
*Photographic Memories: Private Pictures, Public Images, and American History* by Rob Kroes follows in the wake of Alan Trachtenberg’s *Reading American Photographs*, Laura Wexler’s *Tender Violence*, and other significant studies of the interrelationship of photographic representation and forms of memory—private memory, official memory, countermemory—in United States culture. Kroes, Professor of American Studies, Emeritus, at the University of Amsterdam, justifiably boasts of the “daring scope” (xiii) of this short book, which experimentally blends memoir with cultural criticism while ranging over a breathtakingly expansive field of questions and materials. Like so many daring enterprises, however, *Photographic Memories* yields mixed results, and it never truly arrives at the coherent, overarching argument needed to unify its disparate elements.

The autobiographical dominates the two chapters that make up the first section of *Photographic Memories*. In these chapters, Kroes explores the private uses of photography within family structures, as distinct from photography’s more public functions. Chapter One, “Arresting Moments: Revisiting My Photo Biography,” combines Kroes’s meditations on the photographic medium with memoir. Describing his experience of the loss of his wife of thirty years, Sioe Kie, Kroes explores how photographic images have the power to evoke the past—calling up “mental pictures” from one’s “memory bank” (9)—while also considering the power of photographs to distort or idealize. Kroes builds on his exploration of the nexus of photography and memory in Chapter Two, arguing that in American immigrant communities, family photographs are not so much “pictures of the present, or records of the past” as they are “visions of the future,” constituting a “repertoire of hope” (52).

In the longer second section, Kroes turns from the private uses of photographs to the production, consumption and circulation of what he calls “iconic pictures,” photographs of historical importance possessing the power of “epic concentration” (13). Chapter Three is a startlingly wide-ranging chapter that moves rapidly from a Benjamin-flavored account of photography’s relation to modernity, to a consideration of photography as a characteristically American medium, to discussions of such iconic images as Eddie Adams’s “Viet Cong Executed” and Richard Drew’s “Falling Man” (neither of which is reproduced here). Chapter Four, “Faces of War,” manages to find new things to say about the much-discussed relationship between Matthew
Brady’s photography and Stephen Crane’s Civil War fiction. Moving from the Civil War to the Cold War, Kroes in Chapters Five and Six considers the cultural politics of Cold War photography, concentrating on Edward Steichen’s “Family of Man” exhibit (recently the subject of a book-length study by Eric J. Sandeen). Situating the exhibit in the context of U.S. efforts to achieve global cultural hegemony through the dissemination of visual representations of the American “good life,” Kroes concludes that the “Family of Man” exhibit authorized a Whiggish narrative of “humanity on its way to the joys of the consumers’ republic,” exemplified by the U.S. (125).

In Chapter Seven, “Imaginary Americas in Europe’s Public Space,” Kroes discusses the lack of “potent iconic images” of Europe capable of anchoring a pan-European imagined community and considers how the countervailing “visual presence” throughout Europe “of iconic images of American mass culture” may have stepped in to produce a “sense of European space among Europeans” (147, 143, 157). In the brief final chapter, “Shock and Awe,” the autobiographical returns to the spotlight, as Kroes draws in part on personal experience to explore the how photography impacted the global response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Paragraph by paragraph, Photographic Memories is an intellectually engaging study, rich with individual insights. However, the study struggles mightily with the challenges of integrating its autobiographical and cultural critical elements while working within an ambitiously broad historical framework. In a brief preface, Donald Pease describes Photographic Memories as Kroes’s attempt to “come to terms with” a “devastating personal loss” (ix) and if so, it may be this therapeutic purpose, rather than a sustained argument about photography and memory, that unifies and animates the study. Even at the level of individual chapters, the structure is quite loose: the chapter on Stephen Crane and Matthew Brady, for example, is encumbered with an unassimilated subtext about photography and authorship, and by speculations, of questionable relevance, concerning a possible meeting between the novelist and the photographer (96); the final chapter, in lieu of developing a clear sustained argument, ranges freely from personal recollections of President Kennedy’s assassination to an excursus condemning the “lionization of individual photographers” (174). Because of its lack of argumentative and structural coherence, Photographic Memories too often leaves its most appealing ideas—if I may use a photographic metaphor—underdeveloped.

Yet Photographic Memories is valuable for the many questions it raises. These questions begin with its intriguing title, which gestures to Kroes’s belief that individual human memory works like a camera. Despite acknowledging that