Immediacy versus Hypermediacy, Straight versus Un-straight:
Staged photography as Remediation

Ernst Van Alphen

Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin understand the process of remediation as based on a double logic, namely on the two contradictory imperatives for immediacy and hypermediacy. They articulate the contradiction between the two imperatives as follows: "Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: It wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying technologies of mediation" (Bolter and Grusin 1996 313). This kind of personification of culture is needed in order to project on culture and its media a phantasmatic dimension. Culture has desires and fascinations, more concretely, a desire for immediacy and a fascination for hypermediacy. The desire for immediacy is a desire for a transparent medium and a desire to deny the mediated character of technologies and media. It is the "desire to get past the limits of representation and to achieve the real" (343). This real should not be understood in a metaphysical sense, but in terms of the viewer's experience: "it is that which evokes an immediate (and therefore authentic) emotional response" (343).

The fascination with hypermediacy, in contrast, concerns a specific representational practice, a cultural logic, and a visual style. They quote William J. Mitchell to explain it. It is a visual style "that privileges fragmentation, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity and that emphasizes process or performance rather than the finished art object" (327).

Although immediacy and hypermediacy stand for opposite conditions, it is clear that they are not equally strong. For Bolter and Grusin the fascination for hypermediacy is the historical counterpart to "the desire for immediacy." But a libidinal sort of desire determines much more powerfully the direction of historical processes of remediation than the more self-conscious and distant fascination for hypermediacy. The desire for immediacy can be recognized in diverse forms and media, such as illuminated manuscripts, Renaissance decorated altarpieces, Dutch painting, Baroque cabinets, and modernist collage and photomontage (330). Sometimes hypermediacy "has adopted a playful or subversive attitude both acknowledging and undercutting the desire for immediacy" (330). At the end of the twentieth century, the psychodynamic condition or function of hypermediacy has become even more oppositional: "we are in a position to understand hypermediacy as immediacy's opposite number, an alter ego that has never been suppressed fully or for long periods of time." (330)

The transparency for which the desire for immediacy longs seems to be satisfied by the medium of photography. So, it is far from surprising that photography is evoked several times in their treatise on remediation to exemplify the object of desire. The medium of photocollage is then the counterpart of photography, challenging the immediacy of photography by consisting of heterogeneous spaces:

> When photomonteurs cut up and recombine "straight" photographs, they discredit the notion that the photograph is drawn by the "pencil of nature," as Fox Talbot had suggested. Instead photographs themselves become elements that human intervention has selected and arranged for artistic purposes. (333)

The photocollage as an arrangement for artistic purposes results in a medium we look *at* instead of *through*.

In view of Bolter and Grusin's double-logic of remediation, a few words should be said about the difference between remediation and mediation. For Bolter and Grusin all mediation is remediation because each act of mediation "depends upon other acts of mediation. Media are continually commenting upon, reproducing and replacing each other" (346). This is not a side-effect of remediation; they even call it the goal of remediation to refashion or rehabilitate other media. In the case of photography, Fox Talbot justified his invention because of his dissatisfaction with the device of the camera obscura for making accurate perspective drawings by hand. Almost explicitly, he presents photography as a remediation of the medium of the camera obscura. So far, the meaning of mediation and remediation seems to be clear. But in the course of their argumentation, remediation as a process broadens its object: it does not only refashion other media, but also social arrangements and material practices. This becomes clear when they discuss photography as a remediation of the medium of painting:

> And although photography remediates painting, it was a more complex historical case. In their rivalry with painting, some photographers (such as Henry Peach Robinson) sought to be regarded as artists, while "straight" photographers (such as Lewis Hine, Edward Weston, and August Sander) promoted themselves not as artists, but rather as social historians or even natural scientists. Their internal disagreements were both over the material basis of their medium and over the social and formal nature of the remediation that photography undertook. Whatever their differences, in each of these cases, the remediation of the social and the remediation of the material go hand in hand. (357)

Whereas at first the process of remediation seemed to be rather specific and limited to the refashioning of other media, it now dissolves into transformations the scope of which is no longer limited to media. Remediation becomes then the equivalent of transformation, whatever the object of transformation is.

Another slippage in the theory of remediation concerns the ambiguous role of culture and of the subject, or the self. When explaining the double logic of immediacy and hypermediacy, I pointed to the awkward personification of culture. Our culture "wants," has desires and fascinations. In the section "Remediation of Self," the authors claim that the desire for immediacy and the fascination with hypermediacy also has a psychological dimension and that the double logic "can also refer to the attitude of the subject toward the act of representation" (353). This results in assigning the desire for immediacy and the fascination with hypermediacy to the subject. The subject is defined as:

> a succession of relationships with various applications or media. She oscillates between media (moves from window to window, from application to application), and her subjectivity is determined by those oscillations. In the first case, the subject is assured of her existence by the fact that she can enter into immediate relationships with the various media or media forms that surround her. (355)

The desire of immediacy seems to originate in the subject and appears to be fulfilled "by technologies that deny mediation: straight photography, live television, three-dimensional, immersive computer graphics, and so on" (355). But because these technologies never fully satisfy that desire (because they never succeed in fully denying mediation), the technologies that fail to deny mediation give rise to the fascination with hypermediacy in the subject: "As this strategy always fails, a contrary strategy emerges, in which the subject becomes fascinated with the act of mediation itself" (355).

It seems that desire and fascination form a dialectic: desire originates in the subject, whereas fascination originates in the technology or medium at the moment that it fails to satisfy the subject's desire for immediacy. In what follows, I will challenge this double logic of remediation by focusing on a counter practice in photography. Not through straight photography, but through un-straight photography, namely staged photography, I will rethink the desire for immediacy and the fascination for hypermediacy. I will argue that the medium of photography as such is not at all the embodiment of the desire of immediacy. Important photographic practices in the history of the photographic medium emphasize its hypermediacy in order to demonstrate the intentionality of the photographer. And by demonstrating that intentionality, the photographer proves to be an artist.

Staged photography is usually understood as images of posed figures and constructed scenes. It is not the image that is staged, but the world from which the image is taken. In what follows, in contrast, I argue that staged photography also includes other means of constructing and determining the photographic image, such as combination printing, painterly gum processes, and other handwork on negatives or prints. All these different means of manipulating the resulting image counter the idea of straight photography or

snapshot photography. According to this notion, the staging of the photographic image takes place before and after the image is taken, not at the moment the image is taken.

Sitting, Posing and Self-Possession

The main properties Siegfried Kracauer assigned to the standard approach to photography are an outspoken affinity with un-staged reality and the tendency to stress the fortuitous. These properties are embodied in instantaneous snapshots. But in the early photography of the 19th century the staging of reality was a necessary condition for the making of a photograph. The long exposure time needed for a daguerreotype portrait required posing for quite a long time. The iodized silver plates exposed in the camera obscura needed a long exposure to light before a pale image would appear. The sitter whose portrait was being taken had to remain frozen as long as possible. This long exposure time resulted in a very peculiar kind of image showing staring gazes and motionless poses. The long exposures sitters had to endure in those days inscribed an experience of duration and a haunting presence into the image. It was the technology of the daguerreotype image that produced a very specific kind of photographic sign with a specific temporality, which is almost the opposite of the un-staged snapshot.

The required extended posing resulted in negative as well as positive effects. In Henry James's short story "The Real Thing" (1893) an artist complains about a woman who sits for him to have her portrait drawn: "I could see she had been photographed often, but somehow the very habit that made her good for that purpose unfitted her for mine […]. I began to find her too insurmountable stiff; do what I would with it my drawing looked like a photograph or a copy of a photograph" (quoted in Lukacher 30). But the long posing did not only cause a stiffened sitter, it also provided a very special temporality to the image. In his essay "A Little History of Photography" Walter Benjamin gives a beautiful account of the intimate relationship between the extended pose technically required for daguerreotype images and the kind of temporality produced by those images. He describes the photographs of *Newhaven fishwifes* (1845) by David Octavius Hill:

> In Hill's Newhaven fishwife, her eyes cast down in such indolent, seductive modesty, there remains something that goes beyond testimony to the photographer's art, something that cannot be silenced, that fills you with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed in "art." (Benjamin 276)

In this description Benjamin recognizes the past, the present and the future as if all absorbed into one continuous duration.

The long posing for daguerreotype images also requires presence of mind and composure. One should be in control of one's emotions and actions. American abolitionist, and former slave, Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) understands this required composure as a form of self-possession, symbolically announcing freedom and the end of slavery. There is for him a vital link between art in general and reform, and more specifically between photography and freedom. Photography is important for achieving freedom and uprooting racism. There is also no other figure who has been photographed so much in American history of the 19th century, especially daguerreotype images. There remain now 160 photographs of him, all with distinct poses, among which are nine daguerreotypes and four ambrotypes. The first reason why he appreciated these photographs so much has little to do with the image as such, but with the fact that they were relatively inexpensive so that people from all classes could have their portrait made: "The ease and cheapness with which we get our pictures has brought us all within range of the Daguerreian apparatus" (Douglass 128). Daguerre has converted the planet into a picture gallery, he claims. The effect is that "Men of all conditions may see themselves as others see them," because it was only in mirrors that one could see oneself or through the eyes of others. According to Douglass, photography makes people independent from other people's gazes and, as a consequence, from their prejudices. It enables people to look at themselves and free themselves from those prejudices.

When an engraver made a portrait of him with a slight smile, Douglass was outraged. His portrait had "a much more kindly and amiable expression than is generally thought to characterize the face of a fugitive slave" (Douglass 128). Although no longer a slave, he wanted the look of a defiant but respectable abolitionist. For a painted or engraved portrait, one depended completely on the maker of such portraits. He explained why it would never work for a black person to have his portrait made in painting or engraving as follows:

> Negroes can never have impartial portraits at the hands of white artists. [...] It seems to us next to impossible for white men to take likenesses of black men, without most grossly exaggerating their distinctive features. And the reason is obvious. Artists, like all other white persons, have adopted a theory respecting the distinctive features of Negro physiognomy. (Douglass xv)

Because of preconceived ideas about what black people look like, it is impossible for white people to draw or paint them with "impartial" likeness. Photography's assumed faithfulness, in contrast, provided impartial likeness. But more important is that the required posing gave the sitter control over the resulting portrait.

Photographic portraits provide dignity to the sitters for these portraits. When someone's picture is taken "there is even something statue-like about such men": "See them when or where you will, and unless they are totally off guard, they are serenely sitting or rigidly standing in what they fancy their best attitude for a picture" (Douglass 128). Douglass

suggests that posing for a portrait performatively produces dignity. The image is not seen in terms of its likeness to the sitter, but as actively producing a truth about the sitter that results from his posing and other aesthetic elements in the image. The sitter discovers this truth of having dignity when he sees the image taken of him. In Douglass's own portraits the dignity is not only bestowed on him by his statue-like pose, but also by his bourgeois middle-class outfit. He considers this production, or revelation of truth, the social force of pictures. This makes it understandable that he gave this long lecture on daguerreotypes and other photographic portraits in a speech which was supposed to be about the abolition of slavery.

Douglass literally performed for the photographer and determined many formal features of the image. As a result, although he had his picture taken by a great number of different photographers, his portraits have many formal features in common. Their vast majority are closely cropped or vignetted. This draws all the attention to Douglass himself, not to the context of the studio in which the photograph was taken. Compared to other studio portraits of that time, there are almost no props nor backdrops to distract the viewer. The images were supposed to completely concentrate on the portraiture of black masculinity and citizenship. The only variations in the vast number of his portraits concern different angles, different gestures and the adjusting of his clothing, hairstyle and facial hair. "The changes in his appearance indicated his status as a 'self-made man'" (Stauffer xxvii). This status of self-made man was performatively produced by the images. Although he was not the photographer, he is the author of his own portraits. That is why his portraits are indirectly self-portraits. Having these portraits made of him is "a process of soul-awakening self-revelation" (Douglass 169). As a former slave, Douglass needed this self-confirmation through portraiture repetitively.

Instantaneous Images and Posing

When, in the 1880s in France, Lumière developed a new form of photographic dry-plate process, it transformed photography's relation to time and to the spectator. Due to this new process, exposure time was reduced dramatically. It enabled the photographer to catch a moving object in full flight, without creating a blur. As a result, viewers started to see photography as a revelatory practice. A world of phenomena that had been hitherto hidden from the human eye revealed itself in photographs. From then on, it was not the human subject sitting for her portrait who looked 'frozen', but it was time itself. The instantaneous image was turned into a new reality thanks to this newly developed photographic technology. Staged tableau photographs became from then on the sheer opposite of the instantaneous photograph. The image that is at the beginning of this new, but still prevalent, photographic

discourse is probably a photograph of 1887, in which we see Auguste Lumière jumping over a kitchen chair in his courtyard. The instantaneous photograph caught not only the jumping ancestor of photography, but also his ghostly shadow. The context in which this happened is far from staged; it was the courtyard where this experimental event took place. What would soon follow are Edward Muybridge's and Étienne-Jules Marey's analyses of movement. This development in photographic technology seemed to imply the end of staged photography. Although the instantaneity of the photographic image became the dominant paradigm, staged photography remained an ongoing practice, however; but from then on marginalized and met with doubt or suspicion.

Tom Gunning has argued that the new instantaneous photograph offered a completely new discourse of the body in its relationship to space and time. These images of instantaneity are not only precursors of the moving images of the cinematograph, they prefigure also "a new modern self-image, a casual self-presentation diametrically opposed to the formal, almost allegorical poses of studio portraiture" (Gunning 90). Bodies no longer look as posed and disciplined as they were represented in the photographic studios. From then on, they looked more casual, represented in play and leisure.

This new discourse of the body did not put an end to the posing of bodies in staged photography. While becoming a more marginal practice it also opened up new horizons with new meanings for posing and staging. At first, before it became the common, dominant approach to photography, the instantaneous image offered possibilities for scientific uses of photography. It enabled Muybridge and Marey to execute a scientific analysis of motion. But the new photographic technology also provided people who were suspicious of the artistic value of photography with a new argument: at that point, more than ever, the photographic image was the result of a technology for which the agency of the photographer was of little importance. The moment the photograph came to be seen as a 'revelation', it seriously questioned the intentionality of the photographer as an artist. Although this lack of intentionality undermined the notion of photography as a new art, it opened up new possibilities for staging and posing in photography. Indeed, staging increased the modest intentionality in photography. The hand of the photographer could be recognized in his staging of a scene and in his handwork on negatives and prints. Pictorialist photographers especially, who tried to elevate the medium of photography to the aesthetic domain of art, would continue the practice of staged photography.

A major staged genre in the mid-nineteenth century is the photographic *tableau*. In that genre the world is staged literally and elaborately, and often technically. This genre can be seen as a remediation of history painting and genre painting in art, but also of the world of theatre and amateur dramatic pastimes of the 19th-century bourgeois class. One or more

actors posed with props in a natural or artificial setting for one moment out of a narrative scene. The image shows what has been called the "pregnant moment," since German philosopher Lessing's *Laocoon* (1766): one idealized moment of a narrative sequence embodies the entire narrative in a nutshell. The represented action was framed by the borders of the picture itself. Although such tableaus were narratives, because of the staged and constructed nature of the scenes, the overall effect was one of stillness. Many tableaus produce a sense of theatrical display, orienting the staged scenes toward the viewer. They are staged in front of the camera, which gives the images a sense of frontality. This frontality seemingly speaks to the viewer directly in the mode of a second-person address.

The best-known photographers who staged tableau images are the Swedish Oscar Gustave Rejlander, who lived in the UK, and his British follower Henry Peach Robinson. Robinson's tableaus are especially frontal, which positions his viewers as if they were in front of a stage. A good example is Robinson's *Fading Away* (1858). The theatrical scene suggests the elaborate narrative history of a family drama. The daughter is dying, and while her mother and sister support her with their presence, the father is not able to do this. He isolates himself in his own grief. Such complex, intricate histories are evoked by the stillness of this narrative image, requiring prolonged contemplation and meditation. The stillness of Robinson's tableau seems out-of-sync with the narrative it opens up. It is literally like a *tableau vivant*; although very narrative, the scene looks frozen. The 19th-century public was well aware of this uneasy fit of image and meaning. The responses to this kind of photographic staging and artistry were not enthusiastic. The photographic genre quickly fell out of fashion, consigning its proponents to the margins of photographic history (Lowry 53).

The pictorialist photographers O. G. Rejlander and H. P. Robinson did more than just stage the world they photographed. They added another constructed layer to the image. By means of "combination printing" multiple negatives were used to generate a self-consciously composed and composite image. The resulting image is in fact a multitude of separate photographic fragments. Their photographs undermine the alleged referentiality or indexical contingency of the images in puzzling ways. Often, preliminary sketches in pencil and watercolour were made before the photographic image was put together. By using this 'artistic' approach to the composing of the image, the "photographer" could be sure that almost every detail in the image was intended instead of being the result of indexical causality. In the words of Robinson: "Everything must have a meaning, and the meaning must be *the object* of the picture; there must be nothing 'to let'" (Robinson 37). Robinson's remark is clearly inspired by his competitive ambition to elevate photography to the domain of art. Painters in particular were unconvinced about photography as a medium for making narrative tableaus, which had been until then exclusively executed in painting, especially in

history and genre painting. Eugène Delacroix, well-known for his historical tableaus, made sceptical remarks about the narrative possibilities of photography when he imagined a photograph of a scene round the bedside of a dying woman as a total failure: "The reason is that according to the liveliness of your imagination you will find the subject more or less beautiful; you will be more or less the poet in that sense where you are also an actor; you see only what is interesting, whereas the camera records everything" (Journal entry of Delacroix from 1853, quoted in Lukacher 32). Delacroix put his finger on the sore point of the photographic medium. Whereas the painter as intentional agent is present in every detail of his work, the photographer is not, because it is the camera that records everything automatically. According to this notion of art as fundamentally intentional, a photograph cannot contain any poetry or other artistic qualities.

But it is precisely staged photography, especially when the staging is doubled by means of combination printing and forms of retouching, that compensates for this lack of intentionality. If photography succeeds in infusing intentionality in all details of the image, it even has something to add to the traditional artistic domains of painting, sculpture and drawing. In the photograph titled *The Infant Photography Giving the Painter an Additional Brush* (about 1856), Rejlander represents photography's ambition to be artistic in the most classical way one can imagine. This allegory is not only staged, but also the result of combination printing and handwork like painterly gum processes. The "new medium" of photography is represented by the naked infant alias a classical *putto* in the centre of the image. Behind the *putto* we can see in the mirror the reflection of the photographer behind the camera, busy 'creating' the image, revealing the meaning of the classical allegory.

Robinson articulates his position on photography clearly in his book *Pictorial Effect in Photography*: "A great deal can be done, and beautiful pictures made, by the mixture of the real and artificial in a picture. It is not the fact of reality that is required, but the truth of imitation that constitutes a veracious picture" (Robinson 109). In the words of Shelly Rice: "as long as something *looks* real, it doesn't have to *be* real" (Rice 61).

The fabrication of pictures of models who were dressed up by using combination printing methods also incurred a lot of scepticism and criticism. These kinds of photographic images were seen as the opposite of naturalist photography. The American photographer Peter Henry Emerson put forth his critique of non-naturalist photography in his 1889 book *Naturalist Photography*. Emerson contended that photography should be as pure as possible, and he is considered to be the forefather of what later became known as 'straight' photography. Straight or pure photography rejects combination printing and the staging of scenes because, according to Emerson, they turned photography into a hybrid form of painting (for a good reading of Emerson's writings in relation to his own photographs, see

Palermo). The issue is not that all manipulations of the image are seen as aberrations from the ideal perspective of straight photography. But the photographic image should serve a "truth." The debate between Robinson and Emerson concerned the nature of that truth. Both men defended their techniques by constantly referring to "truth," but Robinson legitimized his technique as aesthetic truth, whereas Emerson referred to scientific truth. Nevertheless, both photographers made use of the soft-focus technique.

Robinson used a lens that slightly softened the focus in order to avoid a strong proliferation of facts and details, since such a proliferation precluded photography from being an art. Emerson, however, legitimized soft focus by claiming that we actually see in soft focus, which is a truth of another kind (about the debate between Robinson and Emerson, see Rice 60-63). Although Emerson legitimized his position as scientific truth, this does not imply that he considered the medium of photography only as a tool for scientific research. On the contrary, Emerson became one of the most effective combatants in the fight for the recognition of photography as fine art. Photography could, however, only be taken seriously as a fine art if it was naturalist and pure and did not make use of the aberrations of staged, or un-straight photography, as it later came to be called.[1]

The different notions of truth used by Robinson and Emerson foreshadow the fundamental difference between 19th- and 20th-century notions of photographic art. As Rice puts it:

> For Robinson, artistic truth aspired toward a fixed and immutable Ideal, expressed through rules of composition that could be judged right and wrong. This Ideal ultimately transcended Nature, as long as it did not violate her principles. Emerson on the other hand, was seeking something more imminent, less conceptual; he sought not to express the Ideal but his own vision of nature. For him *perception* was individualized, subjective, necessarily fragmented, impossible to conventionalize. With Emerson, art became an internal state, and photography the medium qualified to turn that state inside out. (Rice 62-3)

Although Alfred Stieglitz and other young photographers of those days strongly supported Emerson's plea for straight photography, Robinson's ideas remained very influential, especially among those who wanted to liberate photography from the scientific and technical contexts in which it then was usually seen, and continued to use the staging of scenes, combination printing, painterly gum processes, or handwork on their pictures. The staging of scenes continued but was, from then on, a practice through which photographers placed themselves in the margins of the artistic as well as the photographic world.

In the 1930s a strong and articulate proponent of un-straight photography set the stage with his photographs and with his books. Californian William Mortensen was internationally renowned, and he attracted students from all over the world. He taught his students to stage

---

[1] See Nancy Newhall, *P.H. Emerson. The Fight for Photography as Fine Art* (1975).

picture scenes, to hand-work their pictures and combination printing. He published nine books with his images and his ideas about un-straight photography. His plea for this marginalized photographic practice is compelling to us today, since we are used to post-modern photographic practices. The staged images of Cindy Sherman seem, for instance, to be inspired by Mortensen's practice of staging.

Mortensen's best-known book is *Monsters and Madonnas,* which he published in 1936. In this book, he expresses his contempt for the obsession with photographic technique in the field of amateur and professional photography: "In photography we see the threat of the Machine come to pass. The Monster is in control. Thousands of potential artists are ruled brain and hand by the dictates of the Machine. The Machine manifests itself in many ways. It appears in the form of a multiplicity of cameras" (Mortensen n.p.). Instead, he actively defended the role of the imagination in photography, expressed by whatever technical means. "With the Monster brought to heel, there remains the problem of releasing and putting to work that creative urge, that emotional drive," which Mortensen refers to as the imagination. The imagination is for him an "active power that demands creative outlet." In the process of making pictures it is necessary always "to seek ways to strengthen and give confidence to the imagination, and to free it from the officious interference of the UN???conscious mind," [*sic.*] that is of the Monster of the camera. To have confidence in the imagination implies that one should use all the means of un-straight photography. These enable the photographer to make pictures:

> Cameras do not make pictures. Emulsions do not make pictures. Developers do not make pictures. Processes do not make pictures. Gammas, factors, and the abracadabra of the technician do not make pictures. Yet all that eventually counts with a photographer is whether he makes pictures. (Mortensen n.p.)

After his introduction in which he explains the role of the imagination in picture-making and the means to do this, he demonstrates it through his own images. In three parts, "Characters," "Nudes," and "Grotesques," he explains all the means he has used to make these images. He explains why 'likeness' is not at all important in picture-making. In the text accompanying his character study "Thunder," he argues that likeness is only of interest to those who are acquainted with the models. If one pursues ideals of wider significance than likeness, realistic representation is of very limited interest. In his text accompanying the image *Woman of Languedoc,* he explains that the costume the woman is wearing makes no pretence to authenticity: "An authentic costume is nearly always bad pictorially." The only criterion that counts is how elements work pictorially. In his text accompanying the image *Machiavelli,* he evokes the classical, literary distinction between truth and verisimilitude.[2]

---

[2] In *L'Art poétique* (1674), Nicolas Boileau privileged verisimilitude in the following words: "Jamais au

Whereas the stakes of the debate between Robinson and Emerson were different notions of truth—artistic versus scientific—Mortensen opted for the alternative to verisimilitude. The devices and means he used to make this portrait do not seek to resemble other existing portraits of Machiavelli; verisimilitude is the pursued quality to make it a good picture. He also made use of combination printing: "The landscape background was accomplished by a montage of two additional negatives, one of hills and one of clouds. The principal negative was printed first" (Mortensen, n.p.). Mortensen does not describe his means as tricks, which should be hidden, but as the necessary tools to make a good picture.

Mortensen's approach to the photographic image is, in fact, conceptual *avant la lettre*. The photographed object is never an end in itself, but it contributes to the mental conception he has of the image he wants to make. With his outspoken ideas about non-straight photography he does not only continue the tradition established by photographers like Cameron, Rejlander and Robinson, but in his writings, he also pays homage to one of the first photographs ever made. As early as 1840, the French Hippolyte Bayard made an image of himself as a drowned man, *Autoportrait d'un noyé*. He made this self-portrait out of frustration and anger, because he was never given any credit for the invention of photography. This is not just a story about this image; Bayard wrote the following text on the back of the image:

> The corpse which you see here is that of M. Bayard, inventor of the process that you have just seen [...]. To my knowledge this ingenious and indefatigable experimenter has been working for about three years to perfect his invention. [...] The government having given too much to M. Daguerre, said it could do nothing for M. Bayard, and the unhappy man drowned himself. Oh! The fickleness of human affairs! Artists, scholars, journalists were occupied with him for a long time, but here he has been at the morgue for several days, and no-one has recognized or claimed him. Ladies and Gentlemen, you'd better pass along for fear of offending your sense of smell, for as you can observe, the face and hands of the gentleman are beginning to decay. H.B. 18 October 1840. (Lerner 220)

Bayard showed a photograph, the proof of his invention, showing his body as a macabre visual attraction. He staged his suicide by drowning, made an image of it and underlined the decomposition of his body. His body will soon be illegible, just like the invention of photography.

Mortensen followed a tradition that already started with one of the inventers of photography. But later in the twentieth century, there were several artists who up the tradition of un-straight, staged photography, and for whom Mortensen was a role model. The best known are the American artists Duanne Michaels, Jerry Uelsmann, Joel-Peter Witkin, and, of course,

---

spectateur n'offrez rien d'incroyable. Le vrai peut quelquefois n'être pas vraisemblable." (chant III, vers 47-48)

Cindy Sherman, and the Dutch artist Erwin Olaf. Michaels described the tensions between straight and un-straight photography in the 1960s and 1970s as follows: "I am a short story writer: Most other photographers are reporters. I am an orange. They are apples" (quoted in Rice 68). His distinction between oranges and apples suggests that both groups of photographers represent different worlds that cannot be compared, although they were using the same medium of photography. While the differences are major and incompatible, the opponents and proponents of straight photography have one thing in common: straight or un-straight, embellished or plain, photography was used as a medium through which an individual sensibility was expressed. The means and devices allowed for the expression of this sensibility differed radically, but the ultimate goal did not.

Allegories of Staging, Allegories of Photography

Staging increases the image's intentionality. However, the staged scenes of Hiroshi Sugimoto have no such effect. His series of black-and-white photographs, *Dioramas* (2014) and *Portraits* (1999)[3] show utterly staged worlds, but the staging has not been done by the photographer. His intentionality is not responsible for it, and his photographs are as straight as one could wish. On his website Sugimoto describes his dioramas as follows:

> Upon first arriving in New York in 1974, I did the tourist thing. Eventually I visited the Natural History Museum, where I made a curious discovery: the stuffed animals positioned before painted backdrops looked utterly fake, yet by taking a quick peek with one eye closed, all perspective vanished, and suddenly they looked very real. I'd found a way to see the world as a camera does. However fake the subject, once photographed, it's as good as real.[4]

The transformation from diorama to photograph is one of fake into real and of colour into black and white. The media of dioramas as well as wax museums belong to the nineteenth century and have a historical aura. Their staged artificiality pursues a maximum of lifelikeness and verisimilitude. But it is their stillness and frozen aspect that betray their artificiality and fake nature. Strangely, when those characteristics are displaced to the photograph taken of such a diorama or wax museum, the same characteristics do no longer qualify as fake but as real. The frozen state and the illusion of stillness is now an effect of the camera's technique. Sugimoto's reproductions of reproductions invert the effects of stillness: scenes that aspire to a condition of suspended time but fail to do so and look dead, are brought to life. "Inverting the logic of photography's unavoidable alliance with death, its

---

3 *Portraits* photograph series focuses on Madame Tussaud's wax museum in London, where Sugimoto photographed the wax mannequins of historical figures against a black background.
4 https://www.sugimotohiroshi.com/new-page-54

capacity to entomb its subject in a moment that will never recur, Sugimoto gives breath to the wax statues" (Spector 18).

The paradoxical effect of transforming death into life is first of all caused by translating artificial colours into black and white. Although the colours of the dioramas are as realist as possible, the chemical colours are not able to create a perfect impression of reality. But because of the fact that black and white preserves a boundary with the world of colour, they seem more alive than the dioramas in natural history museums.[5] This is also the case with the lightning of the dioramas; this is clearly artificial light. In the black-and-white photographs the light seems to be natural. Another metamorphosis takes place with the seam between the stage and its painted background. In the real dioramas the seam between the three-dimensional world and the two-dimensional plane is clearly visible. In the photographs the two worlds continue almost seamlessly.

But Sugimoto's diorama photographs do not only relate to real dioramas, but also to wildlife photography. As Brougher remarks, wildlife photographs generally have a similar look, especially those of dangerous animals. They are usually in colour and have a blurred background. This is because of the photographer's position at a safe distance and his/her use of telephoto-lenses as well as the attempt to capture animals in motion. A second transformation concerns the three-dimensionality of the dioramas as well as wax museums, which is reorganized into a flat perspectival image with a wide tonal range and super-real clarity. The blurred background that one would expect is missing. The photographic images resulting from these transformations are not snapshots of temporal moments, but fixations of a timeless or suspended state. The photographic instants these images present are prolonged indefinitely. Like daguerreotype portraits and photographic tableaus, Sugimoto's dioramas and wax museums are intensely durational. But his images are not the result of long posing or the staging of scenes; his images are straight. By taking artificial, staged scenes of the world as the object of his camera, he turns staging into an allegory. His allegories of staging the world are allegories of photography; not photography as instantaneous snapshots of specific moments, but a type of photography that is durational and that indefinitely prolongs time.

Although the staged scenes look extraordinarily realistic, there is something in these images that indicates that they are not showing the real thing but a staging of the real. "The result is a photograph that 'feels' inherently wrong to us. A disconnection exists between the content and the presentation, between what we see and our knowledge of photography's vocabulary, which is acquired through processing countless images in our media-saturated culture"

---

5 See Belting 83.

(Brougher 20). It is because of the feeling that there is something wrong with these images that they can begin to work as allegories of photography. The moment this feeling arises is the moment when photography's assumed immediacy transforms into hypermediacy. Sugimoto's allegories of photography reveal photography as a medium that is utterly aware of the mediated condition of the "real."

In conclusion, staged photography is not the result of the failure of straight photography to be transparent and immediate. Staged photography can be seen as the outcome of the photographers' intention to demonstrate that there is intentionality behind photography, and that its immediacy is a myth. It is photography's hypermediacy that strikes the eye, and as such, it should not be considered as an embarrassing side effect that fails the ideal of the transparent medium.

Bibliography

Belting, Hans. *Looking through Duchamp's Door: Art and Perspective in the Work of Duchamp, Sugimoto, Jeff Wall*. Cologne: Walther König, 2009.

Benjamin, Walter. "Little History of Photography." *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*. Edited by Walter D. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levine. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008: 274-298.

Boileau, Nicolas. *Art Poétique*. 1674. Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1998.

Bolter, Jay David and Richard Grusin. "Remediation." *Configurations* 4, no. 3 (1996): 311-358.

—. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.

Brougher, Kerry. "Impossible Photography." *Hiroshi Sugimoto*. Edited by Kerry Brougher and Pia Müller-Tamm. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010: 20-29.

Douglass, Frederick. "Lecture on Pictures." *Picturing Frederick Douglass*. New York: Liveright, 2015.

Gunning, Tom. "New Thresholds of Vision: Instantaneous Photography and the Early Cinema of Lumière." *Impossible Presence: Surface and Screen in the Photogenic Era*. Terry Smith ed. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2001: 71-100.

Kracauer, Siegfried. *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. 1963. Translated and edited by Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 1995.

—. "The Photographic Approach." *The Past's Threshold: Essays on Photography*. Edited by Philippe Despoix and Maria Zinfert. Zurich: Diaphanes, 2014: 63–77.

Originally published in *Magazine of Art* March 1951, but also as the first chapter in Kracauer's *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1960.

Lerner, Jillian. "The Drowned Inventor: Bayard, Daguerre, and the Curious Attractions of Early Photography." *History of Photography* 38, no. 3 (2014): 218–232.

Lowry, Joanna. "Modern Time: Revisiting the Tableau." *Time and Photography*. Edited by Jan Baetens, Alexander Streitberger and Hilde Van Gelder. Leuven: Leuven UP, 2010: 47–66.

Lukacher, Brian. "Powers of Sight: Robinson, Emerson, and the Polemics of Pictorial Photography." *Pictorial Effect: Naturalistic Vision: The Photographs and Theories of Henry Peach Robinson and Peter Henry Emerson*. Edited by Ellen Handy. Norfolk Virginia: The Chrysler Museum, 1994: 29–53.

Mortensen, William. *Monsters & Madonnas*. 1936. New York: Arno Press, 1973.

Newhall, Nancy. *P.H. Emerson: The Fight for Photography as a Fine Art*. New York: Aperture, 1975.

Palermo, Charles. "The World in the Ground Glass: Transformations in P.H. Emerson's Photography." *The Art Bulletin* 89, no. 1 (March 2007): 130–147.

Spector, Nancy. "Reinventing Realism." *Sugimoto Portraits*. Tracey Bashkoff and Nancy Spector eds. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2000: 10–23.

Rice, Shelley. "Parallel Universes." *Pictorial Effect: Naturalistic Vision: The Photographs and Theories of Henry Peach Robinson and Peter Henry Emerson*. Edited by Ellen Handy. Norfolk Virginia: The Chrysler Museum, 1994: 59–78.

Robinson, Henry Peach. *Pictorial Effect in Photography*. 1869. Pawlett: Helios, 1971.

Stauffer, John, Zoe Trodd, Celeste-Marie Bernier. *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American*. New York: Liveright, 2015.