

# Photography and Politics

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This discussion explores the relationship between photography and politics. To do so it uses critical theory and a broader exploration of the relationship between the image and reality and interpretations of the image (photographic theory in the scientific / technical sense is not featured in this essay). These aspects are discussed through brief reviews of the literature around the sociology of art, semiotics and key theoretical writers on photography including; Sontag, Berger, Barthes, Bourdieu and Baudrillard as well as other cultural theorists. A brief semiotic case study is applied to the question, where the work of Edward Weston and the author are explored for political content. Finally, the discussion comes to conclusion.

What is critical theory? The term comes initially from the Frankfurt School of Marxism that set out to critique the 'one dimensional' nature of capitalism. The Frankfurt School argues that although the form of the economic structure has the final effect on social structure, culture functions to create institutions and processes that can be independent of, but ultimately supportive to, the needs of capitalism. They took a position that saw this cultural process accounting for the failure of a proletarian revolution and being highly structuralist; that is giving the consumer/worker little choice for self determination.

In particular, Adorno wrote of the effect of capitalism on culture. He argues that there is a distinction between true and false needs. False needs are created by capitalism and in the context of popular culture these needs are created and met by the culture industry (Adorno 1991). Photography, through its role in advertising and creating desires, the selling of products and generally through its use by the media is part of this hegemonic process. In doing so it "*impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves*" (1991: 92). Overall, Adorno and many of the Frankfurt School theorists were elitist in the refusal to support radical movements and welded to the maintenance of Marxist theory despite empirical evidence to the contrary.

It can be argued that critical theory can also be a wider term that loses some of the original Marxist and economically determinist underpinning. Others would argue that once the economic base ceases to be the paramount factor in determining social structure it is no longer critical theory. Instead it is what could be termed 'French Theory' that takes account of postmodern and post-structuralist theory through its exploration of public and private identity. In doing so it draws upon the writings of Derrida, Baudrillard, Foucault, and Lacan. This discourse also continues to explore the way cultural institutions work to shape what passes for reality and normality, privilege and marginalisation and the possibility of political resistance to capitalism and globalisation. Whether we term this as critical theory or not, it is inherently political. If a theory is not political then it cannot meaningfully explore issues of culture and representation.

## Review of the literature

In contrast to a critical theory approach art has traditionally been described in terms of the great masters. This is also true of photography where Cartier-Bresson, Ansel Adams, Steiglitz et al have been presented as 'genius' as if that is only approach necessary to understand their work. Discussion of their photographs also takes place in relationship to an understanding of modernism and/or realism. That is based on an aesthetic of sensibility, the interaction of thoughts and feeling provoked by a photograph.

Berger (1973: 11) comments that this approach is based on a set of cultural assumptions that art is related to beauty, truth, genius, civilisation, form, status and taste. These assumptions offer a neutral and mythical view of the world that functions to make art both remote and non-political, and where technique is considered more important than context. Art, and increasing the photography of the 'great masters', have their value defined by the market not by content and meaning. The justification of paying millions of pounds for a painting or tens of thousands of pounds for a photograph comes from the supposed uniqueness of the artists/photographers skills. This process functions to hide the content of the picture and make its meaning less visible and accessible to the majority of the population.

Sontag (1977) theorises on the effectiveness of photography for representing reality and comments that it "*is now firmly associated with those important modernist conceits: the nominal subject and the profoundly banal*" (1997: 137). She uses the analogy of Plato's Cave to argue that photography can only represent a 'shadow' of reality. How well the photograph succeeded in documenting reality was down to the photographers skill. Furthermore, photographers may deliberately misinterpret reality for personal, commercial or political ends. Sontag suggests that photography on the one hand can transform beauty into clichés, but on other hand can create objects of emotion and sentimentality: that the "*photographic process is something magical ...it is not only like its subject.....it is part of, an extension of that subject; and a potent means of acquiring it, of gaining control over it*" (1997: 155).

In 'Regarding the Pain of Others' Sontag (2003) takes a modified line. She reasserts the indexical nature of photography, but appears to move away from the idea that photography documents reality. In writing about 9/11 she suggests that events become remembered by their photographic representation but that representation is only an image of the event. We often use photographs to create our memory of the past and understanding of the present and such images can 'haunt us'. Whatever the skill of the photographer these photographs have a life of their own directed by media and commercial interest and interpreted by us for our own purposes. But no matter how powerful the images, photographs can never help us experience the pain of first hand suffering encountered in war and famine. We have, suggests Sontag, as need for such images. Hence the tradition of war photographer as hero: "*we want the photographer to be a spy in the house of love and death*" (2003: 50)

Although writing extensively on structuralism and post structuralism, Barthes (2000) also theorised about photography in realist terms. He argues that the signs within a

photograph exist within a defined context and therefore have restricted meaning closely linked to reality. The photographer appears to be downgraded to that of 'operator' and the important part of the process is in the viewing of the photograph by the spectator. Barthes argues that photographs are always about looking back, at a person or to a moment that no longer exists. This works most effectively when something within the photograph arrests attention. He calls this effect the 'punctum'. This is direct, not coded, experience compared to everyday images or 'studium', which is always coded. Presumably photographs that only exhibit studium may fall within the realms of myth that Barthes (1984) saw as stories by which a culture explains reality.

The dramatic effect of the punctum may be due to the shock of the image or emotional connection. Either way it is a direct link back to past reality. Barthes comments: "*Mad or tame? Photography can be one or the other: tame if its realism remains relative, tempered by aesthetic or empirical habits; mad if this realism is absolute and, so to speak, original, obliging the loving and terrified consciousness to return to the very letter of Time (sic).....the photographic ecstasy*" (2000:119).

In contrast to seeing art and photography as realism, Burgin (1976) argues for a materialist art theory where the photograph (text) is a structured place where the reader has to use whatever codes they may have to interpret a message. "*With the hindsight granted to us by Saussure we today can see that classic Realism rests upon a mistaken concept of signification: the sign is assumed to be 'transparent', allowing unproblematic access to the referent*" (1976: 18). This approach stands in contradiction to the modernist ideal of art for its own sake and self referential aesthetics and implies a contradiction of the view of Barthes discussed above.

Benjamin (1999) argues that art used to be a unique object that had an effect of aura over its viewers. The effect of aura worked due to its cultural context: "*it is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the "authentic" work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value*" (1999: 217).

In the age of mechanical reproduction this power of aura has been lost to art. However, Benjamin argues that the loss of aura is beneficial because it both democratises and politicises art. In this respect he challenges the more fixed structuralist ideas of the Frankfurt School and Barthes who through the idea of the punctum thought photographs had aura (although of lost time and lost memories rather than the wider cultural and political aura explored by Benjamin).

Benjamin argues that reproduction allows a work of art to receive and generate meaning from diverse contexts. Although art is commodified and contemporary society attempts to anaesthetise politics, reproductive art can regenerate political debate. The techniques of film, photography and music are available to everyone and enable people to hold and examine aspects of life to explore meaning and interpretations. This allows art to explore what Raymond Williams terms 'structure of feeling' (1977) and can be used to develop counter hegemonic processes.

Benjamin suggests that in this process the "*most powerful agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its*

*destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage*" (1969: 215). In arguing this Benjamin prefigures the role of the Internet for self publishing, digital music production and mass use of photography and video. Such processes challenge the notion of fixed authenticity and static cultural tradition that can be used to uphold the status quo. In contemporary society this may only be a minority use of art compared to its role in promoting the dominant hegemony. Either way, Benjamin is arguing that art (including photography) has political context and effect.

Bourdieu suggests that *what* is photographable and what is not is dependant upon class based values and rituals. *How* things are photographed depends upon aesthetic and ethical choices that are themselves also socially dependant. One could add that this social dependency is also true of *who* is taking the photograph (father, mother, professional, etc). Due to this social dependence Bourdieu believes a photograph not only 'proclaims' the intention of the photographer, but also 'betrays' the surplus meaning of the photographers social environment (1996: 6-7).

Photographs are potentially unlimited in the possible modes of expression. However, they tend to be produced to a rigid formula and rules depending upon context: amateur photographer, wedding photographer, fine artist, etc. Bourdieu claims this is because "*the feature of all the popular arts is their subordination of artistic activity to socially regulated functions*" (1996: 8). This argument suggests, for example, that working class people take snaps of family and friends on holiday and art school students play at fine art and conceptual practice, but that the boundaries between these approaches are not crossed. The boundaries are self imposed in order for the photographer to stay within perceived social norms and to fulfil preconditioned social functions.

Bourdieu sums up the reason why people take photographs as: protection against time, communication with others, expression of feelings, self realisation, social prestige, distraction or escape. All these purposes are socially and culturally based but are undertaken as a response to a psychological need on behalf of the photographer. But this need is a product of the social context within which the photographer operates.

Likewise, each social group will ascribe their own role, function and status to photographs. This will decide whether the photographs are displayed (in public or private, formally or informally), sent to family or friends, posted on a web site, used as a Christmas card or simply viewed and disposed of (digital snaps taken at a party). Bourdieu suggests that because photographs are used to reinforce agreed social rituals and norms people see the images as reflecting reality. As Wells comments the majority of people expect photographs to reflect reality, so any image that does not hold onto this indexicality will be seen as a failure (2004: 331). So for the majority of people the function fulfilled by the photograph is more important than an exploration of its meaning. That is not to say that a partial decoding of the photograph does not take place by the viewer.

Scott (1999) in reviewing the sociological literature of art production argues that it is a product of "*social phenomenon rather than as the expression of some transcendent*

*personalized impulse*” (1999: 807). He goes on to suggest that artistic practices need to be seen in four ways that are equally valid for photographic production:

1. *What can be identified as viable (i.e. inter-subjectively meaningful) topics for art works or scientific projects are given out of conditions of practical and political life.*
2. *Artistic or scientific work is always molded by the context in which it occurs. One of the more significant variables at play here is the division of labor in cultural production, even in such apparently elusive cases as a painter’s studio or a scientific laboratory.*
3. *Art and science depend on inter-personal norms, methods, languages and so on, in order to achieve communicability. Both practitioners and audiences will therefore have had to undergo some degree of common socialization if they are to connect together.*
4. *The social profile of consumers of art and science (alternatively, the market) invariably plays a role in how producers conceive and present their finished work. This is all the more so where intermediaries (such as agents, editors or gallery owners) exert an influence on cultural production.*  
(1990: 808)

If we consider photography as part of this process that it is clear that it is socially produced, but this production will be shaped directly by the needs of the cultural industry. This may be through private galleries, large state supported museums, commercially driven publications or specific commercial contracts. This social phenomenon is underpinned by economic pressures and processes and inherently reflects (mostly) the dominant ideological message. Art and photographic production therefore takes place in a socio economic context. Jameson comments "*what has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes) at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasing essential structural functional position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation*" (1996: 4-5)

The danger here as Berger pointed out (1973) is that mass publicity turns the consumption of art into a substitute for democracy. That is we consume the political message (for example Salgado’s photographs of migrants) alongside the rest of the Sunday morning papers, but having consumed fail to act. As Baudrillard might say, this is not so much image fatigue as the effect of the hyperreal presentation of human disaster as media entertainment. What is not in doubt is the inherent political content of the image.

John Berger (1973) reminds us that that although we communicate mainly through language our formative experiences are based on visual information: "*Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world within words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled*" (1973: 7). Furthermore, how we interpret the visual is interrelated to what we believe and the relationships between things. The implication here is that our understanding of our self (and Lacan reminds us that there

are limits how far that is possible) and the world is based on the visual interpretation of objects.

As indicated above, we know from the work of de Saussure (1974) that every object contains meaning. These meanings are communicated as signs. Every sign is composed of a *signifier*, that is a coded object (in this case a photograph) and the *signified*, the decoding of the mental concepts relating to the object. Burgin comments that “*simply because a message is, in substance, visual, it does not follow that all of its codes are visual*” (1982: 83). The signifier can be read as text through discussion or discourse. Multiple discourses are possible depending on how we want to approach the subject. For example, the documentary discourse, the fashion discourse, the landscape discourse. Most discourses, in turn, form part of larger discourses. In this case we are exploring the possible wider political and cultural discourse derived from the signification of photographs.

As Peirce (1991) pointed out it is helpful to think of three types of signification. He called these types; firstness, that is the *feeling* generated by the mural, secondness, the *facts* depicted in the mural, and thirdness, the *mental* element (love, hate, adoration, etc) derived from the image. Peirce argued that some signs are ‘open’ that is they can have infinite number of meanings. Others are closed as they have a culturally agreed meaning. This later case tends to support Barthes contention that photographs operate with restricted meaning. However, Derrida (1976) argues that the text of each sign has within it traces of all other texts. In theory this could be a continuous process of ‘unlimited semiosis’. In practice this is limited by a shared understanding of what is meaningful, although this limit may be far wider than suggested by Barthes.

Derrida also suggested that our minds comprehend many things through constructing a binary opposition; by their ‘not-ness’. We recognise ‘cold’ because it’s not ‘hot’; ‘rough’ because it’s not ‘smooth’; ‘mother’ because she’s not ‘father. Therefore the signification process only has meaning in the context of other objects. As Barthes (1977) commented meaning is always contextual; the text always escapes the control of the author, and is always open to new interpretations. It is not the photographer or the signifier that defines the meaning but the viewer. This happens through a dialectic process between the viewers external and internal worlds. Writing about the effect of television Hall (1973) suggests this process, that he called Reception Theory, as one that allows the viewer a degree of freedom to negotiate meaning within the text. Whether the photographers intent is accepted, rejected or reinterpreted by the viewer depends upon their relative positions.

One way of understanding this process is through the idea, which comes originally from feminist theory, of ‘gaze’ (Schroeder 1998). As Burgin writes “*Looking is not indifferent. There can never be any question of ‘just looking’*” (Burgin 1982: 188). The concept of gaze explores subjective ways of viewing that usually reflect power relationships. Schroeder suggests that “*to gaze implies more than to look at - it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze*” (Schroeder 1998: 208). That is a photographer may view a new city with a ‘photographers gaze’ that is different to the ‘gaze’ of a local policeman, which in turn is different to a local shopkeeper. At home we have a domestic gaze, on holiday we have a tourist gaze, men look at women with a male gaze, a woman looks at her child with a mothers gaze. On another level there is also the notion of intra-

diegetic gaze within the text or photograph where one person is 'gazing' at another person or object. There is also the idea of directing the viewers gaze through the use of captions or colouring parts of the photograph.

The character of our gaze is dependant upon the nature of our consciousness and the effects of hegemony. Freire (1972) in writing about how people experience the world explores different states of consciousness. He suggests that *magical* consciousness is found in pre-industrial communities where the world is perceived to be unchanging having been created by god or godlike powers. In more developed societies we find *naïve* conscious where there is partial analysis of social conditions but the worldview is dominated by emotional reactions and fear of change. A *critical* level of consciousness provides a fuller analytical understanding of society. The gaze we adopt influences how we interpret signs. In return the interpretation of the sign reinforces or changes our level of consciousness and understanding of hegemony/counter hegemony.

Jean Baudrillard in exploring society and the position of photography within it neatly sums up the arguments explored above. He takes ideas from Sontag, Barthes and Benjamin and projects them into his semiotic analysis of a postmodern world. In this world we are defined by the meaning of the objects we consume. Photography, in his view is an exploration of objects (signs) and their meanings, as far as this is possible in a hyperreal culture. Firstly, he rejects the "*so-called 'realist' photography (that) does not capture the 'what is'. Instead, it is preoccupied with what should not be, like the reality of suffering for example. It prefers to take pictures not of what is but of what should not be from a moral or humanitarian perspective. Meanwhile, it still makes good aesthetic, commercial and clearly immoral use of everyday misery*" (<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/baudrillard/baudrillard-photography-or-the-writing-of-light.html>).

Baudrillard suggest that photography is not about art or technique. These, he argues, are diversions from exploring the meaning of the photographs. We make photographs to try and define reality or to hold onto objects (moments) that will otherwise disappear. In this respect "*photography is our exorcism. Primitive society had its masks, bourgeois society its mirrors. We have photographs... Every photographed object is merely the trace left behind by the disappearance of all the rest... It is photographs which bring us closest to a universe without images, or in other words pure appearance...For it is the object which sees us, the object which dreams us. It is the world which reflects us, it is the world which thinks us. This is the basic rule*" (1999 inside cover). By this he means the photographer finds objects that are there ready to be photographed (in doing so he, like Barthes, reduces the role of photographer to an operator). The capturing of the object preserves it from disappearing and transforms it into a sign. However, what is photographed can only be understood through deconstruction: that is being analysed in the context of what was not photographed. Ultimately, a photograph is defined only by the meaning given to it by the viewer.

The following section provides a brief semiotic analysis of photographs using Pierce's classification cited above. The photographs are drawn from the work of Edward Weston and the author. The analysis will show, given the gaze of the author that these

photographs have political content, although in the case of Weston this may not have been intended. Writing on the process decoding photographs Eco (1982) suggests that there numerous codes. One of these is 'codes of recognition' that "*list certain features of the object as the most meaningful for the purpose of recollection and future identification*" (1982: 33). And that the interpretations of these codes as mentioned above are both time and culturally specific. This enables images to be interpreted in multiple ways depending on context, viewer, caption, purpose. However, as Derrida pointed out just because one viewer interprets a code in a particular way does not stop the political coded information from being present. This suggests that photographic theory needs to acknowledge and explore the implicit political content of photographs.

### **Discussion of photographic content: Edward Weston**

Ansel Adams, a fellow member with Weston of the formalist f/64 group of photographers, writing in the Encyclopaedia of Photography comments that "*Weston is, in the real sense, one of the few creative artists of today. He has recreated the matter-forms and forces of nature; he has made these forms eloquent of the fundamental unity of the world. His work illuminates man's inner journey toward perfection of the spirit*". In a similar vein Weston wrote, "*the camera should be used for a recording of life, for rendering the very substance and quintessence of the thing itself, whether it be polished steel or palpitating flesh*". (Weston 1961).

From Weston's point of view the work is about developing a modernist artistic practice that interprets the photographers' inner feelings towards an external object. Lowe (2004) calls this emotional response rather than personal expression. Either way Weston did not claim that his photographs had any direct political significance. However, the political is coded in his photographs.

### **Dunes, Oceano 1936 and Nude 1925**

Compare the following two photographs of sand dunes and a female nude. Weston argues that his photographs were concerned with form. At one level this is clearly true. What makes these images work as photographs are the interplay of light and shadow, shape, curves and textures. A useful example of Westons stated concern of form over content. However, the nude, like all nudes is an inherently politically loaded image. The woman here is no longer a person, we don't see her face and she has no name. In making this photograph Weston was subjecting the woman to male gaze and reflecting the cultural power of patriarchy over women. She is an object, a shape to be surveyed and reproduced to express a male ideal of beauty as form. For the majority the picture works because it is of a woman. Berger (1973: 64) poses the question; would the image work if it were a man? For the majority it would not because of the hegemonic conditioning of our social relationships and attitude between men and women. The fact that the women chose to pose in this way and may well have been paid to do it further illustrates the depth of this conditioning.

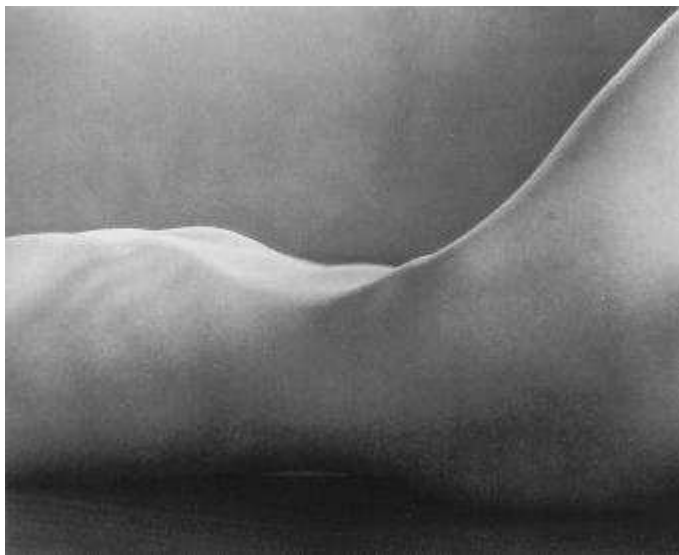
The photograph of the dunes reproduces the photograph of the nude. I don't think it is too much to suggest that Weston found the formal elements in the dunes image satisfying because of its relationship to the images he made of the female form. Weston's photographs reflect his inner feelings and these feelings are based upon his



conception of self and culturally developed attitude towards women. The World History of Photography comments: *“The cool and elegant forms of the more than one hundred nude studies Weston produced between 1918 and 1945 not only represent his search for formal perfection but also reflect the erotic and sexual enigmas with which he struggled for much of his life”*. Both photographs therefore, imply a politically dominant attitude towards women.



Dunes, Oceano 1936  
(This and following Weston photographs from  
masters-of-photography.com)

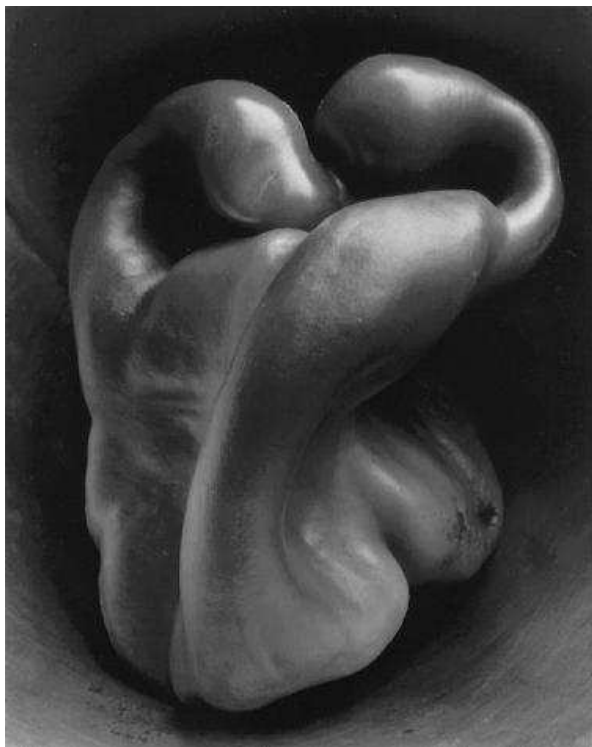


Nude 1925

### Pepper 1930

Weston claimed the photographs of peppers, fruit, vegetables and shells were simply about purity of vision and pure form. Writing in his Daybooks he commented, “*a classic, completely satisfying, - a pepper - but more than a pepper: abstract, in that it is completely outside subject matter. It has no psychological attributes, no human emotions are aroused: this new pepper takes one beyond the world we know in the conscious mind*” (1961: vol 2 181). Tina Modotti found it disturbing mentally and physically (Lowe 2004: 38). Catherine Thompson writing on this image comments: “*The image is sharp and realistic, with every detail of the pepper in focus, yet this image is about more than the bell pepper. This image is about form and about life. The lighting delineates the form of the pepper, its curves, its wrinkles. Its sensuous undulating form is reminiscent of the human form with its curves and folds. Yet this is an object which stands alone*” (<http://nosuch.com/photo/influence.html#F4>)

However, images do not stand alone. Their meaning, as we have discussed, only exist in reference to other objects. The shape and form of the pepper is clearly reflective of the nude form. Some critics suggest female buttocks others the back and arms of male weightlifters; which of these interpretations works for an individual depends on their personal experience and view. The important point is that the pepper works as an image because it reminds us as Modotti suggested of the physical and sensual. This point is reinforced by McGrath (2003) who explores the sexual underpinning inherent in Weston’s work.



Pepper 1930

### **Dead Man 1937**

Weston approaches this photograph in realist mode: here is a body on the ground. It is as if the body could be a fallen tree or dead animal. The ‘facts’ are presented seemingly without comment, although, there is a question over the positioning of the left arm and hand. Did Weston compose the body to make it a more satisfying image?

In the context of our knowledge of the social and economic history of the USA we can deduce that this is a body of a migrant labourer. He represents one of many driven from the dust bowl states towards the west coast and photographed in very different ways by Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans for the FSA. The photograph raises questions about the effects of capitalism and the possibility of death by starvation in a land of food surplus. The image also raises questions on issues outside of the frame. How long has the body been here, are there other bodies lying around, will he be given a formal burial and did Weston assist with this, or having taken the picture did he move on? There is also the personal story of who is this man, what about his family, did they survive and what was his personal narrative?

Apparently, Weston came across this image on a road trip. *“Pausing in front of a picture titled Dead Man, Colorado Desert 1937”* Watts says, *“He and Charis saw a little sign in the desert: ‘Help, I need water, I’m sick’ and then they found this man who had already expired. Instead of running off and telling the authorities, Weston set up his tripod and took pictures. People say he fixated on dead things, but his retort was, Well, death is part of life”*. ( <http://www.death-valley.us/article639.html>). This raises a different set of issues around photography. Does making the image take precedent over offering support to people? Does recording death through war and famine absolve the photographer of the need to give direct support to people in need? These are ethical, ontological and social value questions inherent in the practice of photography and need to be explored by any theory of photography. It cannot be sufficient to just talk about the photograph as if it is abstracted from life.



Dead man 1937

### **Grass Against the Sea 1937**

On the surface a simple picture of grass (the earth), sea and sky. The grass is recorded in detail while the softer elements are in diffused focus. There are no people or signs of people in view. It is this missing element that is significant. Writing about women Tuchman (1981) argues that popular culture ‘symbolically annihilates’ women through trivialising women’s lives and experience or ignoring it completely. Just because objects are not in the photographic image, does not mean they are not relevant to understanding it.

The photograph suggests unaffected naturalness, but underlying this are several questions. The photograph was taken in California. Is grass in the picture an indigenous form on an unmodified landscape? Or is it a by product of human modification to the land? We know that this area is contested space. The sea provides employment for many through fishing, drilling for oil, shipping and leisure activities. The land is farmed and again provides employment and recreation. Who owns this land, who works it, what is the relationship between them? Should the beach area and the surrounding land be developed or protected? These questions concern much of the remaining American wilderness.

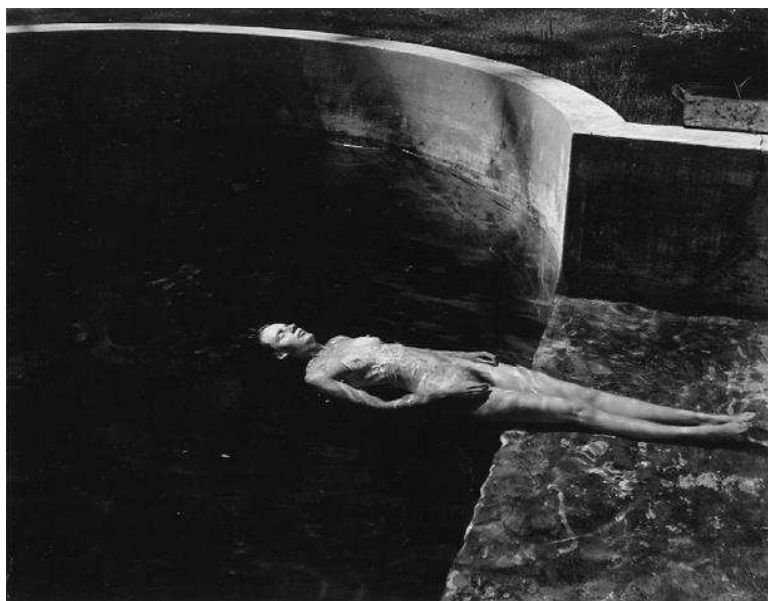


Grass Against the Sea 1937

### **Nude Floating 1939**

Superficially, this is another image concerned with form, texture, light and shadow. It combines the basic elements of water, earth and flesh contrasted against manmade concrete. It is both beautiful and enigmatic. The woman appears to be floating into the abyss, some writers suggest a womb, but at the same time reflecting light over the darkness beneath her. One could write about Weston's creative genius in constructing this picture and speculate on his psychological state and what this picture meant to him. Alternatively, we could question some of the coded messages within the photograph. Why a woman in the photograph and what is the significance of her nakedness? Does she need to be naked? What does the male viewer's gaze and consumption of the naked body take from the image, how is this different for a female viewer? What is the significance of juxtaposing naked female flesh to water and concrete? How do these coded messages reinforce our internalised view of women, sexuality and gender relationships?

Many critics have referenced this photograph, for example "*It is a picture that evokes multiple references while retaining its originality, for example from Henry Peach Robinson's 1860 Picture The Lady of Shalott, although of course she was both clothed and in a boat, and also an early work by Kertesz of an apparently headless body in a swimming pool, although in that the emphasis is more on the distortions and patterns of sun on and through water*" (<http://photography.about.com/library/weekly/aa090301d.htm>). The image can also be linked to the themes Edward Hopper was exploring around the same time; that of isolated human contemplation held between the forces of light and darkness (for example *Automat* 1927). In making these links to other works of art, Weston becomes located into wider cultural and artistic practice and therefore subject to a more diverse set of analysis.



Nude floating 1939

## Discussion of photographic content: personal practice

These photographs were taken as part of an assignment on tourism. They were also an experiment in directing the viewer through selective colouring of part of the image. The following analysis of the photographs is drawn from the authors commentary of the ideas behind the images and the coded material they contain.

The first image depicts an elderly woman in everyday clothes and town shoes with a shopping bag standing by the edge, and staring out across, the sea. The sea and sky have been desaturated to emphasise the bleakness of the scene. For the author the image suggests loneliness and isolation. There are questions: who is she, why is she there, what does starring out to sea mean to her, what might she be thinking? The codes within the image could also link to wider issues concerning elderly people living alone, how society values women who are older and less attractive to men, and social support in an increasing anomic society. For the author the image also contains the symbolism of the open sea as a suggestion of possibility, adventure, escape and a new life. It can also represent loved ones being far away and a time past. Other viewers may have different interpretations.



This and following photographs: Llandudno 2004 by the author

The second image reflects the working class nature of Llandudno. The ice cream cone is an iconic image of a typical British summer holiday. The 'fish and chips' sign also references working class consumption and behaviour. During a typical day at the British seaside it is likely that an average family may consume both products. Indeed, the day may not feel complete without doing so. The photograph comments on popular culture. But also a culture that is in decline as increasing working affluence changes holiday patterns to overseas and towards what are portrayed as more sophisticated tastes (for example American ice cream products). There are further coded references from the ice cream cone to ice cream carts, their role in Brit Pop videos and Italian immigration and stereotyping around ice cream production and marketing.



The final image is of an amusement arcade. Again we know this is a working class cultural setting because of the bingo sign. Amusements have multiple references: some through pinball machines to the USA and images of an American past, others via video games to an Asian electronic future. It may be part of the British working class culture to consume such activities; in themselves little of Britain is reflected. However, bingo is a preserve of British women and the elderly, although in decline with the arrival of the national lottery. The machines outside the amusement arcade contain Winnie the Poo figures. The use of these figures exploits children's interest in the associated stories. Originally a product of the British middle class the rights to the stories have been sold to Disney and are marketed globally. These bright machines attract young children to try and win one of the characters. In doing so, these machines exploit children and parents sentimentality as well provide an acceptable (?) introduction for children to amusements and gaming.



## Conclusion

From the discussion of the literature, and review of the case study photographs, it is clear that photography takes place in a social and cultural context. Furthermore, the photograph exists as a social object that fulfils specific roles and functions according to context. The meaning of a photograph can be explored through semiotic processes. In doing so it is clear that photographs tells us things about place, identity, difference, economic, social and environmental processes as well as suggestions concerning the intention and perhaps psychological drives of the photographer.

Theories that set photography only within the artist as 'genius' mode or see the images as simply reflections of reality, fail to respond to this deeper analysis that is required. Therefore, any viable theory of photography must integrate and respond to the political nature of culture and social construction. Any theory that fails to do so not only talks to itself but has little to say.



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