## Painting, Photography and the Sublime

In 1936 Walter Benjamin framed painting and photography (or, more precisely, photomechanical reproduction) as antithetical.[[1]](#footnote-1) Painting concerns uniqueness and the mark of the hand of the artist-genius whereas photography is about mass replication and the smooth technological surface. But it can also be argued that photography was more the heir to Renaissance perspective than was modern painting. Photography is a mechanization of geometric perspective where the lens takes over from the vanishing point and film takes over from canvas.

Yet the Western tradition of painting since the Renaissance cannot be reduced to representation. We have to remember the role played by the sublime in the form of religious subject matter. It was not only the arrival of photography in the early 19c that heralded a need for a creative adaptation on the part of painting, it was also the end of Church patronage in the 18c and the decline in courtly patronage. The end of Church patronage not only created a financial crisis for art it also confronted painting with the choice of representing everyday life as in the Calvinist 17c Dutch Republic, or finding new sources of sublimity. The strategy of everyday realism evident in 17c Dutch art was re-articulated in early 19c French painting up to the point of Impressionism—with the added benefit of photography. First generation Impressionists such as Degas and Manet were effectively realists who pioneered the use of photography as a creative tool informing the medium of painting. Radical Impressionism only arrives with artists such as Monet and Seurat who begin the process of deconstructing the image, moving towards its “other”. In *Art and Photography* (1968) Aaron Scharf claims that the photographic artefact of the blur evident in early photographs that required long exposure times impacted on Impressionism. [[2]](#footnote-2) This is an interesting speculation but there was more to the disintegration of the image in Impressionist painting than that: it was the first step on the road to abstraction.

Kant is especially important in terms of the development of modern aesthetics and he was not especially concerned with the image or even the external object. The real focus of Kantian aesthetics is the relationship between the systems of nature and mind. For Kant aesthetic experience is a reflective experience of mental processes of perception and cognition. Kant influenced Romanticism, which laid the foundations for modern art. And it is in the Romantic period that modern, post-Christian, philosophical forms of the sublime were formulated. Imitation was found lacking because it merely represented the surface of things. The Romantics sought that which lay beyond the veil of appearances, what Kant called the “thing-in-itself” which lies beyond the senses. What might lie beyond the surface of the real became the subject of modernist abstraction.

But photography could not be excluded from this project because it is an instance of scientific instrumentation that can penetrate nature beyond the capabilities of our native senses and memory. We can think of Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge and their impact on artists such as Balla, Boccioni and Duchamp. And so it is not surprising to see photography coexisting with totally abstract painting: for example, in the work of Constructivist artists such as Rodchenko and Moholy-Nagy.

Walter Benjamin not only championed the ability of photography to penetrate deeper into the real; inspired by Dada photomontage and Eisenstein’s “intellectual montage” he saw that mass produced images could be deployed to create new realities and speaks of film bursting our “prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second”.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It was Dada photomontage that confronted the sovereignty of painting with its antithesis: photo-mechanical reproduction. The “halftone” process perfected in the 1890s allows photographs to be translated into an array of dots that can be etched onto printing plates. Dada photomontage creatively exploited the vast and expanding repository of images that followed. What is also interesting is that the halftone process turns images into information, into the same materiality as text.

Whereas Dada transcended painting with the invention of the new medium of photomontage with Surrealism photomontage entered into a productive dialogue with painting and abstraction. It was in Surrealism that photography revealed a capacity for sublimity sufficient to challenge the dominance of abstraction. Suzanne Guerlac (1997) reports that the Surrealist leader André Breton was searching for an original mode of poetry in the wake of Symbolist formalism and found it in an exhibition of Dada-inspired photomontage-collages by Max Ernst in Paris in 1921.[[4]](#footnote-4) Breton wrote the catalogue essay in which he stated:

The invention of photography dealt a fatal blow to old modes of expression in painting and in poetry where automatic writing, which emerged at the end of the nineteenth century [Breton has in mind Lautréamont and Rimbaud] is a veritable *photography of thought*.[[5]](#footnote-5) [emphasis added]

Crucially, in an endnote Guerlac adds that when Breton refers to *pensée* (idea or thought) this should not to be understood in an “epistemological or intellectual sense” but rather “in terms of Valéry's ‘symbolist’ term ‘inner life [*vie intérieure*]’ and his notion of *l'esprit*, conceived as force of transformation”.[[6]](#footnote-6) Breton’s realisation was that photomontage could be a mode of “automatic writing” tapping into the unconscious as a vital, creative impulse that deconstructed a reductionist opposition between the sublime and the mechanical. The concept of the “photography of thought” opens the way to concepts such as Deleuze and Guattari’s notions of “desiring machines” and “machinic” desire. In retrospect we can comprehend that Breton was formulating a seminal version of the technological sublime.

Surrealism provided a new way of using the image evident not only in Ernst but also in Magritte who uses images in a manner akin to photomontage. Magritte stated “My painting is visible images which … evoke mystery … when one sees one of my pictures, one asks onself … ‘What does that mean?’ It does not mean anything, because mystery means nothing …, it is unknowable”.[[7]](#footnote-7) As with Breton’s photography of thought, Magritte’s images are presented in terms of a veil of appearances, a product of mind as opposed to reality.

Photography as realism, as “straight” photography misses the inherent strangeness of the medium: its function as a prosthetic extension to the senses, memory and cognition and its translation of extended physical reality into a painting-like flatness—but more intense: what Duchamp termed the “ultra-thin” (*inframince*).[[8]](#footnote-8) The photograph points not only to the physical world; via its filmic flatness (also evident in cinema and the digital screen) it also points to the non-dimensional, to that which has no extension—like thought.

Painting in the second half of the 20c mutated and adapted. It “expanded” like sculpture combining with photography—and sculpture. And it entered into a synthesis of abstraction with its opposite: the photographic image. The result of this synthesis is aleatoric montage a chance meeting of images—a disruption of common sense.

Magritte revealed the image as *signifier* making direct links between the ideational arbitrariness of verbal and visual signs. His work points to the fact that serial, simulacral images refer to each other according to a cognitive syntagmatic and paradigmatic logic rather than referring directly to the real. And at this point we can recall Lacan’s statement that “the unconscious is structured like a language”. A connection can be made between Magritte’s Saussurean/Lacanian-like discourse on the arbitrariness of visual and verbal sign in the *The Treachery of Images*, 1928-9 (“this is not a pipe”) and Joseph Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs*, 1965. Both point to the visual image as a species of sign, two-dimensional, detached from physical reality and thereby able to function according to the logic of code and information. This is sublime because it recapitulates the alien, aleatoric logic of nature imprinted in the dream.

Considered in terms of sublimity the photographic image is not merely an imitation of reality, it is a transcendence of reality. For Jean Baudrillard the saturation of society by photomediated images “betrays” reality and we enter into the hyperreal dimension of simulation and simulacra. Abstract painting and photography are opposites but they can deconstruct into each other. Both suggest dissolution and therefore sublimity. Abstraction dissolves when it reaches the logical conclusion that is the monochrome: the non-image, the anti-image. Malevich’s *Black Square* and the later *White on White* of 1918 introduce the monochrome: painting one step away from extinction and, hence, as close to the sublime as seems possible. The photographic image dissolves via a process of multiplicitous simulacral proliferation to the point where the “original” is lost and forgotten.

Benjamin and Breton teach us that photography penetrates the fabric of nature and, via montage, allows us to recreate reality in the manner of thought and imagination. Dada and Surrealism laid the basis for the rebirth of the image in painting in postmodern art. But the image is no longer about representation, it is informed by the aesthetics of chance and the methodology of montage which together take images into a territory beyond meaning and hence akin to abstraction. Aleatoric montage has had an immense influence on art in the second half of the 20c and into the 21c. It is evident in aspects of Pop Art and proto-pop: one can cite the work of Robert Rauschenberg, Richard Hamilton, James Rosenquist and the post-pop conceptualist John Baldessari. The latter introduced the evocative phrase “blasted allegories” to describe the use of images in a manner abstracted from sense.

In the final analysis what is truly sublime is the unconscious and its relationship to consciousness, self and body—art is only a shadow of this elusive process. We begin to realize why artists turned to abstraction, but we can also understand why the Surrealists reintroduced the image via a sublimated conception of photography. They did so because the photographic image presents us with a phenomenological conundrum that confounds the real, the natural, in a manner that relates to Kant’s understanding of imagination as a capacity to create new worlds: “imagination (as a productive faculty of cognition) is a powerful agent for creating, as it were, a second nature out of the material supplied to it by actual nature”.[[9]](#footnote-9)

It was in the 1950s that the image began to be reintroduced into painting beyond the confines of Dada and Surrealism. One can cite the torn billboard “paintings” of the Nouveau Réaliste artists Raymond Hains, Mimmo Rotella et al. And the London based Independent Group (Richard Hamilton, in particular) which invented the new genre of Pop Art. Such artists de-defined the boundary between painting and photomedia to such an extent that when there was an explosion of “expanded sculpture” in the 1960s (installation, body art, land art, site-specific art) it was the photomediated discourse of Pop Art that saved painting from being totally overwhelmed.

In the 1970s there was a shift from the pop art strategy of translating found mass media imagery into the hallowed medium of paint on canvas to a creative use of photography in its own right. This shift was effected by conceptual artists such as Douglas Huebler, Ed Ruscha, Victor Burgin, Jan Dibbets. Perhaps the 1970s was the period in which painting appeared to have died, when photography—now intellectually sublimated—had finally made it redundant. But the monochromatic, philosophical dryness and coolness of conceptual art could not suppress the intrinsic sensuosity of painting. Painting can offer more than the infrathin surface of photography. The lubricity of paint is of the body, photography in its native condition is closer to the mind. But painting in its mutated, adapted and expanded form can traverse all these territories.

The dominance of photo-conceptualism was challenged in the late 1970s and early 80s by an Italian “renaissance” of painting in the in the form of what the Italian art critic Achille Bonito Oliva termed the “Transavantgarde” (Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Mimmo Paladino et al.) which became known more widely as Neo-Expressionism. Although influential, Neo-Expressionism was something of an sideshow in the 1980s when New York still dominated the art scene. Only Julian Schnabel and Jean-Michel Basquiat stand out as major New York based Neo-Expressionist painter of that period. The main game in town was a post-pop, conceptualist, deconstructive approach to mass media that was concerned with post-Benjaminian, Baudrillardian issues of simulacra and simulation, appropriation, and the use of mass media “spectacle” (Guy Debord) as a means of social conditioning especially with regard to gender politics.

Not only did photography remain at the forefront in the 1980s but also for the first time in the history of Western art the key players in a major art movement (postmodern appropriation) were women: Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler. There were men also: such as photo-conceptual artists who turned to mass media (Victor Burgin and Hans Haacke). Crucially, there were also painters such as Imants Tillers, David Salle and Gerhard Richter who formulated their work out of collections of photographic reproductions. Tillers in particular pursued the Baudrillardian hyperrealist thesis that the photographic copy was actually more sublime than the original.[[10]](#footnote-10)

By the 1990s the intense philosophical, political and semiological investigation of photomedia in the New York art world that had lasted since the 1970s died down. It was almost as if the New York art world—driven by the theoretical engine of *October*, the neo-Marxist and poststructuralist art journal (which privileged photography)[[11]](#footnote-11)—had theorized itself to death. But it had done its job, it had proven that photography was eligible for the status of high art. After the theorizing was done the art market took over and the inherently profligate medium of photography was subjected to the castrating economic logic of the limited edition, the logic of rarity that Benjamin saw was intrinsic to painting. Perhaps it is this logic in the end that enabled painting to survive the onslaught of photography. But that logic also feeds off the mystique of the sublime which is inextricably entwined with the cult value (and brand value) of genius.

1. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Scharf, A. *Art and photography*, London: Allen Lane, 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Benjamin, W. op. cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Guerlac, Suzanne, *Literary polemics: Bataille, Sartre, Valéry, Breton*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 247 note 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Tate, *René Magritte: The Pleasure Principle*, exhibition brochure, Tate Liverpool, 2011, unpaginated. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jerrold Seigel, *The Private Worlds of Marcel Duchamp: Desire, Liberation, and the Self in Modern Culture*, Berkeley: University of Califormina Press, 1997, p. 101. Online version accessed September 2011 available at: http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft9h4nb688&chunk.id=d0e1652&toc.id=&brand=ucpress [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, translated by James Creed Meredith, 1790, §49. Online version available from the Gutenberg Project: http://ebooks.gutenberg.us/Alex\_Collection/kant-critique-140.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Graham Coulter-Smith, *The Postmodern Art of Imants Tillers: Appropriation en abyme*, London, Paul Holberton, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. One can cite key articles such as Craig Owens’ 'Photography en abyme' (1978) and Rosalind Krauss’ ‘A Note on Photography and the Simulacral’ (1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)