

The desire and necessity to visually document, analyze, and interact with our social world is timeless and so a text that tries to explore one aspect of visual production, evaluation, and interaction—photography—and trace its almost 200-year evolution is a massive and formidable task indeed. *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, edited by Liz Wells, accepts this challenge and steeps the reader in a thorough understanding of the field's major philosophical players, including Baudelaire, Barthes, Berger, Benjamin, Burgin, Flusser, Kracauer, Eco, Moholy-Nagy, Ohn, Sontag, Szarkowski, and Trachtenberg. It also admirably provides insight on something so generic, widespread, ubiquitous, and ever-changing—photographic use—with theoretical insights like “photographs can exhaust experiences, using up the beautiful through rendering it into cliché” (p. 33).

Each of the text's six chapters is thoughtfully fashioned so it can stand independently of the others, yet, of course, connections still exist among them. The editor notes the tension between photography as dispassionate transcriber, as the vehicle for creative energy and political statement, and as the reproducer of the simulated and even surreal. She and her contributors also track the development of imaging from transcribing physical properties to being separated from such relationships in the digital age. The section on photography and commodification culture, including stock photos and selfies, is especially poignant, timely, relevant, and thought provoking. Wells and her contributors are to be commended for approaching the theoretical underpinnings of photography and visual culture in ways that are sophisticated while still being accessible and acknowledging how various theories interlace, morph, and evolve.

Perhaps *Photography's* greatest strength is its ability to introduce an uninitiated reader to the canon of practitioners, philosophers, and critics who write about or and/or create visual, and

often, photographic, media and how these media are analyzed and interpreted. Less emphasis is intentionally placed on the production of photographic media though the text does address major styles and genres of photographic practice and acknowledges how production can affect reception. The case studies sprinkled throughout the text help with its accessibility and generous sidebar comments provide additional insight in a friendly and conversational manner. I couldn't help but wonder, though, if more insight or appreciation might have been gained by using less well known and "iconic" exemplars in some cases. Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, for example, is so well known that analysis of it in chapter one seems like low-hanging fruit.

Another strength of the piece is that the authors are unafraid to note gaps, absences, and the effects of sociological processes, such as canonization, where appropriate. In the book's first chapter, for example, Wells and Derrick Price keenly note that introductory photography texts reinforce the canon of photographic practitioners at the expense of examining content or styles that do not have a readily assignable name behind them. That this critical approach isn't reserved for a single chapter but instead pervades the entire text is refreshing, as is the authors' transparency in noting their sourcing and when an idea is their own compared to when it's been externally sourced.

The section on documentary photography and photojournalism is, perhaps, painted a bit too dimly and with too broad a brush. The authors—none of whom have journalistic training or interests according to their biographies but instead hail from schools of art, design, and media—include anecdotal evidence from photographers and critics about the state of the field but provide little empirical data that systematically maps the landscape of this area, even while acknowledging its importance. This results in vague, unsourced, and subjective statements like,

“In more recent years there has been a huge increase in the number of news story photographs taken by amateurs” (p. 94). Without sufficient context backed by data, statements like these are relatively meaningless and also fail to address research that notes the difference in quality between amateur and professional news photographers. Another weakness is that, even though the fifth edition of this text was published fairly recently, in 2015, it neglects newer technologies and processes, such as 360-degree images or “live photos” that are fundamentally shifting the field and deserve mention. Absent, too, in the discussion on digital image manipulation and transformation, itself part of a larger discussion on photographic “reality,” was mention of forensic image analysis software that can determine whether an image’s digital signature was altered in post-production.

Despite these drawbacks, the reader of the text cannot walk away without an improved visual literacy by exposure to photographic history, its forms and functions, and key practitioners and thinkers. Wells and her contributors should be lauded for tackling such an ambitious subject and doing it in an accessible fashion.