

this edition.² Unfortunately, at €4,950, ten times the cost of the basic version, this unique edition is likely not in the budget of the average archivist.

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Photographs, Histories, and Meanings. MARLENE KADAR, JEANNE PERREAULT, and LINDA WARLEY, eds. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 258 p. ISBN 978-0-230-61770-4.

Photographs, Histories, and Meanings is an edited collection of essays exploring the social histories of photographs and the forces that shape their interpretive contexts. As the editors Marlene Kadar, Jeanne Perreault, and Linda Warley explain in their introduction, the title of the collection was chosen in order “to focus attention on the processes of historical narration that modify viewers’ interpretive responses to photographs and events” (p. 1). The twelve essays in this collection are important contributions to contextual understandings of photographic history and meaning; revealing and communicating the histories of the photographs through their specific historical contexts and discourses in which they were created, circulated, and viewed. The interdisciplinary approach is strengthened by the diverse academic and professional backgrounds of the collection’s contributors.

The photographs analyzed in this collection are expanded from image to context of creation, function, use, and meaning. The collection is also a significant contribution to critical analyses of social documentary photography presenting a broad geographical scope that includes the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, Ireland; the aid industry in Biafra and Rwanda; Nazi propaganda photography at the Ravensbrück concentration camp for women and girls; the Nazi occupation of Amsterdam (1944–1945); forensic photography in Switzerland and New York; Canadian residential school propaganda photography; competing visual narratives of Farm Security Administration photographs; and reform photography of the Chicago Housing Authority. One of the great strengths of the collection is its acknowledgement and compelling analyses of the layered and dynamic interpretations and ambiguous and shifting nature of photographic meaning.

The contributing authors’ interpretations of the photographs are rooted in the historical, social, and political contexts of a particular temporal and spatial period in the photograph’s life. The authors are sensitive to context and function, ambiguity, and the photograph’s vulnerability to distortion and shifting

2 See http://www.vdhbooks.com/en_vatican_ce2.htm (accessed 2 June 2010).

meanings. Their insights reflect a perceptive visual literacy in their examinations of photographic records. The majority of the essays in the collection employ archival images in their analyses, yet the authors neglect the role of the archivist, the archives, and institutional practices that shape and mediate the archival record and ultimately collective memory. As Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook have convincingly argued, postmodern reflections have demonstrated the power of archives and records to shape and direct historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity as well as to influence how we know ourselves as individuals, groups, and societies.¹

The essays in this collection all seek to understand how photographs can be believed given postmodern awareness of the multiple and ambiguous nature of meaning. Articulating the indeterminacy of photographs, the editors describe them as “thick images with social and historical lives that are not apparent on first look – they are ambiguous; their lives may have been distorted by the passing of time and an overlay of outmoded political agendas and national, corporate, or aesthetic economies of need; and these changes cause shifts in meaning as cultures too, shift” (p. 1).

Photographs, Histories, and Meanings is divided into three sections: Ambiguities, Distortions, and Shifts. Each essay explores a specific moment of meaning in the life of a photograph – “a point in the shifting world of the interpreted text” (p. 2). Within the first section, “Ambiguities,” the authors explore context, intention, and object in interpreting the ambiguous meanings of specific photographs. This section also questions the contexts of representation: the political motivations, the recontextualization of photographs removed from their original intent, and the new meanings that ensue. The section examines the ambiguities of ethics, seeking to understand the effects of manipulation on photographic meaning. In her enquiry into selected images of the aid industry, Jeanne Perreault asks: “What is the relation between the ethics of humanism and the aesthetics of images of suffering” (p. 60)? Perreault’s chapter examines the aesthetic values of these images and how they influence viewers’ responses and communicate a moral imperative.

In the second section, “Distortions,” contributing authors examine photographs as “mutable texts” (p. 5). Recognizing that photographs are “embedded in shifting historical contexts, intentional or accidental hermeneutic distortions and ambiguous and multiple – sometimes competing – meanings” (p. 5), the authors return to the first moments of the photographs’ creation to investigate the specific historical contexts in which the photographs were created, disseminated, and used. Marlene Kadar’s cogent analysis of an SS Reichsführer Himmler Camp Inspection photograph album demonstrates the “ease of dislo-

1 Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002), p. 2.

cation from intention to use, from object to image, from historical moment to the evolution of meaning” (p. 6). The camp inspection photographs record sanitized, staged activities; a performance fulfilling a “particular political or ideological function” (p. 75). However, as Kadar explains, the history and meaning of these photographs are distorted through reproduction and digitization projects that employ the photos uncritically as historical evidence of concentration camp life, rather than Nazi propaganda, disguising the horrors of the concentration camp system.

The final section of the collection, “Shifts,” focuses on the shifts in temporal, spatial, and interpretative contexts of photographic display and reception. The photographs analyzed in these essays have been re-purposed, serving new and different functions. Authors in this section examine such shifts as the exhibition of documentary forensic photographs as fine art, the appropriation of lynching photographs as political and performative protest, the recontextualization of Canadian residential school propaganda photographs now serving as a witness and survival memoir, and the shifting responses to Jewish family album photographs now installed in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The collection is a compelling exploration of the ambiguities, distortions, and shifts in photographic interpretation and meaning. Archivists would benefit from its insights into the historical contextualities of photographic meaning. Equally, the collection would have benefited from archival scholarship, a noted absence. Archival scholarship is strongly aligned with researching and understanding the evidential contexts of the origins of records, the original purposes, the complex relationships between society and the documentary record, all supported by Hugh Taylor’s pioneering proposal that the meaning of archival records exists not in the records themselves but in the transactions to which they serve as evidence. With the exception of Justin Carville’s engaging analysis of a series of postcards from the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, *Photographs, Histories, and Meanings* fails to draw on the growing body of archival scholarship. The collection would have profited from the archival profession’s perspective in this interdisciplinary endeavour.

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