-painting, instead of trusting to what is considered the greater uncertainty of artistic skill.
>
> (Howard 1853: 154)

The industrial process, so despised by Baudelaire and other like-minded critics, is here seen as offering mechanical accuracy combined with a degree of quality control. Photography thus begins to emerge as the most commonly used and important means of communication for the industrial age.[3]

Writing at about the same time as Baudelaire, Lady Elizabeth Eastlake agreed that photography was not an art but emphasised this as its strength.[4] She argued that:

> She is made for the present age, in which the desire for art resides in a small minority, but the craving, or rather the necessity for cheap, prompt, and correct facts in the public at large. Photography is the purveyor of such knowledge to the world. She is the sworn witness of everything presented to her view . . . (her studies are 'facts') . . . facts which are neither the province of art nor of description, but of that new form of communication between man and man – neither letter, message, nor picture – which now happily fills the space between them.
>
> (Eastlake 1857: 93)

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,

[3] For an interesting account of debates and discourses on realism and photography in the nineteenth century see Jennifer Green-Lewis (1996) *Framing the Victorians, Photography and the Culture of Realism*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

[4] Lady Eastlake, a photographer in her own right, was married to Sir Charles Eastlake, first President of the London Photographic Society (later the Royal Photographic Society).

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 fifteen 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 shifted attitudes to Art (Benjamin 1970). 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

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.

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 socio-political circumstances which influence and circumscribe actual human experience **(Benjamin 1931)**.

WALTER BENJAMIN (1931) 'A Small 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 digitalisation 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 chapter 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. Modern photography, in the first half of the twentieth century, offered a particular *way of seeing*. To some extent this idea is as old as the medium itself. But it took on a particular form in the 1920s and 1930s when 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. Here, the stress on form in *photographic seeing* typical of American modern photography parallels the stress on photography as a particular kind of vision in European 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.

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 *Camerawork*:

> 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

There are several strands within the notion of the **postmodern** which are pertinent to photography. First, there is a philosophical argument that defines postmodernism as marking the collapse of overarching narratives and witnessing the end of history. Second, there is the notion of the centrality of the simulacrum in which the endless production, reproduction and circulation of signs has rendered trivial the distinction between 'original' and 'copy', thereby, some fifty years later, achieving the democratisation and loss of 'aura' that Benjamin had discussed. The camera has, of course, been centrally implicated in this. Finally, there is the idea that what marks this period is the endless creation, circulation, distribution and exchange of signs.

Writing as early as 1859, the American jurist and writer, Oliver Wendell Holmes, 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)

While this is a percipient remark, Holmes did not go far enough. He 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.

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. 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).

So what are we to make of a photography which 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)

This 'collapse of difference', however, 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.

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.

'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.

VICTOR BURGIN (ed.) (1982) **Thinking Photography**, London: Macmillan. A collection of eight essays, including three by Burgin himself, which, although varying in theoretical stance and focus, all aim to contribute to developing a materially grounded analysis of photographic practices.

In introducing the collection of essays, *Thinking Photography*, artist/critic Victor Burgin distinguishes between photography theory and criticism (**Burgin 1982**). This distinction is crucial. Up until the 1980s 'photography theory' within education had been taken to refer to technologies and techniques as in optics, colour temperature, optimum developer heat, etc. 'Theory' related to the craft base of photography. Burgin argues that photography theory must be interdisciplinary and must engage not only with techniques but, more particularly, with processes of signification. He also comments that, as yet, photography theory does not exist in any adequately developed form. Rather, we have photography criticism which, as currently practised, is evaluative and normative, authoritative and opinionated, reflecting what he terms an 'uneasy and contradictory amalgam' of Romantic, Realist and Modernist aesthetic theories and traditions. He suggests that photography history, as written up until the 1980s, reflects the same ideological positions and assumptions; that is to say, it uncritically accepts the dominant paradigms of aesthetic theory. Burgin warns against confusing photography theory with a general theory of culture, arguing for the specificity of the still, photographic image.

SUSAN SONTAG (1979) **On Photography**, Harmondsworth: Penguin. A collection of six essays on various aspects of photography which, despite seeming slightly out of date in its concern with realism, still offers many key insights. Her programme on photography, *It's Stolen Your Face*, produced for the BBC in 1978, is based on this collection.

ROLAND BARTHES (1984) **Camera Lucida**, London: Fontana. First published in French in 1980 as *La Chambre Claire*. In this, his final book, Barthes offers a quite complex, rhetorical, but nonetheless interesting and significant set of comments on how we respond to photographs.

In relation to this, as we have already seen, a number of critics have focused on the realist properties of the image. Film critic André Bazin, in the 1950s, in his key essay on the subject, emphasised the truth-to-appearances characteristics of the photographic (Bazin 1967). Albeit within wider-ranging terms, **Susan Sontag**, in her 1970s series of essays collected as *On Photography*, also discussed photographs as traces of reality and interrogated photography in terms of the extent to which the image reproduces reality. Similarly, Roland Barthes emphasised the referential characteristics of the photograph in his final book *Camera Lucida* (**Barthes 1984**).

Critical reflections on realism

> Photographing is essentially an act of non-intervention.
>
> (Sontag 1979: 11)

> Because of the disjunction between the thinking, seeing photographer and the camera that is the instrument of recording, the viewer finds it more difficult than with other visual artifacts to attribute creativity to any photographer.
>
> (Price 1994: 4)

In philosophical terms, any concern with truth-to-appearances or traces of reality presupposes 'reality' as a given, external entity. Notions of the photograph as empirical proof, or the photograph as witness offering descriptive testimony, ultimately rest upon the view of reality as external to the human individual and objectively appraisable. If reality is somehow there, present, external, and available for objective recording, then the extent to which the photograph offers accurate reference, and the significance of the desire to take photographs or to look at images of particular places or events, become pertinent.

Susan Sontag defines the photograph as a 'trace' directly stencilled off reality, like a footprint or a death mask. *On Photography* offers a series of interconnected essays, essentially based on a realist view of photography. Her concern is with the extent to which the image adequately represents the moment of actuality from which it is taken. She emphasises the idea of the photograph as a means of freezing a moment in time. If the photograph misleads the viewer, it is because the photographer has not found an adequate means of conveying what he or she wishes to communicate about a particular set of circumstances. Her focus is on the photograph as document, as a report, or as evidence of activities such as tourism. She also comments that the use of a camera satisfies the work ethic and stands in when we are unsure of our responses to unfamiliar circumstances, but can also reduce travel and other experiences to a search for the photogenic. Sontag is also concerned to point out the ethics of the relationship between the photographer as reporter and the person, place or circumstances recorded. The photographer, especially the photojournalist, is relatively powerful within this relationship, and thus may be seen as predatory. She points out that the language of military manoeuvre – 'load', 'shoot' – is central to photographic practices. Given this relative power, in her view it is even more important to emphasise the necessity of accurate reporting or relating of events. Photographs are not necessarily sentimental, or candid; they may be used for a variety of purposes including policing or incrimination.

Sontag's discussion veers between the reasons for taking photographs and the uses to which they are put. It is marked by a sense of the elusiveness of the photo-image itself. She notes our reluctance to tear up photos of relatives, and the rejection of politicians through symbolically burning images. She describes photographs as relics of people as they once were, suggesting that the still camera embalms (by contrast with the movie camera, which savours mobility). Thus she draws attention to the fascination of looking at photographs in terms of what we think they may reveal of that which we cannot otherwise have any sense of knowing, characterising photographs as a catalogue of acquired images which stand in for memories. Photographs can also, she suggests, give us an unearned sense of understanding things, past and present, having both the potential to move us emotionally, but also the possibility of holding us at a distance through aestheticising images of events. Photographs can also exhaust experiences, using up the beautiful through rendering it into cliché. For instance, she notes that sunsets may now look corny, too much like photographs of sunsets. Throughout, however, we have the sense that meaning may be sought within the photograph, providing it has been well composed and therefore accurately traces a relic of a person, place or event.

In her book *The Photograph: A Strange, Confined Space* (1994), American critic Mary Price argues that the meaning of the photographic image is primarily determined through associated verbal description and the context in which the photograph is *used*. By contrast with Sontag's emphasis on the relation between the image and its source in the actual historical world, Price starts from questions of viewing and the context of reception. Thus, she suggests, in principle there is no single meaning for a photograph, but rather an emergent meaning, within which the subject-matter of the image is but one element. Her analysis is practical in its approach. She takes a number of specific examples, aiming to demonstrate the extent to which usage and contextualisation determine meaning.

Realist theories of photography can take a number of different starting points: first, the photograph itself as an aesthetic artefact; second, the institutions of photography and the position and behaviour of photographers; third, the viewer or audience and the context in which the image is used, encountered, consumed. The particular starting point organises investigative priorities. For instance, ethical questions relating to who has the right to represent whom are central when considering the photographer and institutions such as the press.

Sontag takes a particular position within debates about realism, stressing the referential nature of the photographic image both in terms of its iconic properties and in terms of its **indexical** nature. For Sontag, the fact that a photograph exists testifies to the actuality of how something, someone or somewhere once appeared. Max Kozloff has challenged Sontag's conceptual model, criticising her proposition that the photograph 'traces' reality, and arguing instead for a view of the photograph as 'witness' with all the possibilities of misunderstanding, partial information or false testament that the term 'witness' may be taken to imply (Kozloff 1987: 237). In his collection of essays, *Photography and Fascination*, Kozloff starts from the question of the enticement of the photograph. He concludes that:

> Though infested with many bewildering anomalies, photographs are considered our best arbiters between our visual perceptions and the memory of them. It is not only their apparent 'objectivity' that grants photographs their high status in this regard, but our belief that in them, fugitive sensation has been laid to rest. The presence of photographs reveals how circumscribed we are in the throes of sensing. We perceive and interpret the outer world through a set of incredibly fine internal receptors. But we are incapable, by ourselves, of grasping or tweezing out any permanent, sharable figment of it. Practically speaking, we ritually verify what is there, and are disposed to call it reality. But, with photographs, we have concrete proof that we have not been hallucinating all our lives.
>
> (Kozloff 1979: 101)

However the relation between the image and the social world is conceptualised, it is worth noting that the authority which emanates from the sense of authenticity or 'truth to actuality' conferred by photography is a fundamental element within photographic language and aesthetics. This authority, founded in realism, has come to be taken for granted in the interpretation of images made through the lens. It is precisely this which sets lens-based imagery apart from other media of visual communication. Again, to quote Kozloff, 'A main distinction between a painting and a photograph is that the painting alludes to its content, whereas the photograph summons it, from wherever and whenever, to us' (1987: 236). The photographic is distinct from the **autographic**, or from the digital, in that it seems to emanate directly from the external. Inherent within the photographic is the particular requirement for the physical presence of the referent. This has led to photographs (along with film and video) being viewed as realist in ways that, say, technical drawing or portrait painting are not (although they are also based upon observation). That this is the case needs to be clearly acknowledged and addressed, in order to develop theory adequate and specific to photography.

Reading the image

> It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world, we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relationship between what we see and what we know is never settled.
>
> (Berger 1972: 7)

Two key theoretical developments, semiotics and psychoanalysis, have significantly contributed to changes within the humanities and both have figured in debates relating to the constitution of photographic meaning. **Semiology**, or semiotics, the idea of a science of signs, originates from comments in Ferdinand de Saussure's *General Theory of Linguistics* (1916) but was not further developed until after the Second World War. Essentially, semiology proposed the systematic analysis of cultural behaviour. At its extremes it aimed at establishing an empirically verifiable method of analysis of human communication systems. Thus, **codes** of dress, music, advertising – and other forms of communication – are conceptualised as logical systems. The focus is upon clues which together constitute a *text* ready for reading and interpretation. The key limitation of semiology as first proposed, with its focus upon systems of signification, was that it failed to address how particular *readers* of signs interpreted communications, made them meaningful to themselves within their specific context of experience. It is currently common to use the term 'semiology' to refer to the earlier, relatively inflexible approach based upon structuralist linguistics, and to use 'semiotics' to indicate later, more fluid models, incorporating psychoanalysis, wherein the focus is more upon

meaning-producing processes than upon textual systems. Social semiotics, taking account of questions of interpretation and context, inflects the emphasis specifically towards cultural artefacts and social behaviour.

Italian semiotician Umberto Eco specifically discusses the codification of the photograph as text (Eco, 'Critique of the Image' in Burgin 1982). He argues that, despite the appearance of resemblance between the image and its referent, the iconic sign is, nonetheless, like other sign systems, 'completely arbitrary, conventional and unmotivated'. Thus he focuses on the conventions of perception and the cultural understandings which inform interpretation. He offers a ten-point summary of the range of codes implicated in photographic communication. The codes are presented with relatively little elaboration, and with no ascription of hierarchy within the overall model. This thus stands as a starting point for exploring the potential of complex semiotics as a mode of analysis of the photographic.

Roland Barthes (1915–1980) Studied French Literature and Classics at the University of Paris, and taught French abroad in Rumania and Egypt before returning to Paris for a research post in sociology and semiotics. He taught a course on the sociology of signs, symbols and collective representations at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, and became known for his contribution to the development of semiology, the science of signs, first proposed by linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in 1916 but not fully explored until after the Second World War. Barthes' publications include *Mythologies* (1957), *Elements of Semiology* (1964), *The Empire of Signs* (1970) and *Image, Music, Text* (1977), which includes his well-known essay on 'The Rhetoric of the Image'. *Camera Lucida*, originally titled *La Chambre Claire* (1980), was his last work, and the only publication devoted entirely to photography.

Roland Barthes is known for his contribution to the semiological analysis of visual culture, in particular from his early work, *Mythologies*. Working inductively from his observations of differing cultural phenomena, he proposed that everyday culture can be analysed in terms of language of communication (visual and verbal) and integrally associated myths or culturally specific discourses. The central objective of this early work was the development of all-encompassing models of analysis of meaning-production processes. This was conceptualised both generally and in terms which could take account of particular cultural characteristics. Thus, for example, his analysis of the codification of a short story *S/Z* (1970) was intended to identify, test and demonstrate the explanatory potential of a set of five codes which, he was then suggesting, were potentially applicable to a range of storytelling media (the novel, film, oral narratives). This is the point at which his work is most characterised by strict **structuralist** methodology. Later works, including *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) and *Camera Lucida* (1984), are no longer primarily text-focused and less strictly 'scientific' (i.e. seeking to objectively classify significatory phenomena) in their approach. These works take more account of the individual reader, of processes of interpretation, of psychoanalytic factors, and of what we might term cultural 'slippages' – thereby implicitly accepting a degree of unpredictability in human agency or response.

Camera Lucida is motivated by an ontological desire to understand the nature of the photograph 'in itself'. In semiotic terms, the photograph is disorderly because its ubiquity renders it unclassifiable: 'photography evades us' (Barthes 1984: 4). The style of writing is narrative and rhetorical, the tone is personal: he starts from discussion of himself as reader of the photographic image, asking why photos move him emotionally. In Part One he develops a commentary upon the nature and impact of the photograph using examples from documentary and photojournalism. In Part Two he focuses upon his own family photographs, particularly images of his mother – some of which date from 'history'; that is, a time before his birth – in order to contemplate more subjective meanings (this discussion is not illustrated). However, the objective is not to do with specific genres. For instance, there is no discussion of commercial imagery; nor of fine art uses of the medium. His purpose is essentialist in that he seeks to define that which is specific to the photograph as a means of representation. He is not concerned with the taker of a photograph (the photographer or, as he terms it, 'operator') and the act of taking but, rather, with the act of looking (the spectator) and with the 'target' of the photograph; that is, the object or person represented within the 'spectrum' of the photograph. Thus he observes that the knowing portraitee adopts a pose which anticipates the representational image, and takes account of the fact that this piece of paper will outlast the actual person who is the subject of the portrait becoming the 'flat death', which both exposes that which has been and precedes actual death.

Barthes concludes that it is 'reference' rather than Art, or communication, which is fundamental to photography. Central to his exploration is the contention that, unlike in any other medium, in photography the referent uniquely sticks to the image. In painting, for instance, it is not necessary for the referent to be present. Painting can be achieved from memory, photography cannot. From this emerges the time-specific characteristic of the photograph. It deals with *what was*, regardless of whether the terms or conditions continue to obtain. For Barthes photography is never about the present, although the act of looking occurs in the present. In addition, the photograph is indescribable: words cannot substitute for the weight or impact of the resemblance of the image. The photograph is always about looking, and seeing. Furthermore, the photograph itself – that is, the chemically treated and processed paper – is invisible. It is not *it* that we see. Rather, through it we see that which is represented. (This, he suggests, is one source of the difficulty in analysing photography ontologically.)

What, then, is the attraction of certain (but never all) photographs for the spectator? As writer-lecturer Philip Stokes has pointed out in relation to the potentially boring experience of looking at other people's family albums, 'in every dreary litany there is an instant when a window opens onto a scene of fascination that stops the eye and seizes the mind, filling it with questions or simply joy' (Stokes 1992: 194). Why do some images arrest attention, animating the viewer, while others fail to 'speak' to the particular spectator? Barthes proposes that photographs arrest attention when they encompass a duality of elements – two (or more) discontinuous, and not logically connected, elements which form the 'puzzle' (our term, not his) of the image. Here he distinguishes between *studium*, general enthusiasm for images and, indeed, the polite interest which may be expressed when confronted with any particular photograph, and the *punctum* (prick, sting or wound) which arrests attention. Previously, in an essay entitled 'The Third Meaning', he had suggested that photographs encompass the obvious and the obtuse, implying

play of meaning within the photograph as text (Barthes 1977). This leads him to explore why, when so many images are noted as a matter of routine, only some images make an impact on us. Here, again, he makes a detailed distinction between the photograph which captures attention through 'shouting' or because of the *shock* of revelation of subject-matter (for instance, a particularly startling photojournalistic image), and the punctum of recognition which transcends mere surprise, or rarity value, to inflict a poignancy of recognition for the particular spectator. This, he proposes, emanates more often from some detail within the image which stands out, rather than from the unity of the content as a whole. He sees this effect as essentially a product of the photograph itself. This, we would suggest, limits his discussion. The noticing of detail is also a consequence of the particular spectator's history and interests – even a relatively insignificant detail might offer a key point of focus for a person. In other words, the poignancy or joy of recognition is founded in the act of engagement, the act of looking at a particular image, the relation between the spectator and the photograph.

Barthes goes on to suggest that the photograph in itself, through being contingent upon its referent, is outside meaning. In this sense he views it as 'a message without a code' (to use a phrase drawn from his earlier essay on the rhetoric of the image). Thus he suggests that it is the fact of social observation which is immediate rather than the photograph. For Barthes photography is at its most powerful not because of what it can reveal, but because it is, as he terms it, 'pensive'. It thinks. Of course Barthes does know that a photograph is not a thinking subject: the photograph itself is an inanimate piece of paper. The photographer thinks, the portraitee poses, and the spectator may respond reflectively. Animation occurs only through the act of looking.

Barthes' precise use of words (which, in the French, offers careful nuancing but, in translation, may seem over-precious), and the personal tone, to some extent obscure the general argument which is more **phenomenological** than semiotic in its method. His discussion is useful in reminding us of the essential contingency of the photograph. Like Sontag, he draws attention to its referential characteristics; unlike Sontag, who relates this to a range of practices, he defines this as that which characterises the medium, but it does not necessarily follow from this that it is a representation without a code. On the contrary, it is impossible to contemplate the image without operationalising a range of aesthetic and cultural codes. Ultimately, he also takes relatively little account of the specificity of the spectator and the reasons and context of looking. Despite his emphasis upon looking, and seeing, he focuses centrally on the image as text rather than upon the relation between image and spectatorship. This does limit his ontological conclusions.

Photography reconsidered

The individual as spectator, the reception and usage of photographs, and the nature of processes whereby photographs become meaningful subjectively and collectively have remained central to contemporary debates. Here the influence of psychoanalysis has to be taken into account alongside semiotics, together with the concerns of **social history**.

Psychoanalysis, founded in **Freud**'s investigations of the human psyche (from the 1880s onwards), centres upon the individual in ways which are now taken for granted but which, at the time, reflected certain revolutionary strands of political and philosophical thought. For political theorists the individual became viewed as the basic social unit; also, someone expected to take personal responsibility for social and economic survival. Philosophers such as Nietzsche, regarded by many as the father figure of individualism, emphasised personal moral responsibility, engaging, in particular, with what he conceptualised as the enslaving influence of Christianity. Individualism is a taken-for-granted feature of twentieth-century Western experience. We talk of the individual consumer, individual professional responsibilities, individual responsibilities within the family, and so on. Yet this emphasis is relatively new. Psychoanalytic understandings of individual subjective responses to social experience have offered new models of insight into human behaviour in ways which have been challenging academically (as well as offering therapeutic means of coming to terms with personal trauma).

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) Freud's copious writings and his work with patients form the basis of the discipline of psychoanalysis, used both as a therapeutic method and as a tool to understand interpersonal relations and cultural activities. Psychoanalysis has irrevocably changed the way we understand the world and ourselves. Possibly Freud's most important contribution to modern thought is the concept of the unconscious, which insists that human action always derives from mental processes of which we cannot be aware. Many photographers have used the ideas of Freud as the basis of their work.

Published in the context of a series on communications and culture, Victor Burgin's *Thinking Photography* (1982) focuses on debates within the theory, practice and criticism of photography. The book's authors set out to challenge the notion of the autonomous creative artist, to question the idea of documentary 'truth' and to interrogate the notion of purely visual languages. The intention is to situate photography within broader theoretical debates and understandings pertaining to meaning and communication, visual culture and the politics of representation.[5] The history of theories of art as they relate to – or 'position' – photography is also a key theme. The eight essays (including three by Burgin himself), while they vary in their theoretical stance and critical style, share 'the project of developing a materialist analysis of photography'. What Burgin is concerned with is photography 'considered as a practice of *signification*'; that is, specific materials worked on for specified purposes within a particular social and historical context. Semiotics is one starting point for this theoretical project, but, as Burgin states, semiotics is not sufficient to account for 'the complex articulations of the moments of institution, text, distribution and consumption of photography' (Burgin 1982: 2).

In effect, this collection of essays traces a particular trajectory through Left debates of the 1970s, centring on questions of class, revolutionary struggle and the role of the artist, through semiotics, to questions of realism, to psychoanalysis and spectatorship. (Questions of gender are addressed,

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[5] At this time Burgin lectured in photography at the Polytechnic of Central London (now the University of Westminster). His other publications include *Between* (1986), *The End of Art Theory* (1986), and *Formations of Fantasy* (co-edited 1989). He is now based at the University of California.

although, notably, no essays by women theorists are included.) The book posits two key theoretical starting points: materialist analysis, as represented in the reprinting of Frankfurt School theorist Walter Benjamin's essay on 'The Author as Producer' (first published in German in 1966) and the semiotic, represented in Italian semiotician Umberto Eco's essay, 'Critique of the Image'. The other central historical reference is that of Russian Futurism and the **Formalist–Constructivist** theoretical debates which followed.

Classic Marxist models of artistic production are addressed, critically, in the penultimate essay of the book, 'Making Strange: The Shattered Mirror', by Simon Watney. Focusing on seeing, vision and the social nature of perception, Watney discusses various 1920s/1930s manifestations – in Russian aesthetic debates and in Brecht – of the proposal that through alienation, or 'making strange', new ways of 'seeing', politically and aesthetically, may be forged. The subtitle, 'The Shattered Mirror', refers to the rupturing of any notion of the photograph as a mirror or transparent recorder of reality. (It does not carry the psychoanalytic implications which, as we shall see, characterise Burgin's contributions.) The essay situates ideas of defamiliarisation in relation to past practices in order to reflect upon modern European and American work which he exemplifies, briefly, through reference to French photographer Atget; Bauhaus theorist-photographer Moholy-Nagy; and American documentarian Berenice Abbott. He argues that the project of defamiliarisation in photography rested upon acceptance of the fallacy of the transparency of the photograph. In other words, if we relinquish realist theories of the photograph, the problem of employing effective techniques for defamiliarisation dissolves.

Semiotics, in conjunction with psychoanalysis, informs Burgin's own three essays which, respectively, develop a series of related points about: the nature of the photograph as conceptualised in the context of new art theory; the experience of 'looking at photographs' from the point of view of the spectator; and exploring the psychological nature of the pleasurable response to the image. Thus he is concerned to trace links between the image, interpretation and ideological discourses. The model is most fully developed in 'Photography, Phantasy, Function', wherein the main part of the essay draws upon Freud to discuss psychological aspects of the act of looking, noting that looking is not indifferent. Thus he draws our attention to the voyeuristic and fetishistic *investment* in looking, arguing that to look is to become sutured within ideological discourse(s). He further argues that the photograph, like the fetish, is the result of an isolated fragment or frozen moment, and describes the fetishistic nature of the photograph as one source of its fascination.

At the time of its publication this collection of essays provoked markedly differing critical responses. For instance, writing in *Creative Camera* (1982), Ian Jeffrey largely dismissed what he described as an unfortunate new line of development in photography analysis on the grounds that:

> History, dialectical or otherwise, is a department in which the Burgin squad is under-rehearsed. History is often invoked but not much practiced, and I am left with the sense here of an endless drawing up of rules for a game which is never played.
>
> (Jeffrey 1982: 724)

Conversely, Stevie Bezencenet in the same issue of *Creative Camera* welcomed the attempt to move beyond the traditional analysis of photography – from the three standpoints of the technical, artistic and social – towards a more complex theoretical comprehension of the medium, noting that, as a publication, it had emerged from contemporary debates and suggesting that:

> The practising of theory and theorising of practice are becoming united in the development of a materialist analysis of photography. This is a process which will lead us into the disciplines of linguistics, sociology, Marxism, art history and psychoanalysis, so that we may return to a study of the production of images, with a better understanding of their social operations.
>
> (Bezencenet 1982b: 727)

Theory, criticism, practice

What has all this got to do with making photographs? Visual methods of communication are, of course, embedded in particular cultural circumstances and therefore reflect specific assumptions and expectations. For instance, as has been argued, given the nineteenth-century desire for empirical evidence, photography was hailed for its apparent ability to represent events accurately. This desire or expectation persists in fields such as photojournalism. Furthermore, theoretical concepts interact. For instance, criteria based upon established visual aesthetics inform the assessment of what makes a 'good' photograph, photojournalistic or otherwise. Similarly, questions of representation pertaining to, for example, gender or race, which have contributed to the challenge to the canon within literary studies and art history, are relevant to photography.

The key point is that theoretical assumptions founded in varying academic fields, from the scientific to the philosophic and the aesthetic, intersect to inform both the making and the interpretation of visual imagery. One consequence of the postmodern is a change in type of theoretical endeavour and, consequently, a change in style of publications concerning photography which, in recent years, have become more eclectic in their theoretical sources and less all-embracing in terms of questions posed and projects pursued. Books of essays on a diversity of subjects, adopting a range of differing theoretical concerns and conjunctions, are increasingly common.

Yet, in common with other fields of the arts, photography criticism still tends to be normative, evaluating work in relation to established and accepted traditions and practices. At its worst, criticism masks personal opinion, dressed

up as objective or authoritative with the aim of impressing, for example, the readers of review articles in order to generate their respect and support for the reviewer. At its best, criticism helps to locate particular work in relation to specific debates about practice through elucidating appreciation of the effect, meaning, context and import of the imagery under question.

In order to think about photographic communication, we need to take account of communication theory in broad terms as well as focusing specifically on photographs as a particular type of visual sign, produced and used in specific, but differing, contexts. The photograph, therefore, might be conceptualised as a site of intersection of various orders of theoretical understanding relating to its production, publication and consumption or reading. Central to the project of theorising photography is the issue of the relation between that which particularly characterises the photographic (which, as we have seen, is its referential qualities), and theoretical discourses which pertain to the making and reading of the image but whose purchase is broader, for instance, aesthetic theory or sexual politics. What is crucially at stake is how we think about the tension between the referential characteristics of the photograph and the contexts of usage and interpretation.

The key characteristic of photography – as opposed to digital imaging – is its ultimate dependence upon, and therefore reference to, a physical person or object present at the moment of making the original exposure. This physical presence is the origin or source of the possibility of an image and, consequently, the image stands as an index of the once physical presence. It is this indexical status which is the source of the authority of the image and, thus, of central theoretical debates relating to realism and 'truth'. Photography theory cannot rest simply on optics and chemistry (or, indeed, the binary mathematical systems which underpin digital imaging). Given the ubiquity of photographic practices, a twofold problem emerges: first, to analyse ways in which clusters of theoretical discourses intersect, or acquire priority, in particular fields of practice; and second, to define and analyse that which is peculiar to photography. If we take Barthes' final words on the subject, it is primarily its referential characteristic which variously lends it particular credibility, force or significance. If we start from the greater diversity of positions – semiotic, psychoanalytic and social-historical – outlined in Burgin's edited collection, then the focus must be upon the political and **ideological**. The project of theorising photography thus relies upon the development of complex models of analysis which can take account of these rather different starting points.

Within this conceptual approach it is not the objective presence of the image which is at stake, but rather the force field within which it generates meaning. This contrasts with semiological stress on systems of signification. In effect we are invited to consider not only the text, its production and its reading, but also to take account of the social relations within which meaning is produced and operates.[6] Here, the semblance of the real underpins

[6] For a good general discussion of questions of representation, semiotics and discursive practices see Stuart Hall (1997) 'The Work of Representation', Chapter 1 in Stuart Hall (ed.) (1997) **Representation, Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices**, London: Sage/Open University.

processes of interpretation. Photography is reassuringly familiar, not least because it seems to reproduce that which we see, or might see. In so far as visual representations contribute to constructing and reaffirming our sense of identity, this familiarity, and the apparent realism of the photographic image, render it a particularly powerful discursive force.

CASE STUDY: *Image analysis: the example of* Migrant Mother

In 1936 the documentary photographer, Dorothea Lange, was working for a government-run project known as the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Lange has recounted the story of how she stopped one night on the road – although she was already exhausted by the work of the day – to investigate a group of people who were employed to pick peas. In less than a quarter of an hour she was back on the road having taken several shots of the woman with her children. One of these photographs, *Migrant Mother* (figure 1.1), became the most reproduced image in the history of photography and is known to many people who could not name its author.

In the subsequent sixty years this photograph has been used and contextualised in a number of ways. This, not only as a photograph; it has appeared on a USA postage stamp (illustrating the decade of the 1930s) and has acted as a source for cartoons. The picture has had a history beyond its original context within the FSA and it is regularly referred to as one of the world's greatest news photographs. Many critics have commented on this, noting various moments of appropriation of the image.

A number of differing approaches may be used to analyse photographs. Each model reflects its own particular concerns and priorities. For instance, any single photograph might be:

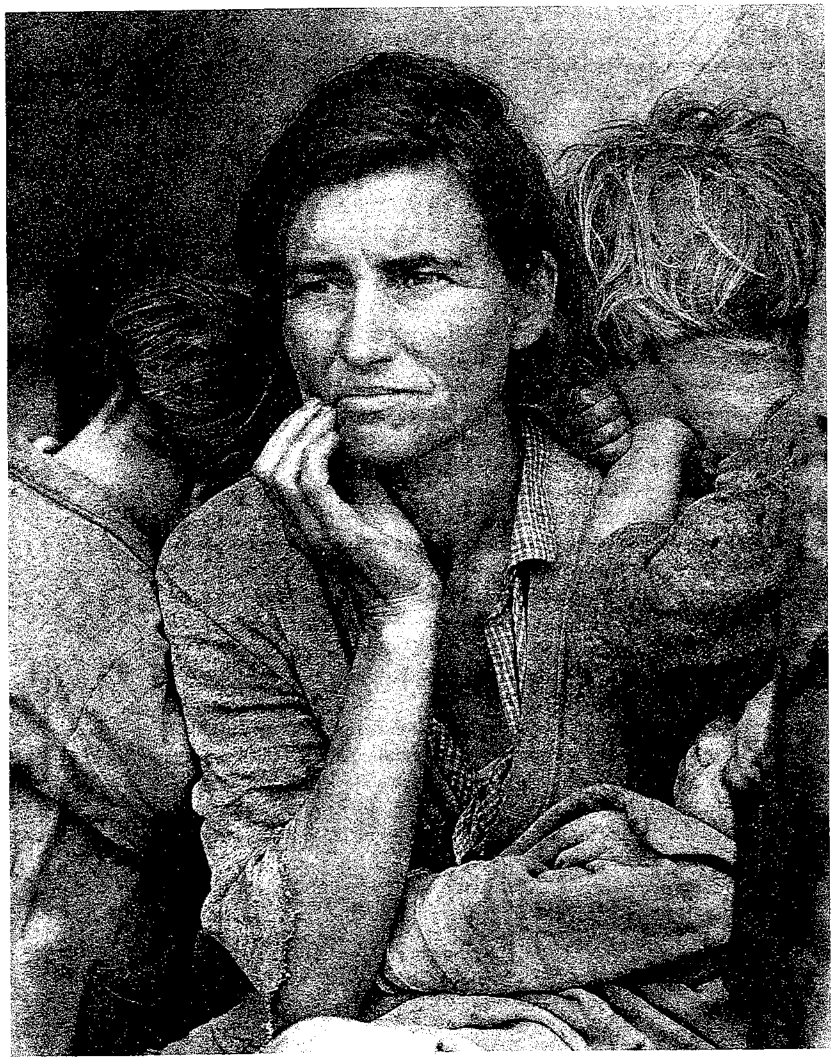
- viewed primarily as social or historical evidence
- investigated in relation to the intentions of the photographer and the particular context of its making
- related to politics and ideology
- assessed through reference to process and technique
- considered in terms of aesthetics and traditions of representation in art
- discussed in relation to class, race and gender
- analysed through reference to psychoanalysis
- decoded as a semiotic text.

Here we take the example of Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* in order to illustrate and comment upon some of the ways in which this photograph has been discussed, and to draw attention to assumptions which underpin particular remarks about it.

See, for instance, Martha Rosler's celebrated essay 'In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)' (reprinted variously), or the opening section of Judith Fryer Davidov (1998) *Women's Camera Work*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Commonly, discussion of images draws upon two or three analytic approaches. For instance, those concerned with the status of a photograph as evidence may also be interested in the intentions of the photographer and the context of making; semiotic analysis makes reference to aesthetic coding and to cultural contexts.

In order to avoid emphasising artificial boundaries between academic disciplines, and to demonstrate the extent to which we operate in an interdisciplinary manner, this case study is organised under a series of headings which allow us to indicate the range of concerns that may be implicated simultaneously in particular writing about a photograph.



1.1 Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, 1936

The photograph as testament

Given that Lange took a number of shots of the woman and children, why is it this image which has become so famous? A number of critics have commented upon this:

> The woman is used purely as subject. She is appropriated within a symbolic framework of significance as declared and determined by Lange. Indeed, the other images taken by Lange at this 'session' add to the sense of construction and direction. They remain distant, though, and lack the compelling presence which Lange achieves in the Migrant Mother image. In this Lange creates a highly charged emotional text dependent upon her use of children and the mother. The central position of the mother, the absence of the father, the direction of the mother's 'look', all add to the emotional and sentimental register through which the image works. The woman is viewed as a symbol larger than the actuality in which she exists. As Lange admitted, she wasn't interested in 'her name or her history'.
>
> (Clarke 1997: 153)

Lange made five exposures of the woman and children in a tent (see figures 1.2–1.5). One image was selected for publication and this became one of the most famous photographs of the twentieth century. We can see that this image excludes literal detail (reference to the whole tent and the woodlands beyond, or to domestic objects) which might anchor the image to a particular place and time.

That the image was in accordance with the intentions of the photographer, and, indeed, of the FSA project is confirmed by Roy Stryker, director of the project, in an interview:

> STRYKER: I still think it's a great picture. I think it's one of America's great pictures . . .
> Interviewer: Would you want to say anything about what that picture means to you personally?
> STRYKER: I can, in two words. Mother and child. What more do I need to say? A great, great, great picture of the mother and child. She happens to be badly dressed. It was bad conditions. But she's still a mother and she had children. We'd found a wonderful family.
>
> (Stryker 1972: 154)

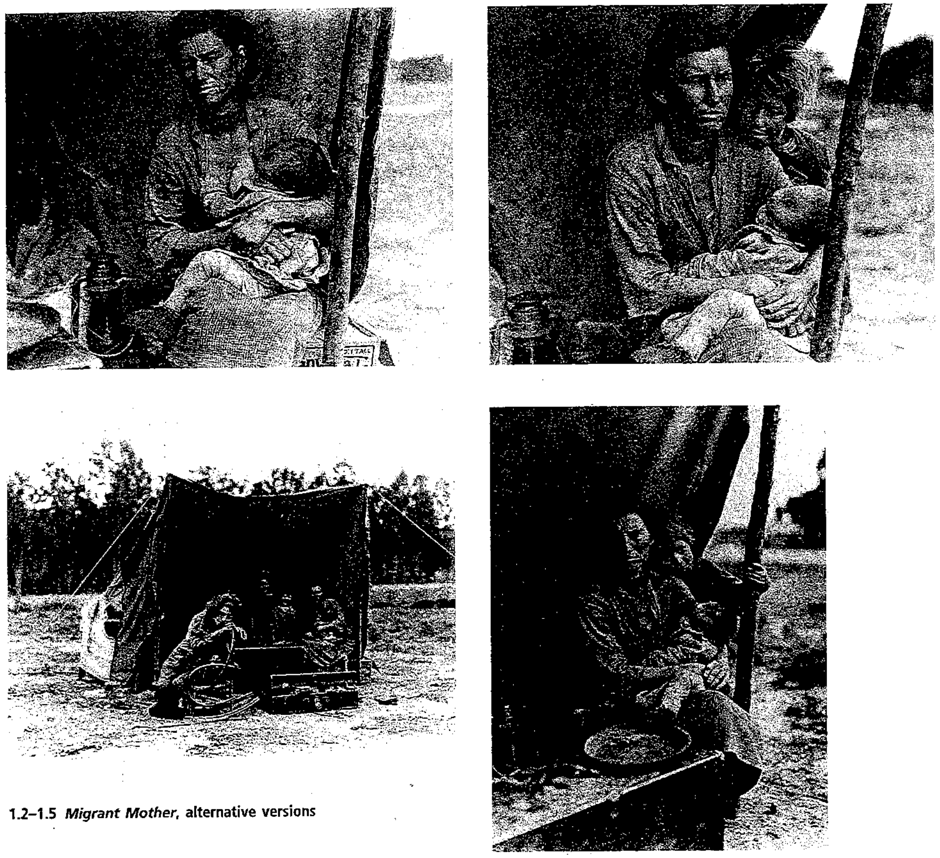
Clearly the potential for the image to transcend its particular location and socio-economic context was recognised by those involved in this project. In this sense, the image reflects a humanitarian notion of universal similarities in the condition of humankind. Many critics have noted this, for instance:

> For Lange, a compelling photograph presented an engaging human drama that addressed questions larger than the immediate subject. Her subjects gained importance from external value systems. . . . 'We were after the

Looking at the picture alongside the others allows us to explore the criteria by which photographers select shape and organise images, and to consider why none of the other images could have acquired the same status in terms of documentary aesthetics and its iconic status.

Clarke does not discuss the specific history and context of the making of the image, or of its immediate use. By excluding detail, Lange made it possible for the picture to be seen as a universal symbol of motherhood, poverty and survival. Clarke seems to go along with this. His approach emphasises the notion of the good photograph, but the criteria whereby an image might be considered 'good' are taken for granted. Emotional empathy is clearly one element, but this is assumed rather than treated as something for critical discussion.

Stryker's emphasis on the drama of the photograph reflects his drive to use pictures for emotional impact.



1.2–1.5 *Migrant Mother*, alternative versions

> truth', she wrote, 'not just making effective pictures'. She was concerned with the human condition, and the value of a fact was measured in terms of its own consequences. . . . Today, the subjects of Lange's picture are, as Therese Heyman has observed, 'figures in history whose hardship the present viewer is incapable of healing – symbols of timeless sorrow'.
>
> (Tucker 1984: 50–51)

Indeed, this picture was included in the exhibition, 'Family of Man' (organised by the American curator, Edward Steichen, in 1955 as a sort of indirect response to the Second World War).[7] The exhibition set out to emphasise all

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[7] *Family of Man*, facsimile catalogue, page 151.

that humanity has in common. Roland Barthes commented on the 'ambiguous myth' of community whereby diversity between peoples and cultures was brought into focus in order to forge a sense of unity from this pluralism (Barthes 1973).

Here Tucker is taking a critical stance, discussing the impact of the picture in terms both of culture and ideology and of the reception of the image, acknowledging differences between now and then.

Note also that she credits her source. This allows us to find the original context of the Heyman quote to check whether we agree with Tucker's interpretation. Crediting sources is a part of good academic practice, as it acknowledges previous critical contributions and helps the reader to find further information.

This essay by Barthes is included in his early collection, *Mythologies*. He draws our attention to, and questions, the fundamental premise of the exhibition. See general discussion of Barthes (pp. 28–30).

The photographer's account

In an essay written almost thirty years after the event, entitled 'The Assignment I'll Never Forget', Dorothea Lange gave us her story of how she made the photograph.

> I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.
>
> (Lange 1960: 264)

In relation to the alleged 'equality' between the photographer and her subject it is worth noting that in 1978, the 'Migrant Mother' herself, Florence Thompson, was tracked down to their trailer home in Modesto, California. One of the twentieth century's most familiar and telling images was recuperated as an ordinary, aged woman who was poor in a humdrum way and no longer able to function as an icon of nobility and sadness in the face of destitution.

Her image has appeared in many forms and in many settings, and has been multiply copied millions of times. She was a most familiar figure, but not until fifty years after the event did she get to comment on it publicly. She told United Press that she was proud to be the subject of the photograph, but that she had never made a penny out of it and that it had done her no good (Rosler 1989).

The fact that Lange's story was reprinted in a major collection suggests that a photographer's account is of particular interest in considering the image. The intention of the photographer and her memory of the occasion are in some way assumed to add to our appreciation of the image and our understanding of its significance. We have to ask ourselves, sixty years on, why this should be relevant to our reading of the image now, in different circumstances.

Genre and usage

The FSA project was essentially documentary. However, control of the reproduction of images did not lie in the hands of the photographers. As photo-historian, Naomi Rosenblum notes, the FSA in effect acted as a photo agency supplying pictures for photojournalistic use:

For discussion of the concept of documentary see chapter 1, pp. 17–18 and chapter 2, esp. section 2, pp. 89–99.

> In common with other government agencies that embraced photographic projects, the F.S.A. supplied prints for reproduction in the daily and periodical press. In that project photographers were given shooting scripts from which to work, did not own their negatives, and had no control

> over how the pictures might be cropped, arranged, and captioned. Their position was similar to that of photojournalists working for the commercial press – a situation that both Evans and Lange found particularly distasteful.
>
> (Rosenblum 1997: 366–369)

One of the central principles of the documentary aesthetic was that a photograph should be untouched, so that its veracity, its genuineness, might be maintained. Even minor violations of this principle were frowned upon:

In this account, the significance of the question of who retains control of the image rests upon an unspoken notion of the integrity of the image in terms of its original composition. For those concerned with a notion of documentary authenticity, there are ethical implications relating to the use of images. These ideas are not brought into question here. If, however, we take the more contemporary view that photographic meaning shifts according to usage or, indeed, that the photograph, once in circulation, stands apart from its maker, this is less a matter of concern.

> Lange's great *Migrant Mother* photograph had always bothered her a little. Just at the instant that she had taken the picture, a hand had reached out to draw the tent flap back a bit further and the photograph had caught a disembodied thumb in the foreground. That thumb had worried Lange. So, when she prepared the picture for *American Exodus*, the thumb was retouched out of the negative.
>
> This was a simple technique that she had employed hundreds of times during her career as a portrait photographer. For Stryker it was a lapse of taste. He was quite bitter over the incident.
>
> (Hurley 1972: 142)

This quote reminds us of rules that functioned as indicators of authenticity. It seems to be concerned with realism. However, implicit within this is a very literal notion of realism viewed as pictures true to appearance. A number of critics, among whom Brecht and Benjamin were prominent, have argued that realism goes beyond a mere matter of appearances and, indeed, that the photograph, in its apparent literal veracity, is limited in its ability to convey information about socio-economic and political relations.

Image in context

The FSA project was a response to the economic crisis of 1929 and the ensuing economic depression of the 1930s together with the collapse of sharecropping agriculture in a number of the south-west states of the USA. It aimed to document and record statistically the position of the rural poor, but the photographers it employed eschewed a mere photography of record in favour of works that stressed the depiction of human destitution and distress. Such images had a clear political purpose, but one that has been criticised for individualising what were collective problems with potentially collective solutions. Abigail Solomon-Godeau:

> Commenting on the works of Dorothea Lange, the film maker Pare Lorentz noted the following: "She has selected with an unerring eye. You do not find in her portrait gallery the bindle-stiffs, the drifters, the tramps, the unfortunate, the aimless dregs of a country." In other words, the appeal made to the viewer was premised on the assertion that the victims of the Depression were to be judged as the deserving poor, and thus the claim for redress hinged on individual misfortune rather than on systematic failure in the political, economic, and social spheres.
>
> (Solomon-Godeau 1991: 179)

In analysing this quote, we want to ask whether Lorentz is accurate in his comment – are there examples of photographs by Lange which might contradict his view? (Several other photographs by Lange are included in Andrea Fisher (1987).) Furthermore, do we agree with Solomon-Godeau's interpretation of his comment? Finally, what distinction is being made here between 'individual misfortune' and 'systematic failure' and what political positions underpin each of these phrases?

Here Solomon-Godeau is concerned with the political implications of that to which the image testifies.

Image-text

The image is titled *Migrant Mother*. This caption, together with the formal organisation of the photograph, are key elements of its appeal. Yet in *A Concise History of Photography* by Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, published in 1965, the same picture is captioned *Seasonal Farm Labourer's Family*, a title which seems less potent since it implies the presence of a working father. The original title and date are given by Andrea Fisher as 'Destitute pea pickers in California, a 32 year old mother of seven children. February 1936'.

Titles contribute to holding the meaning of pictures, to limiting the potential range of interpretations or responses on the part of the audience or reader. Examining – or imagining – alternative titles for an image can help us understand how the title lends resonance to the picture.

Aesthetics and art history

Western aesthetic philosophy is concerned to examine principles of taste and systems for the appreciation of that which is deemed beautiful. Thus the aesthetics of photography have been concerned with formal matters such as composition, subject-matter, and the organisation of pictorial elements within the frame. It has also encompassed questions of technique – sharpness of image, exposure values, print quality, etc. Karin Becker Ohrn tells us that:

> Many of Lange's prints were poor. She made them according to no formula, and they varied widely in density, making it a challenge to print them.
>
> (Ohrn 1980: 228)

These failures of technique were unimportant when the photographs were reproduced in books and journals, but towards the end of her life, Lange presented her work in a number of major exhibitions, and this required careful technical work to take place:

> The prints were processed to archival standards and placed on white mounts. The final result was superb; the print quality was commended by several reviewers of the exhibition.
>
> (ibid.)

The context of viewing is also influential. Naomi Rosenblum comments:

> The images were transformed into photographic works of art when they were exhibited under the auspices of the Museum of Modern Art. For the first time, photographs made to document social conditions were accorded the kind of recognition formerly reserved for aesthetically conceived camera images.
>
> (Rosenblum 1997: 369)

This concern with print quality is often seen as excessively formal, privileging matters of technique at the expense of content, meaning and context. However, different contexts require differing levels of attention to print quality. While a mediocre print may be adequate for newspapers given their low-quality reproduction, gallery exhibition demands high-quality visual resolution. Shift in usage of the image required a different degree of precision.

If the photograph is in a book or magazine concerned with social conditions, its status as evidence is foregrounded. Lange's photographs were published by the FSA in 1939 as a book titled *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion*. The title directs the reader to consider the group of photographs sociologically; the focus is upon the implications of the content. By contrast, when exhibited in the art gallery the context invites us to look at the picture in

aesthetic and symbolic terms. For instance, art historians have observed that Lange's photograph is related – in terms of both subject-matter and framing – to the many paintings of the Madonna and Child in Western art.

In traditional art history, questions of genre, form and technique, as well as subject-matter deemed appropriate for artistic expression, are central. When photographs are re-appropriated within the gallery context, specific art-historical traditions associated with them come into play, becoming, as it were, laid over the picture.

As gendered image

A number of feminist photo-historians have looked at the FSA in terms of the participation of women photographers and the gendering of the image. Lange has been cast as 'mother' of documentary. Thus, for instance, Andrea Fisher in *Let us Now Praise Famous Women* discusses her contribution:

> Dorothea Lange became a key figure in securing the humanism of documentary. She was repeatedly represented in popular journals as the 'mother' of documentary: the little woman who would cut through ideas by evoking personal feeling. Through her pathos for destitute rural migrants, the New Deal's programs of rural reform might be legitimized, not as power, but as the exercise of care. Her place in the construction of documentary rhetoric was thus crucially different but every bit as important as Walker Evans', more widely recognized as the paradigmatic figure of documentary. Where Evans was thought of as the guarantor of honest observation, with his flat-lit frontal shots, Lange was lauded as the keeper of documentary's compassion.
>
> (Fisher 1987: 131)

Fisher argues that Stryker over-edited the FSA work and in so doing obscured the work and the role played by women in the project. She particularly argues that representations of femininity played a crucial role in the rhetoric of the FSA photographs, both in terms of the gender of the photographer and subject-matter.

In hailing Lange as the 'Mother', Stryker placed her as the mirror of immutable motherhood that many of her photographs would subsequently suggest. Her consuming empathy for her subjects became synonymous with her subjects' caring for their children. Though only a fraction of her images conformed to the transcendent ideal of mother and child, it was the image of the Migrant Mother which soared to the status of icon, and became the hallmark of Lange herself:

> The naming of Lange as 'Mother' folded across the reading of her images. It not only prioritized certain images, but became intimately embedded in the sense that could be made of them.
>
> (Fisher 1987: 140–141)

Here Fisher draws attention to the centrality of 'motherhood', a concept which was brought under scrutiny in feminist critiques of the 1970s.

Photography critic John Roberts has summarised her argument thus:

> Fisher argues that one of the principal ideological props of the way FSA photographs were used to construct an American community under threat was the image of the maternal. She cites Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1937) as a primary example of this, one of the most reproduced photographs of the period, so much so in fact that it could be said to stand in iconically *for* the Depression. For Fisher the way the image was cropped and contextualised reveals how much the image of a damaged femininity came to symbolise the crisis of community for the American public. Anxious and in obvious poverty, the woman holds on to her two children, suggesting the power of maternal values to overcome the most dire of circumstances. Here is a woman who has lost everything, yet heroically, stoically keeps her family together. Here in essence was what the magazine editors were waiting for: an image of tragedy AND resistance. That this image became so successful reflects how great a part gender played in the symbolic management of the Depression.
>
> (Roberts 1998: 85)

Questions of gender have been discussed both in relation to the photographer and to the content of the image as a particular representation of, in this instance, maternity. But Roberts takes this up in terms which contain overtones of conspiracy, seeing the gendering in terms of political rhetoric. When we look back to Fisher herself we find a different emphasis. This illustrates, once again, the importance of checking original sources. As we see, Roberts has imposed a specific inflection on Fisher's original research.

Fisher herself offers a slightly different account:

> The incessant picturing of women with their children was never prioritized by Stryker for his photographers; *it was not a conscious political device*. But perhaps it arose, like the whole of Stryker's enterprise, as part of that widely felt nostalgia for a mythic American past: an American essence as natural as the land, and so located in an immutable rural family. But only for an urban audience could the land achieve this mythic status, and the rural mother the status of universal touchstone. Perhaps, too, that desire for lost plenitude found in the image of the Mother its most appropriate analogue.
>
> (Fisher 1987: 138; our emphasis)

Here, questions of gender are seen as interrelating with other sets of ideas about Americanness. Fisher points to the power of this interaction.

Reading the photograph

As we have noted, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a shift in photography theory whereby images became viewed as complexly coded artefacts to be read as cultural, psychoanalytic and ideological signs. For Barthes, in his later writings, specifically *Camera Lucida*, the photograph *signifies* reality, rather than reflecting or representing it. The emphasis is upon what the viewer as 'reader' of the image takes as the principal cues and clues for use as the basis of interpretation.

In reading photographs we may choose to concentrate on the formal qualities of the image; for example, its arrangement within the frame, or the dispositions, stances and gestures of its subjects. Alternatively, or additionally, we may seek to locate the work within the history of image-making, noting similarities and differences from other works of the same kind. Or we may want to explore the way in which the image may be examined from the standpoint of a number of disciplines or discourses which exist outside the photographic.

Semiotics focuses on the formal components of the image, emphasising the centrality of sign systems. Sign systems are viewed as largely conventional; that is, primarily consequent not upon 'natural' relations between images and that to which they refer but upon cultural understandings. For American semiotician C.S. Pierce, signs may be iconic (based upon resemblance to that represented), indexical (based upon a trace or indicator, for instance, smoke indicates fire) or symbolic (based upon conventional associations). Chemically produced photographs incorporate all three constituents: images resemble the person or place or object re-presented; they are indexical in that the subject had to be present for the photograph to be made, which means that the image is essentially a 'trace'; and images circulate in specific cultural contexts within which differing symbolic meanings and values may adhere.

Freudian theory has been acknowledged in Western academia, especially in the latter part of the twentieth century. Within photography criticism, two influential ideas derived from psychoanalytic theory have been that of the function of the gaze, and of analysis of the way in which what might be thought of as 'abstractions' may be inscribed upon the body – literally embodied. These ideas form the background to Pultz's discussion of how we look at this image. Note that in this instance it is the interrelation of gender and of aesthetics which is woven into his analysis. However, we might ask whether Pultz believes Lange's reference to the virgin and child was conscious on her part.

John Pultz begins his analysis of *Migrant Mother* by referring to these ideas in the context of a reading of the gestural system at work within the image. He then moves to consider the woman's body within the tradition of painting; and concludes by commenting on the gendered nature of the space within which the image is set:

> *Migrant Mother* . . . centers on the female body, the body that is socially constructed through the gaze, and has the quality 'to be looked at'. In *Migrant Mother*, Lange builds a narrative around a woman and her three children, centered on the single gesture of an upraised arm. As the two older children turn their heads away from the photographer (out of shame or shyness?) and an infant child sleeps, the mother alone remains awake and vigilant. Her arm is upraised, not to support her head but to finger her chin in tentative thought. The picture is created around certain notions of the female body, including the idea of the nurturing mother. Lange drew on traditional, such as Renaissance depictions of the Virgin and Child and the secularised versions of these that began to appear in the mid nineteenth century with the rise of the Victorian cult of domesticity. Moreover, even though *Migrant Mother* was made in a public space, the close cropping of the image creates within the frame itself a protected, interior, feminised space.
>
> (Pultz 1995: 93)

Image as icon

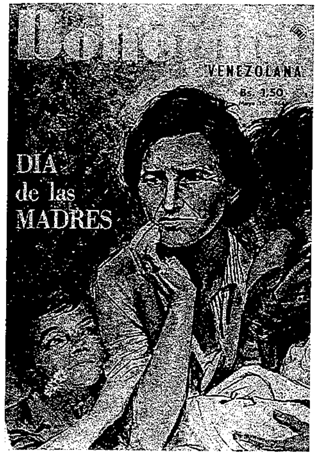
Halla Beloff wants to grant the image an iconic status that takes it out of the realm of representation altogether:

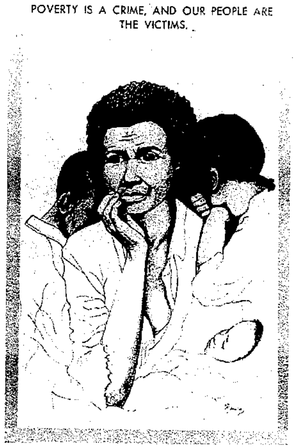
> Such is the power of the camera that we can easily think of photographs as having a kind of independent reality. Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* is a picture that has entered Western consciousness. She is not a mere representation.
>
> (Beloff 1985: 15)

'Icon' here refers not so much to the verisimilitude of the image but to the symbolic value invested in it.

Part of the iconic power of the work derives from its multiple appearances over the years, in many contexts and forms. For instance, in 1964 it appeared on the cover of the Hispanic magazine, *Bohemia Venezolana*, and in 1973 was referenced in *Black Panther* magazine (figures 1.6 and 1.7). Paula Rabinowitz comments on this aspect of the photograph in the following terms:

> I do not need to remind my readers of the power of images – a power that includes their ability to exceed the original impulse of their creation. For instance, the troubling story of Lange's 'Migrant Mother', told and retold, offers with acute poignancy an example of discourse as repository of meaning – the photograph as much as its checkered history includes a woman and her children, a photographer, a government bureau, popular magazines, museums, scholars, and a changing public – an image and tale composed, revised, circulated, and reissued in various venues until whatever reality its subject first possessed has been drained away and the image become icon.
>
> (Rabinowitz 1994: 86)




POVERTY IS A CRIME, AND OUR PEOPLE ARE THE VICTIMS.

1.6 (left) Reference to 'Migrant Mother', *Bohemia Venezolana*
1.7 (right) Reference to 'Migrant Mother', *Black Panther* magazine

Here, there is a notion of photographs as containing 'reality' – a commodity that, as it were, leaches out over time, so that the initial complexity gives way to the merely iconic. Do we agree with this? Or does the image continue to be 'troubling'?

See chapter 4 for further examples of analysis of specific images.

In summary, critical writings appropriate and 're-frame' images in relation to particular sets of concerns. This image has attracted extensive discussion from a range of perspectives, reflecting many differing concerns. Our procedure here was to seek out, select and analyse specific quotes as examples of different 'takes' on the picture.

HISTORIES OF PHOTOGRAPHY

> Inventions – the name by which we call devices that seem fundamentally new – are almost always born out of a process that is more like farming than magic. From a complex ecology of ideas and circumstance that includes the condition of the intellectual soil, the political climate, the state of technical competence, and the sophistication of the seed, the suggestion of new possibilities arises.
>
> (Szarkowski 1989: 11)

Typically, histories of photography offer a series of histories of photographers illustrated with examples from their work. In the twentieth century,

in common with other areas of the arts, such as painting or the novel, there has been a tendency to conflate the history of the subject with the work of particular practitioners. The central purpose of this opening section is to compare key books, published in English in recent years, most of which are variously titled *The History* . . . or *A Concise History*. . . .

What is the story of photography? It was invented in 1839, or so we have commonly been led to believe, but this apparently simple statement masks a complex set of factors. It is true that it was in 1839 that both Fox Talbot in England and Daguerre in France announced the processes whereby they had succeeded in making and fixing a photo-graphic image. But the idea of photography long precedes that date.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL (1982) **The History of Photography**, New York: MOMA, fifth edition, revised and enlarged. This remains a key text, although, as a number of critics have commented, it is limited in its compass by its foundations in the MOMA collection which is primarily American in orientation and idiosyncratic in its holdings, having been built up over the years according to the interests and tastes of its particular curators.

Key archives in Britain for equipment and techniques:

- The National Museum of Photography, Film and Television, Bradford
- The Fox Talbot Museum, Lacock, Wiltshire (National Trust)

To a large extent the history of photography prior to 1938, when **Beaumont Newhall** first published his commentary, then entitled *Photography, A Short Critical History*, has been represented as a history of techniques. The focus was not on what sort of images were made, but on *how* they were made. This approach is to some extent reflected in museum collections wherein it is the instruments of photography which are prioritised for display, with photographs acting as examples of particular printing methods, detailed in accompanying descriptions. The subject-matter of such photographs (and associated aesthetic and social implications), if acknowledged at all, is presented as being of secondary importance.

So, was the story of photography always an account of changing technologies? Martin Gasser suggests that this history is more complicated (Gasser 1992). Considering German, French, British and American publications written between 1839 and 1939, he identifies three emphases: first, what is termed 'the priority debate'; second, histories of the development of photography written primarily as handbooks detailing methods and techniques and also potential uses for photography; third, histories of the photograph as image. It is worth noting that it is the proliferation of material in the second of these categories which has led to the false assumption that the first hundred years of publication were largely devoted to technologies and techniques. Aside from any other consideration, a number of the papers published in the early years of photography made assertions about the intrinsic nature of the medium and speculated on its potential uses.

Which founding father?

Before considering histories of the photograph as *image*, the priority debate deserves brief comment. This debate is concerned with who first achieved the fixing of the photographic image. A number of historical accounts exist whose primary purpose is to argue – usually through a combination of biography and discussion of photographic techniques – that someone other than Fox Talbot in Britain or Daguerre in France 'invented' photography. These two men were the first to announce their findings publicly (in the appropriate scientific journals of the time, in Britain and France) in 1839. But it is also clear, from contemporary correspondence, that Fox Talbot was not alone in Britain in his experimentation. Similarly, in France, Nicephore Nièpce was responsible in the early 1820s for key discoveries leading up to the **daguerreotype**. As every history of early photography emphasises, the challenge did not lie with the development of camera and lens technology. The principle of concentrating light through a small hole in order to create reflection on the wall of a dark chamber was known to Aristotle (384–322 BC). The photographic camera was based on the camera obscura, described as early as the tenth century AD, of which the first illustration was published in 1545. The problem which preoccupied experimentation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was how to fix the image once it had been obtained.

daguerreotype Photographic image made by the process launched by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre in France in 1839. It is a positive image on a metal plate with a mirror-like silvered surface, characterised by very fine detail. Each one is unique and fragile and needs to be protected by a padded case. It became the dominant portrait mode for the first decades of photography, especially in the United States.

The credit for discovering practical chemical processes lies with no single person. As historian Helmut Gernsheim remarks in relation to the daguerreotype, 'though to Nièpce goes the credit of having devised the first photographic process, and of having invented the earliest photo-engraving method, it was left to his partner Daguerre to make photography practicable as distinct from possible' (**Gernsheim and Gernsheim 1969: 41**).

HELMUT AND ALISON GERNSHEIM (1969) **The History of Photography from the Earliest Use of the Camera Obscura in the Eleventh Century up to 1914**, 2 vols, London and New York (first edition, 1955). One of the two classic histories. It is interesting to compare later editions with the first edition in order to see how their interests and research developed.

Nor, indeed, does the credit lie with any particular nation, although, as Gasser reminds us, the ascription of credit has always had nationalistic overtones with, for example, the French, keen to downgrade British claims (1839 was within a generation of the Battle of Trafalgar). Likewise, strenuous rewritings of history allowed the German photo-historian, Stenger, writing in the 1930s during the ascendance of Hitler, to claim German experiments of the eighteenth century as fundamental for photography. Re-examining the prehistory, Mary Warner Marien urges caution in two respects: first, she warns against too uncritical an acceptance of the work of early photo-historians. She notes the extent to which the burgeoning of research in the field since the Second World War has both uncovered new findings and suggested new ways of thinking about previously known facts within the history of photography; recent research represents only the beginning of a much needed archaeology of early photography. In addition, she emphasises the broader historical context of political, technological and cultural change within which photography developed. The overall point is that, in considering the origins of photography, a stance which is both cautious and critical should be adopted (Warner Marien 1991).

The photograph as image

While earlier writing on photography had not exclusively focused on technology and techniques, since the Second World War art-historical concerns have become more central, together with a new stress on connoisseurship of the photograph as a privileged object. A number of the books which we now take as key texts on the history of photography were first written as exhibition catalogues for works collected and shown in institutions. For

instance, Beaumont Newhall's *The History of Photography* stems from a catalogue written to accompany 'Photography 1839–1937' at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York in 1937. The broader context for the introduction of art-historical methods and concerns into photography collection and exhibition includes the development of art history as an academic discipline and, more particularly, the increasing influence of art criticism within modern art in the first half of the twentieth century. Here it is relevant to remember the emphasis upon **Art** as a set of special practices which informed **modernist** thinking. A central feature of modernist criticism was that of maintaining a clear distinction between high and low culture, a differentiation which was equally evident in the writings of some Marxist critics as it was among conservative critics. If photographs were to take their place in the gallery, they inevitably became caught up within more general intellectual trends and discourses.

Since the Second World War, then, the predominant approach to writing the history of photography has been to focus on the photograph as image. Two classic histories, still consulted, are Beaumont Newhall's *The History of Photography* (now in its fifth, revised edition); and Helmut and Alison Gernsheim's *History of Photography*, which, as we have seen, was organised in its earliest form in relation to developing technologies but has subsequently been rewritten to take fuller account of photographs as specific types of image. It is worth pausing to consider and compare these two publications; together they established a specific canon for the history of photography which has been the basis for further development – or taken as a starting point for challenge – ever since.[8]

Educated as an art historian, and appointed on to the library staff at New York's Museum of Modern Art, Newhall was invited to research its first major photography exhibition. His historical overview, which formed the principal essay in the exhibition catalogue, described changing techniques, but also included comments on specific photographers and particular periods of aesthetic development. Newhall was one of the first to introduce aesthetic judgements into the discussion of photographs, but, at this stage, as he has noted himself, he avoided the identification of artists, thereby refusing MOMA's expectations of what an exhibition catalogue should be. It was only in the third edition of his *History of Photography* that emphasis on photographers and an account of the work of practitioners emerges. In this edition he also, for the first time, introduced chapters on straight photography, documentary and 'instant vision', thereby acknowledging characteristics specific to photography. The third edition thus represents the beginning of an engagement with the idea of photography theory as distinct from art theory.[9]

Similarly, it is only in later editions that Helmut Gernsheim refocuses the history to comment more extensively upon particular practitioners. His contribution to the history, developed in collaboration with Alison Gernsheim, was founded in the study of their collection of nineteenth-century photographs.[10]

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[8] We are indebted to insights and observations offered by Deborah Roland in her unpublished postgraduate diploma dissertation *Two Histories of Photography* (London Institute, 1995).

[9] All editions are credited to Newhall, but a number of commentators have noted the research contribution of his wife, Nancy Newhall.

[10] The Gernsheim collection is now at the University of Texas in Austin.

The full title of their research, first published in 1955 and dedicated to Beaumont Newhall, is *The History of Photography from the Earliest Use of the Camera Obscura in the Eleventh Century up to 1914*. The second edition, in 1969, was divided into two volumes, with considerably more emphasis on illustration than previously. The third, revised edition appeared in the 1980s, by then under the single authorship of Helmut Gernsheim (since the death of his wife). The first volume of *The History of Photography* focuses on the origins of photography in France, America, Great Britain and Germany.[11] A chapter on Italy was added later, in the third edition, which was published in 1982. A summary version of the research was published in 1965 as *A Concise History of Photography*, offering a shorter, and thus easier entry into his work. This version includes a brief, and highly selective, discussion of modern photography up to the 1950s. (For purposes of studying the nineteenth century, the two-volume edition which is in large format, with good quality picture reproduction, is recommended for the detail of observation and the range of imagery.)

Both Newhall and Gernsheim focus upon Western Europe and the United States (with no comment, for instance, on Soviet Russia or South America). The key difference between Newhall and Gernsheim lies in Gernsheim's relative concentration on the nineteenth century, and his greater emphasis on technical aspects of photography. His study is more lengthy and less literary in approach than Newhall's. This may reflect the origins of Newhall's essay as an exhibition catalogue, which meant that he had to take account of the problem of succinct communication to a diverse audience. Further differences may stem from nationality: Newhall was American; Gernsheim was born in Germany but was naturalised British. As has already been noted, they were working in relation to particular archive collections, the former drawing upon the collection at MOMA with, inevitably, a central focus upon developments in America, as well as upon the research in Europe conducted prior to the 1937 exhibition. The Gernsheim collection focused on the nineteenth century, and was centred upon British photography.

Both historians proceed to a greater or lesser extent by way of discussion of great photographers. Gernsheim notes that their collection was organised not only in files about photographic processes, apparatus, exhibitions, but also folders on important photographers (see **Hill and Cooper 1992**). Newhall, as an art historian, was accustomed to emphasis on the contribution of the individual artist, and by the fifth edition of his work, the contribution of individual photographers and the authority of their work is clearly a priority. This has the effect of raising the profile of certain 'masters' of photography, thereby defining a canon, or authoritative list, of great practitioners. To quote lecturer and critic, Stevie Bezencenet:

> The complex detail of Gernsheim's history and the simple linear progression that Newhall presents do not allow us to comprehend just how these histories have been constructed. We are locked into a

VICKI GOLDBERG (ed.) (1981) **Photography in Print**, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press

PAUL HILL AND THOMAS COOPER (1992) **Dialogue with Photography**, Manchester: Cornerhouse Publications

NATHAN LYONS (1966) **Photographers on Photography**, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall

CHRISTOPHER PHILLIPS (ed.) (1989) **Photography in the Modern Era**, New York: Metropolitan Museum/Aperture

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[11] The chapter is in fact entitled 'The Daguerreotype in German-Speaking Countries'. He refers to what is now known as Germany and Austria, although in the mid-nineteenth century, Germany had not yet been united, so technically, these were developments in Prussia, Bavaria and elsewhere.

> limited and traditional perception of a medium developing from one *Master* to another, marginally influenced by technical factors and with a minimal relation to anything else: the key site of analysis becomes the qualities of the individual photograph.
>
> (Bezencenet 1982a: 485)

The canonisation of photographers as artists, in line with the emphasis on individual practitioners in other art fields in the Modern period, characterises many contemporary publications. For instance, Photo Poche publish a three-part 'history' organised as brief biographies with comments on photographers, accompanied by one image selected from their lifetime's work. Similarly, *The Photography Book*, published by Phaidon, includes 500 photographs by 500 different photographers (presented alphabetically by surname). Such collections offer useful starting points for identifying the style of particular photographers, but the socio-historical contextualisation is strictly limited. By selecting known practitioners, rather than sets of ideas or types of practice, such books have the effect of reinforcing the canon of acclaimed photographers and marginalising practices which cannot be illustrated through reference to specific names.

History in focus

There are several consequences of canonisation: first, changing attitudes to photography as a set of practices have tended to become obscured behind the eulogisation of particular photographers, their photographs and their contribution. Second, the focus (led by male historians) has been upon male photographers, with the consequence that the participation of women has been overlooked or obscured. Third, there has been relatively extensive discussion of professional and serious commercial practices, but relatively few accounts of popular photography or of more specialist areas of practice, such as architecture or medicine. Fourth, as has already been mentioned, photography history has tended to prioritise aesthetic concerns over broader and more diverse forms of involvement of photography in all aspects of social experience, including personal photography, publishing and everyday portraiture.

Other contemporary histories, published in English and selected for comment here, reflect or engage with these problems to a greater or lesser degree. **Peter Turner**'s *History of Photography* is perhaps the most aware of potential limitations, and most explicitly sets out to transcend them. His range is broader than the other histories, and includes fashion photography and advertising within its compass. Sections are organised primarily in terms of discussion of particular practices rather than technologies or practitioners, although, perhaps inevitably, there is some focus on particular photographers, through the selection of photographs as illustration and through identification of leading exponents. This book, with reasonably sized reproductions of photographs (including some colour reproduction) makes pleasurable

PETER TURNER (1987) **History of Photography**, London: Hamlyn. Includes chapters on particular fields of practice such as fashion and advertising.

reading. Concentrating on images, **Graham Clarke** explores how we understand a photograph through a brief introductory historical overview of practices in terms of genres: landscape, the city, the portrait, the body, documentary, fine art, and photographic manipulations. **Naomi Rosenblum**'s *A World History of Photography* offers an excellent, clearly written account which is thorough and markedly international in its compass. The device of including three separate sections on technical history allows her to focus on images and movements in the main body of the text, which is extensively illustrated.

GRAHAM CLARKE (1997) **The Photograph**, Oxford: Oxford University Press

NAOMI ROSENBLUM (1997) A **World History of Photography** (third edition), New York, London, and Paris: Abbeville Press. Previous editions, 1984, 1989

Mark Haworth-Booth's discussion of *Photography: An Independent Art* offers an eminently readable account of the development of the photography archive at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. While focusing upon images in that particular collection, his discussion is informed and informative about more general developments in photography as both art and technology. Likewise, **Ian Jeffrey**'s account *Photography, A Concise History* is purposeful and generally clearly written. This book set out to be a radical reappraisal of the history of photography as written to date, although Stevie Bezencenet has argued that it was less than successful in its re-evaluation on the grounds that to produce a history of photography now requires a diversity of academic approaches (Bezencenet 1982b). She also notes that Jeffrey offers another history overwhelmingly concerned with male practitioners, making the point that, however radical his declared intentions, his work mirrors the established formula of a chronological account of changes and focuses on dominant modes of photography and particular practitioners.

MARK HAWORTH-BOOTH (1997) **Photography: An Independent Art**, London: V&A publications. Haworth-Booth is Curator of Photography at the V&A. This book was published to coincide with the establishment, in May 1998, of a permanent photography gallery at the V&A for showing works from the museum's collection.

IAN JEFFREY (1981) **Photography, A Concise History**, London: Thames and Hudson

Lemagny and Rouille's account is of interest to the English reader, for its central starting point is within French culture which, in effect, recentres France within photography history. While discussion of photography in Britain is more limited than in some of the other accounts, the references to Europe as a whole are more comprehensive. This book is an edited collection. Despite the editors' stated intention of holding a balance between discussion of photography as a field in itself, and discussion of the broader context within which it functions, some chapters succeed in being more analytic than others. While expressing strong criticisms, in reviewing the book, Warner Marien suggests that its strengths lie in two chapters on photography as art, and she adds that in general this collection takes more account of contemporary theoretical ideas than do most works of this kind (Warner Marien 1988). Likewise, **Michel Frizot**'s *A New History of Photography* is written from a French perspective, as indicated, for instance, in its emphasis in early chapters on the spread of the daguerreotype. Organised chronologically, it offers groups of images juxtaposed with specific thematic discussions which range from the technical to particular fields of practice.

JEAN-CLAUDE LEMAGNY AND ANDRÉ ROUILLE (1987) A **History of Photography**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

MICHEL FRIZOT (ed.) (1998) A **New History of Photography**, Cologne: Konemann

The year 1989 saw the publication of two major historical overviews, both designed to accompany retrospective exhibitions celebrating 150 years of photography. The title of Mike Weaver's *The Art of Photography* (1989) reflects

the location of this exhibition at the Royal Academy in Piccadilly, London. This was the first ever exhibition of photographs to be held there and, as such, both the show and the accompanying publication emphasise the image as art and the status of the photographer as artist. Similarly, **John Szarkowski**'s *Photography Until Now* (1989) – which accompanied the MOMA celebration of 150 years of photography – in relying primarily on the MOMA collection reinforces the American canon (which includes a number of European photographers). Szarkowski trained both as an art historian and as a photographer before working in the MOMA collection for thirty years. His interests centred upon the formal and technical properties which distinguish photographs from other visual media, and in the status of the unauthored or vernacular photograph. However, the production values of both of these publications are high, which makes each a useful source for visual reference and research.

JOHN SZARKOWSKI (1989) **Photography Until Now**, New York: MOMA. Published to coincide with the exhibition of the same name on the occasion of the 150 years' celebration

If you are coming to the story of photography for the first time, Rosenblum offers a good, clearly written starting point for engaging with this history. Alternatively, Szarkowski and Jeffrey complement one another in taking America, or Europe, as central starting points. Indeed, Szarkowski specifically comments on the difference in the situation of photography in the US, as opposed to Europe, at the turn of the century. He suggests that American (he specifies 'Yankee') photographers were more inclined towards reportage than their European counterparts, having invested less in claims for the status of the photograph as art, since America lacked the depth of artistic tradition that was central to post-Renaissance Europe.

Each of the histories reviewed above reflects, to a greater or lesser degree, an established selection of photographers and their images. The 'great masters' approach has been challenged variously. Anne Tucker, in *The Woman's Eye* (1973) was among the first to draw attention to the considerable participation of women as photographers historically. As the title implies, she suggests that what we see photographically – that is, subject-matter and treatment – to some extent reflects gender. This question of gender has been pursued by **Val Williams** in her discussion of British women's participation in a range of practices, including the local (studio) and the domestic (the family album), and, like Peter Turner, her historical account takes stock of commercial practices. Likewise, Jeanne Montoussamy-Ashe (1985) reinstates black women into the history of American photography, noting, for instance, documentation for the 1866 Houston city directory which lists 'col' against the name of a female photographic printer. (Some women are also listed in D. Willis Thomas' *Black Photographers* bio-bibliography (1985), again American.) In all instances, what is at stake is to note the presence of women within a particular field and to consider ways in which gender, positively or negatively, contributed to constructing or limiting the roles played. By contrast, Constance Sullivan's *Woman Photographers* (1990), considering European (including British) and American examples, has stressed women's participation as artists, arguing that women's work historically has demonstrated equivalent aesthetic values to those which characterise the work of their better-known male contemporaries, while often bringing different subject-matter into focus. This book is particularly useful for its quality reproduction of images. But the fundamental point is that each author focuses on putting women back into the picture even if, ultimately, they challenge the canon rather than canonisation.

VAL WILLIAMS (1986) **Women Photographers: The Other Observers, 1900 to the Present**, London: Virago. Revised edition (1991) **The Other Observers: Women Photographers from 1900 to the Present**

NAOMI ROSENBLUM (1994) **A History of Women Photographers**, New York, London and Paris: Abbeville Press

PHOTOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL HISTORY

Social history and photography

Further challenge to the dominance of the 'great masters' history of photography has come from re-interrogation of the status and significance of popular photography. By 'popular' we refer to personal photography, or to photographs which may have been commissioned from professional photographers, but were intended for personal use.[12] The term also extends to include postcards exchanged between individuals, and pictures made to record events or membership of clubs and societies. The high street portrait studio is also a legacy of Victorian photography, and was by no means confined to major cities (see chapter 3). Such studios were often family enterprises, or were run by women photographers.

The contribution of particular photographers, and the economic circumstances within which Victorian and Edwardian photography was pursued, has become a focus of much recent research. But one of the points about reviewing popular photography and rethinking its significance is that concern with the authoring of images is related to questions of provenance (establishing where and when a photograph was taken) rather than to questions of artistic significance. This is because popular photography is increasingly used as social-historical evidence. Personal albums, and other materials, are viewed as a form of visual anthropology and are catalogued within a number of archives, of differing scale and thematic concern. Public museums and libraries may have photographic collections within their local or regional archive; and there are many independent collections.[13] Such rich collections offer myriad research possibilities. They also contribute to the fast-expanding 'Heritage' industry in Britain wherein photographs play a high profile as 'evidence' from the past. As such, they are displayed, or used as reference for the design of reconstructions of buildings or machinery, or republished as postcards.

The photograph as testament

Photographs are commonly used as evidence. They are among the material marshalled by the historian in order to investigate the past. Over the past thirty years they have become a major source of information by which we picture or imagine the nineteenth century. Historians have for the most part had an uneasy relationship with the medium, as their professional training

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[12] Travelling photographers were common prior to Kodak's introduction of the Box Brownie and the consequent more widespread ownership of cameras.

[13] See the Royal Photographic Society (1977) *Directory of British Photographic Collections*, London: Heinemann.

did not introduce them to an analysis of visual images. It was television that first raided the many photographic archives for images of historical interest; this necessarily led to some difficulties, not least of which was that of an archive used in a general way to illustrate commentary, with scant regard for the purposes for which the photographs were made. The social historian may be interested in changing modes of dress, or agricultural and industrial machinery. Photographs are used as evidence of such changes, which means that the detailing of the source and date of the photograph – that is, its *provenance* – becomes especially important. Hence we come across titles of publications such as 'The Camera as Historian' or 'The Camera as Witness'.[14]

Popular education also led to a growth in the use of photographs for the analysis of local or community history.[15] There are a number of reasons why people are interested in using old photographs: some have an ethnographic curiosity about the kinds of clothes or tools that were common at a particular period, while others are fascinated by the characteristic stance and gait of workers in particular trades. Social and labour historians who wanted to gain some idea of ordinary life and work in the Victorian era have also been drawn to the examination of visual material; not merely for the information provided by photographs, but also to begin to recognise in the faces and stances of the subjects something of the real people in the scenes that have been the subject of so many accounts and narratives.

Photography was used throughout the nineteenth century in the service of political and industrial change. One motivation for early landscape photography was governmental employment of photographers for civil and military mapping purposes. For instance, the British government employed photographers for a military survey of the Highlands of Scotland in order to help quell anti-English rebellion (Christian 1990). Similarly, in America, early landscape photography in the West was often commercial in origin: Carleton Watkins' employers included the California State Geological Survey and the Pacific railroads (Snyder 1994). These photographs, along with others made for less systematic purposes, are used as a form of social-historical evidence. Examples range widely: for instance, Alison Gernsheim uses photographs as a basis for a survey of changing fashions (Gernsheim 1981). The status of the photograph as evidence is not questioned. Likewise, books based on past photojournalism are common.[16] Such books purport to present the past 'as it was', taking for granted that this is what photographs do. As is asserted on the inside cover of one such book presenting pictures of Britain and Ireland, 'More than words, more than paintings or prints, old photographs convey an immediate, undistorted impression of the past' (Minto 1970).

Such use of photographs reflects a broader set of academic assumptions. Until recently, British historical, scientific and social scientific method was characterised by empiricism. The nineteenth century was a period of extensive technological and social change, characterised by faith in progress and

[14] Tagg remarks on the publication in London as early as 1916 of a handbook entitled *The Camera as Historian* aimed at those who used the camera for survey and record societies.

[15] See 'The Pencil of History' in Patrice Petro (ed.) *Fugitive Images*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

[16] There are too many examples to enumerate, but many draw upon pictures from the *Illustrated London News* or *Picture Post*.

'Modernity'. Modernity refers to a complex set of developments relating to industrial change, which include the increasing concentration of people in towns and cities, geographical mobility consequent upon the invention of the steam engine and the spread of railway networks, and economic faith in technological progress. In Britain, France and elsewhere, such changes were underpinned economically through imperialism (which made available raw materials and cheap labour from other parts of the world) and through the low pay and poor working conditions experienced by industrial and agrarian labour at home. All these factors contributed to the increasingly public and urban nature of modern life, with the increasing separation of the aristocracy (in Britain), the professional and entrepreneurial middle class, and the workers.

Photography not only developed in the Victorian era but was also implicitly caught up in nineteenth-century interests and attitudes. The Victorians invested considerable faith in the power of the camera to record, classify and witness. This meant that the camera was also entrusted with delineating social appearance, classifying the face of criminality and lunacy, offering racial and social stereotypes. In one of few histories to investigate the photograph neither primarily as image nor as technology, **Alan Thomas** in *The Expanding Eye* considers ways in which early uses of photography reflect and reinforce nineteenth-century concerns. Centred upon Victorian Britain, his account focuses on the popularisation of photography both in terms of *uses* of photographs (it is one of the first accounts to give a whole chapter to photography as family chronicler) and in terms of representation of the everyday. Thus he includes discussion of personal uses of photography in, for instance, the family album; portraiture (including theatre portraits); and photographs which investigate rural and urban working and living conditions. Likewise, **Mary Warner Marien** critically considers the history of the idea of photography, its cultural impact and implications, including discussion of the photograph within mass culture.

ALAN THOMAS (1978) **The Expanding Eye**, London: Croom Helm

MARY WARNER MARIEN (1997) **Photography and Its Critics, A Cultural History, 1839–1900**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

One of the consequences of extensive social change was a series of social surveys, which were designed to try to understand further how different social groups responded to the changing times and sought explanation through the quantitative assembly of information. In 1851 The Great Exhibition celebrated industrial and technological achievement. In that same year, the British Census recorded differences in work status and living circumstances.[17] The motivation for the Victorian survey was not simply academic. Also in 1851 Henry Mayhew published his *London Labour and London Poor*. This first survey of living conditions was illustrated with wood engravings based upon photographs, and therefore stands as an early example of the photograph being used as documentation. It became common for authenticity to be stressed through using such phrases as 'drawn from an original photograph'. The photographic image was already being mobilised as witness.

[17] It is interesting to note that in 1851, fifty-one people recorded themselves by occupation as photographers, and in 1961 there were 2879 (Gernsheim and Gernsheim 1969: 234).

Categorical photography

John Tagg has written extensively on the uses of photography within power relations, noting that photographs became implicated in surveillance very early on. He employs the genealogical method typical of the work of French philosopher, **Michel Foucault**. In *The Burden of Representation* Tagg traces intersecting ways in which photography was involved in maintaining social class hierarchies through delineation of, for instance, prisoners or the poor. He insists on the need to trace the complex relations between representation, knowledge and ideology in terms which take account of fundamental class interests at stake. In his essay 'The Currency of the Photograph' (Burgin 1982) Tagg focuses on what he terms 'the prerequisites of realism'. His title metaphorically references the notion of the photograph as symbolic exchange, while simultaneously referring to the values implicated in such an exchange. Thus he discusses the relationship of the photograph to reality, the constitution of photographic meaning, the social utility of photographs, and the institutional frameworks within which they are produced and consumed.

JOHN TAGG (1988) **The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories**, London: Macmillan

Michel Foucault (1926–1984) One of the most influential of French philosophers of recent times. He enjoyed a distinguished career as a scholar and academic which culminated in his appointment as Professor in the History of Systems of Thought at the College de France. In the 1960s Foucault rejected humanism and philosophies of consciousness and set about the construction of a new kind of critical theory. His concerns were with the way in which specific social institutions and practices construct the objects and forms of knowledge and help to determine our human subjectivity. Some key works in this project are, in English translation: *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (1970); *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972); *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973); *Discipline and Punish* (1977); *The History of Sexuality* (1978).

Likewise, recent reappraisals of uses of photography within social anthropology, and within the records of colonial travellers implicated in European imperialism, have drawn attention to the political and ideological implications of using photography to define social types viewed as different or **Other**. As a number of critics have variously observed, such definitional uses of the image contribute to legitimating colonial rule (**Edwards 1992**). Furthermore, as Sarah Graham-Brown has argued, there is a complex interplay between imperialism and patriarchy, within which women become particular sorts of exoticised victims of the stereotyping of the colonial Other (Graham-Brown 1988).

ELIZABETH EDWARDS (ed.) (1992) **Photography and Anthropology**, New Haven: Yale University Press. An impressive collection of essays on the subject which takes advantage of access to key archives including the Pitt River Museum, Oxford, where Edwards is Curator of Photography.

In his 'The Archive and the Body' (1986), photographer and critic Allan Sekula traces the attempts of Victorian men of science to delineate, record and classify particular 'types' of human being (Sekula 1991). They used physiognomy and phrenology to show that it was possible to read from the surface of the body the inner delineation and moral character of the subject being studied. They employed the developing science of statistics in order to demonstrate that science – aided by one of its new tools, the seemingly impartial eye of the camera – would reveal and systematically record the varieties of criminal faces.

[See chapter 5, pp. 220–4.]

Sekula is, in this complex article, particularly interested in photography's relation to police procedures, but mad people and native peoples from other cultures were similarly subjected to processes of measurement and scentific appraisal. In 1869 T.H. Huxley was asked to make a photographic record of people from a number of races:

> Huxley . . . was asked . . . by the Colonial Office to devise instructions for the 'formation of a series of photographs of the various races of men comprehended within the British Empire'. The system he conceived called for unclothed subjects to be photographed full- and half-length, frontally and in profile, standing in each exposure beside a clearly marked measuring stick. Such photographs reproduced the hierarchical structures of domination and subordination inherent in the institutions of colonialism.
>
> (Pultz 1995: 25)

But a number of further issues beg attention in considering surveillance, social survey and other 'mapping' usages of photography. In referring to the photograph as 'fugitive testimony', Barthes draws our attention to the fleeting nature of the moment captured in the photograph and the extent to which contemporary experience (we are looking back with eyes informed by circumstances and ways of thinking of the 1990s), along with limited knowledge of the specific context within which – and purpose for which – the photograph was taken, make the image an unreliable witness. Photography is involved in the construction of history. But when photographs are presented as 'evidence' of past events and circumstances, a set of assumptions about their accuracy as documents is being made. Such assumptions are usually acknowledged through statements of provenance: dates, sources, and so on. But this is to ignore wider questions relating to visual communication and ways in which we interpret photographs.

In recent years, photography has been used by those who want to construct history around the notion of 'popular memory'. Here the photographs are often of a personal nature, through which communities might begin the process of establishing their own non-formal history; accounts which might well challenge or be oppositional to more official versions. One problem with this is that photographs have often been treated as though they really were a source of disinterested facts, rather than as densely coded cultural objects:

> Ultimately, then, when photographs are uncritically presented as historical documents, they are transformed into aesthetic objects. Accordingly, the pretence to historical understanding remains although that understanding has been replaced by aesthetic experience.
>
> (Sekula 1991: 123)

The history of photography is to a large extent shaped by the characteristic ways in which photographs have been collected, stored, used and displayed. With the passage of time the original motive for the making of a photograph may disappear, leaving it accessible to being 're-framed' within new contexts.

Institutions and contexts

Let us assume that a photograph of a homeless, unemployed man, published in a 1930s magazine to advance some philanthropic cause, is shown, massively

enlarged, on the walls of a gallery fifty years after it was first made. Originally tied to the page with a caption and an explanatory text, it now stands alone as some kind of Art object. How are we to read such an image? As an example of a genre? For its technical qualities? As part of the *oeuvre* of a distinguished practitioner? As a work of Art, or as an historical object which conveys specific information or exemplifies 'pastness'? Do we try to make sense of it in terms of its distance from our own lives, or because there are many similarities to prevailing conditions? Do we try to read through the image some notion of human nature, of how, regardless of political context or the specificity of time, it would feel to be destitute and suffering? Or do we see it merely as a *photograph*, one among many and to be distinguished in terms of its formal, aesthetic qualities rather than its relationship to a world outside itself?

The very ubiquity of the medium has meant that photographs have always circulated in contexts for which they were not made. It is also important to remember that there is no single, intrinsic, aboriginal meaning locked up within them. Rather, there are many ways in which photographs can be read and understood, but in 'reading' photographs we rely on many contextual clues which lie outside the photography itself. We rarely encounter photographs in their original state, for we normally see them on hoardings, in magazines and newspapers, as book covers, on the walls of galleries or on the sides of buses. Their social meanings are already indicated to us and they are designed into a space, often accompanied by a text that gives us the preferred readings of their producers and allows us to make sense of what might otherwise be puzzling or ambiguous images. Indeed, commercial uses of photography, especially in advertising, often play on the multiple possible connotations that are provoked by the image.

One determinant of the way in which we understand photographs, then, is the context within which we view them, and key institutions shape the nature of photography by the way they provide this context. This approach to understanding photography was particularly influential in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s and was central to the concerns of a number of magazines at that time, pre-eminently *Ten/8* and *Camerawork* (**Evans 1997**). As was argued, photographs are weak at the level of imminent meaning and depend for their decoding on text, surrounding, organisation, and so on. Although collections of photographs have always been assembled, photography's ambiguous status with regard to Art has often meant that they were not displayed in museums as objects in themselves, but rather, used as a source of supplementary information to some more valued objects.

JESSICA EVANS (ed.) (1997) **The Camerawork Essays**, London: Rivers Oram. Includes fifteen essays originally printed in *Camerawork* between 1976 and 1985.

The museum

Douglas Crimp has argued that the entry of photographs into the privileged space of the museum stripped them of the multiple potential meanings with which they are invested. They were removed from the many realms within which they made sense, in order to stress their status as separate objects – as *photographs*. Crimp is particularly interested in the work of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in transforming photographs into objects of merely aesthetic attention. He is not alone in drawing attention to the way in which MOMA embraced photographs as art objects, brought them into the privileged space of the gallery and surrounded them with the apparatus of scholarship, appreciation and connoisseurship formerly reserved for paintings and sculptures.

DOUGLAS CRIMP (1995) **On the Museum's Ruins**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. A collection of key essays originally published in *October* and other journals.

But Crimp also examined the practice of the New York Public Library which, becoming aware of the number of photographs it possessed and of their historic and financial value, created a Department of Photography. They scoured all sections of the huge library for a trawl of photographs, which were removed from multitudinous subject areas and reclassified as photographs, often under the individual photographer.[18] Crimp comments of photography that:

> Thus ghettoized it will no longer primarily be *useful* within other discursive practices; it will no longer serve the purposes of information, documentation, evidence, illustration, reportage. The formerly plural field of photography will henceforth be reduced to the single, all-encompassing *aesthetic*.
>
> (Crimp 1995: 75)

What is lost in this process is the ability of photography to create information and knowledge through its interaction with other discourses. Photographs, doomed to the visual solitude of the art object, lose their plurality and their ability to traverse fields of meaning. They are treated as though they are unique and singular, rather than as the kind of industrial object – capable of being multiply reproduced – that constitutes their real existence.

The archive

Allan Sekula, in his article 'Reading an Archive' (1991), draws our attention to the power of the photographic archive. There are, of course, many different kinds of archive, from those held in museums to commercial or historical collections or family albums. They are found in libraries, commercial firms, museums and private collections. What they have in common is the fact that they heap together images of very different kinds and impose upon them a homogeneity that is a product of their very existence within an archive. The unity of an archive, he argues, is imposed by ownership of the objects themselves and of the principles of classification and organisation by which they are structured.[19]

Photographs of many kinds, which may have been taken for different – perhaps even antagonistic – purposes, are brought together: 'in an archive, the possibility of meaning is "liberated" from the actual contingencies of use. But this liberation is also a loss, an *abstraction* from the complexity and richness of

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[18] Likewise, the V&A collection of photographs was established through bringing together photographs from a number of different sections of the museum. For an introduction to this international collection see Mark Haworth-Booth (1997) **Photography: An Independent Art**, London: V&A Publications.

[19] See Chrissie Iles and Russell Roberts (eds) (1997) *In Visible Light*, Oxford: Museum of Modern Art. This exhibition catalogue includes four key essays on photography and classification in art, science and the everyday.

use, a loss of context' (Sekula 1991: 116). But archives play an important function in the creation of knowledge. Characteristically, an archive seeks to grow; it aspires to completeness and through this process of mass acquisition a kind of knowledge emerges:

> And so archives are contradictory in character. Within their confines meaning is liberated from use, and yet at a more general level an empiricist model of truth prevails. Pictures are atomized, isolated in one way and homogenized in another.
>
> (Sekula 1991: 118)

But if serious historians have sometimes neglected to read photographs in the complex way they deserve, the heritage industry has used photography as a central tool in its attempt to reconstruct the past as a site of tourist pleasure. Here, photography becomes a direct way through which our experience of the past is structured.

Many critics have been worried by, or contemptuous of, the touristic use of historical materials and of the function of the visual. For example, Donald Horne claims that photography is an essential part of the tourist experience because it allows us to convert the places we visit into signs which we can then possess. Photography, he suggests:

> offers us the joys of possession: by taking photographs of famous sites and then, at home, putting them into albums or showing them as slides, we gain some kind of possession of them. For some of us this can be the main reason for our tourism. Between them, the camera and tourism are two of the uniquely modern ways of defining reality.
>
> (Horne 1984: 12)

Similarly, Robert Hewison argues:

> Heritage is gradually effacing history, by substituting an image of the past for its reality. At a time when Britain is obsessed by the past, we have a fading sense of continuity and change, which is being replaced by a fragmented and piecemeal idea of the past constructed out of costume drama on television, re-enactments of civil war battles and mendacious celebrations of events such as the Glorious Revolution, which was neither glorious nor a revolution.
>
> (Hewison, in Corner and Harvey 1990: 175)

Now the archive is raided not for photographs as aesthetic objects, but for photographs as signifiers of past times. Blown up from their original proportions, sepia-toned and mounted on walls, photographs retain their implicit claim to authenticity. As cultural critics, including **John Corner** and **Sylvia Harvey**, have argued, we are now looking at the past in new ways and this kind of commodification of the image raises complex questions about how history is constructed and photographs employed to visualise the past. The relation between past and present, and the assumptions we make about photographs as sources of evidence of past times and events, are brought into particular focus in Chapter 2, on documentary, and Chapter 3, on personal photography.

JOHN CORNER AND SYLVIA HARVEY (1990) 'Heritage in Britain', **Ten/8**: 36

JOHN TAYLOR (1994) **A Dream of England: Landscape, Photography and the Tourist's Imagination**, Manchester: Manchester University Press

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CHAPTER 2

Surveyors and surveyed

Photography out and about

DERRICK PRICE

67 **Introduction**
68 **Surveys and social facts**
Photography and imperialism
The camera at war
Documentary photography
Documentary and authenticity
Victorian surveys and investigations
Riis in the New York slums
Social travels and disguises
Photographing workers
Discussion: Illustrated magazines
89 **The construction of documentary**
Picturing ourselves
The Farm Security Administration (FSA)
Documentary meaning and form
99 **Documentary since the Second World War**
Theory and the critique of documentary
Cultural politics and everyday life
Documentary in the age of postmodernism
113 **Bibliography**