

FIFTH EDITION

PHOTOGRAPHY

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

EDITED BY LIZ WELLS

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Photography

Photography: A Critical Introduction was the first introductory textbook to examine key debates in photographic theory and place them in their social and political contexts, and is now established as one of the leading textbooks in its field. Written especially for students in further and higher education and for introductory college courses, this fully revised edition provides a coherent introduction to the nature of photographic seeing.

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- Documentary photography and photojournalism
- Personal and popular photography
- Photography and the human body
- Photography and commodity culture
- Photography as art.

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- Fully updated resource information, including guides to public archives and useful websites.
- A full glossary of terms and a comprehensive bibliography.

Liz Wells is Professor in Photographic Culture in the Faculty of Arts, Plymouth University.

Contributors: Michelle Henning, Patricia Holland, Derrick Price, Anandi Ramamurthy and Liz Wells.

Praise for previous editions:

'A brilliantly designed book. It provides a much-needed conceptual perspective, so lacking in other histories of photography, and with the new material on photojournalism [the book] is even stronger.

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Ken Absalom, Gwent Tertiary College

'Well structured – each chapter is thorough and relevant. The quality of the finish is superb – lovely photos and good use of margin notes.'

Richard Swales, Roade School, Northampton

Photography A Critical Introduction

Fifth Edition

EDITED BY LIZ WELLS

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Editor's preface

This book aimed to remedy the absence of a good, coherent introduction to issues in photography theory, and resulted from the frustrations of teaching without the benefit of a succinct introductory textbook. There were a number of published histories of photography which defined the field according to various agendas, although almost invariably with an emphasis upon great photographers, historically and now. Fewer publications critically engaged with debates about the nature of photographic seeing. Most were collections of essays pitched at a level that assumed familiarity with contemporary cultural issues and debates which students new to this field of enquiry may not yet have had.

The genesis of this book was complex. The first edition resulted initially from a discussion between myself and Rebecca Barden, then Media editor at Routledge, in which she solicited suggestions for publications which would support the current curriculum. Responding subsequently to her invitation to put forward a developed book proposal, two factors were immediately clear: first, that the attempt to be relatively comprehensive could best be tackled through a collective approach. Thus, a team of writers was assembled right from the start of the project. Second, it quickly became apparent that the project was, in effect, impossible. Photography is ubiquitous. As a result, there are no clear boundaries. It follows that there cannot be precise agreement as to what a 'comprehensive' introduction and overview should encompass, prioritise or exclude. After much consideration, we focused on issues and areas of practice that, given our experience as lecturers in a number of different UK university institutions, we knew feature frequently. That we worked to a large extent in relation to an established curriculum did not mean that the project has been either straightforward or easy. On the contrary, the intention to introduce and explore issues reasonably fully, taking account of what critics have had to say on various aspects of photographic practices, involved investigating and drawing upon a wide and diverse range of resources.

The overall response to the first edition was positive. Comments included some useful suggestions, many of which we incorporated within the second, revised edition which, in response to feedback, included a new chapter on the body in photography. This chapter, taken as a whole, stands as an example of the range of debates that may become engaged when the content or subject matter of images is taken as a starting point. In this respect it contrasts in particular with chapters 2 and 6, in which the focus is on a specific genre, or an arena, of practice. The third edition was updated and included colour plates. It was translated and published in Greek in 2008. The fourth edition was further amended and

incorporated colour illustrations throughout. A Chinese version was published in 2012.

More radically, in this fifth edition we have dropped the final chapter. When we first planned the book there were key debates raging as to the import, impact and likely future developments for the digital in photography. These debates questioned some of what had previously been taken for granted in photographic documentation. Previous editions have included a final chapter, titled 'Photography in the age of electronic imaging' (intended as a reference to Walter Benjamin's famous article on 'The Work of Art in an Era of Mechanical Reproduction' and, indeed, to debates of the early twentieth century on the social implications of the mass reproduction and circulation of photographic imagery. At the time of our first edition, there were discussions as to the implications of a shift from analogue to digital imaging – for reference, two of the diagrams that illustrated this discussion follow the Glossary in this edition. Now this is past history, the digital is completely integrated within photographic procedures and, more particularly, is no longer a matter of theoretical challenge or debate, although aspects of the virtual, of the centrality of online space continue to pre-occupy. For these reasons – the transcendence of questioning the import of the advent of the digital, along with the realisation that there are many questions to be asked about the social implications of visual media within virtual (global) space – led us to decide to integrate all discussion of the digital within the other chapters with which, at least in editions 3 and 4 of the publication, a considerable degree of overlap had developed.

As editor, further researching this book over the twenty years since the first edition has led to further questions, as well as to engaging discoveries. The tension between looking, thinking, investigation and discovery is one of the pleasures of academic research. Repeatedly revising the book has offered opportunities to revisit and further clarify various points as well as to reflect on recent critical developments in historical research and theoretical engagements. Given the number of publications on photography that have appeared in the last two decades, we have enhanced discussion of further references.

This book aims to be relevant, and of interest, to students of photography, graphics, fine art, art and design history, journalism, media studies, communication and cultural studies. We hope that it proves both useful and enjoyable.

Acknowledgements

This book could not have been produced without the support of a number of people. First and foremost I should like to thank Michelle Henning, Patricia Holland, Derrick Price and Anandi Ramamurthy, without whom the book would not have been possible. I would also like to thank Martin Lister for his key contribution to earlier editions of the book. The project has been a difficult one but nonetheless a happy one, due to the quality of the team which I have had the good fortune to be in a position to assemble. I should like to thank Rebecca Barden for first commissioning this book: in addition, Natalie Foster, Sheni Kruger, Emma Hudson and others at Routledge for their support.

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Liz Wells
May 2014

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Herbert Bayer, *Lonely Metropolitan*, 1932

Introduction

LIZ WELLS

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Introduction

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This book introduces and offers an overview of conceptual issues relating to photography and to ways of thinking about photographs. It considers the photograph as an artefact used in a range of different ways and circumstances, and photography as a set of practices that take place in particular contexts. Thus it is essentially about *reading* photographic images rather than about their making. The principal purpose is to introduce key debates, and to indicate sources and resources so students (and other readers) can further develop lines of enquiry relevant to them. The book primarily examines debates and developments in Britain, other parts of Europe and in North America. The perspective is informed by the British base of the team of writers, particularly showing the influence of cultural studies within British academia in the 1990s when the book was first planned. Our writing thus reflects a specific point of departure and context for debates. There is no chronological history. Rather, we discuss past attitudes and understandings, technological limitations and developments, and socio-political contexts through focus on issues pertinent to contemporary practices. In other words, we consider how ideas about photography have developed in relation to the specific focus, or field of practice that forms the theme of each chapter. We cannot render theory easy, but we can contribute to clarifying key issues by pointing to ways in which debates have been framed.

Why study theory? As will become clear, theory informs practice. Essentially there are two choices. You can disregard theoretical debates, taking no account of ways in which images become meaningful, thereby limiting critical

understanding and, if you are a photographer, restricting the depth of understanding supporting your own work. The alternative is to engage consciously with questions of photographic meaning in order to develop critical perceptions which can be brought to bear upon photographic practices, historically and now, or upon your own photography.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book introduces a range of debates pertaining to specific fields of photographic practice. We identify key reading and other resources, in order to illuminate critical debates about photography itself, and to place such debates in relation to broader theoretical and critical discussions. Our aim is to mediate such discussions, indicating key intellectual influences within the debates and alerting you to core reading and other resources. In some instances, our recommendations are highly directive. Thus, we summarise and appraise different critical positions, and point to books and articles in which these positions have been outlined. In most cases the literature which we discuss offers clear priorities and quite explicit points of view in relation to photographic cultures. One part of our task is to draw attention to implicit, underlying assumptions which inform the theoretical stances adopted.

Since the purpose of the book is to introduce issues and ideas that may not yet be familiar, design elements have been incorporated to help. Some chapters include specific case studies that are separated from the main flow of text. This is so that they can be seen in relation to the main argument, but also considered relatively autonomously. Likewise, photographs are sometimes used to illustrate points of discussion. However, images may also be viewed as a specific line of development. In order to facilitate visual connections we have limited the range of topics or genres in each chapter. Thus, for instance, Chapter 2, on documentary practices, concentrates primarily upon street photography. Comparison of images of similar content should help you to see some of the ways in which forms and styles of documentary and photojournalism have changed over time. It should be added that, in order to keep the size (and price) of the book reasonably manageable, we have used fewer photographs than is really desirable in a book about photography. You will need to use other visual sources, books and archives, alongside this book, in order to pursue visual analysis in proper detail.

There is a margin for notes throughout the book. Key references to core reading, and also to archive sources, appear in the margin so you can follow up the issues and ideas which have been introduced. References are repeated in a consolidated bibliography at the end. The margins are also used for technical definitions and for mini-biographies of key theorists. Terms which may be new to you are printed in bold on their first occurrence in each chapter, and there is a glossary at the end of the book. We also list principal magazines and journals published in English, and some key archives.

The book is in six chapters, each of which may be read separately, although there are points of connection between them. We have indicated some of these links between chapters, but it is up to you to think them through in detail. A summary of the principal content of each chapter follows at the end of this introduction. This will help you to map your route through the book.

Over the course of the twenty years of this textbook photography has changed in various respects, with a number of issues slipping off the agenda or reformulated to take into account new socio-political concerns and circumstances, and, indeed, the responses of new generations of photographers, historians and theorists to ways in which previous academic generations framed debates and prioritised particular questions. Shifts have been particularly manifest in ways of thinking about the import and impact of electronic imaging and of virtual space. How the nature of photography has changed remains a matter of research and debate, as does the impact of digitalisation on the whole field of media and communications (Lister *et al.*, 2013) However, over the course of the five editions of this publication, digital technology has become thoroughly assimilated to photography in all areas of practice and online space has become a primary public interface for institutions and individuals. Previous editions included a chapter specifically detailing and addressing developments in electronic imaging as they impacted on photography. Given the integration of the digital across all aspects of photographic practices, such separate address is no longer appropriate or relevant.

Discussion cannot be fully comprehensive. Photographic practices are diverse, and it is not possible to focus upon every possible issue and field of activity that might be of interest, historically and now. Furthermore, since the book is reliant on the existence of other source material to which it acts as a guide, it is largely restricted to issues and debates which have been already documented and discussed. Some areas of practice have not had the full focus they might be deemed to deserve. For example, there are many collections of fashion photographs, and there have been numerous articles and books written in recent years on questions of gender, representation, fashion, style and popular culture. But, aside from a couple of recent publications, there remains relatively little *critical* writing on fashion photography. This is an omission which we could not rectify here. Thus, fashion photography forms one section of the more general chapter on commodity culture rather than attracting a chapter to itself. Likewise, a number of more technical practices within medical and scientific imaging fall beyond the scope of this book as, until recently, these areas of photography did not attract the specific philosophic and analytic focus that is now emerging; current interest in the history of uses of photography within science and in contemporary photographic practices within interdisciplinary environmental research means that there has been an increase in critical writing in this arena.

In some respects the chapters seem quite different from one another. There are a number of reasons for this, of which the first – and most obvious – is

that each is written by a different author, and writers have their own individual style. The specific tasks allotted to each chapter, and the material included, also lead to different approaches. The chapter on photography in relation to commodity culture concentrates on the contemporary. The chapter on the body in photography takes image content as the starting point for discussion. Three chapters, in appraising the specific fields of documentary and photojournalism, photography as art, and personal photography, are more obviously historical in their approach. Each takes it as axiomatic that exploration of the history of debates and practices is a means to better understanding how we have arrived at present ways of thinking and operating.

Finally, of course, writing is not interest-free. You should not take the discussion in any of the chapters as representing everything that could be said on its subject. Aside from the limitations of length, authors have their own priorities. Each chapter is written from a considered viewpoint, and each of the authors has studied their subject in depth over many years. As a result of their expertise, and their broader political and social affiliations, they have arrived at particular conclusions. These contribute to determining which issues and examples they have selected for central focus and, indeed, the way they have structured the exposition and argument in their chapter. Whilst each offers you the opportunity to consider key issues and debates, you should not view them as either comprehensive or somehow objectively ‘true’. Rather, you should see the book as a guide to what is at stake within particular debates, bearing in mind that the writer, too, has something at stake. You should also remember that this is essentially only an introduction to issues and ideas.

CHAPTER BY CHAPTER

- In Chapter 1 we introduce key issues relating to photography and, most particularly, identify some of the positions elaborated by established theorists. The chapter focuses initially on a number of debates which have characterised theoretical and critical discussions of the photograph and of photographic practices starting with the interrelation between aesthetics and technologies. We then summarise and discuss historical accounts of photography. Finally we consider sites of practice, institutions and the audience for photography. Central to the chapter is a case study of ways in which one single image, Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother*, has been discussed. It acts as a model of how particular attitudes and assumptions can be illuminated through considering a specific example. The chapter is designed as a foundation for discussions, many of which will be picked up again for more detailed examination later in the book.
- Chapter 2 focuses upon the documentary role of the camera, especially in relation to recording everyday life. There is also some discussion of travel photography and of photojournalism, especially the expanding journalistic role

for photography in the early twentieth century. Claims have been made for the authenticity or 'truth' of photography used within social surveys or viewed as evidence. The chapter considers disputes that have arisen in relation to such claims in the nineteenth century, in the early twentieth century – especially in the 1920s and 1930s when the term 'documentary' was coined – and in relation to contemporary practices in documentary and reportage.

The chapter is concerned throughout with the multiple discourses through which the nature of photography and its social project has been constructed and understood. By concentrating on particular periods it offers a critical history of documentary which problematises and clarifies the relationship of a specific form of representation to other debates and movements.

● Chapter 3 focuses upon the popular and the personal, developing an historical overview of leisure and domestic uses of photography as a medium of everyday immediate communication as well as one through which individual lives and fantasies have been recorded. Particular attention is paid to the family album, which both documents social histories and stands as a talisman of personal experience. The chapter also considers the strategies by which a mass market for photography was constructed, in particular by Kodak, and notes contemporary developments in digital imaging for domestic use. Finally the chapter comments upon recent research on the family photograph, considering what is concealed, as much as what is revealed, in family relationships, gender and sexuality. Attention throughout is drawn to the role of women as photographers and keepers of the photograph album.

In keeping with the style of this book, this chapter signals key texts and further reading. However, the history of popular photography to date has attracted less critical attention than has been directed to other fields of photographic practice; for instance, documentary. In contrast to other parts of the book, this chapter draws upon original research and materials that, being personal, are little known.

● Chapter 4 focuses upon the body photographed, discussing the extent to which the body image came under scrutiny especially at the end of the twentieth century. Here a history of attitudes to photography and the body is traced, noting ways in which the photograph has been taken to embody social difference. Taking as its starting point the proposal that there is a crisis of confidence in the body consequent upon new technological developments, along with a crisis of representation of the body, the chapter explores questions of desire, pornography, the grotesque and images of the dead, in relation to different modes of representing the body familiar from media imagery as well as within art history.

● Chapter 5 continues the focus upon everyday uses of photography through considering commodity culture, spectacle and advertising. Photography is a cultural tool which is itself a commodity as well as a key expressive medium used to promote commercial interests. These links are examined through a series of case studies on global brand identity, and on tourism, fashion and the

exotic; sample analyses of single images are also included. Within commodity culture, that which is specific to photography interacts extensively with broader political and cultural issues. Thus we note references both to commercial photography and, more generally, to questions of the politics of representation, paying particular attention to gender and ethnicity. The chapter employs semiotics within the context of socioeconomic analysis to point to ways in which photography is implicated in the concealing of international social and economic relations.

● Chapter 6 considers photographic practices in relation to art and art institutions, discussing claims made for the status of photography as a fine art practice, historically and now. The chapter is organised chronologically in three sections: the nineteenth century; modern art movements; postmodern and contemporary practices. This historical division is intended not as a sort of chart of progress 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 forms of work and to themes which feature frequently in contemporary practice, including questions of gender, ethnicity and identity. Illustrations particularly relate to land, landscape and environment. This chapter is principally concerned to trace shifts in the parameters of debate as to the status of the photograph as art, to map historical changes in the situation of art photography within the museum and gallery, and to comment on photography as contemporary art practice.

Thinking about photography

Debates, historically and now

DERRICK PRICE

LIZ WELLS

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