

Here are seven books, all, with one exception, only very recently published. Whether by chance, subliminal selection processes or genuine 'zeitgeist', each quite separately touches on core elements of my current positioning, practice and research in regard to working with visual images.

Each comes from a different discipline, genre, field of thinking, and line of perspective. Each is an important 'event' in it's respective field of specialism, but they also work 'intersectionally', exploring similar conundrums, using similar conceptual frameworks, practising and developing similar 'ways of seeing / working / thinking', without explicitly referring to one another. They all involve return, re-consideration and re-working of 'things' past in order to address and push-forward present issues relating to 'politics' of visual imagery.

Behind and alongside each of these books there are of course myriads of other works and texts, many which might be considered more 'important', but the serendipity at play here also, I believe, 'tells a story'.

Jefferies, Stuart. *The Grand Hotel Abyss: the lives of the Frankfurt School*. 2016 Verso.

History: a 'grand', sweeping history of one of the most influential schools of C20th European cultural and critical theory. The Frankfurt School 'synthesised' the European philosophical tradition with the works of Marx and Freud to critique the new consumer capitalism and its mass culture industries, 'industries' which 'distract' attention while 'allowing' fascism, genocide, grossly and intensifying local and global injustices and inequalities, to which we would now add the increasingly dangerous condition of our planet.

Commodification, reification, alienation, false consciousness, 'superstructure', 'the object becoming the active subject whilst the human subject becomes the passive object'...concepts which prefigure later usage of ideology, paradigm, the spectacle, the simulacrum, and the 'age of the image'.

This 'history' provides 'big-picture' context and important detail. The work of Walter Benjamin (see below) is rightly given prime position, though never a full member of the 'School'. However, the 'successor'-role of Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggart's 'Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' receive less attention. Post-1945 developments in French philosophy, anti-colonial liberation philosophy, and 'identity assertion and protest politics' receive even less. But we do have the Frankfurt School's analysis of how the 'world views' of 'everyday people' 'give-way' to dangerous and disempowering 'narratives', 'spun' through very particular uses of 'populist' imagery and image-association. So too the powerlessness one feels in the face of this. This is the 'post-modernist' conundrum, one which Jefferies describes perfectly but is unable / unwilling to address, surrendering instead to a melancholic liberalism, mirroring the Frankfurt School's own ending 'not with a bang but a whimper'.

Fortunately, others stood-up for more optimistic 'politics'.

Sperling, Joshua. *The Life and Work of John Berger*. 2018 Verso.

Biography...a particular form of 'history' and here wonderfully detailing the 'real-life', 'dialectical' development of practice and theory in John Berger's life work with the visual image in 'our times'. 'Our times' running from post-1945 radical, social-democratic optimism, through Cold War distraction and disillusionment, '1968' re-awakenings, further disillusionments, then civil rights and 'identity' politics to our contemporary 'condition' and choices of direction for the future.

As an artist, art theorist, novelist, poet, cultural worker and philosopher, working across a score of different mediums, genres and collaborations, Berger is 'our' most important and influential practitioner-theorist of 'image', 'ways of seeing' and of 'conversation' through the medium of visual images. Able to retain a more resilient optimism than the Frankfurt School, Berger has explored and communicated a wealth of different 'ways of seeing, communicating and living' which 'might, perhaps (as Derrida would say) make a difference'...and will at least indicate that 'we tried'.

My research work will pick-up a host of Berger's suggestions, many of which track back to Benjamin while others presciently anticipate later, ongoing discussions and initiatives.

Salmon, Peter. *An Event Perhaps: a biography of Jacques Derrida*. 2020 Verso.

A different type of biography, showing how early, personal experience of cultural and identity alienation in 'French' Algeria, contributed to Derrida's subsequent grasp and overturning of the binary paradigms which have underpinned the 'Western' mindset and 'way of seeing'. Exhaustively revisiting, shaking and deconstructing the works of Western philosophy, and upstaging the last of these grand meta-narratives, Structuralism, Derrida then demonstrated the implications of this 'turning the world inside-out' across various aspects of societal 'life', demonstrating the possibility of wholly new 'ways of seeing' things.

Derrida used Frankfurt School type critical theory to join Benjamin and Berger in taking-apart / 'deconstructing' accepted 'ways of seeing and thinking'. In addition, he demonstrated how the 'binary paradigm' mindset at the heart of Western philosophy, subordinated / denigrated / excluded things which didn't 'fit' with the established order, showing how these 'othered' things held the key to opening up new possibilities, creating 'differance' i.e. a new and open condition of continuous critical thinking and exploration...the exploration of the 'perhaps', the 'other', the 'counter-cultural' / counter-intuitive, queer and fluid, deferring closure.

The consequences of breaking such paradigms as 'white / black', 'advanced / underdeveloped', 'male / female', 'acceptable / other' etc. extend into how we see ourselves and 'others', issues of 'identity' (see below) and (when it comes to my own project) re-thinking of how we use / should be using visual images in our work. Examples of

non-binary, open-paradigm ways of thinking and 'seeing' are already having considerable impact in contemporary art: most topically, Yinka Shonibare's work and curating of the Royal Academy Summer Show.

Jameson, Frederic. *The Benjamin Files*. 2020 Verso.

A 're-reading of works' rather than a history or biography of Walter Benjamin, by one of the 'Western' world's most highly regarded contemporary cultural theorists and philosophers. A dense work, difficult to read / digest, deserving / demanding multiple re-readings, each of which then triggers new lines of thinking (...just as Benjamin would have wanted!)

Jameson is an ardent critic of the concept 'post-modernism' and its 'end of history' / 'anything goes' / 'anything might as well go' messages. He prefers to speak of later-stage capitalism and the continuing relevance of Marxism in analysing this. He therefore shares the optimism which Benjamin displayed despite everything (until his very final defeat in the Pyrenees), and for which Berger and Derrida both argue, despite their hyper-critical 'demolition' analyses of our contemporary world.

A key focus for my project are the ways in which Benjamin's work provides and supports a highly relevant and necessarily radical understanding of how images can, need to be and indeed are increasingly being understood and used in our contemporary world. Jameson's work provides a treasure-trove of indications as to why this is the case, as well as a wider political and theoretical explanation why this is so important.

Angier, Carole. *Speak, Silence: in Search of W.G. Sebald*. 2021 Bloomsbury.

Another biography, but this time very much a 'personal-life' biography and study of a novelist...illustrating Sebald's literary applications of Benjamin's thought, rather than the philosophical and visual image consequences which Derrida and Berger respectively focused upon. Angier doesn't make explicit the obvious life-experience similarities Sebald and Benjamin shared; nor the application of Benjamin's 'way of seeing' which Sebald practised in both his art and in his directing of contemporary cultural studies at UEA in the 1970's. Her failure to do so is the sole shortcoming of this otherwise wonderfully inspiring guide to Sebald's works, a guide which empowers re-reading his iconic works, this time with a new understanding of his multitudinous use of Benjamin-esque 'tricks'.

Sebald's works include (at the very least): memories of childhood, place, moments, smells; chance encounters and re-encounters; historical 'coincidence' and 'conversations' between different times; fragments, artefacts, archeology, dreams; magical realism but also the appropriation / expropriation and manipulation / subversion of others' stories, photographs and memories. These are all the 'stuff' of Benjamin, Berger and Derrida...but, it has to be said, Sebald shares the melancholic pessimism and lack of direction which characterised the Frankfurt School.

Nevertheless, such extended, literary application of Benjamin 'images' (written, conceptual and visual) clearly has considerable relevance to my own research practice of visual images, and the question: is a 'visual image' application of Benjamin's thinking possible?

Lord, Peter. *Looking Out: 2020 Parthian*.

Another genre: the researching of past visual images. 'Looking Out' references back to and builds upon both aspects of Lord's earlier works: his monumental, scholarly recovery and documentation of Welsh visual art from time immemorial to the present (condensed into *The Tradition*, 2016); and his own, very personal '*Relationship with Pictures: an oblique autobiography*', 2013.

All these three Lord works raise key issues regarding 'traditions' of images, the politics of images, the deliberate marginalisation, 'disappearing' and denial of images, in this case of Welsh art; the appropriation and commercial exploitation of supposed 'Welsh imagery' by both English painters and Welsh nationalists, for very different 'identity' and narrative reasons...and the inter-weaving of all this with Lord's own questioning of 'identity', his own identity and his own work as a visual artist and theorist.

Salami, Minna. *Sensuous Knowledge: a black feminist approach for everyone*. 2020 Zed.

Here's the 'jump' into contemporary and future applications of all the above works. As an essayist (as was Benjamin), professional blogger (as Benjamin would have been!) and (again mirroring Benjamin) a 'crazily hopeful' / optimistic 'futurist', Salami in effect, draws upon all the above discourses to outline the contemporary and future applications of such 'new ways of thinking'.

In recent essays I have:

1. shown how Black identity politics and BLM politics have confronted 'White' society with its need to 'break' / deconstruct traditional paradigms underpinning White privilege;
2. pointed to the next challenge: that of exploring what 'identity' becomes next, moving from the necessarily 'political and coalitional' merging of differences within 'Black' identity, and from the 'White privilege' identity to which white people have previously had their identities trapped and subordinated to for so long.

Salami picks up both challenges and, 'in the manner' of all the above works, breaks all the previous paradigm limits to argue for new ways of exploring and embracing experience and learning, a 'sensuous knowledge' which celebrates and embraces multiple 'ways of seeing', ways of learning, ways of embracing ambiguity, the 'queer', the visceral, haptic, material, historical, poetical and visual aspects of our lives and our inheritances...not as a 'spectacular', anything-goes consumer feeding-frenzy, but as a means to 'putting-right' the mind-sets which have both hidden and nurtured the gross injustices and inequalities post-modernism' has singularly failed to address.