

Rereading Photography Theory of the Eighties

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Three years ago, in an article titled 'The World's Most Amazing 100% Awesome Photography Theory', published in the journal *Photographies* the academic Sharon Harper identified how photography undergraduate courses had 'not developed the scope of its subject matter or developed its theoretical horizons sufficiently'.

Harper argues that the legacies of photography theory's engagement with semiotics, psychoanalysis and Marxist thought continue to be the critical credibility that higher education courses trade on today. This characterisation of photography theory is exemplified by the canonical 1982 anthology *Thinking Photography*, edited by Victor Burgin. In fact, Harper continues, its methods of analysis and ideological critique are now limitations to the development of academia and pedagogy. (Harper is not alone in critiquing photography theory of the 1980s.)

Burgin, however, cared deeply about developing an account of the production of meaning of a photograph within everyday social institutions located within specific histories, recognising the importance of identifying cultural context and its everyday uses, not just within fine art, but also advertising, journalism and domestic spaces.

Thinking Photography worked with some notion of the photograph's specificity, which is now, as it has been for some time, more *imprecise* in an age of wild media convergence of the accelerated networked image (Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis). We might not need the specificity of the photograph *Thinking Photography* presumes, but we do need its rigorous critical thinking. What are its legacies? How can we reread it today in our supposedly post-ideological times? What are the implications for photography education, which increasingly emphasises 'professionalisation' – gearing one up as an agent of/for cultural production? In such a space, critical theory is deprived of its agenda.

Speakers and Abstracts

Against Communication

Olivier Richon (Royal College of Art)

I propose to discuss Victor Burgin use of rhetoric in his text 'Photographic Practice and Art Theory' (published in *Thinking Photography*, 1982, and Based on lectures given at the Polytechnic of Central London and the Slade School of Fine Art, 1974).

Burgin commentators tend to privilege his work as belonging to cultural and visual theory, I will emphasis instead the question of art practice. I wish to demonstrate that Burgin's methodology as an artist is indebted to a notion of rhetoric rather than aesthetics, thus proposing a photographic practice which is intuitive as much as reflexive. If advertising used visual rhetoric consciously to articulate messages, Burgin's practice at that time used strategies developed in advertising in order to highlight the semiotic potential of photographic images, therefore shifting the aesthetics of photography towards a rhetoric and poetics of signs and meanings, calling into question the ideology of transparent communication. Expressions like media convergence and expanded photography seem to be

vague and unsatisfactory, as they encourage a pluralism that is a defense against a more precise approach to the photograph, and often mask an amnesia or ignorance of the history and criticism of the medium. Current educational models are mainly predicated upon a neo liberal business model that fetishises terms like 'professionalisation'. It is therefore timely to reappraise once again the photographic image within the historical avant-garde and conceptual practices of the 1960s. Personally, I would propose to emphasize the literary aspect of the photograph (following Paul Valéry) as discussions tend to take for granted the photographic image within art and media practices.

Towards Praxis and Poiesis: What 'photography' and how 'theory'

Tom Slevin (Solent University)

What is photography theory and how is it used? Sharon Harper's essay in *Photographies* proposes considering more established film- and art-historical processes that contextualise and historicise an image alongside analysis of its form and content. But did not writers she mentioned, such as Victor Burgin and Roland Barthes, already do this? John Tagg certainly described photographs as having no identity outside of their (disciplinary) contextual frame: 'Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work'.

To apply Harper's ideas to ourselves, we should consider the context and history of the very subject area and consider the nature of the photographic education, particular in regards to profound changes in relation to the marketisation of Higher Education, changing concepts of a 'student', and the very identity of Photography degrees within a broader reconsideration of the role of universities within the UK. Does curriculum design interrelate theory and practice to form a 'praxis' (at the risk of reductionism, how can historical context, form and content become 'applied knowledge')?

And yet, within academia, the very term 'photography' is perceived to be in 'crisis'. There appears to be an impulse (perhaps anxiety?) to question, or at least readdress, photography's status. There is clearly an aporia between definitions of photography; the 'end of photography' opposed to the digital proliferation of photography. What 'photography' is therefore really being questioned?

Thinking Photography in the Age of the Biometric Gaze

David Eckersley (Independent Scholar)

Harper's article constitutes an important intervention into discussions concerning the future of critical perspectives on photography in higher education, highlighting the value of expanded approaches to research and analysis, and the limitations that attend to a lack of focus on the materiality of photographic production. However, its seeming reliance upon a 'post-theory' model of Film Studies presents its own set of problems. While this model is right to highlight the analytical limitations of an over-emphasis on signification and the notion of a 'one-size-fits-all' theoretical approach, it tends to elide the importance of the production of subjectivity, including crucial questions pertaining to race and gender.

Furthermore, Harper's own approach reproduces the kinds of generalisation for which it takes 'Theory' to task, relying, for instance, on monolithic notions of 'Poststructuralism'. Through an engagement with biometrically animated advertising imagery, and adopting a 'machinic' approach to understanding photography, this paper seeks to develop a way of

thinking photography that is attuned to both the limitations identified by Harper et al., but which pursues the important critical project begun by Burgin and others; a project that is arguably more important than ever in contemporary times. While the paper acknowledges that photography theory needs a more robust and diverse critical approach, it argues that this must not be at the cost of critically informed cultural analysis, the rejection of which constitutes a politics in itself.

Same-Same, But Different: Thinking photography in the past, present and future
Ben Burbridge (University of Sussex)

This paper considers recent developments in photography studies in relation to what Sarah E. James describes as ‘the academicising and abstracting hermeneutics’ that many emerging scholars have come to associate with ‘the dominance of semiotic and deconstructive readings of photography so popular since the 1970s’. Focusing on a range of edited collections published in the past 10 years, I consider the difficulty of reimagining photography theory from within the same institutional and disciplinary contexts that helped cement deconstruction as orthodoxy. Thus a revived version of the types of inter-disciplinary thinking central to the formation of earlier theoretical perspectives may be required, based on a clear sense of the present moment and what it demands. The beginnings of such a project are already evident in the importance increasingly attributed to perspectives from anthropology, sociology, political philosophy, media archaeology, digital media studies, and the practice-inflected insights of artists, curators and activists within some studies of photography. I conclude by considering three fundamental challenges faced by the field of photography theory today: the risk of technological determinism evident in photographic historiography and the limited understanding of the ‘digital’ as a motivating force this often entails; the continued dominance of western perspectives and a ‘white-washing’ of photography theory; and the persistence of top-down, individualistic approaches to thinking about photography.