

# Photography

*Theoretical snapshots*

*J. J. Long, Andrea Noble and Edward Welch*

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# Photography

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Over the past 25 years, photography has moved to centre stage in the study of visual culture and has established itself in numerous disciplines. This trend has brought with it a diversification in approaches to the study of the photographic image.

*Photography: Theoretical Snapshots* offers exciting perspectives on photography theory today from some of the world's leading critics and theorists. It introduces new means of looking at photographs, with topics including:

- a community-based understanding of Spencer Tunick's controversial installations
- the tactile and auditory dimensions of photographic viewing
- snapshot photography
- and the use of photography in human rights discourse.

*Photography: Theoretical Snapshots* also addresses the question of photography history, revisiting the work of some of the most influential theorists such as Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, and the *October* group, re-evaluating the neglected genre of the carte-de-visite photograph, and addressing photography's wider role within the ideologies of modernity. The collection opens with an introduction by the editors, analysing the trajectory of photography studies and theory over the past three decades and the ways in which the discipline has been constituted.

Ranging from the most personal to the most dehumanized uses of photography, from the nineteenth century to the present day, from Latin America to Northern Europe, *Photography: Theoretical Snapshots* will be of value to all those interested in photography, visual culture and cultural history.

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## Theoretical snapshots

Edited by J. J. Long,  
Andrea Noble  
and Edward Welch

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# Introduction

## A small history of photography studies

*Edward Welch and J. J. Long*

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This book sets out to highlight the scope, breadth and variety of current thinking on photography, a cultural form that has been the subject of intense academic investigation in recent years. But it does so with a deliberate nod to *Thinking Photography*, the volume of essays on photography edited by Victor Burgin and first published in 1982. Burgin's book was intended explicitly to establish a theoretical framework for the study of photography. It featured contributions from both contemporary writers and critics such as John Tagg, Allan Sekula and Burgin himself, as well as essays by Walter Benjamin and Umberto Eco chosen by Burgin as necessary reference points for thinking about photography. To a certain extent, the very fact that we can now talk comfortably in terms of photography as a field of study suggests that the work of academic and intellectual legitimization to which *Thinking Photography* was intended to contribute has paid off.

Since the publication of *Thinking Photography*, what we now call photography studies has steadily accumulated the signs and accoutrements of a recognized domain of enquiry. A series of landmark academic publications – such as *Thinking Photography* or John Tagg's *The Burden of Representation* (1988) – have come to form the touchstones and reference points of subsequent work and have allowed the theoretical armature of the discipline to take shape. Conferences and seminar series on photography are now legion; numerous university courses have been established to teach both the practice, and more recently, the theory of photography; and the existence of such courses has, in turn, generated a variety of critical introductions, readers and other textbooks (e.g. Wells 1997, 2003). Lest further evidence be necessary that photography studies have come of age, 2008 saw the launch of two new journals devoted to the medium in the form of *Photography and Culture* (Berg) and *Photographies* (Routledge). Given both the rapid expansion in the field in recent years and the passing of a significant anniversary for Burgin's volume, it would seem a timely moment to consider where and how photography studies now finds itself. What does the landscape of the discipline look like twenty-five years or so after Burgin's intervention? And is it quite the landscape he might have imagined at the time?

The late 1970s and the early 1980s can be seen, in retrospect, to mark a turning point in the fortunes of photography as an academic discipline. First, in terms of publishing history, several key texts appeared in the years either side of 1980. Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, published in the United States in 1977 and in Britain in 1979, though not in any sense a work of theoretical rigour and coherence, was nevertheless an intervention by a major intellectual with considerable stature – both inside and outside the academy – as a commentator on the arts. Alan Trachtenberg's anthology *Classic Essays on Photography* (1980) collected many of the most significant writings on photography from the nineteenth century to the present. Its importance in establishing a 'canon' of theoretical writings is implicitly acknowledged by Burgin's including the book in his design for the cover of *Thinking Photography*. Such developments were not restricted to the Anglophone academy. In Germany, for instance, the first two volumes of Wolfgang Kemp's four-volume anthology *Theorie der Fotografie* appeared in 1979 and 1980, to be followed by a third volume in 1983 (and a fourth, edited by Hubertus von Amelunxen, in 2000). Meanwhile, in France, in addition to the work of Roland Barthes outlined in more detail below, Philippe Dubois' neglected *L'Acte photographique* was published in 1983.

A second important factor was the gradual infiltration of continental critical theory into Anglo-Saxon academic discourse over the course of the 1970s. While the Anglophone world had been slow to embrace structuralism, it made up for this by an eager reception of those thinkers who are, in one sense or another, post-structuralists and whose major works appeared in French from the mid-1960s: Derrida's *Writing and Difference* and *Of Grammatology* (both 1967), Lacan's *Écrits* (1966) and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* (1973), Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) and *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Added to this is the reception history of the works of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's influence on photography studies – lucidly outlined in Kelly Dennis's contribution to the present volume – can be traced to the republication, in a cheap paperback edition, of the 'Work of Art' essay in German in 1965 (see Krauss 1988), and its English translation, as part of the collection *Illuminations*, in 1969. In embracing these recent developments in socio-political thought, linguistics, semiotics, psychoanalysis and discourse analysis, *Thinking Photography* was self-consciously conceived as a foundational gesture. It was an attempt to establish a rigorous and coherent theoretical framework for the analysis of the photographic image, to set out the ways in which photography should be thought about, and to challenge the ways in which it had been thought about until that point. *Thinking Photography* was thus predominantly a future-oriented project. As Burgin states on the first page of his introduction, the essays in his volume are intended as 'contributions towards photography theory'; and he continues: 'I say "towards" rather than "to" as the theory does not yet exist' (Burgin 1982: 1).

Few would now deny the existence of photography theory. But the relationship between *Thinking Photography* and the corpus of writings that would

now be classified as 'photography theory' is not quite the one envisioned in Burgin's 'Introduction'; for there is an implicit teleological moment in Burgin's claim to be 'contributing towards photography theory', even though '*the* theory does not yet exist'. The implication is, of course, that photography theory, as a unified and unitary body of thought, is the goal towards which contributors to *Thinking Photography* are working. Subsequent developments suggest that this utopian faith was, in one sense, misplaced. Photography's emergence as a central object of study in the humanities and social sciences has in fact been accompanied by a vast proliferation of theoretical approaches to the subject that exceed the notion of 'photography theory' espoused by Burgin. It is to this very plurality and diversity that this volume responds.

At the same time, despite the intensive theoretical and critical activity that photography has generated in recent decades, one of the most interesting aspects of photography studies remains its relative youth. It is true that many of the disciplines making up what we now tend to think of as the 'arts and humanities' are relatively young in terms of the history of scholastic and academic study. Even the grandest and seemingly most established of subjects, such as English Literature, only really acquired academic legitimacy at the end of the nineteenth century, as Terry Eagleton for one reminds us, and did so after a long struggle (Eagleton 1983: 17–53). Nevertheless, contemporary generations of English scholars now find themselves entering a discipline carrying a heavy weight of tradition and history, whose canons and critical orthodoxies must be negotiated and acknowledged even by those who might want to challenge or resist them. Photography studies remains a discipline in formation, one which has properly taken shape over only two or three generations of academic activity, a lifetime which we can measure by the fact that those scholars who were taught by, or encountered, the pioneers in the field (figures such as Burgin and Tagg) are now themselves engaged in teaching a new generation of academics. The still-youthful status of photography studies arguably leaves those working within it in a distinctive and valuable position as they contribute to shaping the direction of photography studies and its theoretical foundations. They can, at the same time, remain aware of the ways in which other, older disciplines have taken shape, and remain alert to the ways in which the sediments of critical orthodoxy were able to accumulate around them.

Indeed, the very nature of photography as a cultural phenomenon may well militate against the coalescence of critical orthodoxies. John Tagg notes that in the 1970s people were attracted by photography as an object of study precisely because it was not bound by a specific institutional canon: if it could boast an aesthetics then this exceeded the paradigm of art history because its practices were both too diverse *and* formulaic (Tagg 1992: 76). This diversity is so broad that any attempt to enumerate photographic practices would be senseless. The point to note, perhaps, is that this very diversity means that while 'photography studies' can lay claim to a high degree of disciplinary legitimacy, it does so without a fixed institutional home. While English literature is



taught largely in departments of English, there are few departments of photography. Instead, photography is studied in departments of art history, but also of modern languages, English, anthropology, sociology, comparative literature, media studies, cultural studies, geography, history and many others. Given that most of these disciplines already had their established methodologies – their own specific ways of formulating both their objects of study and the questions they asked of those objects – it is only to be expected that the approaches to photography developed within each discipline should draw, not only on the ‘foundational’ texts of photography studies itself, but on particular disciplinary traditions. The theoretical plurality discussed above, then, is a function of both the diverse and dispersed nature of photographic practices and the nomadic status of ‘photography studies’, which is perhaps ultimately less a discipline than a trans-discipline. Its plurality is not contingent but structural and embodies contradictions that can be neither resolved by the establishment of theoretical orthodoxy nor sublated in a teleologically conceived ‘photography theory’ of the future.

One of the aims of this volume of essays is to give an indication of current thinking about, and approaches to, photography. It demonstrates the range of critical paradigms and perspectives that have come to inform discussion of the photographic image in recent years, and the range of disciplines engaging with it – whether it be those, such as art history or visual studies, which have long had purchase on photography, or those, such as anthropology, which increasingly recognize the need to see the photograph no longer as an unproblematic source of evidence and empirical data, but as playing a complex role in our encounter with other cultures and societies. In his discussion of Spencer Tunick (chapter 8), Louis Kaplan draws on the work of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy to foreground the ethical questions raised by Tunick’s images in relation to questions of community, subjectivity and identity. He argues that Tunick’s images, through their staging of nakedness in urban space, require us to interrogate the nature of human coexistence, or ‘being-with’, in the modern world. Kaplan’s approach demonstrates the fruitful confrontations between photography and ethics and the insights to be gained from reading each through and with the other.

While Kaplan considers how photography allows us to interrogate the nature of human coexistence, the essays by Elizabeth Edwards (chapter 2) and Geoffrey Batchen (chapter 5) explore the complex relationship between humans and photographic objects, and the role played by photography in mediating social relations. While her focus on the social uses of photography might echo the agenda set down by *Thinking Photography*, Edwards rejects the textual reductionism that Victor Burgin (1982: 144) performs when he writes that ‘the putatively autonomous “language of photography” is never free from the determinations of language itself. [...] Even a photograph which has no actual writing on or around it is traversed by writing when it is “read” by a viewer’. Burgin makes this point even more radically in a later essay (1986b: 51) –

photography is 'invaded by language in the very moment it is looked at: in memory, in association, snatches of words and images continually intermingle and exchange for one another'. For Edwards, on the other hand, language is but one of many factors in the reception and use of photographs. Her essay encourages us to understand the photograph not solely (indeed, not in the first instance) as a visual phenomenon, but as an object which mobilizes and engages with the full range of human senses. Photographs, she reminds us, are 'handled, caressed, stroked, kissed, torn, wept over, lamented over, talked to, talked about and sung to in ways that blur the distinction between person, index, and thing'. For Edwards, thinking about photography becomes a privileged site for thinking more generally about the ways in which social relations are mediated by material culture, and about the relationship between people and things, human and non-human.

In his contribution, Batchen turns his attention to the social phenomenon of nineteenth-century cartes-de-visite. He suggests that, while we may be tempted to overlook them as marginal or aesthetically worthless, they in fact offer a revealing insight into the ways in which bourgeois society envisioned itself in the nineteenth century. At the same time, Batchen argues that exploring the meanings and functions of objects such as the carte-de-visite represents a challenge to a history of photography, which might want to construct itself solely around singular artists producing 'Great Works'. In doing so, his intervention carries on the debate first launched, as John Tagg indicates in chapter 1 and as we shall be discussing later in this introduction, by *Thinking Photography* itself. It also makes clear, as does Edwards's essay, that the battle between different conceptions of photography – as a branch of art history or visual studies on the one hand, and as a complex social object on the other – continues to be fought two decades later.

At the same time, the volume also sets out to reflect critically on the ways in which photography studies has taken shape in the years since Burgin published *Thinking Photography* and consider how and why certain thinkers or critical tropes have come to dominate thinking about photography. Thus, Shawn Michelle Smith (chapter 6) offers a reading of Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, which draws out what she sees as the text's blind spot in relation to the question of race and its representation. She goes on to argue that Barthes' response to race, which emerges in his discussion of some of the images in *Camera Lucida*, resonates with another anxiety which can be detected in the book, that of his relationship as a gay male to the family as a unit of biological and social reproduction. In her analysis of images from Abu Ghraib, and their status as examples of snapshot photography, Catherine Zuromskis (chapter 3) revisits Susan Sontag's work on photography to argue that the nature of the snapshot, and its social roles, complicate the relatively straightforward moral frameworks and relationships of power which Sontag attributes to photography. Kelly Dennis (chapter 7) explores the canonization of Walter Benjamin's writing on photography, suggesting that he 'might have needed inventing by photog-

raphy studies had he not existed in translation'. The process is one in which *Thinking Photography* itself undoubtedly played a part, of course, opening as it does with Benjamin's essay 'The Author as Producer'. Burgin's intention in beginning the collection with Benjamin's essay was to focus attention on the political responsibility not only of the cultural producer but also of the cultural critic. As Dennis points out, engagement with Benjamin's work since then has focused far more on notorious concepts such as 'aura' while remaining 'discreetly silent', as she puts it, about the political dimension of his thinking on photography.

Indeed, as we will be discussing later in this introduction, it has sometimes seemed, in the years since the publication of Burgin's volume, that the radical, politically-inflected engagement with photography, which it set out to promote, has been lost from sight in favour of work that focuses on the personal, the local and the specific in relation to photography. However, a number of the contributors to the current volume, including Smith and Zuromskis, remain faithful to the notion that, as Smith reminds us, 'the personal is political' and that it is in getting to grips with the small-scale and the local uses of photography – in relation to the family, for example – that its political functions can be brought to light. What interests Zuromskis in her discussion of the Abu Ghraib images, for example, is the location of the snapshot on the border between the private and the public spheres, and its role as a space not where power is exercised, but where dialogue can be initiated. For Zuromskis, the impact of the Abu Ghraib images is located in the fact that they foreground the social, affective and dialogic functions of snapshot photography precisely by displaying and acting out the perverse disruption of those functions. Andrea Noble, on the other hand, explores the way in which family snapshots are mobilized in the context of human rights protests in Latin America (chapter 4). Echoing the imperative voiced by Elizabeth Edwards to pay attention to the material nature and presence of the photograph, Noble draws out the forms of agency specific to the photographic image – that is to say, to the social, political and emotional effects (such as shame) which are dependent on and mobilized by the photographs, and would not exist in these contexts without them. At the same time, she argues for the need to rethink some of the assumptions and orthodoxies around the politics of family photography that have taken hold over the past few years.

In their contributions, John Tagg (chapter 1) and Donald Preziosi (chapter 9) locate photography in its wider cultural context, and consider its central role in the modern world's 'regimes of representation', to borrow Preziosi's phrase. In his essay, Tagg explores the workings of two contemporary technologies of visualization (traffic congestion charging schemes and radio telescoping) in order to question the widespread assumption (one displayed by *Thinking Photography* itself, as he points out) that 'the subject always finds itself at home' in the photographic process. His interrogation of the nature of photographic agency produces a rather more unsettling account of the way in which human

subjectivity, rather than governing the processes of photographic meaning, is accommodated and managed by them. In doing so, it reasserts the persistence and continued relevance of questions that Tagg first examined in his own contribution to *Thinking Photography*.

In the volume's closing essay, Donald Preziosi re-situates photography within a broader history of the institutions of visual culture. Examining the 'dream worlds' of the museum and the culture industries, and their role in creating the phantasmagoria of the modern world, Preziosi calls on us to interrogate the social functions not just of photography and art, but of the disciplines which frame our understanding of them. He reminds us of the need to engage with representation and artifice not simply as a defining feature of the artistic realm, but as constitutive of social organization and modes of perception in general; he reminds us too of the political imperative of doing so.

In inviting us to think more generally about the modern world's 'regimes of representation', and the professions and institutions which underpin them, Preziosi contributes to another aim of this volume, which is to encourage a more self-reflexive approach to the discipline of photography studies, or to participate in what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu terms a 'science of science' (Bourdieu 2001). Throughout his work, Bourdieu underlines the need for those involved in an academic discipline to pay attention to the ways in which it constructs and defines its objects of study, and the social mechanisms that govern the knowledge it produces. Central to this process are the battles for authority which take place between different actors in the field as they try to impose the conditions in which legitimate statements about the object of study can be made; decide who has the right to speak about it; and legislate on the validity of what is said (Bourdieu 1984).

Maintaining what Bourdieu calls 'epistemological vigilance' (2001: 178) – a critical awareness of the discourses, interpretative frameworks and relationships of power governing a field of enquiry over time – is arguably of particular importance in relation to photography studies if it is to maintain the relative hybridity and fluidity which has defined it so far, and avoid as much as possible the sclerosis of critical orthodoxy. As Kelly Dennis observes in this volume, 'it is undoubtedly useful to rethink the field of study as it becomes increasingly institutionalized and thus subject to the dogmatism, cult value, and embeddedness of any institutionalized field of study'. After all, the strength and distinctiveness of photography studies lies in its radical and inevitable interdisciplinarity, one to which it is condemned by the very nature of a medium that pervades all aspects of life and therefore must come to the attention of a multitude of fields of enquiry. The next section of the introduction sets out to contribute to that process of critical reflection by revisiting the pivotal moment of the early 1980s represented, amongst other things, by the publication of *Thinking Photography*, in order to consider its role in defining the direction of photography studies and to sketch out the broad trajectory of the discipline since then. It emerges that while Burgin's volume certainly sets out to revolutionize both understanding

and analysis of the photographic image, his attempt to impose his theoretical model is made difficult by the simultaneous appearance on the scene of what would prove to be a powerful and problematic rival for theoretical legitimacy and authority – namely Roland Barthes' *La Chambre claire* (1980), the English translation of which (*Camera Lucida*) was first published a year before *Thinking Photography*.

### Thinking photography and defining a discipline

In his contribution to the current volume, John Tagg reminds us that the essential components of the theoretical framework in which Burgin wants to 'think photography' are laid bare on the cover of his book: Burgin's Leica camera is shown supported and framed by a range of volumes, including Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*; the issue of *New Left Review* in which the English translation of Jacques Lacan's essay on the 'mirror stage' was first published; and Walter Benjamin's essays on Brecht. From the moment we encounter Burgin's volume, therefore, two things are made clear: in the first place, it is arguing for a particular mode of analysis informed by semiotics, psychoanalysis and cultural materialism; and in doing so, secondly, it is positioning photography studies itself as an explicitly *political* project. As far as the Burgin of 1982 is concerned, photography studies should play a leading role in a broader process of ideological critique and political intervention, in working to expose the mechanisms by which the dominant social and economic order sustains and reproduces itself. As Tagg observes, the book appeared at a moment when it was felt not just that social and cultural revolution was possible, but that 'the first brick could be thrown by photographic theory'.

It was nevertheless within the realm of academic study where the brick of photographic theory would cause the most disruption, as Burgin set out to stage a revolution in the discipline by formulating and positioning his ideas in opposition to the dominant modes of reception and interpretation he refers to – dismissively – in the introduction to *Thinking Photography* as 'criticism' and 'history' (Burgin 1982: 3). He aligns the existing approaches of photography criticism and history with traditional art historical criticism, whose understanding of culture is based on the principle of singular figures transcending their historical and social conditions to produce works of timeless beauty, and whose role is to identify and regulate the hierarchy of artistic genius. As such, they are fatally complicit with the cultural, economic and ideological status quo. For Burgin, they are modes 'in which the main concern is for reputations and objects, and in which the objects inherit the reputations to become commodities: a history and criticism to suit the saleroom' (1982: 4). Yet by 1982, such modes had nevertheless acquired substantial authority by dint of their sheer longevity, on the one hand, and the location of their main advocates within powerful cultural institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, on the other.

The theoretical positions adopted by Burgin, and his explicit alignments with Marxist cultural materialism especially, placed him in clear and antagonistic opposition to the dominant modes of thinking exemplified by conservative critics such as John Szarkowski, the notoriously influential curator of MoMA's photography collection. Furthermore, Burgin's theoretical positions were homologous with his institutional position at the time as a lecturer at the Polytechnic of Central London (now the University of Westminster), an establishment on the radical margins of the British academic field, in stark contrast to the august organizations such as MoMA where the dominant figures in the world of photography criticism held sway.

In order to clarify further Burgin's strategy in the opening pages of *Thinking Photography*, and his positioning of photographic theory in relation to history and criticism, it is useful to return briefly to the work of Bourdieu, and in particular his discussion of the emergence and status of sociology as a discipline. Bourdieu's analysis arguably holds good for any embryonic field of study, and all the more so in the case of photography studies since, from Burgin's perspective at least, it could be described quite happily as a social science.

One of the essential criteria defining any field of academic study or artistic activity, for Bourdieu, is its relative autonomy in relation to the broader field of power – that is to say, its ability to resist those external pressures and influences, be they political, economic or social, which can have a bearing on its specific processes and products (knowledge, art, literature and so on). Relative autonomy is the condition in which, Bourdieu would argue, 'disinterested' science – in other words, science pursued and regulated not in accordance with outside interests, but by what he calls the 'mutual censorship' of a peer group – can take place (Bourdieu 2001: 171). Bourdieu cites the examples of astronomy and physics, recognized today as highly autonomous and self-regulating disciplines, but which, in the early stages of their development, were profoundly implicated in broader political and religious debates and subject to political interference as a result (2001: 169).

Furthermore, Bourdieu argues, the less autonomous a discipline is, the more likely it is for the actors who populate it to align themselves with, or succumb to, those external pressures; and those who do will have greater power and influence over their discipline, and accrue greater social capital, than those who do not (2001: 170–1). Such a situation was reflected in the domain of photography studies as Burgin found it by those producing his 'history and criticism to suit the saleroom', those whose work of criticism and interpretation consolidated the commodity value of the photographic image rather than contributing to our 'scientific' understanding of it.

The publication of *Thinking Photography*, which allowed Burgin to gather in one place the elements he saw as essential to a theory of photography, represented an attempt on his part to initiate a trend towards greater autonomy in the discipline, and so establish a relationship to the object of study less contaminated by external pressures. Indeed, the very appeal to the notion of a photog-

raphy 'theory' is an essential part of this process. Burgin's aim is to relocate the authority to speak about photography in domains (linguistics, psychoanalysis, cultural materialism) lying beyond the reach of existing experts and agents of legitimation – domains, moreover, into which he could be sure such experts would refuse to venture because of the challenge they represented to their vision of creative practice and the way in which they revealed photography not as innocent art form, but as implicated in complex processes of signification within society.

The body of ideas on which Burgin drew had already proved their effectiveness elsewhere, of course. In reality, Burgin was doing little more than restaging a revolution which had begun in the realm of literary studies in the 1950s and 1960s, as French theorists such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida rediscovered and thought through the implications of Saussurian structuralist linguistics, and took seriously Saussure's call for a 'science of signs'. The attractiveness of 'theory' can be traced to the fact that it offered what academic study of the arts had lacked for so long, namely, frameworks and methodologies which acquired the aura of scientific explanation by making the business of dealing with cultural objects a question of identifying and analysing observable phenomena (e.g. narrative structures and combinations of signifiers) rather than elaborating on the impressionistic and subjective responses of the viewer or reader. The principle of scientific responsibility is one which Burgin is quick to lay claim to in his introduction in his efforts to underline the validity of his approach: 'photography theory is not exempt from the call made upon any theory to identify observable systematic regularities in its object which will support general propositions about the object' (1982: 2). For Burgin, traditional criticism advanced 'assertions of opinions and assumptions' disguised as arguments (1982: 3). With the help of theory, the power of argument (with all the connotations of rigour, logic and clarity carried by the word) could be put to work in understanding the photographic image.

So how successful has *Thinking Photography* been in setting the intellectual and theoretical agenda of photography studies? While its radical perspective was certainly consolidated and developed during the 1980s in the work of critics such as Tagg, Martha Rosler (1989) and Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1991), not to mention Burgin himself (1986a; 1986b), the book's status today appears curiously anachronistic. It is a book quite clearly of its time, born of a particular moment in the recent history of ideas, and the relic of an era when the belief in the political power of radical cultural critique was still strong. Our sense of the book's status as a relic comes in particular from its material nature. Strikingly, neither its contents nor its design were ever updated: even the most recent printings carry the same photograph of Burgin on the back cover as the first edition and the notes on contributors freeze them in time in 1982. The insistent pastness of Burgin's portrait photo, we might say, encapsulates Barthes' discussion in 'Rhetoric of the Image' of the illogical conjunction between the here-now and the there-then with which photog-



raphy confronts us, the past persisting in the present and haunting it like a ghost (Barthes 1977a: 44).

*Thinking Photography* provokes a peculiar blurring of temporality and chronology in other ways as well. First, this is related to the contents of the anthology. While most of the essays were written in the few years previous to 1982, the collection opens with Walter Benjamin's essay from 1934, 'The Author as Producer'. The initial function of Benjamin's essay is undoubtedly to give some historical depth and foundation to the theoretical paradigm Burgin sets out to promote by placing it in clear alignment with a radical Marxist tradition. However, while there are chronological reasons for its location at the start of the volume, the prominence he gives it is undoubtedly also due to its content. The essay is not wholly, or even in large part, about photography *per se*, but about the social role of the artist and intellectual. Benjamin operates with an expanded concept of cultural production, in which barriers between spheres of activity that remain discrete and self-contained under capitalism are dismantled. While Benjamin foregrounds the barriers separating writers from visual artists, his comments might equally apply to the barriers between artists and critics. Burgin's contextualization of 'The Author as Producer' invites us to read it as a template for those engaged in intellectual action, be it as artists or as theorists – a template that the remaining essays in the volume seek to exemplify.

For an intellectual to be properly revolutionary, suggests Benjamin, 'consists in an attitude which transforms him, from a supplier of the production apparatus, into an engineer who sees his task in adapting that apparatus to the ends of the proletarian revolution' (Burgin 1982: 31). The role of the intellectual, argues Benjamin, is to find innovative ways to subject the dominant social order and its cultural production to critical scrutiny, and thereby help contribute to its downfall. In doing so, he lends support to Burgin's argument in the introduction that the concern of those engaged with the photographic object should be to revolutionize our understanding of it and not to contribute to its market value. The apparently easy coexistence of Benjamin's essay with those by Burgin, Tagg and others suggests that it has trans-historical relevance, and that it can transcend and travel without difficulty between different historical and cultural moments (invites us to draw comparisons, indeed, between the Thatcherite Britain of the early 1980s and the Nazi Germany of the 1930s).

Second, the presence of Roland Barthes both in and around Burgin's volume illustrates how the temporality and chronology of theoretical ideas can become warped by their passage from one academic and cultural context to another, with often complex consequences. The next part of the introduction considers in more detail the striking conjunction that sees the publication of *Thinking Photography* follow on from that of *La Chambre claire* and its English translation, and the ensuing battle for theoretical supremacy which Burgin and the other defenders of a more politically-engaged photography studies felt obliged to fight.



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