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On light in photography; light as a tool of

contemporary storytellers

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Among the studies of natural causes and laws, it is light that most delights its students

Leonardo[1]

Introduction

My interest in light as an instrument that can shape or alter the effect of the photograph on the viewer, started when I first attempted to 'stage' my pictures, that is to create pictures that would 'tell a story', that would guide the viewer through visual clues into a meaning constructed by me. Until then I had always been sensitive to light effects and had used them in various circumstances but in an intuitive and instinctive way. Through my own practice I became increasingly interested in the work of the leading practitioners in the genre of staged tableau photography; I realised that light played a predominant role in my photographs, not only in their outcome but also in their making, on both a visual and a subconscious level. I used it as an expressive means to an end but at the same time it determined my response to and the way I photographed my subjects. Subsequently I started looking at photographers' works trying to decipher the way they used 'lumen'.

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[1] Barasch, Moshe, Light and colour in the Italian Renaissance theory of art - New York : New York University Press, 1978, quote.

The aims of this essay

Throughout my research, I have come to realize that a systematic research on the various ways light has been used in photography has not been undertaken yet. There are a number of books that deal with the practical issues of studio or location lighting, night and low-light photography and how to create attractive wedding or children's' portraits, but I haven't come across a single book that deals with the theoretical and aesthetic issues that play a role in the way our perception of light and photography have been in continuous interplay since the invention of the medium.

On the other hand, the uses of light in painting and cinematography have been the subject of numerous books some of which have been useful for the writing of this essay, since the way we view photographs within our 'modern ocularcentrism'[2] has been shaped by a long tradition in art. Obviously such a vast and multifaceted subject requires much more time and resources than the ones I have had in my disposal; therefore I have only been able to examine it in a way that is far more superficial than I would have wished.

I have -reluctantly- concentrated on the use of light in the work of four photographers who are the leading contemporary representatives in the *area of photographic practice (...) often described as tableau or tableau-vivant photography*[3]. I have chosen this particular genre, often referred to as 'constructed' or 'staged' photography not only because it relates to my own practice but more significantly because *the elements depicted (…) are worked*

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[2] Martin Jay, Downcast eyes: the denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought - Berkeley; London : University of California Press, 1993, p.29
[3] Charlotte Cotton, The Photograph as Contemporary Art, Thames & Hudson, London, 2004, p.49

out in advance and drawn together to articulate a preconceived idea for the creation of the image[4] and therefore the light has been pre-determined by the photographer.

I am interested in tracing down the ways in which this choice has been informed and shaped as light is one of the key elements –arguably the most important- that help us 'read' a picture, greatly influencing its mood and creating possible associations in the mind of the viewer.

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[4] Charlotte Cotton, The Photograph as Contemporary Art, Thames & Hudson, London, 2004, p.8

A short overview: light through the ages

Light has been associated with the divine, and in various religious and mythological traditions considered as a gift from God[5]. According to the Gospel God created light on the first day of the creation of the world and in the ancient Greek myth, Prometheus stole the fire from the gods in order to offer in to humans. *Long before it was the object of scientific study, light and especially the sources of light were venerated as divine*[6].

Zajonc points out that there is an inherent dualism in ancient theories of light which largely persisted until the 16th century's transition to a mechanical conception of seeing, the foundations of which were already laid by 300 BC in the optical studies of the great Alexandrian mathematician Euclid.

Ancient religions like the Zoroastrianism or Manichaeism were founded on the antagonism between light and darkness which was embodied in the form of warring spiritual powers. For the ancient Egyptians light was the gaze of the god Ra; this perception of sunlight as the emanation of the eye of the sun-god, precedes and possibly anticipates the later Greek theories emphasizing the inner activity of the seer[7] - Plato's *fire of the eye,* Empedocles' metaphor for the eye as a lantern taken up by the evangelist Matthew when he wrote that 'the eye is the light of the body'[8], and Euclid's geometrical treatment of light as a 'visual ray' emanating from the beholder's eye.

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[5] Arnheim, Rudolf Art and visual perception: a psychology of the creative eye. University of California Press, 1974 : 'The bible identifies God, Christ, truth, virtue and salvation with light and godlessness, sin and the Devil with darkness' (p.324)
[6] Arthur Zajonc: Catching the Light-The Entwined History of Light and Mind, Oxford University Press, 1993, p.8
[7] Arthur Zajonc, Ibid p.28
[8] Matthew's gospel, 6:22-23

Light itself was perceived as having a double nature; *lux* was god-given, essential light while *lumen* was its emanation or bodily counterpart[9]. This dual concept of light complemented what Martin Jay calls 'the dual concept of vision', the alternating traditions of 'seeing' with the inner eye of the mind – Plato insisted that we see through the eyes not with them- and observing with the two eyes of the body. As Jay puts it, the interweaving of those two traditions proved fertile ground for the varieties of ocularcentrism that have so deeply penetrated Western culture.

The way art was made until the 15th century depended largely on its function as a tool for the religious and moral instruction of the illiterate masses. Light was transcribed in the golden background and aureoles of the Byzantine icons; P. Florenski, quoted by B. Groys[10] describes them as semi-transparent walls which screened the light coming from within, protecting the viewer's eyes from its intensity. In medieval times, light was not discussed as one of the artist's concerns, as much as were *brilliance* and *splendor*, which were part of the general medieval concern with *luminescence*[11]. It wasn't until the arrival of the Renaissance and perspectival space that it became a tool for the creation of illusionist space and was discussed independently from colour and illumination as a subject matter of painting[12].

This shift in artistic perception and the fact that light was by the 16th century becoming the object of scientific observation by natural philosophers such as Kepler and Galileo announced the end of the metaphysical

[9] Arthur Zajonc: Catching the Light-The Entwined History of Light and Mind, Oxford University Press, 1993, p.98

[10] Boris Groys: Life without Shadows in Jeff Wall, Phaidon Press Limited, 1996, 2002, p.59

[11] Barasch, Moshe Light and colour in the Italian Renaissance theory of art - New York : New York University Press, 1978, p.14

[12] Ibid p.13

perception of light. Moral space and spiritual light gave way to perspective space and geometrical light which were to be replaced in the modern era by material space and substantial light; as Zajonc points out, the character of successive ages is reflected in the images they have made of light[13].

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[13] Arthur Zajonc: Catching the Light-The Entwined History of Light and Mind, Oxford University Press, 1993

Light and Photography

In the beginning of her very interesting 'Cultural History of Photography', Mary Warner Marien omits to place light among *the basic ingredients of photography- a light-tight box, lenses and light-sensitive substances*. I believe that thorough research would find enough evidence to sustain that this ambiguity towards light in photography has been evident since the invention of the medium or rather the invention of the techniques that inscribed and fixed the image -projected inside a modern version of a device which was conceived many centuries before: a camera obscura- on light-sensitive material. It strikes me that from the three inventors of the medium, only Nicéphore Niépce named his process with a name related to light; *heliography* means writing with the hélios (=ήλιος, the Greek name for the sun).

William Henry Fox Talbot presented his own process to the Royal society in 1839 as 'photogenic drawing' but in 1841 he patented it under the name *calotype,* while Daguerre's method was named after its ingenious creator (*Daguerreotype*). According to Marien, of the three aforementioned innovators only Niépce described his invention as 'spontaneous reproduction by the *action of light*'; Talbot and Daguerre though stating that photography 'originated in nature and was disclosed by nature', referred to it as a chemical, optical and mechanical process. Various suggestions of practical applications of photography were put forward upon its creation, from Talbot's 'royal road to drawing' to Daguerre's 'instrument for the leisured class ' for 'making

renderings of country houses[14], however, the French astronomer and politician's (and Daguerre's supporter) Francois Arago' s suggestion that it could be *employed as a kind of objective retina that would assist scientists in studying the properties of light*[15] is an imaginative attempt to link photography's 'cause' to a possible scientific outcome.

In photographic history books, reference to light is sporadic and scattered, mainly referring to specific photographers' work (for example in p.168 of his History of Photography, Beaumont Newhall refers to the way Stieglitz set up his portrait sessions), or to technical aspects, such as the way a daguerreotype portrait was posed and lighted[16], or the invention of the flash bulb. Light is discussed alongside the other compositional elements in the photograph such as tonal range, focus and composition, and not as its main precondition.

Julia Margaret Cameron lights her sitters from the side for dramatic effect; yet only *her slightly blurred focus*[17] is always mentioned as her characteristic style, although a few years later the Pictorialist movement used the same blurred focus effect and also light to create painterly images that were thought to be removed from the visual world and thus conveying their ideals of *aesthetic experience*[18] bringing photography *to the level of one of the Fine Arts*[19].

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[14] Mary Warner Marien, Photography: a critical history, Lawrence King Publishing, London 2002, p.14
[15] Ibid, p.19
[16] Ibid, p.63
[17] Mary Warner Marien, Photography: a critical history, Lawrence King Publishing, London 2002,p.158
[18]Marien, Ibid, p.178
[19] Ibid, p.174

In the history of the medium, photographers have used light either in an instinctive or in a carefully planned way to serve the purpose of their photography, culminating thus in a variety of photographic 'styles'. In most cases this purpose was dictated by or in accordance with the prevailing cultural and social climate of the times. From the different applications of photography that were practiced since its invention or discovery[20], some such as the Daguerreotype portrait, employed artificial light to suit studio conditions while others like landscape and archaeological photography had to rely on available light.

Whereas in most of the commercial portrait production in the first decades of its life, the lighting is clearly functional and doesn't serve any particular aesthetic purpose, there are exceptions; the directional light in a female mentally ill patient's portrait from 1855 by the doctor cum photographer H. W. Diamond coming from slightly above the sitter and focusing on her face, bust and hands while leaving the rest of the picture relatively dark, gives a dramatic tone to the picture although it is not clear if this was the intention of its creator who made such pictures for therapeutic and educational reasons[21] (plate 1).

Similarly a picture of an African slave made to aid 'anthropological' study is *romantically lit* from the side *emphasizing facial features that make him appear noble, pensive and unassenting* while in a second daguerreotype of the same slave, *the romantic side lighting of the first image is used to intensify anatomical features that would substantiate Agassiz's* (the Swiss-

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[20] Mary Warner Marien, Photography: a critical history, Lawrence King Publishing, London 2002, p.23
[21] Mary Warner Marien, Photography: a critical history, Lawrence King Publishing, London 2002, p.37

born naturalist who commissioned the pictures) *thesis*[22] on the separate creation of the races, a theory that would scientifically justify slavery. The writer avoids speculating on possible reasons for this difference in lighting that creates two very different views of the same person (plate 1A).

In both Marien and Beaumont Newhall's histories of photography there are references to the light in the daguerreotype portrait studio such as *diffused coming from a skylight*[23] while *reflectors directed more light on selected features*[24]. Following what Marien calls *the key assumption of middle class portraiture*- that a person's character was expressed through physical appearance[25], portraits were lighted in a way to either clearly offer the sitter's face to *the closest scrutiny of the photogenic drawing* -in the standard way described above- or in a way that incorporated painterly aesthetic values like the Hill and Adamson 1843 portrait that *emphasized (…) parts of the body thought to express inner character*[26] (plate 1). Hill and Adamson's style was compared by viewers to the light and shadow effects in Rembrandt's work while Talbot had also remarked a similar resemblance in relation to his own early work.

Other examples of dramatically or suggestively lit portraits were the self portrait by A. S. Southworth and S. Stampa' s portrait of Theresa Burri; the quality of the natural light coming from a visible source (window) on the left hand side of Stampa's picture, is very much reminiscent of Vermeer's soft daylight (plate 2). Also in a portrait of Daguerre by C. R. Meade and another

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[22] Mary Warner Marien, Photography: a critical history, Lawrence King Publishing, London 2002, p.41
[23] Beaumont Newhall, The History of Photography, Secker and Warburg, London 1982, p.32
[24] Mary Warner Marien, Photography: a critical history, Lawrence King Publishing, London 2002, p.63
[25] Ibid, p.40
[26] Ibid, p.72

portrait by R. S. Southworth and J. J. Hawes, the light selectively hits certain parts of the person creating heavy chiaroscuro with large shadow areas[27] (plate 2).

The famous portrait photographer Nadar acknowledged the importance of light in the photographic process when he wrote that *what can't be learned is the sense of light…the artistic appreciation of the effects produced by different and combined qualities of light[28]*. Those qualities were explored in the 1880's and later by the photographic movement I have already mentioned, which was known as Pictorialism. Light was one of Pictorialism's main tools-bright light filtering through fog is used by Clarence H. White to indicate the purity of the morning and the idea of a fresh beginning[29] (plate 3) -along with other methods such as craft-based techniques (gum-bichromate printing and photogravure), soft focus and compositions and poses based on painting and such established visual references.

Another significant part of the history of light in photography is the invention of the flash, which started in its earlier 'primitive' form of the magnesium flash powder used by Jacob Riis in his nocturnal raids at the city's slums, to become the flash bulb used by photoreporters such as Brassai and Weegee. But while Riis used it as a tool for social reform which he hoped would be made possible by exposing the ills of poverty and vice, photojournalists used it as a tool for information and exposure; its distinct effect created by *the harsh look of the sudden burst of intense white light and*

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[27] Beaumont Newhall, The History of Photography, Secker and Warburg, London 1982, p
[28] Mary Warner Marien, Photography: a critical history, Lawrence King Publishing, London 2002, p.152
[29] Ibid, p.180

the shock registered on the faces of those photographed, though 'unreal'[30] came nevertheless to stand for 'candid' and 'objective' photography[31]. Newhall points out that with the flash light the camera has gone beyond seeing and brings us a world of form normally invisible[32].

Apart from photojournalism, artificial light and its various effects was extensively used in advertising and fashion photography; these two kinds of 'staged' photography have proved fertile ground for experimentation on different lighting techniques but time and space will not allow me to go into a more thorough examination.

The three histories of photography that I have drawn from only briefly refer to the ways photographers employed light in their pictures such as Paul Strand's *near abstractions made by focusing on repeated patterns of light and dark found in the experience of everyday life*[33], Ansel Adams' *concentration on dramatic images of natural light effects*[34] or Barbara Morgan's use of artificial light in her dance photographs[35].

I can only hypothesise on the reasons for this lack of consistent and comprehensive discussion on the use of light in photography. Light is indispensable for the creation of the photograph but at the same time it is one of its technical aspects that once dealt with are put aside. This makes it the obvious yet invisible agent for the creation of the photograph. The painter Edgar Degas' comment: *daylight gives me no problem (…) what I want is*

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[30] Beaumont Newhall, The History of Photography, Secker and Warburg, London 1982, p.231
[31] Mary Warner Marien, Photography: a critical history, Lawrence King Publishing, London 2002, p.207
[32] Beaumont Newhall, The History of Photography, Secker and Warburg, London 1982, p.233
[33] Mary Warner Marien, Photography: a critical history, Lawrence King Publishing, London 2002, p.202
[34] Ibid, p.277
[35] Beaumont Newhall, The History of Photography, Secker and Warburg, London 1982, p.232

difficult –the atmosphere of lamps or moonlight[36] perfectly illustrates the dominant attitude in the beginnings of photography when the correct rendering of light and tonal range was an achievement in its own right, in view of the multitude of technical problems that were still to be overcome.

Once the first photographers got over the excitement offered by man's newly acquired ability to mechanically register the effects of light on two-dimensional materials, light was put in the service of various aims like the aspiration to elevate photography to the level of 'high art', to study nature or to create a 'true' and 'objective' document of the visible world for the benefit of understanding and the advancement of mankind.

While adhering to these goals, visual records provided by early photographs show that both artificial and natural light was often exploited in imaginative and creative ways showing that while the majority of professionals used it in a functional, uniform way, there was always a few photographers whose sensitivity for light effects went beyond the ordinary, to produce pictures that stood out by their expressive use of this highly versatile and evasive tool (plate 4).

Assuming that in the histories of Photography written until now there was never enough space to include a thorough overview on the subject of light in photography, I will go on to add that perhaps it is too broad an issue to be studied solely within the confines of the photographic art since it would have to include a study of visual perception and of the way visual art functioned through the ages; how the established art, predominantly painting, provided a platform for photography, a platform that would function either as a

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[36] Mary Warner Marien, Photography: a critical history, Lawrence King Publishing, London 2002, p.197

springboard or as a ceiling, in either case something against which photography would have to measure itself.

Light and staged photography

Photographers –professionals and amateurs alike- have been setting up scenes to be photographed since the very beginning of photography; it could be claimed that the idea of the staged photograph is as old as the medium. According to Michael Bartram[37] *since about the mid 1850s photography had linked itself with the venerable English tradition of 'telling a story' with a picture.*

Among photography's first subjects were arrangements of various objects for the camera, such as Daguerre's famous still life referred to as 'the first daguerreotype'[38] as well as portraits of people. The latter came in a variety of forms, many being simple frontal usually half length portraits of individuals –as in the fashionable and hugely popular daguerreotype portraits- while others were based on scenes of imaginary characters taken from literature, poetry and painting. *Anxious to comply with the narrative tradition but with no precedents in their own medium, the photographers naturally looked to painters[39].* Wealthy amateurs such as Julia Margaret Cameron and Lady C. Hawarden as well as professionals like H. P. Robinson and Oscar Reijlander made photographs with completely fictitious scenarios (plate 3). As

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[37] Bartram Michael, The Pre-Raphaelite Camera: aspects of Victorian photography, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London 1985, p.155
[38] Mary Warner Marien, Photography: a critical history, Lawrence King Publishing, London 2002, p.13
[39] Bartram Michael, The Pre-Raphaelite Camera: aspects of Victorian photography, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London 1985, p.155

alienation arising from the experience of war and the psychological fragmentation of the self finally did away with Pictorialism's grander assumptions about making life an art[40] and following art's entering into the realm of the non-representational, photography turned to the contemporary world first in response to the growing demand for pictures by the media and also to document a world in flux while trying to understand it. Although photographers like Bill Brandt, Doris Ullman (plate 5) and others continued to set up some of their photographs it was harder to perceive it, due perhaps to the modern settings in which it took place in (absence of historic reference) and the adoption of a more realist style as opposed to the painterly style of Pictorialism.

Obviously portraiture continued to flourish as the most evident form of staged photography, as did fashion and advertising photography until in the late seventies and early eighties, photographers such as Philip-Lorca diCorcia and Cindy Sherman started to create pictures explicitly composed for the camera, where the use of light was carefully orchestrated as one of the 'ingredients' that gave visual clues to the viewer for the deciphering of the picture (plate 6). Cinema was a major influence for these artists in the set up and lighting of Sherman's 'Untitled Film Stills' as well as in diCorcia's representations of 'everyday life' scenes. Charlotte Cotton mentions *this dramatic form of light* in his pictures *often described as 'cinematic'* and goes on to add that *arguably it is an accurate description of the lighting used in*

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[40] Mary Warner Marien, Photography: a critical history, Lawrence King Publishing, London 2002, p.237

tableau photography in general which is distinct from the even or single-spotted lighting of photographic portraiture[41].

Philip-Lorca diCorcia: staging the everyday

DiCorcia's first staged images where he used his family and friends as 'actors' could be considered portraits since most of them are titled with the sitters' name and feature one protagonist who usually occupies the central plane of the picture. Jeff Wall notes that *when you have a picture of a figure absorbed in some activity you begin to move outside of the boundaries of portraiture (…) into a kind of picture in which people are identified more by their generic identity as controlled by the type of activity they are in[42]*. In most of diCorcia's 'absorptive pictures' –pictures in which the figures are immersed in their own world and activities and display no awareness of the construct of the picture and the presence of the viewer[43]- light plays a major role in creating what diCorcia has identified as 'a closed world'[44]. It is usually a mixture of artificial and natural light, daylight or household lighting, which illuminates the person transforming him or her into a figure that has just been 'enlightened' in the literal sense of the word, singled out from the rest of the picture through the action of light and thus endowed with special qualities or powers.

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[41] Charlotte Cotton, The Photograph as Contemporary Art, Thames & Hudson, London, 2004, p.52
[42] Restoration, interview with Martin Schwander 1994 in Jeff Wall, Phaidon Press Limited, 1996, 2002, p.128
[43] Ibid, p.127
[44] Peter Galassi: Photography is a Foreign Language, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Thames and Hudson, London, 1995, p.7

Since these images are not created within the specific context of religious, romantic or any other iconography endowed with specific meaning or connotations it is left to the viewer to identify the light source and construct his own meaning in pictures such as Mario, 1978, Auden,1988, Alice, 1988 or Brian, 1988 (plate 6). In other images such as Mary and Babe, 1982 and Sergio and Totti, 1985 (plate 7) the light is apparently normal but the inexplicable presence of two yellow spotlights which illuminate an already well lit living room or the flash hiding the face of Sergio as he snaps toward the unseen photographer –or the viewer- reveal the artificiality of the picture and the existence of a world outside the apparently 'closed' universe of the photograph. Contrarily to Lomazzo's advice to the Renaissance painter that he should study the meaning of the scenes –the 'istoria'- in order to represent the artificial light properly[45], diCorcia shows that there is no single meaning but only possible scenarios. His approach combines Vermeer's 'logical' light (cinematography's 'source lighting' –the style of cinematic lighting where the visible source of light motivates the lighting decision) with Rembrandt's naturalistically 'unmotivated light'[46] where *the objects receive light passively as the impact of an outer force but at the same time they become light sources themselves, actively radiating energy*[47].

This strategy is further employed and perfected in his "Streetwork" where the passers-by illuminated by his hidden flash (plate 8), regain their individuality, are separated from the anonymous crowd in accordance with

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[45]Barasch, Moshe Light and colour in the Italian Renaissance theory of art - New York : New York University Press, 1978, p.152

[46] Cathy Greenhalgh, Making pictures: a century *of European cinematography I* produced by IMAGO London: Aurum, 2003

[47] Arnheim, Rudolf Art and visual perception: a psychology of the creative eye - Expanded and revised ed. - Berkeley, Calif. : University of California Press, 1974,p.325

Aristotle's conception of light as *the actualisation of the potentially transparent*[48] and for a split second are made to irradiate with what in humanistic centuries would appear to be the *sharp clear light of the reasoning mind*[49].

A similar lighting method is employed in his recent series "Heads" where the drama is intensified by the simplification of the background which is reduced to almost pure black, contrasting the illuminated heads of people caught unawares (plate 8); in the resulting images the light is similar to *the strong lateral light used by painters such as Caravaggio* which *simplifies and coordinates the spatial organization of the picture*[50].

In his Hollywood series the combination of different light sources, both natural and artificial, yields more dramatic results directly referring to commercial film imagery; since the location is home to the "Dream industry" of Hollywood film production, the choice of style seems more than appropriate (plate 7). Some of the images are taken in interiors of cheap hotels, at night or at the "magic hour" of dusk *when light becomes a thing to be survived*[51] or at dawn when the lights of the city, the colourful, the colourful illuminated signs and the hazy purple of the sky –nature at its most artificial[52] - create the ideal setting which diCorcia occasionally completes with directional "modelling" light on the subject.

[48] Arthur Zajonc: Catching the Light-The Entwined History of Light and Mind, Oxford University Press, 1993, p.78

[49] Martin Jay, Downcast eyes: the denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought - Berkeley; London : University of California Press, 1993, p.85
[50] Arnheim, Rudolf Art and visual perception: a psychology of the creative eye - Expanded and revised ed. - Berkeley, Calif. : University of California Press, 1974,p.313
[51] Rick Moody, essay in Twilight: photographs by Gregory Crewdson, Harry N. Abrams Inc, New York, 2002, p.10
[52] Ibid, p.10

Gregory Crewdson: the truth is out there

Gregory Crewdson has also appropriated the visual language of commercial film imagery in order to create his haunting images of paranormal phenomena in American suburbia; he has even appropriated its working methods, employing a film crew, building sets and using cranes and other equipment for his "Twilight" series as well as for his most recent work which has been exhibited in White Cube Gallery in April-May 2005 under the title "Beneath the Roses".

Many of the images for the first series are taken, as the title indicates, in the hour of twilight which is associated with the substituting of light by darkness, with dreams, dark fantasies and oppressed desires. Their title gives a direct hint as to the general mood of the images; the atmosphere is of mystery and anticipation. Light effects are used in many pictures; floodlights coming from the sky suggesting paranormal phenomena or the surveillance light of a police helicopter or a mysterious blue light streaming through holes on someone's' living-room floor or into a girls' bedroom (plate 9).

His approach to light is similar to diCorcia's, combining natural –logical- light with artificial light, in a much more dramatic and cinematic way than diCorcia. More so than any other contemporary photographer, he gives light an otherworldly, spiritual, mystical dimension; associated with the *unseen world beyond the frame*[53] which in his case could be the world of spirits or the world of Aliens since he names the film 'Close encounters of the third kind' as his major influence.

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[53]Peter Galassi: Photography is a Foreign Language, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Thames and Hudson, London, 1995, p.7

In one of his 'Twilight' pictures a girl lying in a flooded living room is an obvious reference to the old and extensively used in painting and photography literary theme of the drowned Ophelia. This appropriation of a well known painterly reference and its restaging in a completely contemporary context is not very common in Crewdson but is a strategy used by two other representatives of the genre of staged photography, Jeff Wall and Tom Hunter. Both are non US-born artists and this might be one of the reasons that their influences are not drawn from popular culture but from the Western figurative painting tradition.

Tom Hunter: finding beauty

Tom Hunter has famously reinterpreted *compositions by Vermeer and the pre-Raphaelites in his series Life and Death in Hackney and Persons Unknown*[54]. In Persons Unknown as well as in his Travellers series his sitters, photographed in their homes, are illuminated by bright sunlight coming in through visible sources (windows) –again the cinematographer's source lighting. The reason for this choice is not only his use of the 17th century artist's work as his major visual reference for the particular body of work but also the fact that he wants to portray his friends, the squatters and travellers and their makeshift homes as places of *serenity and peace, beauty and colour*[55] and their way of life as *quite beautiful and worth having a second look at*[56].

In his Life and Death in Hackney series, shot in exteriors contrarily to his earlier work, he seems to have used almost exclusively available light but he chose carefully the time of the day and the weather that would suit the mood of the picture and fit into the particular painting reference he was drawing upon. For example in 'Eve of the party' the woman standing in an empty derelict industrial building is bathed in light in much the same way as the woman standing in a bourgeois bedroom in the 1863 Millais painting 'The Eve of St Agnes' (plate 10). Also Hunter describes how he had to wait for a long time in order to capture the beauty of 'the skyline and the setting sun and the red sky behind it for his photograph 'The Vale of Rest' which is based on a

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[54] Michael Bracewell: Tom Hunter and the modern world, Tom Hunter, Hatje Cantz Publishers in association with White Cube, 2003
[55] Interview with Jean Wainwright, Tom Hunter, Hatje Cantz Publishers in association with White Cube, 2003
[56] Ibid

1858 painting by Millais bearing the same name and featuring a similarly dramatic skyline with the addition of a coffin-shaped cloud that in Scottish folklore is a premonition of death (the picture was painted in Scotland)[57].

Jeff Wall: life as a theatre set

In the case of Jeff Wall, the process with which he borrows elements from baroque, classical and modernist pictorial iconography in order to construct his staged tableaux is far more complicated and has been the subject of a great deal of analysis. Thierry de Duve in his excellent survey in Wall's monograph by Phaidon, refers to Wall's condensing of several of Caravaggio's pictures in his 1989 'The Arrest' or the displacement of Manet's Olympia in 'Stereo' (1989). Although de Duve claims that it is not a matter of 'iconographic borrowing'[58] in 'The Arrest' the debt to Caravaggio is clearly visible in the composition where the action takes place in the front plane in front of a dark monochrome background where a Caravaggiesque light, a yellow light presumably coming from a street lamp illuminates the central character of the arrested man who assumes the passive, stoic attitude of Christ in Caravaggio's paintings from the Passion (plate 13). However, this is one of the rare pictures by Wall where such an iconographic borrowing can be traced directly. Having said that, in 'Stereo' the harsh frontal light illuminating the young man lying on the sofa, strongly reminds of the light that condenses pictorial space in Manet's painting, destroying the illusion of depth and

[57] www.freespace.virgin.net
[58] Thierry de Duve: The Mainstream and the Crooked Path, Jeff Wall, Phaidon Press Limited, 1996, 2002, p.36

perspective, and creating a *disintegrated, hollowed and deconstructed* body[59] (plate 13).

De Duve also refers to Wall's conscious or unconscious borrowings from Poussin[60] or even from 'Poussin filtered by Cezanne', a relation that he refers to as *a reminiscence which is unacknowledged as such (…) an unconscious encounter with something déjà vu*. Although the majority of Wall's pictures rely on such 'encounters' for their deciphering, this multitude of referents makes it impossible to talk about them in general terms –for example if The Storyteller reactivates the Dejeuner sur l'Herbe in its small details in composition, its *plastic space (on the other hand) owes a lot more to Cezanne than to Manet*[61].

In terms of lighting their common characteristic, is the apparent 'naturalism' of light which may be pointing to the apparent 'realism' of the pictures; an impression of realism that is nevertheless discarded after a second, more careful examination. The slickness of the pictures compels the viewer to abandon this impression of realism; they are too perfect, the quality of the light is too similar to that of commercial imagery. Wall according to Donald B. Kuspit *offers us a sentimental education in Modern lighting: an exploration of the effect (…) of what he comes to envision as Modernist lighting 'rendering every part of an illuminated space equivalent (…)*[62]. Kuspit refers here to Walls' use of the fluorescent lighting but this could be applied to his use of lighting within the pictures, especially in his digitally manipulated

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[59] Jeff Wall: Unity and Fragmentation in Manet, Jeff Wall, Phaidon Press Limited, 1996, 2002, p.83-86

[60] Thierry de Duve: The Mainstream and the Crooked Path, Jeff Wall, Phaidon Press Limited, 1996, 2002, p.40

[61] Ibid, p.49

[62] Donald B. Kuspit: Looking up at Jeff Wall's 'Appassionamento', Artforum New York, March, 1982

ones such as 'Stumbling Block'(1991), 'Dead Troops Talking' (1992), 'A Sudden Gust of Wind' (1993) and 'Restoration'(1993). On the other hand his darker pictures like 'A Ventriloquist…October, 1947'(1990), 'Odradek…18 July 1994' (1994), 'Insomnia' (1994) or 'The Vampires' Picnic' (1991) are lit in a more dramatic way that while indebted to painting, also hints at cinematic imagery (plate 12).

Wall's pictures famously have a special relation with light that makes them stand out from the rest of contemporary staged photography; it is the fact that light is not only contained within the picture where it is duly positioned and controlled by the artist but is also *distributed very evenly -democratically you might say- behind the picture surface*[63]. Moreover, Groys saw that light acting as 'quotation marks' around the image telling the viewer that what is seen is a fiction, a quotation[64]. While the use of lightboxes in Wall's work has been usually considered as a loan from, or a critique of urban advertising[65], he somehow rejects this view when he says that he doesn't think that the illuminated transparency is inherently critical, and that he sees it as a supreme way of making a dramatic photographic image[66].

Boris Groys associates their 'glow' to the tradition of the Byzantine icons where the background literally shines being made from gold or silver. But for the 21st century audience the most obvious and therefore stronger reference might not be the luminous advertising display but his own computer screen where he views the photographs he made with his or her digital camera. Most

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[63] Boris Groys: Life Without Shadows, Jeff Wall, Phaidon Press Limited, 1996, 2002, p.59
[64] Boris Groys: Life Without Shadows, Jeff Wall, Phaidon Press Limited, 1996, 2002, p.152
[65] Jean-Francois Chevrier: The Spectres of the Everyday, Jeff Wall, Phaidon Press Limited, 1996, 2002, p.164
[66] Three Excerpts From a Discussion With T. J. Clark, Claude Gintz, Serge Guilbaut and Anne Wagner in Parkett 22, 1989

of these photographs he will never see on paper since research has shown that only 18% of digital photographs ever get printed.

Conclusion

In Charlotte Cotton's words, *cinema, figurative painting, the novel and folk tales act as reference points that help to create the maximum contingent meaning and to help us accept tableau photography as an imaginative blending of fact and fiction[67].* According to this, it may be held that tableau photography has an inherent inability to stand on its own as an autonomous medium but has to depend on other, already established forms of visual and verbal communication in order to be fully understood and appreciated. I have tried to demonstrate the interaction between staged photography and other media such as cinema and painting, taking as my starting point selected works by the four photographers I wrote on. This dependence is exemplified in the writings of one of the earliest 'tableau photography' practitioners, H. P. Robinson, who, in the mid 19th century, although he had *sensed that photography 'had traced a path for itself' was at loss to uncover principles deriving from the unique freedoms and constraints of photography itself[68].*

It seems that the same is true for the ways light has been used in contemporary staged photography; even when the composition and setting have been rearranged by the photographer –as in Tom Hunter's 'Woman reading a possession order' which is a restaging of Vermeer's 'Woman

[67]Charlotte Cotton, The Photograph as Contemporary Art, Thames & Hudson, London, 2004, p.52
[68] Bartram Michael, The Pre-Raphaelite Camera: aspects of Victorian photography, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London 1985

reading a letter'- light functions as the obvious point of reference, helping the viewer work his way into the visual antecedent of the photograph –Vermeer's painting. Thus light acts as a visual 'Ariadne's thread' (Mitos) that guides the viewer through the decoding of the photograph and in order to function as such, has to conform to certain already established and well known rules. On the other hand this 'codification' of light, useful as it may be in acting as a 'guide' is at the same time a limitation; it perpetuates the need for borrowings external to photography and whilst aiding categorisation, helps promote a convenient 'easiness' in our viewing and understanding of pictures.

Afterword

In Antiquity there were only very limited sources of light; the sun, the moon and fire. Nowadays, at a time when our world is lighted by a myriad of lamps, light bulbs, streetlights, car-lights, neon signs, shop windows, fluorescent office lights and strobe lights, when the light of television and the computer screen has almost replaced daylight –and while the old split between natural light and artificial light is being overshadowed by the current split between direct light (sun and electricity) and indirect light (video surveillance)[69] - the photographer is free to choose any kind of light that s/he feels is relevant and apply it to his or her work. In the contemporary world of hybrids, there are no clear rules that determine photographic styles, apart from the laws of the market. Light is thus no more endowed with fixed and immutable connotations defined by religious and social rules but with associations formed by each individuals' culture and experience and in theory at least can be used arbitrarily for different ends. In the end of the day post-modern light's most significant role may be its contribution to the photographer's *attempt to use seduction in the technically perfect slick photograph of the slick world; the attempt to counteract the effect of neutralization that emerges from the artificialization of the world of appearances which the commercial photograph most exemplifies*[70].

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[69] Virilio, Paul : La vitesse de libération. English Open sky, London, Verso, 1997, p.36
[70] Donald B. Kuspit, 'Looking up Jeff Wall's Modern "Appassionamento", Artforum, New York, March 1982

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51. Edouard Manet, Olympia 1963, oil on canvas

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PLATE 1

Hugh Welch Diamond, Seated
Woman with Bird, c. 1855. Albumen print

David Octavius Hill & Robert Adamson,
dr Alexander Keith, c.1843. Paper print

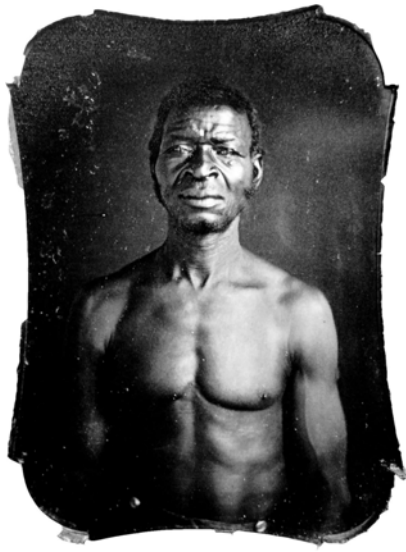Rembrandt Van Rijn, Portrait of a Man
Oil on canvas

Rembrandt Van Rijn, Self-Portrait, 1658
Oil on canvas

PLATE 1A

J. T. Zealy, Jack, 1850s.Daguerreotype.

PLATE 2

Stefano Stampa. Teresa Borri,The
Second Wife of Alessandro Manzoni, Italian
Novelist.1852. Daguerreotype.

Charles Richard Meade.
Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre,
1848. Daguerreotype.

Albert Sands Southworth & Josiah
Johnson Hawes. Lemuel Shaw, Chief Justice
of the Massachusetts Supreme Court, 1851.
Daguerreotype.

Albert Sands Southworth, Self-
Portrait, c.1848. Daguerreotype.

PLATE 3

C.H. White, Morning, 1908.Photogravure print

David Octavius Hill & Robert.Adamson. John Henning and the Daughter Of Lord Cockburn in a scene from Sir Walter Scott's novel 'The Antiquary', ca. 1845.
Salted paper print from a calotype negative

William Lake Price, Don Quixote in His Study, early 1850s. Albumen print from a wet collodion negative.

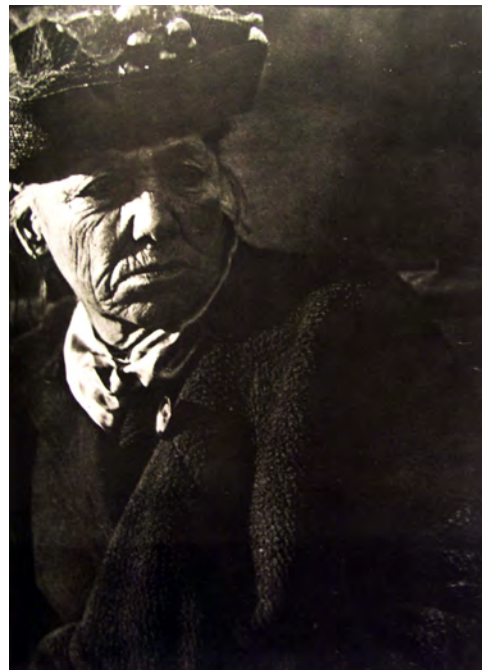J. M. Cameron, The Parting of Lancelot and Queen Guinevere, 1874. Collodion.

PLATE 4

Eduard J.Steichen, Henri Matisse
and "The Serpentine", ca 1909. Platinum print

Alfred Stieglitz, Paula or Sun Rays
Berlin, 1889. Gelatin-silver print.

Ralph Steiner, American Rural
Baroque, 1930. Gelatin-silver print.

Paul Strand, Portrait- Washington Square
New York 1916.

PLATE 5

Ansel Adams, Mount Williamson –
Clearing Storm, 1944. Gelatin-silver print.

**Ansel Adams has taken advantage of the
weather to capture a natural light effect.**

Bill Brandt, East End Girl Doing
The Lambeth Walk, c.1936.

**Brandt uses heavy contrast in his photos
which are a blending of fact and fiction.
While he uses the documentary form his
pictures are often staged. The intense
chiaroscuro creates a dramatic sense of
anticipation and oppression (a surrealist
sense of the 'uncanny')**

Doris Ullmann, Mr and Mrs Anderson,
Saluda, North Carolina, platinum print.

**Ullmann used an old fashioned glass
plate camera to put the grainy, slightly
out-of-focus Pictorialist approach in
service of American portrait studies. From
time to time she asked her subjects to
wear old-time costumes and to pose with
home-stead equipment like spinning
wheels which they did not and could not
operate (Marien, p.294)**

PLATE 6

Cindy Sherman, Film Still #10.

Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Mario, 1978

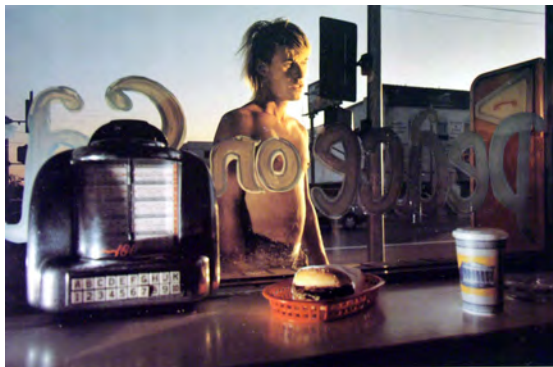Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Alice, 1988

Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Brian, 1988

PLATE 7

Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Mary and Babe, 1982

Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Sergio and Totti, 1985

The image is set at twilight, a time that signifies a turning point between the safety and normality of daytime and the covert, potentially threatening time of night. This dramatic form of light is often described as 'cinematic' especially in reference to diCorcia's work(Charlotte Cotton, p.52).

Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Eddie Anderson; 21 years old; Houston, Texas; $20 (from 'Hollywood')
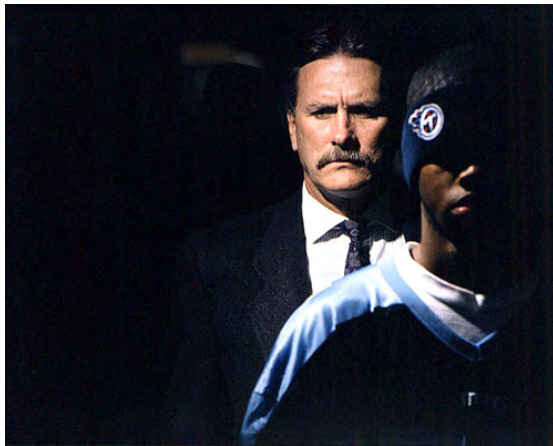

Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Brent Booth; 21 years old; Des Moines Iowa; $30

PLATE 8

Philip-Lorca diCorcia, New York 1993 (from Streetwork)

Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Head #6, 2001 (from 'Heads')
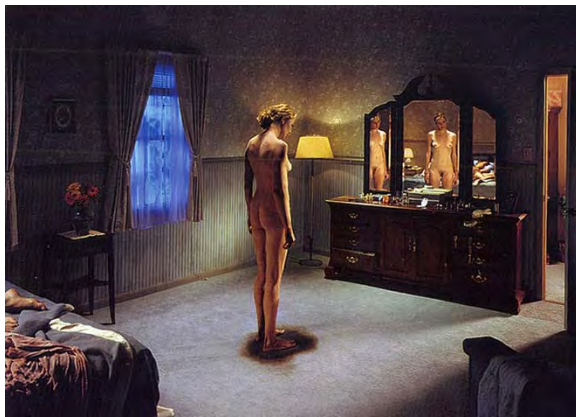

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, The Denial of St Peter, 1610, oil on canvas

PLATE 9

Gregory Crewdson, ('Twilight')

Gregory Crewdson, ('Twilight')

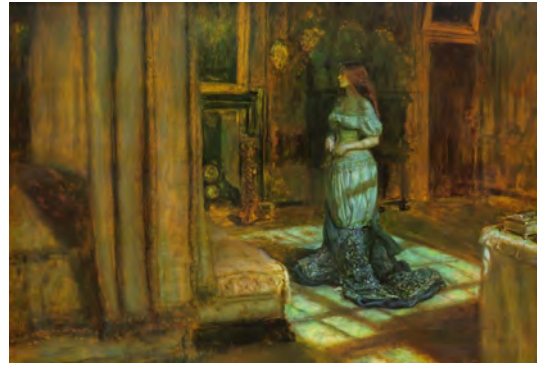

Gregory Crewdson, ('Twilight')

Close Encounters of the Third Kind, film still, 1977

PLATE 10

Tom Hunter, Eve of the Party, (from 'Life and Death in Hackney')

Sir J. E.Millais, The Eve of St Agnes, 1863, watercolour

Tom Hunter, The Vale of Rest, (from Life and Death in Hackney)

Sir J. E. Millais, The Vale of Rest, 1858-9, oil on canvas

PLATE 11

James Robinson, The Death of Chatterton
(1859). Collodion.

Sam Taylor-Wood, Soliloquy 1, 1998

Henry Wallis, Chatterton, (1855-6). Oil on
canvas.

Tom Hunter, Sunday (from Life and Death in
Hackney).

In these three photographs, inspired by Wallis' 1855 painting, there is a consistency in the lighting (which comes from about the same point, behind the lying figure) and which together with the pose, leads the viewer into associating the photograph with the painting. It is interesting how the restaging of popular paintings has evolved from copying to interpreting and the fact that light is one of the unaltered elements, proves its significance.

PLATE 12

Jeff Wall, Dead Troops Talk, 1992. Transparency in lightbox.

There are almost no shadows in this photograph, perhaps to emphasize the fact that these are not real people; they are the troops of Fenton's 'Valley of the Shadow of Death', created for contemporary viewers not as a visual record of courage and sacrifice for the duty but as a play of associations set in a gory filmic environment.

Jeff Wall, The Vampires' Picnic, 1991. Transparency in lightbox

This is one of the most cinematic (in terms of lighting) pictures of Wall, also one of his more dramatic ones, both in the lighting and subject matter.

PLATE 13

Jeff Wall, The Arrest, 1989

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Ecce Homo, c.1600, oil on canvas.

Jeff Wall, Stereo, 1980

Edouard Manet, Olympia, 1963, oil on canvas