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Excursions Beyond the Frame

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The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning by John Tagg. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. Pp. 392, 65 black-and-white photos. \$82.50 cloth, \$27.50 paper.

In the days following the disastrous earthquake in Haiti in January 2010, I became aware of a striking phenomenon. With concrete information on the depth and breadth of the devastation hard to come by, news sources turned, as they often do, to evocative and affecting photographs. For almost a week following the disaster, the *New York Times* online ran a slideshow feature as its lead story. The photographs were painful to look at and at times bordered on exploitative—one wonders what the late Susan Sontag would have had to say about the discourse of victimhood and the “pain of others” on display here. There is certainly nothing new about this type of social documentary photography; the visual rhetoric of suffering has been well established as a journalistic conceit since the 1930s. But here, I was struck by the degree to which this visual barrage of suffering Haitians injured and in pain, mourning the dead, or begging for help in rescuing loved ones trapped under piles of rubble did not simply illustrate the lead story: it was the story. With little more than dry contextual captions, the pictures were meant to speak the unspeakable for themselves, “to show” as that foundational institution of documentary photography, *Life* magazine, once put it, rather than to tell. Coverage on National Public Radio (NPR) in the days immediately following the earthquake

often took a photographic form, as well. Reporting from the streets of Port-au-Prince, correspondent Jason Beaubien, his voice choked with sobs, reverted to simply describing the scene of an ailing young girl, alone, bandaged, and naked, lying under a thin sheet outside an impromptu hospital.¹ Knowingly or otherwise, Beaubien drew on his listeners' long-standing cultural familiarity with social documentary to compose a vivid mental snapshot. For those for whom such mental pictures were not evocative enough, announcers frequently reminded listeners that NPR photographer David Gilkey was in Haiti "sending back images of misery in the Caribbean sun," available for viewing at NPR.org.²

Natural disasters are, of course, well suited to the visually affective representations of social documentary photography. The lines of victim and concerned onlooker are easily drawn, and there is little moral ambiguity to blur our emotional response when an entire population is devastated by an unforeseen natural event. Yet even in situations where the politics are far more complex, social documentary remains remarkably tenacious public visual rhetoric. In images of the triumphs and tragedies of foreign wars, the physical human drama of the Olympics, the violence and upheaval of political protest, or sentimental moments between Barack Obama, his children, and their new puppy, documentary photographs

package the world as a series of symbolic, emotional pictures, prompting affective responses—pity, compassion, national pride, righteous anger—and, in so doing, grounding allegiances to specific political and national ideologies. Moreover, postmodern and media critics from Jean Baudrillard to Fred Ritchin have suggested that the First World has come to experience "reality" increasingly through images.³ As the flow of documentary photography becomes ever more accessible and central to our perception of the world, it becomes ever more important to understand how such images came to construct our perceptions and the ideologies and subjectivities they help to engender. John Tagg's significant and challenging new book, *The Disciplinary Frame*, seeks to do that and more, first by examining the historical foundations and framing of America's documentary image culture and, second, by attempting to peer around that frame, to explore the possibilities that lie beyond the disciplinary structure of the documentary tradition.

Scholars of photography will certainly be familiar with Tagg's groundbreaking and still seminal collection of essays, *The Burden of Representation* (1988), which traces the evolution and institutionalization of photography as a disciplinary tool in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Drawing in particular on the work of Louis

Althusser and Michel Foucault, *The Burden of Representation* makes the case that these photographic manifestations of power are not an essential function of photographic technology, but rather a strenuous and often violent shutting down of interpretive possibilities through the disciplinary process of framing. Thus, Tagg's argument suggests, the qualities that scholars like Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag have located in the photograph itself—its trace of the real, its implicit power relations—are actually products of discursive disciplinary practices.⁴ As the title implies, *The Disciplinary Frame* revisits many of the ideas and issues addressed in Tagg's earlier work. Here, as elsewhere, Tagg explores the mobilization of photography as a tool within disciplinary systems. Photography and, more specifically, the meaning of photography and the way it is framed (both literally and metaphorically) are always bound to power and ideology. That Tagg is reiterating these points in this period of growing media saturation is surely significant. In a time when digital technologies have, for many, complicated notions of indexicality and photographic truth and the social critiques of postmodernism are increasingly historicized or forgotten both inside and outside the academy, it has become all too easy to disavow the problematic politics of social documentary photography and embrace its sentimentalizing

symbolic rhetoric anew. As such, Tagg's current book serves in part as a rallying cry, a reminder of the histories, in particular the successes and failures of the liberal New Deal policies in the 1930s and the representations that were so integral to their dissemination, that are still relevant today.

Expanding upon his analysis of New Deal era photography in the closing chapters of the *Burden of Representation*, *The Disciplinary Frame* argues that the seemingly objective photographic work of social documentary photography is an entirely historical phenomenon. As Tagg demonstrates in his fascinating second chapter, "The Plane of Decent Seeing," social documentary photography emerges in the 1930s as a realist mode (and here one must note that realism, according to Tagg, is not a quality of photography, but an historical phenomenon with a particular "shelf life") that rejects the flat objectivity of earlier modes of photographic representation in favor of a more affective and instructive approach (55). Whereas disciplinary photographs of the late nineteenth century—Alphonse Bertillon's mug shots, for example, or Dr. Hugh Welch Diamond's portraits of the mentally ill—sought to construct a rational, statistical record of the world through images, the documentary style that emerged in the 1930s defined itself through a didactic, activist mode of representation, constructing an "emo-

tional map” that hinged on feeling and belief rather than fact or analysis (71). Moreover, as Tagg shows, the emergence of this new documentary mode as a social tool was entirely premeditated. Through an intriguing portrait of Scottish sociologist and film critic John Grierson, the man who coined the term *documentary*, Tagg shows that the liberal tradition of social documentary was conceived as a progressive means of photographic and filmic representation that, while admittedly both propagandistic and just a little bit totalitarian, had the potential to provide a new means of educating the public through images that were “naturalistic, familiar and positive but at the same time dramatic and emotive” (65). As such, Tagg draws the pithy conclusion that “documentary is not documentation” (72). Rather, he notes, citing Stuart Davis, New Deal institutions like the Federal Art Project and the Farm Security Administration’s Information Division, however well meaning, constituted a “monopoly in culture” (quoted on 88).

The effects of this monopoly in culture are made readily apparent in Tagg’s characteristically masterful analysis of a handful of New Deal era photographs—most pivotally, a well-known image by Margaret Bourke-White. First printed in *Life* magazine in 1937, the photograph depicts poor African Americans standing in a breadline in a flood-ravaged Louisville,

Kentucky, in front of a propagandistic billboard bombastically proclaiming “There’s no way like the American way.” The image is a consummate example of Grierson’s vision for the documentary form. With its fastidious, lucid composition of tropes and symbols, the image functions as a “condensed visual headline” (112). Not unlike the *New York Times* slide shows of Haitian suffering, Bourke-White’s message is so streamlined that even the seemingly anomalous details that so often complicate the photographic message serve only to reinforce the central binaries of black and white, need and plenty, stasis and mobility. One could then see Bourke-White’s image as a paradigm of the disciplinary frame at work; as Tagg suggests, there are “no remainders” through which to explore alternate possibilities (114). The photograph is all meaning. Or is it? Tagg subsequently notes a bit of cable breaking diagonally across the frame in the upper-right-hand corner of the image. It is this bit of cable, obviously not an intentional part of the image but likely something that Bourke-White could not logistically shoot around, that opens the door to a new mode of looking.

Although Tagg launches his argument with an important consideration of the way that New Deal photography represents a disciplinary monopoly on visual culture (and one significantly mobilized not through a centralized enforce-

ment of power but through a truly Foucauldian disciplinary structure produced through the desires and pleasures of, for example, the enthusiastic readers of *Life* magazine), his most original work here focuses on the photographers, images, and practices that elude, in one way or another, what Tagg provocatively terms "the capture of meaning." In so doing, he not only offers a glimmer of hope to his readers and a possible means of brushing didactic photographs against the grain, but he also seeks to complicate critiques of his earlier work leveled by another principal figure in photography theory and criticism: Geoffrey Batchen. In his seminal work of photographic theory, *Burning with Desire* (1997), Batchen uses Tagg as a paradigmatic example of postmodern photography criticism. He cites Tagg's contention (in *Burden*) that the photograph has no identity as such, and that the history and the meaning of a photograph are entirely dependent on its context. Given this, Batchen concludes, Tagg (like so many postmodernists) refuses to address "photography itself" as a discipline, an essence, or a truth, because, as Batchen puts it, Tagg "pointedly rejects the category of 'in-itself'" (7). Batchen does not contest this postmodern critical perspective per se. Indeed, he takes it as a given. But he also seeks to move beyond the limiting binary opposition between, on the one hand, the

formalist essentialism represented by the modernist ontological considerations of photography in the work of John Szarkowski and André Bazin, and, on the other, the postmodern relativists who allow photography no identity "in-itself."

The Disciplinary Frame attempts to push beyond this critical impasse, as well, by complicating the assumption that photography has no identity. Although Tagg certainly reiterates the notion that photographic meaning is entirely dependent on context, and that the determining context of any photograph consists of invisible structures of power (the "disciplinary frame" of the title), Tagg's argument in this book pivots on what he calls the "violence of meaning" and, most provocatively, what might potentially lie outside it. Carefully avoiding both an entirely contingent interpretation and a full-blown essentialist definition of photography as a medium, he writes that "photography has no identity, but photographs may" (15). If a photograph becomes a tool of power through the inscription of meaning, how, Tagg asks, might we approach and understand a photograph without assigning it meaning? While he ascribes no overarching truth to the medium of photography as a whole, Tagg is interested in the fragmented and fugitive details of particular photographic images, like the bit of cable in the Bourke-White photo, that refuse simple

codification and encourage the viewer to peel back the layers of meaning and forge into new territory beyond the disciplinary frame.

In so doing, Tagg's book recalls the far more ontologically oriented observations of photo critics from Oliver Wendell Holmes to Roland Barthes, and their fascination with photography's refusal to conform neatly to holistic cultural interpretations.⁵ Like the clothesline that Holmes suggests insistently presents itself in every landscape photograph much to the consternation of the photographer, or Barthes's elusive and individualized *punctum* that pricks the viewer with precisely that which was not intended, the photographs in W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* (1993) or Walker Evans's 1938 Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition and catalog *American Photographs* are defined by an excess of visual information that cannot easily be contained within the boundaries of meaning. The paradoxical argument that Tagg advances, then, is that a photograph's essential meaning, such as it is, is a refusal of meaning, a riot of contradictions that might potentially elude the disciplinary frame.

This is undoubtedly a tricky argument to make, in part because, as Tagg so keenly articulates, it puts him in the position of making meaning for the photograph through critical analysis, while simultaneously (and perhaps impossibly) attempting to sidestep the

structures of power and discipline that meaning implies. Tagg has no illusions about writing from a position outside of ideology, and he is careful to tease apart the myriad disciplinary structures with which his work must necessarily intersect, from the discipline of art history to the very act of looking itself. He is also openly dubious about his prospects for success from the outset, comparing his project to that of Roland Barthes, who prefaced a lecture at the Collège de France with the contention that all speech is fascist. To write about a photograph is, as Tagg suggests from the outset, to ascribe it meaning. And to ascribe meaning to a photograph is to limit its interpretive possibilities, to discipline its productive unruliness. Tagg's analysis, then, is an attempt to write about photographs and, in some sense, to produce meaning without really producing meaning.

At first, this approach is liable to make one's head spin. As a hermeneutic, Tagg's articulation of a how a photograph might function beyond the disciplinary structure of meaning is at times frustratingly abstract. Like trying to hold sand in a sieve, Tagg simultaneously interprets photographs and drains them of meaning. But this frustration is perhaps intentionally provoked, and was, for this reader, ultimately and pleasantly revelatory. Not unlike Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*—a book that bears more similarities to Tagg's current

work than he may be prepared to acknowledge—Tagg both articulates and performs photography's potential inscrutability, gesturing to what might be termed, after Barthes, a kind of "madness." But this madness is methodical, and at its best moments, when played out through detailed case studies, revolutionary.

Early in the book, Tagg evokes Jacques Lacan's famous discussion of the gaze in Hans Holbein the Younger's 1533 painting *The Ambassadors*. The painting is at first glance a conventional portrait of the eponymous ambassadors. But the representational space is disrupted by a distorted form in the lower center of the image, a skull that can be made legible only through a dramatically oblique point of view, which, in turn, destroys the legibility of the image of the ambassadors. For Tagg, this oblique view is the key to eluding, if only for a moment, the monolithic power of the gaze. And, throughout the book, Tagg identifies a number of metaphorical skulls in the narrative of New Deal documentary photography, eruptions and fragments from the incidental—the bit of cable in Bourke-White's photograph—to the far more disruptive—the unassimilable elements of Walker Evans's work that so complicated his inclusion in the New Deal project or the unstable signifier of the zoot suit in African American and Chicano culture in the 1940s. Through

these details and fragments, Tagg teases out rich and fascinating fugitive histories embedded within the surface of a didactic image culture. These individual case studies are a pleasure to read, brimming with insight, and, in a way, "showing" what Tagg cannot quite state outright. Doggedly resisting oversimplification, entrenched in history and theoretical nuance, Tagg's consideration of documentary photography refuses precisely the easy abstractions and generalizations of meaning to which the genre all too often seems to lend itself. As such, he takes a difficult and at times paradoxical position, but like the taciturn and melancholic Walker Evans, Tagg demonstrates the necessity of his position, however untenable it may be. In the process, Tagg not only enriches the historical scholarship on American documentary photography in the first half of the twentieth century, but he also breaks new theoretical ground by positing a new way of looking at particular photographs that eludes ontological distinctions of the medium as a whole while also reveling in the ability of certain images to expose and exceed the discipline of the frame.

Finally, as historically situated as Tagg's analysis is, the theoretical implications of his argument are equally valuable for understanding contemporary documentary image culture. I prefaced this essay with a discussion of photographs from the aftermath of the earth-

quake in Haiti. These images, like so many images from the New Deal era, reduce the complexities of the event to a headline, foreclosing on the possibilities of a more nuanced and involved examination. Yet now, as then, the disciplinary discourse of photography is unwieldy and not entirely impregnable. In 2009, the U.S. Defense Department allowed the International Committee of the Red Cross into the prison facility at Guantánamo Bay to take pictures of the prisoners there to be sent home to their families. These snapshot-style images, subsequently tracked down and published by the *Miami Herald*, depict supposedly dangerous insurgents, in traditional and street clothes, smiling, posing, relaxed, and even charming. The complexities of these photographs should not be understated. Undermining at once condemnations of the brutality of the Guantánamo prison facility and depictions of the prisoners as dangerous potential terrorists, the images provoked a range of puzzled and often negative reactions from the American public, both liberal and conservative. Like the zoot-suited pachucos in Tagg's analysis, these images "offered another narrative of identity . . . one that located its different voice yet would not take a stand on the unmoving ground of a defensive fundamentalism" (205). Ultimately, it is this kind of unstable image that offers the most productive possibilities for photo-

graphic historians, theorists, and viewers. As Tagg shows, such photographs expose the inconsistencies and fissures in the totalizing structure of photographic rhetoric, and highlight the messy heterogeneity that lies at the core of the medium.

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NOTES

1. Jason Beaubien, *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, 14 January 2010.
2. *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, 19 January 2010.
3. Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); and Fred Ritchin, *After Photography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009).
4. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981); and Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).
5. Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, CT: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 71–82.