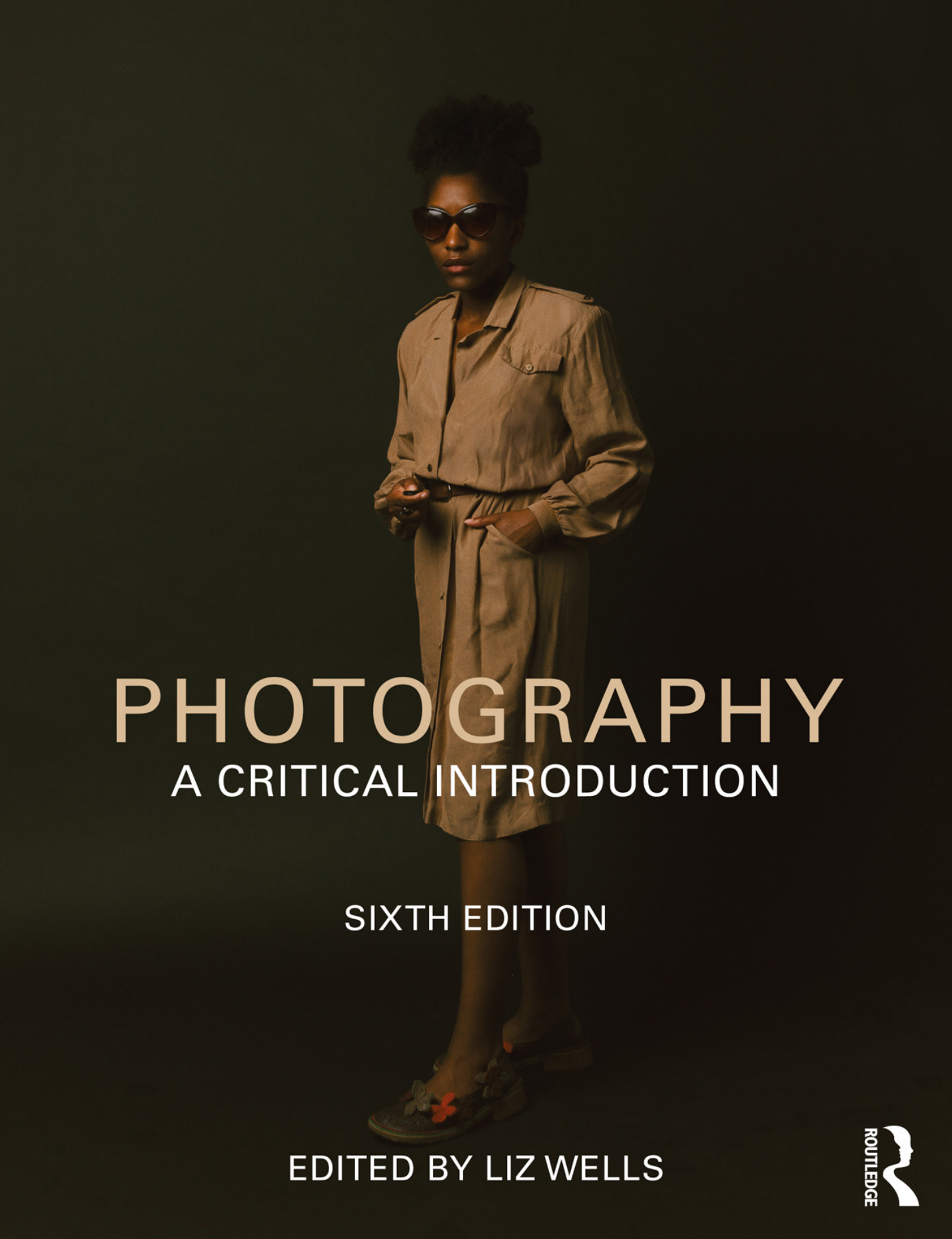

PHOTOGRAPHY

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

SIXTH EDITION

EDITED BY LIZ WELLS

ROUTLEDGE

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Liz Wells is Professor Emeritus in Photographic Culture, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Business, University of Plymouth, UK.

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

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Jane Tormey, *Author of* The Routledge Companion to Photography Theory; Cities and Photography; Photographic Realism: Late Twentieth-Century Aesthetics

Photography
A Critical Introduction

Sixth edition

EDITED BY LIZ WELLS

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Liz Wells is Emeritus Professor in Photographic Culture, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Business, University of Plymouth, UK. Publications on landscape include *Land Matters, Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity* (2011). She edited *The Photography Reader* (2nd ed. 2019) and *The Photography Culture Reader* (2019), and is co-editor *photographies*, Routledge journals. She has contributed numerous essays on people and place to photographers' monographs and exhibition catalogues. Recent exhibitions as curator include *Seedscapes: Future-Proofing Nature* (Impressions Gallery, Bradford, Autumn 2020, and UK tour); *Layers of Visibility* (Nicosia Municipal Arts Centre, 2018); *Light Touch* (Maryland Arts Place for Baltimore Washington International Airport, Feb–June 2014); *Sense of Place, European Landscape Photography* (BOZAR, Brussels, 2012); and *Landscapes of Exploration*, recent British art from Antarctica (UK tour: Plymouth, Cambridge, Bournemouth, 2012–2015). She served as an elected member of the Board of Directors, Society for Photographic Education, 2011–2018.

Editor's preface

This is the sixth edition of a publication first discussed in 1993, almost three decades ago. 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. In the 1980s 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 meeting 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 writer-researchers 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 translation was published in 2012, swiftly followed by a Korean version.

More radically, in the fifth edition we 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 had 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 in terms of making and (online) contexts of circulation and, more particularly, is no longer a matter of theoretical challenge or debate. 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.

As editor, further researching this book over the 25 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, although we have expanded discussion of further reference, it is no longer possible to cite every relevant book, journal article or website. There is much more out there for you to explore!

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 Carole Baker, 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 challenging 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, Jennifer Vennall, Geraldine Martin, and others at Routledge for their support.

I should like to thank colleagues, especially Kate Isherwood, and students who, over the years and in some instances without realising, have contributed to shaping and developing the project. Needless to state, the book could not have been further developed without this extensive feedback for which we are all very grateful. We would also like to thank staff at various archives for their help in introducing us to their study collections, and, in particular, the many photographers and archivists who have given permission for use of their images as illustrations.

Liz Wells
November 2020

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DISCLAIMER

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Herbert Bayer, *Lonely Metropolitan*, 1932

Introduction

LIZ WELLS

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 engaging with 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 and materiality 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 that 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. In Chapters 2, 3 and 6, images may also be viewed in terms of historical lines 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 and to make sense of them in relation to your own specific interests. 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 25 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 photography has changed and the implications of various developments remain a matter of research and debate, as does the impact of digitalisation on the whole field of media and communications (Lister et al. 2013). Earlier editions included a chapter specifically detailing and addressing developments in electronic imaging as they impacted on photography. However, over the course of the six editions of this publication, digital technology has become thoroughly assimilated to photography in all areas of practice. At the same time, virtual space has become a primary public interface for institutions and individuals, as was clearly demonstrated in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic. Given the integration of the digital across all aspects of photographic practices, since edition 5, such separate address has no longer seemed pertinent or, indeed, possible.

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 we are currently enjoying 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 discussion of war photography, street photography and the impact of the digital on documentary and photojournalism. 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 explores the contemporary use of mobile phones and digital imagery for personal photography. 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.

  In keeping with the style of this book, this chapter signals key texts and further reading. 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.

This chapter includes three additional sections, entitled 'new dimensions', that bring contemporary issues into focus. Carole Baker offers diverse responses to the lively provocations of Michelle Henning's rich text on photography and the body. Each response coincides with an area of contemporary socio-political and cultural tumult, and of intensity in relation to the body, where words, images and actions matter. First, she considers the racialised body constructed from visual systems of colonialism, second, the female body and its intersections with visual technologies, and third, the traumatised body made visible through cultural production. They are intended to inspire, encourage or provoke readers to grapple with and challenge contemporary ideas and debates.

- 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, on tourism, fashion and the exotic and on nation-branding, the example of India; 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 socio-economic 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, postmodernism 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, with particular reference to photography as a means of environmental investigation.

Your first encounter with an image representing the concerns of the book will have been the front cover. Your second, the frontispiece. Both offer a reminder that photographic meaning and the contexts through which we make sense of images are fluid, subject to cultural shifts and changes. The

front cover operates within a marketing context, with each edition branded through a new image that represents some aspect of the concerns of the publication. As a point of principle, we have always selected images by non-mainstream photographers as a way of suggesting that there are alternative histories, practices and contexts within the field. For this edition, the cover image is from a series *Igbo Women* by Adaeze Ihebom who is an Italian-Nigerian artist born in Rome. Through staged self-portraits she explores the situation and identity of women from Igboland, South-Eastern Nigeria, from pre-colonial and British colonial eras through to the twenty-first century, thereby offering perceptions from a particular post-colonial and gendered perspective.

By contrast, the frontispiece has remained consistent since the third edition, evoking not only modern photographics in Berlin in the 1930s but also an increasingly turbulent period within European history that must have caused wariness, isolation and confusion. At the same time, the image itself, with its eyes engaging our gaze, suggests the action of looking that is fundamental to photographic seeing. I had considered substituting it this edition, thinking that the reference might have run its course. However, in 2020 with cities locked down during the Covid-19 pandemic, watching and waiting – not to mention hands that should be sanitised – take on new significance; the photomontage, along with the notion of 'Lonely Metropolitan', acquired unexpected yet potent relevance. I decided to keep it.

CHAPTER 1

Thinking about photography

Debates, historically and now

DERRICK PRICE AND LIZ WELLS

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

We cannot imagine a world without photographs. Photography permeates all aspects of our life, acting as a principal source and repository of information about our world of experience. It follows that historical, theoretical and philosophical explorations of photographs as images and objects, and of photography as a range of types of practice operating in varying contexts, are necessarily wide-ranging.

There is no single history of photography. As E.H. Carr has observed, 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. Stories told reflect what the historian hopes to find, and where information is sought. He was writing in an era when libraries and archives were the primary research locations. Nowadays we usually start by researching online. But his note of caution remains relevant: fact gathering may be influenced by many factors, not least the particular networks used by web-based search engines. It is up to us to evaluate the status of our sources and the significance of our findings.

Furthermore, the historian's selection and organisation of material are to some extent predetermined by the purpose and intellectual parameters

of any project. Such parameters reflect particular institutional constraints as well as the interests of the historian (for instance, academics may be expected to complete research 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).

Attitudes to photography, its contexts, usages and critiques of its nature are explored here through brief discussions of key writings on photography. 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. 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.

As with any abbreviated history, this chapter can only offer brief summaries of some of the historical turning points and theoretical concerns that have informed and characterised debates about photography from its inception. Our aim is to identify some key questions and offer starting points for further research and discussion which are taken up in the following chapters and also through the references to further reading (in margins and notes). Photography is ubiquitous, and it penetrates culture in very diverse ways. Nowadays, it plays a central role within social media on the one hand, while being a major factor within the art market on the other. These activities go on alongside longer standing fields of operation (including but not restricted to: documentary and photojournalism; people and places; personal, domestic and family photography; travel, exploration and representation of cultures other than our own; commerce and advertising). The questions that we might ask shift according to the context and type of practice being considered; but whatever the field of operation, analysis of the role of photographic imagery is central to critical interrogations.

AESTHETICS AND TECHNOLOGIES

The impact of new technologies

In the 1920s, when Moholy-Nagy commented on the future importance of camera literacy, he could hardly have anticipated the extent to which photographic imagery would come to permeate contemporary communication. Indeed, the late twentieth-century convergence of audio-visual technologies with computing led to a profound and ongoing transformation in the ways in which we record, interpret and interact with the world.

In recent years this has been marked both by the astonishing speed of innovation and by a rapid extension and incorporation of technologies within new social, cultural, political and economic domains. As Martin Lister remarked in 2009, we have 'witnessed a number of convergences: between photography and computer-generated imaging (CGI), between photographic archives and electronic databases, and between the camera, the internet and personal mobile media, notably the mobile telephone' (Lister in Wells 2009). Indeed, nowadays the mobile (cell) phone is also the camera.

We often see this ferment of activity as a defining feature of the twenty-first century and, perhaps, think of it as a unique moment in human history. But, in the 1850s, many people also thought of themselves as living in the forefront of a technological revolution. From this historical distance, it is hard to recapture the extraordinary excitement that was generated in the middle of the nineteenth century by a cluster of emerging technologies. These included inventions in the electrical industries and discoveries in optics and in chemistry, which led to the development of a new means of communication that was to become so important to so many spheres of life – photography. Hailed as a great technological invention, photography 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 names 24 people who had 'felt the hitherto strange and unfamiliar desire to have images formed by light

1 For definitions see Gordon Baldwin and Martin Jürgens (2009) *Looking at Photographs: A Guide to Technical Terms*. Revised ed., Los Angeles: Getty Publications.

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).

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 argued, there is nothing in a technology itself which determines its cultural location or usage (Williams 1974). If technology were viewed as determining cultural uses, much would remain to be explained. Not the least of this would be the extent to which people subvert technologies or invent new uses which had never originally been intended or envisaged. 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 and 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 to be **art**. Given the contemporary ubiquity of photography, including the extent to which artists use photographic media, to posit art and technology as binary opposites now seems quite odd. But in its early years photography was celebrated for its putative ability to produce accurate images of what was in front of its lens, images that were seen as being mechanically produced and thus free from 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. 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

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

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE (1821–1867) Paris-based poet and critic whose writings on French art and literature embraced modernity; he stressed the fluidity of modern life, especially in the metropolitan city, and extolled painting for its ability to express – through style as well as subject-matter – the constant change central to the experience of modernity. In keeping with attitudes of the era, he dismissed photography as technical transcription, perhaps oddly so given that photography was a product of the era which so fascinated him.

> library of the naturalist, magnify 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 the idea 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 at 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, for many nineteenth-century critics in Western culture, steeped as they were in empiricist methods of enquiry, the mechanical nature of the camera militated against its use for anything other than mundane purposes.

Nineteenth-century photographers responded to such critical debates 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.

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.

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

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

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: 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).

as the carrier of 'facts'. These facts are connected to new forms of communication for which there is a demand among all social groups; they are neither arcane nor specialist, but belong in the sphere of everyday life. In this respect, Eastlake was 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 characterised 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 the image captures information beyond that which concerned the photographer.

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

In the days of chemical photography, and prior to the possibilities afforded by Internet tools such as Google Earth, the simultaneous 'it was there' effect of photographs recording people and circumstances contributed to the authority of the photographic image and, arguably, still does. However, nowadays, in according authority to pictures, we are more likely to question the circumstances under which photographs have been made, their source, the status of the photographer and the purpose for which an image was made. For example, we might view pictures uploaded by local people documenting an incident or set of circumstances as *more* authentic than images authorised by a company or political organisation. Accepting that digital

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

photography and digital imaging are now major industries, when assessing the significance of particular pictures we take into account image-making contexts and purposes. If documentary as a genre involves visual records for future reference, now we are very likely to ask from whose point of view such documents were made.

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 photographs. 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 1936). Formerly unique objects, located in a particular place, lost their singularity as they became accessible to many people in diverse places. Lost too was the 'aura' that was attached to a work of art which was now open to many different readings and interpretations. For Benjamin, whether operating to allow more people to view likenesses of persons, places or existing objects (for instance, reproductions of paintings or sculptures) or facilitating novel forms of visual communication that might not otherwise have occurred, photography was inherently more democratic than previous forms of image-making. Yet established attitudes persist. In Western art the artist is accorded the status of someone endowed with particular sensitivities and vision. That the photographer as artist, viewed as a special kind of seer, chose to make a particular photograph lends extra authority and credibility to the picture.

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

The photograph, technically and aesthetically, has a unique and distinctive relation with that which is/was in front of the camera. Analogical theories of

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.

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

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

the photograph have been abandoned; we no longer believe that the photograph directly replicates circumstances.

Yet, technologically, the photographic image is an indexical effect based on observable reality. The chemically produced image brought together a range of considerations – including subject-matter, framing, light, characteristics of the lens, chemical properties of the film used and the paper on which a picture was printed, and creative decisions taken both when shooting and in the darkroom. The digital image differs in certain respects, including the greater diversity of image manipulation possibilities, and the visual effect of the surface of the computer screen when compositing, editing and viewing. Nonetheless, the basis in the observable fuels realist notions associated with photography, despite our familiarity with digital manipulation possibilities. Paradoxically, perhaps, we want to believe what we see, even though at the same time we know that photographic images are selective and may be significantly changed from that originally seen through the viewfinder.

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.

Related to this are the interests and motivations that impel photographers towards particular subjects and ways of working. Very many biographies have been written purporting to explain photographs through the investigation of photographers' personal experiences and political engagements; all too often tribute to the photographer and a particular way of seeing outweighs more critical analysis of the affects and import of a particular body of work. Yet questions of motivation and the contexts and constraints within which photographers operate clearly influence picture-making. Whilst not writing biographically, questions of motivation are woven within Geoff Dyer's reflections on the nature of photographs (Dyer 2005). Why might a particular subject be chosen, and why do some types of object, pose or place seem to be repeated so often? As a cultural critic he comments that in trying to construct a taxonomy of photographs he found endless slippages and overlaps. This led him towards appraisal of photography via what can be known, or speculated, about the motivations of photographers. His examples are largely restricted to well-known American practitioners, and to documentary modes, yet his musings have wider pertinence as he provokes us to reflect upon the historical emergence of certain themes and subject-matter, and the evolving attitudes towards decorum or explicitness of image-content. Questioning why a photographer might have made and published a particular image is one starting point for thinking about the significance of particular photographs or types of photography.

Thus philosophical, technical and aesthetic issues – along with the role accorded to the artist – all feature within **ontological** debates relating to the photograph. But in recent years, developments in computer-based image production and the possibilities of digitisation and reworking of the photographic image have increasingly called into question the idea of documentary realism. The authority attributed to the photograph is at stake. That this has led to a reopening of debates about 'photographic truth' in itself shows that, in everyday parlance, photographs are still viewed as directly referencing actual observable circumstances.

See Chapter 2 for further discussion.

Photography, modernity and the postmodern

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

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

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

Benjamin was writing at a time when the idea that photography offered a particular way of seeing took on particular emphasis; in the 1920s and 1930s both the putative political power of photography and its status as the most important modern form of communication were at their height. Modernism aimed to produce a new kind of world and new kinds of human beings to people it. The old world would be put under the spotlight of modern

technology and the old evasions and concealments revealed. The photo-eye was seen as revelatory, dragging 'facts', however distasteful or deleterious to those in power, into the light of day. As a number of photographers in Europe and North America stressed, albeit somewhat differently, another of its functions was to show us the world as it had never been seen before. Photographers sought to offer new perceptions founded in an emphasis upon the formal 'geometry' of the image, both literally and metaphorically offering new angles of vision. The stress on form in photographic seeing typical of American modern photography parallels the stress on photography, and on cinematography (kino-eye), as a particular kind of vision in European art movements of the 1920s. Our ways of seeing will be changed because we can observe the world from unfamiliar viewpoints, for instance, through a microscope, from the top of high buildings, from under the sea. Moreover, photography validated our experience of 'being there', which is not merely one of visiting an unfamiliar place, but of capturing the authentic experience of a strange place. Photographs are records and documents which pin down the changing world of appearance. In this respect the close kinship between the still image and the movie is relevant; photography and film were both implicated in the modern stress on seeing as revelation. Indeed, artists and documentarians frequently used both media.

halftone By the mid-1890s 'halftone', based on tiny dots of various sizes, could facilitate the tracing of tones of photographs into ink ready for mechanical reproduction alongside written text. Previously engravers were employed in the laborious process of tracing and gouging out images on wooden blocks that were then inked to enable printing. The halftone allowed newspapers and magazines to use up-to-date photo illustrations, enabling mass circulation of imagery, in effect contributing a basis for photojournalism.

In addition, photography was centrally implicated in the burgeoning of print media that dated from the early years of the twentieth century. It was precisely this mass circulation of images that allowed Benjamin to conceptualise photography as a democratic medium. Arguably it was what was happening on the printed page that excited imagination at the beginning of the twentieth century. Posters, photomontage and – later – photographic magazines such as *Time*, *Life*, *Picture Post*, *Vue* offered opportunities for experimentation with image juxtapositions and modes of visual story-telling. However, as David Campany notes in an account of the work of American photographer, Walker Evans, by their very nature, magazines are transient. He suggests that,

> The photobook form always has at least half an eye on posterity but the illustrated magazine has a very different temporality and culture significance. It is not made to last, but lives and dies, succeed or fails in the space of its short shelf life.
>
> (Campany in di Bello et al. 2012: 73)

He goes on to argue that the reproduction of documentary and photojournalistic images made for publication that were 'essentially ephemeral' but later singled out for exhibition in museums or inclusion in monographs 'does little to capture the contingent complexity of their initial page presentation' (*loc cit*) remarking that it is only in the beginning of the twenty-first century that researchers have started to consider the history of photo-magazines along with that of the photobook. In some respects this is accurate. But we