The Burden of Representation

Essays on Photographies and Histories

John Tagg

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Los Angeles  
John Tagg

Introduction

I

In his posthumously published book, Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes, against his apparent interpreters, leaves us with a poignant reassertion of the realist position. The camera is an instrument of evidence. Beyond any encoding of the photograph, there is an existential connection between ‘the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens’ and the photographic image: ‘every photograph is somehow co-natural with its referent’. What the photograph asserts is the overwhelming truth that ‘the thing has been there’: this was a reality which once existed, though it is ‘a reality one can no longer touch’.

The quiet passion of Barthes’s reassertion of a retrospective photographic realism, whose unconscious signified must always be the presence of death, has to be read against the death of his own mother, his reawakened sense of unsupportable loss, and his search for ‘a just image’ and not ‘just an image’ of her. His demand for realism is a demand, if not to have her back, then to know she was here: the consolation of a truth in the past which cannot be questioned. This is what the photograph will guarantee:

The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation.

The image which is brought to mind is that of the photograph as death-mask. But this same image serves to remind us that
photography is not unique in its alleged phenomenological basis. The death-mask signifies the same 'that-has-been-and-is-no-more' by mechanically substituting volumes of plaster or bronze for the convexities and concavities of recently dead flesh. Yet it is entirely questionable whether a death-mask could conjure up the piercing, lost reality which Barthes wanted to experience in his grief. The same may be said for the engraved images produced by the physionotrace – the briefly fashionable device for tracing profiles which was, in a sense, the ideological precursor of photography in that the mechanical basis and reproducibility of its images not only ensured their relative cheapness and availability, but were also seen at the time, the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, as the source of a truth not possessed by conventional images.

I need not point out, of course, that the existence of a photograph is no guarantee of a corresponding pre-photographic existent. The notorious and retrospectively clumsy montage which showed US Senator Millard Tydings in earnest conversation with Earl Browder, appearing to implicate him in communist sympathies and losing him his seat in Congress during the McCarthy period, made that crude and costly deception only too clear – with the benefit of hindsight, laughably clear, perhaps. But such wisdom after the fact always runs the risk of making montage a special case: a case of manipulation of otherwise truthful photographic elements. On a more subtle level, however, we have to see that every photograph is the result of specific and, in every sense, significant distortions which render its relation to any prior reality deeply problematic and raise the question of the determining level of the material apparatus and of the social practices within which photography takes place. The optically 'corrected' legal record of a building façade is no less a construction than the montage, and no less artificial than the expressively 'transformed' experimental photographs of Lois Ducos du Hauron or, in a different context, those of Bill Brandt. The legal record is, in much the same way though for different purposes, an image produced according to certain institutionalised formal rules and technical procedures which define legitimate manipulations and permissible distortions in such a way that, in certain contexts, more or less skilled and suitably trained and validated interpreters may draw inferences from them, on the basis of historically established conventions. It is only in this institutional framework that otherwise disputable meanings carry weight and can be enforced.

The indescribable nature of the photograph – the causative link between the pre-photographic referent and the sign – is therefore highly complex, irreversible, and can guarantee nothing at the level of meaning. What makes the link is a discriminatory technical, cultural and historical process in which particular optical and chemical devices are set to work to organise experience and desire and produce a new reality – the paper image which, through yet further processes, may become meaningful in all sorts of ways. The procedure is familiar enough. Reflected light is gathered by a static, monocular lens of particular construction, set at a particular distance from the objects in its field of view. The projected image of these objects is focused, cropped and distorted by the flat, rectangular plate of the camera which owes its structure not to the model of the eye, but to a particular theoretical conception of the problems of representing space in two dimensions. Upon this plane, the multicoloured play of light is then fixed as a granular, chemical discoloration on a translucent support which, by a comparable method, may be made to yield a positive paper print.

How could all this be reduced to a phenomenological guarantee? At every stage, chance effects, purposeful interventions, choices and variations produce meaning, whatever skill is applied and whatever division of labour the process is subject to. This is not the inflection of a prior (though irretrievable) reality, as Barthes would have us believe, but the production of a new and specific reality, the photograph, which becomes meaningful in certain transactions and has real effects, but which cannot refer or be referred to a pre-photographic reality as to a truth. The photograph is not a magical 'emulation' but a material product of a material apparatus set to work in specific contexts, by specific forces, for more or less defined purposes. It requires, therefore, not an alchemy but a history, outside which the existential essence of photography is empty and cannot deliver what Barthes desires: the confirmation of an existence; the mark of a past presence; the repossession of his mother's body.

We could go further. Even if we were confronted by the actual existent about whose (past) existence the photograph is supposed to assure us, we could not have the authentic encounter Barthes wants. We could not extract some existential absolute from the
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conscious and unconscious, cultural, psychological and perceptual codes and processes which constitute our experience of the world and make it meaningful – just as they invest meaning in a paltry piece of chemically discoloured paper. Neither experience nor reality can be separated from the languages, representations, psychological structures and practices in which they are articulated and which they disrupt. The trauma of Barthes’s mother’s death throws Barthes back on a sense of loss which produces in him a longing for a pre-linguistic certainty and unity – a nostalgic and regressive phantasy, transcending loss, on which he founds his idea of photographic realism: to make present what is absent or, more exactly, to make it retrospectively real – a poignant ‘reality one can no longer touch’. What exceeds representation, however, cannot, by definition, be articulated. More than this, it is an effect of the production of the subject in and through representation to give rise to the phantasy of this something more. We have no choice but to work with the reality we have: the reality of the paper print, the material item.

But what is also real is what makes the print more than paper – what makes it meaningful. For this, however, we must look not to some ‘magic’ of the medium, but to the conscious and unconscious processes, the practices and institutions through which the photograph can inscribe a phantasy, take on meaning, and exercise an effect. What is real is not just the material item but also the discursive system of which the image it bears is part. It is to the reality not of the past, but of present meanings and of changing discursive systems that we must therefore turn our attention. That a photograph can come to stand as evidence, for example, rests not on a natural or existential fact, but on a social, semiotic process, though this is not to suggest that evidential value is embedded in the print, in an abstract apparatus, or in a particular signifying strategy. It will be a central argument of this book that what Barthes calls ‘evidential force’ is a complex historical outcome and is exercised by photographs only within certain institutional practices and within particular historical relations, the investigation of which will take us far from an aesthetic or phenomenological context. The very idea of what constitutes evidence has a history – a history which has escaped Barthes, as it has so many labourist and social historians too. It is a history which implies definite techniques and procedures, concrete institutions, and specific social relations – that is, relations of power. It is into this more extensive field that we must insert the history of photographic evidence. The problem is historical, not existential. To conjure up something of what it involves today, I suggest in the text that you ask yourself, and not just rhetorically, under what conditions would a photograph of the Loch Ness Monster (of which there are many) be acceptable?

II

What I go on to argue is that the coupling of evidence and photography in the second half of the nineteenth century was bound up with the emergence of new institutions and new practices of observation and record-keeping: that is, those new techniques of representation and regulation which were so central to the restructuring of the local and national state in industrialised societies at that time and to the development of a network of disciplinary institutions – the police, prisons, asylums, hospitals, departments of public health, schools, and even the modern factory system itself. The new techniques of surveillance and record harboured by such institutions bore directly on the social body in new ways. They enabled, at a time of rapid social change and instability, an unprecedented extension and integration of social administration, amounting – even before Alphonse Bertillon’s systematisation of criminal records in the 1880s – to a new strategy of governance.4

At the same time, the emergence and official recognition of instrumental photography was caught up with more general and dispersed transformations in society and in ways of thinking about it, representing it, and seeking to act on it. The development of new regulatory and disciplinary apparatuses was closely linked, throughout the nineteenth century, to the formation of new social and anthropological sciences – criminology, certainly, but also psychiatry, comparative anatomy, germ theory, sanitation, and so on – and the new kinds of professionalism associated with them, which took both the body and its environment as their field, their domain of expertise, redefining the social as the object of their technical interventions. On a profound level, indeed, the two developments could not be separated, for, as Foucault’s work has shown, the production of new knowledges released new effects of
power, just as new forms of the exercise of power yielded new
knowledges of the social body which was to be transformed. Power
and meaning thus have a reciprocal relation described in the
coupled concepts of the regime of power and the regime of sense.
What characterised the regime in which photographic evidence
emerged, therefore, was a complex administrative and discursive
restructuring, turning on a social division between the power and
privilege of producing and possessing and the burden of being meaning.
In the context of this historical shift in power and sense,
photographic documentation and evidence took form; not all at
once, of course, for the photograph’s status as evidence and record
(like its status as Art) had to be produced and negotiated to be
established.

Yet it is important to reiterate that this status cannot be
understood solely in the context of archival practices and new
discourses centring on the body. First, there are real dangers in
separating late nineteenth-century discourses which specify the
body from discourses of the social environment which they came to
supplement but not supplant; indeed, as the Quarry Hill albums
discussed below show, photographic evidence has to be tracked
across both domains. Second, the changing status of photography
must also be pursued through courts of law, Select Committee
hearings, governmental inquiries, commissioners’ reports, and
debates in legislative bodies where the determinants of evidence
and proof were defined and redefined. This will mean not only
investigating the legislation and judicial practices which laid down,
in various police, prison and criminal justice Acts, where and when
photographic records were required to be made and the terms
under which they could function as evidence. It will also mean, as I
argue in Chapter 4, looking at the photograph’s second court
appearance, not as the instrument of criminal law but as the object
of copyright laws which defined the status of creative properties
and thus contributed to that separation and stratification of
photographic production into the amateur and professional,
instrumental and artistic domains which was laid out in the last
decades of the nineteenth century.

In both cases, whether pursuing the photograph as instrument or
object of legal practices, we shall have to take full account of
significant national differences, between Britain, France, the United
States, and so on. And, while we are being cautious, we might also
add a number of other reservations that must qualify attempts to
extend Foucault’s metaphor of Panopticism and his concept of a
new technology of power/knowledge to the photographic domain.
First, the chronology of change, which is unclear in Foucault,
cannot be taken to point to a single and final reversal of the
political axis of representation or to mark a definite periodicity.
Nor can national differences and inconsistencies be suppressed.
For example, if the 1880s in France were a period of rationalisation in
police photography, with the introduction of Bertillon’s ‘signaletic’
identity card system, this does not mesh easily and conveniently
with developments elsewhere. In Britain, local police forces had
been using photography since the 1860s, but, even after the 1870
Act requiring county and borough prisons to photograph convicted
prisoners, the value of such records for detection continued to be
questioned. A parliamentary report of 1873 summarising returns
from county and borough prisons showed that, of 43,634
photographs taken in England and Wales under the 1870 Act up to
December 31, 1872, only 156 had been useful in cases of detection.
This had to be set against a total cost of £2,948 18s. 3d. Thus, the
police in Britain, like other governmental offices, did not obtain
their own photographic specialists until after 1901, following the
introduction not of an anthropometric system like Bertillon’s, but
of Sir Edward Henry’s fingerprinting system. Even then, the format
of acceptable record photographs was still under debate in the late
1930s.

Second, certain exaggerated readings of Foucault – of which the
eyssays that follow are not innocent – face the problems of older
versions of the thesis of social control: they run the risk of
overlooking more mundane, material constraints on the lives of the
dominated classes and of overstating the triumph of control, while
clinging to notions of a thwarted but revolutionary class. As the
historian Gareth Stedman Jones has insisted, Benthamites and
evangelicals in Britain, for example, were no more successful than
radicals and Chartists in moulding a working class in their own
image; from the 1850s on, a working-class culture was gradually
established which, however conservative and defensive, proved
virtually impervious to external attempts to determine its character
or direction. Yet, having said this as a partial corrective to some of
what follows, the force of the argument is clear, that the emergence
of photographic documentation and what Barthes sees as the
photograph's 'evidential force' were bound up with new discursive and institutional forms, subject to but also exercising real effects of power, and developing in a complex historical process that is all but obliterated by the idea of a continuous 'documentary tradition' which takes the status of photographic evidence as neutral and given.

III

'Documentary' as such was a later development belonging both to a different phase in the history of the capitalist state and to a different stage of struggle around the articulation, deployment and status of realist rhetorics. Taking its name from a usage coined by the film critic John Grierson in 1926, documentary came to denote a discursive formation which was wider by far than photography alone, but which appropriated photographic technology to a central and privileged place within its rhetoric of immediacy and truth.\(^9\) Claiming only to 'put the facts' directly or vicariously, through the report of 'first hand experience', the discourse of documentary constituted a complex strategic response to a particular moment of crisis in Western Europe and the USA - a moment of crisis not only of social and economic relations and social identities but, crucially, of representation itself: of the means of making the sense we call social experience. Outside this crisis, the specificity and effectivity of documentary cannot be grasped. Focused in specific institutional sites and articulated across a range of intertextual practices, it was entirely bound up with a particular social strategy: a liberal-corporatist plan to negotiate economic, political and cultural crisis through a limited programme of structural reforms, relief measures, and a cultural intervention aimed at restructuring the order of discourse, appropriating dissent, and resecuring the threatened bonds of social consent.

Integral to such a venture, therefore, was a discursive strategy whose realisation was to give the documentary mode - which, by contrast, remained oppositional in Britain in the 1930s - a central place in Franklin Roosevelt's reformist 'New Deal' programme. By mobilising documentary practices across a whole series of New Deal agencies, Roosevelt's administration did more than assemble propaganda for its policies. It deployed a rhetoric with larger claims than this: with claims to retrieve the status of Truth in discourse, a status threatened by crisis but whose renegotiation was essential if social relations of meaning were to be sustained and national and social identities resecured, while demand for reform was contained within the limits of monopoly capitalist relations.

Certainly documentary traded on realist modes and practices of documentation which had longer histories in the growth and struggles of urban, industrialised societies. Such histories implicated documentary, too, in the development and deployment I have described of new discourses on society, new ways of scrutinising it, representing it, and seeking to transform it. The process was, as I have already argued, bound up with the emergence of institutions, practices and professionalisms bearing directly on the social body in a new fashion, through novel techniques of surveillance, record, discipline, training and reform. Intersecting with older practices and discourses of philanthropy, these new institutionalised techniques articulated with and extended the sphere of influence of a restructured state apparatus in ways which integrated social regulation in an unprecedented manner, devolving it systematically to domains of life never before subject to such intervention. The documentary movement of the paternalistic New Deal state belonged to this history of centralising, corporatist reform which, from the mid-nineteenth century on, through health, housing, sanitation, education, the prevention of crime, and a strategy of seemingly benevolent social provision, had sought to represent, reform and reconstitute the social body in new ways.

Social welfare was thus wedded to a mode of governance whose instigation did not pass unresisted, whether actively or passively, yet which sought to establish its rule not primarily through coercion and authoritarian control, as under fascism, but through relations of dependence and consent. Central to it, therefore, was an emergent formation of institutions, practices and representations which furnished means for training and surveilling bodies in great numbers, while seeking to instil in them a self-regulating discipline and to position them as dependent in relation to supervisory apparatuses through which the interventions of the state appeared both benevolent and disinterested. In the context of this modern strategy of power, we can safely dismiss the view that the reversal of the political axis of representation in late nineteenth- and early
twentieth-century documentation and the subsequent amassing of a systematic archive of subordinated class, racial and sexual subjects can be looked at as ‘progressive’ phenomena or as signs of a democratisation of pictorial culture.

If there is a continuity, then, it is that of developing systems of production, administration and power, not of a ‘documentary tradition’ resting on the supposed inherent qualities of the photographic medium, reflecting a progressive engagement with reality, or responding to popular demand. Yet even at this level, the continuity is one of uneven and sporadic development. In changing historical circumstances, at moments of recurrent crisis or rapid transformation, systems of governance could not survive unchanged and had to be renegotiated in ways crucially focused on the logics of social meaning and systems of representation which they sustained and which, in turn, served as their supports.

The photographs examined by the essays in this study are patterned across such shifts and crises in the discursive order. The years in which the Quarry Hill area of Leeds was systematically surveyed and photographed, for instance, marked the close of a period of instability in Britain – of high unemployment, social unrest, threatened epidemics, and immigration – which called forth new social stratagems, new techniques of representation and administration, through which, it was hoped, a specific kind of attention to the material needs of the poor would provide the means of their regulation and reformation. It was in such a context that the institutions, practices and discourses of social welfare came to be articulated in the space of the local state. Crisis was averted and a new phase of development was prepared by a social restructurings negotiated through local apparatuses deploying new powers and new modes of representation. Just as in the USA in the 1930s, in the midst of an even more profound economic, political and cultural upheaval, social unity was recast and a new relation between corporate capital and the state was worked out at a national level, in which welfare structures and documentary practices played a crucial role in securing social regulation and consent within a social democratic framework. The ‘Depression’ years and the temporising response of liberal democracy, as I have argued, provided the setting in which documentary rhetoric as such emerged. But it was half a century earlier that, in the most developed capitalist countries, the local structures of the welfare

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state were prepared. Integral to them was a new regime of representation.

**IV**

This last phrase, however, runs the risk of remaining only a provocative historical hypothesis. To stop here would leave us in danger not only of eliding significant national differences but also of running together a complex and discontinuous history. Between the involvement of photography in the welfarism of the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the emergence of the liberal, democratic documentary mode of the 1930s, important changes have yet to be analysed. In the nineteenth century, for example, we are dealing with the instrumental deployment of photography in privileged administrative practices and the professionalised discourses of new social sciences – anthropology, criminology, medical anatomy, psychiatry, public health, urban planning, sanitation, and so on – all of them domains of expertise in which arguments and evidence were addressed to qualified peers and circulated only in certain limited institutional contexts, such as courts of law, parliamentary committees, professional journals, departments of local government, Royal Societies and academic circles. In the terms of such discourses, the working classes, colonised peoples, the criminal, poor, ill-housed, sick or insane were constituted as the passive – or, in this structure, ‘feminised’ – objects of knowledge. Subjected to a scrutinising gaze, forced to emit signs, yet cut off from command of meaning, such groups were represented as, and wishfully rendered, incapable of speaking, acting or organising for themselves. The rhetoric of photographic documentation at this period, whether attached to the environmentalist arguments of public health and housing or focused on the alleged pathologies of the body isolated in medical and criminological discourse, is therefore one of precision, measurement, calculation and proof, separating out its objects of knowledge, shunning emotional appeal and dramatisation, and hanging its status on technical rules and protocols whose institutionalisation had to be negotiated. As a strategy of control, its success has been greatly exaggerated; but as a strategy of representation, its claims and their consequences seem to have gone largely unchallenged.
By contrast with the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the economic, political and cultural crises of the 1920s and 1930s occurred in more developed capitalist democracies in which, while the technical and instrumental use of photography continued and was greatly systematised and extended, a wider negotiation of social consensus was also demanded. A crucial inflection of the discourse of documentation therefore took place. Mobilising new means of mass reproduction, the documentary practices of the 1930s, though equally the province of a developing photographic profession, were addressed not only to experts but also to specific sectors of a broader lay audience, in a concerted effort to recruit them to the discourse of paternalistic, state-directed reform. Documentary photography traded on the status of the official document as proof and inscribed relations of power in representation which were structured like those of earlier practices of photo-documentation: both speaking to those with relative power about those positioned as lacking, as the ‘feminised’ Other, as passive but pathetic objects capable only of offering themselves up to a benevolent, transcendent gaze – the gaze of the camera and the gaze of the paternal state. 

But in its mode of address, documentary transformed the flat rhetoric of evidence into an emotionalised drama of experience that worked to effect an imaginary identification of viewer and image, reader and representation, which would suppress difference and seal them into the paternalistic relations of domination and subordination on which documentary’s truth effects depended. At the same time, and in keeping with a reasserted environmentalism which displaced again the geneticism of nineteenth-century anthropometric sciences, it transposed the static separation of bodies and space characteristic of earlier photographic records into an ethnographic theatre in which the supposed authenticity and interrelationships of gesture, behaviour and location were essential to the ‘documentary’ value of the representation. The comparative measurement of specimen subjects and spaces in isolation gave place to what the Farm Security Administration photographer, John Collier Jr, called ‘visual anthropology’. 

One notable, if partial, exception to this might come to mind in the work of Walker Evans. But if, for photographers like Evans, an older archival mode of documentation remained available as a rhetorical resource to mark out a difference both from documentary and from earlier Symbolist strategies, it did so only within the demarcated institutional spaces of aestheticised photography which Evans inherited from Stieglitz and others and in which, given their security and separateness by the 1930s, the Pictorialists’ explicit and excessive connotations of Art were no longer necessary. It was, therefore, not only elision of the power relations of archival representations that marked Evans’s practice, but also its increasing entrenchment within the privileged ‘High Art’ spaces of an ever more stratified and hierarchical culture.

It was just such spaces that the New Deal documentary mode eschewed. Indeed, opening up new sites for cultural practice was integral to its strategy and rhetoric. What enabled this novel ‘humanistic’, anthropological discourse to reach its wider audience was its convergence in the 1930s with the accelerating development and exploitation of new technologies – new cameras, film stock, means of mechanical reproduction, presses, papers, inks; new techniques – of graphics, layout, presentation and reportage; new styles of publication and exhibition; and new methods of finance, promotion and distribution. Such innovations changed the basis of political communication and made publicity central to the political process. Under their momentum, documentary emerged not as a specialist scientific or aesthetic discourse, but as a popular form with an unprecedented audience and dispersal. The very years in which the liberal, statist measures of the New Deal were being enacted and fought for, witnessed a crucial historical ‘rendezvous’ of means, rhetoric and social strategy. Only in this juncture could the documentary mode take on its particular force, command identification, and exert a power, not as the evocation of a pristine truth but as a politically mobilised rhetoric of Truth, a strategy of signification, a cultural intervention aimed at resealing social unity and structures of belief at a time of far-reaching crisis and conflict.

Photographers of the Historical Section of the Division of Information of the Resettlement Administration, later absorbed by the Farm Security Administration and the Office of War Information, did not therefore just ‘reflect’ a social and economic upheaval. Working for an innovatory New Deal agency and addressing primarily the urban populations of the north and east, they were enjoined to make a particular sense of the crisis of ‘The South’ and west, rendering social disintegration and misery visible and legible within the terms of paternal philanthropic reformation.
...and, by this act of meaning, retrieving the relations of deference and power on which Roosevelt’s state corporatist strategy depended. But, as the conjuncture of the second New Deal broke apart, even as early as the mid-point of Roosevelt’s second term, documentary photography could no longer enact the same meanings. Neither the relief agencies nor the documentary discourse they deployed were to survive a war which did for the monopolised industrial and agricultural economies what the New Deal state could not. In dramatically changed wartime and postwar conditions, a new cultural formation took shape. While practices of surveillance proliferated in an atmosphere of militarism and McCarthyism, the work of the Farm Security Administration’s photographic section was all but destroyed, the documentalist Photo League was arraigned and suppressed, and the traces of documentary style lingered only in parodic form in the pictorial commodifications of Life and National Geographic Magazine, the corporated celebration of Roy Stryker’s Standard Oil New Jersey archive, and the multinational humanism of The Family of Man.

Significantly, Edward Steichen’s populist and patriarchal exhibition contained not a single photograph by Walker Evans, whose derogatory opinion of the Museum of Modern Art’s widely acclaimed show was soon to prevail in curatorial circles.11 Though in tune with the unspecific rhetoric of familialism and freedom of the early Cold War, The Family of Man came to appear naive, sentimental and dangerously tinted with the liberalism of a discredited period when set alongside the cool, dissociated universalism of disidentificatory modernist practices. Such practices emphasised authorial freedom against Steichen’s editorial dictatorship, but also, and most importantly, set themselves in a space beyond politics, the popular, and national culture. It was in this direction that the policy of the Museum of Modern Art was to steer, riding a tide of rhetorical liberalisation and corporate modernism which was to characterise a new phase in the ‘cultural Cold War’.12 Under the curatorship of John Szarkowski, Walker Evans staged a singular return to the Museum in which his work was read as, at once, a programme for a peculiar photographic modernism and the point of departure for a new and select ‘documentary’ tradition handed down from Evans to Frank, Arbus, Friedlander and the rest.13

The historicist reduction of complex practices to stylistic streams, defined, opposed or reconciled by a privileged criticism and gathered in the transcendent space of the Museum, typified the strategic attempt to impose a corporatist hegemony in a reasserted cultural hierarchy. But whatever sense or necessity such a critical appropriation of the term ‘documentary’ might have had at the time, its earlier currency was strained to the point of breaking. The unlikely and paradoxical mixture of social and psychological ‘truths’, exotic voyeurism, fetishised artistic subjectivity, and formalist claims to universality, which may once have appeared mutually enhancing, was contradictory and inherently unstable. For all the critical élan with which a modish tradition was constructed that could appear, by turns, modernist and realist, universal and American, objectively true and subjectively expressive, profoundly human and obsessively privatistic, its effectivity was short-lived. The assimilation of photographic practices to ‘Fine Art’ models was fraught with difficulties, and that precarious generalisation Photography did not sit well in the modern museum of Art. The history of photography stands in relation to the history of Art as a history of writing would to the history of Literature. It cannot be reduced to a unity and assimilated to the very canon it has, practically and theoretically, called into question. The idea of a modernist photographic lineage has no more status than the notion of a popular documentary tradition to which it has been counterposed and which it has regretfully served to re-incite.

To say this about the dominant representations of photographic practice in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s is also to say something about the context in Britain in which the research for these essays was begun. There, too, a variety of residual documentary practices were posed as the popular, humanistic, or even radical left alternatives to recently imported versions of mystical or formalist aestheticism, though both were set against the nostalgic conservatism of the Royal Photographic Society and the technicism and stereotypical exaggerations of commercial photography, advertising and photojournalism. The institutional, practical, but also theoretical means to challenge this continual re-enactment of the terms of a nineteenth-century debate on the...
nature of photography, by developing new forms of intervention and provoking a radical realignment, had hardly begun to emerge. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that, if many of the necessary resources were present outside the spaces of photography – in the fragmentation of post-conceptual artist art and the impetus to cultural activism, in the trickle of translated post-structuralist theory, in a revitalised Marxist debate, and in a resurgent, theoretically articulate women’s movement – they were far indeed from beginning to disrupt photographic practice, education, or curatorial and administrative policy.

Before passing on to a consideration of how these issues shaped the essays which follow, I want to look first at an apparent conflict in the argument put forward in the early chapters of the book. Is there not a contradiction between the claim that the development of photography as a technology of surveillance and record entailed a radical reversal of the political axis of representation, and the recognition of the opposite movement in the dispersal and seeming ‘democratisation’ of photography, following the introduction of equipment and services accessible to a wide amateur market?

Clearly there is a contradiction – one that must be engaged with, one rooted not in the argument but in the process of historical development and symptomatic, at a deep level, of contradictions central to a capitalist mode of production which must place its means of production in the hands of those it expropriates and in which there is an inherent antagonism between the socialisation of production and consumption and of the mechanisms of discipline and desire, and the private appropriation of surplus value. At the same time, this contradiction in the deployment of photographic technology also has to do with conflicts inherent in the longer historical development of reproductive means of cultural production which, as well as raising levels of production and consumption and seeming to disperse cultural activity in ways difficult to control, have also had the opposite effect of facilitating the imposition of cultural homogeneity, while simultaneously creating new divisions of power both between the possessors and controllers of the means of cultural production and the dispossessed, and between those who are and those who are not literate in the appropriate cultural languages. Within the space of these contradictions there is undoubtedly room for cultural resistance, dissent and opposition. Yet this dissent rarely develops. More particularly, the emergence of a mass amateur base or, perhaps more accurately, the production of a new consumer body for photography did not represent a challenge to the existing power relations of cultural practice. In fact, it may have furthered their solidification. Why?

In the first case, photography only passed into popular hands in the crudest sense of the term. The development of popular amateur photography was entirely dependent on the large-scale production of equipment and materials, mechanised servicing, and a highly organised marketing structure, which together made possible a second phase of industrialisation of photography and the emergence of multinational, monopolistic corporations such as that pioneered by George Eastman. For the new class of amateurs and even for certain professionals, large parts of the photographic process were entirely reliant on and in the control of this photographic industry whose privately or corporately owned means of production were highly concentrated and necessitated elaborate divisions of labour and knowledge – both developments opposed to democratic dispersal. In consequence, too, at the level both of equipment and servicing, much of the process made available was highly mechanised or tailored to the needs of mechanisation and standardisation. The instrument that was handed over was, of this necessity, very limited, and the kinds of images it could produce were therefore severely restricted on the technical plane alone.

More significantly, perhaps, if a piece of equipment was made available, then the necessary knowledges were not. Technical knowledge about the camera was not dispersed but remained in the hands of specialist technicians, themselves dependent on means of production they did not own or control. Knowledge of the mechanics of picture-making was equally specialised and constituted an increasingly professionalised skill, usually calling for much more elaborate training and equipment than that available to the amateur and installing a difference so marked that, for photography with pretensions to a higher status, the explicit connotations of Art characteristic of late nineteenth-century Pictorialism proved entirely dispensable. By contrast, popular photography operated within a technically constrained field of signifying possibilities and a narrowly restricted range of codes, and in modes – such as the head-on portrait pose – already connoting cultural subordination. Acceded a lesser legal status than either commercial or so-called artistic photography and, by definition, positioned as inferior in an
The Burden of Representation

increasingly stratified arena of cultural production, amateur photographic practice was also largely confined to the narrow spaces of the family and commoditised leisure which imposed their own constraints by tying it to consumption, incorporating it in a familial division of labour, and reducing it to a stultified repertoire of legitimated subjects and stereotypes.

All this must be weighed before we can even begin to talk about 'democratisation' or criticise the alleged poverty of popular photography. If amateur photography operates in an exceedingly limited institutional space and signifying range, then it is hemmed in on all sides by divisive barriers to technical and cultural knowledge, ownership and control. But beyond this, even if variation, innovation and dissent were exhibited by amateur photographic practice, it would not carry the weight of cultural significance, because, by definition, its space of signification is not culturally privileged. Any success in shifting the parameters of signification – one definition of inventiveness and imagination – would therefore be outweighed by the social hierarchy of registers of meaning. Thus dissent or innovation in popular photography is rarely seen as transforming signifying possibilities or contesting orders of practice (as, for example, in Jo Spence's professional, institutionally promoted reworking of the family album). Rather what it involves, if it is to be visible at all, is a change of level, moving upwards in the hierarchy, ceasing to be 'amateur' photography in evaluative terms, graduating to another space: the space of professional, technical or, more usually, Art photography. (Witness the migration of the work of Lewis Carroll, Lartigue or Mike Disfarmer, among others.)

This is what calls into question wholesale and normative condemnations of amateur photography. There can be no totalising definitions of originality or imagination spanning the complexity demarcated spheres of modern cultural practice. The field of portraiture, for instance, dominating as it does so much of amateur photography, is divided, over its entire range, into a number of zones defined by different forms of practice, different economies, technical bases, semiotic resources and cultural statuses. No absolute set of criteria crosses these zones. Nor can their separation be seen as a ready-made basis for evaluation. Rather, we must try to grasp their historically produced relations not only as levels in the market, but as levels in a hierarchy of practices whose most privileged strata, increasingly sustained by post-market institutions, are called 'Art', whose middle ground ranges from 'commercial art' to 'craft', and whose lower registers are designated 'kitsch', 'vernacular', 'amateur' or 'popular culture'. These are distinctions articulated within a particular historical cultural formation and lend substance by the particular historiographies it sustains. Their hierarchical ordering is a function of the tensions and conflicts of the development of cultural production under the political and economic relations of capitalism and the dissonant drives of market expansion and social reproduction. It is these tensions and conflicts, especially between the colonisation of new markets and the reproduction of social values, that necessitate a stratified culture in which a conspicuous and selectively supported 'High Art' more visibly sustaining normative social mores is articulated in and through a mutually defining difference both from 'commercial' and from 'popular' culture. The difference, then, is one that is institutionally produced and internal to the system, not one founded on an essential opposition, as conservative cultural critics from Matthew Arnold to Clement Greenberg have claimed.

As in the general cultural sphere, the hierarchisation of photographic practices rested on the historical development of distinct economies, institutional bases and secondary supportive structures. But it also needed to be secured at the legal and political levels. As we have seen, popular amateur photography would not have been possible without the development of a large-scale photographic industry, fostering the emergence and domination of international corporations such as Eastman Kodak. The corporate stage of production was both the condition of existence of popular photography and its limit. It was new technical, organisational and marketing methods which laid the basis first for the enormously profitable mass production of photographic images, and then, in the second phase of capitalisation, for the even more lucrative industrialised production both of photo-mechanical reproductions and of equipment and materials. Unscrupulous competition and the high investment costs of such developments inevitably raised demands for statutory protection and controls, registered in legislation and legal disputes on censorship and copyright through which, in part, the contradictions between cultural privilege and control and the potentiality of the new means of cultural production were negotiated.
What emerged from such legal and legislative interventions was a series of distinctions – between the licit and the illicit, between property and non-property – overwritten both on the emergent hierarchy of photographic practices and on new legal and institutional definitions of instrumental and non-instrumental representations. The result was a structure of differences – between amateur and professional, instrumental and artistic – which was to become relatively fixed and in which popular practice was allotted a particular, subordinate place. It was a stratification as characteristic of photography’s development in England as in France, even allowing for different juridical conceptions of copyright. Whether or not a notion of the subject was brought into play, photographic law was still overdetermined by pre-emptive ideas of property, meaning and cultural value so that, while protection and status were given to ‘artistic conception’ and capital investment, the actual ‘operatives’ and makers of photographic images, like print workers and studio technicians today, might be denied any legal claim to their control. Hence the close relation between the setting in place of a hierarchical order of practices and the emergence, at every level, of a hierarchy of practitioners – from the amateurs and disenfranchised ‘proletariat of creation’, up to the professional stratum of artists, editors, journalists and others empowered to intervene in the production of meaning and the whole range of experts, from art critics to criminologists, privileged to adjudicate on its results.

The concentration of power, status and control characteristic of the structure of which amateur photography was a subordinate part lends little support to interpretations of the advent of mass photographic practice either as a triumph of democracy or as proof of the poverty of popular imagination. What it rather suggests is a pattern of institutional organisation and a structure of relations of domination and subordination which precisely echo those in which photography was mobilised as an instrument of administrative and disciplinary power. The contradictory moments of photographic development turn on the same process of social hierarchisation. At work in them is an institutional order, a professionalised structure of control, and a political economy of discursive production which, so far from being an expressive unity, have no need of consistency but attempt only to sustain their effectivity by orchestrating a range of different and even contradictory discourses and theories of discourse and the play of their power effects.

VI

Power, then, is what is centrally at issue here: the forms and relations of power which are brought to bear on practices of representation or constitute their conditions of existence, but also the power effects which representational practices themselves engender – the interlacing of these power fields, but also their interference patterns, their differences, their irreducibility one to another. Here, a determinate space is opened up as the effect of recent theoretical debates for which power can no longer be seen as a general form, emanating from one privileged site, uniform in its operations, and unified in its determinate effects. The space is crucial, since it exposes a rift in the causal sequences of deterministic theories of cultural practice and in the general conceptions of representation on which they rest. Its consequences are, therefore, far-reaching for all attempts to theorise cultural politics and history, even including the more than reluctant discipline of art history and those varied belated critiques which have gone, once again, under the name of the social history of art.

It would be encouraging to think that this connection of art history and the field of cultural theory might no longer appear unlikely or odd – or, at least, less so than at the time these essays were begun. The weight of established authority at the institutional level and at the level of the dominant discourses of art history may still insist that the two be kept apart, but new forms of critical and historical theory, exemplified in the work of T. J. Clark, have made decisive inroads since the early 1970s. These developments may not have been as visible as those in the history of theory in the same period, but they have gathered momentum and, at last, by force of attrition, unfixed the ritual patterns of art historical debate.

Though originally presented in spaces pointedly ‘outside’ the discipline of art history, the essays here are, from one point of view, to be read as a response to this context and especially to Clark’s innovatory attempt to synthesise historical analyses with his
readings of recent French Marxism, semiotics and psychoanalysis. Clark’s rethinking of the issues of realism, urbanisation and representation, the relations of class to culture, and the conditions of production and reception of specific works of art, provided important points of contact with the themes of this book. What gave focus to these concerns, however, was the central belief, shared by a number of approaches at that time, that the problems of art history were at root methodological and that what the subject needed was ‘theory’, something which could only be imagined as coming from outside – outside the discipline and even, in Britain at least, outside what was thought to compose the national intellectual culture. The dominant methodological focus and questionable belief in methodological solutions were to leave new approaches vulnerable in crucial ways to a decade of political, educational and intellectual change. Yet, at the beginning, they provided an essential impetus to work which tried to break with established art historical modes and engage with new forms of critical, analytical and political theory which were then entirely transforming the concept of cultural studies. Written over a period of ten years, the arguments and interventions of the essays in this book, with all their revisions, reversals and hesitations, are plotted on this process of engagement. Their point of departure was an attempt to shift the debate about realism and representation by piecing together the outlines of a historical account of the development of documentary evidence as a function of social administration, but the intention was also to assemble the elements of a theory, in the belief not only that these elements could be eclectically reconciled but that they could be welded into a systematic method. For example, the earliest essay, ‘The Currency of the Photograph’, set out to bring a semiotic analysis of photographic codes into conjunction with an Althusserian account of ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ and to hold them in place by a Foucauldian emphasis on the power effects of discursive practices. The purpose was to avoid the reductive, expressive models that had prevailed in the social history of art, from Antal and Schapiro even to Clark himself. The problems of this ‘solution’, however, soon became evident.

Introduction

VII

As the essay itself wants to show, a classical semiotic account of immanent systems and codes of meaning cannot specify the institutional nature of signifying practices, their patterns of circulation in social practice, or their dependence on specific modes of cultural production. What is missing, however, cannot be supplied by grafting on a Marxist account of the hierarchical instances of the social formation. The reflectionist concept of representation on which such accounts must inevitably depend runs entirely counter to a semiotic conception of language as a conventional system of differentiations already containing and in effect party to the constitution of social relations. This is a view which precludes the notion of a determinate, pre-linguistic realm of the social or the treatment of language as a simple medium through which a primal social experience lends expression and thus recognition in the answering experience of similarly positioned social subjects. It follows, then, that we cannot think of abstracting experience from the signifying systems in which it is structured, or of decoding cultural languages to reach a given and determinant level of material interest, since it is the discursive structures and material processes of these languages that articulate interest and define sociality in the first place.

The object, however, is not to replace a ‘social’ explanation with a discursive analysis, but rather to trace the relation between the two; to map out the productivity and effectiveness of successive, coexistent, contradictory or conflicting languages; to plot the limits governing what they can articulate and how far they can remain convincing by recruiting the identification of their speakers and channelling the convictions of those they address. A discursive analysis such as this does not pretend to be final or exhaustive. Discourses have conditions of existence which they do not determine and, in any case, comprise more than languages alone. Moreover, any analysis of their effects cannot be other than a conditional calculation framed by the context, perspective and form of practice within which it is itself made.

To reject the idea that cultural practices and systems of meaning constitute a level of representation determined in its meanings and effects by some more basic material reality is not, therefore, to posit an autonomous discursive realm. Equally, what is not discours
cannot be held to constitute a unified, distinct and counterposed domain: an ontologically prior unity of being to which discourse may be referred. (The argument is crucial here for cultural theory, as it was earlier for grasping the nature of photographic representation.) What is denied is not the 'non-discursive' but the conception of it as a unitary category with general attributes, knowable through a non-discursive 'experience', yielding general criteria of epistemological validity. The non-discursive, the real, is diversely constituted in different discourses and practices and cannot be imagined as a universal, common or necessary referent, existing autonomously, yet somehow available through a non-discursive representation to serve as a measure of truth. Just as there is no object of knowledge or process of knowledge in general, outside specific discursive systems, so there can be no general test.

Particular bodies of discourse and practice can and do develop their own appropriate criteria of adequacy and effectivity, specific to their objectives and to the technologies they deploy, but not valid beyond their domains. As bases for disputes and tests, such criteria may be radically different, but their efficacy is sufficiently established in the context of the determinate purposes and circumstances of the discourses and practices to which they relate. There is no necessity to posit a general measure and certainly no basis to the idea of measuring their relative degrees of openness to an imagined authentic experience of an original reality.

The difficulties this puts in the way of the kind of analysis which simply wants to view signifying systems as encoding and decoding practices and to locate them within what Althusser called 'Ideological State Apparatuses', cannot now be avoided. Althusser's decisive advance was to treat 'ideology' as social relations, displacing notions of ideas or consciousness which had hitherto reduced ideology to a (mis)representation of the social in thought. 'Ideology' now appeared as the effect of definite institutions, practices and forms of subjection, as an indispensable mode of organisation and conduct of social relations. What Althusser continued to insist on, however, was the general and unified character of these relations and of the institutional processes by which they were produced and held in place. By subsuming all 'ideological' social relations under the mechanism of the 'Ideological State Apparatuses', Althusser elided differences between the institutions he named, inflated the concept of the state to a point of analytical redundancy, and condemned his model to a circularity in which the Ideological State Apparatuses were bound to perform in unison a function procured for them in advance by the power and unity of purpose and ideology of an already ruling class. The model had to assume what it set out to explain. The discourses, practices and institutional structures of the Ideological State Apparatuses could secure nothing in themselves but only function as the reflex of an already inscribed power and repetitively re-enact or re-present what was already ordained at the level of the relations of production, into which a complex diversity of irreducible social relations were now collapsed.

For all Althusser's intentions of breaking with expressive, historicist readings of Marxism, his retention of the idea of unified levels or instances performing functions set for them by their positions in a structured totality returned his theory to the same linear separation and functionalist reduction of social practices and the same hierarchy of causality that characterised the base-superstructure model. When the concepts of pre-given unities and the transparency of representation are rejected, this model is decomposed, and with it goes the function of reproduction: the idea that the cultural institutions and practices of a particular society must exhibit a necessary unity of character and ideological effect. The conditions of capitalist production are, for example, complex, flexible and compatible with a wide range of familial, managerial, educational, administrative and cultural forms, and even these may not be allowed to stand in the way of the colonisation of new markets. The political, economic and cultural fields are not, therefore, unities constituting definite sectors or instances, governed by their place in an architectonic totality.

Rejecting the architectural model of floors or levels does not, however, mean asserting that cultural institutions, practices and formations are either autonomous or inconsequential. Nor is it to deny that cultural practices and relations can be changed, challenged or reformed through institutional interventions, political practices or state actions, or that such interventions will have effects on wider social relations. It is rather to insist that these effects are not given in advance and that change in one cultural institution will not set off an inexorable chain of echoing repercussions in all the others. It is also to acknowledge that the complex conditions of cultural institutions cannot be specified in a
general concept, nor their mode of operation and consequences predicted by a general model. The effect is to remove all analytical guarantees but not to grind any process of deconstruction to a halt, since analysing forms of conditionality and the connection between cultural, political and economic social relations does not require a general theory of causality or evolution, any more than it needs a general mechanism of individual incorporation - whether in the form of a theory of alienation or a theory of the 'interpellation of the subject'.

The same complaint, it needs to be said, can also be made against recent attempts to supplement the theory of ideology by a psychoanalytical account of the production of 'the subject' in which, as in Althusser's own account, the abstractness and universality of the theoretical mechanism invoked are in constant tension with the historicalness of the apparatuses in which this mechanism is supposedly enacted. It is one of the purposes of the essays which follow to suggest that the historical relations of representation and subjection are much more complex and overdetermined than they appear in generalised and historically unspecified accounts such as Laura Mulvey's seminal analysis of spectator relations of power in 'classical Hollywood cinema', or Elizabeth Cowie's equally influential essay 'Woman As Sign'. Operating as the latter does in a timeless space between anthropology and semiology, it is not attuned to grasp the crucial processes of historical and institutional negotiation or yield anything but a schematically abstracted diagram of power and a mythological periodisation.

The problems clearly go beyond solution by supplement. What has become vulnerable is the very concept of ideology which acquired a novel centrality in Marxist theorising only in the 1960s, as the struggles and problems of modern capitalist societies compelled the recognition of complex fields of social relations not adequately grasped by classical Marxist models. As a means to index certain beliefs, experiences, or forms of consciousness, seen as necessarily representing and organising the actions of unwitting social subjects, to a conception of material class position or interest, the category proved, in the words of one social historian, 'inert and unilluminatingly reductive'. Even in Althusser's penetrating and innovatory analysis (and certainly in most defences of 'left' documentary photography), it could not be disentangled from

notions of essential class identities, the transparency of representation, and of a transgressed but knowable truth.

If 'class analysis' was to survive in cultural theory, it could not do so through a concept of ideology in the form of a return to origins or a theory of expression. There are no given and essential class relations from which cultural representations of class derive and against which they have to be measured. Nor can the multiple and diverse relations of domination and subordination bearing on and generated by cultural practices be collapsed into relations of class alone. Rather, the complex articulations and discourses of class specific to particular historical moments must be explained from the order, organisation and effectivity of representational practices and sited within a wider play of power. Across this field, the notion of 'class struggle' can only denote a dispersed, aggregative and non-unitary outcome, cut across by other forms of conflict, and not the inevitably evolving expression of homogeneous and irreconcilable identities called into being at a more fundamental level. Nor can attempts to gauge such an outcome caim any privileged exterior vantage. Far removed from the absolute judgements of historicist narration, they must rather be seen as involving specific limited forms of political calculation, dependent on determinate historical means and particular, challengeable political perspectives which have to be constructed and are not given.

VIII

All this is a deal more circumspect than the ambitions of traditional Marxist cultural theory (even as they are reflected in the earlier of the essays which follow). Circumspection of this sort, however, does not imply political disengagement, and if the relation that is posited between theory and practice is changed, it is not abandoned. To offer a cultural analysis as a conditional calculation of the power effects of specific forms of practice under determinate conditions may lack the glamour of a master knowledge, but it may come closer to promoting departures in cultural practice by furnishing criteria to characterise specific situations of action, without having the effects of pre-emptive theory and while remaining sensitive to the continual adjustments necessary to
effective intervention. By contrast, for all the supposed mobilising value of traditional Marxism's simplifying schema and claims to scientifiveness, its conception of an objective historical process has more often had a disabling effect on active struggle, while its fixed modes of calculation and inflexibly reductive patterns of explanation have proved inadequate to the demands of new forms of cultural practice and insensitive to the possibilities of new arenas of conflict in present-day capitalist societies consequent upon the growth and dispersal of new kinds of welfare, administrative, educational and cultural institutions and their articulation of new modalities of power.

It was precisely for this reason that Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses appealed so widely to those whose struggles - especially against racism and the subordination of women - lay, most immediately, outside accepted political domains and were inhibited or marginalised by the workerism, economism and essentialism of existing Marxist and socialist theories. Hence, too, its popularity on the left as a basis for fostering cultural activism and legitimising cultural struggle: struggle not only through, but in and on the institution of photography, for example.

Yet, paradoxically, Althusser's model served simultaneously to disarm the very struggles it seemed to have validated. By locating such struggles, as we have seen, in what he defined as state apparatuses, Althusser ensured that they remained tied to and limited by conditions of struggle originating outside their sphere and governing the entire supposed social totality. In the terms of such an analysis, specific and local institutional interventions had to pave the way for revolution or else be condemned as reformist measures, liable to collapse back or merely reinforce 'the system'. What seemed to open new possibilities of action in a whole range of cultural, familial and educational sites turned out, in effect, to obstruct innovatory practices by reinforcing traditional notions of revolutionary struggle, with all their accompanying exaggerations of the role of the theoretically informed activist.

But Althusserianism was not alone in feeding this process. While Foucault's work seemed to offer a much more effective conception of a 'microphysics' of power and of local struggles against its 'capillary forms', the monumentalising of his institutional histories into a general metaphor for the 'disciplinary archipelago' had the same debilitating effects on action. Robbed of its historical particularity and theoretical restraints, Foucault's panoptic regime was turned into the mirror equivalent of Althusser's machinery of repression and consent, the pessimistic darkness of the one contrasting with the revolutionary light of the other, like a cold war image of a world divided, with only the choice between this way or that: the internalised repression of the society of surveillance or the imaginary freedom of ideological self-subjection. The prospect of productive day-to-day struggles and successful specific interventions was always receding in such totalising systems, which are open to nothing but equally total change. Faced with a task out of all proportion to existing capabilities, arousal to action gave way to post-structural depression.

IX

If some of the arguments developed below veer too far, at times, in the direction of these totalising tendencies, the general tack on which they are set is headed the opposite way. This, as I have stressed, is not a course which means abandoning cultural political analysis or suggesting that cultural practices are autonomous, unconditional or trivial. What develops across the articles, read in the order in which they were written, is rather an attempt to break from ahistorical modes of textual analysis without falling into a reductive account of the relation of cultural practices to economic and political social relations and the state. The issue of the state remains central to the themes of this book. To reject Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses is not to deny the historical importance of significant changes in the nature of the state in developed industrial societies, to underestimate this state's capacity for proliferating interventions, or to question its strategic importance for struggle as the institutional concentration and condensation of political power and representation. It is equally crucial, however, not to be led into reading every play of power relations as the product of the overt or covert actions or structure of the state, any more than as the reflex of some immanent disciplinary will. We have to be able to develop an account of social relations, the state and governmentality in which, theoretically and historically, it makes sense to talk of cultural politics and cultural interventions and yet it is possible to conceive of a variety of non-reflectionist practices.
The importance of this to cultural political analysis is manifest since, without it, such analysis would have no status at all.

The historical analyses gathered here rest on the view that cultural practices have significance – and, in turn, constitute a site of struggle – precisely because of their place in that non-unitary complex of social practices and systems of representation which do not express, but construct, reflect, maintain or subvert the relations of domination and subordination in which heterogeneous social identities are produced. Such practices belong, therefore, to a field of power effects in which they are articulated with economic and political practices, representations and relations, without presupposing any unified outcome. They also depend on specific, historically developed means and modes of production and other conditions of existence which they do not determine; but they cannot be evaluated by reference to these conditions as to a source or origin. The problem for analysis is to calculate the specific conjunctural effects of cultural practices in relation to their conditionality. But these effects cannot be established outside such historical calculations. There are no necessary and binding rules of connection between conditions of existence and modes of production and effects at the level of signification – no incontrovertible laws of relation, for example, between ‘mass media’, corporate ownership, and trivialisation and depoliticisation of meaning. Or, to put it another way, the commodity status of certain cultural products in capitalist societies cannot be equated with their sign status, as in the theory of fetishism and, on a more facile level, as in so many attacks on the production of saleable art objects in ‘left’ cultural criticism of the 1970s.

There are no laws of equivalence, then, between the conditions and effects of signification, only specific sets of relations to be pursued. There is no mechanism of expression, linking holistic classes to their supposed outlooks and cultures, only a complex of processes of production of meanings going on under definite historical constraints and involving the selective and motivated mobilisation of determinate means and relations of production in institutional frameworks whose structures take particular historical forms. There is no meaning outside these formations, but they are not monolithic. The institutions, practices and relations which compose them offer multiple points of entry and spaces for contestation – and not just on their margins. There is no space, therefore, that can be condemned in advance as necessarily a site of incorporation or privileged as the proper site of cultural action – the gallery or the streets; privileging one space over another, however, may be a function of a particular discourse and/or institutional order. The potentialities of action depend on an accumulation of conditions, the nature of the site, the means of cultural production involved, the means of intervention, the mode of calculation deployed, and so on. But the sites and the discursive practices they support are never isolated. Their interrelations and hierarchies – ‘Art’, ‘craft’, ‘mass communications’, ‘popular culture’, ‘folk art’, ‘subcultural styles’ – also constitute levels of intervention demanding their own specific forms of practice.

The consequences all this has for cultural practice and for mapping out the grounds for cultural struggles are clear, though these consequences cut against what traditional aesthetics and criticism assume can be taken for granted. The dramatic unities are gone. There can be no one place or stage for action, whether thought of in institutional terms or as the abstract, mythological space of the avant-garde and certain operatic versions of art history as class struggle. Then, too, no one strategy can be adequate for the diversity of sites and confrontations; there are no recipes for action, social commands, or artists’ mandates here, no prospect of socialism in one work of art. Nor can only one agent or kind of agency be thought to be involved. The specialness of the artist and traditional intellectual can no longer serve even as a mobilising myth. Cultural institutions require a whole range of functionaries and technicians who contribute their skills to or service cultural production at a whole series of points, in a whole variety of ways. Any adequate cultural mobilisation must therefore be as highly stratified and collective as the dominant mode of production: as collective as the film industry, television, architecture or, indeed, the artist–dealер–critic–museum circuit; as collective and complex as the skills, practices, codes, technical rules, procedures, protocols, knowledges, habits, divisions of labour and distinctions of rank which make up the institutional base.

But if, in this, practice is stripped of universality and robbed of guarantees, the argument also turns on critical theory. Theory can offer argued calculations of the effects of particular practices in specific conditions, or provide criteria for characterising situations and modes of action, but it cannot lay down the lines of an
objective process or prescribe necessary directions. Neither can it operate from anything but an implicated internal perspective, a political position that has to be constructed, a basis in its own conditionality as itself a cultural practice. If this opens the way for a specific practice, it effectively explodes the privilege that criticism, across the political spectrum, has claimed for itself since the Enlightenment.  

It also suggests the limits of a methodological debate which was, for over a decade, the dominant focus for opposition to traditional approaches in art history, as in film and photographic theory. The problems of such a focus proved to be not only the theoretical ones of the reductivism, eclecticism and metaphysical essentialism of the various versions of the belief in methodological finalities. The greatest dangers lay in the way new critical and historical practices for the most part bracketed out questions of their own institutional limits, power relations, and fields of intervention. In this, advocates of social history were as guilty as the most abstract structuralists. For all the concern with ‘dominant representations’, real opportunities for analysis, organisation and engagement were missed: if the majority, for example, encountered ‘dominant art history’ through tourism and leisure consumption, the strategic importance of work in these areas, outside museums, was never seriously grasped; nor did new curricula effectively equip students to intervene in these fields. The arena of confrontation was never so diversified. Concentrated in certain limited spaces, predominantly in higher education, and seemingly content if not secure in its all but complete academicisation, the methodological challenge was staged and significant ground was gained. But the very terms of this academic success were to contribute to its serious vulnerability in the face of catastrophic political change, state intercessions, economic cutbacks, redundancies and unemployment. Ironically, the very issues that had begun to come to the fore in theory now threatened to overtake a theoretical movement which had begun in very different conditions, in the educational expansion and upheavals of the 1960s.

At this point, left till last of course, it has to be said that I am talking about my own work, as well as that of others; talking, indeed, about this book and the conditions which disrupted its writing and delayed its completion. It is more than theoretical second thoughts which separate its point of departure from its moment of completion, and the very processes of power and institutional struggle with which it wanted to deal are written on it more deeply perhaps than they are written in it. If this was to lead, however, to no more than a defeatist view of the theoretical project of which this book is part, there would be no point in finishing the sentence. But the argument returns: critical writing – this book – cannot pre-empt or argue away the conditions which frame its intervention, but neither is it exhausted by them. What it can do is shift the discursive structures in which these conditions can be grasped and lines of resistance drawn out. That is not enough and that is not an end to it. But the point is neither to throw away the book, nor imagine it ever complete. The problem now lies in developing the strategies, practices, discourses, institutions and mobilisations which might be able to change how and where it can speak and to write it again to some effect.