From Benjamin to Azoulay:

Photography's disposition as a *sensus communis*

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Academic year: 2018-2019
Word count: 16,032

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Acknowledgement

A master thesis is, first and foremost, a necessary and also general way of measuring if a student has acquired a sufficient set of skill and knowledge at the end of his or her master studies. It is, secondly, a test of patience for professors, parents, friends and lovers of the student writing the thesis. This acknowledgement, then, is for everyone - particularly Gijs, mum and dad - who has helped me through this trajectory: thank you for staying, for bearing patience and for your encouragement.

I would like to express my very great appreciation to my Professor, Dr. S.A. Shobeiri, for helping me carry out the project, and for putting a lot of trust in my ideas when I myself could no longer find it. His flexibility and patience is quite exceptional.

It almost surprises me to say that in the end, my curiosity for photography did not at all vanish; on the contrary, it has increased, after all this time, and I am looking forward to the next chapters of my career in this endlessly interesting phenomenon.

Introduction

The history of the condition of photography's documentary character is dense and ambivalent. Its conceptions are manifold as photography's inherent relations to the world are complex and ambiguous. Used by all and sundry, it moves - either in digital form or in print - within many diverse domains: it is art in museums, a historical record in archives, legal evidence in court, the latest news in newspapers, and personal memory in a photo album. All at once, photography embodies diverse appearances with various purposes. This intersections of different domains that cross photography, complicate a definite understanding of the practice that documentary photography encompasses. Its heterogeneous character disrupts a demarcation such as *documentary* – a distinct category based upon the visual organisation of a photograph. We tend to label a photograph alongside such genres, read it against a seemingly clear-cut and visually traceable set of information. We tend, in other words, to search for its definitive meaning, while photography by itself is pluralistic and dynamic.

In this thesis I have researched a number of key conceptualisations of photography that lead the photographic discourse and in this respect our custom understanding of documentary photography. One of its leading threads runs via two domains which supposedly stand in opposition to one another: the aesthetic domain of the photograph has hampered its socio-political manifestation. A photograph identified as a work of art is at disadvantage of finding recognition for its social or political value since quality is measured first and foremost by means of aesthetic parameters. This dichotomous *leitmotif*, the aesthetic domain of a photographic work vis-à-vis its political domain, led to the belief that if documentary is to represent reality truthfully, or objectively, they cannot be artistic, and vice versa. This question has guided scholars in envisioning the photographic medium and accounts for a considerable number of texts that form the groundwork of this thesis.

To a large extent, then, photographic discourse is determined by a question of how we ought to understand the photographic documentary faculty, something based on a double identity of politics and aesthetics that exists as an apparent opposition. This either-or way of envisioning of photography's function or assignment resulted from a longstanding tradition of discourse - something this thesis further looks into - that evolved into a theoretical standstill that circles around questions whether or not photography operates politically correct in terms of social representation, and if it is functional as a tool for social change – a debate stemming from postmodern scholarship known under the umbrella term *politics of*

representation;[1] based on its aesthetic dimension, photography has been accused for exploiting its subjects, and for insufficiently communicating reality – subject matters that both remain highly debated.[2]

Overlooking photography's crucial role when it comes to inciting social and political change and the actual affects it does have within society, this theoretical *impasse* has come to the attention of several scholars, of whom Ariella Azoulay could be seen pioneering a different course in our understanding of photography. Azoulay establishes a different sensibility towards photography by proposing an alternative history in which photography exists as a socio-political *event,* rather than a mere visual medium, through which political relations are created. The photograph, she envisions, is the result of a collective endeavour in which photographer, photographed subject, and the eventual spectator, all stand in equal relation towards one another (Azoulay, *Civil Contract* 23).

In analysing photography's political ontology, her theoretical frame furthermore is based on a photographic practice that takes place against a background of disaster politics, envisaging photography as a means of exposing catastrophe, and counteracting catastrophe by building communal relationships by means of the photographic act. Her theory, then, fathoms general conceptualisations of photography, regarding questions of what photography is, how it functions, and how we should engage with it. In her theoretical work on photography, I have found a means of bridging photography's aesthetic dimension to its socio-political nature, so to argue that photography's aesthetic and political dimension are not mutually excluded. The concept of *sensus communis* offers a tool for understanding Azoulay's conception and explains how photography's aesthetic plane does not necessarily hinders its social or political vocation.[3]

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[1]See Hilde Van Gelder and Helen Westgeest, 'Photography's Social Function', in *Photography Theory in Historical Perspective* (2011), 152-189.

[2]There are many literary sources that relate to this discussion of photography representing reality, for instance by means of the *index*, as discussed by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1981). John Tagg understands photographic *truth* to be established by institutional apparatuses of power (*The Burden of Representation* 1988). These and other titles are still valuable in today's questions surrounding photographic representation, in times of digital photographic manipulation, *fake news*, and the trustworthiness of the photo image as a source of news. Questions surrounding photographic exploitation are found within humanitarian studies, see for instance Sanna Nissinen's 'Dilemmas of Ethical Practice in the Production of Contemporary Humanitarian Photography' (2015) or ''The Arithmetic of Compassion': Rethinking the Politics of Photography' by James Johnson (2011).

[3]Besides the common translation of a *sensus communis* as simply one's common sense, in philosophy there are two different conceptions: it was described by Aristotle as the ability of integrating the stimuli of the five human senses to a cohesive perception of an object, also referred to as the sixth sense – something Immanuel Kant understood to be the 'transcendental imagination'. Kant on the other hand contemplated the *sensus communis* as that what binds together a community; that what its members collectively share. It is this latter conception that is regarded here (source).

Object of study

The term 'documentary' as commonly applied to indicate a genre demarcation proves inconvenient within this discussion, as this thesis will show, for it is based on a set of formalistic conditions that are bound to the aesthetic realm – it diverges from Azoulay's argument when bridging the aesthetic and political dimension of photography; in addition, Azoulay herself does not explicitly differentiate between genres of photography and speaks only of "photography". I will thus continue to refer to the practice of social documentary photography, simply using the word 'photography'. By this I mean photography that is social in its foundation; photography that centres on the human subject.

The research object of this thesis then is first and foremost the transitioning understanding of photography's socio-political nature in relation to its aesthetic nature that evolved during the historical course of photographic theory. In a quest to comprehend this shift, I examine Azoulay's conceptions of photography in comparison to the most persistent arguments made by preceding scholars, around which photographic discourse initially centred. In order to comprehend Azoulay's conception of photography as a socio-political event, it is key to contextualise her work in terms of that of other relevant scholars. By doing this, I aim to seize the re-evaluations of photography brought forward by Azoulay and others who challenge predominant conceptions of a social photographic practice, in order to argue for an alternative framework or different analytical approach.

This thesis, then, researches and answers the following research question: Presupposing a change within photographic discourse in which the conceptualisation of photography, one that is fundamentally social in its practice but also identified as aesthetic, undergoes a transition, in what way does photography's binary position differ in a former discursive framework compared to a reframed envisioning, as demonstrated by Ariella Azoulay's theoretical work? More concisely, in what manner does photography's socio-political dimension compare to its aesthetic dimension in both discursive frameworks?

I have formulated sub-questions that are answered in the chapters of this thesis:

- What theoretical conceptions institutionalised photography's seemingly dichotomous position in which its aesthetic dimension and its political dimension exist as mutually excluded?
- How is this dichotomy manifest within photographic theory?
- In what way do Azoulay's conceptualisations bridge this binary envisioning of photography?

Addressing a paradigmatic shift in theoretical discourse asks for a historiographic approach in which a former theoretical framework is discussed, subsequently followed by a current discursive framework. The three chapters of this thesis follow this division of frameworks. The first chapter discusses the institutionalisation of photography's binary appearance by looking into the writings of cultural philosopher Walter Benjamin. It theorises photography's disposition as work of art that, ostensibly, opposes its socio-political faculty. The second chapter focusses on photographic discourse up until the end of the twentieth century that, as affected by Benjamin's texts, reaches a dead-end which eventually results in a paradigmatic shift of which Azoulay's way of regarding photography is, I contend, constituent. Both chapters set out the basic presumptions paramount to the former discursive framework, framed by Azoulay's deviant insights that lead up to the third chapter, in which Azoulay's central arguments are implemented into a frame of understanding photography, articulating a different approach towards photography in which its socio-political nature might be enhanced by its aesthetics, rather than overshadowed.

Theoretical framework of visual and photography studies

> The intelligibility of the photograph is no simple thing; photographs are *texts* inscribed in terms of what we may call 'photographic discourse', but this discourse, like any other, engages discourses beyond itself, the 'photographic text', like any other, is the site of a complex 'intertextuality', an overlapping series of previous texts 'taken for granted' at a particular cultural and historical conjuncture.
>
> - Victor Burgin, *Thinking Photography*

Similarly to photography, concretely framing a thesis is key to deliver a coherent research. The method employed fits within the principle of discourse analysis. It implies a comparative study of texts by leading scholars that set the tone of the debate in photographic theory. There are several discursive ways of knowing the world that stem from a particular school of thought. Applying a framework of one particular school has often been shown to be unproductive. Exposing new ways of conceptualising photography by looking through different theoretical lenses presents a photographic practice that does not fit the established discourse, and asks for a new way of reflecting.

The conceptualisation of photography as a *sensus communis* that resonates in Azoulay's work could form a new discursive frame of theorising documentary photography. Such a "new way of seeing", follows from a phrase inspired by John Berger's book *Ways of*

Seeing (1972). Berger follows the principle that we "never look just at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves" (Berger 9). It is founded on a key premise of Visual Studies when looking at how images work; that it is not simply the image object itself, but a complex range of social relations that affect how an image is created on the one hand, and how it is perceived on the other. Quoting Hall Foster, Gillian Rose illustrates in her book *Visual Methods* (2006), how this *visuality*, which is to be distinguished from our physiological ability of vision, refers to the way our vision is constructed in various ways, "how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein" (qtd. in Rose 6).

There are many different ways of seeing the world, and these various visualities are understood to influence the way we comprehend the world around us. Citing several theoreticians who argue that there are dominant visualities regulated by certain authoritarian institutions, Rose reminds us, by pointing to the work of Donna Haraway, that such "dominant scopic regimes of (post)modernity [are] neither a historical inevitability, nor [are] they] uncontested" (5).[4] Visual studies, then, takes up the task to discern various visions and visualities, or *scopic regimes*, to identify particular forms of representation and how they are produced by particular (dominant) scopic regimes, as they are "intimately bound into social power relations" (ibid.).

This focus on power is one of the key characteristics of studies in photographic theory: images visualise social power relations. Dominant forms of visuality produce a hierarchy of social relations that, contrastingly, reproduce dominant ways of seeing and knowing. Although a crucial insight, in this thesis I regard these notions, as exercised within visual studies, as being unproductive and obsolete. The focus of attention has lingered for long on how visual images construct social difference. It is therefore imperative to take a different perspective. It is, as Rose states when following Foucault, that pre-existing categories and preconceptions "must be held in expense. They must not be rejected definitively, of course, but the tranquillity with which they are accepted must be disturbed" (157). It is a method of analysation central to discourse analysis, which focusses on attaining knowledge surrounding the construction of social realities that run via discursive practices and form vast frameworks, which over time seem self-evident. Discourse analysis takes, per

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[4]See, for example, Donna Haraway's "Simians, Cyborgs and Women" in which she elaborates on the way social power relations are articulated through certain visualities (1991). She stresses, amongst other things, how our European, Western way of visualising the world, regulated by capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy, is only *a* way to view the world (Rose 5).

definition, a critical position towards such axioms: that what is assumed incontrovertible in our daily lives becomes historically specific and thus disputable within discourse analysis.

Chapter one. A Benjaminian critique of photography

Photography's discourse unfolded in the shadow of its more distinguished and dignified uncle; since its inception, it has sailed along the traditions and narratives of art history. Time and again, it sought for recognition and a place amongst other, older and established art forms, in particular painting. By proposing a political ontology of photography, Ariella Azoulay argues with her theoretical works *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008) and *Civil Imagination: a Political Ontology of Photography* (2011) that we ought to reconsider the discourse of photography, as since its inception it has been institutionalised within the discourse of art, causing an apparent hegemonic opposition between photography's political and aesthetic character. The conceptualisation Azoulay proposes oversteps this opposition allowing us to envision photography from a radically new point of view.

In this chapter, I delineate key moments determinant for the development of this particular but dominant discourse of art, its traditions and the way these have been universally instituted. As the scope of one chapter offers little space to elaborate on every event relevant to the advancement of its discourse, this chain of events is narrowed down to the theoretical work of cultural philosopher Walter Benjamin, whose essays on photography perform a crucial centre point, as will become clear, in establishing the discourse's foundation.[5] He delineates photography's binary position as an art on one side, and socio-political document on the other. By reconsidering his arguments regarding photography alongside Azoulay's terms, I aim to show the foundation that brought photography's binary position into being.

Introducing Azoulay

As already stated, photography was contemplated from its inception, in the shadows of the discourse surrounding the work of art; always in reference to the mechanisms of art and the several dimensions belonging to the visual art object, e.g. the aesthetic plane (Azoulay, *Civil Imagination* 14-15; *Death's Showcase* 29-30). This decided the common understanding of what photography is - an image made by a photographer that is subsequently seen in a certain place by one or more spectators - and has remained the same for approximately 150 years. "From the perspective of the individual positioned behind the lens – the one who sees the

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[5]Azoulay has outlined an elaborate discussion on the invention of photography, its key historical characters such as Daguerre, Niépce, Talbot and the varying emphases put on photography's mechanism (*The Civil Contract* 89-93).

world, shapes it into a photograph of his own creation, and displays it to others" this steadfast conventionalisation became widespread, planted into society's institutions (Azoulay *Civil Imagination* 24). The institutionalised, or conventionalised, properties of photography - the way we understand it, read it, and apply it - have been developed, as conventions do, within a certain framework. The act of looking at and understanding photographic images, that is, being able to identify the photographic object, and understanding photography first and foremost by means of its technological mechanism, is a learned practice: based on social agreements or "rules", we understand there is an indexical relation between photographed object 'x' and 'real' object 'x' that exists or once existed physically outside of the photographic frame in the real world[6] (Azoulay 'The Ethic of the Spectator' pars. 18-19).

Azoulay invites her readers to depart from this conventional way of framing photography's ontology. She proposes a different point of view, in which photography's ontology is no longer reduced to a mere technology, executed by a single person who produces images depicting a particular event of the past; instead, she contemplates photography as an event, and an encounter during which relations are formed between photographer, photographed subject and eventually the spectator, demonstrating photography's fundamental political character.[7] The camera and photographer initiate a series of events in which several subjects are brought together: an encounter between participants "where none of them possesses a sovereign status". All three parties within the photographic space are equally active (*Civil Imagination* 17). This horizontal dynamic, an equality between all participants of the photographic encounter leads to a new understanding of how photography mediates and configures a dimension of social relations between human beings.[8] The act of photography, then, is no longer restricted to the technology of the camera or the operating photographer alone – a conception that persistently governed the ontological understanding of photography within the paradigm of art.

As most scholars studying the ontology of photography, so is Azoulay's work, to a great extent, determined by the theoretical work of Walter Benjamin. In *Death's Showcase: The Power of Image in Contemporary Democracy* (2001), Azoulay follows Benjamin in placing the act of photography between its historical line of art and its political engagement with world events, by discussing the work and practice of photographers that are issued

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[6]For more social theory on conventional uses, see Bourdieu, who wrote on conventions as "rules of a game" (*The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* 1996).
[7]It is imperative to keep in mind that the limitations Azoulay points out in her theory of photography, concern limitations of a discourse, and not the practice of photography itself.
[8]The third chapter further discusses the social relations as mediated by the photographic event.

within the Israel-Palestine conflict – the political conflict that contextualises all her written works and arguments regarding photography.

Having produced several exhibitions on photography, mainly in Israel, Azoulay became familiar with the ins and outs of the art field during her practice as curator, a position that, by its nature, placed her within the paradigm of art.[9] One of her annotations in *The Civil Imagination* explains her critical position in relation to her very own work field, as she found her vision restricted, "in many ways, to that which the paradigm authorized", resulting in her aim to "oppose the dominant art discourse in Israel" (and correspondingly, a shared, international discourse) through politicising art (*Death's Showcase* 34). Looking back on her experience as a curator, she comments how this act of politicisation was, to a large extent, determined, as is the rest of the field of art, by Benjamin's body of thought (ibid.).

A Benjaminian framework: politicising the aesthetic

A number of principles central to photographic discourse ensued from the theoretical work by Benjamin, one of first figures to extensively discuss photography, its ontology, its effects on society and its qualification as an art. The central events that shifted photography's function within society are closely analysed by Benjamin. His passages have been subsumed by numerous writers and scholars, and constructed in what is a now a widely recognised theoretical and historical framework on which most late-twentieth century and contemporary scholars of visual and cultural studies build their arguments when looking at photographic history and ontology. His contribution to the institutionalisation and transmission of "the dichotomy between the political and the aesthetic is", Azoulay comments, "significant" (*Civil Imagination* 30).

Although its invention was marked in 1839, intellectual engagement with the still novel medium flourished specifically in context of European and American avant-gardist environment almost a century later. Photography's technology then became widely available; its presence found its way in almost any imaginable environment – political, private, cultural, and juridical. Used by the many, its expanding culture naturally triggered an increase in theoretical reflections engaging with photographic culture.[10] The environment of Euro-American art museums ensured that writings on photography became increasingly

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[9]A list of Azoulay's exhibitions and Curriculum Vitae can be viewed on her website:
http://cargocollective.com/AriellaAzoulay
[10]Azoualy has written a concise overview of the history of photography, *The Civil Contract of Photography* 89-97 (2008).

frequent available, but they were mainly concerned with photography's more highbrow, artistic productions (Linfield 18-19).

Susie Linfield illustrates in *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* the early 20th century visual regimes that surrounded Benjamin and his contemporary photographic practitioners. Shaped by the cultural scenery of the Soviet Union, their avant-gardist setting of the 1930s Weimar era was situated - still before the traumatic events of the Nazi regime - to burst with cultural creativity (16-24).[11] Benjamin performed his scholarly activities within the context of the Institute for Social Research, better known as the Frankfurt School. Engaged with Marxist thought and writing alongside his contemporaries Theodor Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer and Bertold Brecht, he sought to fathom the societal effects of that time's increasingly popular visual mediums, film and photography. The 1918 abolition of press censorship resulted, for instance, in a flood of newspapers and magazines; in context of the institutionalisation of journalism, photography was central in documenting everything from "the latest film stars to social problems, natural catastrophes, and political crises" (Linfield 180).

In 'A Little History of Photography' (1931) and 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935), Benjamin studies photography's functionality in and its relation to society in context of theories on the work of art; the medium's inherently rapid way of both recording individual appearances as well as reproducing such documentations, meant radical change for society's preservation and, accordingly, the interpretation of mankind's history.[12] In an increasingly fast-paced capitalist industry, its technology thoroughly influenced people's perception of society: its reproductive force advanced an age of globalisation.[13] Journalism covered hardships of their societies, telling stories through photo-essays, a format more regularly used, underlining the potential social value of photography: "Political demonstrations, revolutions, even executions, as well as life inside mines, factories, slums, homeless shelters, drug clinics, and progressive schools, were

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[11]Linfield illustrates how this intellectual breeding ground for innovation and creativity existed by pointing out its culture where "words and images, radical politics and the avant-garde, reporters and intellectuals, fluidly mixed", for example Robert Capa was going to the same café as Benjamin and many other photographers such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Martin Munkácsi were active in Weimar Republic (*The Cruel Radiance* 19).
[12]Benjamin's concept of *historical materialism*, 'A Little History' (526) – see page 22 for further explanation.
[13]Azoulay's "Death's Showcase" in the year of 2001 in the middle of discussions of globalisation, its pros and cons, reformulates this idea of exchange relations through the means of photography. Also in relation to what Azoulay says, the growing importance of statistics in academic field: charting all phenomena around us, photography was and is of great importance to this – this relates to her thought of "conquering the world as a picture" (as formulated by Heidegger).

documented" (Linfield 180) – it is "the conquest of the world as a picture", as Azoulay states, present and applied as a vast structure in society ('The Ethic of the Spectator' pars. 1-3).[14]

Magazines brought to their readers previously unseen worlds. The political turbulence and the wake of photographic reportage institutionalised, alongside photography's artistic being, its socio-political and documentarian character in which agencies recognised a modern democratic and effective means to fight against fascist adversities; notably at the start of the Second World War, communicating the need for social emancipation became increasingly urgent and photography could fulfil, so it was thought, this purpose.[15] Its apparatus, Benjamin urged, would be of significance in criticising and transforming society's established institutions - if it were not for the conventional way of producing and perceiving the photographic image.[16]

Photographs were commonly conceived to convey reality as if they were a transparent window through which one could step into the real. In 'A Little History' Benjamin asserts, quoting Brecht, that a "reproduction of reality" does not concretely say anything about that social reality or the complexity of human relations that lies behind it. A photographic image of a factory, Brecht argues, cannot communicate anything concrete about such an institute. Worse even, a mere photographic reproduction of its façade could obscure the complex entanglement of human relations behind it, by formally aestheticising what is in fact a not-so-pleasing reality. Benjamin pleaded, against this supposed social transparency, that photography cannot communicate bare reality; rather than letting them speak for themselves - it was commonly thought that photographs *could* speak for themselves - photography ought to construct something instead of showing what was already there ('A Little History' 526).

The assumed transparency addresses the production of photography responding to a "modish system" introduced by a commercial motive, that at that time increasingly began to regulate the arts market, "the greatest danger facing photography today" (ibid.):

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[14]She borrows this quote from Heidegger. 'The Ethic of the Spectator' is largely built on this Heideggerian idea.
[15]Both in Nazi Europe as in 1930s America this documentary maturation was evolving - e.g. Dorothea Lange was actively photographing the consequences of the Great Depression for the Resettlement Administration (better known as the Farm Security Administration), a project that would later become much debated within scholarly theory on photography. Many other photographic projects, developed during this period, were commissioned by agencies.
[16]Despite of photography's many promises, practiced on one hand in artistic institutes and on the other alongside the promising democratic culture of journalism, its maturation as a medium for mass communication was of concern to Benjamin and his companions – weary, as it emerged simultaneously with another worrisome form of mass politics - fascism - of the large-scale effects such visual media could incite. Documentary photography's revolutionary quintessence stood against its handicap of conveying statements deceptively – in an undifferentiated stream of imagery, misleading photographs were, and still are, hard to discern from the more urgent and meaningful (Linfield 16-24).

> The creative in photography is its capitulation to fashion. *The world is beautiful*—that is its watchword. In it is unmasked the posture of a photography that can endow any soup can with cosmic significance but cannot grasp a single one of the human connections in which it exists, even when this photography's most dream-laden subjects are a forerunner more of its saleability than of any knowledge it might produce. But because the true face of this kind of photographic creativity is the advertisement or association, its logical counterpart is the act of unmasking or construction. (Benjamin, 'A Little History' 526)

By "act of unmasking or construction", Benjamin denotes a constructive photography that effectively communicates certain underlying systems that are hidden behind the surface.[17] The photography Benjamin urges for, that instead of succumbing to the market structure in beautifying the world, grasps "the human connection", stood in stark contrast to the prevalent photographic practice of that day that aspired, as previously discussed, for recognition within the art world.

The museological history of photography

The "museological" history of photography centres on a selection procedure that Gil Pasternak ascribes to Museum of Modern Art's former director, Beaumont Newhall (Pasternak 40).[18] Newhall's aspiration to rectify photography's status as a form of art found expression in the exhibition *Photography 1839 – 1937* (1937), for which he selected photographic work that helped to "demonstrate a link between photography and art", by focussing on the work of photographers who "consciously aspired to demonstrate the unique characteristics that qualify photography as an art form" (Pasternak 40).[19] The selection of photographic work fit into his idea of a history of photography revolving around an "abstract idea of straight optical vision", based on a strict set of criteria surrounding the aesthetic

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[17]Around this time, there were more cultural critics who coined such ideas, such as Brecht's "Verfremdungseffekt" or "defamiliarisation" or "ostranenie", coined in 1917 by Viktor Shklovsky. It also returns in Lev Kuleshov's Soviet montage theory.

[18] Beginning his career in the MoMA in 1935, Newall was the first director to develop an exhibition involving the history of photography as to give credit to its value as an arts form.

[19]This recent publication by Pasternak outlines significant shifts within the course of photography's scholarly discourse. "Photography Reframed" (2018), refers to this museological context as first of three central moments, each of which entails a distinct discursive model of studying photography. Although this thesis follows this same analysation of discursive systems, I argue for two distinctive systems instead of three, and with this, one key shift, instead of two.

organisation of photographic representation, such as composition, sharpness, the tonal range from white to black, and an absence of trace of darkroom manipulation (ibid.) (Fig.1).[20]

The relation between aesthetic and photography's social calling, however, did issue under debate. In *The History of Photography* (1949) Newhall cites Henri Matisse when discussing photography's social vocation: "Photography can provide the most precious documents existing, and no one can contest its value from that point of view. If it is practiced by a man of taste, the photographs will have the appearance of art . . . Photographs should register and give us documents" (Newhall 235). Newhall stresses how documentary photographers renounced their photographs to be considered as art, but simultaneously addresses documentary to be an approach - a promising power - of making "drama from our daily lives and poetry from our problems" (qtd. in Newhall 238), whose "artistic faculties" would give "vivification" to fact; as if the sombre realities of the underprivileged would need any of this vivification to raise awareness of gravity of such problems.

Nevertheless, the chapter devoted to documentary photography praises the value of documentary photography overall and work of photographers who endeavoured their photographic practice to "fight" against human suffering: Lewis Hine, who was "greatly concerned with the welfare of the underprivileged", took his camera to record the immigrants of Ellis Island, and their "unsavoury tenements that became their homes, penetrated into the miserable sweatshops they found work, and photographed their children playing among the ashcans and the human derelicts in the sprawling slums of New York City" (Newhall 235). Realising his subjective photographs to be working powerfully in criticising the economic system that exploited the underprivileged, Hine would wield his photographs as communicators of human despair. His series of young children working in a cotton mill – caused, as Newhall emphasises the actual power photographs could affect, the "eventual passing of child labour laws" (ibid.) (Fig. 2).

The aesthetic faculty belonging to the photographic image, then, was not seen to be a discrepancy – on contrary, it could reinforce the photographer's critical commentary on societies' malfunction. Newhall's successors, Edward Steichen and John Szarkowski, although performing distinct methods of exhibiting works of art, followed through with Newhall's effort to establish photography within the museum institute and his criteria for evaluating photographers' work, culminating in a number of exhibitions that proved of

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[20]Find an overview of Newhall's exhibition on the website of Museum of Modern Art:
www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2088?

crucial influence on the public's perception of photography.[21] The photographic work included in these exhibitions has become what is now the canon of photography – iconic works belonging to a "canonical history" that emphasises photography's "medium-specific visual characteristics" (Pasternak 41)[22]. Following critiques uttered by scholars during the late twentieth century, as next chapter discusses, Pasternak points out how Newhall's approach marginalises a "possible relevance of image content and context" and neglects the impact photographs could have outside this museum context; in the same vein as Azoulay, Pasternak maintains how photography's social dimension became overshadowed by its formal and aesthetic realm (ibid.).

The discrepancy between photography's social vocation and its use of aesthetics, returns once more in Benjamin's 'The Author as Producer' (1934), where he continues to tackle a "straight" photography practice, this time explicitly pointing to the work of photographer Albert Renger-Patzch and his German photographic Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) movement in general. His *The World is Beautiful* - an anthology of one hundred photographs - very formalistically reveals beautifully ordered patterns in both nature as well as man-made objects, such as factories (Fig. 3). In rejection of an idealism and sentimentality of a previous generation artists, Renger-Patzch embraced photography's ability to precisely and faithfully record the world, so as to engage with it in a more straightforward manner. Be that as it may, Benjamin could not agree with Renger-Patzch' work and approach: "Needless to say, photography is unable to convey anything about a power station or a cable factory other than, "What a beautiful world!" (…) For it has succeeded in transforming even abject poverty - by apprehending it in a fashionably perfected manner - into an object of enjoyment. ('The Author as Producer' 775).[23]

Where Newhall could not but acclaim photography's force as a tool of social critique, Benjamin's scepticism is telling. Benjamin's urge for a type of photography that did not

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[21]Steichen Curated the much contested exhibition *Family of Man* in 1955 – much contested, as the next chapter shows, by a generation of scholars. Szarkowski's exhibition *New Documents* in 1967, was similarly contested; he was Director of the Department of Photography between 1962 and 1991 "When Szarkowski took over at Moma, there was not a single commercial gallery exhibiting photography in New York and, despite Steichen and Newhall's pioneering work, the form had still not been accepted by most curators or critics. Szarkowski changed all that. He was the right person in the right place at the right time: a forward thinker who was given control of a major art institution at a moment when his democratic vision chimed with the rapidly changing cultural tastes of the time" (The Guardian 2010).

[22]Rutger van der Hoeven recently published his research into the presumed universality of such iconic photographs, demonstrating a visual memory that would be universally shared. See "Global Visual Memory: A Study of the Recognition and Interpretation of Iconic and Historical Photographs" (2019).

[23]Albert Renger-Patzsch on the photographic medium: 'There must be an increase in the joy one takes in an object, and the photographer should be fully conscious of the splendid fidelity of reproduction made possible by his technique' (Source by Tate web see link).

aestheticise the social real, implies a type of photography that is more sufficient. It simultaneously indicates that a real lifeworld, the social and political relations behind the "façade" of the photograph are *dependent* on the sufficiency of the photograph or photographer. Both Benjamin's and Newhall's comments deal with the photograph and the photographer's skill. Within the paradigm of art, the art object and its creator are at its centre. Its framework rotates around the question whether something is to be judged as art or not, or alternatively, if a work of art is good, or not. Within documentary practice, this system of judgement would deem a photograph "good" when it is politically concerned and sufficiently communicates social hardships. Benjamin's former cited critical judgements could be read based on a political insufficiency (Azoulay *Civil Imagination* 35-41).

This system of good/bad or art/not art that governs the discourse of art derives from a tradition of the judgement of taste. The judgement of taste lies, traditionally speaking, in the hands of the art professional: "The figure of the critic, who from the eighteenth century onwards had become the public arbitrator of art, was transformed over time into the source of authority" (Azoulay *Civil Imagination* 33). It is a professional gaze, as Azoulay terms it, that the critic employs, that one finds in every professional work field (*Civil Imagination* 36). The fact that the work of art is the source "of all activities in the field", and the status attributed to the artist is directly linked to his or her art object, means that a judgement of taste pivots entirely around the particular work and creator. This model of judging also constitutes the basis of assessing photography: it is conceptualised through the perspective of the individual taking the photograph.

This framework, as stated by Benjamin, questions the political that is manifest in the object in relation to the aesthetic, or "the manner in which a work of art hosts the political or gives it expression" (*Civil Imagination* 39). The political dimension of a photograph becomes a mere attribute of the image that itself is measured as resulting from the photographer's contribution. What follows, are evaluations saying that a photograph's reality is too aestheticised. Taste "comes to judge the political and treats these two limbs of the equations as if they [the aesthetic and the political] were equivalents possessing an equal standing as objects of taste" (ibid.).[24]

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[24]By posing this argument, Azoulay states that judging a work as "too aesthetic" implies simultaneously that it is not political enough. This, however, is not necessarily so; one can judge something as too aesthetic, as it can become too manipulative - stirring one's emotions where it is out of place. This does not imply that the work is not political enough. Azoulay never contextualises her arguments in this sense. In the basis, however, this side note does not curtail her overall argument.

Concluding:

Its reproductive force made photography, and the visual, available to all. It also diminished the sentiment of the unique that entitles the work of art and the traditions of the art world and, with it, art's privileged place to display the world. This "loss of aura", as Benjamin put it in words in 'The Work of Art' is, Azoulay contends, a loss of authenticity, place and hence traditions of the arts (*Death's Showcase* 21, 27).[25] The image industry, making the visual universal and the image a "flat" exchangeable commodity, paved the way for a seeming universality - an equality of place, where the visual has become of each and every one: "In principle, anything can turn into an image, anyone is entitled to have his image taken, and any image can be subject of the gaze of anyone" (*Death's Showcase* 26).[26]

Given that the demarcation of authenticity would no longer apply when it, used by the many, ceased to be applicable to artistic production, the function of art would then be reversed. "Instead of being based on ritual", Benjamin anticipated, "it begins to be based on another practice – politics" ('The Work of Art' 224). As soon as photography would be released from the realm of arts and its centuries' old traditions of "ritual" and authenticity, it could practice its social and political purpose. Photography as envisioned "in accordance with socialism" could only then affect established institutes and institutions, a social means to e.g. support the working class, employing photographic productions towards emancipatory ends ('The Author as Producer' 214).[27]

But whereas Benjamin stressed photography's political responsibility towards social reformation, photographers, who aimed their camera politically, ended up in a system of judgement in which a photograph's political and aesthetic plane did not merge well: "The photograph (…) has become institutionalized in discourse through its identification with the photographer, as his or her property, and as the point of origin or the discussion of photography" (*Death's Showcase* 23). The photographer, or his or her agent or representative, has the authority of the final say when it comes to the photograph. This "inaccessibility of the photograph" holds that a discussion of it expires at the motives and

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[25]"Destroying the aura is the mark of a perception whose "sense of the universal equality of things has increased"; authenticity is, Azoulay says, nothing other than the criterion of power, since its source cannot be challenged: the authentic, the aesthetic, this quality, a quality that can be judged, but is ungrounded; it can't be challenged (*Death's Showcase* 26).

[26]This "flatness" of the world, our knowing the world through photographic imagery, returns in this passage by Sentilles reading Sontag: "For Sontag, photography has reduced the world to its image, yet it is photography that can get us back to 'reality'. (…) Sontag argues that human beings have mistaken the copy for the thing itself and, as a result, have created a false division between the copy and the 'real', devalued both the copy and the thing itself, and overlooked the profound ways images affect the world." Sarah Sentilles 'Misreading Feuerbach: Susan Sontag, Photography and the Image-World' (2010).

[27]See also Brecht's concept of *Umfunktionierung*.

competence of its producer, obstructing the very diverseness intrinsic to the photographed event. A seeming democracy of the visual, as the invention of photography promised, is not democratic at all when a discussion of photography ends at the intentions of the photographer.

Both the art world's structural behaviour, as well as Benjamin's "formula" - calling for a more political art, against aestheticising political issues - caused a dichotomous understanding of the photographic image. Revolutionary photographs, that were produced to "change" the world, have instead become a canon of photographic images – recognised and praised first and foremost based on their iconic appearance. This emphasis on the visual is the outcome "of a form of discourse whose logic of sovereignty and creativity predisposes it to position the photograph as the sole outcome and vanishing point of any discussion of photography" (Azoulay, *Civil Imagination* 21). It is a limitation, or a democratic shortcoming, that caused a generation of scholars, specifically during the last two decades of the twentieth century, to charge documentary photographs and their creators for their inability of applying photography as a tool for social critique. In chapter two, these critiques are discussed as a symptom of the discourse previously described.

Chapter two. A critical discourse

Developing visual culture studies

Where in chapter one I demonstrated Benjamin's distinctive approach to photography, in this chapter, I aim to demonstrate how his emphasis of scepticism towards photography's aesthetic dimension became a discursive frame of thinking of photography that discards its potential as a tool of social critique wholly – a framework Azoulay aims to surpass.

Benjamin's double-sided idea of photography's potential and failure to incite social and political change exercised an influential benchmark for scholars active in cultural and visual studies. Jeannene Przyblyski's 'History is Photography: the Afterimage of Walter Benjamin' (1998) outlines his impact on the social discourse of photography during the second half of the twentieth century. Her essay summarises various works by scholars and artists from diverging academic backgrounds, who during the late twentieth century took up Benjamin's body of thought and, as such, further institutionalised by means of his writings an academic tradition of critical photographic theory, which centrally positions Benjamin's critical remarks. His work has since the 1960s become a constant point of reference within critical studies of photographic history and, more generally, in cultural studies.[28]

At this time, during the late 1970s and early 1980s when visual culture studies had become an established field within academia, and photography an acknowledged object of studies, more texts that examined photography were written and translated into English. More broadly, a pictorial "revolution" was taking place in academia, a cultural or visual *turn* that encompasses a number of critical questions surrounding the concept of visuality (Pryzblyski pars. 4). Observing this new practice within scholarly research, Gillian Rose (*Visual Methodologies* 2016) sets forth how this then new academic field was initiated to become an institutionalised area of research by a group of scholars at Birmingham University. It meant a significant change within humanities and the social sciences, as emphasis was placed on visual material culture: visual media had become "a crucial means by which many social scientists understood social processes, social identities, and social change and conflict" by looking at how the visual affected the social (Rose 2-4).

One of its critical concerns, as previously explained, was how social power-relations within society were reflected by visual imagery. Centring on our field of vision, Francesco Ventrella explains, and specifically around the representation of others, the visual turn

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[28]See, for instance, the book *Basic Critical Theory for Photographers* (2013) by Ashley La Grange, which offers "discussion, thought and practical assignments around key debates in photography".

"challenges the idea that images are transparent and obvious; the visual is turned every time seeing is displayed to make it available to analysis" (Ventrella 207).[29] Photographs as object of study should herein be interpreted on one hand in relation to the manner in which a culture makes itself visible, and on the other to the way in which culture "conceives of representation and representing as ways of knowing" (ibid.). The political context of such questions is evident when we understand that, through conventional narratives of the past, "those whom we see and those whom we not see" in photographic representation, also remain 'out of sight' outside the photograph, within actual political relations (ibid.).

Embedded in critical theory, this academic tradition - although initiated later in the twentieth century - is to large extent founded on Benjamin's theoretical work, and more particular on his idea of historical materialism which suggested "the readability of history" to be inscribed in visual material culture: "Within history writing, this entails a consideration of visual documents not simply as an illustration of a fact, but as a historiographical tool to mobilize the story told (or untold) by archival sources" (Ventrella 208). It grounded to large extent the basic premise to scholarly critique as articulated by visual culture scholars, whose critical theories addressed photographic images in a recognisably Benjaminian manner.

Photography's failure: criticism after Benjamin

The rapidly expanding photographic environment during the 1970s further set the fundaments of these critiques, coinciding with an expanding collector's market in photography, the increasing centrality of photography to postmodern art practices, and "a heightening of photography's prestige-value within the art museum": such circumstances rendered Benjamin a "hot commodity" (Przyblyski pars. 5). His writings, ironically, provided to some a rationale to appreciate photography as an exhibitable art form, whereas to others his theoretical work formed an object of serious intellectual inquiry to severely criticise the museological history of photography.

In *Photography: a Critical Introduction* (2000) Liz Wells discusses how Benjamin's double-sided critiques carried through to the 1970s, as artists and art critics had become aware that the "old documentary forms were inadequate to express, let alone help to change, the prevailing conditions of social, political and personal life" (108). It signalled, as Wells remarks, a return to the earlier debate in which Benjamin and his contemporaries participated,

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[29]Although the Visual Turn in academia took place in the 1990s, its practice commenced much earlier, already during the very beginning of the twentieth century. The academic domain in which photography was discussed, and that today forms the field of visual culture studies, dates back to this late twentieth century photographic discourse.

that questioned the power of documentary to trigger social and political change. Truthfulness and objectivity, which was generally assumed during photography's earlier days, they argued, was no longer feasible. Its practitioners had been using their photography in an exploiting manner disregarding the unequal power-relation between them and the photographed subject, or the inability to neutrally and objectively record reality. Societal aversities, they recognisably reiterated Benjamin, were overly aestheticised within the context of museums and galleries: the way photography had been used as communicator of social calamity proved no longer tenable. They dissociated themselves from the idea of photography as tool for social critique, and positioned photography with deep mistrust (Wells 108; Linfield 5).

Thus inspired by Benjamin's writings and the advancements of a scholarly visual turn, this younger generation of critics and historians examined photography's cultural implications and value, and further established the foundation of today's conceptualisations of photography's socio-political manifestation. One of first publications to respond to Benjamin's work within this academic field was John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), followed by Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977) and 'Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)' by Allen Sekula, written between 1976 and 1978. They all propose ways to better practice documentary photography: more morally conscious and ethically just in respect of their subjects. They developed a social discourse that centres on the idea of a promise and failure of photography as a tool for social critique – which is, as will show, still a consequence of the discursive framework of art.

Like Wells, Linfield discusses Benjamin's noteworthy influence on photography criticism of late twentieth century and outlines, one by one, all critics of photography who have been "setting a certain tone of photography criticism" – a tone, that is rather unsympathetic or even hostile towards photography's functionality when it comes to communicating certain realities (5). In *On Photography*, Sontag accuses photography of having colonised the world; her argument, describing photography as "treacherous", "imperial", "voyeuristic", or "the most irresistible form of mental pollution", leaves little space to regard photography in a positive light (qtd. in Linfield 5). Studying Diane Arbus' photographic work, Sontag sees photographers voyeuristically objectifying the socially marginalised: the photographer is a "supertourist, an extention of the anthropologist, visiting natives and bringing back news of their exotic doings and strange gear" (Sontag 41-2) (Fig. 4).

The photographer's outsider position is not capable of engaging with his or her subjects but rather installs distance, a feel of alienation, towards them. Sontag furthermore criticises the effect photography has on our moral consciousness; very similar to Benjamin's critiques of the photograph being incapable to show more than a mere façade, Sontag observes that, although presenting us imagery of catastrophe, photography does not tell us anything about their causes or historical context; we rather become numbed than engaged through photographic representation, as they present the world via "archetypical abstractions", instead of its concrete and specific situations: "The shock of photographed atrocities wears off with repeated viewings . . . In these last decades, 'concerned' photography has done at least as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it" (qtd. in Linfield 7).

The tone set out by Berger, Sontag and also Roland Barthes, was echoed by their "postmodern and poststructuralist children" who followed their footsteps a decade later (ibid.). Sontag's sceptical insistence on photography's lack of ability to engage or move its spectators is recognisable in Allen Sekula's 'Dismantling Modernism', in which he disapproves of, or "dismantles", modernist notions that have surrounded and stymied documentary photography; the idea of objectivity, neutrality, and authenticity that surround its rhetoric, he illustrates by means of many photographic examples, are false. Documentary, not being capable of anything else than sentimentalist and shallow representations of reality, Sekula says, contributed "little to the understanding of the social world" and, also by addressing Arbus' photography, he comments that "each image is nothing so much as a contribution to the artist's self-portrait". Nor the photograph or the photographer's good intentions, whose narcissistic practice with an undertone of charity turns its subjects into "exotic creatures, objects of contemplation", are spared within Sekula's essay (237).

Martha Rosler's 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)' (1981) is no less relentless of traditional documentary practice and analyses once more the structure of documentary photography, although she places the problem not so much in photography itself, but in its institutionalised power structures: the elite classes who are the only eventual spectators that visit photographic exhibitions in art galleries, where photographs are presented as objects to be enjoyed and bought for their aesthetic presence. This art market structure, she contends, influences photographic practice. Looking at 'victim photography', she asserts, of people in despair, gives the onlooker, the spectator, a feeling of benevolence, a feel of showing compassion and altruism and secondly a feeling of safety, for it is not he or she who is in despair, but, again, this marginalised 'other' (78).

The "postmoderns", as Linfield refers to them, as such "declared war" to the formalist approach of critics such as John Szarkowsky who, as chapter one discussed, celebrated photography's visually appealing characteristics (9); they attacked the FSA's photographic project of the consequences of the Great Depression, where photography was used towards the political agenda of the government and it was clear, to them, that photography was no longer capable of autonomously operating its moral duty of critically commenting on social injustices. One by one they put forward photographic examples in which the myth of photography's powerful eye-opening purpose time and again became disillusioned, with Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1938), as an all too well-known frontrunner (Fig. 5).

The list of critiques is, Linfield shows, endless.[30] Benjamin's quote of Brecht, "Less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality", returns time and again in the critical work of the authors above. Where photographic productions should form a call-for-change, they were actually transformed, by consequence of the art world's systemic mechanism, into an object of contemplative enjoyment.[31] Since its invention, the use of the medium had been deployed to create awareness by showing harsh realities, injustices, and catastrophes. Engaging with such realities, it had now itself come under attack from academic critical analysation. The ill-fated and harsh realities shown are too formalised and distanced, turning poverty ultimately into an object of consumption, so that "the *struggle* against poverty" itself becomes an object of consumption (emphasis added): "And I further maintain that a considerable proportion of so-called left-wing literature possessed no other social function than to wring from the political situation a continuous stream of novel effects for the entertainment of the public. This brings me to the New Objectivity. Its stock in trade was reportage. Let us ask ourselves to whom this technique was useful" (Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer' 776).

Przyblysky remarks how their texts on photographic culture fit a more general trend of 1970s and 1980s academic practice "toward a social history of art that could embrace Marxist analyses of the institutional structures of artmaking and viewing, the structural analysis of visual representation as language, and, to a lesser extent, feminist analyses of art's corporeal politics" (Pryzblysky pars. 4). Marxist thought indeed underlies their recurring

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[30]Chapter one of Susie Linfield's *Cruel Radiance* gives its reader, page after page, a complete overview of the attacks asserted against documentary photography.
[31]It is how Rosler criticises the market structure underlying the arts that exploits its subjects, victimises them, something Benjamin observed decades before. Today, it is still an oft-heard critique – see for instance the documentary *Enjoy Poverty* by Renzo Martens (2008). This discussion has developed also alongside humanitarian practice and particular photographic use towards humanitarian ends, such as Sanna Nissinen's 'Dilemmas of Ethical Practice in the Production of Contemporary Humanitarian Photography'.

themes, and functions as a thread in their critical commenting on photographic representation. "Committed to post-Marxist, feminist and poststructuralist theories", Pasternak writes in same line, "they strove to fight the social injustice and discrimination that defined the experience of life in capitalist society", leading them to investigate photography's impact on society by examining its role within influential social institutions (41). The formalist approach towards photography initiated by John Szarkowski's Photography Department of the Museum of Modern Art "had acquired such a bad name by the mid-1980s", that analysing photography by means of its institutional manifestation within society became one of the few acceptable choices for politically-conscious photography historians and critics" (Pryzlysky pars. 26).

Criticising critical theory: a congestion of a discourse

Through this institutional lense, photography's social functionality was completely thwarted as it stood under the recapitulation of Benjamin's body of thought. The previously listed critics who built on his insights and drew more broadly upon the fundamentals of an art historical discursive framework, condemned traditional documentary photography for not functioning as a tool of social and political critique. This critique has developed into a vast tradition of photographic theory that even today, forms a rationale within the academic field of visual studies. In their homogeneous diversity, they broach recurring themes as common denominators of their academic, leftist context which should all be read in context of academic developments within visual culture studies. To claim that an academic discourse was historically determined by these scholars would perhaps be oversimplifying things, but their body of thought and particularly certain key texts became to be so 'key', that we could speak of a canon of theoretical thought that sheds light on photography.

Their criteria are based on notions that have become normalised for the way we analyse and appreciate documentary photography and proved defining and determining for documentary photography in contemporary discourse. The photographer's awareness of a necessary critical and self-reflective attitude has slowly grown to become a common sense. Their understanding of photography has been incorporated even by the general public, and Linfield comments that if "fewer essays like Sekula's and Rosler's are written now, it is in part because their ideas have been absorbed and accepted by so many in the academy, the art journals, the museums, and the galleries; as theorist W. J. T. Mitchell has written, "reflexive critical iconoclasm . . . governs intellectual discourse today" (Linfield 11).

The discussed social historians of photography follow the same line or framework in contemplating photography as did Walter Benjamin. Their theoretical practice might seem to indicate a paradigmatic shift within photographic discourse – a shift that switched the museological discourse to a more socio-politically centred discourse - as Pasternak argues, which illuminates the social implications of photography, focussing not on its aesthetic history, but instead on its socio-political history (42). While this rings partly true, their critiques were by and large uttered in a Benjaminian tradition – in the end, this debate consistently comes down to a question of a politics of representation, once more revolving around photographic representation of the political, in conflict with its "too" aesthetic dimension. The scholars who engaged with critical theory of photography, Gelder and Westgeest discuss in 'Photography's Social Function: the Documentary Legacy', all evoke critiques they, by and large, built on the photographic icons of early documentary practices: referring, always to the same canonical photography to underpin their ideas, only to overturn the blindly assumed documentary authority.

The arguments and critiques, then, stem from a much longer established social discourse on photography, and the museological or canonical and the socio-political discourse are simply two sides of the same coin: they have irreconcilably run parallel from the beginning, simply instituting two various ways of framing photography, but within one paradigmatic system. The opposing structure of the aesthetic versus the political that, as a blueprint, frames the critical tradition towards documentary photography, then, stranded into a deadlock. Benjamin's formula, Azoulay points, which subsumes "the totality of activity that goes on in the name of art in such a manner as to relegate each activity necessarily to one or another side of the opposition is precisely the source of that which limits the possibility of thinking outside of the parameters of the opposition, of questioning its validity and of turning it into the focus of research in its own right" (*Civil Imagination* 34).

Although Azoulay puts forward Benjamin's "formula" of calling for a politicisation of art as the main cause for the opposition between the political and the aesthetic, it is also, as the postmoderns or social historians pointed out, the traditional art world structure that eventually converted this ideal to its own mechanism. This relation of politics opposing aesthetics was theorised by Benjamin as mutually exclusive, "representing two directions of artistic practice. (…) From the time of Benjamin's formulation until the end of the twentieth century, this opposition was understood in such a concise and condensed fashion that no space of action seemed to exist beyond the two positions Benjamin delineated" (Azoulay, *Civil Imagination* 31).

Whereas the political formerly did not exist as a category by which a work of art was judged, it had become a regular way of evaluating photographic art during the second half of the twentieth century. Azoulay wrote this from her point of view herself being active in the arts; she was looking for ways to avoid the interpretations of Benjamin's opposition "then current in the world of art" – an arts world that parted ways with the 1930 arts world in which Benjamin lived, but nonetheless was still largely functioning on his precepts as this chapter has aimed to show (*Civil Imagination* 33). Under these precepts, during the last two decades of the twentieth century, photographic discourse parted from the rhetoric of authenticity, objectivity and truth that governed it – the idea, or the discourse, of the photograph revealing a truth has diminished, lost ground.

Azoulay offers another conception, in which the event of photography does not stop at one photograph. Instead of regarding photography by looking at the singular photographs that have made the selection procedures of magazines, museums or art galleries, Azoulay emphasises the illusion of photograph being a closed unit (*Deaths Showcase* 92-101): photography does not stop at one famous, iconic photograph. Instead, she proposes photography as a network of presences in which there are many truths. "A photograph, being a fragment taken from a flow or a sequence, is supposedly [in the long-established discourse] a stationary object. What's seen in the photograph is not given, and the gaze upon it can never immediately exhaust it. The gesture of identification - this is x - frequently used in reference to photographs when tagging a photograph's subject, homogenises the plurality from which a photograph is made and unifies it into a stable image, giving the illusion that we are facing a closed unit of visual information" (Azoulay, 'Ethic of the Spectator' pars. 7).

Concluding: re-opening the ethos of photography

The endless list of critiques towards documentary photography, set forth during the last two decades of the twentieth century, certainly contained many worthwhile insights; the naivety of photographic truth, and the documentary authority, with which many photographers undertook their photographic projects has been banned for once and for all. The historians' critiques, however, might have been even more valuable and sustainable, if they had proposed a better alternative within which photography could actually operate. Their iconoclast attitude seems to devaluate a documentarian photography practice altogether; referring only to the same modernist photographic examples such as Arbus' or Hine's, and using the same critical vocabulary, the photographic discourse that they have established, emerged and remained in the shadow of the discourse of art – that holds on to the idea of

photography as product of a "sovereign" creator, as the centre point of discussion (Azoulay *Civil Imagination* 14). Although this was seen also by these critics, they could not look beyond this notion.

Their critiques surround the canon of photographic practice, as regulated by influential institutes such as the Museum of Modern Art, and eminent art journals. As the postmodernist way of understanding photography, then, had bumped into a deadlock, a shift of paradigm, as the next chapter reveals, eventually did take place, although within another scholarly culture that took up yet a different approach. Up until a decade later, during the nineties, there was little attention for a quite obvious use of photography by the "normal" people: not necessarily influenced by institutions, but a civil use of photography that developed with even more acceleration at the dawn of digital photography. It was only when this reality came to attention of scholarly discourse, which we might speak of a shift of paradigm, when it comes to photography. It is this framework, that seems to bridge the dead-end led by the former two countering discourses, and in which Azoulay's work seems fitting.

Within this framework, Azoulay pursuits a restoration of photography's ethical functionality that was so deeply buried under the thick layers of critiques during the 1970s and 1980s – a way of understanding photography that, apart from "disintegrating the cult value inherent to art, "enables the recuperation of the ethical stance and a certain resistance to the threat of aestheticization" (32). She hereby emphasises Benjamin's more constructive envisioning of photography that the postmoderns had overlooked: "He [Benjamin] is interested in photography – and in looking at photographs – as practices that make possible the recuperation of experience and its transmission, which make possible in turn the recuperation of an ethical stance in the age of mechanical reproduction": With the invention of photography, "Mankind", she decides by quoting Benjamin, "which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself" (32-3),

Benjamin's critiques regarding photographic practice have themselves become subject to or incorporated in the traditions of judgement belonging to the conventional system of art history. He, on the other hand - and this is where Azoulay and him meet - observes that there is more to the photographic image than the mere image itself: the social relations that form the photograph, or the event, as Azoulay understands it, of photography, is the key premise to a different way of framing photography as discussed in chapter three. In reference

to Benjamin's passage in "A Small History" (202),[32] when he asserts in a comment on a photograph in which he perceives something about it, something "that does not testify merely to the art of the photographer", something "not to be silenced, something demanding the name of the person who lived then, who even now is still real and will never entirely perish into art" (original emphasis 32). There is more to the photograph than its being a photograph.

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[32]Azoulay makes reference to the 1980 translation of Benjamin's work, "A Small History of Photography". As such, I here have used the citation from this version, instead of the 1968 translation.

Chapter three. Relocating to a communal discourse

> The camera is not merely a lens that the photographer uses to view and produce a picture that will later be printed in the darkroom. It is itself a display showcase that invites the viewer-photographer to view the world in the present, right now, while tying his hands behind his back. Thus, he is invited to look at but not to touch-Bosnia, Rwanda, Bahgdad, Kosovo
>
> - Ariella Azoualy, *Death's Showcase*

The critical conceptions of documentary photography in terms of its representation became as I have previously discussed, an *ideé fixe* that overlooked its broader humanist potentialities. Instead of discarding its ability of delivering social and political critique, Diack and Duganne recognise in 'Not Just Pictures: Reassessing Critical Models for 1980s Photography' a recent tendency in studies of photography in which attention is first and foremost put on photography's humanist capacity of building an "inter-cultural community, partnership, and solidarity" (240). It is a different way of envisioning social photographic practice, one that stands independent from its practice within possible art institutes, one that indicates a transition of our conception of social photography.

It fits the idea of a paradigm shift that occurred as consequence of the establishment of visual culture as an academic discipline. Photography was previously conceptualized, as the first two chapters discussed, by means of its aesthetic canon as is common within the frame of the arts. The phenomenon of photography as used by the many, a medium of the hoi polloi, or *vernacular* photography, was not believed worthwhile for critical study, nor was it recognised as a central part of the whole practice of photography. Only after considering this fundamental aspect, did awareness of photography as a crucial factor in shaping a public, shared imagination, functioning to a great extent outside of the realm of arts, grow until today's factor where photography has given way to a new framework of studying the photographic. Two authors who especially payed attention to this 'civil' dimension of photography, were Pierre Bourdieu, pioneering already in 1965 with his *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, only to be followed three decades later by Geoffrey Batchen's *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (1997).

This is not to say that, apart from their insights, photography's political nature was not considered; it was researched modelled on the usual criteria or protocols of the arts, looking at the oeuvres of photographers, theorising photography through its canon as if it were representative of all photographic practices. Instead of questioning new relations "that

emerge between people through the mediation of photography" the conventional boundaries only allow room to think of photography as a technology operated by a single individual: its creator, the photographer (Azoulay, *Civil Imagination* 5).

It was the wealth of images, the idea of "spectacle", or the abundance of photography which overturned or ruptured this canonical framework.[33] The wealth of photographic material, found in archival collections, transformed the canonical discourse of photography: "In the wake of this shift" Azoulay explains, "the perspective associated with the discourse of art was transformed into merely one possible point of entry into the study of photography, and a particularly limited one at that" (*Civil Imagination* 14). "(…) research into photographic oeuvres and their creators, modelled on the familiar protocols of art and the history of art, took the place of the political question: "What characterizes the new relations that emerge between people through the mediation of photography?" (*Civil Imagination* 13). It is this last question, as proposed also by Azoulay, which stands central to the new way of regarding photography.

By the time photography had become available to the many, its users understood photography only via its clear-cut purpose to be the production of images, as this was communicated to them by means of instruction manuals, leaving its social and political embeddedness in and imprint on society out of sight. When we let go of the way of perceiving the image as is customary in the field of arts, thus, not perceiving the photographic image as a work of art, that results from an artist, this opens up another way of perceiving photography. The photograph becomes a recording of the photographic event – the moment that a photographer captured the space in which she or he was present along with other subjects.

Azoulay's "civil gaze"

In the early 1990s, around the time of a changing view of photographic practice, conditions for photography's visibility within museums were likewise altered. They began to host images of horror from various zones of war and conflicts – where museums once were the place for contemplation of the beautiful, they had now taken their responsible position as institute in society by showing adversities and disasters of the world, which asked for a different way or a different frame of 'looking' ('Ethic of the Spectator pars. 7). Now, it was not only the media that communicated these images, it was also the museum space. It altered

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[33]See Guy Debords *Society of the Spectacle* (1967)

the spectator's vision on the world: as images of disaster became widespread, with it, came a responsibility of the spectator – a responsibility that the critics of the previous chapter did not deem possible.

Our perception of images of horror, and the fear of our becoming numb towards this horror, have become subject to many scholarly publications; it came along with critiques regarding humanitarian photography that, up until today, receive commentary on their 'dishonesty' or 'corruption' - in the same manner as the critiques by the 1970s and 1980s critics (Fig.6). It caused an *inflation* of horrific photography, and with this, a numbing of the spectator's ability to make an effort to engage with the depicted event, to see beyond the photograph, into the photographed event. This task or responsibility of the spectator is something Azoulay refers to as "prolonged observation", where the spectator moves "from the addressee position into the addresser's position and to demonstrate responsibility toward the sense of the photograph by addressing it even further, turning it into the beacon of an emergency, a signal of danger or warning – transforming it into an emergency énoncé" ('Ethic of the Spectator' pars. 7-8).

Such a 'new way' of understanding photography, and looking at photographs, "is characterized by the effort to link the photographs to the situation in which they were taken" (Azoulay 'Getting Rid' 241). In her 2010 article, 'Getting Rid of the Distinction Between the Aesthetic and the Political' Azoulay urges us to restore a gap that exists within our viewing, so that we can "re-position" ourselves in relation to "the disaster we are watching and to let us be engaged with its happening, its victims and on its perpetrators, as well as on its accomplices – we the spectators" (242). This gap, created by the discourse of photography which is "entrapped between the hegemonic opposition between the aesthetic and the political", must be bridged (*Civil Imagination* 27).

Scholarly attention now focuses on the photograph as used by everyone; photographic practice not as an art, but as vernacular phenomenon. Its everyday, common use in which Benjamin foresaw to be revolutionary, the historical materialist approach, of having the potential to record history photographically, and therefore study and know man's history. Apart from everyone's "vernacular" use, photography is also present as a duty in the form of identity photos, or as normative, as in school class photographs. The *omnipresence* of photography has resulted in "photography becoming a prime mediator in the social and political relations among citizens, as well as the relations between citizens and the powers that be" (ibid.). Everything is mediated by photography. Azoulay refers to both Heidegger and Debord when referring to this omnipresence of the image in the modern era, stating that

although they do not explicitly mention photography being part of it as such, both "undoubtedly" relate to photography. Continuing on its pervasiveness, and she does this in her other works, she points out, that there are barely any restrictions on the use of photography in public space: photography is a practice, based on a mutual trust.[34]

"Citizens have been bound together in an agreement on photography, through the convention of photography, according to which, what appears in the photo is not all that was there – this has been agreed upon by the civil contract of photography – but was, however, photographed from what "was there" – and this, as well, has been agreed on through the same civil contract" (Azoulay 'Ethic of Spectator' pars.7). The self-evidence of photography is based on its historical moment of invention – France proclaiming its democratic characteristic: a medium for everyone to use, giving way to a democratic (second) revolution (ibid.). "Photography functions on a horizontal plane, it is present everywhere – actually or potentially" (Azoulay 'Ethic of the Spectator' pars.1). The practice of photography is embedded into a collective, social context, as it is practiced by the many: the collectively photographing or capturing, is reciprocally collectively perceived which has as consequence that the initial gaze during the moment of capturing, escapes its own control: it cannot control how it is perceived. Between the making and spectating are many factors that influence how it is eventually perceived.

The traces of the encounter are inscribed on the photograph; whether the subjects were present "by choice, through force, knowingly, indifferently, as a result of being overlooked, or as a consequence of deceit. Many of these traces are neither planned nor are they the result of an act of will. That which is seen, the referent of the photograph in other words, is never a given but needs to be constituted to precisely the same degree as the interpretations that have become attached to it. "What's seen in the fragment taken from a flow or a sequence, is supposedly a stationary object. What's seen in the photograph is not given, and the gaze upon it can never immediately exhaust it." The gesture of identification – "this is x" – frequently used in reference to photographs, homogenizes the plurality of which

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[34]This, however, has changed in the Netherlands since last year – privacy policy has incited many new regulations of which many concern the use of photography online, in public, and on the internet – i.e. Facebook making an effort to protect the identity-less persons in the background of someone's photograph. Now, no longer everyone or everything is liable to become a photograph that makes its way to public display; at least, not here. When someone wishes to take a photograph in public, for extern publication, one needs to ask for a signature of approval. Then again, the use among citizens taking photographs of each other in public cannot be regulated and you are still likely to be captured on someone's iPhone without you knowing this. It gives food for thought, what the world would have been like, when from the start, permission was needed for every photograph taken.

a photograph is made and unifies it into a stable image, giving the illusion that we are facing a closed unit of visual information" ('Ethic of the Spectator' pars. 8).

"Even when these traces express cultural and social hierarchies that organize power relations between photographer, camera, and photographed person, they never simply echo such relations nor do they necessarily reflect the point of view of the most powerful figure present in the arena at the time the photograph was captured" (Azoulay *Civil Imagination* 24-25)[35]. Its property of collectiveness implicates an agreement, a "contract" that "allows the logic of photography to overpower social relations, while at the same time provide a point of resistance against photography's total control, initiating a responsibility to prevent the completion of this very control" ('Ethic of the Spectator' pars.1). This flatness of hierarchy/non-hierarchy as consequence of its heterogeneous character is specific to photography, different than with other forms of documentation, making photography a "powerful and suggestive source for understanding the political existence of human beings, as well as for investigating their history" (Azoulay *Civil Imagination* 25).

The photographer and his or her camera play an essential role in the making aware, most often without knowing it, i.e., unintentionally. Without the photographic event photographed, certain things might have remained in the dark for ever. Benjamin's idea of an unconscious optics is basically what is also referred to by Azoulay as the 'openness' or the 'gap' of photography: more than simply illuminating things, showing them in a (new) light, photography primarily lets us see that what initially escaped our consciousness. It de-mystifies reality: photography has since its inception rendered most of histories events visible, made it public. An individual's unconscious becomes alleviated through the visual; this is not limited to the photographer's conscious gaze – it not the photographer, in the end, who accomplished the revealing of the unconscious. "This unconscious transcends the sum total of all the conscious actions and gestures of the photographer that may be subsumed to his or her desires and intentions (Azoulay *Deaths Showcase* 31).

This is the openness of the photograph, a consequence of its autonomous functioning, autonomously from its initial producer, the subsequent distributor, curator or editor: the life of a photograph is diffused, often anonymously, operating over time, seen and read by a possibly endless variety of subjects, hence interpreted, given meaning, in an endless variety of ways. Irrespective of the original moment of capturing, it illustrates that the photograph, exactly because of its social relations behind its surface, Benjamin's "façade", do not belong

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[35] Note how this is a comment to all scholars commenting on the photographer who "exploits" the photographed subject.

to the person who captured the moment.[36] "What was, indeed existed, but not necessarily in this way, and it has not necessarily ended" ('The Ethic of the Spectator' pars. 7).

Back-up for Azoulay by contemporary scholars: Demos

T.J. Demos rests his critiques on the concept of Bare Life by Giorgio Agamben as does Azoulay. He observes, in similar fashion, a photographic gap in which there will always be something that escapes representation (181). Demos' way of reflecting the current role of arts and particularly documentary forms of visual arts, stands in line with a group of contemporary theorists that seeks to position the artistic practice of imagemakers. He seeks to offer assistance in mapping out and provide help, to approach many of these problems politically, to challenge these conditions, which have to do with the global hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. "For Demos what separates all these contemporary documentary practices from what he understands as traditional strategies and logics is this awareness and creative engagement with the incapacities and inadequacies of the image."

It is the "formally sophisticated", intellectual and politically engaged artist who rather nomads around the world opposed to the suppressed subject of these artists: the victim of these politics – an all too familiar image, an archetype that has become a gimmick, think about Renzo Martens' art projects. But it is refreshing, how Demos emphasises the continuation of this construction being untenable, pointing at new approaches, strategies, insights and the awareness of the cynical and little worthwhile attitude of the persistent critiques delivered during the 1980s, when keeping in stance this mindset. He rightfully poses the hard to answer question if, and if so, how, we ought to 'represent artistically the lives of those existing outside citizenship and the legal protections of national identity'. Are there worthwhile artistic strategies that fruitfully engage with these humanitarian crises and the current critical state of the world?

A sensus communis: the communal function of taste

The photographer's practice, which operates towards diverse concerns, has to convolute a clear conceptualisation of the social nature of the photograph and likewise, his or her responsibilities. But where the theoretical discussion was formerly hung stuck at the question

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[36]This changes, however, when a photographer deliberately communicates his photographic work within the genre of 'art photography' or staged, fictional photography in which the indexical relation to the real lifeworld is absent; this is, of course, another form of photographic practice. Azoulay does not mention this, but it is imperative to stress that the practice concerned in her theory, as well as in this thesis, regards a documentarian practice, a journalistic practice, ethnographic photography: all types of photography in which a trace of reality is evident.

of how to represent the photographic subject morally appropriate, something which lies in the hands of the photographer, Azoulay bridges this question of ethics by re-engaging photography's aesthetic value: in her conceptualisation, the aesthetic condition of documentary is simultaneously a condition of ethics. This ethics condition concerns the relation between photographer and subject; this relation, secondly, over time establishes social opinions or societal consensus through the eyes and minds of the spectator. Based on her theory, I therefore propose the idea of photography as a means, or a tool, for solidarity and co-existing: photography as a *sensus communis*[37].

Azoulay turns to Hannah Arendt, as Arendt brackets this particular argument by Kant, asserting that this is the only moment within his whole oeuvre "where Kant transcends the treatment of the individual, turning instead to his/her being with others – to: "the spectator of a work of art as one who in his/her judgement binds him/herself to other spectators in order to pronounce the judgement of taste that proceeds from his/her inclusion in a community of taste" (*Civil Imagination* 35). Kant explores, then, our judgement faculty of taste as something through which we establish and communicate general rules, based on one utterance; our common judgements gather, merging into common sense and a general imagination/consensus: "Taste, supposedly the most individual of our senses, became for Kant that sense modality that a spectator could use to judge the work displayed before her and to share this judgement with other spectators who participate in a community of taste" (*Civil Imagination* 35).

The political imagination is a shared experience of human beings (the imagination of human kind) – a *sensus communis*. A power to create in one's mind through a shared sensibility or belief that exists between individuals.[38] It is the form of imagination that "exceeds the grasp of the individual mind" and transcends the single individual. (*Civil Imagination* 5). It is political because this imagination plays a role in their 'togetherness': it exists in exchange between them, even emerges in between them. This shared imagination is most visible through historical events led by a people's altered shared consciousness, e.g. the beheading of Louis XVI: "the imagination that led to the beheading of the monarch did not

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[37]Besides the common translation of a sensus communis as simply one's common sense, in philosophy there are two different conceptions: it was described by Aristotle as the ability of integrating the stimuli of the five human senses to a cohesive perception of an object, also referred to as the sixth sense – something Immanuel Kant understood to be the 'transcendental imagination'. Kant on the other hand contemplated the sensus communis as that what binds together a community; that what its members collectively share. It is this latter conception that is regarded here (source).

[38]Imagination: "faculty of the mind which forms and manipulates images", mid-14c., ymaginacion, from Old French imaginacion "concept, mental picture; hallucination," from Latin imaginationem (nominative imaginatio) "imagination, a fancy," noun of action from past participle stem of imaginari (Thesaurus)..

germinate in an individual consciousness alone. Nor did it come into being in a single day. On the contrary, this specific imagining circulated among individuals, changing shape and form as it did so" (*Civil Imagination* 6). It is the political imagination that 'presents the shared experience of human beings', and photography has a key role in this.

An important remark, that Azoulay points to, is the disregard of the role of the spectator, whose viewing is crucial to the openness of understanding the representation. Eventually, it is the spectator who, as stated, carries through the event of photography, and with this, the event bears the potential "for permanent renewal that undermines any attempt to terminate it or to proclaim that it has reached its end." The notion of a closure is overthrown thanks to the agency of the spectator (*Civil Imagination* 27).Where aesthetics can enhance political adversity (with the idea that all images have an aesthetic plane, since it is part of the visual, and hence of our sensorial system, whether deliberately applied by its producer or not), it is the spectator's responsibility to look beyond the aesthetic plane. In a world, "in which social relations are mediated through photography", Azoulay urges us to oppose our knowing the world via two dimensional image planes ('Ethic of the Spectator' pars. 7).[39] The accenting of the world becoming two-dimensional, and her plea to resist understanding the world as it is mediated through mass imagery, especially during this time of digital revolution, is still very relevant: "The manual reconstructive act is... to resist the transformation of the world into a two-dimensional surface, into a picture which posits the viewers into the position of merely addressees whose only function is to confirm the seen by saying yes or no" (*Death's Showcase*).

Azoulay stresses photography's urgent position in our life world, in same fashion as Benjamin almost a century ago – this time, however, with a radically different approach. Benjamin's idea of photography's political faculty being an antidote to any oppressing regimes still finds solid ground[40]. The visual spectacle that was brought by photography does alter our perspective to the world; it slowly brings awareness of both the nice and unjust realities previously untold.

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[39]The spectacle, Baudrillard, Foucault.
[40]The aestheticisation of politics was a strategy he recognised being key to fascist regimes, which conceived life artistically and structured their politics correspondingly as a form of arts. The politicisation of the arts, in Benjamin's eyes, would then serve as antidote ("Art in the Age" 1969).

Conclusion

Benjamin's body of work is where two paradigms meet and divide: the discourse that follows the traditions of art history, and the discourse of visual culture studies that follows the cultural and social history of the visual. This is not to say that in the latter paradigm, there is no place for art. Photography here is very much considered an art; however, its ontology, the way it operates in society, is envisioned through a different framework. Politics and aesthetics form a central approach, but here both dimensions do not oppose; they reciprocally enhance each other. I have argued how Benjamin's dichotomous understanding of photography has developed into a discursive framework of understanding photography.

Chapter one has browsed through early photographic discourse by discussing the theoretical work by Walter Benjamin, in order to on one hand trace back the institutionalisation of photographic discourse, while simultaneously illustrating the field in which photographic practice was being institutionalised. The second chapter, very shortly, regards scholars whose work is largely founded on Walter Benjamin's conceptualisations, considered as an implementation of Benjaminian framework at a later stage surrounding a politics of representation. The third chapter has attempted to conclude all Azoulays insights through the Kantian and Arendtian idea of a *sensus communis*, in which an envisioning oversteps the dead-end created by postmodern scholarship of the late twentieth century.

This thesis then has looked into recurring conceptualisations of documentary photography and the academic environment within which they were pronounced, in comparison to the theoretical work of Ariella Azoulay - in order to surpass what I have argued to be a *cul-de-sac* of the established discourse. The practice that is known under the common denominator 'documentary photography', and the conceptions on which it is grounded, was slowly constructed via an intricate succession of utterances delivered by multiple scholars ever since the inception of photographic technology. This range of characteristics that are specific to photography, has been reflected on, criticised, reformulated, again criticised, eventually preserved as *the* way of knowing the phenomenon of photography: a canon of theoretical insights explaining the modus operandi of photography, its behaviour and its effects in society.

Through both chapter one and chapter two I have argued how, up until today, the distinct category of photographic documentary work, is the result of a set of conceptions that over time accumulated into a discursive framework. A series of critiques expressed during the last two decades of the twentieth century, put a large number of documentary works and

photographers under fire. Key subjects of these critiques eventually piled up into a pertinent set of critiques, becoming standardised criteria for reading documentary photography. This set of criteria that judges documentary photography to be good or bad, follows a line of traditions in which photography's aesthetic plane is weighed against its political value – or, vice versa, its political significance is measured in context of an aesthetic evaluation. The incompatibility of these two dimensions is one of the symptoms of the theoretical framework that surrounds documentary photography in particular, and photography more generally.

Within such a canon of conceptualisations, a discursive framework that shapes what is today the discourse of photography - or the way we speak of or think about photography - we must bear in mind that these uses and knowledge of photography are established by social convention, by nature of agreement and customs. On the one hand, fruits of a discourse are evident and manifest when consensus through it is formed on a certain phenomenon. In general, such unanimity is constructive and allows for unison among the many. It can, however, become a hindrance when consensus on something blocks a necessary revision of this phenomenon. The one-sidedness of thinking of photography by means of the photograph alone is evident in the rejection of reading photographs as a source for relevant information.

Often heard objections are that the photograph is biased, misleading, and erroneous: the photographer often has a personal agenda and the photograph thus cannot be trusted (this is a measure of integrity on behalf of the photographer or photograph that as argument would prove unsolvable and is therefore futile). Instead, we could surpass the intentions of the photographer, when acknowledging that a photograph or the photographed event encompasses more than the photographer's ideas or subjectivity alone. Azoulay took up this challenge, to traverse the prevalent status quo by countering many key notions that have guided photographic discourse since its inception; she challenges us to see photography in new light, renounce the seeming innate preconditions that appear deep-seated but are, she illuminates, not insurmountable.

The theoretical oeuvre by Ariella Azoulay offers another set of criteria, or better still, another frame of understanding photography. The ontology of photography as discussed by Azoulay takes our envisioning of photography into a different direction. She proposes that we ought to reconsider the discourse of photography as it has been institutionalised since its inception, institutionalised by the discourse of art, what caused the apparent hegemonic opposition of photography being on one hand political, and on other aesthetic. The conceptualisation Azoulay proposes, oversteps this opposition, allowing to envision photography from a radically new point of view: envisioning photography as an event

through which social and political relations are established, it is this quality of the photograph that is foregrounded. Accepting herein, that a photograph inherently depicts, in an aesthetic manner - since the visual is by itself aesthetically determined - the political relations that speak through the photograph, both "realms" that formerly hampered each others manifestation, no longer exclude but enhance one another.

Limitations and further reading

First of all, it is fair to state the subject of this thesis might have proved too broad for the size of one master thesis; for in order to include all relevant questions, topics and literary sources, it would have taken some more years and chapters to thoroughly read through this subject. This, I feel, strongly impairs this thesis subject that deserves more time and exploration, in order to include all necessary literature sources and much more photographic material. Especially the latter, the few photographs implicated within this thesis, feels like a big shortcoming.

Secondly, this thesis has aimed to reflect on and relativise the academic traditions that I myself experienced during my Bachelor's and Master's trajectory; during its many courses, the titles listed in the obligatory bibliography felt quite limited – limited, that is, to a certain way of reflecting on photography. It felt, to me personally, slightly outdated in its Eurocentric vision, considering only the iconic, modernist, canon of photography. The reason, then, why I started this thesis was, first and foremost, a personal quest for photographic practice and literature that offered a different history and theory of photography. The theoretical insights that the work of Ariella Azoulay offered, felt like a new pair of eyes looking at the phenomenon of photography. My personal attraction regarding her theoretical work, then, should be considered in the reading of this thesis.

A third limitation is simultaneously the recommended further readings that should have been considered for the argument of this thesis: the philosophical work written by Jacques Rancière, on the relation between aesthetics and politics. Particularly the book *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004) would have been a valuable addition to this thesis.

List of Figures

Figure 1. Documentation of Newhalls exhibition *Photography 1839-1937*. [41]

Figure 2. *Cotton Mill Girl*, Lewis Hine, 1908. Hine's series of photographs of children working in factories is one of the most influential, well-known photographic examples of photography capable of inciting social change; Hine, working as an investigative photographer for the National Child Labor Committee.[42]

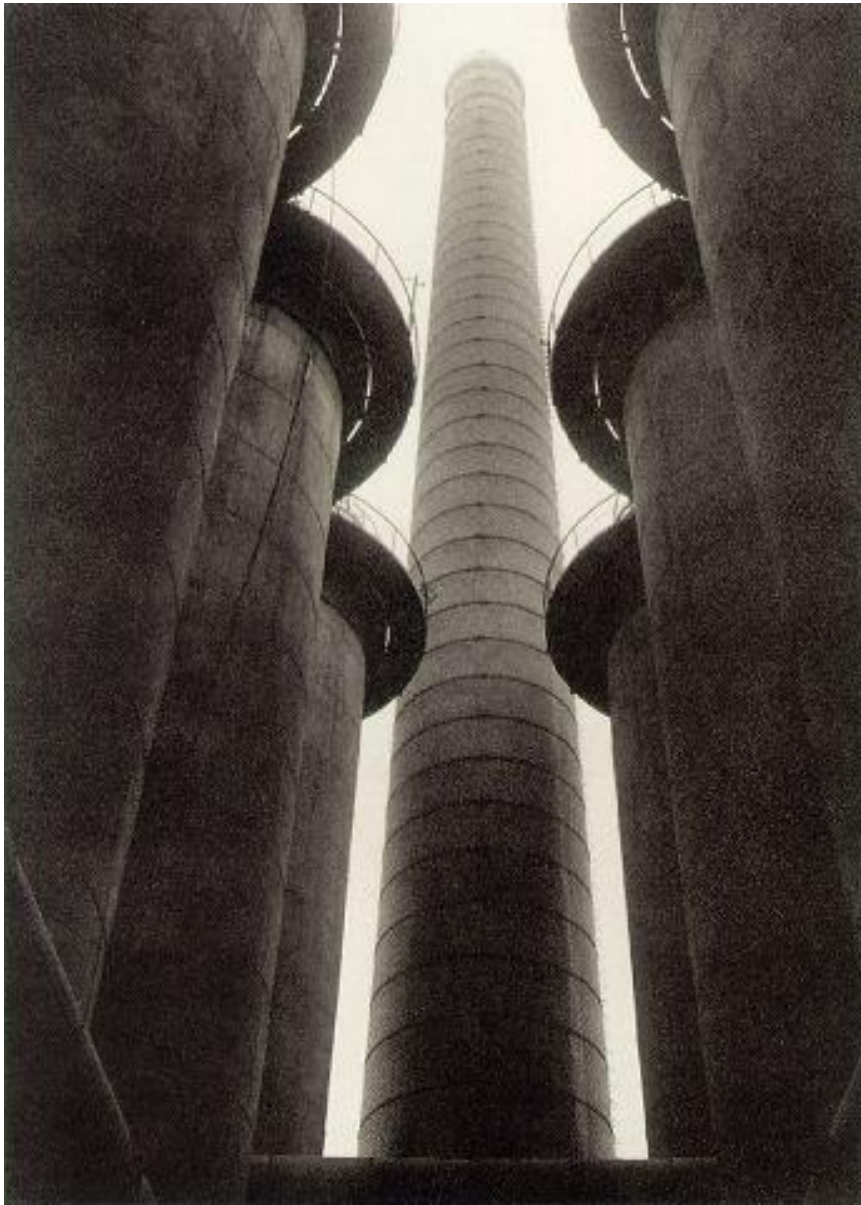[42]Source: http://100photos.time.com/photos/lewis-hine-cotton-mill-worker

Figure 3. The Neue Sachlichkeit photography byAlbert Renger-Patzsch, *Kauper, seen from below*. Herrenwyk, 1928.

Figure 4. Diane Arbus's *Child with Hand Granate in Central Park, N.Y.C. 1926*, 1926. When looking at Arbus' contact sheet on the right, it becomes clear why Arbus was criticised for this photograph and others: she clearly selected the most bizzare photograph but "their exotic doings and strange gear" vanishes when placed in context of the contact sheet. In the end, critics sought for transparency and integrity of the photographer, they all too often did not find.
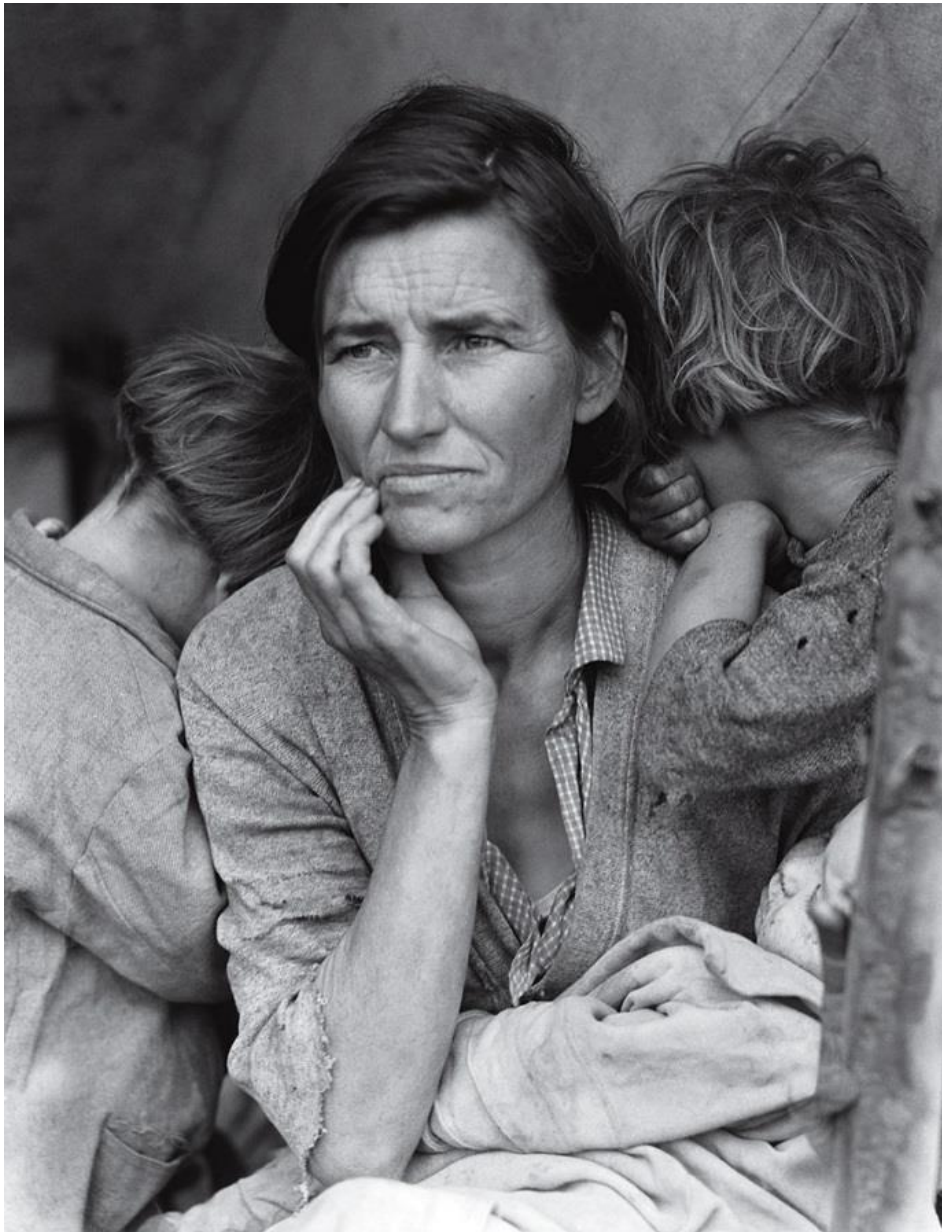
Figure 5. Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, 1936. This iconic photograph is also iconic for its example of "failed" documentary practice. Florence Owens Thompson, the mother depicted on the photograph, became the famous face of the Great Depression. Years later, however, Thompson's story was discovered; the story goes that Lange promised Thompson not to publish her photograph; neither did Thompson or her family gain anything from this publication. It is one of many examples by which the documentarian's humanist intentions. Furthermore, Rutger van der Hoeven recently published a research on the presumed universality of iconic photographs, demonstrating a visual memory that would be universally shared. Migrant Mother was indeed universally recognised; however, people did not know the story behind it.[43]

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[43]See "Global Visual Memory: A Study of the Recognition and Interpretation of Iconic and Historical Photographs" (2019).

Figure 6. These photographs have become well-known for their misinterpretation. In the first, these young people were accused of driving through a scene of catastrophe, watching the drama unfold – then the photographer was accused of portraying these subjects unjustly. The photographer: "Like all images of conflict, I have mixed feelings about this picture I took in south Beirut in 2006. I see it every morning framed on a stark white wall in my Brooklyn apartment. The opaque nature of reality in the Middle East is captured in the image. The beautiful subjects in the red Mini Cooper driving through a devastated neighborhood took offense at how they were depicted. They falsely claimed to reporters that they were actually refugees. The way I was subsequently treated by numerous members of the media made me want to leave the profession and go someplace far away. For me, this picture also stirs feelings of hopelessness for the region. War has developed a vicious tenacity in the Middle East. It seems to only get bloodier and darker with each passing year. News pictures are a hostage to time and place, liberating them from the fallout of what happens in the days and months after the click of the shutter". Spencer Platt—Getty Images

And another example of recent fake photographic news.:

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