

Optical Distortions/Abstractions

Optical distortions can be further intensified by adding various concave, convex, or prismatic oculars in front of the camera lens, which subvert the representational outlook of the referent, turning it into a visual abstraction. Similar distorting effects can be achieved by isolating visually a tiny detail of the object so that the image loses its organic relationship with the rest of the referent, and thus assumes an ambiguous structure. By doing so, the photographer faces of the most difficult problems in photographic art, namely to provide an aesthetic or ideological justification for the interventional subversion of the representational aspect of the medium. In other words, the photographer has to substitute the ontological authenticity of the image with the visual signifier(s) capable of supplying the image with a cogent aesthetic feature. No one has demonstrated better both the shortcomings as well as the values of optical distortion in photography than the German and French experimentalists of the Twenties and Thirties. Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy, in their photographic abstractions, achieved the necessary balance between optical distortion and the presence of the actual referent, even though visually decomposed. Beneath this stylistic balance, however, there is always a notable tension resulting from the graphic abstraction that comprises its own structural entity and the traces of the representational outlook of the camera (see plates_____).

‘The function of structure in photography is most critical in abstract or semi-abstract photographs, which “dangerously” approximate painting (the quotation marks are used here to point the subtle distinction between the two media). Of course, it is the photographer’s prerogative to push the optical distortion toward the complete suppression of the ontological authenticity, i. e., to eliminate every trace of the referent’s representationality, or to play with the delicate interaction of abstract forms and the life-like elements which Barthes calls “That-Has-Been”. Whenever photographers decide to achieve absolute abstraction, they often include other graphic and pictorial elements in their work (such as paint, cloth, additional paper material, even plastic surface/relief), which subsequently turns into mixed-media; those photographers who insist on preserving at least some likeness of the original referent must rely on the specific photographic expressive means, such as high-contrast and grain, that reveal the texture of the referent (e. g., skin, wood, metal, earth, water, etc.)

In contrast to cinema – where the shot’s own composition is interrelated with the graphic configuration of the preceding and succeeding shots – in still photography the visual structure exhausts itself within the given frame (except in photo-collage where a series of stills are dependant upon each other not merely according to the topic they share, but also with regard to the compositional relationship between the stills). The great constructivist photographers were fully aware of visual structure, as best exemplified in the work of Moholy-Nagy, every segment of which has profound signification – both thematic/ideological and formal/aesthetic – for the overall meaning/impact of the photograph. The arrangement of the objects within the frame in Moholy-Nagy’s photographs is an integral part of the picture’s message, conveyed in purely visual terms, yet in a manner different from painting, or to use Moholy-Nagy’s own words, “none of the canons of pictorial aesthetics can be applied to it.” Moholy-Nagy’s photographs possess a singular aesthetics structure which may be considered non-artistic (he believed that “it is quite unimportant whether photography produces ‘art’ or not”). “Artistic” or not, Moholy-Nagy’s constructivist photographs are distinguished by a highly sophisticated visual structure, especially his photcollages, photo-negatives, and photomontages (see figs. _____).

The perceptual tension resulting from the different stylistic components and materials is most dramatic in photomontage which often combines painting and photography in such a way that it is difficult to tell one from the other. The photomontage which brings its visual structure closer to the photographic side is more truthful to this medium than the one that does otherwise, turning it into the graphic art. Rodchenko was the master of photomontage that, in spite of all the added components and materials, remains genuinely photographic. As a devoted Constructivist, Rodchenko was above all concerned with the balance between the incorporated elements which he consistently subordinated to the central photographic aspect of the composition. In this respect, it is revealing to compare Rodchenko’s photomontage posters and book covers with similar work by El Lissitzky, who placed emphasis on the graphic aspects so that the photographic component would be subdued by the overall pictorial outlook of the image.

Abstraction is the most challenging aspect of photographic creation: it brings the medium to the “edge”, where its nature is significantly subverted; the photographer’s major concern, therefore, is to achieve what is called the photographic integration of the ontological authenticity, on the one side, and the formal intervention on the other. In all media which consist of numerous components – some specific to their nature, some borrowed form of other media – the overall

integration of all the elements, both thematic and formal, is of paramount importance for their genuine artistic impact. We are dealing here not with a mechanical/technical merger of the particular components but with the aesthetically justified and ideologically meaningful fusion of thematic and formal elements, regardless of the stylistic trend.

It is, of course, difficult to evaluate the overall integration of an artistic work, largely because it depends on personal taste and subjective artistic attitude. Despite this arbitrariness, there is a considerable number of artistic achievements – photography notwithstanding – which have received unanimous critical approval. Even though they may be re-evaluated in the future, the forthcoming close analysis will focus on those photographs that are currently considered important contributions to photographic expression. A close formal examination of the visual structure of these works will try to explain how the integration of form and content is achieved in each specific case. In addition, and as has already been indicated, the selection of analyzed photographs is restricted to those which – according to the author – are distinguished by specifically photographic expressive features.