The Photography Handbook

The new edition of The Photography Handbook builds on previous editions’ illuminating overviews of the history, theory and practice of the creation and consumption of photographic images. It also engages with the explosion of new platforms for making, viewing and distributing images, and the practical and theoretical issues these raise.

New materials in this edition include new chapters on ‘Photo-elicitation’ and ‘Photography and Technological Change’, exploration and analysis of ‘selfie’ culture, and extensive discussion of the work and practices by a new generation of photographic artists.

The Photography Handbook, Third edition also features:

• exploration and discussion of key photographic terms, including Composition, Framing, Visualisation, Formalism and Realism;
• analysis of the ethics of photojournalism, and ethical issues specific to digital photography practice today;
• case studies illustrating different photographic production practices and specific related issues, including an assignment for The Guardian, the Libyan People’s Bureau siege, and the work of war photographers;
• a foregrounding of digital photographic practices, and exploration of areas including photographic manipulation, digital photojournalism, citizen journalists and copyright on the internet;
• end of chapter summaries of key points, and an extensive glossary of essential photography terms.

The Photography Handbook, Third edition is an invaluable resource for students, scholars and practitioners of photography, and all those seeking to understand its place in society.

Terence Wright is Emeritus Professor at Ulster University, where he was Professor of Visual Arts and Course Director of the MFA Photography programme. He is a member of the International Editorial Board of the journal Visual Studies and a member of the advisory board of the World Congress of Anthropological Associations. Formerly he worked as a freelance photojournalist in Central London and has held visiting fellowships at the Centre for Research in Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Cambridge and The Institute for Medical Humanities, University of Texas.
The Media Practice handbooks are comprehensive resource books for students of media and journalism, and for anyone planning a career as a media professional. Each handbook combines a clear introduction to understanding how the media work with practical information about the structure, processes and skills involved in working in today’s media industries, providing not only a guide on ‘how to do it’ but also a critical reflection on contemporary media practice.
# Contents

**Figures**

**Acknowledgements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1  Historical outline of photographic representation</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  Pre-production</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  The photographic image</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  Post-production</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5  Photo-elicitation</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6  The documentary photograph</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7  Photography as a cultural critique</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8  The ethics of photojournalism</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONTENTS

9 Photography and technological change 231

10 Conclusion 260

Glossary 263
Bibliography 268
Index 283
Figures

I.1 A.W. Cutler, *A Shropshire Lad*, 1870s

I.2 Don McCullin, *Fallen North Vietnamese soldier*, 1968,
   Gelatin-silver print

1.1 Terence Wright, *Tree at Upper Swell*, Gloucestershire,
   1997

1.2 *Camera Obscura* engraving from Athanasius Kircher, 1671

1.3 Scheiner’s experiment, in Descartes’ *La Dioptrique*, 1637

1.4 American photographers taking a daguerreotype of a courtesan,
   1853–4

1.5 Antoine François Jean Claudet, *Laboratory Instruments*,
   stereoscopic still-life, 1853

1.6 Andrea Pozzo, *Saint Ignatius entering Heaven*, c.1707

1.7 Calum Colvin, *Heroes 1*, 1986

1.8 Oscar Rejlander, *Self portrait from Darwin*, 1872


2.1 Betty Viner, *Mr and Mrs Edwin and Emily Wilde*, early twentieth
   century

2.2 Terence Wright, *Baronet Street, Derry*, 2014

2.3a Jo Spence, *Industrialisation (1)*, 1982

2.3b Jo Spence, *Industrialisation (2)*, 1982

2.4 Peter Kennard, *Crushed cruise*, 1980

2.5 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled film still #48*, 1979

2.6 Terence Wright, *Williams Tower in Houston, Texas (1)*, 2015

2.7 Terence Wright, *Williams Tower in Houston, Texas (2)*, 2015

2.8 Terence Wright, *Williams Tower in Houston, Texas (3)*, 2015
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIGURES

6.3 Terence Wright, Photo-call at the National Gallery
6.4 David Sillitoe, The Monet exhibition at the National Gallery, 1997
6.5 David Sillitoe, The photograph as it appeared in *The Guardian*, 6th March 1997
6.6 Terence Wright, *The Guardian* (Australia) webpage
6.7 Terence Wright, *The Guardian* Kings Place Offices
6.8 Terence Wright, Fiona Shields, Picture Editor of *The Guardian*, 2015
6.10 Terence Wright, David Hay, 1980
6.12 Terence Wright, Police with guns at the beginning of the siege at the Libyan People’s Bureau, 17 April 1984
6.13 Terence Wright, The press set-up at the siege
6.14 Terence Wright, The end of the siege
6.15 Terence Wright, The siege photograph which was used on BBC Television News
7.1 Reuters, *Helicopter Rescue*, Mozambique, 2001 (courtesy of Reuters)
7.2 Stephen Shore, *Broad Street*, Regina, Saskatchewan, 1974 (© Stephen Shore/Art + Commerce)
7.3 Terence Wright, Charlie Meecham and Kate Mellor in Nanholm Studio, Yorkshire, 1997
7.4 Kate Mellor, *Stadttor*, Düsseldorf, 2011 (courtesy of Kate Mellor)
7.5 Charlie Meecham, *Kendal Museum*, 2012 (Dodo model made by Carl Church)
7.6 J. Lamprey, *Anthropometric image of Malayan male*, c.1868–9
7.7 *Kultured kameraden: a study of Hun physiognomy*, 1917
8.1 Heinrich Hoffmann, *Adolf Hitler*, 20 April 1944
9.5 *L.J.M. Daguerre: a lithograph of a daguerreotype*, date unknown
9.6 Henry Peach Robinson, *Carolling: a composite photograph*, 1887
9.7 Dan Ponting, *Self(ish) Characters #14*, 2009
9.8 Rafiqur Rahman, Poster of Osama Bin Laden and Bert, in Bangladesh protest, 2001
9.9 Terence Wright, Cover of *Country Life* magazine, December 2001
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my friends, colleagues and students in the fields of photography, visual studies and visual anthropology for inspiration, information and ideas: especially Charlie Meecham, Kate Mellor, Maureen Thomas, Michael Moore, and the staff and students of the MFA Photography and PhD programmes at Belfast School of Art, Ulster University. Many of the insights into photographic practice were gained during my freelance work with BBC Television: I am indebted to the experience, professionalism and friendship of the News and Current Affairs staff. I would like to thank the staff of The Guardian, especially the picture editor Fiona Shields for allowing me, once again, to observe and report on their working practices. Many thanks to Jerome Crowder (Institute of Medical Humanities, University of Texas Medical Branch) for allowing me to use his research material for the photo-elicitation case study, as well as his advice, friendship and help in facilitating my work on this new edition at UTMB. I am also very grateful for the patience and attentiveness of my editor at Routledge, Niall Kennedy. Finally, a very special thanks to my wife Janice for her support, guidance and wisdom.

Publisher acknowledgements

Image credits


Camera obscura engraving from Athanasius Kircher, 1671. Reproduced courtesy of Science and Society Picture Library.


Henry Peach Robinson, Carolling: a composite photograph, 1887. Reproduced courtesy of Art Institute of Chicago.


Cover of Country Life magazine. Reproduced courtesy of Terence Wright and Country Life Picture Library.


Andrea Pozzo, Saint Ignatius entering Heaven, c.1707; Oxford Street, London, 1998; Baronet Street, Derry, 2014; Williams Tower in Houston, Texas (1), 2015; Williams Tower in Houston, Texas (2), 2015; Williams Tower in Houston, Texas (3), 2015; An example of deliberate false attachment ‘selfie’, 2015; The Strand, Galveston, Texas, 2015; Wooton, Oxfordshire, taken with a long lens, 1997; Wooton, Oxfordshire, taken with a wide lens, 1997; President Reagan and Prime Minister Thatcher, 1984; The old school, 1904 and 1997: a digital photograph; Maurice Bishop, 1983; A ‘found’ caption, 2015; ‘Reading’ on-screen thumbnails; Rainstorm, Paris, 1988; The Guardian front page: Wednesday 21 January 2015; A photograph taken from a ‘conventional’ angle; Terence Wright, Post-production cropping; Periyar, India: an example of angled cropping, 1996; Factory fire, Cricklewood, London, 1985; Photo-call at the National Gallery; The Guardian (Australia) webpage; The Guardian Kings Place Offices; Fiona Shields, Picture Editor, The Guardian; The Guardian layout wall; David Hay, 1980; New Year’s Eve, Trafalgar Square, London, 1979–80; Police with guns at the beginning of the siege at the Libyan People’s Bureau, 17 April 1984; The press set-up at the siege; The end of the siege; The siege photograph which was used on BBC Television News; Charlie Meecham and Kate Mellor, Nanholm Studio, Yorkshire, 1997; Tube Theatre, London, 1983; Tube Theatre, London: detail of analogue image, 1983; Tube Theatre, London: detail of digital image, 1983. All images reproduced courtesy of Terence Wright.

Text credits

I.R. Sorgi ‘Suicide’ image and associated text reproduced courtesy of Buffalo State College Archives and Special Collections.

Some Ethical Considerations’, *Digital Photography* (San Francisco Camera-
work, 1988) and ‘Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations, Some
Considerations’, *Afterimage*, 17 (4), 1989, and included in Martha Rosler,
*Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001* (Cambridge, MA:

Quotation from ‘Camera Art’ by L. Levine, *Studio International*, vol. 190 (1976),
international.com.

Quotation from ‘Would We Care Without the Tide of TV Images?’ by
Austin, M. published 5 March 2000. Courtesy of *The Times*. Quotation
reprinted from *Consciousness and Cognition*, Vol. 13, Issue 2, Epstein,
R. ‘Consciousness, Art, and the Brain: Lessons from Marcel Proust’,
pp. 213–40, copyright (2004), with permission from Elsevier.

Quotation from Sommerlad, N. (2014) ‘MI6 closing in on WPC Yvonne Fletcher’s
killer on 30th anniversary of her death’ *Mirror Online* www.mirror.co.uk/
news/uk-news/yvonne-fletcher-murder-mi6-closing-3421949. 17 April.
Reprinted courtesy of Mirrorpix.

Reprinted courtesy of Ken Kaminesky.


The Scottish Parliament Parliamentary News Release, information licensed under
the Open Scottish Parliament Licence V.2.

While every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and obtain permission,
this has not been possible in all cases. Any omissions brought to our attention will
be remedied in future editions.
Introduction

The alchemy involved in photography (in which packets of film are inserted into cameras, buttons are pressed and pictures of Aunt Edna emerge in due course) are regarded as uncanny, but as uncanny processes of a natural rather than a human order, like the metamorphosis of caterpillars into butterflies. The photographer, a lowly button presser, has no prestige, or not until the nature of his photographs is such as to make one start to have difficulties conceptualizing the process which made them achievable with the familiar apparatus of photography.

(Alfred Gell 1992: 50)

Over the past one and a half centuries, photography has been used to record all aspects of human life and activity. During this relatively short history, the medium has expanded its capabilities in the recording of time and space, thus allowing human vision to be able to view the fleeting moment or to visualise both the vast and the minuscule. It has brought us images from remote areas of the world, distant parts of the solar system, as well as the social complexities and crises of modern life. Indeed, the photographic medium has provided one of the most important and influential means of expressing the human condition. Nonetheless, the recording of events by means of the visual image has a much longer history. The earliest creations of pictorial recording go as far back as the Upper Palaeolithic period of about 35,000 years ago (some 25,000 years before the development of agriculture). And although we cannot be sure of the exact purposes of the early cave paintings – whether they record the ‘actual’ events of hunting, whether they functioned as sympathetic magic to encourage the increase of animals for hunting, whether they had a role as religious icons, or if they were made simply ‘to enliven
and brighten domestic activities’ (Ucko and Rosenfeld 1967) – pictorial images seem to be inextricably linked to human culture as we understand it.

Throughout the history of visual representation, questions have been raised concerning the supposed accuracy (or otherwise) of the visual image, as well as its status in society. Ideas and debates concerning how we see the world and the status of its pictorial representations have been central political, philosophical and psychological issues from the time of Plato to the present-day technological revolution of the new media communications. Vision and representation have pursued interdependent trajectories, counter-influencing each other throughout the history of Western culture. The popular notion that ‘seeing is believing’ had always afforded special status to the visual image. So when the technology was invented, in the form of photography, the social and cultural impact was immense. Not only did it hold out the promise of providing a record of vision but it was able to make such representation enduring.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the invention of photography appeared to offer the promise of ‘automatically’ providing a truthful visual record. It was seen not only as the culmination of Western visual representation but, quite simply, the camera, functioning in much the same way as the human eye, was regarded as a machine which could provide a fixed image. And this image was considered to be a very close approximation to that which we actually see. The chemical fixing of the image enabled the capture of what might be considered a natural phenomenon: the camera obscura’s image. At the same time, the photographic image was held to be an achievement of our sophisticated Western culture and produced the type of image that artists had struggled throughout the centuries to acquire the manual, visual and conceptual skills to create. In this developmental scheme of things, every form of picture making that had gone before, including the visual arts of ‘other’ cultures, amounted to more or less approximate attempts at achieving the representational heights attained by the Western world. Just as children learned how to draw by starting with ‘primitive’ scribbling and developing into making more complex and skilful adult drawings, so the representations of ‘others’ were seen as mirrors of their cultural and racial development. According to this view, Western art had shown the way for the ‘correct’ ways of viewing the world and set the model for depiction to be executed as it should be, and the camera seemed to prove this.

It may seem a further irony that, because of the camera’s perceived realism in its ability to replicate visual perception, it was assumed that all peoples would ‘naturally’ be able to understand photographs. This gave rise to the question of whether photography constituted a ‘universal language’. For example, in 1933 this view was expressed by photographer August Sander in a series of radio broadcasts ‘Even the most isolated Bushman could understand a photograph of the heavens – whether it showed the sun and moon or the constellations’ (Sander 1978: 674). However, in the face of the rapid increase in global communications which has characterised the latter part of the twentieth century, we do need at least to ask to what extent
the photographic image can penetrate through cultural differences in understanding. Or is photography as bound by cultural conventions as any other form of communication, such as language? Yet despite such uncertainties we find that, ‘Photography is nearly omnipresent, informing virtually every arena of human existence’ (Ritchen1990: 1).

Is it possible that our familiarity with the photographic image has bred our current contempt for the intricacies and subtle methods that characterise the medium’s ability to transmit its vivid impressions of ‘reality’? Photography is regarded quite naturally as offering such convincing forms of pictorial evidence that this process of communication often seems to render the medium totally transparent, blurring the distinction between our perception of the environment and its photographic representations. As Alan Sekula (1982: 86) has pointed out, it is the most natural thing in the world for someone to open a wallet and produce a photograph saying ‘this is my dog’.

**REFLECTIONS OF CULTURE**

Since its invention, there has been a gradual widening in the viewing of the photograph from virtually secret perceptions to those of blatant public display; the first photographic images, in the form of *daguerreotypes*, were relatively difficult to see. They could not be looked at directly, so the viewing of small images contained in ‘folders’ was private and restricted. Over the intervening years, the techniques of photographic reproduction have increasingly made the image more public and open and have increased the scale of the image to the advertisement hoarding. From our contemporary perspective, the advent of digital imaging and the internet have helped to make cameras the constant companion of the majority of Western citizens. Functioning as an essential feature of the mobile phone, the dividing line between taking a photograph and transmitting the image to an audience has become indistinct. At the same time other ‘traditional’ issues remain pertinent concerning the role of photography in society that have aimed to determine whether the camera operates as a mute, passive recorder of events or whether it possesses the voice and power to instigate social change. We may further speculate whether the camera provides images that have a truly educational function by conveying information or if it operates primarily as a source of amusement and entertainment. In provoking such issues, the photographic debate reflects polarised arguments that traditionally have characterised much of Western thought.

Ever since its invention in 1839, photography has played a central role in representing the major changes that have taken place in society throughout the modern age. As a product of science, the photograph ‘automatically’ realised the existing canons of two-dimensional visual art, yet (perhaps above all) it provided such a popular means of entertainment that we can regard the photographic image as a typical product of its age. In addition to its social role, since this early period, the technology
of photography and the attitudes towards the medium by its practitioners have changed radically. This may partly be attributed to photography gradually moving into what might be termed ‘mythic time’ – its initial role as a nineteenth-century record-keeper has now moved beyond the human scale and photographic images, once immediate and close to photographer and subject alike, have now passed out of living memory. The passage of time has transformed the photograph from the aide-memoire into the historical document, a document which often reveals as much (if not more) about the individuals and society which produced the image than it does about its subject(s) (see Figure I.1).

In order to locate the medium in the British political, philosophical and colonial Weltanschauung of the era, photography had emerged at the point in history when the Chartist riots were taking place. Charles Darwin had just published *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839). Further afield, Britain had just taken possession of Hong Kong. Since that time, photographic images have recorded dramatic periods of
political, social and cultural change, which include the decline of the colonial era, the introduction of mechanical warfare, as well as new world views instigated by such scientific advances as space travel on the one hand, and the increased destruction of the natural environment on the other. However, this book hopes to show that photography, and other systems of representation, do not just passively reflect culture but can provide the vision and impetus that promote social and political change and development. For example, it is difficult to imagine the cultural changes of the Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth century without recognising the central role of the development of perspective in bringing about new visual means of representation (see Edgerton 1980). Similarly, photography has made a major contribution to the bringing about of the media culture that characterises our own era, while at the same time it has assumed the ironic role of bringing the harsh realities of the world to the coffee table.

The relationship between a medium and its social environment is complex. For instance, photography has not simply acted as a passive reflector of change but has provided a system of visual representation that has both generated and promoted the social, political, economic, scientific and artistic developments of the past 180 years or so. The use of photography in advertising has evolved to perpetuate the very same consumer society to which photography owes its origins. But while the photograph can operate as a vehicle for mass communications and propaganda, it can also preserve personal memories as well as having the capability to express photographers’ subjective responses to the world. Within 20 years of photography’s invention the camera was ubiquitous and in extensive use. As Lady Elizabeth Eastlake put it in 1857:

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 in 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 brave breast on the battlefield. [See Figure I.2.]

(Eastlake 1857, in Newhall 1981: 81–97)

It is interesting to note that despite this ubiquity of the photograph in the mid-nineteenth century, by today’s standards the photographic procedure was technically cumbersome and the ability to engage with photography was reserved for a privileged minority mainly in Western society. However, as we can see from Eastlake’s catalogue of applications, the photograph does not propose simply to record objectively the physical environment, nor just to express the human relationship to surroundings, but it also connects people to each other. In this role, it acts as a site for the meeting of ideas while it also serves as a stimulus for human social interaction. In later chapters we shall examine the photographer’s active use of this
characteristic of the medium. In the digital environment, her statement remains essentially valid. Such phenomena as Facebook have widened, multiplied and facilitated photographic distribution on an unprecedented scale.

THE UBIQUITOUS IMAGE

The late modern period has witnessed an ever-increasing influence of the visual image, with the twentieth century culminating in the global primacy of television: a medium whose influence is being dramatically eroded by new digital technologies. For photography, the new prospects and uncertainties posed by digital storage and manipulation present new challenges. In this post-television age we stand at the point of the next leap forward in communications technology with the transmission of images via (what was initially referred to as) the ‘Information Superhighway’. During this period it was suggested that we now inhabit the ‘post-photographic era’ (see Mitchell 1992: 225), where technological and cultural change
have devalued photography to such an extent that events have taken us beyond the photograph’s use and value as a medium of communication. Furthermore, should we be asking if the advent of digital imagery means that photography, initially born from painting, has turned the full circle and has now returned to emulating painting – its progenitor? However, in the intervening years since Mitchell’s declaration, photography has expanded exponentially marked as much by the widened availability of camera technology to the general public as the expanding influence of photographic theory and practice in the higher education sector.

Nonetheless, during its relatively short history, how do we account for the widespread influence and range of application of photography? In just a few years after its initial invention(s) the medium underwent a rapid succession of technological refinements. Its transformations and developments were accompanied by a widespread expansion of photographic practice carried around the world, for the most part, on the tide of colonialism. Perhaps the central reason put forward for the proliferation and dramatic uptake of photography is its ability to transcribe the world in a form that is readily portable from one location to another and that it preserves a visual record over the span of time. Support for this view rests on three related tenets:

1. The image is produced by mechanical means and therefore seems, not by necessity, to rely on human agency.
2. The camera forms images that appear to look real and, as such, they can be seen as both continuing and extending the general trajectory of Western art.
3. Physiological evidence would seem to suggest that the camera is constructed on, and functions by, the same optical principles as the human eye. This further reinforces the idea that the image produced by the camera has a very close correspondence to the images that we normally see.

In contrast to these points of view, it has been suggested that photographs are far from ‘automatically realistic’. As products of a particular culture, they are only perceived as real by cultural convention: they only appear realistic because we have been taught to see them as such. This assumes that their representational relationship with the world is similar to that of language, i.e. by agreed social convention. As such they offer only one of numerous alternative means of providing a coded description of the world around us. We can therefore speak of photography as one example from a variety of visual languages. In this context, interpretation would seem to be the closest term that can be used to account for our understanding of a photograph. This may lead us to question whether photography is purely a visual medium, or to take the further step of considering the value of limiting our analysis of the photograph to quasi-linguistic structures.

However convincing this latter theoretical viewpoint may be, it does imply a considerable shift of emphasis in the regard for the medium. It accentuates the viewer’s response to a ubiquitous image which does not result from simplistic
mechanistic procedures, but is produced by a complexity of cultural factors, which perpetually relocate photographic images. Therefore it is the forces of culture that constantly alter our perception and understanding of photographs. As such, any image may have no fixed meaning at all and, although physically static, its message becomes subject to the fluctuations of shifting social patterns. In addition to this, we might consider that although the photograph yields its information all at once, this is not necessarily how we receive it. While we do not ‘read’ the photograph with the same prescribed linear progression involved, say, in reading a text, our perception of the image occurs over a period of time and necessitates a high degree of scrutiny. And, in contrast to movie film, it is the viewer who determines the duration of his or her engagement with the image. This means that the value of photography’s representational powers lies as much in the image’s historical and cultural contexts as in any inherent properties of the photographic medium itself. At the very least, our looking at a photograph, and our obtaining information from it is not as straightforward as we might have first thought.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

It is the intention of this book to introduce the principles of photography that might enable the reader not only to gain a sound theoretical background, but also to develop a critical approach to the field of photographic practice. It aims to provide guidelines for the systematic study of photographic media. As such it is intended to be of interest to practitioners and theorists of the media and visual arts alike. The book is aimed at students and scholars of photography, media studies, communications and the visual arts, in addition to new areas of study where photography (and photographic imaging) have gained a foothold – such as anthropology, sociology, history and the medical humanities. Through its comprehensive introduction to lens-based picture making, it is anticipated that it will have additional value to those studying the ‘time-based’ visual media of film and video and will have further relevance to the role of the photograph in multimedia production.

The book examines the importance and application of such theoretical positions to photography by establishing the medium’s characteristics, scope and limitations. It aims to provide the reader with a vocabulary for photographic phenomena, to develop visual awareness and visual literacy, as well as enable students to familiarise themselves with current theoretical viewpoints and to evolve critical frameworks for their own photographic practice. The book examines the relationship between practice and theory, which may be summarised as follows:

- **Practice** Here photography is seen as a series of selection processes of pre-production selection and post-production editing. For example: choice of camera format, camera angle, viewpoint, shutter speed, aperture, development, editing ‘thumbnails’, cropping, captions, etc. Information is
selected from the environment through the activity of taking photographs, then that selection of information from the obtained visual array is gradually refined into that which will appear in the final photographic print or display screen. Subsequently, the viewer’s perception of the image can be directed by the general context of the display and the particular caption applied to the photograph.

- Theory The theoretical dimension examines the determinants of selection so that the photographer is able to make both an informed choice and efficient use of the medium to deliver the desired image while, at the same time, considering and reflecting upon his/her own social and cultural, temporal and spatial, location. Such choices may be determined by the type of assignment (high control/low control), institutional constraints (newspaper/corporate), in addition to the wider cultural and historical context.

Traditionally, the media context for photography is characterised by a desire to represent important events, having less concern for the intended artistic interpretation or the activity of investigating the scope and characteristics of the medium. However, this book aims to show that these approaches to photography can play an important role in visual communication. Furthermore, this work has been written in the belief that artistic practice – aimed at establishing the scope and limitations of photography – can provide a valuable set of exemplars, which can help us to understand the territory we are exploring.

THE PURPOSE OF CRITICAL THEORY IN PHOTOGRAPHY

When a photographer takes a photograph, he or she makes a selection of visual information that is determined by his or her technical and aesthetic skills, personal views and experience, together with a set of social and cultural values. And in the course of this book we shall see how these determinants not only affect the style, content and expression of a photograph, but also how those images are perceived and responded to by the viewer. For example, we might consider that the casual reader of a newspaper will have an implicit understanding of the photographic images reproduced on the page. Rather than accepting the photograph at face value, we might question whether it accurately recorded the scene, as it would have looked at the time. Or, in contrast, does it express the photographer’s point of view? Is it the precise instant recorded that is of particular importance, or should the photograph on the page be understood as standing as a symbol to represent a state of affairs in the world?

Theory can operate by offering a degree of explanation of what is going on. It should not be taken as being all-embracing, nor necessarily offering ultimate truths. In fact, it can often be the deficiencies within a theoretical standpoint that offer the
scope for the most promising and stimulating developments. In this context, there is an interesting relationship between critics and artists, where the critics aim to establish categories, which artists then make it their business to extend or to subvert.¹

The next issue we might consider is the extent to which an understanding of these theoretical positions is necessary for the photographic practitioner. Will they help to produce better photographers or do they merely exist as academic exercises? And to what degree of theoretical depth is it advisable, or indeed necessary, for the photographer to delve? It is unfortunate that in many instances one finds a polarised antagonism between photographers who do and theorists who think. For example, in his book *Camera Lucida*, the French critic Roland Barthes offers the following commentary on a photograph:

William Klein has photographed children of Little Italy in New York (1954); all very touching, amusing, but what I stubbornly see are one child’s bad teeth . . . the detail which interests me is not, or at least is not strictly, intentional, and probably must not be so; it occurs in the field of the photographed thing like a supplement that is at once inevitable and delightful.

(Barthes 1982: 43–7)

While this may seem all well and good, William Klein himself raises an objection to Barthes’ analysis of his photograph:

he’s more interested in what he sees than in what the photographer sees. I saw other things when I took the picture . . . but Barthes isn’t all that interested in what I see or what I’ve done. He’s not listening to me – only to himself. Anyhow, Barthes and many critics, even Sontag, talk about photography, not about photographers.

(Klein 1981: 18)

Immediately we are thrown into a debate between the photographer’s intention in taking the photograph and the viewer’s understanding and interpretation of the image. This said, it remains one of the essential problems of photography that, in comparison with other media, photographers seem exceedingly reluctant to theorise about their own practice. This leaves the impression that they photograph by instinct, that photography is an innate ability, and because photographers are born with photographic vision, they do not need to think about what they do. After all, it is considered that the photographs speak for themselves. I hope that this book will remedy such misconceptions. For example, by means of contrast, writing on the relative merits of painting and photography as far back as 1911, Alvin Langdon Coburn suggested:

the essential difference is not so much a mechanical one of brushes and pigments as compared with a lens and dry plates, but rather a mental one
INTRODUCTION

of a slow, gradual, usual building up, as compared with an instantaneous concentrated mental impulse, followed by a longer period of fruition.

(Coburn 1911: 72)

Working in this way, photographers may seem to take images instinctively, almost without thinking, yet later during the post-production process they reflect upon their practice and, on the basis of these reflections, go out and shoot again.

One of the most frequently voiced criticisms of the role of theory in photographic education is that it stifles spontaneity and creativity. In this regard, photographic education in Britain found itself situated at a curious intersection between the art-school ‘atelier’ tradition (with its philosophy of free expression and experimental exploration of the medium) and the socio-political inheritance from the old polytechnic sector proposing a new rationalism whereby all practice is the result of socially and culturally determined forces. In worst-case scenarios, the resulting states of affairs engender a rigid dichotomy that leads either to a shallow, impressionistic and introspective approach, which has little to do with the broader practice of photography, or to the student’s state of stagnation whereby he or she is unable to pick up the camera until all the theoretical formulae have been pre-established, fully understood and the interpretative strategies have been pre-empted.

Despite the wide range of subject matter that is committed to the camera, whether it be a portrait, landscape, studio set, street riot or a murder (notwithstanding the ethical and emotional factors), the photographic procedure is, in many important respects, the same. Essentially, the process entails the projection and capture of a three-dimensional world onto a two-dimensional light-sensitive surface. It is a fundamental concern of this book that this phenomenon constitutes the foundations for critical practice in photography. Furthermore, it is proposed that theory and practice should develop hand in hand, with the practice of photography conducted in a climate of critical reflection and re-evaluation. Both the practice and theory of photography should be sites of discovery and experimentation, which aim to plot their developments in relation to the past traditions of photographic work at the same time as keeping their sights on the innovations of the future.

The book is based on the belief that anyone who uses a camera or who views a photograph will most probably be subscribing, albeit unwittingly, to some or other theory of representation. It can be argued that every photographer adopts some sort of theoretical standpoint almost as soon as they think of picking up the camera. Whether they have considered the further ramifications that arise from this prospect to the extent of adopting a theory of photography is another matter. In any case, all photographers will most likely have expectations that the camera will produce a certain sort of image that will fulfil their expectations to a greater or lesser degree.

For example, the parent, who perhaps becomes a photographer once a year, taking a snapshot of a child on holiday with a cameraphone, will have certain expectations with regard to the outcome of the image that is about to be produced. This
is accompanied by a set of criteria for the evaluation of the success (or otherwise) of the endeavour and an idea of the intended audience. This may rely upon the pre-ordained standards for display to the restricted audience of the family album, to be viewed by close friends as well as present and future members of the family. These issues may not be conceived of in quite these terms, but there are criteria for the evaluation of photographs which are derived from an underlying theoretical standpoint – a situation, which not only demands an implicit understanding of the camera’s ability to provide a visual record, but which also determines the anticipated outcome, which will be subject to certain traditions, codes and conventions of visual representation. The photograph may be intended to be realistic, a good likeness (if not flattering); will have formal qualities – it will be composed in a particular way, be colourful, etc.; it will express the socially acceptable image of a happy holiday. At the same time, it will be perpetuating a traditional photographic practice of the family snapshot accompanied by its hundred-year (or so) history. Not only was this enabled by the introduction of easy-to-use photographic equipment (like George Eastman’s *Box Brownie* in 1890) that encouraged the rise of amateur photography, but also the nineteenth-century expansion of the railways that took people to the seaside as well as the *Factory Acts* that gave people the time to travel there. They established the two-day weekend and annual leave. All such considerations will, in turn, engender further theoretical implications.

Knowledge of photographic critical theory will not provide the formula to enable the student to become a successful photographer. Photographs that are constructed from rigid theoretical frameworks can appear as reminiscent and as lifeless as the results of painting by numbers. Of course, it is not necessary to acquire any of this theoretical background in order to take good photographs. However, for the student of photography, or for those intending to work with the medium or have greater understanding of his or her own practice and potential, photographic theory can offer a valuable insight into the medium’s history, scope and characteristics. It is my belief that this will enable the student to take a broader and more innovative approach to the photographic medium, the practices of the future and the production of photographs that can contribute to extending the range of critical approaches to the medium.

In the chapters that follow, we will first examine the historical context and visual tradition that gave rise to the photographic phenomenon. Chapter 1 proposes a shift of emphasis away from the conventional ‘history of photography’. Although it offers an historical outline of photography, it does not intend to be merely descriptive, but aims to provide both the historical background and the rationale for photographic representation. It introduces theories of vision, perception and representation which serve to indicate the characteristics of the photographic medium and the extent to which the photograph relates to the information gained through the activity of visual perception. This approach establishes a theoretical framework, which can also be used to address the characteristics of digital photography.
Chapter 2 considers the pre-production factors in approaching the photographic shoot. It begins with a discussion of some of the conceptual skills necessary for using the camera and aims to understand photography through the intentions of the photographer, which are categorised in terms of realist, formalist and expressionist aesthetics. This is followed by a chapter dedicated to an investigation into the character and nature of the photographic image. Little attention is given to photographic techniques per se – specific details such as darkroom practice and how to use a camera are well covered in a number of introductory photographic textbooks. In this volume it is considered that a more limited yet selective orientation to technical theory will suffice.

The scope and limitations of the post-production process become the subject of Chapter 4, which is followed by a discussion that deals more specifically with issues arising from notions of documentary practice in photography. Chapter 5 considers how the photograph moves us: how it elicits a response from the viewer and how it can be used to trigger memory. Chapter 6 explores the use of the camera as a documentary tool and Chapter 7 looks at photography as a medium of expression. In paying special regard to contemporary photographic practice, a media-based photographic assignment is examined. The photographic assignment aims to enable students to see the entire process – from initial commission to reader’s response – from a number of viewpoints. These are based upon interviews with those involved at various stages of the assignment: editor, photographer, picture editor and reader. Each of these stages will be accompanied by the photographs which result from the actual assignment, as well as the various stages of the decision-making process. In addition to making decisions based on photographic criteria, there are social constraints on the photographer’s activities. Consequently, ethical issues are discussed in Chapter 8. Lastly, Chapter 9 describes the current impact of new technologies on photographic practice. In this final chapter we shall turn to the transformations to photography made by technological innovation resulting from the shift of emphasis from the analogue to the digital image. It aims to estimate the future significance of digital imaging for photography.

NOTES

1 For example, Weitz (1956: 439) suggests that innovation in the arts depends upon invalidating ‘closed’ systems. It results from ‘a decision on someone’s part to extend or to close the old or invent a new concept. (For example, “It’s not a sculpture, it’s a mobile.”)’.

References


BAAS (1874) *Notes and Queries on Anthropology, for the Use of Travellers and Residents in Uncivilized Lands*, London: Edward Stanford (British Association for the Advancement of Science).


Demarchy, R. (1899) in Camera Notes III, 2, pp. 45-56.


Newhall, N. (1952) The Caption, the Mutual Relation of Words/Photographs Aperture, 1, pp. 22.
Oechsner, F. (1943) This is the Enemy. London: William Heinemann.


