

Discuss some of the ways that postmodern photographic practice questions, critiques, or opposes Modernist notions of photography.

When comparing modernism and postmodernism in photography, it would be important to note that modern art and postmodern art are very broad subjects. So broad that one cannot condense all of the two into an essay, nor can your argument be foolproof from rebuttal. There are far too many postmodern photographers to mention, so I shall concentrate on a select few and their methods of questioning Modernist photography.

Modernism as we know it today is a movement that began alongside the industrialization of the western world. With Industry and machines came the idea of modernism, that science would eventually overcome nature to create a perfectly streamlined world. The modernist movement argued that the new realities of the 20th century were permanent and imminent, and that people should adapt their world view to accept that what was new was also good and beautiful. Order and meaning to the Modernist movement were found through the concept of Grand Narratives, something that will crop up later in the essay.

Postmodernism came of course after Modernism and can be seen as a reaction to the world after modernism. This does not necessarily have to be a critique of modernism, but usually critiques of modern life can bear relevance to previous movements such as modernism that may have caused what is being critiqued.

Modernist photographic practice specifically adhered of course to different social and artistic rules. It is a very modernist medium, it's hey day being at the peak of modernist idealism (1880-1940). The use of photography was kept relatively simple. Documentary was very much perceived as its sole use at this time. Work by people such as Charles Marville and Eadweard Muybridge are excellent examples. Additionally the concept that the photograph had to be technically perfect was a key thought of Modernist photography, especially in the early 20th century when black and white film was reaching its height of quality. An Example of this can be the photographers of group f/64. The groups key idea being that high quality was key to creating fine art photography.

“Modern photographers worked within the limitations of the medium by creating finely crafted prints in the darkroom. Photographers turned cameras towards more urban subjects and began to develop meaning in form and content, especially in architecture, landscape, and portraiture, even as painters turned from Impressionism towards abstraction”¹

1. http://www.museumofnewmexico.org/mfa/ideaphotographic/essays_yates.html

From this analysis I can therefore draw up these assumptions: Modernist photography is generally simplified to the medium of documentation, even in fine-art by photographers such as Ansel Adams. Modernist photography is primarily documentation of the real whether it be nature, human interaction or historical events; Modernist photographers in documenting the world around them will not choose to turn the camera upon themselves, unless it is for specific “self-portrait” purposes; Modernist photography is of high quality, and black and white is preferable to colour because of its traditional artistic merits; Modernist photography adheres to similar ideals as Modernist art.

It is with these assumptions of Modernist photography that we can now correctly analyze postmodern photographic practice.

In doing so it allows me to draw the Hypothesis: *Postmodern photography specifically attempts to oppose the above assumptions of photographic practice.*

Postmodern photography has no boundaries or limits in the way modernism has. It also evolved out of modernist photography, with photographic practice becoming more conceptual as the 20th century progressed. Photographers began to use photography not just as a medium for documenting or for creating fine-art photographs. Artists began using photography as a new medium of artistic expression, as it allowed them to access new concepts. The range of work in postmodern photography is vast:

“Late twentieth-century photography has been an extraordinary explosion of disparate visions, so much so that any attempt at definitive taxonomy at this point is a daunting effort.”²

Postmodern photographers have used the style of documentary as a way of social critique, much more than their Modernist contemporaries. Yinka Shonibare and Cindy Sherman have taken this even further and created photographic scenes using themselves as the subject. Yinka Shonibare has used the medium of photography to create situations that would not have existed. He created a series of photographs titled “diary of a Victorian dandy” (see Fig 1.1) which showed him in various situations as a member of the British aristocracy. He is doing many things in his depiction of himself. One of the most important is that he is turning the camera upon himself, making himself the centre of interest in the photographs while at the same time he is the photographer. This is an acceptance that he is present in the creation of the artwork. Additionally his photographs depict an entirely fictitious situation, a “mock-up” if you will of an historical period. This is further fictitious because colour was not available in the Victorian era and he is a black man in aristocracy. The photographs are not supposed to convince us that this is a real situation, instead we are supposed to read the idea of the photograph, and the cultural and social implications a photograph such as this would create. Shonibare plays with the British nostalgia with the modernist age of Victoriana, by putting himself into the picture. In doing so he exposes the modernist movement as one of racial difference. Alluding to the Assumption of a modernist stereotype that the central character is white, western, cultured and financially secure.

2. http://www.museumofnewmexico.org/mfa/ideaphotographic/essa_vs_halus.html



Fig 1.1

While Shonibare was looking at British cultural assumptions Sherman was doing the same thing in America. Sherman does the same thing in her “untitled film stills” series. (Fig 1.2 and Fig 1.3) In these she depicts various female roles from fictitious films. She creates a cinematic look with the photographs by having herself gazing out of the camera and striking an elegant pose.



Her photographs show how women are represented in American cinema. Figure 1.3 shows her in the role of the housewife doing the washing up, responding to the modernist notion of the housewife. Additionally because she is not looking directly at the camera she is inviting herself to be gazed upon rather than confronting the viewer. This is the idea that “men look, women are looked at”³ which is the antithesis of Feminist idealism. It is believed that in doing such a thing the artist is objectifying the woman. Sherman is objectifying herself in the same way that she believes that women were being objectified in cinema. “The work is what it is and hopefully it’s seen as feminist work, or feminist-advised work, but I’m not going to go around espousing theoretical bullshit about feminist stuff.”⁴

She is also to a certain degree being abstract by not putting titles to her pictures. This forces the viewer to decide what they are looking at, rather than being told as used to.

“The untitled photograph provides no real clues and therefore forces the viewers to find their own answers”⁵. This is a postmodern way of naming images. It is by a way of abstraction opening up the possibilities of a photograph. Instead of defining with a title that explains the situation. It allows for a much broader discussion of the image, rather than giving a straightforward answer.



3. [http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0361-9486\(198723\)12%3A4%3C681%3ATFAAAT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-1](http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0361-9486(198723)12%3A4%3C681%3ATFAAAT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-1)

4. <http://www.tate.org.uk/magazine/issue5/s/herman.htm>

5. <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/aug1999/sher-a18.shtml>

What we have seen from both Shonibare and Sherman is the use of photography to question narratives of the modernist movement. The use of the artist in the image, to convey the idea of the photograph, allows the photographs take on a whole new meaning. They are more about the concept than about how real the image looks or how good the quality of print is. Note how in both of Shermans photographs, the angle is odd, she is placed at the edge of the frame rather than 1/3 in. It is not about aesthetics, the quality of the print and the shape or form. Postmodern styles of photography oppose these notions of photography.

Another photographer who contested the idea of the male gaze is Helmut Newton. Newton worked mainly in the realm of fashion photography, where he became used to seeing the female model as an object to be desired by both men and women. He began to experiment with his fashion shoots “Newton explored the nexus between power, gender roles and sexuality in his fashion photography”⁶.

Compare these two images, fig 1.4 by Newton and Fig 1.5 by Bellocq.



Fig 1.4



Fig1.5

In the Photograph by Bellocq the persons face has been scrubbed out by the artist, we cannot see her face so she becomes a subject for our gaze. She has no gaze and she is reduced to an object. The model stands in a casual manner, accepting that she is on display. By scrubbing out her face Bellocq is on purpose objectifying the model, who is a prostitute posing for Bellocq. In Newtons image there is a completely different tone, there is harsh lighting which illuminates the woman. The photograph is taken lower down so that the woman looms over us in a powerful way. Her stance is also one of power; she stands square on to the camera, shoulders and legs straight. She has her hands together with one clenched in a fist over her crotch. It is as if she is not covering her genitals but protecting them. She stares straight back at the camera, unflinching and fierce, because of this she is less a sexual object more a threat.

“These models look at us with an imperious, critical stare. The woman looks in control. When she looks back, at the camera it is as if the spectator doesn't exist. It is a look of indifference to the male voyeur”⁷

⁶ http://www.sauer-thompson.com/junkforcode/archives/2004/01/helmut_newton_remembered.html

⁷ <http://www.sauer-thompson.com/junkforcode/archives/001373.html#001373here>

Newton contested not only modernist ideas of gender and sexuality but also the fashion industries. It can be said that Newton plays with our response to a sexually charged photograph. As seen above it was in changing camera angle, lighting and pose that Newton confronted the male gaze.

The idea of Futurism and capitalism as a positive thing were two important narratives of the Modernist age. It was thought that eventually we would have a scientifically improved world where people could buy objects and equipment to improve our lives, and these would be made better and cheaper over time. The ideas of cubism and utopianism were seen as positive things that would improve our world. The postmodernism argues that this did not happen and that we are now stuck in a world that has failed. Bernd and Hilla Becher studied industrial buildings examining the similarities and differences in their appearance. They photographed in a documentary/scientific style similar to a Muybridge photo experiment. They made sure that every photograph was taken at a specific height so that all photographs would when put together have the same size constraints (see fig 1.7). The way they are positioned 3x3 like a formal analysis, as if they are to be studied for signs of similarity. The water towers in this formation no longer look like dull objects, instead they look like spaceships or something out of War of the Worlds by H.G. Wells. Additionally while they are photographing the same object in different locations they cannot help but show each object's noticeable difference from the other. While the modernists had planned for utopian perfection and repetition, the Bechers point out the aesthetic diversity of modern architecture.

“Early in its history, photography attempted to establish a scientific basis for the visual image, and photographs served as instruments of cataloging and classification. Today, conceptual modes find in the photograph a means of documenting social orders that would otherwise remain invisible. Furthermore, such depiction of “types” as in the Bechers’ arrays, reverses the notion of the anonymous stereotype, and instead revels in subtle differences.”⁸

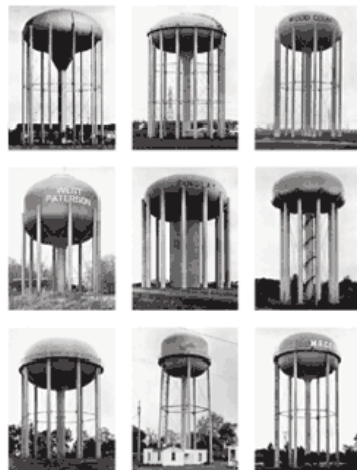


Fig 1.7

Robert Adams is an American landscape photographer who photographed from 1970-74 around Denver, Colorado where he grew up thirty years previously. He photographed the landscape around Denver as a result of being shocked as to what it had turned into since he grew up there. His romanticised childhood depiction of where he grew up was destroyed, as he found a landscape scarred by human habitation. The Resulting project was “What we bought: The new World (1970-4)” depicting the Denver countryside as a desolate ruined space. The dull bungalow suburbs in row after row (fig 1.8). Adams use of composition and framing in this specific image creates the impression that what we are looking at is dull and flat due to the 1/3 up horizon and the low angle. Adams is not just documenting, he is adding his own criticism to the photographs by composing the images to convey how he feels this land is being treated.

Fig 1.9 shows Adams’ technical skills in conveying emptiness Here he has decided to go inside a supermarket to take this shot, yet he still manages to make the place look so desolate and depressing, just like his landscape imagery.

Adams photographs also bear resonance when compared with nineteenth century photographers that documented the unexplored American territories. Compare Fig 1.8 with Fig 2.0 by Timothy O Sullivan. Robert Adams’ photographs point out that all that is new is “what we bought” what capitalism (the local council had given companies tax breaks to set up in the area, thus creating suburbs of workers) has done to the area. “He projects them back into a nineteenth-century landscape tradition and perceives their horizons as seemingly deserted now as they were then”⁹

In looking at what we bought, Adams is essentially looking at the aftermath of Modernism on the American countryside. Instead of the countryside thriving it has been destroyed by consumerism. “All the series produced by Adams over the past four decades are shot through with this fundamental sense of a lost innocence in our dealings with natural world”¹⁰



Fig 1.8



Fig 2.0



Fig 1.9

⁹ Kozloff Max, *Lone Visions, Crowded Frames*, http://www.masters-of-photography.com/A/adamsr/adamsr_articles1.html

¹⁰ p26 *Cruel and Tender*

Both The Bechers and Robert Adams used photography as a way of documented the world, yet they did this in a style different to the traditional method of photography. They used postmodern ideas to convey much more than just documentary. In past times the photographer would choose an angle and composition that would best suit the subject being photographed. Adams especially went against this traditional rule and chose angles that made the subject look as it was in reality. “(photography) In the tradition of realist and reportage imagery it could be seen as an index of the real conditions of the world”¹¹

Postmodern photographers are continually reaching new levels of photographic thinking. Most photographic art is now much more complex than any of the people I have discussed in this essay. Most of the people discussed in this essay were making work in the late sixties and seventies. This I think is most important in discussing their role in transforming photographic practice from modern to Postmodern. They are trying to remove the aesthetics that modern photography puts upon its subject. Photography in the modernist period had an ability turn objects into pictures of beauty. The photograph has the power to give the most ordinary objects a beauty and emotional quality that perhaps does not exist.

Walter Benjamin in *on Photography* is quoted to have said “(the camera) is incapable of photographing a tenement or a rubbish heap without transfiguring it. Not to mention a river dam or an electric cable factory.....It has succeeded in turning abject poverty itself, by handling it in a modish, technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment.”¹²

Benjamin describes perfectly here the ethics of the modernist photographer, what postmodern photographers wanted to do is show the world as it is. Not to beautify it.

While photographers such as Shonibare were attempting to criticise the ethics of modernist idealism, other wanted to change the way we perceived photography. Postmodern photographic practice has moved away from critiquing modernism and has concerned itself now with popular culture as a wider spectrum. Yet in looking at popular culture one cannot escape cultures that modernism has created. This is why postmodern photography is part an evolutionary process in image making and also a critique of cultures history. Fig 2.1 shows John Baldessaris artwork of two pictures put together. The people in the pictures have their heads hidden under large coloured dots. In combining two photographs Baldessari is rejecting the constraints of a single photograph “a clash of pictures, producing meaning that wasn’t inherent in the individual images”¹³. In using paint to paint dots onto faces he is combining photography with painting, synergizing art with photography.

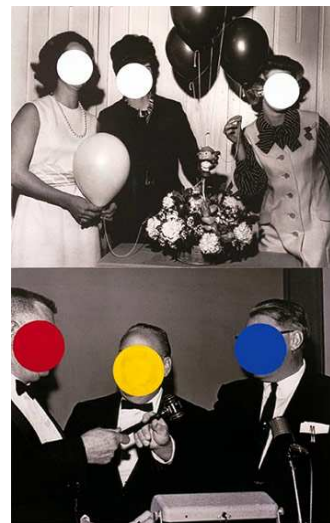


Fig 2.1

11. *Art after 1960*, p120

12. *Sontag, On photography*, penguin, p107

13 Heiser Jorg, *John Baldessari*, http://www.frieze.com/review_single.asp?r=2241

Susan Sontag Argues that “Whatever the moral claims made on behalf of photography, its main effect is to convert the world into a department store or museum-without-walls in which every subject is depreciated into an article of consumption, promoted into an item for aesthetic appreciation”.¹⁴

What Sontag describes is the world we see today, a world where every object can be defined in a photograph. This is a very modernist notion as it allows for simplicity and modern life to be combined. Postmodern photographers have tried to confront this thought by changing the techniques and styles of photography greatly. Because of this photography is now a diverse and varied art medium.

¹⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin, p110

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