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# A Short History Of Photography



## Synopsis

Walter Benjamin's groundbreaking essay on photography theory explores the social and psychological dynamics of the mass-media age and is recognised as one of the indispensable works of cultural theory. The classic 1972 translation by Stanley Mitchell is now available in book form for the first time to mark the 80th Anniversary of the original publication, with a new Introduction by writer and photographer Henry Bond.

From the Introduction "Applied as a *modus operandi*, any intention to demystify or debunk through a rebuttal of idiosyncratic "conventional wisdom" often emerges directly from everyday life: anthropological field research made on a tram; in a cafe; at an art exhibition; lazing on a mountainside smoking a joint (see *My First Impressions of Hashish*); or, as here, whilst perusing a selection of recently published photo-books.

Benjamin's essay was first published in German in three consecutive weekly instalments in the arts-to-politics magazine *Literarische Welt*, in the Fall of 1931, where it appears as *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*. Notwithstanding its appearance in the context of a journalistic, features-led current affairs title, Benjamin's essay is, I claim, "I am bold, but I cannot imagine I am alone in this conclusion" the single most significant essay in the quite slim canon of indispensable photo theory texts: there is no later scholar of photo who has not been influenced by it.

Benjamin's deliberately unassuming "little" history can and should be opposed to all the grand reference tomes on photography that are packed with so much (includes more than 3,000 color and black-and-white images, etc.), but which are ultimately only unwieldy and tedious.

**About the Author** Walter Benjamin (15 July 1892–26 September 1940) was a German-Jewish intellectual, who functioned variously as a literary critic, philosopher, sociologist, translator, radio broadcaster and essayist. His work, combining elements of historical materialism, German idealism and Jewish mysticism, has made enduring and influential contributions to aesthetic theory and Western Marxism, and has sometimes been associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory. As a literary critic, among his major works are essays on Goethe's novel *Elective Affinities*; the work of Franz Kafka and Karl Kraus; translation theory; the stories of Nikolai Leskov; the work of Marcel Proust and perhaps most significantly, the poetry of Charles Baudelaire. He also made major translations into German of the *Tableaux Parisiens* section of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* and parts of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

**About the Translator** Stanley Mitchell (born 1932) is a British academic and author. He was born in London and attended Christ College School in Finchley, North London, which included a period of evacuation to Biggleswade during World War II. . . . translations include books by Brecht, Georg Lukács and Pushkin.

**About the Introduction** Henry Bond is a writer, photographer, curator and visual artist. In his *Lacan at the Scene*

(Slavoj Žižek, series ed., Short Circuits, MIT Press, 2009), Bond made a contribution to theoretical psychoanalysis. In 1990, with Sarah Lucas, Bond organized the art exhibition East Country Yard Show, which was influential in the formation and development of the YBA art movement; together with Damien Hirst, Angela Bulloch and Liam Gillick, the two were "the earliest of the YBAs." Bond's visual art tends to appropriation and pastiche; he has exhibited work made collaboratively with YBA artists including a photograph made with Sam Taylor-Wood and the Documents Series, made with Liam Gillick. In the 1990s, Bond was a photojournalist working for British fashion, music, and youth culture magazine The Face. In 1998, his photobook of street fashions in London The Cult of the Street was published. In 2011, his The Gaze of the Lens was published. Biographical material Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License/

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## Customer Reviews

Strange translation - seems so totally different in tone from the original essay, as published, 'the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' in Illusions, by Benjamin w intro by Hannah Arendt, that I am suspicious of the translator's interpretation. This one is accessible, but loses much - in the translation. At least will be read by many who otherwise would not plough into the more complicated one.

Benjamin makes some interesting points --mainly because his work has come to define thinking in the field of photographic critique. Otherwise a quick and intellectually stingy piece of writing. Noteworthy is the reference to soup and scalability -- Maybe Warhol thought equally poo err my of this essayV

A quick and easy read if you are researching photographic history and theory. Benjamin's style of writing is very accessible. A book of its time, obviously.

In some ways, superior to the more famous essay. A must for students of both Benjamin and photography. Oh! I needed two more words! Read it!

Not what I was expecting, a very abstract view on the history of photography in the form of an erudite type essay!

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