



Critical Theory and Photography

WORKSHOP with Professor Martin Jay
Grand Parade, ROOM G4, University of Brighton
Saturday 27th June 2015

This workshop hosted by CAPPE, the CSRG, and the Faculty of Arts, is aimed at staff and research students interested in photography, critical theory, and visual theory. If interested please email Mark Devenney on m.devenney@brighton.ac.uk.

Professor Martin Jay is Director of the Programme in Critical Theory at University of California, Berkeley. He is a renowned Intellectual Historian and his research interests have been ground breaking in connecting history with other academic and intellectual activities, such as the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, Cultural Criticism, Photography and Historiography among many others. He is the author of many books including *Refractions of Violence* (2003); *Downcast Eyes* (1994), *The Virtues of Mendacity: On Lying in Politics* (2010); and *Essays from the Edge: Parerga and Paralipomena* (2011).

During this workshop we will engage with three of Professor Jay's recent publications on photography and critical theory. All members of the Universities of Sussex and Brighton are welcome to participate. Participation in the workshop with Professor Jay is limited to a maximum of 20. Participation in the workshop is free.

WORKSHOP OUTLINE

Session 1: Photography as “magical nominalism” **Room G4, Grand Parade, 10.00-12.00**

In ‘Magical Nominalism: Photography and the Re-enchantment of the World’ (2009), Jay develops the position that photography can be understood through a nominalist lens, insofar as the photograph freezes a certain moment, in all its uncanny particularity, in time. This freezing allows a fleeting moment to stay with us, unchanging, and gives the photograph a “magical” quality.

In this session we will engage with Jay's understanding of nominalism and his rendering of photography as a nominalist practice; we will interrogate his rendering and application of the critical and visual theories of Walter Benjamin, Rosalind

Krauss, Roland Barthes, and W.J.T. Mitchell; and we will discuss what the merits and shortcomings are of an understanding of photography as magical nominalism.

Reading: Martin Jay, 'Magical Nominalism: Photography and the Re-enchantment of the World', *Culture, Theory and Critique* 50 (2009) 2-3: 165-183. ([Link](#))

LUNCH: 12.00-13.00

Session 2: Photography, the event, and politics
Room G4, Grand Parade, 13.00-15.00

In 'Photography and the Event' (2014), Jay brings together French critical theories of the event with the work of Roland Barthes to cast a light on the experience of viewing photographs. Can the photograph be understood as "an event that hangs on the wall", as Thierry de Duve has it? Can photography capture the historical ruptures that Michel Foucault, Alain Badiou and many others call "events", or is it predestined to be absorbed into the cultural narrative that Barthes call "*studium*"?

In this session we will question Jay's interpretation of theories of the event and of Roland Barthes's work; we will scrutinise his combining of the two and ask whether the respective theoretical frameworks can withstand such combination; and, finally, we will ask the broader question of how photography not only documents politics and, occasionally, captures it in its evental splendour, but also how and in what ways photography is itself deeply and undeniably political.

Reading: Martin Jay, 'Photography and the Event', in: O. Shevchenko (ed.), *Double Exposure: Memory & Photography* (2014: Transaction Publishers): 91-111.

Session 3: Still life, vibrant decay: photography as *memento mori* and stubborn survival
Room G4, Grand Parade, 15.30-17.30

In 'Laura Letinsky and the Art of Stillness' (2015), Jay reflects on the still lifes of photographer Laura Letinsky, noting that whereas still lifes traditionally depict worldly objects in their materiality and richness, Letinsky's work instead captures them in their fragility and vulnerability, after their having been used, consumed, or discarded. This leads him to consider the links between the stillness of photography on the one hand and their capacity to communicate stubborn hope on the other.

In this session we will engage with notions surrounding photography and its relationship to death, decay, and melancholy on the one hand, and life, birth, and hope on the other. We will take this chance to reflect on all the themes that have been considered so far: photography as "magical"; photography as political; and the Janus-faced relationship the photograph has to life and death.

Reading: Martin Jay, 'Laura Letinsky and the Art of Stillness', in: *Float Magazine* 2 (2015): 6-13. ([Link](#))