Jane Tormey

Photography and Political Aesthetics

ROUTLEDGE

PHOTOGRAPHY AND POLITICAL AESTHETICS

This accessible book explores the creative uses of photography with political purpose, both in terms of subject matter and of the political perspectives that have driven attitudes to viewing photographs.

The shorter Part I reviews twentieth-century thinking that has influenced attitudes to photography and the political. Part II identifies the political ideas that drive practical strategies in the twenty-first century. It considers the politics of photography by looking at what affects people's lives and agency: attitudes to difference and identity; power relations between institutions, individuals, and communities; the impact of trauma and global change. With a focus on the exchange of ideas between visual practice and theories, a selection of projects are examined from a range of perspectives, such as post-colonial and feminist thinking, post-humanism, and cultural and social theory, with references ranging from Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to Achille Mbembe, Bruno Latour, and Chantal Mouffe. The pursuit of 'political aesthetics' borrows from Jacques Rancière's ideas about cultural production. *Photography and Political Aesthetics* identifies photography as politically productive when positioned within political movements, and champions practices that perform, investigate, or give attention to presentation and public dissemination.

This book is ideally suited to students studying photography, art and aesthetics, visual politics, and cultural studies, and researchers across the fields of photography, media, art, and politics.

Jane Tormey is the co-editor of *The Routledge Companion to Photography Theory* (2020) and *Art, Politics and the Pamphleteer* (2021) and the author of *Cities and Photography* (2012) and *Photographic Realism: Late Twentieth Century Aesthetics* (2013). She is an independent scholar and Honorary Fellow of Loughborough University.

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INTRODUCTION

Photography and Political Aesthetics appraises creative uses of photography with political purpose. It discusses photography and its encounter with political issues, in terms of content and the perspectives that drive attitudes to viewing photographs. The aim has been to collate the many factors that influence discussions of photography that touch on the political, with regard to its historical and ideological positions and to aspects of twenty-first-century thinking. The book is motivated by my interest in the political potential of photographs, and the conflicting theoretical issues associated with that potential. And on a practical level, despite there being many texts addressing specific aspects relating to photography in political contexts, there appears to be no one book that appraises the central and recurring themes. My recent involvement in editing the *Companion to Photography Theory* recognised that nearly all the contributors talked about relationships between photography and politics in some way or other.

The politics of photography concerns what affects people's lives and agency: attitudes to difference and identity; the power relations between institutions, individuals, and communities; the impact of trauma or hardship; local and global changes; capitalism, state policies, and individual behaviours; climate crisis and its impact; conflict and migration. The discussion of 'looking' in Chapter 1 establishes my underlying premise that social and political structures and events cannot be separated from individual and collective experience or levels of engagement and responsibility. Photography and the 'political' encompasses personal motivation and the broader frame of social investment: it doesn't happen in an abstract sense somewhere beyond us. My examination of photography starts with cultural theories influenced by Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault, and discusses

the ideas of later commentators such as Ariella Azoulay, Judith Butler, Bruno Latour, Achille Mbembe, and Chantal Mouffe. The book's pursuit of the many features of 'political aesthetics' borrows from Jacques Rancière's ideas about cultural production.

Chapter content moves between examples of practice and theoretical ideas, but is rooted in artistic practice and visual culture, which is my background. I am interested in the intersection of different disciplines and how ideas are shared, expressed, and developed in visual practice. Starting with the assertion that visual practices parallel, rather than illustrate, theories, I consider a selection of photographic projects from a range of perspectives, including post-colonial and feminist thinking, philosophy, post-humanism, cultural, and social theories. My emphasis therefore considers the methodologies adopted by photographers in advance of, and in response to, changing philosophies and theories. The book appraises a number of central issues: the implications of photographing people, the impact of digital technology on attitudes, practices, and public consumption, and the visual politics of knowledge production. In promoting the many aspects of photography's potential for political expression, and emphasising the methodologies that drive practical strategies, I identify the directions of contemporary political aesthetics.

Using the generic term 'photography' is unavoidable, but does tend to perpetuate a preoccupation with the nature of photography as a discrete discipline, which is unfortunate. And my interest is in practices that, in their concern with the social and political, contribute to breaking down this distinct identity. Photography may not be able to relinquish its histories, but as an evolving technology, it takes many cultural forms and is applied to many functions. I also use the term 'image' that better incorporates the new materiality indicated by the online image. In an earlier discussion about 'post-structural aesthetics' (2013), my references were those of photography discourse and philosophy – particularly that of Jacques Derrida. I determined then that, following post-structuralism and conceptualism, photography is more suitably considered in terms of the representation of thinking than the representation of objects. Here I broaden references to include perspectives relating to civil responsibility, decolonisation, political theories, and media studies. I look at the ways the paradigm has adjusted from a concern with what the photograph is, to what it does.

My use of the term 'aesthetic' refers to much more than what something looks like, or the conventions of form. It refers to the principles on which a work is based – the attitude taken in its making and the value put upon what is important. In its plural form 'aesthetics' refers to general characteristics of these principles and their study, and the many dimensions of experience – the sensations of human perception in all its forms, besides rational thought. 'Aesthetics', which originally concerned sensory experiences and

perception, has become a vague term that denotes praxis that is generally not rational or useful, sometimes sensual and sometimes relating to merely formal attributes (such as depth or proportion) and sometimes any cultural form understood as 'art'. As the late twentieth century began to conflate aesthetic procedures with political issues, twenty-first-century practices drive towards a more fully realised potential that repositions photography within political motivation and action. I argue that the insertion of the political fundamentally changes the nature of aesthetics.

The deliberate avoidance of too many contemporary examples from the West has resulted in a focus on the Middle East, Africa, and China. And as I commenced this project in early 2020, restrictions imposed by the pandemic and its aftermath forced a peculiar form of online research. Most of the photographic works discussed can be categorised as 'art photography', although I do avoid this description because it is laden with limited expectations of what photographs can do. And my sometimes interchangeable references to 'art' indicate that any creative use of photography is now embedded within the wider context of art. My attitude to photographic practice is allied to what is termed 'visual studies', which has been partly responsible for the expansion of cross-disciplinary approaches to looking at photographs. The discursive frame of visual studies centres methods of analysis around an issue – a cultural problematic rather than the constraint of traditional disciplines. So discussion of photography need not be confined to the narrow confines of the history of photography, but can be discussed not only from different theoretical perspectives but in more self-reflexive terms.

In discussing specific practices, I have tried to avoid indicating one model or other as being better or worse, as that perpetuates a reductive conception of photography. Inevitably, however, my choice of projects does betray a socialist bias and an interest in practices that are challenging and performative. I am interested in the way images tell stories, contribute knowledge, question situations, or make argument, and in how the use of photographic images can picture complex concerns, document experience, or investigate political issues. I assert the potential of visual discourse – 'photography' – that stands between the historic notion of an objective analogue representation and images updated in a digital world to encompass its immersive properties. And by visual discourse I do not mean a return to an inward-looking dialogue attempting to define the encounter with the algorithm and imagery – such as we had with 'what is photography?' I don't argue that photographs have any direct political influence, and yet in this climate of socially engaged art, artists/photographers do try. I do argue however for its capacity to exceed verbal communication, for its performative potential, and to be politically useful in purposeful ways.

Structure

The book has two parts: Part I reviews twentieth-century ideas that have influenced attitudes to photography and the political; Part II identifies the political ideas that drive practical strategies in the twenty-first century. The chapters can be read in sequence to build a picture of contemporary political aesthetics. They also develop themes that track ideas and methods progressively through the book: for example Chapters 2, 6, and 7 discuss developments in documentary photography; Chapters 4 and 5 discuss changing attitudes as a result of digital photography; Chapters 3 and 8 grapple with the tensions between aesthetics and politics. Endnotes function as a form of glossary and to identify sources for further information.

Part I summarises historical and ideological influences affecting discussions of photography and the political and which provide a background to practices in the twenty-first century. Chapter 1, 'Power Relations', establishes the significance of photographing people and the critiques of representation derived from post-colonial thinking, feminism, and psychoanalysis that have influenced attitudes to the depiction of individuals and peoples. It establishes differences between people as a central issue, and the experience of looking at photographs as a form of matrix involving the photographer, the subject of the photograph, and the viewer. Chapter 2, 'Representation, Aesthetics, and Documentary', identifies the conflicts inherent in social documentary photography. It introduces debates concerning the tension between aesthetics and politics, and establishes Walter Benjamin and Allan Sekula as key influences who introduce central themes relating to photography's political potential. It outlines historical assumptions and ideological aspects of photography that are implicit in documentary traditions, and the democratic strategies that confront them. Chapter 3, 'Instrumental Purpose and Disruption', focuses on arguments about the purpose of photography: whether it should be politically instrumental or aim for more affect. It provides an historical background of influences to later developments in practice this century: avant-garde photography movements in the 1920–30s and their resurgence in 1970s Britain; disturbance of modernist traditions of photography in the 1960–80s by conceptual art, text-based works, and feminist practices; the role of photography in works concerned with social structures and real lives.

Part II discusses a selection of projects from the twenty-first century. Outlining a series of perspectives that have shifted the paradigms established over decades, it situates theories *in* examples of practice, which test out some of these ideas. The underlying premise for discussion of contemporary photography is that of its capacity to present political discourse visually. Chapter 4, 'Image, Knowledge, and Argument', establishes the potential of photography for presenting complex political issues and

argument. It considers the nature of visual knowledge and how the image and its figurative properties are adjusted in the light of ideas relating to non-human vision, non-representational theory, and perceptions of a post-truth era. The chapter presents different approaches to the instrumental use of visual information: discussing Bruno Latour's philosophy advocating inter-disciplinary enquiry, it features installations that assemble material from diverse perspectives; works by Forensic Architecture develop investigation as a political strategy. Chapter 5, 'Immersive Worlds', explains the qualitative difference made by digital processes as being immersive in two respects: their integration in everyday life, and their exploitation for onscreen viewing and installation. Selected practices reflect opposing views regarding the potential of digital materiality: works critiquing the hidden systems of the network society and social media; and digital worlds created by Asian artists whose posthuman approach displays a concern for the planet and alternative futures. Chapter 6, 'Citizen Relations', develops discussion initiated in Chapter 1 about the photography of people, with a focus here on the circumstances in the Middle East. It updates critiques of representation, outlines Ariella Azoulay's civil imagination, and discusses questions relating to human rights, citizenship, agency, and spectatorship. It reviews compensatory strategies that challenge mainstream photojournalism, and which use participative approaches to documenting community experience in works by Anne Paq and ActiveStills. Chapter 7, 'Histories, Archives, and Fictions', features methodologies used by photographers from the African continent to challenge repressive historical narratives associated with colonialism. With reference to theorists Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr and to Afro-futurism, the chapter extends the possibility of 'potential history' discussed in Chapter 6. With works by Sammy Baloji, Emeka Okereke, and Omar Victor Diop, for example, it discusses strategies using archive and montage to redraw history, and performance and fictional staging to revise representation.

Chapter 8, 'Political Aesthetics', works as a form of conclusion as it pursues the properties and potential of photography's political aesthetics. It identifies a significant feature of contemporary practice – that the intention, content, and values of many projects do not differentiate between aesthetics and politics. Community environmental projects in Ecuador and the theories of Jacques Rancière and Chantal Mouffe introduce a broader framework with which to consider political aesthetics. Referring to spaces of shared learning, and Kevin DeLuca's 'image politics', it identifies photography as politically productive when positioned *within* political movements, and champions practices that argue, perform, and investigate, or make deliberate use of presentation and public dissemination.

PART I

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POWER RELATIONS

Chapter 1 outlines the implications of photographing people. I consider the power relations that occur in the event of taking a photograph and the photographic 'look' that is phenomenological and ideological. I introduce critiques of representation derived from post-colonial thinking, feminism, and cultural politics, which have influenced attitudes to the depiction of individuals and peoples. I consider photography's relation to power as a form of matrix involving the photographer, the subject of the photograph, and the viewer.

The camera, the eye, the lens, the photograph are referred to metaphorically on several levels. The camera is the one that looks – that exerts technological power over the one that is observed. The camera assumes the character of surveillance (literally and metaphorically), and the photograph represents evidence and is testimony to the power of looking.[1] In starting this book with *looking* at others, I emphasise the agency and/or vulnerability of the individual and acknowledge that my underlying premise is of a small politics that starts with each of us – response, engagement, responsibility – rather than placing photography as happening in an abstract sense beyond us. Social and political structures and events cannot be separated from personal experience, and the politics of photography begins with personal motivation and the broader base of social investment.

Looking

The narrative of power relations for photography starts with looking at, and being looked at by, other people. The act of photography is affected by its purpose and the social position of each involved: the subject of the

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photograph, the photographer, and any institutions or interested parties represented. The procedure, which starts with the photographer looking, is complex and most often has consequences that are assumed or undeclared. In 1977, Victor Burgin describes four basic types of look in the photograph:

> the look of the camera as it photographs the 'pro-photographic' event; the look of the viewer as he or she looks at the photograph; the 'intra-diegetic' looks exchanged between people (actors) depicted in the photograph … and the look the actors may direct to the camera.[2]
>
> *(Burgin 1982: 148)*

Burgin's passage omits the looks exchanged between photographer and subject, which is where I start here. The photographic event between two people is, first, a phenomenological[3] act of two people regarding each other; second, an imbalance of power because the photographer has an obvious advantage being in control of the camera; and third, likely to have implications of inequality or privilege. This looking may give rise to gentle manoeuvring or negotiation, or be more confrontational or voyeuristic depending on the situation of those individuals. The respective positions of vulnerability and power depend on the relationship at the point of taking the photograph, the expectations of those involved, and whether there is conflict or exchange: the photographer's attitude (of sympathy, curiosity, amusement), the photographed subject's attitude (of reluctance, acceptance, participation), and whether the photograph is taken with or without the subject's knowledge.

Privilege operates through social position and class, as in this example. In 1936, James Agee and Walker Evans collaborated on an assignment for *Fortune* magazine to record the daily lives of tenant farmers, some of the poorest people in the southern states of America. In describing three families, Agee's commentary details the looks exchanged between himself and individual family members. Aware of intruding on their privacy, Agee agonises over the meaning of particular looks and how his engagement with them may be interpreted. For example, with Fred Ricketts who talked incessantly to cover his fear of Agee's true intentions (Agee 2001: 342), and with Louise who:

> has not once taken her eyes off me since we entered the room: so that my own are drawn back more and more uncontrollably toward them and into them … I cannot look into them long at a time without panic and quick withdrawal, fear, whether for her or for myself, I don't know.
>
> *(352–3)*

As an extension of the eye, the camera has more aggressive associations – Agee considers the camera to be 'a weapon, a stealer of images and souls, a

FIGURE 1.1 Walker Evans, *Mrs. Frank Tengle, Hale County, Alabama*, 1936. Note: the book used pseudonyms – Fred Ricketts' actual name was Frank Tengle and his wife Sadie was Flora Bee Tengle.

gun, an evil eye'. The act of looking is amplified therefore with the presence of the large camera and 'the terrible structure of the tripod' used by Evans (320). During the photo session, Agee is uncomfortably aware of the 'precariousness of balance' and tries in vain – through his looks – to give Mrs. Ricketts some reassurance, but her eyes, 'wild with fury and shame and fear', seemed to say: 'If you are our friend, lift this weight and piercing from us' (323). As if speaking to her, he writes:

> it was as if you and your children and your husband and these others were stood there naked in front of the cold absorption of the camera in all your shame and pitiableness to be pried into and laughed at … and there was not a thing you could do.
>
> *(321)*

Agee's commentary of these encounters is emotional and describes the complex balance of power held in the exchange of looks, and the likely imbalance in terms of control. It relates the experience of uncertainty and embarrassment that may be familiar to every one of us – how we manoeuvre ourselves in response to others, guess how we appear, and what others may think of us.[4]

This existential encounter is explained in accounts of the establishment of identity and consciousness, in terms of differentiating ourselves from others – who are different. Here it is characterised by Jean-Paul Sartre's account of equating others with 'objects' [1943]:

> I am fixing the people whom I *see* into objects; I am in relation to them as the Other is in relation to me. In looking at them I measure my power. But if the Other sees them and sees me, then my look loses its power.
>
> *(Sartre 2001: 266)*

In order to sustain his sense of self and retain a measure of power, Sartre describes the interaction as a balance of looks, concessions, assertions, and conflict exchanged in the reciprocal process of self-determination (223). The *imbalance* can be extreme, emotionally felt, and historically marked, as demonstrated in the potent writing by Frantz Fanon, the philosopher from the French colony of Martinique.[5] In his essay 'The Fact of Blackness' [1952], he expresses the experience of subject formation 'in the eyes of the white man', as being black, different, and Other and as 'sealed into that crushing objecthood' (Fanon 1988: 82–3). He situates the dynamic of power embodied in the 'look' within the oppositions of black and white, colonised and coloniser. Confronting this objectification, he searches for his place in the world in which his own customs have been eradicated for being different from the civilisation that has imposed itself on him. When meeting the white man's eyes:

> I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships … I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object.
>
> *(84–5)*

Negotiations emerge in any exchange between oppositional positions. In *Woman, Native Other* (1989), the Vietnamese filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha writes of the power dynamic, not only between white hegemony and 'others', but between men and women. Asserting an alternative – female – way of thinking to the 'anonymous all-male and predominantly white entity' referred to as 'he', Trinh relates her experience – and from the position of 'I' – of being classified and subjugated by patriarchy:

> I have wondered time and again about my reading myself as I feel he reads me and my false encounter with the other in me whose non-being/being he claims to have captured, solidified and pinned to a butterfly board … I fear and reprove classification and the death it entails, and I will not allow its clutches to lock down on me, although I realize I can never lure myself into simply escaping it.
>
> *(Trinh 1989: 48)*

Her writing is simultaneously subjective and political and tells stories from the point of view of a cultural knowledge that manifests a different paradigm from logical thinking and chronological procedure. She characterises this by relating the procedures of a meeting in a village market in which the 'heart of the matter' is allowed to emerge 'by letting it come when it is ready to come': 'There is no catching, no pushing, no directing, no breaking through, no need for linear progression which gives the comforting illusion that one knows where one goes' (1–2).

Looking: objecthood

The experiences of objecthood, exampled above, are fundamental to the positions of power in photographic representations of people. In being photographed, we relinquish control of the purpose to which the image might be put. Applying Sartre's existentialist view to the specific instance of encounter with the photographer,[6] Roland Barthes [1980] describes the experience of being photographed as one in which his consciousness is disassociated from his identity, resulting in him becoming 'object' and ex-posed (Sartre 2001: 260):

> once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing'. I instantaneously make another body for myself. I transform myself in advance into an image.
>
> *(Barthes 1993a: 10)*

He describes the precarious balance of control involved as being somewhere in-between self-possession and the photographer's appropriation of him as fodder for his own purpose: being photographed 'I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming object' (Barthes 1993a: 14). As a photographed object s/he can be used to represent something more universal than an individual (a cipher), as an idea (motif) that expresses something for the photographer's purpose, or to serve as a displacement of meaning (a fetish) for the benefit of the spectator.[7] Following this objectifying process to a logical end, the person photographed loses their specific individuality and becomes a generalisation and dehumanised. The image is no longer to do with that individual's identity or experience. In this way, Evans' images of Fred Ricketts have become signifiers for 'a typical share cropper' or, even more generalised, 'the poor of America in the Great Depression'.

Three implicit conditions of existentialism, which contribute to ideas of power and possession associated with photographing people, are advanced by Barthes and Susan Sontag and persist in photographic theory: the primacy of the individual, 'I'; the suspicion of others; and the contradiction that we are differentiated by others. The photograph visualises the position of power that resides in the active role of the subject who 'takes the picture' and the passive role of the object 'being taken'. Sontag points to the implicit violation in this language of photography (being 'taken' or 'shot') and asserts its predatory nature (Sontag 1979: 14). Ideas from psychoanalysis add another dimension to being photographed – that of functioning as a 'picture' for others, as a fetish for desire. As with film, the photograph distances the spectator from the observed subject and facilitates voyeurism (Metz 1975: 61–3). From a feminist perspective, and with specific regard to the stereotypical construction of women in film, Laura Mulvey [1975] considers the *activity* of looking as opposed to the *passivity* in being looked at. She describes a patriarchal world that identifies the male as active, whilst the female passively displays herself in such a way that 'a man can live out his fantasies and obsessions'. Mulvey's 'to-be-looked-at-ness' captured by 'the gaze' indicates the hierarchy of male/female dualism, and the significance of the image as bound to the processes of desire and display (Mulvey 1989: 15–25). The process provides a resource for male fantasy and perpetuates the expectation of women as passive participants in the constitution of meaningful life.[8] Later [1981] Mulvey modifies this dualistic view to include the 'female spectator' (1989: 29–38), and Kaja Silverman qualifies it by explaining that the spectator's 'gaze' identifies with the camera, rather than with the subject. It is a disembodied and ahistorical