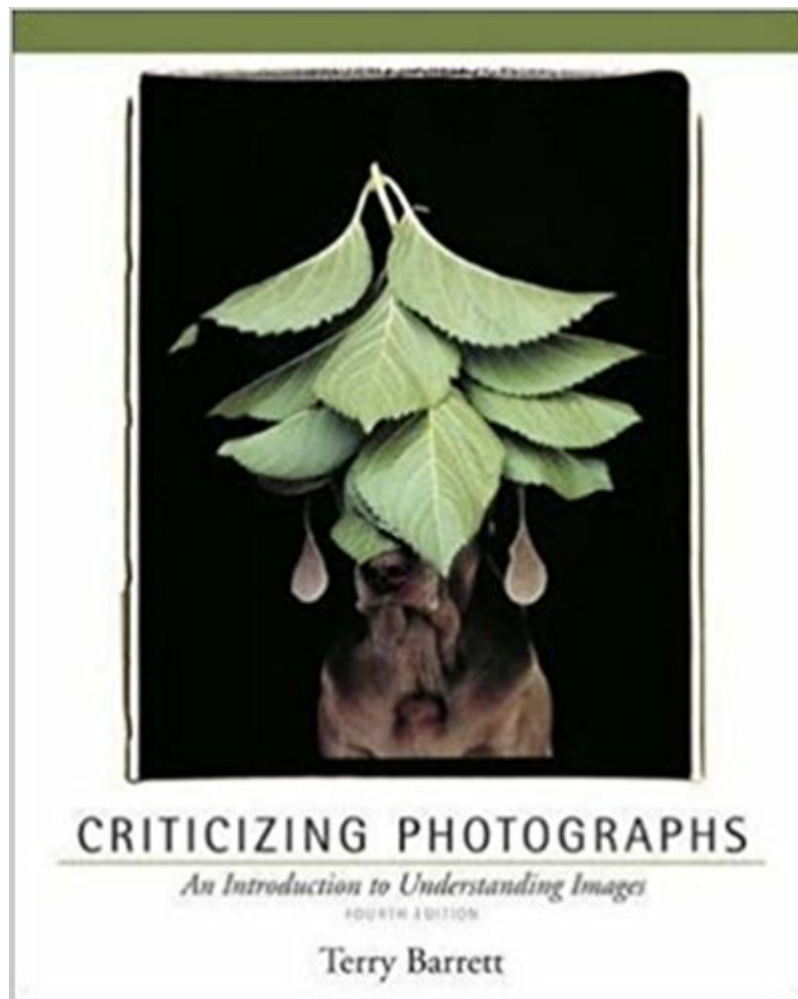


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# Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction To Understanding Images



## Synopsis

This brief text is designed to help both beginning and advanced students of photography better develop and articulate thoughtful criticism. Organized around the major activities of criticism (describing, interpreting, evaluating, and theorizing), *Criticizing Photographs* provides a clear framework and vocabulary for students' critical skill development. The fourth edition includes new black and white and color images, updated commentary, a completely revised chapter on theory that offers a broad discussion of digital images, and an expanded chapter eight on studio critiques and writing about photographs, plus examples of student writing and critique.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

NOTE: This is a review of the third edition of this book, which is also posting under the fourth edition, which is a substantially better book. For people interested in the fourth edition, please read my review which appears under the title of "Getting Better." A look at the subtitle to this book, "An Introduction to Understanding Images", might lead one to believe that it is about photographs and what makes them good or bad (or if there are such things as "good" and "bad" photographs). But instead it is about photographic criticism, primarily written. And even then it really doesn't tell you very much about how to write criticism yourself, or how to interpret what you read, or how to develop patterns of thought that would enable you to criticize in a useful fashion. Instead most of the book is concerned with the pigeon holes into which different kinds of photographic criticism can be put. An unstated thesis of this book seems to be that the criticism of photographs is an art form itself. Certainly anyone who has read something like Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of

Mechanical Reproduction" might agree. But if it is an art, then it has both form and content, and any book claiming to teach one about the art (I almost said craft) had better address those points. To know that there are theoretical schools like Postmodernism or Feminist Theory is useful to those trying to organize photographic criticism and may be helpful to the photographic critic who is trying to decide what his own approach is, but knowing that these schools exist does not help a critic as much as a knowledge of how to look at a picture and organize a written commentary. Fortunately, the book has a number of examples of written criticism, including several examples of different critics addressing the same picture. Unfortunately most of the criticism addresses the content of the photograph without considering how the form relates to the content or how, as Mark Schorer has said, technique leads to discovery. For example, Ansel Adams' photographs rely upon the range of light from the whitest whites to the blackest blacks to make their statements about the grandeur of the American wilderness. Unfortunately, nothing in this book considers photographic technique for the critic, although there are plenty of opportunities. For example, there is an ambiguous picture by Robert Doisneau taken in a Paris Caf   showing a younger woman and an older man. The picture is grainy and the depth of field shows the woman more sharply than the man. Both of these techniques should contribute to the possible interpretation of this photograph, and yet they are not mentioned. I think the photo critic who wants to improve his art would be far better served by learning something about photography, and then reading actual criticism, like John Szarkowski's "Looking at Photographs". "Criticizing Photographs" should only be considered as a supplement to such studies.

A diversity of critical voices and photographic approaches is explored, giving the reader access to a rich world of creative thought. Barrett defines criticism as "informed discourse about art to increase understanding and appreciation of art." He organizes his treatment of the four major activities of criticism—describing, interpreting, evaluation, and theorizing—which in turn address four basic questions: What is here? What is it about? How good is it? Is it art? The book provides in two short appendixes, practical advice on writing about photographs and on conducting casual and directed discussion of photographs. Monterey Peninsula College, Anne Canright

When I reviewed the third edition of this book several years ago, I didn't rate it highly, but I thought that perhaps the fourth edition might be a better book, and it is. Despite its subtitle, which might lead you to believe it is about understanding pictures, the bulk of this book is directed at formal criticism

of photographs. After an introductory chapter on the nature of criticism, Barrett suggests a process for criticizing photographs that includes description, interpretation and judgment. The author also suggests a classification scheme for photographs which he believes could be useful in forming judgments, although I found it no better than many other taxonomies and at times difficult to apply to many photographs. Throughout he mentions many schools of analysis, like formalism and feminism and shows how these schools might influence criticism. He then launches a foray into photographic critical theory which is concise but accurate and which deals with such questions as the truth and morality of photography. He finally talks about the act of writing criticism and also about critiquing photographs. Barrett illustrates his points with many helpful examples of written criticism. Most of the examples deal with pictures of the modern or post-modern school, but the information is transferable to other kinds of photography. The book is illustrated with both color plates and black and white plates, although the black and white plates are spread throughout the book, which leads to a lot of page flipping. It would be nice if the next edition included a page number when these plates are referred to. The subtitle, "An Introduction to Understanding Images" might lead one to expect that there would be some insights into how and why photographs work but I became aware that Barrett presumed his audience would have some prior knowledge of this. Thus while he spoke of the importance of a photographer's technique in understanding a photo, there was no mention of how technique might be used to convey a photographer's vision. In the earlier edition, I found this a serious weakness, but it now seems clear that the author expects that this kind of information will come from somewhere else. On the other hand, the careful reader will derive some idea of what to look for in a photograph by reading the many examples. No one wanting to come to an understanding of how to read a photograph from a single volume will learn to do so from this book. In fact, no one volume is likely to do that, although a book like "The Photographer's Eye" by John Szarkowski would be a good place to start. On the other hand, for the individual who knows something about the nature of photography, or within the context of a larger course of study, this is a good book to begin to learn how to write photographic criticism.

Criticizing Photographs remains one of the most important books in the field, and Barrett has updated the text with new photos to discuss. His new editions include worthy changes and are not ploys to sell new copies. I have used his books for years in an advanced photography college class.

Having never taken a course in art appreciation, I found this book to be an excellent introduction to interpreting photographic images. The comment above about this book serving as a framework is a

good one. Essentially any photograph will fall into one of the categories, giving the viewer a frame of reference within which to interpret and appreciate the meaning of the work. It forces you to slow down and think about each photograph you encounter, ultimately enriching the viewing experience. I highly recommend it for photography aficionados and photographers alike.

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