

Suspended Evidence: Rethinking the Photographic

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Abstract

Though the post-media condition erases their specificity, cinema and photography, in their mutual dynamic, have reappeared overwhelmingly in contemporary media practices and theoretical reflection, specifically since a renewed interpretation of the still-moving dialectic has become a crucial dimension of the contemporary image. Therefore exchanges, overlaps and bonds between the filmic and the photographic categorize the prevailing paradigm not only in the analysis of the new forms of the image, but also in reinterpreting the history of the two media and of their earliest and perpetual intersection. The historical reconsideration of the connection between cinema and photography demands clarity in some grey areas that so far have been neglected, such as film stills, analysed in the following essay. They constitute a complex *dispositif* of exchange between cinema and photography, and not by chance are central to much innovative research on the photographic. Historical analysis and visual experimentation have progressed in parallel, both interested in a 'return to the past': to the origin of our gaze, but also to a different relationship with images. Hence, having first identified the necessity to adopt a perspective on media relations based on confluence instead of influence, the essay deals with two symptomatic forms of confluence between cinema and photography. First, a form of 'compressed cinema' that gives up on time and on the flow of the images and instead is condensed within a single photograph (like in Gregory Crewdson's works); second, a sort of suspended photography, that takes on the incompleteness, the dynamism and the temporality of cinema, thus transcending its boundaries (as in Linda Fregni Nagler's *Pour commander à l'air*).

Influence, Confluence, Overlap

Three special journal issues published in almost direct succession in the 1980s are

* The content of this essay has been discussed and agreed on by all the authors, though for practical purposes we specify that the first part *Influence, Confluence, Overlap* was written by Barbara Le Maître, the second part *Overlapping/Re-staging* by Barbara Grespi, and the third part *Suspended Images* was written by Luisella Farinotti.

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now broadly acknowledged as marking the starting point of reflection on the relationship between photography and cinema, or at least an essential moment in the theoretical formulation of the question.¹ In these volumes, and others of roughly the same time, the photography-cinema relationship is addressed primarily in terms of reciprocal *influence*, multiple influences more or less manifest as effects. The predominant issue at hand was grasping how certain photographic images are haunted, animated, affected by the cinematographic mechanism and the plasticity of film. Thereafter, the writers consider most of the ways photography simultaneously takes up and displaces problems that derive *a priori* from the medium of film, such as in the ‘photographic movement sequences’ discussed by Raymond Bellour in *L’Entre-Images*,² or the use of montage by Marc-Emmanuel Mélon in certain photographic albums.³

But these reflections also sought to distinguish between the various ways films themselves comprehend — in both senses of the term — not only photographs as narrative operators and/or figurative instruments, but also effects originating in photography. Thus the freeze frame could be conceived at once as the creation of a sort of ‘photo-effect’ that is specific to the moving image and as ‘dazzling evidence of the photographic subsumed in film’.⁴ Emblematic of these approaches is a text by Philippe Dubois, *La Photo tremblée et le cinéma suspendu*, which, by providing a ‘panoramic image of the great figures in the convergence of the principal text-effects of photography and cinema’,⁵ ultimately described most of the structures that allow the two media to exchange their respective properties.

This brief account of some of the major research trends in the field also covered in the present volume is by no means intended as exhaustive. That would necessitate citing a great many early and recent works, and adding at least the Anglophone research context to that of the French.⁶ But this preliminary outline

¹ See *Revue Belge du Cinéma*, 4 (special issue ed. by Philippe Dubois, Summer 1983); *Photographies*, 4 (special issue *Photo et cinéma*, ed. by Raymond Bellour, April 1984); *La Recherche photographique*, 3 (special issue *Le Cinéma, la photographie*, December 1987).

² Raymond Bellour, ‘La durée-cristal’, in *L’Entre-Images, Photo, Cinéma, Vidéo* (Paris: La Différence, 1990), pp. 96–99.

³ In addition to the article published here, see M.-E. Mélon, ‘Les Formes historiques du discours photographique : contribution à une archéologie des rapports entre photographie et cinéma’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Université de Liège, 1994).

⁴ Bellour, ‘L’Interruption, l’instant’, *La Recherche photographique*, 3, pp. 50–61 (p. 53).

⁵ Philippe Dubois, ‘La Photo tremblée et le cinéma suspendu’, *La Recherche photographique*, 3, 19–29 (p. 20).

⁶ To cite briefly a few works that have addressed this problem directly since the 1990s: Garrett Stewart, *Between Film and Screen: Modernism’s Photo Synthesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) and, by the same author, *Framed Time: toward a Postfilmic Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Barbara Le Maître, *Entre film et photographie. Essai sur l’empreinte* (Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2004); Laura Mulvey, *Death 24× a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006); David Company, *Photography and Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008); *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, ed. by Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Caroline Chik, *L’Image paradoxale. Fixité et mouvement* (Villeneuve d’Asq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2011); *Between Still and Moving Images: Photography and Cinema in the 20th Century*, ed. by Laurent Guido and Olivier Lugon (New Barnet, Herts: John Libbey Publishing, 2012); *Between Stillness and Motion: Film, Photography, Algorithms*, ed. by Eivind Røssaak (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

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allows the following questions to be raised: where does this leave us in terms of a standpoint on the relationship between various media? How, in particular, should the relationship between photography and cinema be addressed today? And above all, why should we return to a question that has already so consistently, amply and minutely been discussed?

In principle, the pioneering works alluded to above belong to an intellectual moment when the concept of the medium lacked the significance it later adopted, once Rosalind Krauss theorized its singular reinvention through photography.⁷ No full discussion of that essay can be attempted within these few introductory lines.⁸ We wish only to draw attention here to the very suggestive formulation whereby the theorist, taking James Coleman's work as an example, describes the hybridization of 1) certain parameters of the cinematographic mechanism or other aspects of its language, 2) the gestural repertoire of theatre, and 3) slide photography: the three aspects of hybridization that constitute the work in question (and the reinvention of the medium that it represents). Rosalind Krauss insists on 'the seriousness with which Coleman intends to invest the lowly materials from which he is fashioning his medium'.⁹

Fashioning his medium? In fact this formulation suggests supplementing the notion of medium as totality of means, as an *a priori* condition of a work's expressive content,¹⁰ with a second conception whereby *the medium is also what the work makes of it* and the ways of using one or another medium are necessarily manifold. That is to say, the work is no mere tributary to a medium that fixes or prescribes its formal economy, rather it composes or constructs its relation to 'its' medium, and also to all the media that are materially or ideally implied in its making. Thus, a second perspective — one concerned with understanding exactly how the work engages with (the specificities of) various media — can now enhance the approach to the connections between photography and cinema in terms of the reciprocal influence(s) of one pre-defined medium on another.

To lay out this trajectory of thought — for which the 'post-medium condition' discussed by Rosalind Krauss is unquestionably a crucial source — means to rethink the juncture between a first approach to media relations in terms (or from the perspective) of influence, and another that is more focused on a principle of confluence. These are the ultimate stakes of this volume.

⁷ Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Reinventing the Medium', *Critical Inquiry*, 25.2 (special issue *Angelus Novus: Perspectives on Walter Benjamin*, Winter 1999), 289–305.

⁸ It is discussed in greater detail later in the volume (see my contribution about Jeff Wall, below).

⁹ Krauss, p. 301.

¹⁰ Of course, this 'totality of means' depends fundamentally on evolving techniques and/or technology, such that every medium appears as a historically unstable reality (if not a category).

Overlapping / Re-staging

By testing the applicability of a postmedial approach to the relationship between cinema and photography, the following essays explore how far the re-configuring of media can be extended from the single work of art to all the visual forms that, over time, have radically situated themselves at the borders between languages. In this context, some contributions here included bring to light crucial stages of a possible archeology of the hybrid form as a way of questioning the prerequisites of the media on which they draw. Chronophotography has evidently represented one of these 'stages', and its rediscovery in contemporary art put in focus its already postmedial dimension,¹¹ whereas the role played by astrophotography is perhaps less expected. While pursuing its own scientific objectives, it too erodes the borders between the two media, producing an experience of space and time that belongs to both of them.¹² The history of scientific images probably offers us the most radical cases of the intersection between cinema and photography,¹³ as if the call of postmediality can be felt precociously in the field of the non-artistic, where the need to harness the medium in order to achieve concrete objectives has always produced a strong incentive for overcoming its (presumed) linguistic and cultural specificity.

Is this not perhaps also true in the case of still photography, another vast area of confluence of practices, forms and cine-photographic materials? Still photography owes its borderline identity to its basic commercial purposes, so functional and peripheral that for a long time it remains the only activity on set to receive no credits: this means that throughout the classical era and beyond, the still photographer is not acknowledged as an artist, nor in any way as a contributor to the making of the movie. He is viewed as a technician who acts at the borders of the set, producing materials destined for other media (the press, above all), and the fact that he takes it upon himself to elaborate a code of conversion of the filmic into the photographic seems not to pertain properly to the world of cinema. Perhaps it was precisely that institutional disconnection from cinema which allowed still photography to operate with more freedom in relation to the mediums on which it draws, and to become, in the contemporary era, a sort of matrix of some artistic, postmedial gestures, like that of the American photographer Gregory Crewdson. A brief analysis of still-photography and its 're-activation' in Crewdson's pictures might work as a partial complement of the archeology sketched in the following essays.

¹¹ See Francesca Scotto Lavina, 'Still-moving Engrams: The Ecstasy of Bodily Gestures in Chronophotography and its Contemporary Reproductions', below.

¹² See Francesco Giarrusso, 'From Stillness (in)to Motion through Astronomical Images: The Cases of Jules Janssen's Photographic Revolver and Josep Comas i Solà's Spectrographic Cinematography', below.

¹³ In addition to physiology and astronomy, diagnostic imaging too has often challenged the seeming exclusivity of the two languages.

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First of all some basic clarifications: the still has nothing to do with the photogram, indeed it is not (or hardly ever) the enlargement of a chosen frame taken from a film strip, but a photograph taken on the set, serving a double role of set photography (photos of the cast and crew at work) and still photography (the re-staging of a specific scene in order to promote the film). In time, and in parallel with the rising popularity of photojournalism, the first variation assumed aesthetic value, while the second variation, which continued to be practiced, gained artistic appreciation only later, as a result of attention from artists beginning in the mid-1970s. It is obviously the latter which interests us, because set photography, particularly when commissioned by the agency in place of the production, reactivates the logic of the ‘decisive moment’, while still photography continued to create a borderline visual experience.

In order to obtain images of a film which are firstly easy to understand and to publicize, and secondly memorable and visually attractive, the so-called ‘stillman’ works at the crossroads between the two media, by subjecting a cinematic staging (actors, set designs, costumes) to a photographic treatment. In this way he transports the filmic away from its chosen apparatus, offering film the chance to exist ‘intermedially’ (in the foyer of the theatre, in the specialized press, but also, later, in art galleries).¹⁴ Does this transfer ‘betray’ the filmic? Not in principle, considering, following Barthes, that the filmic is in some way obstructed by movement, and, on the contrary, is conveyed by the single photogram and its ‘obtuse meaning’. How is the photographic, on the other hand, reconfigured in relation to such an artificial staging?

In some way, still photography introduces an idea of the photographic that is close to what is expressed by Krauss since, by focusing on the strategic realization of the greatest possible sharpness, it elaborates a particular way of seeing in depth which constitutes the ideal place for the convergence of different languages (painting, sculpture, theatre and, obviously, cinema).

Such sharpness is guaranteed by three specific techniques — the use of large format plates (usually an 8×10 inch camera), hard lighting and depth of focus — which produce the unique aspect of still photography, extremely clear and hard edges, to the extent that it often reveals more than what was meant to show (the possible irregularity of the staging, the artifice of the gesture, or better, the ‘code’ of conversion of reality into the imaginary). Indeed, large plates register an impressive quantity of detail regarding the actors and their surroundings, while depth of focus — with which still photography experiments precociously, far earlier than its widespread use in the cinema of the 1940s¹⁵ — produces a

¹⁴ This idea is developed by Le Maître, ‘Le Photographe du film, une histoire de décentrement’, in *Arts du spectacle, métiers et industries culturelles. Penser la généalogie*, ed. by Laurent Creton, Michael Palmer, Jean-Pierre Sarrazac (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2005), pp. 137–44 (p. 95).

¹⁵ See Steven Jacobs, ‘The History and Aesthetics of the Classical Film Still’, *History of Photography*, 34.4 (2010), 373–86, and Joel W. Finler, *Hollywood Movie Stills: Art and Technique in the Golden Age of the Studios* (London: Reynolds & Hearn, 2008).

pronounced, three-dimensional effect, highlighting the human figure rising up and out of the image. In front of these images, the spectator's eye activates a form of perception that relates to that of sculpture, and s/he ends up 'visiting' the film from inside, as though circling around the actors.¹⁶ Rather than a conversion from moving to still, iconic matter changes state, leaking fluidity and 'coagulating' on a *tableau* composed of solid figures and objects. Metaphors like 'concentration' and 'distillation' are in fact often used to describe the creative process of the still photographer,¹⁷ which is thus presented as a sort of extraction of essences, implying the evaporation of the liquid via some intervention on the original materials: 'Gestures are altered, body positions are reorganized, and facial expressions are held. The lighting is perfected, wayward hair and clothing are groomed so as not to distract, and the camera focus is pin sharp.'¹⁸

Another equally strategic factor that contrasts the grainy effect and the loss of focus is the immobilization of actors in front of the lens. With the famous 'once more for the stills' the still photographer of the classical era requires of the stars the protracted assumption of a certain gesture, obliging them to perform as models instead. The actors have to interpret a character while holding a single expression or pose at great length, and this leads us back to the theatrical (and pictorial) logic of the *tableau vivant*. Indeed, immobility of the body is part of the spectacle offered by still photography (the focus of which is *the actor in the act of performing a character*, and not the character in action). Still photography represents, therefore, the first photographic remediation of the *tableau*, a *dispositif* with its own story and a second life in contemporary cinema,¹⁹ but which in reality has already encountered the moving image. Indeed, the practice of the pose is not foreign to silent cinema, which gave overwhelming emphasis to the bodily gestures of the actors, often calling for moments of emphatic stasis, which has recently been attributed to the practice of *statue posing*.²⁰

Let us consider for a moment the unique stillness of still photography, which is in fact a double stillness: the actual immobility of the models is combined with the arrest and the absolute suspension of time, determined by the click of the shutter; and vice versa a 'freezing' gaze is directed at a theatre of bodies that are already frozen, at a fragment of an already-immortalized world (the photography of a *tableau vivant*?). Here photography addresses itself, it looks at itself in

¹⁶ It is not possible here to deal with the problem of the sculptural in still photography, we simply note it in relation to modes of perception. See F. David Martin, 'On Perceiving Paintings and Sculpture', *Leonardo*, 11.4 (1978), 287–92.

¹⁷ We do not consider here the still photos taken to create photonovels, which were extremely popular in the 1950s: their characteristics are not entirely equivalent.

¹⁸ Company, 'Once More for Stills', in *Paper Dreams: The Lost Art of Hollywood Stills Photography*, ed. by Christoph Schifferli (Paris: Editions 7L, 2006), pp. 7–13 (p. 7).

¹⁹ As argued by Ágnes Pethő, 'The Image, Alone: Photography, Painting and the *Tableau* Aesthetic in Post-Cinema', below.

²⁰ On the widespread technique of *statue posing* in the training of actors see Carrie J. Preston, *Modernism's Mythic Pose: Gender, Genre, Solo Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

the mirror, so to speak, and in this way it stages itself. It is the experience of a doubled image, of a photograph re-photographed, as portrayed in the film *The Machine that Kills Bad People* (*La macchina ammazzacattivi*, Roberto Rossellini, 1952), where the act of taking a picture of a picture already taken has the effect of transforming the body represented into a statue, wherever it may be. What the still photographer has in front of him is already an image too, a paradoxical photograph without a support. This recalls the short circuit described by Louis Marin writing about Caravaggio's *Testa di Medusa*,²¹ a painting characterized by the hallucinatory realism of its details, that are powerful enough to 'destroy painting',²² but which also goes further in presenting together both the freezing gaze and its effect. According to Louis Marin, when he portrayed himself as Medusa and overlapped the petrifying gaze and the petrified head, Caravaggio interrupted the connection between image and reality and at the same time spectacularized this crucial cut:

C'est lui [le peintre] qui est sur le bouclier comme cette tête même, regard aveuglant et aveuglé et cri-silencieux. Ainsi le peintre s'inscrit-il dans le tableau sous le double signe du regard pétrifiant-pétrifié et de la césure de ce par quoi il est regard, la tête; mais coupée à sa plu fort puissance, à sa plus extrême violence: présentant la violence même de cette coupure.²³

Still photography shares this logic of cutting, and expresses an idea of the photographic as the act of detachment of the image from reality. An intrinsic detachment, not only for the fact that the stillman immortalizes something which was constructed for and in front of the lens, but also for the intangibility of the 'fictional reality' he tries to grasp. The still contains cinema, but not the film that it is preparing to become, nor that which it was just before, but rather that which in fact it cannot be. For this reason, the question of whether it refers to a real scene or to one that was cut from the movie, or even to a movie never shot, is not relevant.

Several contemporary artists have grasped this idea fully, and from the mid-1970s have started working, more or less explicitly, on the model of still photography. It is significant that Cindy Sherman's series *Untitled Film Stills* (1978) — in which she staged herself in various female film roles, mimicking the stills of prototypical, unrealized movies — inaugurates what has been called staged photography, or *tableau* photography. Inside this trend, the cinema plays a fundamental role, no longer as a language of movement and montage which can affect the photographic form, but as a machine that transforms reality into the imaginary, and in this way flowing (also) into photography. Perhaps following this reasoning, Jeff Wall goes so far as to say that 'no picture could exist today

²¹ Caravaggio, *Testa di Medusa*, 1596–1598, oil on canvas, 60×55 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

²² Louis Marin, *Détruire la peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977, repr. 1997).

²³ Ivi, p. 181.

without having a trace of the film still in it, at least no photograph, but that could also be true of drawings and paintings'.²⁴ While Wall identifies a specific, more sophisticated mixture of cinema and photography,²⁵ the recognition of still photography as an archeological form of intermedial imagination ought probably to be credited to Gregory Crewdson.

The idea of still photography as a frame of reference in Crewdson's work has been circulating for some time,²⁶ but what we would like to clarify here, is that Crewdson does not simply imitate its format, as Cindy Sherman did, but he continues its story as an intermedial *dispositif* which makes cinema and photography converge around the question of depth of field.

It is worth examining first the cinematic aspect of Crewdson's photographs: this is the result of a series of formal and narrative factors, which are particularly clear in his two main works. *Twilight* (2002) and *Beneath the Roses* (2005) are completely immersed in the American imaginary of suburban life; they construct believable characters and real narratives, drawing their strength from cinema, and in particular from the mixing of different genres (science-fiction, thriller, melodrama). The minimalist social types depicted appear at dawn and dusk in suburban streets or in the most intimate rooms of the house (the bathroom, the bedroom), often in very informal dress, if not half-naked. The aging woman, the young mother, the pregnant girl, the young lovers are, however, living an anything but ordinary instant, lit — not only metaphorically — by some invisible and mysterious presence which turns the familiar environment into something sinister. The alienation typical of suburban life becomes the perception of the truly alien, following a formula taken from science-fiction, and in particular from one of its key moments: a character waking in the presence of some strange force, or falling into that evening lethargy which steals self-control and facilitates the invasion of the body-snatchers.

The staging of this fantastical situation, however, follows the principles of another cinematic genre. This is not to say that explicit, figurative sci-fi visual memories are lacking (for instance, in the final photo of *Twilight*, we find a 'Spielbergian' beam of light coming from above and ploughing through the frame); however, the relationship between characters and environments reflects, on the whole, the visual logic of the melodrama, a genre based on the constant consonance between the outside and the inside, the state of the world and the psychic theatre of the characters.

Being essentially psychological-science-fiction dramas, Crewdson's images are

²⁴ Quoted by Company, 'Posing, Acting, Photography', in *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image*, ed. by David Green and Joanna Lowry (Brighton: Photoworks, 2006), pp. 97–112 (p. 97).

²⁵ See Le Maître, 'Jeff Wall, beyond the Borders of the Medium: Photography, History Painting and the Cinema of the Living-dead', below.

²⁶ See Company, *Once more for Stills*, p. 12, but also Jacobs, p. 385 and Green and Lowry, 'Photography, Cinema and Medium As Social Practice', *Visual Studies*, 24.2 (2009), 132–42 (p. 135).

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so rich in narratives, and at the same time so enigmatic, that they have stimulated the imagination of novelists: Richard Banks, Ricky Moody and Jonathan Lethem took it upon themselves to re-narrate them in words. Banks recognizes the *motif* of the door hanging open, revealing that ‘the characters are ready for a quick getaway, in flight either from a bad marriage or a stick-up’ or that ‘the driver suddenly remembered the long-forgotten crime, suffered or committed’.²⁷ Aside from its melodramatic meaning, the *motif* of the door hanging open, recurring nearly everywhere — car doors but also windows, house doors, shower doors, closet doors, a sort of a trade-mark of these two series — creates a figurative bridge among the images. This kind of horizontal connection, however, does not produce a narrative network; on the contrary the narration remains compressed into the single picture, although the characters sometimes repeat from one *tableau* to another, evidently co-existing in the same universe. There is indeed a common world to which they belong, but perhaps not one single movie that contains all their stories, and certainly no logical sequence to be reconstructed. This clarifies, at least in part, the role played by cinema for Crewdson: not a language which changes photography, by introducing time series and dynamism (both dimensions emphatically refused by the photographer), but an archive of images which overlap with reality, covering it with many layers. Perhaps, more precisely, an archive of scenes, which have represented in different registers the transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary, of the quotidian into the surreal, of the real into the imaginary. Crewdson’s creativity is enhanced by the memory of scenes (more than of movies), one of which recurs obsessively: a middle-aged woman placed, surreally naked, outside in the open and under the gaze of a boy. Crewdson stages the naked body of a woman at the caravan door, of a mother standing in the dining room, of a pregnant woman in a corner of the garden: his photographs reproduce endlessly one of the most disturbing scenes of *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986), in which Isabella Rossellini, having been dumped by the maniac who has kidnapped her son, waits, naked, at the door to her house for the young Jeffrey, and runs through the grass to hole up in his arms. Crewdson re-stages this strange naked body many times inside his pictures, overlapping it with other memories, therefore inserting it into other re-stagings; his *tableau*, in the end, proves to be much more layered than it might at first sight seem.

In this regard, again Lynch is key to a better understanding of Crewdson’s work. In the first image of *Blue Velvet*, a line of roses stands out *against* a very white fence; the camera pans down and stops at ground level, so that the roses almost burst out of the image. One of Crewdson’s first photos is almost identical, except that the roses are positioned *behind* the fence, therefore drawing our eyes toward the background, in a first level of depth, after which many others follow. In reality, this untitled photograph, like all the other works in the series *Natural Wonder* (1992), is a diorama, a *dispositif* for seeing in depth, through

²⁷ Gregory Crewdson, Russell Banks, *Beneath the Roses* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2008), p. 7.

which Crewdson re-stages cinema in order to lead it toward photography. In the diorama, by the way a possible ‘ancestor’ of still photography, cinema and photography flow together, interrupting their separate, parallel lives.

Two very brief conclusive remarks help put in focus the dynamics of confluence in the work of Crewdson. The first is that in order to take his pictures, Crewdson really does need to trigger the *dispositif* of the cinema, and in particular its entire production machine; photography literally must pass through cinema. Hence the assembly of the cast, including Hollywood stars (among local inhabitants in small-town Massachussets) and the organization of elaborate sets which involve up to one hundred professionals, thus implying the division of creative labour into stages (planning, production and post-production) and a working time of at least four months. His crew moreover includes veteran cinematographer Richard Sands, and as such we face a situation in which a photographer directs a cinematographer in order to take pictures. This is already eloquent enough: in order to establish a new relationship with its own chosen support, the image, under the form of mere staging, passes through another medium, which guarantees, for a few moments, a pure and potentially intermedial existence.

In the moment of shooting — and this is our second remark — Crewdson steps once again into the borderline zone between cinema and photography. On the one hand, he chooses a format which is par excellence photographic — not the 35mm, but the 8×10 inch camera, like the majority of professional still photographers — on the other hand, he shoots every scene many times, taking at least fifty photographs for each *tableau*;²⁸ this allows a true *building of the image*,²⁹ which is then achieved through the post-digitization process. During this phase, the clearest parts of the different shots — objects, bodies, set-designed elements and all the other minuscule details — are selected and overlapped on a single *tableau*, which therefore is not the result of a single perception, but of many acts of perception, ‘summed’ together, that is to say, on the photographic plate. The end result is a hyperbolic depth of field, a picture in which everything is equally, inhumanly sharp. In this *tableau* composed of numerous invisible layers, like the successive ‘sheets’ of an ancient diorama, cinema and photography are reciprocally reconfigured, by rediscovering a sort of common origin.

Suspended Images

The question of a return to the origin of a specific form of the gaze complements a possible archaeology of the hybrid form. Crewdson too works on this idea in his last work, *Sanctuary* (2009), dedicated to a sacred place for the history

²⁸ The process is filmed in the documentary *Gregory Crewdson: Brief Encounters* (Ben Shapiro, 2012).

²⁹ On the gesture of ‘building an image’, see the interesting remarks of Pethő, in the essay below.

of cinema: the Cinecittà studios in Rome.³⁰ Even the title suggests the conception of Cinecittà as a sanctuary, at the same time assigning the included photographs a memorial — if not funerary — value, that aims to recall the beauty of a disappeared world. The forty-one photographs of the series present, indeed, a ruined, grass-covered place, lifeless, without a human presence. Deserted roads, arches, doors and thresholds that open into emptiness depict the mysterious landscape of an abandoned set, inhabited by ghosts that are still, nonetheless, capable of animating the images.³¹ These are no longer ‘on-set photographs’, but ‘photos of a set’: the legendary one of Cinecittà, the symbol of cinema as a machine that creates illusionary but nonetheless truly realistic worlds, tangibly present in this space in which Medieval houses are placed side by side with the temples of the Roman Empire, in a constant overlap of landscapes and imaginaries. This ‘scene of appearance’ is made even more evident by the scaffolding that shore up the set decorations and fill the images, giving the impression of a huge construction site still in progress: long pipes emerge from behind the facades or between the shingles of a destroyed roof, iron armours sustain entire buildings or stand out like suspended skeletons. It is a sort of ‘behind the scenes’ or an off-screen space that enters the frame, the real structure of a fake world, the frame construction of a dream whose remains cumber the landscape. Given the fact that the boundary between construction and disuse is extremely thin, it is precisely the condition of disorder and destruction exhibited in these photographs — suspended between greatness and decay and whose melancholic tone is emphasized by the use of monochrome — that makes it clear that we are looking at abandoned film sets.

Ruins, after all, are the appropriate and recognizable form of ‘the ancient times’, recreated for *Rome* — the HBO television series³² — whose abandoned set, with its torn off floor tiles and grass-covered temples and columns, is one of the subjects of Crewdson’s photographs. The sense of decay seems to correspond to a shared vision of history, as if the papier-mâché skeletons of the cinematic imaginary overlap with the remains of the Roman Empire — which really exists a few kilometres away from Cinecittà. In the work, Crewdson leaves the United States for the first time, looking instead at a far away world and its history, nonetheless recognizing in it an imaginary that also belongs to him and moreover witnessing its disappearance. Exactly ‘what remains’, the decomposition of

³⁰ *Sanctuary* is a series of forty-one black-and-white photographs made between 1 June and 1 July 2009 on the back lot of Cinecittà studios in Rome. First exhibition: Gagosian Gallery, New York 2010. The construction of such a lengthy series is already, in a sense, assigning to photography the role of ‘the frame’, of the fragment of a virtual cinematic sequence, thus establishing the first, and most obvious, link between the two media.

³¹ Several unoccupied sets were present in the Cinecittà studios when Crewdson took his photographs: among them, the nineteenth-century New York set of *Gangs of New York* (Martin Scorsese, 2002) and a Medieval Italian town, from an unidentified movie. More than the others, the remains of the Roman Empire from the HBO series *Rome* fill the images.

³² Shot between 2005 and 2007 at Cinecittà studios, the television series, created by Bruno Heller, is an HBO, BBC and Rai Fiction co-production.

things under the pressure of time and history, is the object of the fascinated and sorrowful gaze of an American tourist travelling in the Old World: the ruins of the Classical antiquity overlay the remains of the sets as the living testimony of an unburied past; *remains* indeed, and not memories of the glory of the past but figures of an elegy that concerns both that location and cinema itself.

The photographic series opens with the image of an ancient door intersecting a paved street, which runs through the surrounding walls and is closed by a round arch; the last image represents an iron gate that opens onto a path surrounded by wild fields, leading out of the Cinecittà studios. From a movement toward the inside to one toward the outside, from a piece of set design to a real element (the gate is part of the perimeter of the studios), the series represents a boundary crossing. This is confirmed by the recurrence of the visual motif of the threshold, thus reaffirming the metaphor of the gap between times, modes and visions. The second photograph of *Sanctuary*, that stands as an introduction for the whole work, makes this especially clear. The image is an extreme long shot taken from above, which reveals a layered landscape: beyond the scaffolds that hold a facade — whose frame construction occupies the foreground delineating the lower side — there is a small cluster of wooden houses from different ages and different film sets, among which it is possible to identify Classical-Age buildings with overlapping arches. Close to the borders of Cinecittà several modern buildings stand out, while the hills on the horizon delimit the landscape. The artificial splendour of reconstructed Classical antiquity is inserted between modernist, functionalist architectures, trespassing organically between past and present, real and fake, nature and artifice, life and staging. In this impossibility to distinguish between spectacularization and testimony, document and reconstruction — that is already within the things themselves and does not need to be staged — Crewdson seems to restore a productive relationship between reality and the image and to present a mode of viewing that is similar to certain landscape photography ‘in a Edward Weston way’, not to mention the contemplative sobriety of Atget and his willingness to document what is likely to disappear. It was Anthony Oliver Scott — not by chance a film critic who was in charge of writing the introductory essay for *Sanctuary*’s catalogue — who identified this connection, specifying however that in Crewdson’s work the duty of preserving and remembering the past is performed in a fictional world that has all the features of reality, and therefore in a ghostly world that overlaps and affects the real one.³³

Not only is it possible to acknowledge, in the images of the series, the influence of previous figurative forms — in a layering of models that combines landscape painting, a Romantic sensibility towards the ruins, monumental photography and historical cinema — but in fact reality itself is modelled and defined by

³³ See Anthony Oliver Scott, ‘When in Rome: Gregory Crewdson’s *Sanctuary*’, in *Sanctuary*, catalogue of the eponymous exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery, New York (New York: Abrams, 2010), pp. 8–11.

these memories. Precisely this active relationship between cinema and reality is the main focus of *Sanctuary* and of Crewdson's latest research.

Without entering into specific interpretations of the work, what is particularly relevant here is the double gesture of restoration: not only of the ghosts of an idea of cinema, of a world that now is mainly a memory, but also of *a way of looking* that is overtly testimonial, as it is for photographic memories. Crewdson seems to go back to a somehow elementary form of photography: he abandons artifice and the apparent complexity of his *tableaux vivants* in favour of an unexpected realistic dimension, he chooses black and white in order to establish 'the past' of cinema as well as the origin of his gaze. If cinema and its ghosts are the central meaning of his photography, and, on an even deeper level, of the very *experience of the real* — as it is in many works of contemporary photography — it is nevertheless the duty of photography to consign an experience of time in which preservation and transformation coexist: the sense of something that has passed and of its memory. Therefore *Sanctuary* may be considered above all an example of the primitive and elementary value of the photographic image that is *the relic*: a shrine to the ruins of cinema, a memory of a world that continues to affect our way of seeing, which photography, in a sort of paradoxical and historical inversion, acknowledges as its matrix.

In this gesture of the recovery of forms from the past it is possible to identify a stance that coheres with the contemporary dynamic of the re-writing, confluence and fluctuation between experiences, times and modes of the gaze that belong to different phases in the history of images. Indeed, numerous artistic forms and practices express such an interest in conducting research *about* the past of the contemporary visual culture; it is a sort of 'regard en arrière'³⁴ that is interested in reconstructing the many forms of the visual experience to find a *new* identity of the image. In particular, the main focus of this research is the irreducible tension between stasis and movement: a sort of primal scene in which we can trace the origin of our gaze and an alternative relationship with images and the experience of time they consign.

Moreover, the return to obsolete forms — including photography and cinema, in their materiality as media — has also produced a more general reconsideration of the two media, that cannot be resolved as a plain opposition. Specifically, contemporary research on the foundational elements of the images has rediscovered the importance of the dialectic between stillness and motion, thus individuating their mutual implications, their inter-mingling, which is always constitutively 'impure':

In the suspended animation created by the intersection of photography and cinema we find a model for simultaneously looking forward and backward at the vicissitudes

³⁴ *Arrêt sur image, fragmentation du temps. Aux sources de la culture visuelle moderne/Stop Motion, Fragmentation of Time: Exploring the Roots of Modern Visual Culture*, ed. by François Albera, Marta Braun and André Gaudreault (Lausanne: Editions Payot, 2002), p. 7.

of the media in question, and see that new media do not simply displace what came before, but rather shine a light onto older media, permitting us to see them differently.³⁵

The possibility of re-tracing a ‘counter-history’ of the images — with the aim of developing intermedial nexus, connections more than ruptures, confluences rather than influences — appears to be essential in order to understand the complexity of the contemporary visual experience, as well as a condition of contemporary aesthetics. Studies in media archeology, above all, are currently exploring the phenomena of the resurfacing and confluence of non-synchronous forms, retracing the connections between the past and the present of the images and of the viewing experiences.³⁶

We could mention, by way of example, the ‘new aesthetics of attractions’. This is not intended as a repetition of early cinema’s attraction mechanisms in the new forms of digital special effects,³⁷ but rather as a *shift* from the early astonishment caused by the movement — the ‘astonishing moment of movement’, described by Tom Gunning,³⁸ that constitutes a foundational moment for the cinematic experience — to a new fascination for the suspension of movement. It is the ‘reverse transition to immobility’ that Vivian Sobchack identified ten years ago as the pursuit of a new ‘experience of revelation’³⁹ of time. The ‘appeal of “slow motion”’⁴⁰ is based on exactly the same process of movement visibility that ruled the attractions of the early cinema, despite this reversal of direction:

[...] what ‘attracts’ is not simply ‘still to moving’ or ‘moving to still’ but, rather, the *movement from* one terminus to the other — indeed, the movement of movement itself, which, made visible in slow motion, occupies the uncanny space ‘between’ these end points, and reveals them both to be merely different ‘dimensions of the same process’.⁴¹

Thus the issue at stake is not the intrusion of a temporal fracture, the interruption of movement, the clash between different experiences of time — as in a

³⁵ Beckman and Ma, ‘Introduction’, in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, pp. 1–19 (p. 10).

³⁶ See, among others: *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications and Implications*, ed. by Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2011); *Between Still and Moving Images: Photography and Cinema in the 20th Century*.

³⁷ See *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. by Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

³⁸ Tom Gunning, ‘Re-Newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century’, in *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*, ed. by David Thornburn and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003, pp. 39–59).

³⁹ Vivian Sobchack, ‘“Cutting the Quick”: Techne, Physis, and Poiesis and the Attractions of Slow Motion’, in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, pp. 337–51.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 337.

⁴¹ Ivi, pp. 340–41 [emphasis in the original].

freeze frame — but the modification of a natural perceptive process that makes visible “the essential” movement of movement itself’.⁴² A *revelation* that corresponds, according to Sobchack, to an ‘extended sense of time’⁴³ that for the most part has been lost in contemporary society.

The necessity to relocate lost ways of viewing informs the need for research about the past for many contemporary filmmakers and visual artists. We may also call it ‘an aesthetic of anachronism’, motivated less by the longing for a vanished age of cinema, than by the aim to *recreate* the tensions that have been always present in the history of images. This capacity to reinvent is expressed, by way of an example, through explicit forms of stylistic mimicry (a case in point is Miguel Gomes’s cinema, which restages silent cinema), and moreover through the *return* to a ‘basic’ condition of the gaze that adopts extreme measures of the objectivity of time and space. The latter is exemplified by *Contemplative Cinema*: a real experience of collapse of movement into fixity.⁴⁴

Even the digital, in its incessant experimentation with the visual arts, recovers the ‘old’ ambition of electronic images and video to assimilate forms, images and techniques. The erosion of the boundaries between old and new forms of images, which the digital enables, cancels the opposition between moving and fixed. Nevertheless, this dichotomy resurfaces with unprecedented features in the work of some visual artists.⁴⁵ The memory of magical forms of animation, typical of pre-cinema, is reflected in the ‘fascination for slowing down the images, for the decomposition of the dynamics, for the freezing of movement, almost wanting to recreate a sort of post-precinema with present-day digital techniques’.⁴⁶

Perhaps the most evident example of something that transcends the boundaries between different types and times of images, and of the coexistence and interconnection among ‘non-synchronous’ elements, is the GIF.⁴⁷ A sort of ‘animated photograph’, or a photographic vision of cinema, in which fixity and movement are simultaneously present, GIF images seem to propose once again the primitive experience of the ‘magical’ animation of the inanimate. In this

⁴² Ivi, p. 342.

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ Ágnes Pethő’s essay, mentioned above, is focused specifically on contemporary forms of slow cinema, in which suspended time pushes the cinematic image toward the limits of the *tableau*.

⁴⁵ As Elena Marcheschi argues in her essay ‘Deterritorialized Images: Future Visions, Past Memories’, below.

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 80.

⁴⁷ In the last few years, commentaries on Graphic Format Interchange images are constantly increasing in number. Among the many contributions on this topic, we should mention at least Jane Hu, ‘GIF Typologies and the Heritage of the Moving Image’, *Hyperallergic*, 28 (2012) <<http://hyperallergic.com/57585/gif-typologies-and-the-heritage-of-the-moving-image/>> [accessed 17 March 2016]; Lorenzo Marmo, ‘Looping, Laughing and Longing: The Animated GIF in the Contemporary Online Environment’, *Comunicazioni Sociali*, 1 (special issue *Snapshot Culture: The Photographic Experience in the Post-Medium Age*, ed. by Adriano D’Aloia and Francesco Parisi, 2016), 78–86.

sense — through the constant repetition of the same gesture — it is not unlike the circular movements of the optical toys of pre-cinema: a sort of phenakistoscope or zoetrope with automatic motion, subjected to loops and repeated twitches. The GIF's mechanics of sequence are interrupted the second before the movement may generate a change; in which every initiated gesture folds into itself, is relaunched, starts again in an incessant and identical loop suitable for a child's cognitive schema. Indeed, in this very obsessive repetition we can identify a suspended experience of time, stretched between the infinite impulse for a new beginning and a movement that is nonetheless incapable of generating a change. With its movement, that continuously collapses only to start again, the GIF — even while constituting the reproduction of an archaic visual experience — embodies a paradoxical sense of time in which the new has all the features of the already seen. Sustained by a fetishistic mechanism of regressive fixation on the always identical, the GIF in fact embodies the fragmented nature of the fetish, which further connects it to the photograph: the real starting point, and also point of inquiry, for many contemporary visual practices.

'It's necessary to start again from photography',⁴⁸ writes Bellour, in an essay that investigates the connections between different images in contemporary audiovisual production. A return to photography as an enigmatic, absolutely non-evident experience substantiates visual culture widely, as is argued by Michel Frizot, to whom Bellour dedicates the essay. Specifically, the (re)construction of a photographic archive will help us understand this additional 'scene of the return', and thus conclude our brief analytical overview.

Among the artistic practices that take interest in the past, works that rewrite archival materials have played a pivotal role. The reinterpretation and reconfiguration of existing archival material is strictly related to the Foucauldian idea of an 'archaeology of the present', intended more as a promise rather than a restitution, more as a legacy to revitalize, rather than to recompose philologically. The work of Linda Fregni Nagler, a conceptual artist who studies, reconstructs and reconfigures the iconographic conventions of vernacular photography between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, is set within this theoretical framework. One of her latest works, *Pour commander à l'air*,⁴⁹ presents a series of images connected through a figurative motif: all the photographs show a subject balanced precariously, or 'suspended': on the verge of jumping — or jumping into the void. These are indeed 'precarious' images, in which an act or the outcome of the act represented is indefinable, hence throw-

⁴⁸ Bellour, 'Concerning "The Photographic"', in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, pp. 253–76 (p. 269).

⁴⁹ Exhibited for the first time in 2014 at the MAXXI, in Rome, and now partly acquired by the ACACIA Collection of the Museo del Novecento in Milan, the series *Pour commander à l'air* consists of fifteen photographs taken from the archives of twentieth-century American newspapers.

ing the notion of the 'decisive moment' into crisis, though it is nonetheless represented. All of the images come from different archives of American newspapers from the last century that the artist has collected, photographed and enlarged in the darkroom. This process reveals the presence of layered retouching and corrections that redefine the photographic trace. As Fregni Nagler herself states, 'retouching is a way to underline the meaning, it helps to make visible what, in photography, is out of focus or even absent. However, it is also a means of obscuring, concealing, masking, and furthermore is a form of metamorphosis and transformation.'⁵⁰ Therefore, there are many different gestures of image rewriting in the work, starting from the artist's choice to compose the series of photographs through subtle, mutual references between them, but also as a hint to a pre-existing work, Sarah Charlesworth's *Stills* (1980), that shows photographs of people falling from buildings. This work similarly presents enlargements of pictures taken from newspapers, and depicts people falling: we do not know if they are jumping into the void to save themselves from a fire or, conversely, to take their own lives.

In the series *Pour commander à l'air*, however, Fregni Nagler introduces a more complex idea of balance and suspension than in Charlesworth's work, which is focused on showing a vertiginous act of falling. Conversely, the work of Fregni Nagler shows men on the edge of a roof, or hanging from a window, looking down; subjects performing balancing acts that defy gravity in an impossible attempt to freeze the movement; children 'flying' in vertiginous and dangerous jumps: all of the people compose a set of interrupted acts, in which the evident interruption of time highlights the exact act of movement that the snapshot freezes. The dynamic quality of the gestures represented allows the viewer to perceive a 'tension toward the movement': an instability that concerns not only the subject of the image but its very condition, inasmuch as the image looks toward the off-frame space where the unreachable/unseen ending of the actions should be.

As Mary Ann Doane underlines, 'the snapshot takes movement as its referent but betrays it through its petrification':⁵¹ only instant photography — as the violent rupture of the flow of time — makes *visible* the bodies suspended in a jump or in a flight, arresting them as if they will never touch the ground. This is 'the power of the machine' (or medium 'specificity'): that is, the ability to interrupt the vertigo of falling, and a speed that is imperceptible to our eyes. However, 'the shock of the instant lies in its implausibility':⁵² the breaking of continuity appears as unnatural as it is revealing: what we see is the fragment of a movement, a moment *in between* stillness and motion that absorbs them both in a mutual, unbreakable connection.

⁵⁰ 'Intervista con Linda Fregni Nagler/*Pour commander à l'air*', ed. by Elena Bordinon, *ATP Diary*, 22 April 2015 <<http://atpdiary.com/linda-fregni-nagler-decardenas/>> [accessed 17 March 2016].

⁵¹ Mary Ann Doane, 'Real Time: Instantaneity and the Photographic Imaginary', in *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image*, pp. 23–38 (p. 28).

⁵² *Ibidem*.

Even the photographs that do not show a ‘flying’ body but rather a subject waiting, about to jump, maintain this tension and hint at ‘what happens next’, therefore referring to the off-frame. It is precisely this moment, before anything happens, that interests Fregni Nagler. She imagines the photographers who pursue such snapshot and the ‘decisive moment’ as being forced to wait for a long time, subjugated by the dramatic time taken for a decision that can take many hours. ‘I wanted to represent the impotence of waiting’,⁵³ ‘a time that is psychological and also symbolic’, that lasts even longer due to the limits of the captured moment, to the inability to convey the completeness of the event.

This incompleteness specifically, as a constitutive limit of all images, not only of photographs, is therefore the foundation for a new ‘aesthetics of indecision or of suspension’, where what the image cannot show is definitive, what is *in* the image pushes *beyond* the mere data. The absent, incomplete, defective, inconclusive image, which is aware of the difficulty of resolving the complexity of the real, is key to a new way of questioning our gaze, interested in recovering those ‘grey areas’ of the visible that the digital image tends to erase.

The figure of the ‘off-frame/off-screen space’, which gives way to one of the major oppositions between cinema and photography — the conclusive, ‘blind’ off-frame of photography versus the varying space of cinema, with the permeable borders of its frame — becomes the central figure of a composition that calls upon the viewer to ‘look differently’, builds a cognitive experience of crisis and doubt and promotes an attitude of openness and suspension toward the images.

The persistent recourse to off-screen space made in several contemporary films is a form of resistance to the supposedly comprehensive ‘evidence of the world’ and of its images. Instead these are counterposed to a symbolic interactivity that is typical of cinema, and partially lost with the advent of digital technologies. In films like *Play* (Ruben Östlund, 2011), *A Separation* (*Jodaeiye Nader az Simin*, Asghar Farhadi, 2011), or *Stranger by the Lake* (*L’Inconnu du lac*, Alain Guiraudie, 2013) — to name only a few — the shot is never self-sufficient and the act of disclosing always exceeds the image, in an epistemological tension regarding the off-screen space. Essentially, the issue at stake no longer consists of measuring the limits of the image, but rather of assigning the image to its limits and of turning them into the setting of a new discovery that involves both photography and cinema.

This introduction can only touch upon an issue that would require a more in-depth analysis; however, here — at the boundaries of the frame and of this overview — we identify in the well-established figure of *a limit* the key for new research, where once again photography provides a model for experience: ‘The photographic exists somewhere in-between; it is a state of “in-betweenness”: in movement, it is that which interrupts, that paralyzes; in immobility, it perhaps bespeaks its relative impossibility.’⁵⁴

⁵³ ‘Intervista con Linda Fregni Nagler/*Pour commander à l’air*, ed. by Elena Bordignon.

⁵⁴ Bellour, ‘Concerning “The Photographic”’, p. 13.

Suspended Evidence: Rethinking the Photographic



Linda Fregni Nagler, *Pour commander à l'air*, 2014 – *Daredevil*
Gelatin silver print on Matt Baryt Paper, Selenium Toner, 114.5×165.4 cm