

# CRITICIZING PHOTOGRAPHS

An Introduction to Understanding Images

TERRY BARRETT



# Criticizing Photographs

Emphasizing the understanding of images and their influences on how they affect our attitudes, beliefs, and actions, this fully updated sixth edition offers consequential ways of looking at images from the perspectives of photographers, critics, theoreticians, historians, curators, and editors.

It invites informed conversations about meanings and implications of images, providing multiple and sometimes conflicting answers to questions such as: What are photographs? Should they be called art? Are they ethical? What are their implications for self, society, and the world? From showing how critics verbalize what they see in images and how they persuade us to see similarly, to dealing with what different photographs might mean, the book posits that some interpretations are better than others and explains how to deliberate among competing interpretations. It looks at how the worth of photographs is judged aesthetically and socially, offering samples and practical considerations for both studio critiques for artists and professional criticism for public audiences.

This book is a clear and accessible guide for students of art history, photography, and criticism, as well as anyone interested in carefully looking at and talking about photographs and their effects on the world in which we live.

**Terry Barrett** is Professor Emeritus, The Ohio State University, where he taught criticism and photography. Dr. Barrett is the author of *Why Is That Art?*, *Criticizing Art*, *Interpreting Art*, *CRITS*, *Making Art*, and articles and chapters on teaching and learning in the arts.



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# **Criticizing Photographs**

## An Introduction to Understanding Images

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**Terry Barrett**

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# Photograph credits

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# Preface

Years of teaching art criticism have convinced me that one of the best ways to appreciate an image is to observe, think, and talk about it. This is what art criticism entails, and it's what this book is about. My goal is to help both beginning and advanced students of photography use the activities of criticism in order to better appreciate and understand photographs.

This book is organized according to the major activities of criticism identified by aesthetician Morris Weitz, the author of the “open definition of art,” in his study of *Hamlet* criticism—namely, describing, interpreting, evaluating, and theorizing. These activities are presented in this book as overlapping and interdependent. I believe that Weitz's breakdown is sufficiently broad so as not to exclude any considerations about criticism and sufficiently narrow to provide a directed and clear consideration of the complex activities of criticizing photographs. Although Weitz distinguished these activities in 1964, I think they readily accommodate postmodernism concerns and are amenable to a diverse range of theoretical persuasions and political stances. The spirit of the book is pluralist, inclusive of many different voices, and resistant to dogmatic thinking.

The following chapters consider describing photographs, interpreting and evaluating them, and theorizing about photography, in that order. I've placed major emphasis on the interpretation of photographs because I believe that discussion of meaning is more important than pronouncements of judgment and that interpretation is the most important and rewarding aspect of criticism. Interpretive discussion increases understanding and thus deepens appreciation, whether that appreciation is ultimately negative or positive. A judgment rendered without an understanding is irresponsible and irresponsible. Unfortunately, *criticism* is too frequently confused with negative value judgments because of its everyday connotations. The term *criticism* in the language of aesthetics encompasses much more.

For the present, at the risk of oversimplification, the four activities of criticism—describing, interpreting, evaluating, and theorizing—can be thought of as seeking answers to four basic questions: What is here? What is it about? How good is it? Is it art? This book explores the criticism of photographs by means of these major questions.

The book also provides a variety of answers to these questions by critics, including student critics in Chapter 8, who sometimes agree and sometimes disagree about the same photographs. I've cited dozens of critics and many more photographers. In my selections I've tried to present a diversity of critical voices to responsibly provide readers with a range of critical stances and approaches from which to choose. I chose these particular critics and photographers as being especially appropriate to the points being discussed; no hierarchy of critics or photographers is implied by my choices.

## New to this edition

This edition features changes throughout, for clarity, comprehension, and timeliness. All of the color photographs are reproduced in color and all photographs are appropriately close to where they are mentioned. One major change places the chapter on theory as Chapter 2, whereas in the past it has been the second-to-last chapter. This change to forefront theory underscores the fact that theory influences all aspects of photography criticism and alerts the reader accordingly. The number of categories of photographs has been shortened from seven to six. In prior editions descriptive photographs were subtly distinguished from explanatory photographs: Here the two are condensed into one category, descriptive explanatory photographs, for easier use. As always, reader responses are most welcome from students and instructors (barrett.8@osu.edu).

## Acknowledgments

This book may never have happened without my serendipitous meeting of Jan Beatty, then an editor at Mayfield Publishing Company, the first publisher of this book, and her continued gentle and joyful handling of the entire editorial process from the initial conception of the book through to its third edition. The fifth edition was most ably guided by the people at McGraw-Hill, including editors Betty Chen and Meghan Campbell, and the production team of Robin Reed, Margarite Reynolds, Sonia Brown, and Laura Fuller. This present edition comes through the support of Bloomsbury Publishing Company, especially the care of Louise Baird-Smith, Faith Marsland, Alexander Highfield, and permissions editor Susan Michael Barrett. Natalie Foster, Jennifer Vennall, and Abigail Stanley at Taylor & Francis, as well as freelancers Emily Boyd, Aidan Cross, and Bookbright Media. I especially want to publicly thank my wife, Susan Michael Barrett, for her continuous expressions of loving encouragement throughout this revision, her carefully judicious readings of the text, and the joy she adds to our lives.

Past editions of the book have benefited from manuscript reviews by Thomas Barrow, University of New Mexico; Ron Carraher, University of Washington; Darryl Curran; Margaret Doell, Adams State College; Corinne Diop, James Madison University; Mariah Doren, Central Michigan University; Doug Dubois; Carol Flax, University of Arizona; Mary Frey, Hartford Art School; Gretchen Garner, University of Connecticut; Marita Gootee, Mississippi State University; Marcella Hackbardt, Kenyon College; Jessica Hines, Georgia Southern University; Victoria Hirt, University of South Florida; Dean Kessmann, The George Washington University; Sybil Miller; Bea Nettles, Karen Norton, Purdue University; University of Illinois; Dan Powell, University of Oregon; David Read; Susan Ressler, Purdue University; Leesa Rittelmann, Hartwick College; Adrienne Salinger, University of New Mexico; Carol Scollans, University of Massachusetts, Boston; Ernest Scott, University of Illinois; Robert Smith, Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design; Richard Stevens; Stan Strembicki; David Taylor, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces; Prince V. Thomas, Lamar University; Anthony Thompson, Grand Valley State University; Christopher Tsouras, Community College of Southern Nevada; John Upton, Orange Coast College; Gwen Walstrand, Missouri State University; Sue Wrblan, George Mason University; Samuel Winch, Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg; and Jon M. Yamashiro, Miami University. This current edition was reviewed by Julia Peck, University of Gloucester; Kris Sanford, Central Michigan University; and one anonymous reviewer. . . .





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# 1 About art criticism

This book is about actively engaging in photography criticism so that we can better appreciate and understand photographs and their effects. Unfortunately, we usually do not equate the term *criticism* with *appreciation*, and for good reasons: In ordinary usage *criticism* carries negative connotations. One rarely, if ever, hopes to be criticized. Nevertheless, this book is about criticism in a broader sense of intelligent, appreciative dialogue about art and its social consequences. The major premise of this book is that we can more carefully examine and more deeply appreciate photographs by learning and applying the various processes of professional critics.

Social media often positions criticism as judgmental and negative. In its aggregate of movie and television reviews, for example, “Rotten Tomatoes” derives its name from the custom of audiences throwing rotten fruits and vegetables onto stages as acts of disapproval with theater performances. In popular culture, critics are presented and seen as mere consumer advisors. Reviewers rate restaurants, television shows, movies with iconographic thumbs up or down or 1 to 5 stars, constantly reinforcing criticism as judgmental consumer advice. Of all the words critics write, those most often quoted are their judgments: “Pulls you in and doesn’t let you go” (*Game of Thrones*), “One of the great science fiction films of all time” (*Blade Runner*). These words are highlighted in bold type in ads because these words sell products, but they constitute only a few of the critic’s total output of words, and they are quoted out of context. These snippets have minimal value in helping us reach an understanding of a play or a movie and why, in the opinions of reviewers, they may merit accolades, if they do.

Social media also provides its users with quick and shallow voting with “likes” and hearts, thumbs up or down, likes, and various emojis meant to indicate approval or disapproval. Rather than considered discourse we get snap judgments devoid of reasons.

## Critics are writers

Critics are writers who like art and choose to spend their lives thinking and writing about art. Christopher Knight, who has written art criticism for the *Los Angeles Times* since 1989, left a successful career as a museum curator to write criticism precisely because he wanted to be closer to art: “The reason I got interested in a career in art in the first place is to be around art and artists. I found that in museums you spend most of your time around trustees and paperwork.”<sup>1</sup>

About writing, bell hooks, critical theorist who writes about art, says this about writing:

Seduced by the magic of words in childhood, I am still transported, carried away, by writing and reading. Writing longhand the first drafts of all my works, I read aloud to

myself, performing the words to hear and feel them. I want to be certain I am grappling with language in such a way that my words live and breathe, that they surface from a passionate place inside me.<sup>2</sup>

Peter Schjeldahl, a poet who writes art criticism as a career, says about his poetry that he wants to be understood and enjoyed by all readers: “there are no rewards in being obscure or abstruse or overbearing.” About being an art critic, he says: “I get from art a regular chance to experience something—or perhaps everything, the whole world—as someone else, to replace my eyes and mind with the eyes and mind of another for a charged moment.”<sup>3</sup>

Some critics do not want to be called critics because of the negative connotations of the term. Art critic and poet Rene Ricard, writing in *Artforum*, says: “In point of fact I’m not an art critic. I am an enthusiast. I like to drum up interest in artists who have somehow inspired me to be able to say something about their work.”<sup>4</sup> Michael Feingold, who writes theater criticism for the *Village Voice*, says: “criticism should celebrate the good in art, not revel in its anger at the bad.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Lucy Lippard is usually supportive of the art she writes about, and she says she is sometimes accused of not being critical, of not being a critic at all. She responds, “That’s okay with me, since I never liked the term anyway. Its negative connotations place the writer in fundamental antagonism to the artists.”<sup>6</sup> She and other critics do not want to be thought of as being opposed to artists.

## Definitions of criticism

The term *criticism* used in art discourse is complex, with several different meanings. In the language of aestheticians who philosophize about art and art criticism, and in the language of art critics, *criticism* usually refers to a much broader range of activities than just the act of judging the merits of a work of art. Morris Weitz, a philosopher interested in art criticism, sought to discover more about criticism by studying what critics actually do when they criticize art.<sup>7</sup> He took as his test case all the criticism ever written about Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. After reading the volumes of *Hamlet* criticism written over centuries, Weitz concluded that when critics criticize they do one or more of four things: They *describe* the work of art, they *interpret* it, they *evaluate* it, and they *theorize* about it. Some critics engage primarily in descriptive criticism; others describe, but primarily to further their interpretations; still others describe, interpret, evaluate, *and* theorize. These critical activities occur in different sequences of thoughts and do not necessarily proceed from description to interpretation to judgment to theory. Of the several conclusions Weitz drew about criticism, a most notable one is that any one of these four activities constitute criticism and that evaluation is not a logically necessary part of criticism. He found that several critics criticized *Hamlet* without ever judging it.

When critics criticize, they do much more than express their likes and dislikes—and much more than approve and disapprove of works of art. Critics do judge artworks, and sometimes negatively, but their judgments more often are positive than negative: As Ricard says, “Why give publicity to something you hate?” When Schjeldahl is confronted by a work he does not like, he asks himself several questions:

‘Why would I have done that if I did it?’ is one of my working questions about an artwork. (Not that I *could*. This is make-believe.) My formula of fairness to work that

displeases me is to ask, 'What would I like about this if I liked it?' When I cannot deem myself an intended or even a possible member of a work's audience, I ask myself what such an audience member must be like.<sup>8</sup>

Michael Feingold thinks it unfortunate that theater criticism in New York City often prevents theatergoing rather than encourages it, and he adds that "as every critic knows, a favorable review with some substance is much harder to write than a pan."<sup>9</sup> When Abigail Solomon-Godeau considers her writing about photography, she says there are instances when it is clear that something is nonsense and should be called nonsense, but she finds it more beneficial to ask questions about meaning than about aesthetic worth.<sup>10</sup>

"What do I do as a critic in a gallery?" Schjeldahl asks. He answers: "I learn. I walk up to, around, touch if I dare, the objects, meanwhile asking questions in my mind and casting about for answers—all until mind and senses are in some rough agreement, or until fatigue sets in." Late in his life he wrote about his personal taste in art that he suspended as a critic:

I retain, but suspend, my personal taste to deal with the panoply of the art I see. I have a trick for doing justice to an uncongenial work: 'What would I like about this if I liked it?' I may come around; I may not. Failing that, I wonder, What must the people who like this be like?<sup>11</sup>

Edmund Feldman, art historian and art educator, wrote much about art criticism and defined it as "informed talk about art."<sup>12</sup> He also minimizes the act of evaluating, or judging, art, saying that it is the least important of the critical procedures.

A.D. Coleman, a pioneering critic of recent photography, defined what he does as "the intersecting of photographic images with words."<sup>13</sup> He adds: "I merely look closely at and into all sorts of photographic images and attempt to pinpoint in words what they provoke me to feel and think and understand." Morris Weitz defined criticism as "a form of studied discourse about works of art. It is a use of language designed to facilitate and enrich the understanding of art."<sup>14</sup>

Throughout this book the term *criticism* will not refer to the act of negative judgment; it will refer to a much wider range of activities and will adhere to this broad definition: "Criticism is informed discourse about art to increase understanding and appreciation of art and its effects." This definition includes criticism of all art forms, including dance, music, poetry, painting, and photography. "Discourse" includes talking and writing. "Informed" is an important qualifier that distinguishes criticism from mere talk and uninformed opinion about art. Not all writing about art is criticism. Some art writing is journalism rather than criticism: It is news reporting on artists and artworld events rather than critical analysis.

A way of becoming informed about art is by critically thinking about it. Criticism is a means toward the end of understanding and appreciating photographs and their effects on viewers. In some cases, a carefully thought-out response to a photograph may result in negative appreciation or informed dislike. More often than not, however, especially when considering the work of prominent photographers and that of artists using photographs, careful critical attention to a photograph or group of photographs will result in fuller understanding and positive appreciation. Criticism should result in what Harry Broudy, a philosopher who furthered aesthetic education, called "enlightened cherishing."<sup>15</sup>

Broudy's "enlightened cherishing" is a compound concept that combines *thought* (by the term *enlightened*) with *feeling* (by the term *cherishing*). He reminds us that both thought and feeling are necessary components in responding to images. Criticism is not a coldly intellectual endeavor.

### Sources of criticism

In this book we are mainly considering criticism that is published in books, art magazines, photography magazines, exhibition catalogues, academic journals, the popular press, and online. Studio critiques, forms of art criticism that take place in classrooms and artists' studios, are discussed in Chapter 8.

*On Photography*<sup>16</sup> is a book of critical essays that Susan Sontag first wrote between 1973 and 1977 in the *New York Review of Books* that were then published in a single volume that remains influential today. John Tagg's *The Burden of Representation*<sup>17</sup> is a book of his critical essays in which he investigates uses of photography much broader than photographs that are considered art.

Exhibition catalogues are a major source of critical writing about photographs. Catalogues list the exhibited works, often reproduce all of the works in the exhibition, usually have an introductory essay explaining why the curator selected this group of works for an exhibition, and often include essays on the work by different writers. Such essays offer insightful interpretive commentary on photographs and photographers. After the exhibitions, the catalogues are marketed as books and take on a life of their own. *Another Kind of Life: Photography on the Margins*,<sup>18</sup> was a group exhibition and is now a book of photographs and essays about them by different authors. Martin Parr's *Think of Scotland*<sup>19</sup> is an example of a temporary exhibition of photographs by a single photographer that now remains intact as a self-sufficient book.

Much photography criticism is found in the art press in glossy magazines such as *Artforum International*, *Art in America*, and *Art News*. Criticism is increasingly available on the Web in online journals and blogs such as *Artnet News* and *Hyperallergic*. Photography criticism is also published in journals specifically devoted to photographic media, such as *Aperture* magazine and the *British Journal of Photography*. *The Art Bulletin* is an example of a scholarly journal that includes photography criticism written for audiences that are informed about art and photography.

Some critics write for very large audiences and publish in mass media circulations: Abigail Solomon-Godeau has published some of her articles in *Vogue*, and Robert Hughes and Peter Plagens wrote art criticism for *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines. Increasingly, critics are using the Internet to reach readers: Charles Desmarais, art critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle* newspaper, distributes his reviews by email, and Jerry Saltz, critic for *New York Magazine*, frequently publishes reviews and shorter opinions on *Facebook*. Desmarais, Saltz, and other critics are also available through *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and other social media platforms.

Each of these publications has its own editorial tone and political ideology, and critics often choose their publications according to their style of writing, their critical interests, and their personal politics. Critics also adapt their styles to fit certain publications. Editors often provide direction, sometimes quite specifically. Policies about what the publications cover vary. Grace Glueck, former art critic for the *New York Times*, explained that the paper covers important museum and gallery shows in New York City because that is what its

readers expect. Because the magazine is national and devotes comparatively little space to art, Peter Plagens, former art critic for *Newsweek* magazine, covered exhibitions of national and international interest.

Many critics have editorial independence about what they cover. When she wrote criticism for *New York Magazine*, Kay Larson said that she wrote about what interested her. She explains that she tried to see everything in town that she could manage to see, looked for things that she liked, and then made her choices about what to write: “Ultimately I base my decisions not only on whom I like but whom I feel I can say something about. There are many artists every week whom I do like and whom I feel I can’t say anything about.”<sup>20</sup> Robert Hughes, who wrote about 24 pieces a year for *Time* magazine, was subject to very few editorial restrictions or instructions: He covered what he chose.

When critics write for different publications, they are aware that they are writing for different audiences. Their choices of what to write about and their approaches to their chosen or assigned topics vary according to which publication they are writing for and for whom they imagine their readers to be. Sean O’Hagan, who writes a column called “On Photography” for *The Guardian*, is conscious of writing for a large circulation daily newspaper in England. He says:

I am not writing for an art magazine where one can assume that the reader has a certain familiarity with the subject or with the history of conceptualism or whatever. I can’t use dense, theoretical language to deconstruct works by Jeff Wall (Figure 4.1) or Gursky, nor would I want to.<sup>21</sup>

## Kinds of criticism

Ralph Smith, a scholar of aesthetic education, distinguished two types of art criticism, both of which are useful but serve different purposes: “exploratory aesthetic criticism” and “argumentative aesthetic criticism.”<sup>22</sup> When doing exploratory aesthetic criticism, a critic delays judgments of value and attempts rather to ascertain an object’s aesthetic aspects as completely as possible, to ensure that readers will experience all that can be seen in a work of art. This kind of criticism relies heavily on descriptive and interpretive thought. Its aim is to sustain aesthetic experience. In doing argumentative aesthetic criticism, after sufficient interpretive analysis has been done, critics estimate the work’s positive aspects or lack of them and give a full account of their judgments based on explicitly stated criteria and standards. The critics argue in favor of their judgments and attempt to persuade others that the object is best considered in the way they have interpreted and judged it, and they are prepared to defend their conclusions.

Ingrid Sischy, editor and writer, has written criticism that exemplifies both the exploratory and argumentative types. In a catalogue essay accompanying the nude photographs made by Lee Friedlander, Sischy pleasantly meanders in and through the photographs and the photographer’s thoughts, carefully exploring both and her reactions to them. We know, in the reading, that she approves of Friedlander and his photographs and why, but more centrally, we experience the photographs through the descriptive and interpretive thoughts of a careful and committed observer.<sup>23</sup> In an essay she wrote for *The New Yorker* about the popular journalistic photographs made by Sebastiao Salgado, however, Sischy carefully, logically, and cumulatively builds an argument against their worth, despite their great popularity in the artworld.<sup>24</sup> In this particular essay she demonstrates argumentative

criticism that is centrally evaluative, replete with the reasons for and the criteria upon which she based her negative appraisal.

Andy Grundberg, a former photography critic for the *New York Times* and author of books on photography, perceives two basic approaches to photography criticism: the “applied” and the “theoretical.” Applied criticism is practical, immediate, and directed at the work; theoretical criticism is more philosophical, attempts to define photography, and uses photographs only as examples to clarify its arguments. Applied criticism tends toward journalism; theoretical criticism tends toward aesthetics.<sup>25</sup> Grundberg is fluent in both modes of criticism.

Critics write theoretical essays that may appear as feature essays in magazines and scholarly journals. For example, Louis Kaplan applied the theoretical insights on the topic of community by contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy to the photographs of a community of lovers by Nan Goldin: “A photographer and a philosopher share with us the fundamental acknowledgement that sharing constitutes each of us, that our being-in-the-world is always already a being-with.”<sup>26</sup>

Theoretical explorations of photography are also of book length: Roland Barthes’s book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981) is a theoretical treatment of photography that attempts to distinguish photography from other kinds of picture making. In *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (1997), Geoffrey Batchen uses the methodology of Michel Foucault to explore the ideological and ideational origins of photography and why early photographs look the way they do.

In her writing about photography, Abigail Solomon-Godeau draws from cultural theory, feminism, and the history of art and photography to examine ideologies surrounding making, exhibiting, and writing about photographs. Her writing is often criticism about criticism.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to applied and theoretical criticism, Grundberg identifies another type of criticism as “connoisseurship,” which he rejects as severely limited. The connoisseur, of wine or photographs, asks: “Is this good or bad?” and makes a proclamation based on his or her particular taste. This kind of criticism, which is often used in casual speech and sometimes found in professional writing, is extremely limited in scope because the judgments it yields are usually proclaimed without supporting reasons or the benefit of explicit criteria, and thus they are neither very informative nor useful. Statements based on taste are simply too idiosyncratic to be worth disputing. As Grundberg adds, “Criticism’s task is to make arguments, not pronouncements.”<sup>28</sup> This book is in agreement with Grundberg on these points.

## **The backgrounds of critics**

Critics come to criticism from varied backgrounds. Some but not all art critics have advanced degrees in art history and support themselves by teaching art history as they write criticism. Some come from studio art backgrounds and both write criticism and exhibit their art: Peter Plagens, former critic for *Newsweek* magazine, writes criticism for the *Wall Street Journal* and exhibits his paintings.

Barbara Kruger (Figure 6.2), conceptual artist best known for her collages and installations, has also written reviews of music, film, and television for *Real Life* and *Artforum*. Many of her essays are published in a collection, *Remote Control*.<sup>29</sup> Michael Kimmelman, architecture critic for the *New York Times*, studied art history as a graduate student but