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French Pictorialism: Anti-Modernity and Avant-Garde in Photography

*Lecture on November 23, 2013 on the occasion of the symposium
"Inspirations – Interactions: Pictorialism Reconsidered"*



R. Demachy, *Portrait de femme*, plaque de verre négative au gélatino-bromure d'argent,
18 x 24 cm, vers 1905, collection Société française de photographie

Pictorialism is generally defined as an anachronistic attitude towards modernism in photography; it is understood more as a submission to the academic patterns of painting rather than as an invention of new photographic forms. But can we define Pictorialism simply as anti-avant-garde? If we adopt another point of view and if we change the historical perspective, we can explain Pictorialism as a critical attitude against progress. While avant-garde is a break in the tradition of art, Pictorialism is a break in the progress of a positive history of techniques. In this way, I will explain all the different practices of Pictorialism as disruptive attitudes towards the history of modernity. Thus, I define Pictorialism as an anti-modernity.

Michel Foucault and Pictorialism: The androgynous image

In his only text dedicated to the relationship between painting and photography, dated 1975, Michel Foucault gives us a very new and interesting explanation of what is Pictorialism. In contradiction to sociological and linguistic interpretations of photography (notably Pierre Bourdieu's and Roland Barthes' ideas), Foucault defines artistic photography as an abnormal phenomenon and uses the sexual metaphor of the "*image androgynous*" in order to characterize a hybrid aesthetic. During the nineteenth century until Pictorialism, Foucault underlines a filiation of a hybrid photography, citing Julia Margaret Cameron for example. For Foucault, the end of this kind of game with images dates from the birth of modern art. The responsibility for the death of Pictorialism beyond androgynous images comes from the "puritan codes of art" (read: modern art).

The sexuality of the image and Foucault's interpretation of the "*androgynous*" as opposite to "puritan" needs to be put in the context of his interest in the social disciplines; in fact, Pictorialism as an androgynous art is described as in opposition to moral discipline. This interpretation is very different and opposite from Roland Barthes' analysis of Pictorialism a few years later in "*La chambre claire*": more traditionally, Barthes condemns Pictorialism as a mistake. His judgment is only aesthetic in a modernist and artistic sense.

Without doubt, Foucault is interested in a politicization of Pictorialism and in the whole tradition of images and their circulation in society. Artistic evaluation is a very secondary question to him. I subscribe to this conception in order to explain Pictorialism as a reaction to progress more than as a reaction to modern art, as it was a break with modernism within the discipline of photography – a break from the perfection of the lens, the mechanical result of the print, the respect of the negative – and described instead the attitudes of Pictorialism as so many anti-disciplines. Pictorialism, understood as an anti-modernity, as an anachronistic trend in the history of photography, is probably more interesting now than a concept of Pictorialism opposed to the avant-garde.

Optical disease: Artistic lens versus scientific technique



Constant Puyo, *Portrait de fillette*, téléobjectif anachromatique, tirage au gélatino-bromure d'argent, 18 x 12.5 cm (image), vers 1905, collection Société française de photographie

During the last years of the nineteenth century, progress in optical lenses allowed reality to be registered with accurate definition. Technological solutions were based on the correction of optical aberrations, among these the aberration of sphericity, the aberration of refrangibility, and the aberration of chromaticity were important. Now accuracy, precision, and clearness beyond the natural capacity of human vision were obtainable. These corrected lenses were what scientists needed but were not what artists were looking for. The most famous attitude against optical inaccuracy came from England with Emerson's naturalistic theory, as he rejected the "blurry school." The French Pictorialists were very interested in the battle between *net* and *flou*, between clarity and blurriness or vagueness, but beyond polemics they gave a technological response to the scientific vision with the well known "*optiques d'artistes*."

Robert Demachy and Constant Puyo asked opticians to produce some specific lenses. These artistic lenses were not just archaic, simple, and so-called bad instruments; they were calculated to preserve specific aberrations. Some aberrations were necessary for artists to be able to obtain certain effects in landscapes or portraits, for example. It was a kind of science of aberrations, a catalogue of interesting mistakes.

One might describe the Pictorialist attitude towards optical techniques as an invention of a pathological vision or a kind of optical disease. The vision they needed for creation was neither a naturalistic one (an equivalent to the eye's perception) nor a scientific one, but was a selection of optical deficiencies, such as nearsightedness (myopia) or farsightedness (presbyopia). Artistic lenses produced for Pictorialist photographers helped define an aesthetic of sick sight.

If we agree with this interpretation, we can conclude that modern photography, with its corrected lenses, like glasses on the nose of a myopic person, is a normative system of vision against which Pictorialists built an alternative system.

Instantaneity versus staged photography (the performed image)



Robert Demachy, *Behind the scenes*, vers 1897, collection Société française de photographie

The staged aspects of Pictorialism have been critics' main target. Modernist opinion considered staged photography archaic, praising instead the snapshot. Immobility seems to be a regression compared to the suspension of movement in a snapshot. Pictorialist taste for staged photography was nevertheless an aesthetic choice rather than a technical limitation. This choice came from an artistic tradition forgotten by modern art but very well known during the nineteenth century: the tradition of *tableau vivant* (living painting), which was understood as a paradigm for Pictorialism; therefore, Pictorialism's model relied less on painting than on theater.

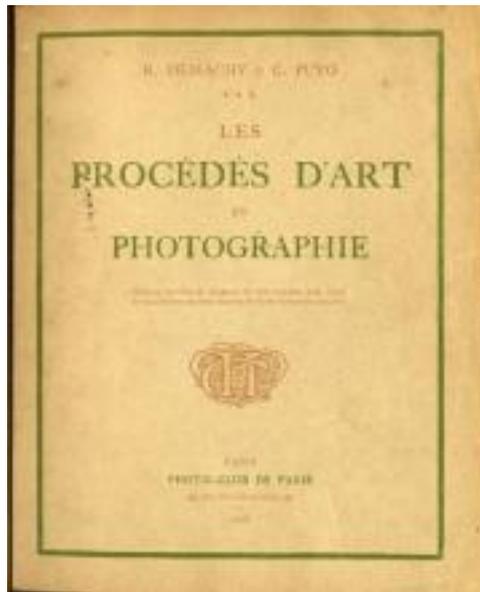
Tableaux vivants were a kind of spectacle in interaction with photography. The Comtesse of Castiglione was one of the very famous artists involved in both arts, as was Comte Olympe Aguado, who created the extraordinary composition titled *admiration!*, a parodic scenography of the habits of Emperor Napoléon III. At the end of the nineteenth century, Pictorialist photographers continued this tradition, which was an aristocratic hobby as well as a popular theater in the music hall.

Artificiality, theatricality in the context of the tableau vivant style of art is obviously not an impossibility of movement but a language itself. This art consists of a reconstitution of a famous painting or a famous sculpture; it is a specific cultural practice. Pictorialism continued this tradition not only by reproducing tableaux vivants, but also by including the principle of theatricality. The models are not posing; on the contrary, they are performing (as actors). In my opinion, the main aesthetic subject that modern art condemns in Pictorialism is the issue of performed photography, which is not exactly staged photography.

Accused of being merely a photographic imitation of painting, Pictorialism was in fact closer to theater – not of course the naturalistic kind of theater promoted by Zola, who was known as a photographer as well as a writer, but rather theater based on pantomime, the kind of theater in which we find the aesthetic of the tableau vivant: anti-naturalistic, artificial in its forms, where actors are similar to puppets. Pictorialism is not so different from the theories of the avant-garde theater promoted by English actor and theater theorist Edward Gordon Craig. His conception of the actor as a “Über-marionette” influenced many Russian authors like Meyerhold and Piscator. Ironically, Craig was the son of the famous Victorian actress Ellen Terry, a model for Julia Margaret Cameron, which is perhaps the reason why he defined modern theater as a new kind of tableau vivant.

That said, staged photography in Pictorialism surely had more in common with society-life culture than with constructivist theater, but we have to understand above all the aesthetic of immobility as an anti-naturalistic attitude rather than as an imitation of painting or an archaism. Moreover, the naturalistic style is above all the common conception of art, in photography as well as in theater; the naturalistic style seems to be based on life itself. This is why theatricality in art cannot be accepted: it is closer to the idea of death (still life) than to the idea of life.

Materiality and printing: Hybridity



Robert Demachy – Constant Puyo
Les procédés d'art en photographie. Photo-Club de Paris, 1906. In-quarto (28 x 22.5 cm)

First and foremost, it is Pictorialist printing methods that defines the aesthetic of this artistic movement. At first glance, a Pictorialist photograph is recognizable by its physical appearance: it looks like an engraving or a drawing. The hybridity of the process comes from the use of pigment techniques. In France, Demachy and Puyo called it “*les procédés d'art*.” The famous gum bichromate is radically different from the gelatin silver bromide process. Gum bichromate was discovered by Alphonse Poitevin for his research on unaltered processes and the question of printing around 1840, so by 1900 it seemed a very old technique and surely not a process for snapshot practice. More than an archaic and anachronistic process, pigmentary printing was so different in its appearance compared to the very precise surface of a silver print that it could not be associated with modern photography at the time.

While a snapshot requires the clarity and brilliance of silver printing, Pictorialist images in contrast require a materialization of their surface. The refusal of transparency is a refusal of modern reality. The aesthetic of the effect of the surface is also an iconographic issue, one linked to the effects of atmosphere, fog, mist, smoke, and so on. Let me underscore this aspect: the unity of iconography and technique led to an aesthetic of opacity, which is radically different and opposed to transparency as the sign of modernity.

But actually the most anti-modern aspect of Pictorialist printing processes was obviously its hybridity: resembling a drawing, a picture (print) creates confusion for the identity of the arts. Remember Foucault’s “androgynous image”: this confusion of gender is opposed to a definition of modernism as an aesthetic of the specificity of an artistic practice or medium.

Playing with the negative: *Impure* photography



Robert Demachy, *Portrait de femme retouchée*, négatif sur verre au gélatino-bromure d'argent, 24 x 18 cm, vers 1905, collection Société française de photographie

The famous polemic between Robert Demachy and English photographer Frederick Evans in 1902 concerns the moral issue of purity in photography. Evans could not accept Demachy's (and Frank Eugene's) most radical technique: scratching of the negative plate. In his theory of scratching, Demachy compares photography to engraving, supporting the idea of sacrificing the details in an image. Such an interpretation of the negative, combined with the use of artistic lenses and gum processes, produced an image without relation to reality.

Evans could not accept this freedom Demachy claimed. To him, the negative was to be respected as something sacred. The issue of purity and the definition of "pure photography" was recycled by Stieglitz as a sign of modernity, even if at first it was more a question of morality than a question of aesthetics. During this period, the opposite of pure photography was called Pictorialism; now, however, one can name the opposite of pure photography impure photography.

Pictorialism, divided into pure photography and impure photography, engages issues of both morality and aesthetics. Thus, one cannot accept the conception of Pictorialism as anti-avant-garde unless one agrees that the avant-garde embodies the ideology of purity!

Iconography and the present day



Robert Demachy, *Speed*, photogravure, *Camera Work*, No 7, 1904

Repeatedly we have noticed that anachronism was one of the main challenges facing French Pictorialism. It took up particular iconography based on classical genres such as the portrait, the landscape, the nude, but perhaps based even more on sentimentalism and the picturesque. Even if we find a symbolist iconography in Demachy's work, French Pictorialism generally preferred sentimentality and flatness. Some examples express eroticism in nudes and mystery in facial expressions, but one must admit that French Pictorialism preferred elegance over eccentricity.

Nevertheless Demachy took up modern subjects such as *Vitesse* (speed) and *La foule* (the crowd), but compared to the iconography of the modern city and architecture promoted by Stieglitz, around 1910, French iconography seemed to be more or less obsolete. Yet we should underscore the fact that French photographers very often asserted the argument that the subject was nothing, the interpretation everything.

Indifferent to the present day, Pictorialists' efforts consisted in the transformation of sight. Devoted to an art based on impurity, hybridity, optical aberration, and theatricality, the modern city, the acceleration of time and futurist conceptions of the world did not interest French Pictorialist photographers. This indifference toward current events was in fact not very different from the attitudes of the Cubist painters! Looking at Braque and Picasso's iconography, one can observe that they, too, respected traditional themes – still life, portrait, landscape – and that artistic invention emerged out of the concept of new ideas of space.

But it is also a question of context. Take for example the publication of a famous picture by Stieglitz, *The Hand of Man* (1902).

Conclusion: How did Alfred Stieglitz treat Pictorialist photography?



Alfred Stieglitz, *The Hand of Man* (Long Island City, NY), 1902, photogravure, 8 3/4 x 6 5/8 inches (Colby College Museum of Art). Published in *Camera Work*, No. 1 (January 1903)

In my opinion, the most striking example is Stieglitz's photograph *The Hand of Man*, published in *Camera Work* in 1903 and again eight years later in the same magazine (No. 36, 1911). This photograph is a metaphor for the imprint of man on nature. The subject could not be any more classic in its modernism: a steam engine's exit from a station, a common impressionistic motif.

In the first edition in 1903, *The Hand of Man* was published among Käsebier's non-modernist images. However, in 1911, the same *Hand of Man* was featured among several other Stieglitz images, in particular the famous *Steerage*, which depicts the life of a modern city. This difference in contexts changes the *Hand of Man* from an impressionistic subject into a documentary approach to a world more closely aligned with an avant-garde attitude.

However, Stieglitz originally published this photograph in 1903. His initial insistence on the overloaded atmosphere, on a landscape rendered illegible by smoke, gave way in 1911 to a clearer treatment that reveals the reflected graphic set of rails. While both images display the same compositional centering, the lines of the second image suggest a dynamic continuation of movement, whereas the first image's composition is tightly contained within the bounds of the frame.

During the 1910s, Stieglitz's choice relied more on another operation that was not directly bound to iconography: it was a matter of emptying the atmosphere of what formally indicated it, of clearing up the contents of the image, emptying it in the physical sense of the term. This atmospheric dematerialization inevitably confers another function on the borders of an image: rather than contain the air, the frame decisively cuts the pure totality of the scene and implies an outside not represented within the confines of the image.

Thus, he proposes a kind of purification of the image in order to submit photography to reality as well as to modern art.



Alfred Stieglitz, *The Hand of Man*, 1911, Gelatin silver print, (8.9 x 11.8 cm)
Alfred Stieglitz Collection. Gift of Georgia O'Keeffe
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Poivert has organized numerous exhibitions, such as *Le Salon de photographie, le pictorialisme en Europe et aux Etats-Unis* (musée Rodin, 1993) and *La Subversion des images, surréalisme, photographie, film* (Centre Georges Pompidou, 2010). His publications include *Le pictorialisme en France* (Höebecke/Bibliothèque nationale, 1992), *Robert Demachy* (Nathan, 1997), co-published with André Gunthert, *L'Art de la photographie, des origines à nos jours* (Citadelles et Mazenod, 2007), and most recently *Gilles Caron, le conflit intérieur* (Photosynthèse, 2012), an exhibition catalogue at the musée de la photographie in Charleroi, Belgium.