

Towards a New Documentalism

Jorge Ribalta

Tagg, John. *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. (9780816642885)

Azoulay, Ariella. *The Civil Contract of Photography*. Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2008. (9781890951887)

Since John Tagg published his first book, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), he has been one of the most recognised figures in photographic theory. He is part of a brilliant generation of Anglo-American authors who emerged from the 1968 political movement, appeared in the public arena in the context of the 1970s New Art History, and whose contribution to a theorisation of photography using the tools of Marxism, poststructuralism, Gramscian cultural studies, feminism, and psychoanalysis remains unsurpassed. Tagg himself recently formulated the project of this group in these terms: “we half believed that this State could be smashed and that the first brick could be thrown by photographic theory” (John Tagg, “Mindless Photography,” in J. J. Long, Andrea Noble, and Edward Welch, eds., *Photography: Theoretical Snapshots*, New York: Routledge, 2009, 29). Tagg’s *Disciplinary Frame* continues the project of a cultural history of photography critically inscribed in the discourses and institutions of modern culture that he initiated with his first book. However, Tagg’s strong investment in a Foucauldian framework (noticeable in the book’s title) account’s for certain of the project’s epistemic (and political) limitations.

The first chapter of *Disciplinary Frame* traces the role of the photographic archive and the socially regulatory uses of photography in the constitution of the modern liberal State. According to Tagg, this State is characterised by two factors: an implicit war logic, which determines the coercive force and the violence inherent to the State logic; and the instrumentalisation of culture as a means of producing social inclusion and constructing citizenship, a process he calls “recruitment and mobilisation” (49).

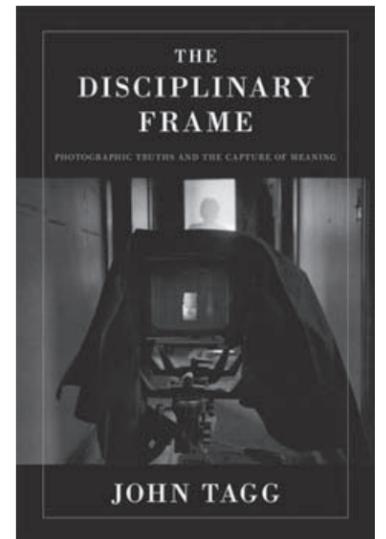
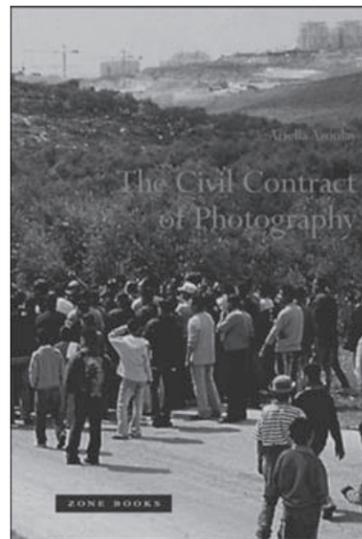
The central chapters deal with the 1930s, the key period when documentary discourse was constituted according to technocratic-liberal New Deal policies. In claiming that Farm Security Administration (FSA) documentary photography represented the “first and only true art form produced by social democracy” (61), Tagg follows the work of John Grierson, the recognised founder of the reformist documentary film movement in the late 1920s. The second chapter studies FSA and Griersonian discourse as constituting documentary photography as a specific cultural form for social “recruitment and mobilisation” within the specific historical conditions of the 1930s. The ethical contract between the citizen and the paternalistic State as a form of collective participation was based on an ethics of transparency and expressed in documentary tropes such as “truth,” “dignity of fact,” or the “innate decency of the ordinary” (93). The third chapter focuses on Walker Evans as a specific and problematic case study inside of the hegemonic documentary paradigm in 1930s America (emblematised by *Life* magazine). Tagg argues that Evans’s “melancholic lassitude,” or his characteristic ambiguity and resistance to meaning, determines “an impossible internal distance from the very discursive frame in which it is produced as subject” (177), and would introduce a degree of self-critique to that “documentary style” of which he has been canonised as “father.” Chapter 4 focuses on the dissolution of

both documentary and social democracy in the United States, determined not only by the completion of the FSA project and the participation of the United States in World War II, but also by the structural transformations in the composition of the working class and the new public role of minorities (here Tagg refers to women, African American, and Latino movements) throughout the 1940s. By examining practices related to those social groups, Tagg argues that the rhetoric of transparency, which characterised the New Deal documentary contract, lost its historical conditions. The New Deal logic of universal social inclusion, in other words, had reached its limit.

The last two chapters are shorter and of a different nature; they break the historical focus and sequence of the previous chapters and take on the “disciplinary mechanisms of history and art history” (209). By referring to Roland Barthes’s statement in *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) that the inventions of Photography and History were simultaneous, chapter 5 attempts to write a pre-history of the documentary discourse in photography. In this way, it problematises the limits and conditions of the discursive field of documentary photography and the photographic archive, and it exposes some of the exclusions that they produce. The final chapter is articulated as thematic flashes on terms such as “the image,” “the frame,” and “the apparatus” and their attempts to formulate possible directions for the continuation of the project of the 1970’s New Art History, which Tagg calls an “endless metacommentary,” where the discursive practice is not detached from the realm of the social and the political.

Tagg’s major contribution in this book seems, quite paradoxically, to occur in its most “traditional” aspects, such as its political-genealogical reading of the constitution of the documentary paradigm as an expression of New Deal policies. It is very important (and Tagg does this exceedingly well) to understand how documentary rhetoric has been historically built upon such notions of universalism and transparency, which are inherent not only to New Deal’s social democracy but to liberal representative democracy technologies for public address and communication. By focusing on the Griersonian-FSA paradigm, Tagg illuminates the structural link between the documentary approach and the liberal democratic public sphere. But this important and necessary discourse is hardly new. Maren Stange’s, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and John Roberts’s *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) are two good examples of other theoretical photographic studies emerging from the New Art History approach that have traced that lineage before; we might also point to the work of artists like Martha Rosler or Allan Sekula, whose political readings of photographic modernism since the mid-1970s on many levels coincide with and precede those of Tagg.

My main dissatisfaction with Tagg’s approach



stems from the fact that he limits his discussion of documentary culture to the Anglo-American Griersonian-FSA mode, which is (for good reason) the hegemonic model of the twentieth century. But he should be aware that such a focus excludes other practices that may question or invalidate his own conclusions. In this respect, it would be interesting to see Tagg’s brilliant scholarship applied to the American Photo League as part of the international worker-photography movement of the 1930s, which is the other (and still rather repressed) side of the 1930s documentary and political dilemmas. The Photo League constitutes a possible counter-model to FSA documentary, and it is part of the many successful attempts in the 1930s to constitute a proletarian public sphere. One wonders to what extent Tagg’s theoretical framework simply does not allow him to study anything but hegemonic practices and discourses, or the ways in which the bourgeois State co-opts, “recruits and mobilises” rather than the deviations, ruptures, and moments of indeterminacy or resistance. Tagg’s method also seems to predetermine his melancholic defeatism, which we might associate with his decision not to read documentary photography after 1945 or to think beyond the genealogical and intervene politically in current debates.

So, what if what is politically needed today is precisely what Tagg seeks to avoid – namely, “the reconstitution of a new archivism or of a new documentalism” (233)? What if, in other words, we need to reinvent some equivalent (but not identical) conditions of universality and transparency associated with the classic forms of New Deal documentary, precisely because the documentary social function continues to exist and operate publicly and hegemonically in spite of declarations from academia that it is obsolete? Documentary is everywhere today, since it is structurally linked to democratic discourse and to the ideological conditions of the liberal public sphere in which we live, as Tagg himself has worked to illuminate. That said, we also need to recognise that documentary practices will continue to exist as long as liberal democracy does. What do we do with that?

We can look for a possible and productive answer to that question in Ariella Azoulay’s book, *The Civil Contract of Photography*. Azoulay lives and works in Israel and her study of photography, particularly in this book, is very much informed by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This means that the book’s theoretical elaborations are rooted in the empirical observation of and participation in the photographic practices related to that conflict,

which produces well-known conditions of exclusion of political rights and citizenship to a large number of people. In such a context, photography has demonstrated that it continues to be a key political instrument of emancipation in current social struggles.

Azoulay's theoretical tools are grounded in feminism, postcolonial theory, and political philosophy. She draws from the work of Etienne Balibar, Giorgio Agamben, and Judith Butler, as well as Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, and Martin Heidegger. Her book is an unusual combination of photographic theory and political philosophy which reconceives citizenship as based on the "relations between the governed" in ways not limited to the conditions of the State. This notion of citizenship is based on a "new ontological-political understanding of photography" (23) that considers the many different agents involved in the production and circulation of photographic discourse (the camera, the photographer, the photographed subject, and the spectator), with none of these granted the power to control meaning alone. Azoulay's notion of photography as a civil contract is, moreover, a reference to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1760). She thus theorises photography as a non-essentialist secular agreement amongst citizens, as defined by modern political philosophy.

The book is divided into nine chapters, as a "progression of different, but related topics," and combines a theoretical elaboration on and analysis of practices primarily concerning the Middle East conflict. In the introduction, Azoulay explains that her project is to analyse how photography may contribute to a public and collective space that creates conditions of citizenship and participation beyond the regulation of governing powers. She writes: "*The Civil Contract of Photography* is an attempt to anchor spectatorship in civic duty toward the photographed persons who haven't stopped being 'there', towards dispossessed citizens who, in turn, enable the rethinking of the concept and practice of citizenship.... An emphasis on the dimension of being governed allows a rethinking of the political sphere as a space between the governed, whose political duty is first and foremost a duty toward one another, rather than toward the ruling power" (16-17). She goes on to explain that her use of the term "contract" replaces others like "shame" or "compassion." As a result, it is grounded in an understanding of the relations established through photography and its modes of public circulation, which produces a de-territorialised public sphere that offers a general and equally shared condition of citizenship.

The first chapter is a reading of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* from the French Revolution of 1789 as a constitutive document for modern (male and female) citizens. The second chapter explains the civil contract of photography itself and constitutes the core of the book's argument. Chapters 3 and 7 contribute to an understanding of the conditions of consent among partners and the figure of the spectator as an effect of photography. Chapter 4 analyses the image of horror as a case study for understanding what the author calls the production of an "emergency claim" in photography, drawing examples from the second intifada. Chapters 5 and 9 deal with representations of women and sexual violence, while chapters 6 and 8 present the "living conditions of Palestinians as existence on the threshold of catastrophe," as well as the photographic methods of managing and oppressing the Palestinian population.

What makes this book important is the way it changes the conditions for thinking about the public life of the photographic document and opens up a fertile new space to be explored in the future. Bringing together modern philosophy and her own observations of Palestinian political struggles, Azoulay reinserts micro-political practices into discursive production and reactivates the social potential of the photographic document. Contrary to photographic theory produced in the context of the New Art History, Azoulay's book displays neither a theoretical nor a political hesitation to reintroduce notions of universality and transparency into her discussion of documentary photography. Here it is useful to compare Azoulay with Tagg, whose discursive process challenges the positivistic universalism of modern political philosophy, based on a universal classless-genderless-raceless citizen. Post-1968 theory (what has been variously labelled poststructuralism and postcolonialism) introduced micro-politics, or a politics of minorities not predetermined by State logic, as the site of political struggles in new social movements, at the same time that it de-centered the myth of the universal citizen. Tagg also expresses the limits or failure of a micro-political scope by stopping short of bringing micro-politics into a transformative logic – that is, into a practice able to overcome the repressive macro-political machine of the State. By internalising the theoretical legacy of both modernity and postmodernity, on the other hand, Azoulay addresses the fact that micro-politics needs to generate forms of universalism, or somehow deal with the macro-political scale, in order to produce transformative and emancipatory effects. It is precisely in the photographic documentary contract that she finds space for such an operation: "photography remains part of the *res publica* of the citizenry," she writes, "and is or can become one of the last lines of defense in the battle over citizenship for those who still see citizenship as something worth fighting for" (131).

It is meaningful in this respect to see how Azoulay's book liquidates simply and quickly questions concerning the photographic index and photographic realism, which have been so determining in postmodern approaches to the medium precisely because the index has functioned as an emblem of positivism and thus of the (false) universalism and transparency of the photographic sign. By examining how "indexical" documentary photography continues to circulate and function socially in the media in spite of philosophical debates about the death of photographic realism, she observes that "critical discussions seeking to challenge the truth of photography, or argue that 'photography lies', remain anecdotal and marginal to the institutionalised practices of exhibiting and publishing photographs. Only a glance at a newspaper kiosk is needed to realise the enduring power of the news photo. Photography's critics tend to forget that despite the fact that photography speaks falsely, it *also* speaks the truth" (126-27). This is not a negation or refusal of postmodernism, but a change of emphasis, a new focus. While a critique on the level of artistic mediation or representation is fundamental, it cannot stop there; the theoretical tools Azoulay offers have powerful ethical implications and suggest new ways to reconnect discursive production with social struggles.

The Disciplinary Frame and *The Civil Contract of Photography* are thus complementary books insofar as they update the cultural and political space of

the photographic document. They do so, moreover, in a period when photographic theory has not been particularly productive on that front, trapped as it has been in metaphysical dilemmas concerning the indexicality of the photographic sign, which includes the debates on post-photography and the impact of digital technologies on photography's nature. Paradigmatic of this state of the field is the recent anthology edited by James Elkins, *Photography Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2007), which continues to foreground somewhat sterile debates about indexicality above all others, one can hope for the last time. The appearance of these new books by Tagg and Azoulay, along with other recent studies by authors like Blake Stimson (*The Pivot of The World: Photography and its Nation*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), may be symptomatic of a welcomed turning point. What these authors do is particularly important, since they also fundamentally challenge Michael Fried's claim that today "photography matters as art as never before" (*Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008). Together they offer a very different conclusion: if photography can return to a polemical documentary status today, then it will come back to life. What is more, photography may be useful for throwing bricks against the State, but it can also transcend and surpass the State. It can produce what we might call a "citizenry of photography," or a de-territorialised restoration of citizenship in the global era.

Jorge Ribalta, artist, freelance curator and writer, Barcelona, Spain