Photography Theory
THEORIES OF PHOTOGRAPHY
A SHORT HISTORY

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What is a photograph? What is photography? The answer to these apparently simple questions—what is the medium—would seem to be a necessary basis for its theorization. A theory of something purports to offer up a set of overarching, generalizable qualities and functions—how something operates and why. But to respond to the query “What is a photograph?” is not merely to describe a familiar, omnipresent item—a “transparent envelope,” as Roland Barthes has called it—a thing that we often see through in order to get information about the world. It is to describe a series of historically contingent processes that, at one time or another, comprised a photograph and the practice of photography. How do we speak in one breath of photography, and unproblematically incorporate the range of objects and practices that includes daguerreotypes, calotypes, 35-millimeter prints, Polaroids, and digital photographs into a convincing theoretical model?

Consider their fundamental material differences; the shiny, easily damaged daguerreotype, the product of a direct and unrepeatable process, is pressed between a glass sheet and metal mat
for protection, becoming integral to its physical life. Its subject matter was originally a laterally reversed image; later, this reversal was corrected by placing a mirror at an angle before the lens and photographing the subject in that mirror, in turn resulting not in a direct image of the subject, but an image of its reflection. We cannot speak of this particular photograph as an index (to invoke a term that is fiercely contested throughout the volume) of the world-out-there, that is, contiguous with the object it represents, unless we make clear that that contiguity is with a mirror reflection. Nor can we speak of mass reproduction (another key term in photography theory), as the daguerreotype was a single, original, and unrepeatable image. Contrast William Henry Fox Talbot’s nearly contemporaneous calotype, which introduced the negative-positive process on paper (a paper negative and a paper positive), as well as instantaneity, resistance to deterioration, and reproducibility, not to mention affordability. However, the paper fibers often showed through to the proof, blurring details and haziness and making it a less-than-precise record, distancing the empirical world rather than revealing details invisible to the naked eye. The twentieth century witnessed lighter cameras, perforated 35-millimeter film, and an efficient negative-positive process that resulted in an endlessly reproducible, mobile image. Though this modern photographic model might seem to be normative—a widespread enough phenomenon upon which to base a generalizable photographic theory—contrast the equally modern Polaroid, which is a direct process, with no negative, no mass reproduction possible (except via auxiliary processes such as rotogravure), and an unparalleled immediacy of imagery. That immediacy is perhaps only rivaled today by the digital image, where medium itself becomes virtual.

Therefore, a clear definition of intrinsic, universal qualities of a photograph would be, at the very outset, hampered by its dependence on technological change. To speak of “the photograph” would be to speak of its multiplicity and malleability. As Richard Bolton has rightly noted, perhaps “photography has no governing characteristics at all save adaptability.” Moreover, is it correct to say that it is the object—the photograph—that we theorize, or is it photographic practice, which would incorporate the psychologically and ideologically informed act of taking photographs and the processes of developing, reproducing, and circulating them in society? Or do we theorize their function? Some writers argue that the photograph’s role in discourse, its actual purpose, is wholly the rightful object of photography’s theorization. Just as the apparatus itself is historically bound, making it impossible to declare a kind of photographic unity, so too are its various social functions. How do we understand how photography operates in society—ideologically, politically, psychologically? Which photography, exactly? Art photography? Advertising photography? Photojournalism? Documentary? Erotica? Photography is a manifold phenomenon, taking hold in discourses ranging from fine art to journalism, criminal investigation to optics. As the British photographer and critic Victor Burgin writes, it seems “reasonable to assume that the object of photography theory is, at base, a photograph. But what is a photograph?” He continues, listing not its various incarnations as an apparatus, but its various social understandings: “When photography first emerged into the context of nineteenth-century aesthetics, it was initially taken to be an automatic record of reality; then it was contested that it was the expression of an individual; then it was considered to be a record of a reality refracted through a sensibility.” Just as the physical composition of the photograph changes, so too does the cultural perception of photography, which Burgin suggests is imbricated in its theorization.

Theory too is historically conditioned, of course; photographic theories themselves are not immune from discursive trends. In this introduction, I will provide a short history of the theories of photography, beginning from some of the first public utterances to the present day, framing them in their respective historical contexts. These theories were articulated in response to a set of
particular conditions—political, commercial, cultural, and technological—and sought to provide some overarching observations and predictions about the medium in a certain moment in time and place. Covering a span from the 1830s until the twenty-first century, the introduction will by necessity be summary, offering an overview of a dispersed and contested theoretical field. Most of the writers discussed in this essay could be treated in a lengthy introduction of their own; their writings—their texture, their implications—exceed the summaries I can offer here. Certain writers who have received extensive treatment elsewhere, for example Walter Benjamin or Roland Barthes, have been distilled to a few key points. I have highlighted the elements of texts that emphasize continuities of concern over the century and a half of photography theory that further develop a particular strand of thought, or that challenge an argument. My aim is to illuminate the key issues addressed in photo theory, pointing out similarities, contested differences, moments of aggrandizement, points of repression, and insistent returns to a theme. These theorizations move from a few isolated writers searching to explain a novel phenomenon and its impacts on society to a full-blown academic discourse that becomes more substantive, pluralist, strident, and contentious as the twentieth century draws to a close and the ramifications of the digital age confront us.

1 During photography's beginnings (which, as Geoffrey Batchen demonstrates, was a pluralism of events and coincidences, not a decisive historical moment), the medium was hailed by prominent writers of the day as “the most important and perhaps the most extraordinary triumph of modern science” (Edgar Allan Poe in 1840) or linked to “a form of lunacy,” tied to “the stupidity of the masses” (Charles Baudelaire in 1859). Given that both writers were devoted to the dark power of the imagination and the exploration of enigmatic, subjective states—Baudelaire was an admirer of Poe—the discrepancy between their two evaluations could not be starker. Importantly, the divergence is rooted in the different assessments of the daguerreotype's social functions. The first account, written just a year after Daguerre's public presentation of the invention he named after himself, is enthralled by the daguerreotype's nearly divine representation of “absolute truth,” which is “infinitely more accurate than any painting by human hands.” According to Poe, science not only was the source of the imagination, but also would exceed “the wildest expectations of the most imaginative.” For Poe, the power of science was in the unforeseen, the yet-to-be-known, and therein lay its promise and its lure. Not coincidentally, Poe took pleasure in the fact that the daguerreotype could capture inaccessible heights and lunar charts, ciphers of his own imaginative sensibility.

The second response, written fifteen years later, is searingly apprehensive about photography’s encroachments on art and the imagination. Unlike Poe, who was dreaming of photography’s potential, Baudelaire witnessed the mass commercial appeal and celebration of the mechanical replication of the physical world. Photography, in Baudelaire’s estimation, contributed to the impoverishment of the artistic imagination, only fueling the popular notion that art and truth lie in the exact replication of the visual world rather than the world of the imagination, dream, and fantasy. “An avenging God has heard the prayers of this multitude,” wrote Baudelaire in mock biblical prose; “Daguerre was his messiah. And then they said to themselves: ‘Since photography provides us with every desirable guarantee of exactitude’ (they believe that, poor madmen) ‘art is photography.’” For Baudelaire, photography could at best be a tool of memory, a record keeper, an archive, but never a fine art. In his words, “Poetry and progress are two ambitious men that hate each other.”

Art, science, and commerce: these are the terms around which early photographic theories turned. On the one hand,
the replicated image was the product of a mechanical process, the effect of a technical device that, through the infiltration of light on a light-sensitive surface, could record the world before it. The camera was a picture-machine: objective, mechanical, technological. On the other hand, there was a language surrounding nineteenth-century photography that was based in nature, not technology. Photographs were also called “sun pictures” and said to be “impressed by nature’s hand.” The title of William Henry Fox Talbot’s photographically illustrated book of 1844, *The Pencil of Nature*, correlates the photograph with a sketch of nature. Photographs were “obtained,” or “taken,” the way natural history specimens were found in the wild. Both the conception and the reception of the photographic image remained bifurcated.

Significant technological advances in the early twentieth century shifted the terms of discourse from the aesthetic and commercial merits and demerits of photography to the aesthetic politics of mass reproduction. Rapid developments in photographic technology, including the invention of the lightweight 35 millimeter Leica camera in 1924, the use of perforated film rather than ungainly light-sensitive plates, the heightened photosensitivity of film and photographic paper, the development of the wide aperture lens, and the flashbulb, allowed photographers to work at higher speeds and previously impossible light conditions. In addition, the refinement of the photogravure technique in the early 1900s enabled text and high-quality images to be printed simultaneously on a single page. A new publishing industry emerged that centered on the picture magazine, soon rivaling text-only newspapers. The mass-reproduced photograph had become an integral part of a new consciousness industry.

Intellectuals recognized that the new postwar age was indelibly marked by the mechanically reproduced photograph. While many critics considered the mass-reproduced photograph to be symptomatic of social decline, Siegfried Kracauer, writing for his bourgeois feuilleton audience in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 1927, invested the omnipresent photograph with redemptive potential. Although Kracauer’s dialectical perspective is equally mired in social disenchantment, he holds onto the notion that decline (represented in part by the illustrated magazine) is a vital, though negative, step toward enlightenment. In his essay “Photography,” Kracauer argued that the sheer accumulation—what he variously called “blizzard,” “the flood,” and the “assault”—of photographs in the press catapults this photographic archive of modern life into the realm of allegory. The multitude of photographs displayed in the press, according to Kracauer, forces the beholder to confront the truth of capitalist society: its mechanical superficiality, its banality, its spiritual meaninglessness. Photography, in Kracauer’s estimation, “is a secretion of the capitalist mode of production.” Only through a raw encounter with the surface nature of photography, in its accumulated emptiness, can the process of disenchantment and, importantly, change begin. At the heart of Kracauer’s thesis is a paradox: “In the illustrated magazines, people see the very world that the illustrated magazines prevent them from perceiving,” he writes, suggesting that seeing is not the same as being critically conscious of what one sees. Siegfried Kracauer believed that the abundance of photographs, archived in the multiplicity of picture magazines, appearing on newsstands month after month, year after year, could potentially catapult consumers into unflinching recognition of, and revolt against, a rapid, overrationalized society. Until that moment, however, the sheer accumulation of photographs offers an eternal, ever-renewable photographic present, repressing the lurking presence of transience and death by ever reproducing more, new pictures.

Kracauer’s friend Walter Benjamin too vested the mass-reproduced photograph with revolutionary potential, most famously in his 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Written from a Marxist perspective and in the context of the spread of fascism in Europe, Benjamin asserted that photography “shatters” capitalist, bourgeois tradition by
Photography Theory

destroying the “aura” of the sacred, authentic, and original art object. The aura, which he defines as “an experience of distance, however close the object may be,” is an extension of the object’s “cult value,” once rooted in the origins of art in magic and religious ritual and now manifest in a secularized cult value, which valorizes the singularity, physical authenticity, and tradition of the art object. A reproduction “as offered by picture magazines and newsreels,” destroys the art object’s “aura,” bringing the distant object closer and making it accessible to a mass public, at simultaneous moments, in multiple locations. This aspect of Benjamin’s argument is summarized in the often-quoted assertion “That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.” At issue here is the plurality of copies versus a unique existence, for, as Benjamin observes, “to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense.” With the destruction of aura, art is not based on ritual but on politics; argues Benjamin, capitalizing on the mass function of the reproduction; in 1936, he saw fascism to be aestheticizing politics and communism to be politizing art.

“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” elaborates on the ideas that Benjamin first expressed two years earlier in his 1934 essay “The Author as Producer,” which argued for the rapprochement between technological innovation and radical politics. Benjamin insisted that the cultural agent must function within and transform the production relations of the time, utilizing photographic production and reproduction for the purposes of social change. It is here, in this marriage of material form and engaged content, that Benjamin offers his response to Baudelaire’s antithesis of aesthetic meaning and technology. Baudelaire’s ambitious poet, in Europe of 1934, needed to embrace modern technology in an aesthetics of struggle, to intervene using modern material.

One form of modern imagery that in Benjamin’s opinion supplied the productive apparatus without changing it was photographic reportage (framed by the Soviet-derived aesthetic of the New Objectivity, a trend of 1920s German photography that employed dramatic camera angles, seriality, extreme close-ups, and stark light-dark contrasts). In Benjamin’s estimation, reportage reproduces the values of capitalist society, bringing things from afar—foreign lands, springtime, celebrities—up close, all in the service of novel effects, entertainment, and modishness. Nothing is inaccessible; even poverty and suffering are aestheticized by elegant camera angles or glossy reproductions. Photography now transfigures the world by aestheticizing it, reporting surfaces, not struggle. Benjamin argues that the way to rescue photography from its replication of capitalist modishness is to mobilize language, by way of the caption, to direct the meaning of the photograph to revolutionary ends. As he phrases it, text rescues the image from “modish commerce” in order to give it “revolutionary use value.”

Benjamin’s first formulation of the symbiotic relation between photography and language can be found in “A Little History of Photography,” published in Die literarische Welt, September–October 1931, during mounting political and economic instability in Germany. There he argues that inscription anchors photographic meaning, offering it a constructed depth that rescues it from surface meaninglessness. To aid in his argument about photographic superficiality, Benjamin mobilizes Bertolt Brecht’s now often-quoted remark:

[Less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or the A.E.G. reveals almost nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations—the factory say—means that they are no longer explicit. So something must in fact be built up, something artificial, posed.24]
That artificial, posed "something" adds up to Surrealist photography for Benjamin, who places his stakes in photographic imagery that offers a visibly constructed meaning. Siegfried Kracauer too urged that the "surface coherence of the photograph must be destroyed" in order for history, substance, the idea to present itself, otherwise the "image idea" drives away the idea.

Benjamin bases his understanding of photographic meaning in a technological determinism, proposing that photographic matter and process determine the meaning of an image. The silent, restful, quiet concentration of the early daguerreotype, he argues, is rooted in the material facts of the procedure such as prolonged exposure time and the need to be in a separate, closed-off space away from distractions (Benjamin revealed in the fact that David Octavius Hill photographed his subjects in a cemetery). "The procedure itself caused the subject to focus his life in the moment rather than hurrying on past it; during the considerable period of the exposure, the subject ... grew into the picture." For Benjamin, these early daguerreotypes had an aura, produced by the "way light struggles out of darkness," which lent qualities such as fullness and security to the subject's gaze. "Everything about these early pictures was built to last.

In stark contrast to the gravitas of the daguerreotype was the "split-second of exposure" of the 1920s snapshot, which Benjamin considers to be in keeping with the instability and flux of contemporary life: "[A]s Kracauer has aptly noted, the split second of the exposure determines whether a sportman becomes so famous that photographers start taking his picture for the illustrated papers." While its immediacy and speed suggest that the snapshot cannot summon an aura, it would also promise to be more powerful in destroying the bourgeois artwork's aura, as he advanced in his later "Work of Art" essay. But the loss of the photographic aura preceded the modern-day snapshot; in Benjamin's mind, it was already initiated by the gum print, or gum chromo-mate print, which was introduced in 1894 and remained popular into the 1920s. The procedure allowed the photographer to create atmospheric effects by dissolving the pigmented gum arabic surface with a stream of water or a brush. For Benjamin, these effects of depth and moody lighting preferred by the imperialist bourgeoisie were artificial and whims of fashion.

While the bourgeois sought spiritual effects in tampered pictures, the photograph itself summoned an enchanting presence that Benjamin called the "optical unconscious," things visible to the camera eye and the unconscious eye but invisible to the waking eye. "[P]hotography reveals ... physiognomic aspects, image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things—meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams, but which, enlarged and capable of formulation, make the difference between technology and magic visible as a thoroughly historical variable." Photography, like the talking cure, reveals associations and presences not immediately available to the conscious mind.

Photography's role in shaping mass public consciousness (or unconsciousness) only intensified after World War II and peaked during the Vietnam War. Mass media—primarily photography but also television—were the means by which the public received horrific images of the war atrocities. Between 1954 and 1956, the French semiologist Roland Barthes wrote a series of essays—one each month for about two years—for a mass public on current events. Several essays on the role of photography appeared in the left-wing *Les Lettres nouvelles*. Barthes was less invested in the relation of photography to art, and focused instead on its construction of cultural myths on a mass scale. His key assertion in *Mythologies* is that photography is not nature (in contrast to the previous century's claims that photography is its coextension), not a "universal language" (a notion that he roundly attacks in his "Family of Man" essay), but a form of coded, historically contingent, ideological speech, amenable to scientific study, semiotic analysis in particular, which he defines as the "science of forms." The result, insists Barthes, will not be an ahistorical formalist study.
but one that enables a deepening of historical criticism, noting, “A little formalism turns one away from History, but a lot brings one back to it.” In “Myth Today,” Barthes links photography with modern mythological speech, which is historical form parading as natural knowledge, as a kind of enduring truth. As the first term of a mythical system, the photograph distorts, alters, and disintegrates meaning, reproducing forms and relations of production as needed to maintain the power of the dominant ideology. Photography is constitutive of structures of power—history transformed to look natural. Above all, photography is malleable. As he notes in a later essay of 1961, “The Photographic Message,” “[A] photograph can change its meaning as it passes from the very conservative L’Avrore to the communist L’Humanite.”

In two essays written during the early 1960s, “The Photographic Message” (1961) and “The Rhetoric of the Image” (1964), Barthes deepens his ideas on photography and semiotics first articulated in *Mythologies.* Elaborating on the observations first offered by Walter Benjamin on the guiding role of text in photography, Barthes asserts that one way of anchoring that floating chain of signifieds, to “counter the terror of uncertain signs,” is to root it with a “linguistic message.” While Benjamin sees text as offering depth and structure, Barthes ultimately considers text as a repressive form of ideological control: text helps the viewer to “choose” the correct level of understanding, leading the viewer to attend to some signifieds in the image and avoid others. “By means of an often subtle dispatching, it remote-controls him towards a meaning chosen in advance.” (In “The Photographic Message,” he calls text “parasitic.”) The photograph generally exceeds the language assigned to it, however, since two signifying systems cannot duplicate one another, suggesting a level of redemption for photographic meaning.

Barthes insists that the photograph has an Edenic state, in which it is cleared, in a utopian fashion, of all connotations, becoming a “non-coded iconic message”; it is innocent, by virtue of what he declares is its “absolutely analogical nature.” In this utopian state, the photographic message is what Barthes calls “a message without a code.” However, as soon as a photograph leaves Eden, so to speak, and enters into circulation, it becomes culturally coded, transforming the image and putting it into the realm of connotation. Barthes maintains that this connotation is not, strictly speaking, part of the analogic photographic structure, but dependent on a context, often an ideological one. For Barthes, the photograph always oscillates between the naturalized image and the ideological sign, the denoted and the connoted message. His famous interpretation of the Panzani advertisement in “The Rhetoric of the Image” deconstructs a “naturalized” image of what he calls Italianicity, or transmitted clichés about Italian culture, in a photo-based advertisement for packaged pasta products to demonstrate how the photographic image is ideologically constructed in terms of codes and secondary systems. Barthes observes, “[T]he more technology develops the diffusion of information (and most notably of images), the more it provides the means of masking the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given meaning.”

The 1960s mark photography’s decisive entry into the institutions of the fine arts, from museums to the art market. This shift was in large part engineered by the curators of American museums who sought to plead the case of photography as high art, excavating photography’s essential properties so as to determine its difference from painting and sculpture and justify its place in the museum. As Douglas Crimp has noted, “[I]f photography was invented in 1839, it was only discovered in the 1960s and 1970s—photography, that is, as an essence, photography itself.” But Christopher Phillips observes that this cultural repackaging of photography in the 1960s shifts the emphasis from photography’s (potentially
revolutionary) role as a mass medium to its "cult value" status, consequently inverting Walter Benjamin's terms. This would be the appropriate context in which to consider the writings of John Szarkowski, curator of Photographs at the Museum of Modern Art from 1962 to 1991. Szarkowski is the bête noire of postmodern critics who condemn his sheer disregard of political, social, and cultural context in the quest for essential photographic meaning. Szarkowski's project was to assert the aesthetic value of the photograph against the mass culture of journals and magazines in which many photographers earned their daily bread. Apparently when Szarkowski arrived in New York in 1962, no gallery showed fine art photography. His 1966 publication *The Photographer's Eye* seeks to systematize photography and insert it into a Greenbergian modernist discourse, isolating the formal elements specific to photography and thereby giving it an authoritative aesthetic language of its own. In his own words, *The Photographer's Eye* "is an investigation of what photographs look like, and of why they look that way. It is concerned with photographic style and with photographic tradition." The book asserts that there is indeed such a thing as a shared vocabulary of photography, some sort of common denominator, that belongs to photography alone. He proposes that the following five independent qualities are inherent in the medium: (1) "The Thing Itself," because photography deals with "actual"; (2) "The Detail," (3) "The Frame," because "The photographer's picture is not conceived but selected"; (4) "Time," because "There is in fact no such thing as an instantaneous photograph"; and (5) "Vantage point," by which he means the various perspectives from which "the thing itself" can be framed, such as bird's- and worm's-eye views or foreshortening. While Szarkowski mobilized Clement Greenberg's critical strategy for the purposes of his photographic aestheticization, he stops short, as Christopher Phillips insightfully points out, of a materialist account of the photograph and the move to abstraction. "The formal characteristics he acknowledged were all modes of photographic description: instead of stressing (as had Clement Greenberg in his formalist essays on painting) the necessary role of the material support in determining the essential nature of the medium, Szarkowski wished to reserve unexamined for photography that classical system of representation that depends on the assumed transparency of the picture surface. Thus the delimitation of formal elements could prove no end in itself, but only serve as a stage for a move to the iconicographic level." Ande Bazin, the film critic for the French journal *Le Parisien libère*, is another writer in search of photography's essence in the 1960s. His purpose, however, is not to aestheticize photography for institutional purposes but to excavate the core qualities of the still photographic image in order to develop critical methods for the moving picture. Like Barthes, Bazin is interested in photography's role as a mass medium of culture, seeking differences between photography and film and finding them anchored in temporality. The ontology of the photographic image is moored in the psychological aspects of the invention, in particular, as a defense against the passage of time, a protection against death, whose primordial origins Bazin locates in Egyptian tombs. Bazin argues that in the modern world, the image is about the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny. Photography, he writes, "does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption." In contrast to photography, which Bazin likens to long-dead insects preserved in amber, film cannot ensnare the instant, delivering mummified duration instead. An important aspect of photography's ontology is to be found in its objective access to the real: "No matter how fuzzy, distorted or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model." Indeed, realism and its historical discourses are a primary preoccupation in Bazin's essay. Yet at the same time, Bazin notes, photography delivers
hallucination while it delivers fact—what Roland Barthes would later call photography’s “madness”—offering us an image of the real, of something that was, that we can hold in our hands, paste in an album, or put in a frame, but that does not physically exist in our time and space.

The social, cultural, and political caesurae of the late 1960s radicalized much (but not all) critical thinking about photography, turning the terms of discourse away from its core properties—be they formal, temporal, or structural—to a concern with the subject in politics and ideology. While the preoccupations of these writers are similar to those of the 1930s, the sheer scale of mass media—their omnipresence—necessitated different dimensions of discourse since the medium, as Barthes observed, had shifted from novel to naturalized. Roland Barthes chose not to change or update Mythologies in the wake of May 1968, for he noted that the need for ideological criticism was made “brutally evident” by these events. As he writes in his 1970s preface, Mythologies is an ideological critique bearing on the language of mass culture. The series of essays written by the American philosopher Susan Sontag, first published in the New York Review of Books from 1973 to 1977 and subsequently collected in a volume called On Photography, are similarly invested in the political ideology of photography. Sontag is primarily interested in the ethical and moral problems raised by the sheer mass of photographs in capitalist society. Accordingly, much of her language frames photography in terms of consumption, acquisition, and power, offered up in a language that anticipates quotation. In her essay “In Plato’s Cave,” for instance, she offers aphoristically, “[T]he camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mode,” for “[t]o collect photographs is to collect the world.” And, “Photographs, which package the world, seem to invite packaging.”

Photography’s primary social role, she argues, is not as an art form but as a mass form, continuing, “It is mainly a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power.” Taking photographs is a way of limiting experience of the world and making it safe by transferring it into a photogenic image, a souvenir. Both the act of photographing and the photograph itself become apotropaic devices, managing and taming difficult experience, numbing shock, not unlike a fetish—the word she uses herself is “talismanic.” In contrast to Kracauer, who hopes that the sheer mass of photographs will shock the viewer into some understanding of the surfacelessness of the capitalist mode of production, Sontag ultimately offers up a Brechtian argument, which asserts that photographs only show the surface, not the complex relations below the surface:

Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from not accepting the world as it looks.... The knowledge gained through still photographs will always be some kind of sentimentalism, whether cynical or humanist. It will be a knowledge at bargain prices—a semblance of knowledge, a semblance of wisdom; as the act of taking pictures is a semblance of appropriation, a semblance of rape.

This language of superficial understanding, appropriation, and rape conjures leftist politics in post-1960s United States, produced in the crosscurrent of widespread anticapitalist, anti-imperialist, and pacifist sentiment at home and the American military intervention abroad in Vietnam.

Perhaps it was because Roland Barthes felt that he had said everything he needed to say about photography and ideology in Mythologies that he elected not to load his book Camera Lucida of 1980 with an overt politics. Or perhaps his concerns were more urgently personal at this moment in the late 1970s. Written in the wake of his mother’s death and published shortly before his own untimely end, Roland Barthes’s Camera Lucida is, among other things, a meditation on the memory work of photographs and
the privacy of photographic experience within the mass of public images. With the exception of Walter Benjamin, no other writer on photography is more often quoted and quibbled with than Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. Moving away from the structuralist concerns of his earlier works, *Camera Lucida* invests more in the subjectivity and hallucinatory mystery of photographic experience. Although photography's material base is a mechanical and chemical process, the medium offers a melancholy poetics—traces of things and places that-have-been, a capturing of time lost, a specter of our imminent death—imparting an element of romantic mourning to this very banal object. Admitting that he is "concerned with the impulses of an overready subjectivity," Barthes's language is personal, full of parenthetical remarks, elliptical observations, and allusive conclusions, which infuriates some of his readers and charms others. That allusive and multilayered form of writing links Barthes and Benjamin, charging their work with a suggestiveness that makes it fecund for generations of thinkers after them. Or, for others, useless. Many writers argue that Barthes's *Camera Lucida* is not useful for building up a functional theory of photography.

Possibly because of its maddening idiosyncrasy and ellipticality, there is a tendency in the interpretation of *Camera Lucida* to distill the text to the notions of the *punctum* and *studium* as the irreducible keys to interpreting a photograph. Like the work of Kracauer, Benjamin, and Sontag, Barthes's work addresses the mass of images in society, if primarily to dismiss them (he does not like all of them, experiencing indifference to most). This multitude of images he calls the *studium*, which are coded, cultural, and ideological, an experience of polite interest in photographs that he contrasts with the *punctum*, a noncoded detail in a photograph that unexpectedly pricks or wounds the viewer. It is a "subtle kind of *beyond*" that the image permits us to see. Importantly, the *punctum*, which disturbs the *studium*, is private and personal.

While *punctum* and *studium* are certainly significant aspects of the essay and perhaps the most exportable ones, the book is an intricate investigation of and riff on the experience of photography. This is a project that is obliquely in alliance with that of other 1960s writings on the subject, as he speaks of an ontological desire to "learn at all costs what Photography was in itself." I say "obliquely" because just as soon as he declares this intention, he fails to deliver on its so-called essence, offering instead an account that is contradictory, elusive, contingent, and subjective. While the photograph is Edenic in his earlier writings, here Barthes aims to be primeval: "I wanted to be a primitive, without culture," he writes, proposing to suspend his set of scientific apparatus in order to get at what photographs are in themselves.

The first "essential" element that Barthes proposes is that the photograph is never separated from its referent: "it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the *This* (this photograph and not Photography), in short, what Lacan calls the *Tisché*, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable expression." The photograph," writes Barthes, "belongs to a class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both—referent and photo." Our tendency to point, to conflate representation with the thing itself, brings Barthes to say, "Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see." As much as Barthes insists that the "stubbornness of the Referent" is part of the essence of photography (a notion that will be roundly attacked by subsequent theorists of photography), he also asserts its opposite:

First of all, I did not escape, or try to escape, from a paradox: on the one hand the desire to give a name to Photography's essence and then to sketch an eidetic science of the Photograph; and on the other the intractable feeling that Photography is essentially (a contradiction in terms) only contingency,
singularity, risk: my photographs would always participate, as Lyotard says, in "something or other": it is not the very weakness of Photography, this difficulty in existing which we call banality.  

At the heart of his analysis, it seems, is not so much photography's referential nature, but its temporal nature, an idea first explored in "The Photographic Message" and developed considerably in Camera Lucida. "To ask whether a photograph is analogical or coded is not a good means of analysis. The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time" (italics mine). The presence of an object deferred is as central to Barthes's argument as the stickiness of the referent. Is it the "that" or the "has-been" that is the intractable element of Barthes's "that-has-been"? "Interfuit: what I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject; it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present and yet already deferred. It is all this which the verb intertext means."

Declaring that every photograph is an analogue or a certificate of presence past, as Barthes does, is not the same as insisting that it offers a one-to-one, undistorted (indexical) relationship to the world, as later commentators would have Barthes do. Barthes asserts, "[N]othing can prevent the photograph from being analogical." An analogue, according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, is "a person or thing seen as comparable to one another." Deriving from the Greek word analogous, or "proportionate," an analogue is something that can be likened or is similar; it does not connote exactitude. Be that as it may, Barthes concludes, "Photography's noeme has nothing to do with analogy." Rather, it is "an emanation of past reality: a magic, not an art." And with that, we are returned to Barthes's primitivist imaginary.

Roland Barthes's richly suggestive Camera Lucida is one of a plurality of analyses that enters photography theory in the 1980s. Art historians also weigh in on the field, motivated by the significant methodological shifts in the art historical discipline that widened the field of study. Except for Szarkowski, the other prominent writers on photography theory thus far have not been art historians, but poets and novelists, journalists and philosophers, a film theorist and a semiotician. Ranging from the so-called new art history to the incorporation of film theory, feminist theory, the psychoanalytical models of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault's writing on power and control, and Louis Althusser's analysis of ideology, to name just a few, critical writings of the 1980s offer up an unprecedented complexity of theoretical approaches to photography. They were accompanied by a new prominence of photography in the art market and the increased prestige of photography within postmodernist art production.

Many of these key texts on photography theory have been assembled in Richard Bolton's The Context of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography (MIT Press, 1989), which offers a significant cross-section of writings on photography in the early to mid-1980s in American scholarship. Bolton's own assessment of the status of photography in 1987 reads,

We no longer need to argue for photography's acceptance as a form of art.... We no longer need to argue for the establishment of a distinct history of photography... [but] the social function of photography and the social role of the photographic artist have been ignored.... By analyzing the material, institutional, and ideological influences on photographic practice, these writers create a new understanding of the dynamics of modernist photography and, more importantly, of the role of the photograph within modernity, within the modernization that has transformed twentieth-century life. These essays describe
not only the politics of photographic representation, but also the politics of meaning itself. While Roland Barthes emphasized that photographs are constituted by and constitutive of a contextually driven social language, the use of discourse as a key term in photography theory came about in the 1980s with the widespread influence of Michel Foucault’s work, which demonstrated that discourse, not universal essences, constitutes the object. For example, in “Photography’s Discursive Spaces” (1982), American art critic and professor of art history Rosalind Krauss investigates photography’s shift from a wider scientific and empirical discourse in the nineteenth century to an aesthetic discourse in the twentieth century.

In the nineteenth century, she argues, photography was often in the service of science and knowledge, integral to discourses of topography, geography, exploration, and survey, but those practices have been retrospectively inserted into aesthetic discourses by members of the museum institution who are invested in legitimating photography as an art. They assess the medium according to imposed (modernist) terms, such as flatness, composition and atmospheric effects, as well as aesthetic genres such as landscape, or notions of oeuvre and style. “The object here,” as MoMA photography curator Peter Galassi famously wrote in the catalogue of his show Before Photography, “is to show that photography was not a bastard left by science on the doorstep of art, but a legitimate child of the Western pictorial tradition.” Krauss argues that this discursive shift, engineered by powerful arts institutions, takes these objects out of their original contexts, canceling their initial meanings and assigning them new ones. “Everywhere at present,” Krauss notes, “there is an attempt to dismantle the photographic archive—the set of practices, institutions, and relationships to which nineteenth-century photography originally belonged—and to reassemble it within categories previously constituted by art and its history.”

Douglas Crimp and Christopher Phillips also investigate the interpenetration of discourse and photographic meaning, examining two specific institutional models: the New York Public Library and the New York Museum of Modern Art, respectively. Crimp’s “The Museum’s Old/The Library’s New Subject,” published in 1981 (a year before Krauss’s essay) and then revised in Bolton’s The Context of Meaning, considers the then-recent recategorization of photographs in the New York Public Library from their various dispersed archival locations into a singular department of Arts, Prints and Photographs. Crimp argues that photography effectively has been transferred from an informational category to an aesthetic one—from the library to the museum—reassigning its plural functions in information, documentation, illustration, and so on into a singular category of autonomous modernist art. He considers the change to be indicative of a paradigm shift. For Crimp, Szarkowski’s interpretation of the photograph according to its formal qualities is a perversion of the modernist project, “[f]or photography is not autonomous, and it is not, in the modernist sense, an art. When modernism was a fully operative paradigm of artistic practice, photography was necessarily seen as too contingent—too constrained by the world that was photographed, too dependent upon the discursive structures in which it was embedded—to achieve the self-reflexive, entirely conventionalized form of modernist art.” Szarkowski’s retrospective recategorization of photography as art isolates photography within a single discursive practice, denying its earlier functions, and, for Crimp, setting in motion modernism’s calcification and demise.

In “The Judgment Seat of Photography” (1982), Christopher Phillips, an American photography critic and editor, examines how the New York Museum of Modern Art’s Department of Photography shapes public discourse on the medium. As Phillips notes, MoMA, “through its influential exhibitions and publications, has with increasing authority set our general ‘horizon of expectations’ with respect to photography,” by which he means...
the set of cultural, ethical, and historical expectations we hold in relation to photography.\footnote{Krauss uses the notion of the index—she also uses the terms trace, imprint, transfer, and clue to indicate the multiple ways of getting at this relation between photographic image and referent—to point out that photographs are first and foremost bound to the world itself rather than to cultural systems.\footnote{Krauss draws on Roland Barthes’s assertion that a photograph in its Edenic, purely analogical state is a “message without a code,” to emphasize that photographs, at base, are empty signs. She likens them to what linguist Roman Jakobson calls “shifters” (like the words “this” or “I” or “you”), which are filled with meaning only when juxtaposed with an external referent, with supplemental discourse.\footnote{Although Krauss ultimately argues that discourse, context, and supplemental meaning are what supply the empty indexicality of the photograph with meaning, its referentiality (and its basic meaningfulness) remains at the core of her analysis. Indexicality and displaced meaning are continually in play with one another in this theoretical framework.}}}

In contrast to many writers on photography from the 1980s onward, Krauss is compelled by the referential status of photography. The term index figures prominently in her writings\footnote{In Krauss’s formulation, “The photograph is thus a type of icon or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object.”} and denotes the terminology proposed by the semiotician Charles Peirce, who theorizes the differences among signs according to a set of nine nonexclusive categories that includes symbol, icon, and index.\footnote{An “index” is a sign connected to its referent along a physical axis, such as a thumbprint or a footprint, offering a one-to-one correspondence with the thing it represents. Importantly, Peirce signals the complexity of photographic meaning, noting that the photograph is both an index and an icon, which establishes meaning through the effect of resemblance. In Krauss’s phrase, it, breaking down the difference between original...}
and copy, singular object and multiple. With the "total collapse of difference," Krauss asserts, the photograph enters the realm of the simulacrum and the theoretical territory of Jean Baudrillard, in which the possibility of differentiating between the real and the simulation is refused. Instead, what the mind experiences is a world full of copies, of resemblances. We are surrounded by the reality effect, Krauss observes, a labyrinth of resemblances of the real. Although the photograph is a trace of the world-out-there, it is nevertheless a mechanical representation of that world, a copy, a resemblant object, and not the thing itself. Herein lies what Krauss believes to be the discourse proper to photography; it is not an aesthetic discourse but one of "deconstruction in which art is distanced and separated from itself."

As Rosalind Krauss observes, Alan Sekula is one theorist of photography who consistently condemns the aestheticization of photography. He looks instead to its functions in the system of capitalist commodity exchange. An American Marxist critic and practicing photographer, Alan Sekula examines how the discourses of power and class relations within capitalism construct photographic meaning. "It goes almost without saying," Sekula writes in his 1981 essay "The Traffic in Photographs," "that photography emerged and proliferated as a mode of communication within the larger context of a developing capitalist world order," thus decimating any notion of photography as a universal or independent signifying system. Indeed, Sekula takes issue with Barthes's division between photography's primitive, denotive core of meaning and its connotative, cultural meaning. For Sekula, photography is an incomplete utterance that always depends on external conditions in order to signify. Turning Barthes's language of mythology back on him, Sekula asserts that this notion of pure denotation is powerful "folklore," elevating photography to the legal status of document and lending it a "mythic aura of neutrality."

Instead, Sekula continually links photographic meaning to a task: "A photographic discourse is a system within which the culture harnesses photographs to various representational tasks.... Every photographic image is a sign, above all, of someone's investment in the sending of a message." That task is always trapped between the two animating tensions of capitalist photographic discourse, which is at once objective and "scientific" as well as subjective and "aesthetic," haunted, as he suggests, by the "chattering ghosts" of bourgeois science and bourgeois art, caught in "an incessant oscillation between what Lukács termed the 'antinomies of bourgeois thought.'"

I take Sekula's "The Body and the Archive" (originally published in 1986) to be indicative of these concerns. Sekula argues that photography is "a double system," functioning "horizontally and vertically." On the one hand, the photographic portrait (in this instance, a daguerreotype) provides "ceremonial representation of the bourgeois self," reaffirming steadfastly held notions of identity within a particular class; on the other hand, the photographic portrait in the guise of the criminal identification photo operates repressively, establishing and delimiting the terrain of the other, of the criminal, the deviant, of social pathology—that is, not the upstanding bourgeois citizen. "Every proper portrait has its lurking, objectifying inverse in the files of the police." Sekula's context-driven account, based on discourses of phrenology and criminology in nineteenth-century society, demonstrates how the photograph is part of a complicated social discourse, linked to historically bound notions of scientific "truth" and policing at the same time that it is allied with bourgeois notions of self through portraiture. For Sekula, the materiality or physical quality of the photograph is less significant than how the photograph functions to serve and reinforce capitalist power structures. The contingency and indeterminacy of the photographic message that Barthes and Benjamin anchored with the "caption" or "linguistic message" are now simultaneously broadened and fastened by Sekula with the more expansive notion of discourse.
Like Sekula, John Tagg argues that without a specific historical context, the photograph is meaningless in his *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, a set of essays begun in the 1970s and published as a book in 1988. The plurals indicated in his title—photographies and histories—suggest the multiple discursive practices he excavates in his book, drawing on Michel Foucault's theories of discipline and power and Louis Althusser's analysis of ideology and political control. While the formalist position of American museum professionals was a central point of contention among American postmodern theorists, it is the realist position of Roland Barthes that Tagg assails in his writings. Tagg rejects what he insists is Barthes's central claim in *Camera Lucida* that "every photograph is somehow co-natural with its referent." Tagg vehemently contests the notion that a photograph guarantees a corresponding pre-photographic existent and a particular level of meaning, arguing instead (using a universal claim of his own) that "every photograph is a result of specific and, in every sense, significant distortions which render its relation to any prior reality deeply problematic." His description of the unstable and distortional photographic process is as follows:

Reflected light is gathered by a static, monocular lens of particular construction, set at a particular distance from the objects in its field of view. The projected image of these objects is focused, cropped and distorted by the flat, rectangular plate of the camera which owes its structure not to the model of the eye, but to a particular theoretical conception of the problems of representing space in two dimensions. Upon this plane, the multicoloured play of light is then fixed as a granular, chemical discolouration on a translucent support which, by a comparable method, may be made to yield a positive paper print.

How could all this be reduced to a phenomenological guarantee? At every stage, chance effects, purposeful interventions, choices, and variations produce meaning, whatever skill is applied and whatever division of labor the process is subject to. This is not the inflection of a prior (though irretrievable) reality, as Barthes would have us believe, but the production of a new and specific reality, the photograph, which becomes meaningful in certain transactions and has real effects, but which cannot refer or be referred to a pre-photographic reality as truth.

Tagg believes that the photographic distortions are meaningful enough to counter any sort of evidential force. The discourses of photography that center on its truth value—such as the legal record or criminal evidence—Tagg asserts are validated by not by its "natural" relation to fact, but by institutional and social practices. It is precisely these social practices that historians of photography need to examine in order to understand the functions of the medium. With Tagg, photographic meaning is ever deferred and displaced to institutional practice and power structures. "It is this field we must study, not photography as such."

The referential status of photography is again interrogated by American photography historian and practicing photographer Joel Snyder in "Picturing Vision," an essay that seeks to debunk the notion that the photograph produces "a natural or privileged relation between picture and world," and that rejects the idea that it is a "condition of pictorial significance." If I hit the wall with a hammer," Snyder writes, "there is no reason to conclude that the dent must bear a resemblance to the head of the hammer." Drawing on the writings of the philosopher Nelson Goodman and the art historian Ernst Gombrich, Snyder argues that the so-called nature of photography is not at all natural, that it does not replicate vision, but that it was constructed according to habits of vision established during the Renaissance. Emphasizing that the invention of the camera itself originated in conventions of vision based on painting, Snyder provides a brief history of the camera to demonstrate that its conception and manufacture were predicated on handmade pictures. "The problem for post-Renaissance painters was not how to make a picture that looked like the image.
produced by the camera, it was how to make a machine that produced an image like the ones they painted.\footnote{98} “Photography,” he points out, “did not sidestep the standards of picture production, it incorporated them.”\footnote{109} Snyder suggests that we adopt a model of vision itself as pictorial, based on various standardized customs of seeing, thus “picturing vision”—and photographic vision—as cultural, habitual, and, in fact, distorted, not a natural one-to-one correspondence with the material world.

If the previous accounts of photography theory relate its meaning to institutional and academic structures, the next two accounts look for its meaning in unconscious habits, drawing on psychoanalytic theory.\footnote{110} In his alliteratively titled “Photography, Phantasy, Function” (1982), Victor Burgin theorizes photography by means of theorizing looking at photography—the act of visually consuming the still image.\footnote{111} Combining Sigmund Freud’s theory of the fetish with Jacques Lacan’s writings on the gaze and the formation of the subject, Burgin provides a psychoanalytic interpretation of the act of looking at photos as constitutive of the beholder’s ideological subject position. Vision is never a question of just looking, insists Burgin: “the look always-already includes the history of the subject.”\footnote{112} His analysis hinges on the notion of suture, first theorized by a student of Lacan and later adapted into film theory, which is concerned with how (visual) utterances both incorporate and activate the subject within a particular discourse.\footnote{113} Suture operates in all discourse and names the complex processes by which the subject is interpellated by discourse, recognizing him or herself within it. The primary suturing instance in photography, Burgin argues, is the subject’s identification with the camera position. That ego-identification with the camera-eye will oscillate between voyeurism and narcissism, that is, between a controlling gaze over the object represented and identification with that object.

Burgin proposes a “structural homology” between the look at the photograph and the look of the fetishist.\footnote{114} The fetishist, according to Freud, has found some inanimate object to serve in place of the penis that he has traumatically found to be lacking in his mother; he (the fetishist in Freud’s formulation is always male) looks at the fetish in order to look away from the site of trauma, displacing the look onto another thing in order to disavow the lack he knows is there but does not want to acknowledge.\footnote{115} The structure of fetishistic looking is a structure of “yes I know, but” or a separation of knowledge from belief that Burgin finds echoed in looking at photographs. “To look at a photograph for a while is to become frustrated,” because looking at first gives scopophilic pleasure but then that pleasure is frustrated, because we still cannot access the reality that it represents.\footnote{116} “The look belongs to the camera.”\footnote{117} Instead, the beholder experiences a constant to-and-fro between authority over the image and alienation from that image, desire and disassociation, causing a disruption in the imaginary relationship with the visual field before us, not unlike the fetishist who looks and then looks away from the site of sexual trauma. Offering a psychoanalytic take on what Siegfried Kracauer considered to be the surface nature of the photograph and the sheer excess of them in circulation, Burgin observes that we look and then look away, noting that photographs are deployed so that we need not look at them for very long; there is always another photograph in its place to receive the displaced look.\footnote{118} Burgin’s theory of photography suggests, then, that we look and then look away from the photograph to understand it. As Geoffrey Batchen has already observed, Burgin’s theory “displaces attention from the photograph itself (a category that Burgin has in any case already abandoned as antithetical to the semiotics of meaning production)” to operations outside, in another place.\footnote{119} Although Burgin argues elsewhere that there is no singular, unique system of signification upon which all photographs depend, he seems to undermine this claim by arguing for the homology between photographic structures of looking and the fetish.\footnote{120} That is, all photographic looking is figured by the operations of the fetish. Yet because fetishistic
looking is not unique to photography alone, since it also describes the fetish, Burgin's analysis eludes the essentialism he deplores.

In contrast to Burgin, Christian Metz's "Photography and Fetish" of 1985 emphasizes the relation between the material functions of the photograph and the fetish as a protection against death, rather than a source for displaced gratification. A fetish, like a photograph, signifies loss (symbolic castration) at the same time that it offers protection against loss. The authority of the photograph, which Metz calls "a silent rectangle of paper," rests in its motionlessness and muteness. It also operates as a figuration for death: "Innecility and silence are not only two objective aspects of death, they are also the main symbols, they figure it."[121] Metz notes that others insistently return to this parallel between photography and death, citing Philippe Dubois, who writes of photography as "thanatology," and of course Roland Barthes. In common parlance, photography is compared with shooting; the camera becomes a gun. The practice of displaying photographs of the deceased beloved keeps them in a live stasis, while at the same time, a photograph of ourselves witnesses our own aging, capturing a moment in our finite time that is always-already past and anticipates our own passing. The snapshot, too, is like death, states Metz. It is "an instantaneous abduction of the object out of the world into another world, into another kind of time.... The photographic take is immediate and definitive, like death and like the constitution of the fetish in the unconscious, fixed by a glance in childhood, unchanged and always active later."[122] While film returns the dead to an appearance of life, restoring bodies into time, photography by virtue of its stillness "maintains the memory of the dead as being dead."[123]

The fragment, which Szarkowski argues is a photographic essence, is differently theorized in Metz, who bestows it with the psychoanalytic weight of the fetishistic part-object. Cutting off the subject matter from its context in space and time figures castration and is figured by the camera's "click."[124] Cutting off also intimates an off-frame, something absent from view but close by.[125] This is precisely the operative structure of the fetish, according to Freud, which receives the traumatized glance of the boy-child who looks away from his mother's lack, displacing the gaze onto something close by, off-frame, just adjacent to the primal glance. Fetishism, like photography, is a constant process of framing and deframing. Metonymically, the fetish alludes to the adjacent place of lack; metaphorically, the fetish is the equivalent of a penis, replacing the absence with a presence, a thing, a part-object.[126] Metz observes how the fetish in everyday language combines a double and contradictory function: on the side of metaphor, an inciting and encouraging one, it brings luck, it is a pocket phallic (or like a photo in the wallet); and on the side of metonymy, an apotropetic one, averting danger, warding off bad luck.[127] Metz's interpretation of the "yes I know, but" structure of the fetish is opposite that of Burgin; for him, it points not to the permanent frustration of looking at a distant object, but to its proximity: "[S]he or he knows what a representation is but nevertheless has a strange feeling of reality (a denial of the signifier)."[128]

That these conventions associated with photography and looking are also determined by patriarchal power structures (treated as normative in most accounts—so commonplace as not to bear scrutiny), in addition to historical, class, and institutional discourses, is taken up by American photography critic and feminist scholar Abigail Solomon-Godeau. As Solomon-Godeau observes, a feminist analysis of photography is not a localized appendage of, or a supplement to, other discursive studies of photography theory, but is, in her words, "an epistemological shift that involves nothing less than a restructuration, a reconstitution of knowledge."[129] The supposedly transparent and naturalistic medium of photography "has been an especially potent purveyor of cultural ideology—particularly the ideology of gender."[130] Solomon-Godeau critically examines the visual and discursive apparatuses through which the terms "masculine" and "feminine," "man" and "woman", have been and
continue to be constructed as subject positions, both in making and looking at photographs. Her work interrogates the ways in which photographs reproduce and also challenge tropes of male as viewer/female as viewed or male as active subject/female as passive object of the gaze. Solomon-Godeau observes that the binary structure of this male/female, subject/object split also works to repress homosexuality, often presuming a heterosexual spectator. “[F]eminism alerts us to the falsity—as well as the concomitant oppression—of presuming a universal male spectator.”

In several essays, Solomon-Godeau foregrounds the sexual economy of looking at erotic and pornographic photography, which arguably represents the pinnacle of heterosexual male viewing. In analyzing their pictorial strategies, Solomon-Godeau demonstrates their artificiality as opposed to their universality: when this analysis is directed at male nudes, which posits different potential viewers, both male and female, the alienation engendered by culturally normative categories becomes all the more evident. Similarly, Solomon-Godeau takes psychoanalytically informed terms such as scopophilia, voyeurism, and the fetish, which are theoretically structured around a male viewer and his pleasure and/or trauma, and examines them vis-à-vis female photographers and viewers, examining how they can be complicit with, subversive of, or ambiguous about patriarchal norms.

Like most theorists of photography in the 1980s, Solomon-Godeau too rejects the notion that photography is a thing in itself, but rather believes it is something dynamically produced in the act of representation and reception and is always-already framed by preexisting discourses. Solomon-Godeau writes eloquently about institutional structures and discursive formations, but, importantly, the photograph itself never goes missing as it often does in other accounts of photography and its theories. She scrutinizes how a photograph produces meaning by attending to, in her words, “the syntax, the rhetoric, the formal strategies by which their meanings are constructed and communicated.” Her writing addresses both discursive codes and the material facts of

cite the photograph, noting, for example, how the “grainless and preternaturally sharp” quality of the daguerreotype works to articulate every freckle and blemish of a (viewed) woman’s skin, thereby heightening the picture’s erotic and realist effects and solidifying her argument. In her work, the photograph as a historical object and as a visual imperative is always present, not displaced elsewhere. Solomon-Godeau discusses the ramifications of matter, aesthetics, and desire as integral, not contradictory, to a politicized art historical project.

Geoffrey Batchen’s *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (MIT Press, 1997) grapples with the opposing trends in photography theory that have emerged since the 1960s, arguing that they are not as diametrically opposed as they initially appear. On the one hand, “postmodern critics,” as Batchen identifies them (though noting that they are by no means theoretically unified), argue that photographic meaning is determined by context and deny that there is such a thing as “photography as such”; on the other hand, the formalist critics seek to identify fundamental characteristics of the photographic medium. Batchen, who admits having been trained and influenced by the former category, what he calls “the dominant way of thinking about the medium,” argues that both positions are guilty of looking for some kind of essence. “In postmodern criticism, the photograph still has an essence, but now it is found in the mutability of culture rather than in its presumed other—an immutable nature.” In the end, both camps believe that “photography’s identity can be determined as a consequence of either nature or culture,” and precisely that binaryism is troubling for Batchen. In taking these binary claims, Batchen argues that both postmodern and formalist positions “avoid coming to grips with the historical and ontological complexity of the very thing they claim to analyze.”

Taking his cue from Michel Foucault’s archaeological project and Jacques Derrida’s critique of opposition in the notion of difference, Batchen excavates the moment of photography’s discursive
origin—not the disputed moment of photography's invention, but the moment of its conception, the desire to photograph—as a strategy to get at the problem of photography's complex identity. Photography's earliest proponents, he demonstrates, "offer far more equivocal articulations that incorporates but declines to rest at either pole." Batchen's response to this either/or dichotomy is a both/and response, which is eloquently summarized in his reading of Hippolyte Bayard's Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man of October 18, 1840, a photograph that was made just over a year after the medium was made public. In Bayard's staged self-portrait, Batchen points out, photography is understood as both performative and documentary, nature and culture, demonstrating that during its early beginnings, photography's ontological status was understood as unstable, complex, and multiple, shuttling self-consciously between representation and the phenomenological real. "We can no longer afford to leave the battlefield of essence in the hands of a vacuous art-historical formalism," declares Batchen, because it is in the very matter of every photograph and photography's discursive spaces in which the operations of power and oppression reside. "

"[P]ower inheres the very grain of photography's existence as a modern Western event." 4

The new millennium witnessed the widespread dissemination of another technology of photography, digital photography, which many consider to be a radical break from analogue photography. In contrast to the film-based and chemically transformed analogue photograph, the digitally encoded, computer-processable image first exists as mathematical data. While light-sensitive silver salts on film in a camera produce an analogue photograph, in a digital photograph, a grid of light-sensitive picture cells, or pixels, emit electrical signals proportional to the intensity of light they receive. The gridded pattern is sequentially scanned and the signals are converted to numbers proportionate to their strength, then electromagnetically stored. They can be altered (or not) by computer, and then transmitted onto a screen (television, computer) or onto paper. In contrast to analogue photography, which is tonally continuous, digital photography is broken up into discrete steps, subdividing the visual field into a grid.

One of the predominant qualities of digital technology, it is argued, is its ability to produce imagery that has no immediate relation to the material world. Until it is printed, made material, the image is immaterial and ephemeral. This means that the image matter itself is infinitely malleable, freed from the restrictions of the analogue world and inserted into the exploratory, experimental, and potentially infinite digital realm. The image becomes "information" in the computer. As Peter Weibel, the director of the media museum Zentrum für Kunst und Medien (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, once noted, "For the first time in history, the image is a dynamic system." Discussions of the simulacrum intensify as the virtual world increasingly intersects with our lived, material world. French cultural theorist Paul Virilio prognosticates, "There will be no simulation but substitution." 145

William J. Mitchell, professor of architecture and media arts, has written a methodical account of the ruptures between analogue and digital photography in The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-photographic Era (MIT Press, 1992). His analysis rejects the notion that the digital photograph is infinite; instead, it is the traditional photograph that offers indefinite amounts of information. When enlarged, he argues, the analogue photograph reveals more detail, though a fuzzier and grainier picture. A digital image, by contrast, "has precisely limited and tonal resolution and contains a fixed amount of information." When a digital image is blown up to reveal its gridded microstructure, enlargement reveals nothing new but only lays bare the discrete square shapes of the pixel. However, to rework or tamper with the analogue photograph's fragile and recalcitrant emulsion-coated
surface, concealing all traces of recombination, is a labor-intensive and time-consuming process. To rework a digital image is effortless and even integral to it. Mutability and manipulation are inherent to the digital medium, Mitchell argues: “Computational tools for transforming, combining, altering, and analyzing images are as essential to the digital artist as brushes and pigments are to a painter, and an understanding of them is the foundation of the craft of digital imaging.”148 Because manipulation in digital imagery is so easy, however, its evidentiary force—its truth value—as an authentic record is put into question. “Increasingly, digital image manipulation was defined as a transgressive practice, a deviation from the established regime of photographic truth.”149 “We are faced not with conflation of signifier and signified, but with a new uncertainty about the status and interpretation of the visual signifier.”150 Even the mass replication of digital versus traditional photographs is different, Mitchell argues. While analogue photographs cannot be replicated without degradation, that is, without the loss of visual information, digital images can be copied ad infinitum, without loss of quality. “A digital copy is not a debased descendent but is absolutely indistinguishable from the original.”151

Manovich, formerly a graphic designer and now a professor of new media, is Mitchell’s most vocal critic and the most prominent proponent of digital media’s continuities, not breaks, with analogue technologies.152 His essay “The Paradoxes of Digital Photography” argues that the digital photograph might break with aspects of older modes of representation but also reinforces them.153 Manovich criticizes Mitchell’s analysis for focusing entirely on the “abstract principles of digital imaging.”154 In practice, he argues, Mitchell’s key points do not hold, adding provocatively, “Digital photography simply does not exist.”155 Manovich concedes, for example, that in theory, Mitchell is right that a digital image offers finite information and therefore limited detail. In reality, though, high-resolution images now make it possible to record more information, in finer detail, than ever possible with analogue photography.156 “Current technology has already reached the point where a digital image can easily contain much more information than anybody would ever want.”157 Moreover, Manovich notes, new technologies have bypassed the pixel grid such that “the pixel is no longer the ‘final frontier’; as far as the user is concerned, it simply does not exist.”158 Manovich also takes issue with Mitchell’s association of montage with digital photography and the tradition of realism with the essence of analogue photography. “What Mitchell takes to be the essence of photographic and digital imaging are two traditions of visual culture. Both existed before photography and both span different visual technologies and mediums.”159

Manovich also considers Mitchell’s notion of “normal” unmanipulated photography to be problematic, arguing that unmanipulated straight photography does not dominate modern uses of photography. Rather, straight photography was but one tradition of photography that coexisted with others. “Digital technology does not subvert ‘normal’ photography because ‘normal’ photography never existed.”160 Manovich equally disagrees with Mitchell’s assertion that digital reproduction avoids pictorial degradation. While this may be true in theory, in practice, the considerable size of a single digital image requires a significant amount of computer storage space and makes it time-consuming to transmit over a network. Current software (the most widespread technique is JPEG) relies on lossy compression, which makes image files smaller by deleting information. Each time a compressed file is saved, he notes, more information is lost and therefore subject to even more degradation. Nor does Manovich see this trend reversing in the future. “[L]ossy compression is increasingly becoming the very foundation of digital visual culture.”161 Consequently, the theoretical differences between traditional photography and digital photography appear to be negligible enough in practice that significant physical differences between the two do not exist for Manovich.
It was Roland Barthes who wrote that photography is an uncertain art. He noted its disorder—that all of its practices and subjects were mixed up together. Much the same can be said of photography theory. It remains a messy and unsettled field, vehemently debated but with little consensus, and strong positions held on all fronts. Therein lies its appeal and its potential. The primary points of contention revolve around several key themes that continue to be revisited in the essays in this volume: the nature of its relation to the world-out-there, that is, its referentiality or indexicality, and whether this is significant; quarrels about photography's uniqueness or if it is always already determined by its histories and contexts; and if it is an object or a function. While there has been a great deal of focus on the social, political, cultural, and psychological resonances of the photographic medium, it does seem that the actual physical characteristics of the medium and how they signify have gotten short shrift. In the 1980 introduction to *Classic Essays on Photography*, Alan Trachtenberg observed, "There has been little notable effort to address the medium itself, to examine its evolving character, its social and cultural properties, its complex relations with other media, and the great variety of roles it performs. Partly, although historians especially should know better, the cause of such neglect lies in the assumption that photography is unitary, a single method of making pictures, a unique visual language."

Since that introduction was written in 1980, writing on photography theory has done much to address the social and cultural ramifications of photography, its relations with other media (most commonly advertising, film, and painting), and its multiple functions. Of course, there is still more to be said on all of these fronts—as various and multiple as the histories and contexts in which photographs operate. With a few notable exceptions, however, what is still missing from many accounts is how the medium and its various evolving incarnations signify in its particular contexts. That is, how does matter mean? How do the material and physical processes of different photographic practices contribute to the meaning of the image represented? How are politics and culture imbricated in its very form? How does the photographic object circulate in a public sphere or a private one, and how does its physicality transform into meaning? Benjamin's "A Little History of Photography" is a compelling and useful model, integrating photographic technology with its social, political, and psychological meanings to arrive at a subtle and nuanced analysis. The photograph emerges as something that we not only look through but also look at. Given the increasing authority and omnipresence of digitality and virtuality, these questions about photography and its materiality seem all the more urgent and productive.

Acknowledgment

My thanks to Abigail Solomon-Godeau for her bibliographic recommendations for this essay.

Notes


16. Barthes, “The Rhetoric of the Image,” 43. With photography, Barthes argues later in the essay, humanity encounters for the first time in history a message without a code. “Hence the photograph is not the last (improved) term of the great family of images; it corresponds to a decisive mutation of informational economies” (45).


33. Some have interpreted that personal language as a bid to write fiction, not an academic study. Margaret Iversen understands CL to be a "kind of fable about photography," while Margaret Olin distinguishes between Barthes the author versus “Barthes” the narrator of the book in order to separate two writerly strategies. See Margaret Iversen, "What Is a Photograph?" Art History 17, no. 3 (September 1994): 450–54; and Margaret Olin, "Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes’s ‘Mistaken’ Identification," Representations 80 (Fall 2002): 99–118.


70. Barthes, CL, 77.
71. Barthes, CL, 85.
73. Barthes, CL, 85.
74. Barthes, CL, 85.
75. Victor Burgin, in his essay "Something about Photography Theory" (1986), argues that the "new art history" has had no consequences for the study of photography as the new art history wants to avoid isolating works from the broader social circumstances of production and reception, which is impossible to do with photography. Art historians have succeeded in doing just that, as we shall see, but Burgin's statement reiterates his theoretical position against those very formalist accounts in order to assert the radical mobility and contingency of the photograph.
78. Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces," in her The Originality of the Avant-Garde. Originally published in Art Journal 42, no. 4 (Winter 1983): 311-34; and also republished in Bolton, The Context of Meaning, 287-302. Andrew E. Herschberger has recently published a critique of Krauss's Foucaultian method in "Photography's Discursive Spaces," arguing that the dichotomized and misused Foucault by nominating two categories—art and science—to which nineteenth-century photography was assigned. Herschberger notes that Krauss fixes these divisions, in turn making normative, coherent, and unified categories, while Foucault asserted that discursive formations are dispersal and illogical. He also argues that Krauss misses the notion of the archive in precisely the way that Foucault was critiquing it, namely, as an institutional repository for documents and records. Foucault, according to Herschberger, imagines the archive as a system that is never fully completed. How then, can it be dismantled and reassembled, as Krauss claims, when for Foucault it is beyond our grasp and never completed? Herschberger asserts that Krauss has set a precedent for misunderstanding in subsequent Foucaultian interpretations of photography. See Andrew E. Herschberger, "Krauss's Foucault and the Foundations of Postmodern History of Photography," History of Photography 30, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 55-67.
80. Krauss, Photography's Discursive Spaces, 150.
87. See C. S. Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in Philosophical Writings of Peirce, edited by Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 1955). As many writers have pointed out and as the roundtable discussion amplifies, Peirce's complex argument is often oversimplified and missed in discussions of the index in photography. It nevertheless remains a key term in the debates of photography theory.
90. Krauss investigates shifter and photographic meaning in both Parts 1 and 2 of "Notes on the Index."
97. Sekula, Photography against the Grain, xv.
98. Alan Sekula's "The Body and the Archive" was first published in October 39 (Winter 1986): 3-64, and was revised in Bolton, The Context of Meaning, 343-88. All citations refer to the Bolton version.
105. Tagg, The Burden of Representation, 63.
110. See also Margaret Ivensen's compelling rereading of Roland Barthes's CL through a Lacanian perspective, which further explores the structures of traumatic looking in photographs. Ivensen, "What Is a Photograph?"


125. Metz links the off-frame to Barthes’s *punctum*: "For Barthes, the only part of a photograph which entails the feeling of an off-frame space is what he calls the *punctum*, the point of sudden and strong emotion, of small trauma; it can be a tiny detail. This *punctum* depends more on the reader than on the photograph itself, and the corresponding off-frame it calls up is also generally subjective; it is the metonymic expansion of the *punctum*", Metz, "Photography and Fetish," 87.


132. See, for example, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Reconsidering Erotic Photography: Notes for a Project of Historical Salvage," and "Sexual Difference: Both Sides of the Camera," both in *Photography at the Dock*.


152. See Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003), which, among other things, plots the connections between new media arts and traditional cinema.


