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Photography

Modernity conquered the world through pictures, appropriating 'invisible' and visible spaces with new technologies of vision including x-rays and photography. In turn, twentieth-century modernism is obsessed with issues of visibility. In the major years of modernism, new vocabularies of vision were transforming literary and cultural texts, for example *Ulysses*. Although photography was invented in 1839 and, in a sense, predates modernism, photographic technologies and modes of perception are vital to the history of modernism and its visual cultures. In addition much of twentieth-century art was either made as photography or experienced through photographic reproductions.

Photography criticism initially therefore struggled to tell the story of modernist photography in categories like modernist art: in genres like 'landscape', and through the expressive and technically innovative creativity of its leading pioneers (Evans and Hall 1999). But from the 1970s, with translations of the writings of the pre-war Marxist Walter Benjamin and the post war semiologist Roland Barthes, critics began to recognize how much modernist photographers themselves moved between industrial 'low' culture and high art, for example Man Ray and Germaine Krull, and began to look at what photography does as much as defining its characteristics (Benjamin 1972; Barthes 1977). The history of modernist photography, critics now agree, dates from 1900. Photography contributed photograms (exposing sensitive paper to light), photomontage (cuttings) and abstractions to art movements including Futurism, Dada, Surrealism and Russian Suprematism. In the 1920s and 1930s the key photographers, Alexander Rodchenko, Man Ray and Laslo Moholy-Nagy were also avant-garde artists. In America the Clarence White School of Photography encouraged the turn from pictorialism to modern design (Rosenblum 1987), and in the

years after World War One the work of four photographers: Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Alexander Coburn and Edward Weston mark American photography's most modernist moment. Picasso praised Stieglitz's use of formal structures in *The Steerage* (1907). By photographing close-up everyday objects and textures, Paul Strand's abstract photos were not 'documentary' but a new modern form. As Strand argued 'all good art is abstract in its structure' (Hill and Cooper 1988: 14). Similarly, Alexander Coburn's *Vortograph* (1917) a portrait of his friend Ezra Pound fragmented by mirrors, also mirrored Cubism (Clarke 1997).

Although an America/Europe binary is porous because the emigre Moholy-Nagy transformed American photography education by founding the Institute of Design in Chicago, certainly in France and Germany from the 1920s, advances in photo reproduction techniques, with the new wide-angle lenses and high speed shutters, enabled photographs to have wide-spread circulation in journals. These disseminated modernist ideas of space and time much further in Europe than Stieglitz had been able to do in his American journal *Camera Work* (Coke 1986). One of the first exhibitions of modernist photography, the Salon de l'Escalier in Paris 1928, was followed, the next year, by the major German Film and Foto (FIFO) exhibition. If modern photography was perceived as an individualistic medium in America and Europe, in Russia El Lissitzky's *The Constructor* (1924) linked modern photography to collectivism and Constructivism.

Although Douglas Crimp claims that 'photography's re-evaluation as a modernist medium signals the end of modernism' certainly the conception of photography as an art, initiated in the 1920s and 1930s, has persisted (Crimp 1993). This is because, until photography was accepted by mainstream galleries, the important moments of modernist photography were books: Moholy-Nagy's *Malerie, Photographie, Film*

(1925), August Sander's *Place of Our Time* (1929) and Walker Evans's *American Photographs* (1938) (Light 1995). Modernist literature warmly embraced photography. Succeeding Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman's celebration of the daguerreotype in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century Virginia Woolf's deep knowledge of photography: her constant photographic practice and use of photographic referents, inspired her to choose photography as a generative medium in many books particularly in *Three Guineas* (Humm 2002). While it would be wrong to say that photography and the other arts were straightforwardly reflectionist, modernist artists as much as writers utilised photography. For example, from 1919 Matisse had photographs taken of his works in progress. In turn the American photographer Walker Evans, who married a painter, was inspired by Surrealism in Paris in 1926 and loved the high modernism of Joyce and Pound.

Yet the specificity of modernist photography as a practice also gripped intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s. Particularly in the writings of Walter Benjamin and the cinema critic Siegfried Kracauer, the activity of photography is opposed to art's aura because photography and cinema have political promise as mass media (Benjamin 1972; Kracauer 1995). Photography could extend our understanding of the material world while providing access to subjectivity, or what Benjamin calls 'the optical unconscious', by capturing gestures and details. These intellectual theorisations were crucial to positioning photography as a modern art. The 'new' style involved formal simplicity and patterning, dramatic viewpoints, a use of close-ups, dramatic tonal differences and conspicuous cropping. Subjects included machinery, tall skyscrapers and everyday objects and plants shaped into anti-realistic images. Man Ray invented the Rayograph (1920) by placing objects onto light sensitive paper (with Moholy-Nagy the process is more generally referred to as 'photograms'). Dramatic camera

angles were employed by Rodchenko and Coburn, particularly in Coburn's *The Octopus* (1912) taken from New York's Metropolitan Tower (Light 1995). The Berlin Dadaists transformed photomontage from commercial design into a modernist aesthetic and the use of modernist serial imagery continued post-war both in Europe and in America in the work of Robert Flick and others.

But modernist photography's extreme formal close-ups, or oblique shots of the female nude is its main innovation (Rosenblum 1987). Photographers particularly Edward Weston utilised a sexually charged language to make the body's surface erotic (Armstrong 1998). Women modernists did not always share this masculine enthusiasm for erotic portraiture. Margaret Bourke-White for example, combined an expressive modernist vocabulary in *High Level Bridge, Cleveland* ((1929) with the emotional politics of *Sharecropper's House* (1937). Imogen Cunningham made abstract patterns of industrial structures as well as photographing plant forms with emotional closeness. Cunningham, together with Weston and others, co-founded the west coast F. 64 (small lens aperture) group, whose only public exhibition (although F. 64 was hugely influential through reproductions) included the work of Consuelo Kanaga the photographer of African Americans who had discovered negritude in Paris. Black modernism in America repudiated formalism and, in the 1920s photographs of James van de Zee, created a style of urban modernity to visualize the 'New Negro' with psychological depth and social pluralism.

It is crucial to note these issues of gender and race to contextualise the more canoninic American photographers such as Stieglitz, Strand and Weston. Stieglitz was the first to bring modern art to America in his 291 gallery. Here, and in his journal *Camera Work*, Stieglitz generated the concept of the photograph as an art object. His now celebrated photographs *The Flat Iron* (1903) and *The Steerage* (1907), with their

autochrome process turned Manhattan into abstract patterns and ideal forms. Strongly influenced by Vasily Kandinsky's work in the 1920s, Stieglitz went on to make small, brilliant images of clouds he called 'equivalents' which became an influential technique.

Paul Strand, Stieglitz's friend, began in 1916 to photograph household objects using form and tonality, rather than naturalism, to shape his images, in a fundamentally modernist way. Influenced by Picasso's Cubism and by Dada, Strand's photographs of New York City published in *Camera Work*, created modernist textures and forms in tight framing. From the 1920s, Strand applied his aesthetic to urban and natural images in what became known as 'New Objectivity' (Rosenblum 1997).

Meeting Strand in New York in the early twenties encouraged Edward Weston to a pure 'straight' photography. Together with Ansel Adams, Weston adopted a photographic language of pure form exemplified in the brief titles of his photographs: *Breast* (1922) and *Pepper* (1929). Weston announced his dedication to modernism in a lecture in Los Angeles in 1922 (Stebbins, Quinn and Furth 1999). Modernism had arrived in LA with an exhibition of American modernist paintings and the erection of Frank Lloyd Wright's Hollyhock House in 1920. Weston experimented with abstract patterns of vegetables, shells and nudes using light and texture. For example, Weston's portrait of his naked son *Neil, Nude* (1925) rejects the child's specificity in favour of an idealised image. In Mexico Weston focused more on landscape abstractions. Weston's interest in indigenous art and simplified forms grew into a belief in universal visual rhythms, making Weston a leader of American modernism in the twenties. He gained the first Guggenheim Photography Fellowship in 1937 although his landscape photography in the thirties suggests a rejection of pure formalism.

A similar tension between a modernist ideal image and a commitment to photography as evidence marks the work of the American Walker Evans in the 1930s. Evans major contributions are the books *American Photographs* (1938) and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* co-authored with James Agee in 1941. The book format encouraged Evans's formal modernist record of poor tenant farmers. This problematic: of making poverty aesthetically 'beautiful', impacted on the work of all the photographers funded by the Farm Security Administration including Dorothea Lange and Margaret Bourke-White. But Evans's photographs are apparently simple portraits, often taken in full light in middle distance, albeit with abundant visual motifs. This 'snapshot' quality was very influential on much later American photographers in the 1960s such as Diane Arbus and influenced John Szarkowski's curatorship of photography at the New York Museum of Art (MOMA) and his enthusiasm for a photography of the 'everyday'. Similarly Evans's love of street signs inspired later artists such as Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol.

European and Far Eastern modernist photography took a different direction. For example *Hosokawa Chikako* (1932) by the Japanese photographer Kozo Nojima explored a universal modernist vocabulary but without the American attention to documentary detail (Rosenblum 1987). In some senses the development of European modernist photography came more from the development of photographic techniques. In Italy, for example, the photographer brothers Anton and Arturo Bragaglia experimented with self-created 'photomovementistics' of multiple exposures to illustrate the simultaneity of movement and dynamism in urban modernity. Other innovations in camera technology, particularly the new lightweight Leica cameras, were exploited by Andre Kertesz when he arrived in Paris from Budapest in 1928. Dedicated to rendering urban time and daily life Kertesz utilized a gamut of

techniques including multiple viewpoints in his *Meudon* of 1928, reflective surfaces and close-ups. But it was Man Ray who was the pioneer of experimental European photography in following his invented rayograms with the promotion of photography as an art form. Man Ray's innovative images, such as *Glass Tear* (1930), took him in the direction of Dadaism and Surrealism in which the subjective, as much as the formally objective, creates the photographic effect and Ray's work featured in the key exhibition curated by Alfred Barr 'Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism' at MOMA 1936-7.

In Russia Alexander Rodchenko, one of the leading Constructivists, also used experimental viewpoints for psychological effect. In the 1920s Rodchenko montaged photographs of streets and their users into a structural geometry. By reflecting himself in *Chauffeur, Karelia* (1933) Rodchenko made explicit the photographic construction matching his double exposed photoreportage of the late 1920s. Moholy-Nagy shared Rodchenko's interest in a new language of photography and himself visualized photography as a key determinant of modernist culture. Both artist and educator, first at the Bauhaus and later at the Institute of Design Chicago, Moholy-Nagy led formalist photography into a new aesthetic which he called 'the new vision', the title of his key book (Coke 1986). From 1922, Moholy-Nagy wrote over thirty key articles about his ideas and featured in many exhibitions. In collaboration with his wife Lucia, Moholy-Nagy experimented with photomontage, unusual viewpoints and framing, negative prints and photograms all of which also marked his painterly style.

Paradoxically, with the founding of MOMA's department of photography in 1940 which exhibited Moholy-Nagy among others, the continuity of modernist photography began to fragment. The Americanisation of modernism more generally in the arts continued in the post-war period, with the emergence of the New York

School, the writings of the influential critic Clement Greenberg, the abstract 1950s photographs of Minor White and Aaron Siskind, and John Szarkowski's curatorship at MOMA (1962-1991). But elsewhere in America and in Europe, with the development of film, video and digital aesthetics, photography, if a quintessential modern medium, was no longer essentially modernist. Increasingly from the 1970s, the abstractions of modernism came under attack particularly in the British journal *Creative Camera* evident in the journal's preferred plural terminology of 'photographies' (Brittain 1999). But if postmodernism hotly contested a modernist aesthetic and looked to popular culture for inspiration, paradoxically postmodernism appropriated and even celebrated the most canoninic modernist photographers. For example, Sherrie Levine's 1979 *Untitled (After Edward Weston)* is simply a copy print from a reproduction of the famous 1926 Weston photograph *Torso of Neil*. In any case, perhaps the idealisation of modernist photography as abstract individualism is itself a postmodern construction.

Professor Maggie Humm

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Museum of Photographic Arts

www.nmsi.ac.uk

National Museum of Photography, Film and Television

www.tokyo-photo-museum.or.jp

Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography