Beyond Portraiture: Recent Writing on Photography

KATHRIN YACAVONE

James Elkins, *What Photography Is* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), xiii + 222 pp.
Liz Wells, *Land Matters. Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 333 pp.

More than any other twentieth-century writers, Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag are associated with the theory of photography.[1] Even after the emergence of digital image technologies in the 1990s, and its impact on photographic theory,[2] one book especially, *Camera Lucida* by Barthes, continues to be perhaps the key point of reference for any theoretical discussion of photographic images, analogue or digital. This is despite the unapologetic realist position Barthes adopts, anchored in the psychological reality effects of the photograph's indexicality (that is, the physical-causal relation between the object and its representation, according to C. S. Peirce's semiotic theory), effects which have been seen as weakened or mediated in digital image-making. Barthes's book, concerned as much with themes of absence, mourning, death and pain, filtered through the lens of autobiography (and published shortly before his own death in 1980), as on the nature of the photographic medium, has been criticized by art historians for its exclusive focus on portrait photography. Subsequently, the same objection has been levelled against photographic theory more generally.[3] Nevertheless, Barthes's hugely influential notion of the *punctum*, defined in the first part of *Camera Lucida* as an unintentional detail in a photographic image that emotionally 'pierces' the viewer,[4] and hence provides a new, uniquely personal meaning and

value to the image, has been appropriated by art historians, including Michael Fried, in his major reappraisal of photography as an 'anti-theatrical' art. By virtue of the *punctum*, according to Fried's ontological reading of the concept, photography defies the 'theatricality' characteristic of traditional art that prioritizes an intentionally created spectacle, since the presence of an unintended detail suggests a distinction between 'seeing and being shown'. In other words, a *punctum* may be 'seen' by the beholder of the image without being intentionally 'shown' by the photographer.[5] From this perspective, Fried argues that recent art photography continues in the anti-theatrical vein of modernist artistic traditions.

Such aesthetic arguments are, however, far removed from Barthes's concerns in *Camera Lucida*, which must be seen in the context of a different tradition, centred on the psychological and social reality of photographic images of the human face and body. Barthes was of course not the first writer to draw conclusions concerning the perceptual and affective dynamics of photography as a medium on the basis of portraits as but one use or form of it. In his 1931 'Little History of Photography', Benjamin famously wrote in relation to capturing the human face that 'to do without people is for photography the most impossible of renunciations'.[6] Although Benjamin addresses other photographic genres (such as architectural photographs of Paris by Eugène Atget and Germaine Krull), one of his lasting contributions to photographic theory is his analysis of the psychological impact of photographic portraits on the viewer as a result of the optical-mechanical recording of a moment of the sitter's personal and historical time.

Two recent books on photography decisively depart from the primacy of the portrait in such major writings in photographic history and theory. James Elkins and Liz Wells, both noted theorists and the editors of important reference works,[7] instead turn their attention to genres that have received comparatively little scholarly attention. In *Land Matters*, Wells explores the complex interrelations between landscape photography, culture and identity (as

her subtitle indicates) from a cultural-critical and implicitly Foucauldian perspective. With an overarching concern for how photography prompts reflection on the representation and idealization of land and how, in turn, images of landscape engage political, social and environmental positions, Wells moves through a multi-faceted corpus of contemporary photography that geographically spans North America, Britain and Ireland, Scandinavia and the Baltic regions. Elkins's *What Photography Is*, on the other hand, follows a more idiosyncratic itinerary. From photographs of selenite mineral deposits and frozen ice, to mountain ranges in the American West; from microscopic photographs of amoeba and dust, to atom bomb explosions, and finally, images of human pain, Elkins's book is an attempt to discuss what photography is, or may be, outside of any discursive framework of genre or other pre-conceived categorization. Instead, he puts emphasis on the specific act of looking that photography (uniquely) prompts. While the two books under consideration are thus different from one another (if not diametrically opposed) in terms of argument, methodology and style, as this review essay will demonstrate, each manages to pave the way for new and intriguing critical debates on the status of the photographic image, in part through a deliberate avoidance of the portrait and through sustained engagement with photographs of the natural world. The importance and originality of these studies withstands the fact that some of their specific arguments are less than fully convincing.

Against Portraiture

Throughout his book Elkins is forcefully dismissive of portraiture as the key to understanding what makes photography unique and valuable among representational media. The reasons for this are pragmatic, to do with methodology, and profound in terms of their theoretical implications. Firstly, portraiture, according to Elkins, is a genre that inhibits the particular kind of looking at photographs that he self-reflexively pursues and writes about. Secondly,

Elkins's rejection of portraiture is profound owing to that fact that it allows for a novel meta-theoretical reflection on discourses on the medium, as primarily shaped by theorists such as Barthes and Benjamin. We have perhaps become too accustomed to accepting Benjamin's conception of the psychological relation of the viewer of the photograph towards the person whom it depicts. In describing a 1843–7 photographic portrait of a Newhaven fishwife taken by the Scottish photographers David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, Benjamin emphasizes the 'demand' on the viewer made by photographic portraits, one which prompts curiosity as to the sitter's identity in terms of her name, life story and feelings in a much more urgent and profoundly ethical way than painting ever could.[8] In *What Photography Is*, by contrast, Elkins foregrounds a different kind of demand, not the Benjaminian one rooted in the human face. Looking at a stereoscopic image of a pine forest, he describes this and other photographs' 'demands' as 'inexplicable' (76); they cannot be encompassed by, or reduced to, an empathetic human reaction to a face in a photograph (with any of its ethical implications). Instead, the photographs that Elkins is interested in speak to an apparently less personal and emotional aspect of photography that remains difficult to pin down in ethical, aesthetic, historical or (auto)biographical terms. It is a matter, Elkins paradoxically suggests, of the opposite of what we are usually accustomed to seeing in (or, better put, *through*) photographs, namely the represented object. His aim, by contrast, is to see photographs as *material images*.

Despite disagreeing with Barthes's inductive approach (moving from consideration of the experience of specific portraits to generalizations about photography as such), Elkins's exploration of the meaning and nature of photography is also an affirmation of Barthes's way of writing on photography, of his style. Upon opening *What Photography Is*, readers familiar with the English edition of Barthes's book will be immediately struck by the typographical layout, whose short, numbered sections self-consciously imitate *Camera Lucida*.[9] This visual mimicry is symptomatic of the entire book's attitude towards *Camera Lucida*, which is

simultaneously acknowledged as a major reference point and rejected as 'half-ruined theory' and a 'solipsistic story' (7). Elkins's assessment echoes something of the recognized hybridity of *Camera Lucida* as both photographic theory and autobiographical storytelling. He proposes to return to *Camera Lucida* only in order to 'write against it' (ix), but to do so in a Barthesian fashion, predicated on staying true to one's own experience of actually looking at photographic images, even if the images in question are of a very different kind. If *Camera Lucida* can aptly be summarized as a book on photographs charged with memory, loss, mourning, sentiment, emotion, affect, nostalgia and trauma, *What Photography Is*, by contrast, foregrounds the 'non-humanist, emotionless' side of photography (xi), characterized by a 'lack of feeling' and a 'coldness' that the medium also (re)presents (xii), in the author's view. As a consequence of this ambiguous relation to its predecessor, much of the reward offered by Elkins's book derives from the evocative force and richness of Barthes's writing on photography and *What Photography Is* is both true to and radically different from *Camera Lucida* to the extent that Elkins's inquiry, while adopting Barthes's affirmative subjectivity, draws radically different conclusions. As in Barthes's book, the style and argumentative line of Elkins's study, written with his typical panache and lucidity, is meandering and circular rather than progressive. Just as Barthes did thirty years before him, Elkins often returns to the same ideas and images from different perspectives.

Elkins's arguments against portraiture are also driven by a critique of the semiotic definition of photography as an indexical sign that has been a linchpin of photographic theory before and after the so-called digital turn.[10] Although Barthes himself never used Peircean terminology – either in his pioneering semiotic writings on photography of the 1960s, rooted in Saussurean linguistics, or in *Camera Lucida* – his aforementioned realist position has justifiably been associated with discussions on photography's indexicality. Elkins suggests that looking at photographs of panes of selenite and of black ice on a lake, that is, abstract

images of random patterns of mineral and ice formation, helps to 'avoid' debate on the indexical sign (23), since, for him, associated notions such as the freezing of a moment in time, the semiotic distinction between the object and its representation, and its psychological and emotional effects are irrelevant for an understanding of these images. Photography, Elkins continues, is less about light photons touching a sensitive surface, ensuring the indexical, or physical-causal, relation between an object and its representation, a process in itself automatic, optical-chemical and free from human meditation (as Bazin, Barthes and Sontag stress), but about 'touching' in the haptic sense of the word, in the form of the physical contact between a photograph finished or in-process and human hands (24). This is exemplified, for instance, in the fingerprint on a mid-nineteenth-century image by William Henry Fox Talbot, which bears witness, Elkins maintains, to the manual labour involved in producing photographs.

This hitherto neglected emphasis on the material surface of the photographic image as an object,[11] goes 'hand in hand', in Elkins's book, with a critique of Barthes's punctum as a 'romantic attachment' to images (38) and an excuse to 'ignore the photographs themselves' (40–1). He accuses Barthes of looking 'beyond them for romance and memory' (41) and of losing sight, in the process, of the image as an image. As a practical measure to gauge 'what photography is', at the beginning of chapter four, Elkins proposes a 'series of farewells' (99), methodologically discarding photographic portraiture in all its guises: family photographs of unknown people, found or vernacular photography, street photography capturing strangers as fleeting passers-by, fine art portraiture and photographs of his own family. Akin to Barthes's own division of *Camera Lucida* into two parts, half-way through *What Photography Is*, and after the de-cluttering of photography of all 'distractions' potentially provided by the human figure (116), Elkins arrives at an apparent conceptual impasse, which, however, turns out to be a new starting point for a differently oriented investigation. He declares that 'photography

as a whole is, in the end, (...) a bit boring' (126). One should not hasten to attribute irony to this seemingly flippant comment. Rather, what Elkins is attempting to emphasize is a value and meaning of photography stripped of all emotional, cultural and historical associations, all the 'unwanted stuff', as he writes (116). In terms of the image itself, what is left is what Elkins terms the 'surround' (116), the unintentional, often unnoticed surrounding of a figure or object, which he contrasts with the intentional painterly background.

Considering that Elkins is first and foremost interested in *seeing* photographs, rather than constructing and relaying '*stories* about acts of looking' (124, my emphasis), his focus on the 'surround' serves as the focal point of such seeing. Whereas Barthes shifts the emphasis in the second part of *Camera Lucida* towards mourning, death and trauma, implied in his definition of *punctum* as the '*that-has-been*' of a (portrait) photograph,[12] for Elkins the 'end' of description and language is *not* related to trauma, but to seeing without distractions (149). Fittingly, the last part of his fourth chapter is devoted to microscopic photographs of amoeba, which are undefined, transparent creatures blurring with their surrounding in a way as to deny a clear distinction between figure and surround. According to Elkins, such microscopic images of amoeba (many of which illustrate his text) are prime examples for questioning 'habits of seeing', which, as he suggests, ignore the surround in favour of the figure (152). For Elkins it is precisely the refocusing of perceptual attention towards that which is most often ignored that enables thinking about 'what photography is'.

While it becomes increasingly clear as *What Photography Is* proceeds that Elkins takes issue, primarily, with Barthes's definitions of photography in general, and not his claims about the kind of experiences triggered by the Winter Garden photograph of his late mother as a child, Elkins also rejects more specific points in Barthes's analysis, especially when the French theorist comments on the type of photographs which the American art historian is most interested in. For example, Elkins's short fifth chapter deals with 'rapatronic' images of

nuclear bomb explosions, that is, photographs taken in the 1940s and '50s by the pioneering American photographer Harold E. Edgerton with his high-speed camera with a millionth-of-a-second shutter speed. Elkins reminds us of Barthes's laconic remark with regards to Edgerton's famous images of milk drops hitting a liquid surface: '(little need to admit that this kind of photography neither touches nor even interests me: I am too much of a phenomenologist to like anything but appearances to my own measure)' (161).[13] Objecting to Barthes's confining his interest to a 'phenomenological understanding' of objects represented to human size and scope, Elkins suggests that such 'images not made to the measure of human experience' (162, my emphasis) can nonetheless 'elicit a strongly embodied reaction' (161).

With respect to one striking image of an atomic test explosion by the American photographer (Figure 1), Elkins provides an illustration of his argument. Describing the object represented in this photograph first metaphorically as something 'like a nectarine, left to rot at the back of the refrigerator until it has half-sunk into the shelf' (162), he goes on to discover the trees at the bottom of the picture and further explores how the nectarine metaphor fails the experience of this particular photograph. 'The object in this picture refuses to be described in terms of things I know', he writes, which leads him into 'a kind of visual desperation', rooted in an inability to describe what he sees (164). It is at this point that Elkins provides an explicit hint at 'what photography is', namely a visual medium that, counter-intuitively, it must be added, 'gives us all kinds of things that we don't want it to give us. Things we prefer not to dwell on (...). But also things that we cannot quite make sense of (...)' (174). In short, '[p]hotography is at war with our attention' (174). Attention, in Elkins's view, is usually granted to the familiar, explainable and understandable and to those areas of knowledge that photography theory has instructed us about (akin to Barthes's *studium*), but also, and equally, to the personal, affective, emotional and sentimental (Barthes's *punctum*).

To further sustain his paradoxical thesis that photography is what we do not want to see, in his concluding chapter Elkins turns to other photographs 'not to human measure'. Here he focuses on what he calls photography's 'harshest property' (180), namely the representation of human pain. His example is a series of four or five 'lingqi' photographs from 1901–5, showing a Chinese execution practice consisting in cutting into the living body (which fascinated George Bataille who reproduced a number of these images in his *Tears of Eros*). However, quite unlike Bataille's or the surrealists' interest in these photographs, Elkins is still concerned with 'rigid seeing' (208), consisting of a painstakingly detailed and strict formal analysis of these images (which are also reproduced in the book to allow the reader to compare the images with Elkins's meticulous description). Even though he insists on discussing 'the body in pain, not the face' (179), this final analysis of photographic images in *What Photography Is* represents an unexpected return to the human figure. Elkins is adamant that his formal, emotionally detached analysis is diametrically opposed to Barthes's '*he-is-going-to-die*' approach, which is an 'escape from seeing into reverie', in Elkins's view (210). Yet he nevertheless insists that the 'pain of interpretation' evident in his analysis of the 'lingqi' images is 'much worse (...) in photography than (...) in painting or film' (210). This argument about medium-specificity appears as an inadvertent return to the realist question of photography's indexicality and all its phenomenological implications for the viewer. It is fundamentally unclear why and how the 'pain' of interpreting these photographs is 'much worse' than that of a painting of the subject for any other reason *except* that we (consciously or unconsciously) see and know them as 'real', that is, as indexical images of human suffering which occurred in front of the camera. Although this apparent smuggling in through the back door of photographic specificity rooted in the indexical and iconic reality quotient of the image is not directly tackled by Elkins, his final definition, according to which '[p]hotography is a *camera dolorosa* (...): a compound of displeasures' (219), does not appear as far removed

from Barthes as is suggested, when Elkins argues that Barthes's temporal *punctum* or, in his words, the 'sign of death in photography (...) is in the end just another source of pleasure' because it apparently hides 'actual pain' (220). In the end, Elkins's book is perhaps more similar to *Camera Lucida* than the reader (and perhaps the author himself) would have expected on the basis of the at times callous adjectives used to describe Barthes's quest and indeed of the argument of the first five chapters of *What Photography Is*.

For Landscape

Whereas Elkins pits landscape images against portraiture to highlight the non-cultural, de-subjectivized and material ways of seeing photographic images that pictures of natural phenomena may bring to the fore, Wells in *Land Matters* demonstrates affirmatively how the content, form and metaphor of landscape photographs, amounting to a recognizable genre, come together to engage questions about history, representation and identity. Moreover, if Elkins strongly opposes the Barthesian sentimental 'reverie' (210) that portrait photographs are prone to prompt, for Wells, landscape imagery positively activates a valuable 'reverie' by providing an 'imaginary substitute' (44) for actual, synaesthetic outdoor experience mixed with memory and imagination. Diametrically opposed to Elkins's *tabula rasa* approach, and as the multiple levels of meaning of the title *Land Matters* indicate, Wells's aim is to explore the politically, ideologically, culturally and historically freighted aspects of landscape photography, including its critical 'interventionist' function (9).

The different approaches in question can be paradigmatically juxtaposed in relation to the 'rephotography' project by American photographer Mark Klett et al., which both Elkins and Wells discuss. Rephotography, as the term suggests, consists in re-photographing the same sites (e.g. locations in the American West) at different moments in time (which may even involve different generations of photographers), resulting in remarkably similar (Figures

2a–c)[14] or, at times, surprisingly different views. Elkins exploits the comparative dimension of these necessarily serial photographs in order to draw attention to what he calls 'pointless' searches (63) for minute differences in two or more images and, by extension, in order to emphasize a self-reflexive questioning on the 'min[ing] [of] images for meaning', 'a solution', 'a significance' (61), and on what may or may not constitute 'normal seeing' of a photographic image (68). Wells, on the other hand, contends (more in line with the photographers' intentions) that Klett's rephotography projects combine 'aesthetic issues and photographic histories and methods [with] topographies of social, geographic and geological change' (130). For Elkins, such searching for the 'histories' would imply 'leaving the exactitude of these images behind' (63), that is, a distraction from seeing what the photographs actually show.

These differences notwithstanding, Wells acknowledges that photography alone 'cannot *account* for social developments' (130). Rather, her approach to landscape photography is marked by Foucauldian notions of discourse. This entails an understanding of photography as 'a discursive system' (12), along the lines advocated by American-based photography theorist John Tagg[15] (whom Wells, however, does not cite), rather than a neutral conveyor of literal content and meaning, or as 'pure' visual form. In this respect, Wells's argument is notably influenced by Rosalind Krauss's seminal essay, 'Photography's Discursive Spaces',[16] which critiques the appropriation of Timothy O'Sullivan's nineteenth-century geographical survey photography by twentieth-century modernist discourses as 'art'. The particular photograph that served Krauss as a starting point in her essay is tellingly reproduced as a frontispiece illustration in Wells's *Land Matters*. However, Wells de-emphasizes historical shifts between nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourses on photography, and instead highlights how contemporary art-market contexts (including art-book publications, gallery and museum exhibitions) negatively impact on the cultural-critical

potential of practices of landscape photography of the last twenty years. In spite of this increasing commercialization since the 1990s, Wells observes a shift towards a 'critical tendency' in contemporary practice that foregrounds a genre-specific 'politics of place' as pertaining to what she appropriately defines as a '*grounded aesthetics*' (10), as distinct from metaphysical notions, such as the Romantic sublime. This is understood as a post-modern practice in which 'formal and thematic perceptions are situated within socio-historical contexts' (10). The critical position which Wells identifies in contemporary practice is rooted, first and foremost, in the work and research carried out by individual photographers, whom she considers as 'authors' in the Foucauldian sense. She argues (at the end of her study) that authority pertains to 'consistency of ways of looking and seeing', that is, the coherent style of a body of work (281). The photographer is thus described as an 'investigator and storyteller' (281) whose deployment of 'photographic codes, aesthetic conventions, and the semiotics of scale and titling' 'enhances our sense of careful consideration [of the photographs] thereby lending further authority to the stories told' (284). Along these lines, the documentary function of the photographic image (rooted in its indexicality), with which photography's 'authenticity' has traditionally been associated, is replaced by the authenticity and authority of the artist-photographer (7). This conceptual paradigm, which is addressed head-on only at the end of the book, has, however, important methodological implications for the preceding chapters, namely that Wells affords particular attention to the photographers' statements about their own work, which often provide the backbone of her interpretations of specific photographic œuvres. Nevertheless, the attendant danger of reading into images what the photographers intended them to be is circumvented by virtue of careful, detailed contextualization in national, regional and local terms. Thus, after a more broadly focused opening chapter on the evolution and history of the landscape genre in both painting and

photography, the remaining five chapters, richly illustrated, are dedicated to landscape photography in specific national and geographical contexts.

Framing discussion of specific photographs and bodies of work with relevant historical context, chapters two and three span issues of colonial settlement in the United States and Canada as well as notions of 'wilderness' associated with the American West. Wells draws on a varied corpus of photographs, a heterogeneity which, in her view, reflects the complexities of immigration histories and also the different attitudes towards land use and environmental change. At the same time, a common characteristic of the images and their creators, according to Wells, is their simultaneous concern with 'pastoral myth and economic demand' (69), such as, for instance, in the photography of John Pfahl. His series of waterfalls is described as 'critically investigative' (60) for the reason that Pfahl's photographs juxtapose the natural power of water (through wide-angle perspective) with its industrial usage (through inclusion of waterwheels in the picture plane, for example). The socio-historical potential of representing water in landscape imagery is similarly discussed in relation to the American West where the scarcity of water renders its use (and depiction in photography) 'highly political' (151). The work of Peter Goin, one of the photographers involved in a collaborative project on water demand and usage called 'Water in the West' (which included photographer Mark Klett), is not only concerned with water as a limited resource, but also raises the question, through his involvement in publications and exhibitions, of 'how photographers as artists can contribute to public debate' (152). Wells summarizes this and other projects by American photographers by suggesting that 'in contemporary culture ethics pertaining to land is (...) associated with ecological and environmental concerns and with debates about conservation and sustainability' (157); a tendency which nonetheless coexists with photographic bodies of work that are less politically charged and which emphasize the awe-inspiring sublimity and beauty of nature, as in the case of Ansel Adams, whose famous

photographs taken in the Yosemite national park in the 1960s continue to influence current landscape photography through their iconic status.

After a chapter concerned with British photography, where investigation of land and landscape is deeply bound up with ideological discourses on class, gender and ethnicity, as well as with the patriarchal and the pastoral, which Wells sees challenged (since the 1970s and '80s) by a pronounced turning away from modernist preoccupations with form towards a new critique emerging 'from image content' (191), chapter five turns to a relatively neglected region in terms of landscape photography specifically and photographic history more generally: the Baltic region and Scandinavia. The inclusion of Nordic countries in discussion of landscape photography is particularly fitting, given the relatively sparse spread of urbanization in these countries, allowing for land and landscape to 'contribute to the inflection of national cultures and concerns, and, arguably [to] play a key role in the construction of national psyches' (218). Among the Scandinavian photographers featuring in this chapter, who to some degree share a pronounced interest in weather and light, and its movement and modulation of objects, is Sweden-based Petter Magnusson. His photograph *Explosion, No.1* (2002) shows a remote mountain settlement in Norway, one of whose isolated houses is blown up in a (digitally generated) explosion which destroys the Norwegian dream of the 'idyll of the rural retreat', as Wells notes (223).[17] While her discussion of photography from the Baltic regions surprisingly concludes that there is 'less stress than might have been anticipated on exploring land as territory and heritage', the chapter ends with consideration of photography from Finland where, by contrast, 'land and environment is central to (...) contemporary practice' (241), especially in the photographs of Jorma Puranen, whose work is tightly bound up with national culture and history, thus serving as a prime example in Wells's exploration of these themes.

The final chapter of *Land Matters* is focused on how landscape photography engages collective and personal memory, thereby contributing to self-identity formation. In this respect, it is also an unexpected turn towards the personal, a shift that – less surprisingly – draws inspiration from Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. In line with Barthes's view of the capacity of photographs with a *punctum* to act as potential triggers for a play of personal memory and imagination, Wells argues that landscape photography 'may *reconfigure* memory', rather than simply confirm it (290). This pertains, she suggests, to the 'fluidity of the inter-relation of imagery, personal recollection and collective history' (290), which brings into play what Wells somewhat misleadingly terms the viewer's 'haptic unconscious', understood as a complement to the Benjaminian 'optical unconscious' of the photographic camera and defined as responses to an image 'in terms of senses other than sight' (290–1). The subsequent reference to Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* must be counted as a stock reference in photographic theory in discussions of the synaesthetic quality of photographic images, which make us 'hear', 'smell', 'feel' and 'taste' as much as they make us see (291). Coming to Wells's book after reading Elkins, one is tempted to observe just how difficult it is to escape the affective charge of photography, and of cultural and theoretical reference points centred on it that discourses on photography have canonized over the years.

From this perspective, Wells's (re-)affirmation, at the very end of her study, of the interpretative and evocative power of 'subjective associations and collective identity' brought into play by landscape photography (302), with reference to Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, also brings us full circle. That is, back to the starting point of Elkins's meta-theoretical book. While Wells and Elkins share a desire to investigate photography beyond portraiture (for the different reasons discussed here), the conclusions drawn from their investigations are remarkably incongruent, or, from a different perspective, surprisingly complementary. Both *What Photography Is* and *Land Matters* ultimately demonstrate that one answer to the

question of ‘what photography is’, is a type of imagery that not only warrants, but often compels response in the form of *language*, whether this language is emotional and nostalgic (Barthes), formal and coldly analytic (Elkins), or socio-cultural and critical (Wells). And it is perhaps a particular quality of photography that such apparently opposing and opposed discourses not only co-exist, but fruitfully enter into dialogue with each other.

---

[1] Influential yet relatively less discussed contributions to the discipline include writings by Siegfried Kracauer, Lázló Moholy-Nagy and André Bazin, and, in the latter half of the century, John Berger and Victor Burgin (in the UK), Rosalind Krauss and Allan Sekula (in the United States) or Philippe Dubois, Jean-Marie Schaeffer and Henri Van Lier (in a French-speaking context).

[2] See the seminal, yet often critiqued, study by William J. T. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1992).

[3] This criticism was voiced, for example, by the two authors whose most recent work on photography is discussed here: James Elkins, ‘What Do We Want Photography to Be? A Response to Michael Fried’, in *Photography Degree Zero. Reflections on Roland Barthes’s ‘Camera Lucida’*, edited by Geoffrey Batchen (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2009), 171–85 (178–9); Liz Wells, ‘Navigating Theory Now’, in *Photography Theory*, edited by James Elkins (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 342–6 (344).

[4] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), 26.

[5] Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New York and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 100.

[6] Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', in *Selected Writings*, 4 vols., edited by Michael Jennings et al. (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1996–2003), vol. 2, 507–30 (519).

[7] *Photography Theory*, edited by James Elkins (New York and London: Routledge, 2007); *The Photography Reader*, edited by Liz Wells (New York and London: Routledge, 2003) and *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, edited by Liz Wells (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

[8] Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', 510. See also Giorgio Agamben's commentary on photography's exigency with reference to Benjamin, 'Judgment Day', in *Profanations*, translated by Jeff Ford (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 23–7.

[9] Elkins provides the explanation for readers less familiar with Barthes's book (x–xi), and recommends reading *Camera Lucida* before continuing to read his own (ix).

[10] The discussions on photography at Elkins's 2005 Art Seminar focused predominantly on the notion of indexicality. See his edited volume *Photography Theory*, 129–203.

[11] See, however, Margaret Olin's (then forthcoming) study *Touching Photographs* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2012), which explores 'touching' on both literal and metaphorical levels.

[12] I recall Barthes's (re-)definition: 'This new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the noeme ("*that-has-been*"), its pure representation.' (*Camera Lucida*, 96).

[13] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 33.

[14] Although both Elkins and Wells reproduce images by Klett, the ones here shown are different from the ones printed in *What Photography Is* and *Land Matters*. I wish to thank

Mark Klett for his kind permission to reproduce his photographs from the *Third View Project*. See http://www.thirdview.org, consulted 19 May 2014, 3.30pm.

[15] For example, John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

[16] Rosalind Krauss, 'Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View', *Art Journal* 42:4 (1982), 311–19.

[17] I also see a humorous element in this harmless, digitally created explosion picture, which, in this way, is opposed to the nuclear explosion captured by Edgerton.