

THE CINEMATIC DIMENSION IN GREGORY CREWDSON'S HOVER SERIES (1996-1997)

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Abstract: The following article tries to highlight the cinematic dimension in Gregory Crewdson's photographic series. The author argues that Gregory Crewdson, on many occasions, acts as a film director, and not an ordinary one, but an 'auteur' filmmaker (a comparison with Jean Luc-Godard or David Lynch would not be so far-fetched in this situation as many would think). Consequently the 'Auteur Theory', usually used in film studies and in the stylistic analysis of different filmmakers, in order to analyse in a nuanced manner how the personality, the personal ideas and life experiences of a particular film director are manifested in his films, will be used in this article as an instrument in order to more profoundly understand the vision and art of Gregory Crewdson. The author will also present a cultural and historical context in which the conceptual photography originated and thrived in, which served as basis for Crewdson's art. Also, the focal point of the applied analysis will be on the *Hover* series (1996-1997) because, even though it was the second series created by the American artist (after *Natural Wonder*), it represents the foundation for all of his later photographic creations, in terms of "directing" a photographic image, of using the narrative ambiguity or in the use of serialism.

Keywords: conceptual photography, contemporary art, Gregory Crewdson, narration, contemporary photography, staged photography.

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Introduction

The author of the article aims to analyse the syncretism of, but also to study analytically the cinematic component in the photographic creations of Gregory Crewdson. Due to the relatively small size of this analysis, the focus will be on a single photographic series, namely *Hover* (1996-1997). Only this series will be the point of interest of this article. This endeavour also aims to develop a link in the field of academic research between two arts that are usually analysed separately, but which, in this article, will be explored as a unit, namely photography and cinema. This is because the two artistic languages reflect the way Gregory Crewdson creates: photography meticulously directed and with implications as profound as those found in the auteur film. This artistic hybrid will be explored and interpreted in the following lines.

Before delving into the actual analysis of the article, I will present a personal motivation in favour of choosing this artist and this subject. Gregory Crewdson (b. 1962) is a contemporary American photography artist, an influential creator on the global art photography stage, he is a follower of conceptual and narrative photography, creates photographic paintings, is influenced by cinema, is dreamlike in a certain measure (he is no Luis Buñuel or Man Ray in this respect, but his surreal side cannot be ignored either) and explores apathy and melancholy through the characters of his worlds. These are just some of the most common descriptions of Crewdson.

Many of those who analyse his works and vision forget a significant aspect: there is an interdisciplinarity in his art, which transcends beyond what

is immediately visible, it is not just a simple “epidermis” of the image, but one that delves deep into the ideas, imagination and artistic personality of Crewdson, but also indirectly of the viewers who come in contact with these images. If during an aesthetic, semantic or any other type of analysis, operated on his photographs, this in-depth interdisciplinary aspect is not considered, doubled by a psychoanalytic aspect (which also has to do with the American artist’s biography, since his father was a psychoanalyst [Cotton, 2018, p. 67]), the analysis and its results will be relatively superficial. In the case of most photographers (selected from the history of all types of photography), a deconstruction of the plastic, conceptual / emotional and technical components is enough to understand them or for them to be understood at a penetrating level. The exception to this rule was conceptual photography, which was based on a high capacity for interpretation by the viewers, more so than in any other photographic genre. This idea certainly applies to Gregory Crewdson. There are other artists of the same bill, such as Jeff Wall, Cindy Sherman, Gillian Wearing, Andreas Gursky, Philip Lorca di-Corcia, etc., but the focus in this article will be on Crewdson’s creation.

Research Methodology

For this article, the author used several research methods to highlight different aspects. For example, qualitative analysis, with an emphasis on interpretation, is the main analytical tool in this article. The whole approach is an interpretive one, the point of origin is outlined starting from the following questions: in what way is Crewdson’s photography a syncretic one? And what role does fiction play in this syncretism? These opened certain interpretive paths that the author tries to use as a basis and further develop.

Afterwards, this method was combined with “Auteur Theory” by Francois Truffaut, who considered the director to be the central figure in an art film and that, if one feels the director’s personal imprint, his personality and ideas in film, then it becomes auteur cinema (Truffaut, 1954). This idea was adapted in the context of photography. In the case of Gregory Crewdson, it is appropriate because he often behaves like a film director, but things can be further nuanced, to be precise as an auteur film director, because his ideas, personality, vision of culture, media, human psyche, American society are embodied in his photographic series in a particularly idiosyncratic manner.

Narrative analysis was also another very useful tool when interpreting the content of these photographs. Since the American artist also created photographs that have a certain “story”, hermetic and fractured (this nuance will be analysed in the following lines), there is a type of narrative discourse elaborated in these images and, consequently, this type of analysis can be applied in this context.



Fig. 1. Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled (woman planting in road)*, *Hover* series (1996-1997), 50 x 60 cm, exhibited at the Luhring Augustine Gallery (Crewdson, 1997a).

Finally, the interdisciplinary approach cannot be ignored, as during this article two arts are compared in different ways: photography and cinema; on the “ground” of photography. Cinema is viewed from the perspective that it influences the vision, style, and aesthetics of Gregory Crewdson’s photographs.

The Historical Context of Conceptual Photography and Narrative Photography

Considering the genre in which Gregory Crewdson falls, namely conceptual and narrative photography, I will present a brief historical and cultural context in this section. It is worth mentioning that conceptual photography was visibly influenced by the conceptual visual arts. The experimental atmosphere and postmodern aesthetics of the 1970s certainly played an important role in the

paradigm shift that art photography underwent, not just the visual, performing arts, or installations and object (Grundberg, 2021, pp. 2-3). Land Artists such as Robert Smithson (1938-1973) or Richard Long (b. 1945) could not bring their artwork made in nature to galleries or museums, nor could they bring their audience to where these were. Thus, due to these constraints, some artists came to use the camera and, (in) directly, when they framed their subjects, they began to pay attention to composition, light, perspective, etc. They took photographs, which are practically the only evidence that these creations existed in that form, in those spaces. Otherwise, there would be nothing left. Performance Art or Body Art artists such as Marina Abramović (b. 1946), Bruce Nauman (b. 1941) and Vito Acconci (b. 1940) were in a similar situation¹. Some performed in their own studios, alone, while others performed in galleries in front of an audience. But without those photographs taken either by the artists themselves, using a timer, or by third parties who captured certain gestures from their performative actions, only the texts written by different historians or art critics would have remained for posterity. This can be seen as a first step of photography towards conceptual art and other postmodern artistic languages. However, here the photograph remains at the stage of documenting something. These artistic creations of various kinds were not conceived and imagined for the camera that had the secondary role of “archiving” them, but the merit of these languages or artistic currents is that they used photography in a different manner and utilised this visual language and the camera in the most experimental artistic approaches. Liz Wells believes that Conceptual Art created a “bridge” for photography to reach museums and contemporary art galleries (Wells, 2015, p. 321).

The next step, that of making photography itself conceptual and not just documenting conceptual art, would be accomplished around the same time, in the 1970s, through the creations of artists such as Duane Michals (b. 1932) and Lucas Samara (b. 1936), Arthur Tress (b. 1940) or Francesca Woodman (1958-1981), to name a few of the most influential names of conceptual photographers. Previous artists, but especially influential ones such as Claude Cahun (1894-1954) or Ralph Eugene Meatyard (1925-1975) should not be overlooked². With the exception of Claude Cahun, who can be considered historically modernist, but postmodernist in aesthetics and conceptual approach, all the others began in the ‘60s and ‘70s to take the first directed photographs, from a certain point of

1 For an overview of land-art and performance artists the following source was consulted: Hopkins, David (2018) *After Modern Art 1945-2017*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 158-163 (Land-art) and pp. 172-182 (Performance-Art).

2 For a brief history of narrative photography, see Bright, Susan (2005) *Art Photography Now*. London: Thames & Hudson. pp. 78-79.

view, in a radically different way from all the classic photographic genres, but also from the art photography up to that period. These, even if they are different in many ways, in terms of aesthetics, plastic, conceptual, psychological, imaginative, intellectual level, in terms of personalities, their own intellectual formation, etc., have in common the desire to experience the narrative through their photographs. All of them wanted to be “storytellers”, but that “story” must be essentialized either in a single photographic image or through serialism, that is, a combination of photographic images that were to be read in a certain visual direction (Duane Michals and Michael Snow would probably be the best examples in this regard). We should not forget artists such as Bernd and Hilla Becher, John Baldessari or Andreas Gursky, who could also be grouped in the aesthetics of conceptual photography. There are photography critics who consider the Becher couple to be the first purely conceptual photographers, the fundamental difference between the members of this group and the one mentioned above is that, for the former, the exploration of the narrative becomes the main means of creating photographic images, while for later, the narrative does not exist, it is not developed in any way, the idea prevails.

Throughout this particularly complex landscape, an artist like Gregory Crewdson will make his presence felt in the early 1990’s through the *Natural Wonder* series (1992-1997). He, along with previously mentioned artists such as Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall or Mac Adams (to highlight just a few of the most important artists), will continue the aesthetic and conceptual directions drawn by the previously invoked artists, but more programmatically and perhaps more sophisticated, as they use the ideas of their predecessors and develop them. More specifically, in Crewdson’s images there are certain aspects that could be observed in the dreamlike creations of Arthur Tress or in the directorial approach of Duane Michals.

Cinematic Dimension

The cinematic dimension is the element most frequently associated with Gregory Crewdson’s aesthetics by various theorists of contemporary photography but also by the artist himself. There are many reasons for this association. One of the most important is the way Crewdson directs all his images, starting with the *Natural Wonder* series (1992-1997), continuing with *Hover* (1996-1997), *Twilight* (1998-2002), *Beneath the Roses* (2003-2008), *Sanctuary* (2009), *Cathedral of the Pines* (2013-2014) and reaching the last series, *Eclipse of Moths* (2018-2019). Before going into the actual analysis in this subchapter, it should probably be clarified what is meant by the cinematic dimension in relation to photography?



Fig. 2. Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled (man sodding street closed)*, *Hover* series (1996-1997), gelatin silver print, 50x60 cm, exhibited at the Luhring Augustine Gallery (Crewdson, 1997b).

There can be several answers, depending on the aspect for analysis and from what perspective. For example, light can be cinematic and it will subsequently be studied, but it can also be part of a possible acting. In this case, however, the component related to the “film production” of photographic images, the involvement of relatively large teams, all subordinated to the “directorial” vision of the American photographer, will be analysed. In this case, the photographer resembles a filmmaker, as defined by François Truffaut in his influential article (1954). This perspective of the author who makes his mark on all levels, psychological, intellectual, cultural, imaginative, social, on his creation will be explored in the following lines.

With the exception of the *Sanctuary* series (2009), which was made on the streets of Rome and could be considered the least directed of all these series, all the other series are articulated around a strong concept, with a personal point of

view, with an artificiality assumed aesthetically and not at all kitsch, because in terms of emotional register it falls into the dramatic, serious area. This series is the exception. In *Sanctuary*, Crewdson approaches a type of street photography, even documentary, slightly poetic, oppressive and melancholic. Urban spaces are devoid of human figures, he can be compared to photographer Eugene Atget or painter Giorgio de Chirico, and the directing, even if it exists, is present in very small doses.

More specifically, this cinematic dimension can be seen in a series such as *Hover* (1996-1997). This is his second major photographic series of his career, consisting of black and white photographs taken on film, in large format, in a suburb of New England. Visually, the most notable element is the point of view used: we are dealing with a wide high angle, a wide depth of field (everything is very clearly rendered regardless of the distance from the camera). The artist used a very high crane to get this perspective³, which captures certain directed scenes from the American suburbs. As a term of comparison, in the previous series, *Natural Wonder* (1992-1997), there is a more assumed theatrical character; Crewdson chose another visual style: narrow framing, probably a more telephoto lens, low angle shots plus the development of chromatic relationships (which also exists in other subsequent series of images, with the exception of *Hover* [1996-1997] and *Sanctuary* [2009]). The awareness of directing remained constant in these first two series for Gregory Crewdson, but in the first series, because it was made entirely in the studio, creating a kind of set design, using birds and other artificial creatures, could be considered as having a theatrical rather than cinematic dimension. While in the second series the elements of scenography or props created by Crewdson in the previous series are no longer found here, the theatricality becomes cinematic. Basically, the American artist uses what he has at hand in New England to imagine his photographic images. Typical American suburban homes, gardens, cars, swimming pools, long, straight country roads, mountain wildlife, all these elements that are commonly found in that space are Crewdson's work material.

Also, from these photos, one can find the germs of the cinematic present in the aesthetics of the American artist in all the series that will precede it. In addition to visual directing, there is also one that takes place at the content level. In his photographs, for example also in the *Hover* series, an ambiguous narrative is felt. This is a key concept in the entire crewdsonian creation (present in other photographers in the same aesthetic area, such as Jeff Wall or Mac Adams). What

³ Gregory Crewdson details this process in an interview with Bradford Morrow (Morrow and Crewdson, 1997, p. 42.)

does this mean? In his photos, it looks like something just happened or something is about to happen. This narrative ambiguity can be interpreted as a cinematic element, there are many auteur filmmakers who frequently explore it (such as Ingmar Bergman, Jean Luc-Godard or Terrence Malick; they are very different from several perspectives, but they have in common this concern for a type of narrative “uncertainty”, to which they always return), but, obviously, in the photographic art it manifests itself in a different manner than in cinema.

As is well known, photography is primarily a spatial art, it does not exist in time, it does not have an intrinsic duration (as in film or literature), everything is suspended in time. Probably because of this, photographers have seldom been concerned with exploring a narrative dimension through their images. Narration needs duration, a temporal unfolding that this art cannot offer. What is remarkable about creators such as Crewdson (and others mentioned above) is that they want to explore in their photographic creations precisely this aspect of the elaboration of a narrative structure through a singular image. This could be seen as another cinematic rather than a photographic element.

This aspect is also creatively explored in the *Hover* series. In Fig. 2. one can see how something happened in the middle of that street, in an American suburb. In the upper third there is a police car and a policeman looking towards the middle of the picture where an angry, upset driver (we can assume this because in the title of the paper there is the word “sodding” which means “upset, angry”), continues to lay grass in the middle of the street. Some layers seem to be about to fall off the trailer. The driver is upset, the sprinklers are gushing, the neighbours are watching as if hypnotized, the policeman is also observing what this driver is doing with the layers of grass.

This is the narrative fragment developed in this photo. The only certainty about the message and its content is that nothing is clear. Why is the driver upset? Why are those around him mesmerized? Why are the layers of grass laid on the ground? We, the viewers of this photo, can interpret this sequence in different ways, but without having the certainty that our interpretation is correct.

Similarly, in Fig. 1. another narrative is constructed in the same space and probably at the same time (given the similar light in each image and the spatial coherence), from a very similar perspective (black and white, wide high angle, great depth of field), but in a different place in this suburb. In the first third of the photo, a mysterious woman appears, alone, there is no one else in this space, she is trying to plant something, we don't know what exactly, in the middle of the street. In the place where the protagonist is you can see certain plants, overturned pots, as if after an episode of rage (similar to the previous image). A significant dose of mystery remains here as well. Why plant on cement? (There's a surreal accent here as well.) Why are there some messy pots? Why is the woman hypnotized?



Fig. 3. Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled (concentric circles)*, *Hover* series (1996-1997), gelatin silver print, 50x60 cm, exhibited at the Luhring Augustine Gallery (Crewdson, 1997c).

As in other photographs in this series, including Fig. 3, even more supernatural elements imagined and directed by Crewdson appear, such as certain concentric circles in a field. In many genre films, this visual pattern is interpreted as: aliens have created those signs and humanity must be on alert (a good example of this is *Signs* [2002] directed by M. Night Shyamalan which has a whole narrative structured around these patterns). Gregory Crewdson does not adopt this interpretation in his case, in a postmodern way it could be considered these concentric circles are made by another mysterious and lonely man who “seems” only to mow the grass, but he mows in this pattern with possible supernatural connotations. Again, as in the previous photos, there are many questions and few answers. Perhaps more information could be added if another element with cinematic potential, serialism, is analysed. There is no explicit serialism as in the case of John Hillard or Duane Michals, but given that in the *Hover* series there are two more photographs that play with these distinctive signs of the circles

drawn in the grass (without being concentric this time), we can talk about certain connections between images at a conceptual and narrative level. For example, one of the circles (small in visual weight) is investigated in a courtyard, behind a house, by a group of firefighters who also seem apathetic and hypnotized (as are often the characters imagined by Crewdson) by these created forms; and the other circle (large visually as it occupies about a third of the image) is also in another courtyard, but there are no other characters around it. What kind of mystery is being explored here? Maybe Crewdson wanted to play imaginatively with the genre conventions of a series like *Twin Peaks*, directed by David Lynch, in which the supernatural, the mystery intertwines with the everyday, mundane life in a small town in an American suburb. The strange, disturbing American suburb that is universalizing and becoming a metaphor for the condition of contemporary man could be a possible interpretation of these images. The irrational, much like the surrealist artists of the last century claimed, can make its presence felt even in the most common places, the American artist seems to proclaim.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this article was to analyse and interpret syncretically the way in which Gregory Crewdson used in his photographic creations in the *Hover* series (1996-1997) cinematic elements and instruments, directly, ie by directing, production and “elaborate scenarios” (as noted in the previous lines), or indirectly, by the way in which certain creative decisions taken by him can be interpreted. Essentially, the cinematic elements studied were: Crewdson’s “auteur film” directing; the presence of the narrative, with the ambiguous variation of the narrative (the mystery developed in all his photographs through space, objects, characters, perspective); and a more discreet type of photographic serialism (whereby certain photographic images are in a relationship of visual and metaphorical dialogue with others of the same series). The aim of this analysis was to emphasize the versatility and depth of Gregory Crewdson and, perhaps, to offer an argument in favour of his influence in the field of contemporary art photography.

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