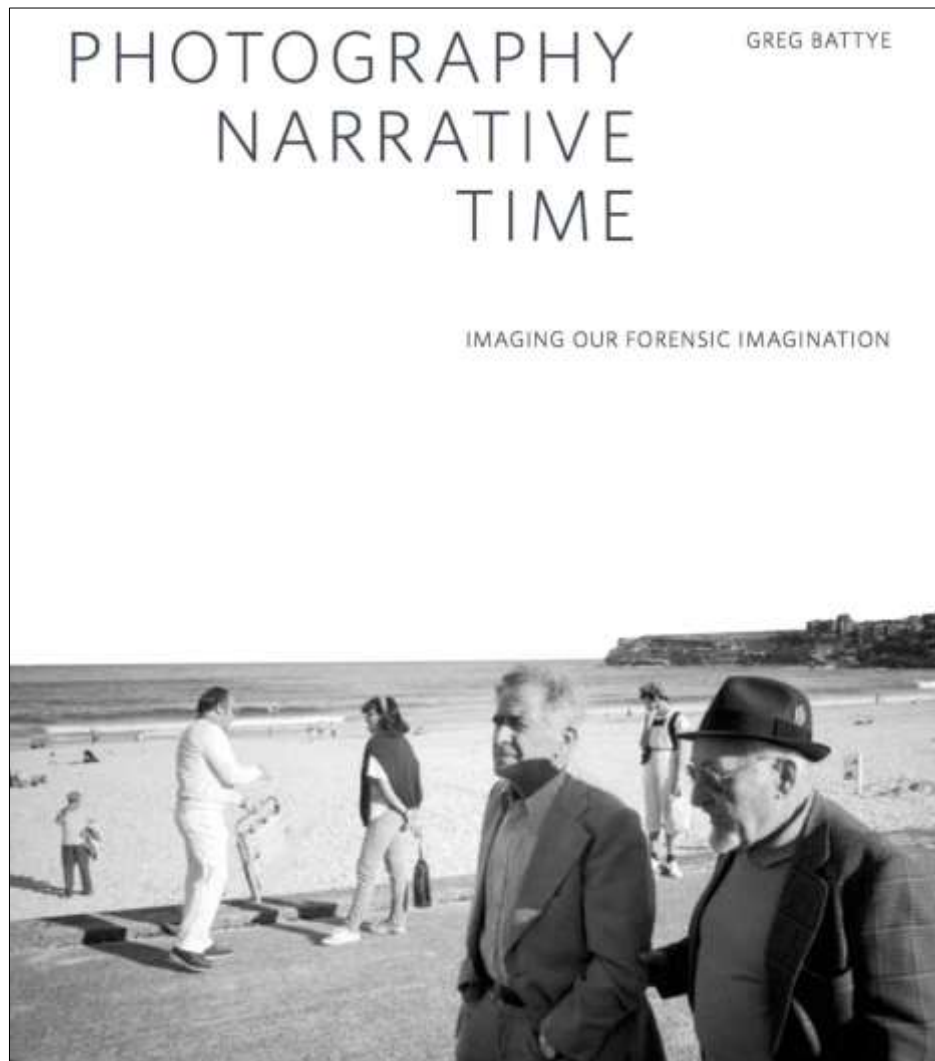


Review: *Photography Narrative Time: Imaging Our Forensic Imagination*, by Greg Battye

Reviewer: Jeff Doyle



GREG BATTYE. *Photography Narrative Time: Imaging our forensic imagination*, Intellect, Bristol/Chicago, 2014.

The popular view of the 'photograph' still adheres as the capturing or encapsulating of a/the frozen moment; Even the more academic versions clustering yet around Roland Barthes now virtually heritage position of the *punctus* seem unable to theorise or practise beyond the notionally frozen 'present'. Of course narrative or time can intrude into photography via the sequence of images, or through judicious, and often it seems necessary, titling or textual footnoting of images, as if the image needs to be explained, and cannot be fully understood as image with its own codes and languages. This is *not* Battye's position.

As his title makes abundantly clear and his text elaborates at incredible depth for what *appears* to be a modest word count (there's *a lot* in this book), photography and in particular the single photograph, is instinct with narrative and time. Moreover and more profoundly photographic inscription – 'light writing' which Battye argues has not radically changed from the analogue to digital praxis – is essentially and profoundly implicated in the way that human culture 'thinks' and even – and this is not going too far at all – through that thinking constructs and is constructed by its own sense of being – of being a 'subject', of being a 'presence'. Photography is then an ultimate body of cultural artefacts implicit - indeed inferential - in the making of modern subjects both as individuals and collectively. Battye's study is *that* valuable in its taking up the issue of narration and time, incorrectly marginal to photographic theory and practice.

The introduction of narrative and time allows Battye to argue that making and reading photography comprises layerings of meaning that result from human cultural evolution and that need for almost surgical detailing of what the material text – the photographic image – offers for further in-culturation; moreover that the required strategies of interpretation are elicited from both the photograph and the readership's cultural baggage(s). I make crude a more sophisticated nuanced case. In one sense the whole of Battye's study here argues that the exchange between the reader and the photographic text is predicated *in time* and is a narrative, or more properly a 'narrating' of its own. Narrating is the really active term of significance here, meshing narrative, time and presence more completely than I am able to do more than suggest here. This is significantly original; very. But I get ahead of many issues here.

Of many strengths are numerous complex interpenetrations of theory and critique via delightfully insightful readings of images. Complex to be sure, but also lucidly clear; throughout Battye's prose is learned and densely underpinned by a large array of historic and present theory; underpinned by, but not intrusively overwhelmed. It is an intended compliment to say that Battye wears his theory lightly and yet seriously intelligently. So, his basic thesis is that time and narrative strategies are implicit in the way we make and read photographs. And as I have said above, to 'prove' these ideas he leads the reader through an evolving interlacing of time and imaging, explaining the enduring power of photography and more importantly, to my mind, the ways in which it not only has meaning within 21st C culture but can be seen as an originating strategy implicit in the workings of the mind and the development of the 'subject' – Battye touches here on areas redolent of cutting edge cultural critique such as Badiou, Zizek, et al's ideas of the 'event' and its comingling with, and through, 'presence' - still and rightly strong topics in European post-modernisms. It will be enlightening to see more detailed work combining these areas. And indeed Battye's position is not only clear but forward looking as a foundation offered – he admits with a touching academic reticence that there is more to do – that this study is a beginning; more than a very good one I would say.

Having announced this trajectory Battye then sets out in 8 chapters various ideas of narrative and time in support. So, chapter one surveys how the pictorial might deal with narrative, building on art history and the few seminal theoretical works such as Kozloff, Jeffrey and Maynard, most focussed more on narrative deriving from sequences of images, where Battye wants to concentrate on the single stand-alone image. Chapter 2 studies narratology, based in cinema through literature, of what narratives might be and the differences between narrative and narrating, citing Bordwell, Prince and Genette among others. Chapter 3 moves into sociology, wonderfully critical of Bourdieu for one and opens up that new (to my generation) field - the New Social Media, instinct with even newer ideas of identity and presence. This significantly expansive chapter is followed by interpretations of time in chapter 4 and in chapter 5 in even more depth about implications of time and memory in photography.

The last three chapters in sequence provide even more strategies for incorporating (yes, in fact a bodily emphasis usefully infiltrates) time and narrative via schematised narratologies from multi-disciplines. Battye is not prescriptive here in the way that earlier formalisms and structuralisms (cited and implied) – from Saussure, Propp, early Levi-Strauss through ‘first-stage’ Foucault - came to be used; his position is to adumbrate methods as less definitive closed but more as guidelines or ways to provide an increasingly layered set of possibilities. One might look at Delueze as a convergence (to invent a term). In this manner the book leaves the reader delighted and wanting more not because it lacked anything but rather that it had opened so many useful fascinating and intellectually challenging ideas.

Throughout Battye supports theory with sustained close readings (to adapt an old lit. crit. term) of both well-known images such as Cartier–Bresson’s, Capa’s and more recent wunderkind such as Hogencamp’s *Marwencol*, Jeff Wall, Sherman, and Crewdson; and then of the less well-known such as criminal, medical and judicial (literally) forensic sites, and other governmental agencies. Traversing from high art to the popular and even into the social media realms of the Net - to numerous websites and so on from Flickr to Hipstamatic, Battye touches on a dazzling array of sites. This is innovative and essential. His study is enterprising in requiring a thorough reader to engage with its own methods. The book reproduces only a small number of images – a mere 14 – but this is *not* the problem for a book on images that it might appear. One of Battye’s arguments about the ‘narrating event as presence’ constructing (my summary collocation), lies in the contemporary availability of ‘image’ to the world-wide new ‘social media’ subject. Hence many of Battye’s references both theoretical and practical direct the reader to the web. What is already then a book of thick description (in the anthropological sense of Geertz et al) is made the more impacting as a ‘reading event’: with book in one hand and web open on a nearby screen, the very notions of a narrating and interactive ‘presence’, if you will, is manifest. The book invokes its own reading practice as exemplary.

I recommend to other readers that they follow the example and engage with this book, with websites open. It is I hope the first of more books by Battye himself, but also by others who should take many of the doors/sites or platforms - so thoroughly and intelligently opened here.

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