

What Was Modernism?

Lecture 4: Modernism and Photography

1) A Brief History of Photography

2) Authorship and Autography

1) A Brief History of Photography

The Anglo-American modernist period marks one of the most dynamic moments in human cultural history, signalling a profound shift not only within the cultural relations between audience and object, but also within the artistic sensibility, aesthetic understanding, and the material representations of these transformations. While science, literature, and the arts radically revised the world in an attempt to capture the shattered, fragmentary nature of modernity, the aesthetic counterpoint to the 'shock of the new' was the large-scale use, development, and dissemination of the photographic image as an emblem of this world. Simultaneously transient, fantastic, and yet utterly mundane [...], the photograph not only embodied the condition of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, but encouraged the emergence of a totally *visual* consciousness.

(Hansom, xiii-xiv)

- 1839 The photographic process becomes public; Louis Daguerre's 'Daguerreotype'-process draws on forerunners in optics (*Camera Obscura*, 15th/16th C) and chemistry (bleaching ↔ exposure to light, interaction of heat, air and light); William Henry Fox Talbot's 'Calotype'-process producing 'negatives' from which an unlimited number of 'positive' prints could be made
- 1851 Frederick Scott Archer's 'Collodion'-process speeds up exposure times
- 1871 Richard Maddox introduces the use of Gelatine instead of glass for the photographic plate, thus establishing the dry plate process which makes development much quicker
- 1884 George Eastman introduces the flexible celluloid film
- ▶ photography becomes ever more convenient, the taking of pictures needs less and less specialised knowledge
 - ▶ a highly popular/democratic medium

[The first successful photographic image, produced by Nicephore Niépce with over eight hours exposure time in 1827: a view from the Niépce family house in Gras, France]

[The earliest permanent paper negative known, produced by William Henry Fox Talbot. It is small and of poor quality. However, unlike the daguerreotype images, it is reproducible. Created from paper soaked in silver chloride and fixed with a salt solution, it depicts the lattice window in the South Gallery of Lacock Abbey (1835).]

[William Henry Fox Talbot: *The Pencil of Nature* (1844): Photograph of a Haystack]

**Photography and Modernism:
e.g. Edward Weston**

- 1911 portrait studio in Tropic (now Glendale), CA,
 working in the popular soft-focus, romantic pictorialist style
→ contact with modernism through articles and illustrations in publications
 such as *Camera Work*, *Broom* and *The Little Review*
- 1918ff. increasing concern with abstraction and flatness,
 first sharp-focus photographs
- 1923ff. in Mexico, Weston hones his modernist style, focused upon
 simplification and abstraction in portrait heads and nudes as well as in
 images of toys, toilets and tree trunks
- 1926ff. back in CA, Weston explores shells, peppers and nudes in high
 modernist fashion, as well as juxtapositions of incompatible objects and
 scales, dream-like scenes, ultimately embracing a looser, more gestural
 style

[Edward Weston, various examples]

2) Authorship and Autography

- “photography confronts authorship with autography” (North 2001, 1379)
- “‘the image’ – or, more accurately, a differential system thereof – supplanted writing as the grounding of fiction” in a process in which “realism and photography [were] partners in the same cultural project” (Armstrong 1999, 3/26)
 - subjectivity is confronted with the possibility of reality seemingly representing (writing/painting) itself, as it were, which opens up an unprecedented recourse to ‘objectivity’
 - the emphatic subjectivity of Romanticism is counterbalanced by the impersonal/objective programmes of realism and modernism

[T]he documentary effect is only one result of the collaboration between fiction and photography. By ‘realism,’ I mean the entire problematic in which a shared set of visual codes operates as an abstract standard by which to measure one representation against another. I believe it is accurate to situate not only works of romance and fantasy within this problematic, but literary modernism as well. No less dependent on a visual definition of the real than Victorian realism, modernism nevertheless located whatever it considered authentic in nature or culture within an invisible domain on the other side of the surfaces one ordinarily sees.

(Armstrong 1999, 11)

romanticism	authorship
realism	reality inscribes itself (into a medium)
modernism	autography

Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry” (1821)

The human mind could never, except by the intervention of these excitements [of poetry and art], have been awakened to the invention of the grosser sciences, and that application of analytical reasoning to the aberrations of society, which it is now attempted to exalt over the direct expression of the inventive and creative faculty itself.

The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave.

A man cannot say, "I will compose poetry." The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is like a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: this power arises from within [...] Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results; but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline.

The functions of the poetical faculty are two-fold; by one it creates new materials of knowledge; and power and pleasure; by the other it engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order which may be called the beautiful and the good.

Poetry, and the principle of the Self, of which money is the visible incarnation, are the God and the Mammon of the world.

T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919)

The analogy was that of the catalyst. When [...] two gases [...] are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected: has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.

experience/passions → "*significant* emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet"

T.S. Eliot, "Hamlet" (1919)

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding and 'objective correlative'; in other words, *a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events* which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.

Photography / Authorship / Readership

The photograph collapses all time into the *now* of looking. This, like most other modernist experiments, plays with the immediacy of being and the ways available to us to represent that situation.

(Hansom 2002, xiv-xv)

Like the photographer, the [modernist] author does little more than initiate the process by which phenomena register themselves in permanent form. The authorial function thus becomes merely mechanical, or chemical, and the agency once so necessary to the prestige of authorship is reduced almost to vanishing.

(North 2001, 1379)

It is commonplace now to understand that all texts produced by authors are not products of individual creators. Rather, they are the result of any number of discourses that take place among the writer, the political and social environment in which the writing occurs, the aesthetic and economic pressures that encourage the process, the psychological and emotional state of the writer, and the reader who is expected to receive or consume the end product when it reaches print. Even if not intended for an audience or the publishing marketplace, a piece of writing cannot escape the numerous influences that produce it. All discourse is socially constructed. Yet we continue to maintain the traditional image of the author as an individualist up against a materialistic world, trying to create something pure and unsullied by the rank commercialism of society despite the interference of the system of publication, which requires mediation and compromise.

(Inge 2001, 623)

Revolutions in Communication (Kovarik 2011):

1) The Printing Revolution

1455-1814: technology

1814-1900: commercialisation/industrialisation

2) The Visual Revolution

photography/motion pictures/advertising

3) The Electronic Revolution

telegraph and telephone/radio/television

4) The Digital Revolution

computers/networks/globalisation

Bibliography Lecture 4:

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- Kovarik, Bill, *Revolutions in Communication: Media History from Gutenberg to the Digital Age*. New York: Continuum, 2011.
- North, Michael, "Authorship and Autography." *PMLA* 116.5 (2001): 1377-1385.
- Novak, Daniel, *Realism, Photography and Nineteenth Century Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008.

Internet Resources:

- Historic Camera: The Illustrated History of Photography*.
http://www.historiccamera.com/history1/photo_history300.html (accessed 8th Nov, 2017)
- Revolutions in Communication: Media History from Gutenberg to the Digital Age*.
<http://www.environmentalhistory.org/revcomm/> (accessed 19th May, 2017)