TOWARD CRITICAL DISCOURSE ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHS

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by
Terry M. Barrett, E.A.
The Ohio State University
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Approved by:

Arthur Elland
Adviser
Department of Art Education

Clyde E. Dilley
Reader
Department of Photography and Cinema

Russ Norris
Reader
Department of Art Education
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Introduction

...intelligent critical literature on photographs is barely discernible. No other art of comparable importance in our time possesses a body of literature more imbalanced or generally handdum.

Henry Holmes Smith

Until recently, creative activities for children were thought of as limited to the making of art. More and more teachers now realize that talking and writing knowingly and perceptiveiy about works of art are equally creative tasks they can set for children.

Guidelines for Planning Art Instruction in the Elementary Schools of Ohio

For years art educators were content with the development of the personal expression of students through their making of art objects. More recently, leaders in the field, notably Elliot Eisner and Ralph Smith, have realized the need for the development of the student's social awareness through the study of art, and the importance of developing the student's ability to respond insightfully to art. Studio production of art objects is now more often seen as important but not sufficient. The lack of attention given to the study of art history and art criticism in the classroom has been corrected to a considerable degree by the work of men shaping art curriculum, notably Manual Barkan and Arthur Efland, as evidenced recently by the advent of Curriculum Development for Aesthetic Education and Guidelines for Planning...
Art instruction in the Elementary Schools of Ohio, both of which emphasize response to art, as well as the production of art.

Photographic educators, while attending to the many areas of creative and applied photography, and while increasingly pursuing the history of photography as an area of study, still seem remiss in photographic criticism, despite some strong voices calling for the pursuit.

Photographic leaders writing on the topic are generally negative concerning the quality of criticism found today, when it is found. In the second year of Aperture's history, editor Minor White wrote that "photography is short on competent criticism today, and absolutely lacks great criticism."

The opening quotation of this introduction by Henry Holmes Smith appeared in the same publication in 1957. Bruce Downes, editor of Popular Photography, decried the lack of qualitative criticism in 1943, and years later stated: "Now in 1962 nothing has changed." Ten years later John L. Ward, author of The Criticism of Photography as Art, researched the literature of photographic criticism and stated: "I discovered only a handful of writers who have written important, sustained, analytical criticism of individual photographs in the entire history of the medium."

This study then, is meant to further bring art criticism into the mainstream of the arts curricula, by the inclusion or improvement of photographic criticism in photography and art classrooms. The subject of this paper is photographic criticism, specifically the criticism of black and white still
photography. While photography has its own attributes, problems and history, the critical considerations given it are not necessarily exclusive of other art forms. This attempt to contribute to criticism is encouraged by art educators asking for such, and by photographic leaders decrying the lack of quality criticism available to the interested public.

It does not seem too idyllic to believe that the study of critics and criticism would eventually lead to a supportive interest in criticism and a place for photographic critics at a greater parity with respected art critics, and photographers and historians, the other recognized contributing members of the photographic community. Nor does it seem too remote a possibility that the study of criticism would bring students to a better understanding and appreciation of critics as well as the photographs they criticize; nor further, to expect the too often heard student and teacher plaudits of approval about a particular photograph to be gradually replaced with articulate response.
1. **An Overview of Critical and Aesthetic Positions Regarding Photography**

Recognizing the continued lack of and need for serious criticism of photography, John L. Ward wrote *The Criticism of Photography as Art*, subtitled *The Photographs of Jerry Uelsmann*. In the book Ward presents reasons for the lack of good criticism, critically reviews the aesthetic and critical literature of photography, and defines an aesthetic position which he applies to a criticism of the photographs of Jerry Uelsmann. The first part of the book is particularly enlightening because of Ward’s succinct summary of the more significant aesthetic and critical positions regarding photography. His review of the positions will be heavily relied upon here as an overview and clarification of the past.

Ward discusses five approaches to criticism: that of the Pictorialists, the Purists, and the Intentionalists; and more recent approaches called "Reading," and Archetypal criticism. Actually archetypal criticism as applied to photography has only one source: William E. Parker’s article "Uelsmann’s Unitary Reality" which appeared in *Aperture* in 1967. Ward cites it as a milestone in the upgrading of photographic criticism, and is influenced by some of Parker’s ideas in his own criticism of Uelsmann’s photographs. Parker draws upon Jungian psychology to search for archetypal symbols and implies that the value of Uelsmann’s work is caused by the manipulation of these symbols to awaken ideas which lie at the roots of all human experience.
Ward cites two examples of the application of an archetypal approach to the
criticism of poetry and art, but at this point in its development it is difficult
to call the archetypal approach a major one in photographic criticism.

The pictorialist and purist positions constitute a recurring and still
contemporary battle in discourse about photography. Very recently in a New
York Times review A.D. Coleman reported on a San Francisco area show
called "Emulsion '73" which apparently rekindled the pictorialist-purist hos-
tility:

...the show was apparently as significant for its
eclusions as for some of its inclusions (cloth pieces,
three dimensional photo-objects, multiple images).
McKillop (juror) not only left out the nude and water-
falls, but actually had the effrontery to tell the rejected
outreach and the public, that in effect the f/64 tradi-
tion had played itself out and there was no longer any
point in scoring Point Lobos for the ones Edward
Weston missed.

The pictorialist position is built on the premise that a photograph can and ought
be judged by the same standards that are applied to other two dimensional art
forms. This idea was put into practice by Alfred Stieglitz with the realization
of Gallery 291 at the turn of the century:

The rooms were also started with the idea that there
might be things shown there other than photography
so that photography could be measured in juxtaposition
to other media of expression. These exhibitions were
the beginning of what gradually evolved into what was
later known as "291."

The purists argue that photography has intrinsic uniqueness and that
the worth of the photograph is dependent on fidelity to these qualities. In Ward's
words, 'to the pictorialist, photography is a means, art is the end; to the
purist, photography is both means and end, and talk about art is highly sus-
pect.' A second issue in the pictorialist-purist argument revolves around
objectivity: the purists saw photography's ability to record objectively as a
justification and a necessity, while the pictorialists were interested in making
evident their own character and purpose expressively with photography which
necessarily interfered with objectivity.

Since the pictorialist aim is art, any means available is legitimate,
which theoretically allows for radical experimentation in means to achieve
that end. Ward quotes C. Jabez Hughes' pictorialist position which was stated
as early as 1861:

\[
\ldots\text{a photographer, like an artist, is at liberty to employ what means he}
\text{thinks necessary to carry out his ideas. If a picture cannot be produced by}
\text{one negative, let him have two or ten; but let it be clearly understood, that these are only means}
\text{to an end, and that the picture when finished must stand or fall entirely by the effects produced, and}
\text{not by the means employed.}^{13}
\]

Although the theory provided the freedom to experiment, Francis Brugiere is
one of few photographers cited who successfully reconciled an experimental
approach with artistic concerns. Rather it has been only recently that photo-
graphers such as Jerry Uelsmann and Ray Metzker have gained notoriety with
experimental imagery supported by pictorialist theory.

Most pictorialists relied on direction from four authors: the 19th
Century pictorialists drew upon John Burnet's *A Treatise on Painting* and

Composition and Light and Shade; the 20th Century pictorialists draw upon the insights of Henry R. Poore in his books such as *Pictorial Compositions* and the *Critical Judgment of Pictures*; and Henry Peach Robinson who admitted his debt to Burnet; and P.L. Anderson who in turn credits Poore as the source of many of his ideas. Ward further points out that all four writers proceeded on the assumption that rules of formal organization remain constant through the history of art and that these rules, derived from pictures which for the most part were painted between 1500-1850, were valid for all pictures.

In a caution against outright dismissal of the pictorialist position, Ward makes an important point in contrast to recognized limitations in pictorialist theory:

Thus—and this is a point which has been too often overlooked—the esthetic basis of pictorialism was flawed not because it applied painting standards to photography, but because it set up principles which were only relevant to a specific Weltanschauung as fixed standards of value; they were not necessarily appropriate to either the painting or the photography of the last hundred years. 14

As another caution against total dismissal of the position, Ward cites the contributions of the lasting photographers of Edward Steichen, Robert Delmacy, Frank Eugene, Gertrude Kasebier, and J. Craig Annan, and the contributions of the critics Charles H. Caffin and Sadakichi Hartmann who analytically studied and brought insight to the works of important photographers. It is also mentioned that some of the worst criticism has been and is being written
by pictorialists in such magazines as *American Photographer*, *Camera Craft*, and *Popular Photography*, as a result of their subjecting the hapless photographs of amateurs to the rigid laws of pictorialism.

Prurism on the other hand is credited with little literature, and it is suggested by Ward that prurism can only function as a negative evaluative principle: one can reject as unphotographic those pictures which use manipulative techniques to modify the image, and therefore dismiss them, but that there are no standards to rate those which are left. Beaumont Newhall and Helmut Gernsheim, two contemporary writers, are cited for making evaluations based on purist principles without use of visual analysis to support their claims.

Edward Weston, the major spokesman for purism, writing in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, described two unique photographic characteristics, and formulated a central purist tenet:

> In its ability to register fine detail and in its ability to render an unbroken sequence of infinitely subtle gradation, the photograph cannot be equaled by any work of the human hand. For this reason any manual interference with the image at once destroys those very qualities that give the true photograph value as an art form.15

John Szarkowski, curator of the photography collection of the Museum of Modern Art and author of *Looking at Photographs*, in talking about Paul Strand, another major photographer adhering to purist standards, adds to our understanding of the position:
In 1917 Paul Strand said that if one were to use photography honestly he must have "a real respect for the thing in front of him," which he would express "through a range of almost infinite tonal values which lie beyond the skill of human hand." The last half of the statement has to do with photographic aesthetics, the first half with photographic morality. "A real respect for the thing in front of him" implies that the subject is not merely the occasion but the reason for the picture. This stern creed (rather than technical and aesthetic positions) was perhaps the real cornerstone of belief in straight photography.

However, direct the above statements by Weston and Strand regarding their respect for the medium and the subject matter, the distinction between "true photographs" and "painterly photographs" is not as clear as it may appear in theory. Ward calls to mind the fact that Weston himself has been criticized by Clement Greenberg for confusing photography and painting, and the arch pictorialists Robinson and Anderson protested against certain photographs for being unphotographic.

As a creative aesthetic purism is credited with a fruitful history as it encouraged photographers to explore and taught them not to be concerned that their work failed to meet critics' expectations of what art ought look like. And while many of the pictorialists were unable to accept the changes in art at the turn of this century, the purists were not bound by the dated laws of past painting and their imagery kept in step with the changing times.

In discussing intentionalism, Ward points out that unlike pictorialism and purism, intentionalism is not a creative aesthetic in that it does not recommend any values to the photographer, but rather is used as an evaluative
criterion. Intentionalist criticism is widely present in photographic criticism and its tenets are often used by pictorialists, purists, and Readers alike. The two photographer-teachers, Minor White and Henry Holmes Smith, whose approach to photographic criticism in an educational setting will be presented later in this paper, rely on the intentionalist position in varying degrees.

The intentionalist position is stated emphatically by A. Krasznai-Krausz in the *Focal Encyclopedia of Photography*:

> The purpose of the photographer in making a particular picture must receive first consideration; whether his work appears to fulfill that purpose or fall short of it is, in fact, the only point that really matters. If the man behind the camera happens to be solely concerned with some rare or subtle expression in his subject's face then he should be criticized only on account of anything that may distract from that expression, no matter whether the distracting element by itself represents good or bad photography. 17

A difficulty with the position, as Ward says it, is that the actual application of intentionalist makes criticism futile, "since any failure in a photograph may actually be a success if the photographer intended to produce it, no matter how trite or unimaginative the intention was." 18 It is also noted that intentionалиsts attend to the photographer's purpose, vision, view of reality, personal history, and so forth, as a primary concern, and relegate the photography itself to a minor role. As an example of this overemphasis Ward cites the introductions of Lincoln Kirstein to the photographs of Walker Evans and Henri Cartier-Bresson in which no mention is made of a single photograph as an entity.
More basic problems with the intentionalist position are developed in Monroe C. Beardsley's familiar essay, "The Intentionalist Fallacy." Briefly stated, there is no sure way to verify what the maker intended. Minor White stresses the importance of understanding the photographer's purpose, but qualifies the intentionalist position. White's fundamental reservations are summarized by Ward:

... first, that the mere fulfillment of the purpose may not guarantee a satisfactory photograph if the purpose is reprehensible; second, that the artist may not be available to explain what his purpose was; and, third, that it is possible that the photograph may have value for reasons which have nothing to do with the photographer's intentions, since "photographers frequently photograph better than they know."19

Despite these reservations, Ward keeps White in the intentionalist group, but he would seem to fit more comfortably in the "Reading" approach, of which he is a main proponent.

In his magazine Aperture, in an article called "What is Meant by Reading Photographs?"20 Minor White proposed Reading as a method of getting at the complex structures of meaning, overtones, and implications of a photograph by an avoidance of evaluation coupled with visual analysis by concerted concentration in the form of a dialogue with the photograph. Minor White and Henry Holmes Smith, the other major contributor to the Reading approach, have drawn upon the thinking of I.A. Richards and the New Critics of literature who followed, building on their emphasis of the importance of analysis of the work itself. White and Smith conducted experiments in Reading with
their students at the Rochester Institute of Technology and Indiana University respectively; the results of which are reported in *Aperture*. 21 In 1957 White invited members of the photographic field to read five photographs of Aaron Siskind, 22 and in the same year White and Walter Chappell corroborated on a relatively detailed approach to Reading which is presented later in this paper along with articles on Reading which Henry Holmes Smith wrote, also for *Aperture*.

The Reading literature was relatively profuse in the late 1950's, but has not appeared at all in recent years. Ward attributes the lack of further development of the approach as an admittance of failure by the Reading proponents, and further suggests that the reason for the failure is a fundamental fallacy in the concept of Reading itself; namely, that an avoidance of evaluation is impossible if one is to consider significance in a picture, in that decisions concerning significance are inseparable from decisions concerning value. Ward himself sees evaluation as an essential component of criticism:

"It should be noted that reading is not criticism, since value judgments are avoided." 23 However, it will be argued later in this paper, with the aid of Morris Weitz, that evaluation is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of criticism. It will also be suggested that the Reading approach is fundamentally sound and ought to be furthered through the clarification of some key concepts so as to attempt in the future to avoid readings which at times in the past have not been supported by the visual information available in the photograph.
2. Morris Weitz on What Critics Do

Morris Weitz's *Hamlet and The Philosophy of Literary Criticism*²⁴ is an analysis of what critics do, as opposed to what, in their philosophical moments, they say they do. Having reviewed in a general manner past and present positions of photographic criticism, the writings of Morris Weitz, the aesthetician, are presented here in an attempt at a clarification of some of the problems of criticism in general, before presenting the Reading approach to photographic criticism.

Weitz uses the voluminous criticisms of *Hamlet* as a paradigm of criticism. In part one of the book he identifies the main issues in this criticism through careful and systematic expositions of the doctrines of the major critics throughout the history of *Hamlet* criticism. Part two is an attempt at clarification of these issues through elucidation of key concepts.

While Weitz is using the criticism of *Hamlet* as a paradigm, and believes that what can be said about its times, doctrines, procedures, disagreements, issues, and assumptions could be applied to all criticism, he does not attempt to prove it. Proof of the large claim would entail an analysis of all the criticisms of all works of art to show that there is no criticism that differs fundamentally from *Hamlet* criticism. Narrowing his claim, he states that at least what is true about *Hamlet* criticism is true about some of the whole of criticism. This is a limited claim but almost as important as the larger one because the conclusions reached must be incorporated into any
large-scale theory of the nature of criticism, and further he states that any correct answers to the question "What is criticism?" must include answers derived from his survey. 35

Weitz's argument above seems appropriate for asserting the applicability of his findings about literary criticism to photographic criticism. The major conclusion of the book is the establishment of the logical multiplicity of Hamlet criticism, and consequently, that the pervasive assumption in this criticism, namely, that all its discourse yields true or false definitive statements, is itself false. It is found that the critics of Hamlet mostly describe, explain, evaluate, or theorize. Weitz has attempted to show that only description can yield true or false statements, and that explanation, evaluation, and poetics are irreducible procedures, or procedures which cannot be brought to true or false conclusions, and that this finding is central to the clarification of the problems in Hamlet criticism. 36

The critics of Hamlet are shown to ask four kinds of questions which support the claim of logical multiplicity. The questions cited imply giving the procedures of description, explanation, evaluation, and poetics as answers. It is further shown that these four kinds of questions, elucidated with multiple quotations from the critics studied, are not the same kinds of questions, namely types which can yield true or false statements. There can only be true or false statements, however difficult to determine, regarding description. 37
The following pages of this section are concerned with Wettz's elucidation of the procedures of description, explanation, evaluation and poetics. Description is a procedure by which the critic deciphers what is given in a play. In any art object there is a certain grouping of elements, their characteristics and the relations among them. Descriptions allow the critic to talk about these elements, not to argue which is most important or least important, but to find out just what is given in the play. Wettz demonstrates that this is not a trivial task. These given, and therefore undeniable, serve as reports or reminders of some of the elements, characteristics, and relations in Hamlet, constitute a body of verifiable statements which serve to enlighten and make understandable the work in question.28

Through study of the criticisms, it is shown that there are descriptions other than those about the play itself. The criticism includes writings on the sources of the play: its textual, dramatic, theatrical, and intellectual sources. The descriptions also include Hamlet's relation to other plays; the audience; the Elizabethan view of man, God, philosophy, politics, tragedy, passion, and ghosts. Or, more succinctly, critics describe or report on and enlighten the reader concerning the causal environment, or the context of the play.29

Thus facts or data can be and are described by critics, and these descriptions are important because they point out many facets or qualities. They remind the reader of what could be neglected at the peril of understanding. Further, the adequacy of explanation and evaluation rests upon description:
erroneous descriptions of certain constituents imperil the explanation based on them.

Four types of descriptive statements are identified: singular statements of fact, statements about dispositions, comparative statements, and summary or general statements. Although descriptive statements are true or false, it is noted that their truth or falsity is at times difficult to determine either because of lack of requisite evidence, nebulous data, or ambiguity of terms.

Weitz's own summary statements about description are offered here for further clarification:

Descriptions in Hamlet criticism are true or false statements about Hamlet: its intellectual, dramatic, or social environment; or about its textual history. They are important, not trivial, mainly because they report on, hence remind us of, the undeniable date of the play or its environment: i.e., the traits of the characters, the sequences of the plot; the qualities of the language; or the various facets of the Elizabethan age.30

In his section dealing with the procedure of explanation in Hamlet criticism, Weitz shows that critical interpretations, readings, understandings, or statements of the meanings, as well as claims about what is central, primary, or most important in some or all of the play, all function logically as explanation. The critics' language fluctuates, yet explanation persists as the common denominator of their utterances.31
It is demonstrated that when a critic explains he forms a hypothesis based on descriptions, and that the hypothesis can be challenged in many different ways: by rejecting a hypothesis and its particular application to undeniable data; by converting a purported description of a primary datum into a hypothesis about a datum and then rejecting a general hypothesis as true or a specific application of it as relevant; or by denying that the specific hypothesis in its application covers all the data without distortion.  

All the historic critics explain: criticism for them is explanation. The historical critics understand, make a reading, or grasp the play's significance only by means of hypotheses derived from general hypotheses about the Elizabethan age. Therefore, the historical critics are also challengeable not only on the relevance of their method or category of explanation, but on the truth or probability of their general hypotheses.  

In their explanations of Hamlet, the critics begin with their true (or false) descriptions of some of the data in the play. They then ask of these data why they are what they say they are or how they relate to each other. In asserting these questions they introduce a hypothesis which is derived from another more general hypothesis. Therefore, an ideal explanation would be one whose statement of method or category of explanation is true: whose general historical, psychological, metaphysical, or dramatic claim is either true or highly probable; whose specific hypothesis about some or all of the play is confirmable: and whose confirmation is complete in the sense that it covers
Welty concludes that there is no true, best, correct or right explanation, and that there cannot be as long as debate and doubt are possible on what is primary in the play. Rather, he states that there are only more or less adequate explanations of the describable data of the play, and offers the following minimal and realizable criteria for adequate explanation:

Certain minimum criteria, I think, can be stated for their adequacy, although these are not equivalent to the unrealizable criteria of the ideal explanation propounded by the critics of Hamlet who set as one of their goals the true explanation of the play. These minimum criteria are: a clear statement or employment of the method or category of explanation adopted by the critic so that we, his readers, know exactly from what point of view he is explaining Hamlet; employment of general hypotheses that are relevant to the explanation, empirically verifiable, and already confirmed as highly probable by others or confirmed as such by him in his explanation; a formulation of a specific hypothesis about Hamlet that covers the data to be explained without distorting them; and vaguest of all, a quality of coherence in his whole explanation.

Welty opens the chapter on evaluation with these statements:

Evaluation is neither a necessary nor a sufficient procedure in the criticism of Hamlet. The history of that criticism, as even our limited survey shows, includes much criticism which has nothing whatever to do with evaluation. Contrary claims, that all criticism of Hamlet comprises or is identical with evaluation, rest respectively on the confusion of evaluation with an act of choice (i.e., confusing "X is good" with "X is worth criticizing"), or on an honorific redefinition of "criticism" that represents a distortion of the actual functions of critical procedures.
Evaluation is thus a procedure but not the procedure. As a procedure its major assumption is one similar to that of explanation, that is, an assumption that critical evaluation is an employment of language which makes true or false statements about the essential properties of greatness in the play. The evaluitive critics do many things: they praise, condemn, defend, extenuate, exhibit, judge, and re-evaluate. It is asserted that these evaluative activities do not reduce to one; that it is false to say that all of the evaluative critics recommend, guide our choices, grade, persuade, judge, counsel, or emote.  

It is also found in the examples studied that critical evaluation is argument. As argument, this evaluation involves formulation of new and reformulation or employment of traditional principles or criteria of merit, as well as their clarification, justification, and application to the play. Critical evaluation contains what Weitz terms "evaluative utterance" and reasons given in support of these utterances.

The biggest problem of evaluative criticism is said to be the justification of the criteria used in evaluation, or the answering of the request for a reason for a reason. The request implies that a reason can be given in support of a particular criterion. However, it is found that, in fact, the representative critics do not offer reasons for criteria. But they do imply that there are identifiable necessary and sufficient properties of greatness, although none succeeds in showing that there are. Instead, it is shown that in fact much of the history of dramatic criticism is unresolved disagreement over the necessary
and sufficient properties of dramatic greatness. If dramatic greatness could be defined, its application would be a descriptive procedure, rather than an evaluative one: "What begins in critical evaluation as an attempt at justification of a reason for a reason in support of praise (or condemnation) ends in the elimination of the activity of praising (or condemning) altogether."  

A summation of the argument is quoted here:  

The doctrine that critical evaluation of Shakespeare's dramas is true assessment implies that dramatic greatness (or mediocrity) is a property. But dramatic greatness (or mediocrity) cannot be a property without destroying evaluation altogether. Critical evaluation of Shakespeare's dramas, consequently, is not, and more important, cannot be, true (or false) deductive argument for the merits (or demerits) of these dramas; nor can it be true (or false) empirical statements about their merits (or demerits). The traditional ideal of Shakespearean evaluative criticism, namely, the determination of the merits of Shakespeare's dramas on the basis of principles, has not been and cannot be realized. The persistent failure to provide true assessments of the dramas cannot be remedied; instead the ideal must be relinquished.  

In relinquishing the ideal, Weitz does offer criteria of merit for evaluation, and suggests guidelines for determining the more or less adequate answers to questions concerning the greatness of the play. It is noted that adequacy in evaluation centers on criteria of merit rather than, as it does in explanation, on hypotheses. The first criteria of adequate evaluation is clarity: whether the critic praises, condemns, judges, or re-evaluates, he employs certain criteria in the reasons he gives or implies, and these criteria or reasons should be made clear by the critic, although they need not,
and perhaps cannot, be defined. Second, the critic’s criteria should be empirical. If the critic, for example, says “Hamlet is great because it is true to nature,” then he owes a clarification and grounding of the term “true to nature” in the ordinary world so that his readers can verify the term.

Third, the critic’s criteria should be consistent when they are employed as a set. Fourth, the critic’s criteria should be unchallengeable: the critic does his evaluative job when he states and applies unchallengeable criteria of evaluation, however we may disagree with his specific interpretation of them. Fifth and last, whatever criteria the critic uses, he should clarify not only their implications but the criteria themselves in a work of art.41

Thus, as a summary and conclusion about the procedure of evaluation, Weitz states that:

Evaluations in Hamlet criticism, which also purport to be true assessments of the play, are not true or false statements about the properties of artistic greatness or the presence or absence of them in Hamlet; evaluations are mostly praise or condemnation of the play that are supported by good, that is, unchallengeable, reasons or that are joined by reasons for which further reasons are required but are not provided.42

Weitz’s summary and concluding paragraph about the procedure of poetics needs a little further elaboration, and is quoted here before such elaboration:

Poetics in Hamlet criticism are attempts at true, real definitions of essences that do not exist, need not exist, and, in the case of tragedy, cannot exist. They are logically vain attempts to define the
undefinable. Although logically illegitimate, these
definitions are, nevertheless, invaluable because they
incorporate debates over and recommendations of
criteria that function as guides in the enrichment of
our understanding of art. 43

In looking at the various answers in Hamlet criticism to the question
"What is tragedy?" it is established that the concept of tragedy is first,
perennially debatable, and second, perennially flexible. 44 These two logical
characteristics of the concept tragedy render it undefinable, and hence, the
effort of establishing a true poetics of tragedy is a vain attempt.

It is asserted that "criticism need not state, imply, or presuppose a
ture poetics of drama or tragedy or an aesthetics of art in order to render
intelligible or to justify its utterances about Hamlet." 45 It is also argued
that "poetics, unlike description, explanation, and evaluation, is an illegiti-
mate procedure of criticism in that it tries to define what is undefinable, to
state the necessary and sufficient conditions of the functioning of a concept
whose very functioning shows that it has and can have no such conditions." 46

And finally, Weitz offers some predictable conclusions from his
study of Hamlet criticism to the concept of criticism itself:

Criticism of Hamlet includes many things: any claim
about what is primary or relevant or necessary or
sufficient in criticism, consequently, is not a true
(or false) statement about its nature, but an expression
of a preference on the part of the particular critic that
he converts into an honorific redefinition of "criticism."
Criticism has no primary aim, task or function, ex-
cept the second-order or general goal of facilitating
or enriching the understanding of a work of art. 47
The above statements, in turn, lead us to the first sentences of the book, namely, that "Criticism is a form of studied discourse about works of art. It is a use of language primarily designed to facilitate and enrich the understanding of art."
Minor White on Reading Photographs

In a recent New York Times review of the final show hung at M.I.T. by Minor White, Hilton Kramer chose to honor the man by quoting an unidentified colleague who described Minor White as "teacher, critic, publisher, theoretician, proselytizer and house mother for a large portion of the community of serious photographers," in addition, Kramer adds, "to being photographer of classic eminence in his own right."49

Continuing the review of the show, "Celebrations," Kramer attempts to encapsulate what Minor White has been doing throughout his long career as artist, teacher, and editor, now that he is retiring from his position at M.I.T. at age 65. Kramer interprets White's energy in photography as a mission to repair the historical breach between the sacred, esoteric sources of art and the secular, prognostic sources of photography.

Minor White has devoted considerable energy in encouraging multi-level responses to the varied, less than obvious, "sacred" meanings serious photographs offer. His particular contribution to this end, aside from teaching and editing Aperture, considered by many to be the foremost journal of serious photography, was his introduction of writings of his own and others in the late 1950's about a method to experience photographs called reading, as mentioned earlier in this paper. The two following portions of this paper are concerned with the literature available on Reading.
In an article entitled, "What Is Meant By Reading Photographs?" published in Aperture in 1957, White introduced Reading. As a review of the concept, White's shortened definition is offered here.

Hence, to "read" a photograph is to communicate, to the best of one's ability, to another person orally or in written words what one has experienced visually in a photograph or group of them. The stated purpose of Reading is twofold:

First as an object lesson to thousands that more goes on in a photograph than most of us guess. That, in addition to the information given, how a photographer handles both his subject and his materials are clues to his personality on one hand and to his inner message on the other. Second, to explore, sound out, measure however insufficiently, not good or bad, but what a picture says.

Central to the method is a suspension of evaluation to the end, if it must be done at all. In the articles used for this paper, White offers no guides or criteria for evaluation, but rather stresses work toward understanding, experiencing, and communicating the meaning one finds in the photograph under study. White uses the words criticism and evaluation interchangeably, which may account for the introduction of the term Reading: "... reading is to be done without criticism. Obviously criticism and evaluation can not be ultimately avoided, but it is to be postponed with every effort at our command."

One reads a photograph to get at the significance of it through communication with it, and the act of judgment is seen as a foreclosure of further communication, therefore evaluation is to be postponed as long as possible.
Some methods for experiencing photographs, in an article by the same title, were proposed by White and Walter Chappell in Vol. 5, #4 of *Aperture* in 1957. In the prior issue of the magazine White expressed some disappointment with the state of Reading. In a postscript to five Readings of Aaron Siskind’s photographs by Walter Smith, Henry Holmes Smith and others, White expressed gratitude for the work that had been done to that point, but suggested that Reading was an uncertain field, and that “perhaps only the most rudimentary knowledge exists at all.”

In an effort to contribute further knowledge to the direction, White and Chappell proposed methods for Reading which are summarized here.

Four categories, into which most photographs may be placed, are identified and described, and methods appropriate for each category are presented. Photographs are either “documentary,” “pictorial,” “informational,” or “Equivalent.”

A documentary photograph is described as one which takes the viewer some place, or to some time, attempts pure recording, and places content above all. The authors quote from a 1936 *Life* magazine which speaks eloquently of the power of documentation:

To see life, to see the world, to eye-witness great events, to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud, to see strange things, machines, armies, multitudes, shadows in the jungle and on the moon; to see man’s work, his paintings, towers and discoveries; to see things dangerous to come to; the women that men love and many children; to see and take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to
see and be instructed; thus to see, and be shown, is now the will and new expectancy of half mankind.\textsuperscript{53}

In characterizing the pictorialist photograph the authors draw upon A. Krasna-Krasz\' statements in the 1957 Focal Encyclopedia. Krasna-Krasz describes the pictorialist as one who is less concerned with the subject than the picture it will yield, and as one who uses the camera not so much to record as to stress how he sees.

The informational photograph explains, reports, or instructs the mind, and is the result of applied photography or scientific photography. Examples cited are aerial photographs, photomicrographs, and architectural photographs.

White builds on Steiglitz's term 'equivalent' for the fourth category. The equivalent is defined in the following manner:

Any photograph is an Equivalent, regardless of whether a pictorialist, scientist or reporter made it, that somehow transcends its original and customary purposes: i.e., transcends instinctive subject, emotional manner, and intellectual information, and furthermore transcends these parts in union. A very important part of the definition of an equivalent still remains. Such a picture must evoke an emotion, and a very special emotion at that. It is a heightened emotion such as the East Indian would say "takes one heavenward" or Bernard Berenson would say is "life-enhancing."\textsuperscript{56}

Before proceeding to appropriate methods for the categories the authors make certain distinctions. "Experience" and "Reading," although used interchangeably at times, are said to be distinct sets: experience is the end, reading the means. Experiencing a photograph is a private and personal conversation between viewer and picture. Reading follows experience as Reading
is a public act done in the interest of communication and education. Since experiencing a photograph is a personal act a strict prescription cannot be given, so the methods proposed are to be taken only as guidelines. Another distinction is made between "image" and "photograph;" a photograph is a two-dimensional physical object; an image is the mental completion of that object, and only those photographs taken into the mind are given the valuation of the term image. It is images which are read, not photographs.

The method for experiencing documentary photographs contains five main steps. First, one notes whether the background is intended to relate to the main subject or is unintentionally superfluous. If the latter, it is disregarded, and if the former, it is attended to. Secondly, one tags first impressions as an aid to later recall. Thirdly, a period of strenuous observation of everything visible and pertinent takes place. Guidelines are given for different subject matter. For example, if the photograph is of one person the viewer seeks to learn the person's sex, occupation, marital status, mental state, physical state, emotional state, or anything else one can discern from the picture. If the photograph contains two or more persons, then each person is singled out and studied as above, and then keys to the relationship between the people are sought.

If the photograph is a document of an event, one searches for the nature of the event by seeking out all testimony which may reveal, where, what, under what conditions, in what physical or mental atmosphere the
event is taking place. If the photograph is a documentation of a place one
looks for indications of physical presence, social strata, or one conjectures
about what might or could take place in the place.

It is stressed that if step three, that of strenuous observation of every-
thing in the photograph, as summarized above, is meticulously attended to
with acute observation 'you will discover that some kind of bond has been
established, 'which leaves 'traces in us' causing one to 'look up with a new
insight on the world' and recognize relationships between the photograph
and the world one experiences and that 'such recognition enhances living.'\textsuperscript{57}

Step four is given to comparing first impressions with a concluding one.
And step five is the relating of one's private experience to another or group
of people.

The methods for Pictorial photographs and Informational photographs
are basically the same with a few variations and changes of emphasis. For
Pictorial photographs first impressions are also tagged, then one proceeds to
observe everything in the photograph, paying attention to how manner underlies
statement, since that is a main distinguishing characteristic of Pictorial photo-
graphs. One observes the 'graphics' of the print, attending to such qualities
as tone, control of motion, and others; and one studies 'concepts' such as
light, space, and form; and the 'design' of the phonograph. If the subject is
recognizable one studies it by following step three for Documentary photographs.
The fourth step encourages free association, and step five is the sorting out of
associations before one verbalizes the experience.

For informational photographs it is desirable to have, or to gain, knowledge of the specialized field from which the photograph originates. Short of this, one reads the caption. Next the aesthetic qualities are observed by using the methods for Pictorial photographs. In communicating the experience the reader should expand on the informational content if possible, and then move onto aesthetic considerations.

"We wish we were sure of a method for experiencing Equivalents,"58 The difficulty of recognizing an equivalent is readily admitted, and the authors recognize the need for criteria which could be used for identification purposes. The closest the authors are able to come to an identifying mark of the Equivalent is that of a feeling of significance:

Actually one of the safer identifying marks of the Equivalent is a feeling that for unstateable reasons some picture is decidedly significant to you. Or again, after subjecting the photograph to one or all three of the methods heretofore given, you are tormented by the feeling that there is more. We are sympathetic to your disappointment after such a buildup to have a method only hinted at, not outlined.59

Thus White and Chappell conclude the methods with the apology above.

In an earlier issue of Aperture (Vol. 5, #1) "The Workshop Idea in Photography" appeared, in which Minor White, Henry Holmes Smith, Ruth Bernard, Nathan Lyons, and Ansel Adams discussed their approaches to workshops. In his section, Minor White reports on an interesting method he
used with workshop participants in helping them to experience photographs more fully. The method is not referred to in the joint article by White and Chappell just discussed, so warrants mention here.

In enlarging on a few features of his workshops, White discusses a distinction he makes between "Seeing" and "Not Seeing." Not Seeing refers to pragmatic and practical absorption through daily affairs; Seeing refers to looking at anything with the intention of understanding it fully for its own sake. The appropriate technique for increased occurrence of Seeing is simply concentration, a form of concentration based on tranquility. Concentration is focused on an object seen through a ground glass or on a photograph. A list of directives the leader of the session verbalizes during the procedure are quoted here:

A photograph is put on view, but not looked at—
While a period of quiet relaxation is set up within the individual—
Only then are the eyes opened to engage the photograph—
With the body and muscles absolutely still, concentration—
To the exclusion of all else except—
A growing rapport with image—
Mental activity is heightened by—
Scanning, memorizing everything visible—
Until all is seen and felt.
Now a natural period of mental quiet can take over—
During which one listens— and listens—
The photographs as a whole may be heard visually.
If one is receptive the photograph may speak visually.
Tho if you insist, it may speak in your own words. 60

As the experience is repeated the directives are reduced to single words:
quiet—engage—scan—savor—listen—disengage—turn away. It is hoped that
the participant will be able to concentrate at will and alone, and that through this heightened concentration on the photograph, a heightened experience will occur.

An adjunct to the description of White's method, is a means of experiencing used by Professor Clyde H. Dilley at Ohio State University. Each student is asked to stand in front of a hanging photograph, other than his own, which he would like to spend time with. Directives are given similar to White's, but included in which are deep breathing exercises to aid in relaxing, to gain tranquility, and as a means to clear one's mind of extraneous thoughts. This achieved, and after more concentration on the image, participants are asked to stare at the photograph and to non-verbally communicate the picture by drawing with one's finger on the nearest person's back. At the completion of further directives toward contemplation of the image, each member is given a chance to speak about the photograph he chose to study. The responses are markedly different from those in usual critiques. It is unknown whether the resulting effects are caused by the strangeness of the session or because of the method itself, but the experience tends to be memorable for the insights gained regarding the photographs, and for the empathy established between the participating photographers.
Henry Holmes Smith on Reading Photographs

For a generation, photography has been directed at human beings in quantity. At the same time, it suffers from a handicap no living language merits. It has been taught with almost utter ineptness. I think that most of us will understand this from the following analogy: touch typing, in similar circumstances, would be taught under the name of English Literature. English Composition, likewise, would concern itself with width of margins, neatness of erasures, and placement of commas without regard for meaning. One cannot teach a language from a position based mainly on applied technology. To teach an art's history or aesthetics from this viewpoint is laughable. Only in photography has it been tolerated.61

Thus in 1937 Henry Holmes Smith, writing in Aperture, called for the consideration of meaning in the teaching of photography, and proposed that "photographers, masters, teachers, and students" form a community for personal exchange of ideas, pictures, practice, and results. Smith's concerns were threefold: photography students' and teachers' general ignorance of past and contemporary masters' work; the preoccupation with technical considerations to the exclusion of all else; and, the dominance of magazine editors' and advertisers' aesthetic values, or lack of them.

In reference to the last point, Smith wrote that "young photographers are easily misled by inferior and widely published standards."62 The predominant standard which he objected to was the patron's insistence on an immediate awareness of what the photograph "says" in deference to the "reader-on-the-run."63 As a result, any personal images, or images
obscure or difficult, remained unpublished and unseen. A similar point is made by John Szarkowski in reference to a distinction between those photographs "meant to be flipped through rather than lived with, and in which a picture's first impact was more important than its staying power." Szarkowski concludes that many of these photographs are not of great interest the second time around. Smith's stated intent, however, was not to tell publishers what they ought print to fill their needs, but rather to concentrate his energy on developing an understanding of those photographs made for other audiences "where one may find some of the most secure, independent and inventive images of our time."

When a person who has something to say uses photography carefully and deliberately his images may turn out to be difficult, obscure, and precious. Attacks on obscure photographs are often only indications of frustration on the part of the viewer because the image does not yield its meaning immediately, or frustration because recognition of the literal subject matter of the photograph is distinct from the eventual comprehension of its meaning(s).

Smith examined the difficulties in interpreting poetry as described by I. A. Richards in the Guide to Practical Criticism, and found Richards' thinking to be appropriately adaptable to problems in interpreting photographs. Some problems identified by Richards are found by Smith to be similar to problems encountered in interpreting photographs are listed:
1. Difficulty in making out the plain sense of the picture, to "see" what the picture is portraying.
2. Difficulty in sensual apprehension of the rhythms, tones, textures, shapes, all the formal elements of the picture. This is particularly true of photographs which have not been made from "orthodox" subject matter.
3. Difficulty in establishing the pertinent imagery. This failure is often the result of anticipating the wrong image.
4. Misleading effects, the result of an observer's being reminded of some personal scene or adventure.
5. Stock responses, where the pictures involve views and emotions already fully prepared in the viewer's mind.
7. Inhibition, incapacity to move in certain emotional directions.
8. Doctrinal adherences, where the subject matter of a picture involves the viewer with ideas or beliefs, true or false, about the world.
9. Technical presuppositions, for example, assuming that a technique which has shown its inaptitude for one purpose is discredited for all. (This is a constantly recurring response in photography.)
10. General critical preconceptions, prior demand made on photography as a result of theories, conscious or unconscious, about its nature and value, intervene endlessly between the viewer and photograph.97

Smith listed the three basic assumptions he worked under in proposing his method for getting at the meaning of difficult imagery, and they are quoted here:

(1) Mature photographers are capable of providing complete images, which may be examined and "understood" without correction or illusion; (2) sometimes these photographers may be articulate about what they have done; (3) intelligent attention to and discussion of a photograph may help some individuals appreciate more clearly some difficult pictures.70
The methods which were proposed built on the assumptions above are summarized in the following pages.

One method is as follows. A slide of a photograph is projected and participants in the session write down their important responses in the order that they occur. The responses are read to the group and discussed. Guided by the first assumption, attempts by participants to alter the given image are discouraged: the photograph must be attended to as is, and not mentally changed. A consensus of responses is reached, and this consensus is then compared to a prepared statement by the photographer, in accordance with assumption number two, on the meaning of his image as he intended it to be understood: "The photographer's suggested interpretation was used as the standard of reference for accuracy."71

A modification of the above method involved passing around the actual photograph from member to member. Conjectures about the meaning of the photograph were verbalized in turn by the viewers, and modified and built upon as the session progressed. Or a photograph was passed around in silence with the viewer being able to study the photograph as long as he wished, before reporting the response in writing. At times, free association with the image was encouraged.

Smith reports that regardless of which method was used, the responses were as diverse as Richards' reports on responses to poems lead him to expect.
Four distinct problems, in addition to those adapted from Richards and listed earlier, are identified:

(1) the problem of believing that the photograph was "important" enough to spend time on; (2) the discovery of applicable methods, devices or concepts for working with the picture; (3) development of some scheme of evaluation for appraising the varied responses to the pictures; (4) development of a value scale for appraising the photograph's merit. 72

As a solution to the first problem, Smith gains consensus of the group as to which photographs should be considered, even if the decision greatly limits the options, because consent and interest is paramount to sustained attention, an undue strain is placed upon anyone who attempts to study an image without some assurance that the work is worthwhile. Problem number three is solved by using the photographer's statement of the photograph's meaning as a measure of accuracy of the viewer's interpretation.

Two more guidelines are established: inferences about the photograph must be backed up by reference to the visual data in the photograph; and the photograph must be studied as it is, and not as it could have been, or as the viewer would like it to be.

In conclusion, Smith states that the business of interpreting, or finding meaning in images is a difficult and arduous task that often ends in failure, but that the insights gained in the attempt are inspiring and rewarding. He suggests that those interested in the task first attend to the photography he finds most intelligible, and in time move on to the remainder of the imagery. It is
suggested that the paying of strict attention to photographs is the most sensible way of coming to grips with their meanings, and that eventually a vocabulary will be found which will aid in the development of a body of discourse and lead to a much needed intelligent literature of this neglected art.
Conclusion

It is the conclusion of this study that Reading is a fundamentally sound critical procedure, albeit in need of further development, profitably applicable to the photography classroom.

Morris Weitz's definition of criticism as "a form of studied discourse about works of art" is accepted here as a working definition, not a true definition, since the term criticism for Weitz, as the term art, denotes an open concept subject to future change. Further, criticism is a use of language primarily designed to facilitate and enrich the understanding of art. While neither Minor White nor Henry Holmes Smith offer such a succinct definition of Reading, as seen in the prior synopses of their contributions, it is stated that Reading is a form of communication of what one has experienced visually in finding out what a photograph has to say. Hence criticism, in the above sense, and Reading are similar activities.

Reading has built into it a directive to avoid evaluation, or at least a caution to suspend judgment to the very end of the procedure. It is not the reader's task to evaluate a photograph, but rather "to explore" and "sound out what a picture says," and to share resulting insights with others. The purpose of the avoidance of evaluation is to allow one to remain open in the search for meaning, which is done through discourse with the photograph; judgment is viewed as closure. The suspension of judgment until
the end seems sensible enough: if a judgment is made prior to description, explanation or interpretation of the photograph, it is likely to be premature and the possibility of validity is considerably lessened. Other authors concerned with critical procedure, notably art educators Edmund Feldman and Ralph Smith, also recommend restraint in judgment until all else that the critic does is accomplished. Further, regarding the avoidance of evaluation altogether, it has been demonstrated by Weitz, in having determined what critics actually do, that evaluation is neither a necessary nor a sufficient property of criticism itself.

A distinction is needed here concerning necessity. Weitz, in stating that evaluation is neither a necessary nor sufficient property of criticism is speaking of logical necessity, as argued earlier. White and Smith, in proposing the non-evaluative critical method of Reading, seem to be expressing a tactical necessity of avoiding judgment for purposes of prolonging an openness to the image, or maintaining an aesthetic attention for purposes of searching out the various meanings a particular photograph is capable of yielding. And there may well be another type of necessity, that of strong psychological need, particularly on the part of student-photographers for evaluation of their work.

Further, it is noted that White and Smith do make judgments of photographs. As chairman and teacher of photography at Indiana University, Smith presumably grades student photographs, and certainly evaluates portfolios of candidates seeking admission to graduate study in his department.
Minor White has juried numerous photography shows in his long career, and is constantly involved in evaluation regarding which photographers and which photographs to feature out of the many available to him as editor of *Aperture*.

If the proponents of Reading are consistent with their theoretical offerings, we may be confident that in judging photographs, neither White nor Smith deign in favor of immediate acceptance on the basis of pre-established preference, or decide on immediate rejection based on adherence to rigid laws about what photographs ought to look like. More succinctly, it is expected that they do not make snap-judgments.

However sensible the suspension of judgment until description and explanation have been concluded may seem, the point needs stress in light of classroom experience where it has been found that student-critics most frequently begin a discussion of a photograph with evaluative statements, often without reasons with which to support their judgments when asked to do so. Further, both the main proponents of Reading itself, White and Smith, inaccurately use the terms criticism and evaluation interchangeably.

Although Reading is criticism, or at least a form of criticism, the name Reading will be maintained, partly out of respect for the developmental work already done by Smith and White, and because of the widespread misuse of the word criticism as necessarily including evaluation. It seems more productive to change the name than to continuously argue the validity of non-evaluative criticism.
In studying the writings of White and Smith on Reading, one is struck by an attitudinal quality regarding criticism. The thrust is definitely toward the search for meanings in a photograph. To accomplish this end, one carefully approaches the photograph, with an implied humility, to learn its secrets with the aid of a contemplative mind-set. One dialogues with the picture. Once discoveries have been formulated the reader is presumed to be anxious to share the revealed richness with others to in turn increase their awareness. This empathetic attitude is markedly different from one with which the critic assumes a domination over the photograph, giving him the authority to declare the photograph worthless or worthy. If one of the purposes of the critical procedure is a resulting appreciation of the image studied, this attitude of respect for the power of imagery seems more appropriate.

This implied attitude in the writings of White and Smith, although not identified as such by them, is the appreciation of the benefits of what sometimes is called by others an "aesthetic attitude."

Thus, while Reading has these praiseworthy aspects to recommend it, namely, the bringing of an aesthetic attitude to the critical procedure, the emphasis on understanding rather than evaluation, the keeping of the photograph itself as the center of concentration rather than pre-established criteria or other ancillary concerns, it also has its shortcomings.

Minor White himself wrote of the necessity of further development of the Reading approach after having published Five Readings solicited from
professionals. The readers concentrated on five Aaron Siskind photographs over the period of a month, and wrote two-page Readings for *Aperture* which were published in 1957. In a postscript to the Readings, White expressed gratitude for the work having been done, but stated that "it was also becoming painfully obvious that reading photographs is an uncertain field. Perhaps only the most rudimentary knowledge exists in it."78

White did not specify the reasons for his dissatisfaction with Reading. However, in studying the Readings, although one is struck by some significant insights into the Siskind photographs read, one is also disappointed with some very arbitrary and subjective interpretations and associations having little apparent relevance to the photographs. Two of the readers, Walter Smith and Sam Tung Yu, offer their poetry as Readings of the photographs, which leaves the audience of the Readings, which is presumably desirous of enlightenment concerning the photographs, with the arduous task of first deciphering the vagueness of the poems in order to get at the meaning of the photographs discussed. Kurt Sazaroski, a third reader, utilizes his allotted space with a report on his difficulties in doing the Readings, those primarily being his inability to identify the literal subject matter of the photographs.

White's own method of Reading was proposed after and in response to his realization that more directives for the approach were mandatory. In brief review, White proposed a five-step method of Reading: first, the reader determines whether the photograph is documentary, pictorial,
Informational, or an equivalent. Second, one tags first impressions about the photograph. Third, the reader strenuously observes the photograph. Fourth, first impressions are compared to later impressions, and finally, the reader reports his experience regarding the photograph to an audience.

Henry Holmes Smith's method of Reading appeared in the same issue of *Aperture.* Briefly summarized as a review of the prior section on Smith's writings, a photograph is shown to a group, the individuals in the group express their important responses in reaction to the photograph, the group arrives at a consensus of interpretation, and this interpretation is compared to the photographer's stated purpose as a measure of the Reading's accuracy of interpretation.

Both White and Smith encourage free-association with the photograph, and both rely on the photographer's purpose or the photograph's intended meaning, and both are guided by I.A. Richard's cautions to the critic listed earlier in the section on Smith.

Thus, in looking at what critics do in comparison to what readers do, it becomes apparent that critics, as shown by Weitz, mostly describe, explain, judge, and theorize, whereas, it is asserted here in the main conclusion of this paper, that readers mostly make claims about meanings of photographs, or offer interpretations, without stating evidence to support their claims about purported meanings or interpretations. Following then are considerations and proposals for the improvement of the Reading method of criticizing photographs.
Notice is given to the fact that White strongly encourages his students to "identify" elements in the photograph, and to "scan and memorize everything visible," and it is recognized that these activities can be identified as aspects of descriptive activity. However, it is suggested here that if more specific attention and directives were given to description and analysis of the described elements, in order to collect data with which to infer meaning, the likelihood of explanations being more firmly rooted in the visual evidence of the photograph would be greatly increased, and subjective and arbitrary explanations significantly reduced.

Description in itself, apart from explanation, is a use of language by which one can enrich the understanding of the photograph under study, if in no other way, at least by pointing out how complicated a thing a photograph is. Description serves to call attention to significant features that others may not have noticed, or reminds others of the importance of what they have seen. Descriptive activities are also a means of prolonging contact with the photograph, and a means of sustaining aesthetic attention by direct observation for the purpose of stimulating and developing an aesthetic sensibility about a particular photograph to modify the sensibilities of others.

Many options for description are open to the reader. Apart from description of such formal qualities of a photograph such as line, shape, texture, balance, and so forth, photography does bring its own characteristics to imagery which may be profitably described. Edward Weston's statements about
photography's essential "ability to register fine detail," and "its ability to render an unbroken sequence of infinitely subtle gradation," has already been mentioned. In discussing a particular photograph in Looking at Photographs, John Szarkowski eloquently speaks of other formal qualities of the medium:

The seemingly arbitrary cropping of figures by the picture edge, the unexpected shapes created by overlapping forms, the asymmetrical and centrifugal patterning, the juxtaposition of busy and empty masses—these qualities constitute a visual definition of what is meant, in large part, by the phrase "photographic seeing."\(^{31}\)

Description may also call attention to the sharpness or softness of focus in a photograph: the angle and distance from which the picture was taken; the use of artificial or natural, available or studio light; the size of grain evident in the print; the softness or hardness, warm or cool tone of the printing paper; the flexibility, quickness, spontaneity of response of the photograph made with the small camera, or the enforced deliberation, precise Framing, and exact description of the large view camera;\(^{32}\) the size of the print; the range of tones.

While recommending description of formal qualities, it is realized that such detailed formal analysis of all possible descriptors, such as grain size and type of printing paper, may be tediously superfluous in some cases and justifiably dispensed with, but quite appropriate and necessary in others. Bruce Davidson's series of England, with its paradox of small print and
obvious large grain, comes to mind. A purported explanation of these photographs which failed to account for that predominant format element could well be questioned. Starkowski voices a related observation in speaking of meaning in relation to print quality:

Not often but occasionally, the meaning will be so nearly invisible that it will be present in one print and absent in another, only marginally different, made from the same negative, even though both prints may be exemplary by exacting academic standards. 83

Minor White's suggestions, presented earlier, about what to look for in a "documentary" photograph may serve as a reminder of the wealth of information available through direct observation of what may be given in a particular picture. For example, if the photograph contains people, it is recommended that the viewer try to ascertain the individual's sex, age, marital status, occupation, physical and emotional characteristics, and mental state. Then the reader can compare one depicted individual to the others in the picture, and seek out their relationship to one another, and look for environmental information which may be ascertained from the background or foreground and its relation to the people depicted.

While the description of subject matter is an obvious enough procedure, it is again pointed out that the reader's latter interpretation may stand or fall depending on the accuracy of description of the elements present. It has also been noticed that art students in particular seem to resist talk about subject matter as such, thinking it a local activity, and choose rather to concentrate
only on formal considerations, possibly due to the great emphasis over the past years on the formalist aesthetic. Likewise, non-art major student-photographers, lacking the formalist emphasis in their training, tend to concentrate only on subject matter and only those formal qualities particular to photographic technique.

Descriptions of historical, social, or political contexts might be very informative in dealing with certain photographs, particularly those whose subject matter is foreign to the experience of the majority of viewers.

Descriptive comparisons might be beneficial in dealing with a group of photographs, or for dealing with one photograph in relation to others. Describing similarities and differences until all are exhausted would leave each with a particular individuality evident. Comparisons to other two-dimensional art forms could well lead to a wider appreciative base in the arts. It has been noticed, for example, that student photographers without an appreciation for non-objective painting became more sympathetic to it through their own work or work of prominent photographers dealing with non-recognizable imagery.

Description of photographs in relation to other forms of art is in the tradition of Steigltz's appeal of the early 1900's, and may bring one to the awareness that a photograph does not occur in isolation but is part of a body of similar works within a larger artistic context.

If one has given a significant amount of attention to description of a photograph, one may well be satisfied with insights gained, and choose not to
go further and make a hypothesis about its meaning. Ralph Smith makes the
distinction between "exploratory aesthetic criticism," the purpose of which is
to maintain a sustained aesthetic experience; and, "argumentative aesthetic
criticism," the purpose of which is to communicate and defend experience. 64

However, since the stated aim of Reading is the concern for the com-
munication of one's experience about meaning in a photograph in order to
further others' experience, it is suggested here that readers engage more
directly in the process of making claims, or stating hypotheses, and that they
support these claims with undistorted descriptive evidence gathered primarily
from the photograph. Realizing that no true or right explanation will be forth-
coming, the reader's task would be to offer an explanation or interpretation
of the meaning of the photograph which is confirmable, accounts for the rele-
vant data in the photograph, and has a quality of coherence and reasonableness
about it.

In Minor White's method of reading the first thing one does is decide
the type of photograph being read, photographs being either documentary,
pictorial, informational, or Equivalents. Given the characteristics of each
category by White, the identification of a photograph as a member of a type
seems, and is presented as, a simple descriptive procedure. However, upon
scrutiny it becomes evident that the identification task actually is more logic-
ally an explanatory function in the case of documentary, pictorial, and infor-
mational, and an evaluative function in the case of an Equivalent. For example,
In order to place a photograph in the documentary rather than the pictorial category, one must decide whether the picture is "pure recording" of subject matter which "places content above all," or whether the essential content of the picture is the manner of presentation of the subject matter rather than the subject matter itself. These decisions would not appear to be simple statements of evident fact, but rather would appear to be utterances about meaning which need descriptive evidence for support.

In talking about photographs which are Equivalents, with capital E, White uses phrases such as "come upon," "exceptional moments," "something unusual," "something important," "profoundly moved," and "decidedly significant." To identify a picture as an Equivalent is to do considerably more than state an indisputable fact. White's use of the term appears to be evaluative rather than descriptive. As an evaluative category Equivalent serves to praise, but does not necessarily affirm the reason for the praise. Thus it is suggested that if the term is maintained and used, reasons ought be given in support of its application to specific photographs. Once its use is recognized as an evaluative claim, valuable debate may ensue about criteria of photographic excellence.

It is also suggested that Henry Holmes Smith's use of the photographer's stated intent as an evaluation of the accuracy of the reader's interpretation be discontinued because of the problems with the intentionalist position referred to earlier, one being the difficulty of verifying what the photographer intended.
In place of the intentionalist criteria would be reasonableness of argument coupled with the realization that explanations will not be true or false, but more or less adequate.

Taking into account these suggested improvements of the Reading approach to photographic criticism, the teacher’s task would be one of providing guidance, clarification, and support. Students do already talk about their photographs and those of others: the role of the discussion leader would be to guide the talk in order to bring a greater degree of organization and direction to it, or to shape the uncoined and isolated comments from a group into a reasonable discussion. In some cases this may mean limiting the discussion to one photograph out of a group of photographs. It may mean rejecting preference statements in favor of descriptive statements, or disallowing explanatory claims prior to adequate description.

As clarifier, the teacher would help readers make logical distinctions by pointing out what they are saying in relation to what has been said, or perhaps by rephrasing comments to make them more intelligible or noteworthy to the group at large. When a reader makes an explanatory claim, evidence might be asked for from the individual or from the group, or counter-claims called for. The teacher might summarize statements into a position and point out where positions significantly differ, and enumerate evidence cited for these positions.
Students are capable of high level discourse if given the opportunity, direction, and support. In a recent research report published in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, David Zekher has identified five levels of aesthetic inquiry in the discussion of fifth graders:

In fact, when their powers of imagination and curiosity are unrestrained, five levels of inquiry can be identified. If we count art production and appreciation as the first level of inquiry, we find children (1) creating and appreciating art, (2) criticizing it, and (3) challenging or supporting the judgments of others, whether adults or children. Moreover, we find them (4) theorizing about the nature of art and criticism, and (5) analyzing theories and arguments.86

Alongside Zekher’s study, Edmund Feldman has argued convincingly for the benefits, need for, and possibility of engaging children, kindergartners included, in the critical discussion of art.87 To support this discourse, much or little encouragement and direction may be needed depending on the group and the situation. It may be found that particular students are very reluctant to take the risk of public utterance, particularly in formulating hypotheses or in building cases for explanatory claims.

But if the necessary support and guidance is given, student photographers might be brought out of the isolation of the darkroom into a public forum for serious discussion of their work and the work of others. These students might learn that they make more significant images than they have realized; that they can talk intelligently about their images and those of professionals; and further, that through this organized talk their
appreciation for, and knowledge about imagery might be significantly increased.
Notes


4. Efmand, op. cit.


8. Ibid.


19. Ibid., p. 9.
22. Ibid.
25. Ibid., pp. 203-204.
26. Ibid., p. 316.
27. Ibid., pp. 316-317.
28. Ibid., pp. 228, 229, 234.
29. Ibid., pp. 234-235.
30. Ibid., p. 217.
31. Ibid., pp. 240, 254, 268.
32. Ibid., pp. 247-248.
55. Ibid., p. 161.
56. Ibid., p. 164.
57. Ibid., p. 171.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
64. SARKOVSKI, *op. cit.*, p. 185.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid.
70. Ibid., p. 139.
71. Ibid., p. 140.
72. Ibid.
73. WORK, *op. cit.*, Introduction, p. viii.
74. Ibid., p. 318.
75. Ibid., p. vii.
78. Ibid.
80. Weston, Ibid.
81. Sarkowski, op. cit., p. 22.
82. Ibid., p. 140.
83. Ibid., p. 192.


