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Exploration of Time in Jeff Wall's Photography

Abstract: Conceptual photography, since the 1960's, has developed a different approach to photographing than any other photographic genre. Its main focus was on the concept behind the image, on its idea. However, my aim, in this article, is to analyze a variation of conceptual photography, more precisely the narrative one, its history and aesthetics, but also how it was explored by Jeff Wall (b. 1946) and how the Canadian artist approached and integrated time in his photographs. The main purpose of this article is to understand Jeff Wall's place in the history of staged photography and to understand how he developed a creative type of visual narration and its relationship to time. This aspect will be seen in relation to the idea of fiction because the imaginary narration is closely linked with the progression of time. Also, this analysis could be particularly relevant in the context of photographic studies because it focuses on an aspect that has quite psychological and aesthetic depth but it is not present in the field of artistic academic research, namely the connection between fiction and photography. It can also be seen trans- and interdisciplinary.

Keywords: conceptual art, conceptual photography, Jeff Wall, time, fiction, tableau, narrative photography, staged photography, ambiguity, transdisciplinary, interdisciplinary.

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Explorarea timpului în fotografiile lui Jeff Wall

Abstract: Articolul propune o înțelegere a locului ocupat de Jeff Wall în istoria fotografia construite dar și o analiză a structurii narative elaborate de canadian și a relației acesteia cu timpul. Acest aspect va fi raportat la idea de ficțiune întrucât narațiunea imaginative, prezentă la Wall, se află într-o strânsă legătură cu ideea de progresie temporală. De asemenea, această analiză poate fi relevantă în contextual studiilor academice fotografice pentru că se concentrează pe un aspect care are o profunzime psihologică dar și estetică semnificativă dar nu este frecvent întâlnită în cercetarea academică artistică, și anume legătură dintre ficțiune și fotografie. Poate fi privit trans- și interdisciplinar.

Keywords: artă conceptuală, fotografie conceptuală, Jeff Wall, timp, ficțiune, tablou fotografic, fotografie narativă, fotografie regizată, fotografie construită, ambiguitate, transdisciplinaritate, interdisciplinaritate.

Introduction

Conceptual photography, since the 1960's, has developed a different approach to photographing than any other photographic genre. Its main focus was on the concept behind the image, on its idea. However, my aim, in this article, is to analyze a variation of conceptual photography, more precisely the narrative one, its history and aesthetics, but also how it was explored by Jeff Wall (b. 1946) and how the Canadian artist approached and integrated time in his photographs.

Firstly, the following distinction should be made: not all conceptual photography is narrative. For instance, photographic artists such as Bernd and Hilla Becher, John Baldessari, Edward Ruscha or Andreas Gursky (just to offer a few examples) most certainly can be considered conceptual (because of their constant subordination of the image to a particular idea) but they are not developing any form of narration (ambiguous or not) through their images.

Secondly, it should be nuanced how narrative structure can manifest itself in photographic images. Henri Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment" can be perceived as a type of photographic narration. It is formulated by the artist himself in the following manner: "the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance on an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression." (*Cartier-Bresson, 2014, p. 191*) This type of "story" present in the works of other modernist photojournalists like Jacob Riis or Dorothea Lange (and many others) reflects and respects as much as it can, objectively, the social and cultural reality of the photographer. There is almost no intervention in this instance, only technically and visually but not conceptually. The theory of progressive directing formulated by A.D. Coleman is particularly relevant here but will be present in greater detail in the method section and in the analysis of Jeff Wall's art.

However, on the other hand, artists such as Duane Michals, Cindy Sherman or Arthur Tress (just to name a few) explore and develop a different type of visual narration, one that is directed, constructed, with an assumed point of view. It is not worth confusing with the previous type mentioned before. More precisely these artists are characterized by staging their images and by elaborating a type of narration, an ambiguous one usually, because photography is not cinema or literature and it cannot develop stories using time and words. In film there are hundreds or thousands of sequences (which are themselves formed of many frames) that create a particular duration, which aims to develop a type of fiction. In theatre a story can be told by exploring both the spatial and temporal dimensions. But photography has a temporal limitation, it must limit itself to one image, or more rarely, a few images linked together, as we can see in Duane Michals or Mac Adams serialism (as a personal note, I analyzed the serialist aesthetic and these two artists in a previous article in more detail) (*Mixich, 2021*).

However, the focus in this analysis will be placed on Jeff Wall. The Canadian artist is extremely influential in the contemporary art scene. His work is both conceptual and narrative and it displays a unique and imaginative relationship with time, which will constitute the focal point of this analysis. Also quite significant is his approach to contemporary social and political issues explored in his oeuvre: feminism, racism, poverty, alienation which are constantly staged in particular ways (more precisely described in the following sequences).

Methods

Regarding the research methods it can be remarked that in this article, I planned on using a qualitative type of research method, hermeneutics, which will be helpful when interpreting Wall's photographs, the narrative inquiry will also be helpful at this stage because an image will be interpreted according to its meaning which is connected to the depicted story. And, finally, the historical research method will also be useful when analyzing the evolution of staged photography and Jeff Wall's place in it.

Results

Historical Context of the Staged Photography

This is a complicated genre that requires a well-developed analysis, in this section, however, my purpose was to only identify the main historical and cultural points of references in relation to staged photography.

Photographic critic Erin Garcia noticed that fiction has accompanied photography almost since its inception; Robert Adamson and David Octavius Hill can be considered to have been amongst the first creators of this kind, by elaborating between 1843-1847 the series *The Antiquary* inspired by a Walter Scott novel ([Garcia, 2010, p. 6](#)). I would add that even earlier, in 1840, can be found traces of staged photography in Hippolyte Bayard's self-portraits, especially in *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man*.

The Pictorialist movement represents another impactful moment in the history of staged photography. They were amongst the first photographers to have put forward questions relating to the potential artistic nature of photography and its subjectivity ([Garcia, 2010, p. 8](#)). Julia Margaret Cameron, Oscar Gustav Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson are amongst the most prominent artists of this period, that created images using different forms of manipulation and a significant degree of staging. Seeing Cameron's *The Parting of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere* (1874) or Rejlander's *The Infant Photography Giving the Painter an Additional Brush* (1856), one can notice how the allegorical structure played an important part in the staging of these images.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the modernist "purists" of photography (like the *F64 group*) were more concerned with the intrinsic qualities of photographic language (light, tonal contrast, framing etc.) and not on the extrinsic aspects (social, political or psychological issues). They were firmly against any type of staging. However, William Mortensen is an important artist from this period that developed a unique approach to staging by combining grotesque elements with an occult symbolism.

Afterwards, at the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, especially starting from the 1960's, postmodernism influenced the photographic arts strongly. All new artistic expressions, such as Minimalism, Conceptual Art, Performance Art, Land Art and so on, represented a significant influence in elevating the status of photography as an experimental art (nuanced the relationship between visual arts and photography in this period) ([Grundberg, 2021, pp. 2-3](#)).

Liz Welles compared the modernist and postmodernist approaches in photography in the following manner: "Modernist theory had focused on the medium. By contrast, Conceptual Art stressed ideas. Artists were concerned to draw attention to the manner or vocabulary of expression." ([Welles, 2015, p. 318](#)) From here the concrete origins of staged photography can be

pointed, even though, as we have seen, traces of it can be observed since photography's inception, but the programmatic aesthetical origin of this genre is closely linked to this period.

Duane Michals and Arthur Tress are amongst the first ones to have actually created conceptual staged photographs. Anne Hoy defined the photographic "tableaux" as being "distinguished from other art photography and from photojournalism by their ambiguities and by their strongly personal emotional force" and that it "reveals an unabashed artifice, making it plain that the sets were constructed in the studio." (Hoy, 1987, p. 9) Starting from that period this genre evolved in every decade on multiple levels, aesthetically, technically, but to analyze it would take a significant amount of space and time. My aim in this section was to present the context of staged photography up until the appearance of Jeff Wall.

Relationship between Time, Narration and Photographic Space in Jeff Wall's Art

Jeff Wall is an influential conceptual photographer. His approach can be characterized by combining the aesthetic of the snapshot, which consists of an apparent realism, almost documentary, and that of the staged photography, which implies a significant degree of directing. Because of his education, he has a PhD in Art History, Susan Bright identified, besides these two poles, a different one but equally important, namely the cultural one: he created a visual dialogue with 19th century painting (Bright, 2005, p. 79), which was a source of inspiration, especially compositionally.

For this analysis I have chosen to analyze two of his most impactful photographs, relevant to the analysis of time and narration: *Mimic* (1982) and *After "The Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue* (1999–2000).

Firstly, in Figure 1. *Mimic* (1982) Jeff Wall created a scene that seems almost documentary, both visually (actual street, regular people of different races) and conceptually (capturing an instantaneous gesture of racism) but actually it is staged. Everything is directed and rehearsed. Jeff Wall chose those particular actors by giving auditions. He was particularly attentive regarding the clothes, and most importantly the gesture. Nothing is documentary in this image, but that does not mean the social and concrete reality did not play an important role in its creation. Maribel Castro Diaz related the actual story behind this image, how Jeff Wall saw a scene almost identical to this in his hometown, in Vancouver, how he was shocked by the racist gesture and wanted to re-create it through photography (Castro Diaz, 2019:92).

As we can see the image represents three individuals, a white man, his girlfriend and an Asian man walking down on an urban street. The focus is placed on the racist gesture made by the white man, showing the middle finger in a discreet way to the Asian man, while smirking. The Asian man appears to not be aware of it or simply ignoring it.

Here comes the narrative ambiguity previously mentioned, if it were a film, the story would have been clearer. The context, the character's motivation or attitudes would have been more precisely depicted in it but not here. Photography, because of its temporal limitation, explores narration in a unique manner. Maybe the only other artistic language close to it would be figurative painting. Charlotte Cotton had an interesting observation regarding the link between the 18th and 19th centuries figurative painting and the postmodern staged photography, mainly to how the plastic space was thought of in both instances, and to how this space plays an essential role in creating visual fictions in both of these artistic languages (Cotton, 2020, p. 70).

Secondly, if we were to look at the second image, figure 2 *After "The Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue* (1999–2000), a similar approach regarding staged photography can be found here as well, but the snapshot aesthetic has disappeared. Everything is constructed meticulously, and the purpose of it is to depict a scene from the novel *The Invisible Man* (1952) written by African American writer Ralph Ellison. Essentially, there is presented a black man with his back turned to the camera, in a room with no windows, that is strangely lit, with hundreds of light bulbs on the ceiling. This image is actually a creative illustration and reinterpretation of a scene from the beginning of the novel *The Invisible Man*.

There, the main protagonist, a black unnamed man, through a complicated series of events, ends completely isolated from society. He finds refuge in an abandoned underground room, that has no light, no electricity and no windows. In a way it is the most suggestive metaphor for the protagonist. He is formless, because of the lack of light. There is an extremely interesting relationship constructed here, between visibility and invisibility, both socially and metaphorically. And Jeff Wall creatively nuanced it. Because the figure has its back turned on us, it becomes almost an archetypal figure, with no particular individuality, which could have represented the idea of the oppressed black man, in general.

The protagonist is invisible to society but becomes extremely “visible” because of the hundreds of light bulbs. Régis Michel wondered if the 1369 light bulbs depicted in the novel are actually present in Wall’s photography (*Michel, 2007, p. 59*). Indeed, the Canadian artist was quite attentive to details in this regard. The lightbulbs have a significant visual weight compositionally, almost a third of the image, on the upper part, are only lightbulbs. They have an even bigger weight than the mysterious figure.

Here it is depicted a moment frozen in time but without knowing the story of the novel, the interpretation of this image would be incomplete. In it lies the syncretism of Jeff Wall, its depiction of a literary image through photographic language and techniques.

Considering everything that has been analyzed in this sequence it can be remarked that Jeff Wall, in the abovementioned photographs, tried to explore a temporal dimension in his photographs by freezing the narrative moment in a creative manner.

Discussion

The relevance of this article is that it analyzes the syncretic relationship between photography and other arts (theatre, cinema, literature, painting) and the essential role of staged photography in this endeavor. Generally, photography, as opposed to theatre or cinema, is not syncretic, it usually focuses on its unique properties (reproducing of reality, freezing time, use of light, framing etc.) and develops them. But staged photography uses many different types of artistic languages. It can be political, psychological, erotic or metaphorical.

All of the artists that chose this genre refuse the idea that photography can only depict the most basic layer of everyday reality and the only manipulation should be that of technical or visual aspects, or as A.D. Coleman would call it, the “informational mode” (*Coleman, 1976, p. 278*). They believe that photography can rival any other art, on any intellectual or cultural layer and they show this richness through their photographs.

Also, there is a degree of staging in product or fashion photography but it is present at a superficial layer. However, the staging present in this photographic approach is different, more

similar to that of the filmmakers of art cinema, who, by filtering their personality and vision of the world, create complex and intriguing universes that bear their mark. Gregory Crewdson, Cindy Sherman or Jeff Wall can be approached in this manner (and many others as well).

Conclusion

Finally, in this article, I have tried to emphasize the role of staged and conceptual photography in the context of contemporary arts. This type of photography is sophisticated and complex intellectually, filled with many cultural references, and reacting to contemporary social or political issues, but rarely analyzed in an academic context. This genre being so rich in allusions conceptually, visually, semantically, should lend itself well to an academic approach, in the author's opinion. I have chosen Jeff Wall because I believed that through him many of the ideas that I wanted to express can be explored.

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Appendix



Figure 1. Jeff Wall, *Mimic* (1982),
Lightbox, 198 x 229 cm. (Wall 1982a)



Figure 2. Jeff Wall, *After The Invisible Man* by Ralph
Ellison, the Prologue (1999-2000), Lightbox, 174 x
250 cm (Wall 1999a)