

## Theatre and Photography

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**Abstract:** *There is a long tradition in the Romanian theatre school for the study of photography. Maybe it is rather hard for us to realise that quite from the beginning of photography a bound of interdependence has been formed between the two mediums of artistic expression. Pictorialism was the first defining movement in the demarche of integrating and accepting photography among the fine arts. Pictorialists borrowed techniques and subjects innate to painting, and thanks to the rather quick time of rendering compared to painting, the artist endeavours in taking more daring compositions and subjects. Here we notice a rather heavy influence from the side of the director and the actor in conceiving a scene for a photograph. We could notice a reciprocity in the shared influence on one side we may notice a dramatization of some scenes and on the other naturality and unselfconscious inherent to photography which we will later observe in cinematography. The base of the Theatre – photography relationship resides in the limitation of having to tell a story in one frame.*

**Key-words:** *photography; theatre; Pictorialism; photomontage; trompe l'oeil; scenography; directing;*

### 1. Introduction.

Either of the audio-visual multimedia technologies raises new issues regarding aesthetics coming from two aspects; the first one innate to the medium, for example various forms of manipulation and montage inherent to photography, film or digital image. The second issue refers to the cultural context for example the way the new medium relates with the existing artistic environment and other forms of artistic expression. Painting was declared dead once photography arrived on the artistic plain, the same hypothesis was risen about film in regards to television - nevertheless artists continue to paint and make films. Furthermore, established forms of artistic expression strengthen their position through aspects that elude the new mediums – in the aspects of painting, Impressionism, Cubism and Surrealism bring physical and psychological elements that could only be mimicked by photography. Moreover, in contrast with the large amount of fragmented information brought on by photography, film offers a fluid and coherent emotional experience.<sup>2</sup>

If we were to assert one thing with certainty it would be that photography in all its forms has the chameleonic ability to borrow, continue and enhance all the forms and aspects of art. Through this continuity analogue and digital photography brings a new concept of immortality in art. This through taking over thousands of years old of ideas and concepts to self-interpretation of the modern and contemporary arts.

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<sup>2</sup> Aspects and concepts presented in the works of Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulation”.

Artistic photography gathers in the same “page” drawing, painting, sculpture, music, dance, literature and cinematography with all their experiments and more.

## 2. Theatre and Photography – broad aspects

The first steps away from documentary photography towards artistic photography were made by portraitist painters of the second half of the nineteenth century. In most cases artists were constrained by circumstances to abandon painting in favour of the trendier photography favoured by the masses. From a certain point of view the reason was easy to ascertain, the relative short time of execution and the lower price made photography a preferred alternative to painting. The painter’s migration brought with itself a notable influence in respect approaching the subject in either portrait or landscape. They endeavoured to bring in photography compositional elements and of a symbolist nature native to painting.

Not only they were introducing compositional elements but also tried to reproduce brush strokes on the photographic medium. As it was to be expected most of those demarches failed and this kind of photography became synonym with kitsch. Studio photography was known back then as *the tool of the talentless painter*. – an opinion issued by Charle Baudelaire.<sup>3</sup> This first generation of artists photographers didn’t let themselves be discouraged by critics nor by the era’s technological limitations. A notable number of photographers laid down the foundation of what we study today as Pictorialism. Pictorialists driven by their first love – painting, enrich the portrait photography and approach figurative compositions with multiple figures and even landscape. Landscape photography developed and introduced new photographic techniques and photo manipulation.



James Craig Annan ,  
Portrait with Interior



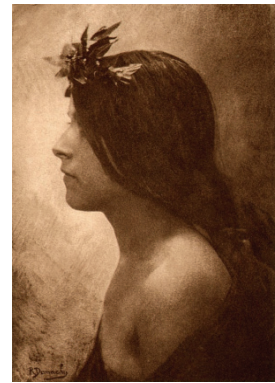
James Craig Annan, A Bullock Cart

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Baudelaire – French poet, essayist and art critic, in his open critique of the 1859 Paris Salon, expressed his negative opinion on photography as an art form.



Robert Demachy, untitled



Robert Demachy, untitled

With these first steps away from the documentary and journalistic photography an new art is being born. An art form, a fast medium, accessible also from a financial point of view that opens itself to the mid social classes. This fact gives the artist photographer the liberty too themes and techniques without the constrictions of the governing elitism and academism. Theatre's influence in photography can be traced back to this accessible form of entertainment like amateur theatre and traveling theatre. Being accessible to both the masses and the photographer, theatre influenced the photographer into borrowing theatre's tricks of carnival scenography, forced perspective, trompe l'oeil and also the first attempts in stage directing. It is important to realize that both the stage director and the photographer have chance to be *limited* to one frame to tell or expose the elements of a story. As the photographer is always in the centre of the scene but behind the camera the director will always sit in the middle of the hall. We may talk about the central position of both the photographer and the director in a general sense and also of the general composition of the frame or scene but also more than often they immerse themselves in the scene to communicate with the actors sometimes in private to determine a spontaneous reaction.

Perhaps few have the chance to see a theatre play from the middle of the hall – the directors place, however in the case of photography the audience have the possibility to see through the eyes of the photographer and to create their own story. I stress concept of *creation of one's own story* starting from the premise that every work of art regardless of the medium of artistic expression resonates differently in each of us. Whether we talk about a theatre play with a high level of complexity that makes the study of higher education or we go back to that traveling theatre with a simple sketch of humorous incline or a parable of good and evil or a

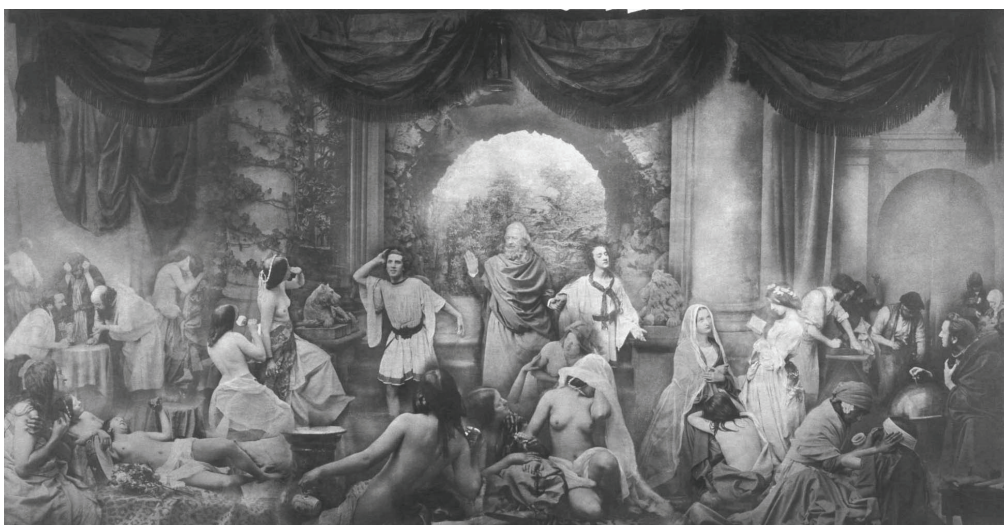
series of photographs with the same implications – those will be perceived differently by any viewer. Every person resonates differently and lays judgement upon the characters' actions and experiences. The same motif could also be observed in photography where the artist disposes in a scene a series of elements and characters that come to life in the mind of the viewer whether they want it or not thanks to the necessity for understanding and logic of the human intellect. The central viewing spot, the light, theatre props and scenography and the actors are and were from the beginning indispensable elements of both mediums of artistic expression. Lighting might be the only element utterly needed in both mediums – and I do not mean the absence of it but more importantly the way it is used in the rendering of a scene. In many cases of both mediums light can be considered a self-sufficient character with its own story and even capable of a dialog with the other characters. It is rather easy to observe and recognize commune elements in concurrence that gives birth to a scene, although we must mention those elements that differentiate and give identity to both mediums. We might notice and argue here that photography lacks actual movement and theatre lacks photography's Black and White. In reality these differences are rather mere appearances - B&W in theatre raises from lighting, costumes and makeup, and movement in photography it's suggested or captured through artistic and technical methods well established in painting for centuries. I mentioned the black and white value ratio to stress the importance and symbolic charge that colours and non-colours have. The balance or rather the lack of it in a chromatic composition may induce in the audience states of mind that enhances the experience of the artistic endeavour. Surely in the case of the nineteenth century photography the chromatic ratio is equivalent with the greys of the black and white value ratio and also with compositional construction and light-drawing. In art centers where photography is an academic object of study, Pictorialism and the exercise of painting reproduction represents an element of high importance in forming of an artist. We must mention that the on-going study relies on reproduction of volumes through light, of establishing chromatic and compositional basis on the expense of copying the subject in itself. In this endeavour I will offer as example photographs realised by students of „Ovidius” University from Constanța – Faculty of Arts.





The images above were used as study of light and composition of the great artists. The aim was that of exemplifying a method of approach on a given theme. Specifically the method of *thinking in colour planes*, and of reproduction of a composition without the restraints and constrictions of common props. – a red ribbon could be a substitute for the wine in Bacchus' cup, or a still life painting can be a substitute for an actual fruit basket; sure enough we go further and bring onwards substitutive symbolic elements as in Sisera's armour that is substituted for a military tunic.

Perhaps the most representative Pictorialist photography in relation with the theatre - "*The ways of life*" by Oscar Gustave Rejlander, takes on the subject of the allegory of Lust and depravity in contrast with the syntagma *Ora et Labora*. From a technical point of view we are talking about a photomontage of more than thirty negatives – by the account of the author. The author a Swedish painter schooled in Italy and settled in Great Britain, exhibits the photograph in Manchester in 1857.



"*The ways of life*" by Oscar Gustave Rejlander

Rejlander, not unlike a director arranges the actors over the stage in different poses or actions describing the concepts mentioned above. The characters, groups of characters, drapes and architectural elements all were photographed separately and recomposed in the resulting composition. Next, on the technical side Rejlander proves his ingenuity by using in place of large curtains, small hangings and drapery photographed separately and recomposed inside the scene. The stone structure and columns in the background were in fact elements of a modest portico from a friend's garden. Rejlander gladly offered technical details concerning his photomontages – this in fact brought only unpleasantness once the photograph was exhibited. Asked by critics, the artist explained in detail the techniques used and the steps taken, the apparently took away from the magic and mystery of the new expression medium. All of this resulting in a series of negative critics regarding the piece added to that was the apparent shock of the presence of nude figures in the photomontage. Even though it wasn't something new, moreover the nude was rather present in British galleries of the time, the nude appeared here for the first time photographed and exhibited for the public. This shock didn't last long, although the techniques used endured over the passing of time and are studied and applied even today and moreover apparently even queen Victoria of Great Britain acquired a copy of the photograph.<sup>4</sup> The technique of Photomontage was intensely used and improved in the period; photographers took on issues that have been partially resolved now, after 160 years.

The compositional structure is based in symmetry – an element meant to stress the concept of duality of the piece. In a lesser known version of the photomontage, the central figure, the sage as it was nicknamed, is replaced by a similar one only this one gazes forward, towards the viewer – this fact was meant to further stress the element of symmetry and duality and perhaps throw a little bit of judgement upon the viewer placed in the position to choose.

The subject of the photomontage apparently addresses the leap towards manhood of two young men. The two stand to the sides of a central figure that appears to have the role of a guide. Seemingly a father-figure or even of divinity the opens in front of the two the virtue and vices of man.

Through the nature of photography of snapping a fraction of time, the two young men seem to be caught in the moment of choosing, or about to make a choice. The two characters, far from being motionless, seem to be drawn or intrigued by the scenes that unveil in front of them. We are talking about a number of scenes because as I mentioned before this photomontage brings together over thirty negatives. On the right side of the composition are depicted scenes that can basically be described through the syntagm *Ora et Labora – Pray and Work*. In the immediate vicinity of the central figures on the right side we observe a feminine figure that looks strikingly like the representations of the Virgin Mary in the western art. In the lower part we see another feminine figure that seem to pray or repent followed by a groupage of two characters one tending to the bandaged head of the other. Here we observe the representation of faith and sacrifice for one's kin followed in the upper segment by the secular side of the narrative. In the middle-right side are depicted scenes of physical and intellectual labour – we will notice a graceful feminine figure that reads from a book, a symbol perhaps for culture and art, followed by a group of carpenters symbolizing not only an honest work but perhaps another reference to the Christian faith. The composition is closed

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<sup>4</sup> historical facts exposed in - „A History of Photography from its beginnings till the 1920s” © Robert Leggat, 1995

by a character that works a compass over an Earth globe, that might be interpreted as a representation of the sciences and discoveries that were synonyms with the Victorian era. On the other hand the left side of the piece is composed of scenes of debauchery, homosexuality (obviously frowned upon in the period), narcissism, alcoholism and gambling.

The characters of temptation and sin were caught in stances of delirium or suffering, other overwhelmed by their own beauty reflected back at them from a mirror or despair and sorrow in the character that hits his head with fists upon losing all his money in gambling. This seeming to end with the characters in lower part of the scene that seems to be in withdrawal or unconscious.

Endeavoring to further expose the relationship between theatre and photography we notice that the photographer tries to display an act, a singular scene within a frame. We uncover however that in certain circumstances the artist photographer manages to bring together a multitude of scene inside one frame. These scenes are elements of a broader ensemble but also can be studied individually having their own support and identity. All of these compositional elements lay beneath the weight of a dark curtain alike those that hid the theatre stages. Our gaze wanders across the montage from scene to scene, we feel the presence of the heavy curtain that seem to rise and lower between the acts.

Even though he was one of the pioneers of photography and photomontage Oscar Gustave Rejlander returned in the end to painting, constrained by the aversion of critics and artists alike towards photography.

Despite his numerous attempts and of many other artists across the globe a great period of time would have passed until the acceptance and recognition of photography as an art form. Photography evolved greatly in the last 160 years, the same can be said about its relationship with the theatre and later with cinematography. Across the history of arts we can note a tight bond between artistic movements of both theatre and photography. Whether we speak about Pictorialism, DADA, Bauhaus, Fotografia Buffa or Staged Photography, theatre had an immense influence on photography. Moreover structural elements of theatre are also found in fashion and advertising photography – that would practically be non-existent without notions of directing, scenography and light design.

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