THE PICTORIAL TURN

1 Galassi 1995, pp.14–15.

Pictorialism is a rather loose assembly of ideas about what makes a good art photograph. Historically, it belongs to a longer-established theory of the tableau in painting and to ideas about composition and pictorial space. The pictorial image aims to render the real as an ideal; composition should have an ideal meaning. There have been at least two turns towards pictorialism in photography. The first was in the 1870s, when the term was coined to refer to art photography, and the second emerged in the late 1970s, although it only really became popular in the 1990s. While this later work cannot be called 'pictorialist' in the same way, and did not have the same international coherence of the earlier movement, there are definite continuities across them. The new or neo-pictorial photography, as it might be called, borrowed the historical clothing of the older pictorialism, but was sharpened up and modernised in full-colour and larger-scale photographs; meaning, too, was renovated.

Figure 14
Robert Demachy, *The Crowd* 1910
Oil print photograph, 15.8 × 22.8
Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Pictorialism

Early pictorialist photographers operated through international competitions, exhibitions and publications. These forums for exhibition and exchange were modelled on the art salon system, which often included painters among the judges. Successful pictures selected for inclusion or a prize were circulated through the many pictorialist photography magazines and annual publications, which also served as a forum for debate about what made good art photography. Although initially centred in Britain, pictorialism spread worldwide to become the first truly international art movement in photography. It began to fade in the 1910s within key metropolitan centres of art, displaced by new avant-garde ideas, but it lingered elsewhere for decades.

Despite its massive popularity and important role in the history of art photography, pictorialism is still generally viewed in negative terms, attracting little or no contemporary critical discussion. This attitude was effectively summed up by Peter Galassi, when, as curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, he wrote:

'Dominated by themes of nature (including the nude) and domestic leisure (again including the nude, as well as the ubiquitous portrait of the fellow aesthete), pictorialist imagery is heavy with pious sentiment and romantic metaphor. The prints favoured chiaroscuro over precise detail and were executed on platinum paper, prized for the intervention of the artist's hand.'[1]

Galassi is certainly right in his summary of the themes typical in pictorialism: nature, nudes, portraits and domestic leisure are repeated frequently. However, it is important to recognise that these subjects were also common in painting at that time too. Since pictorialism was pursued in relation to painting – the dominant form of art movements such as

realism, impressionism, tonalism and post-impressionism – it is not surprising that these themes were echoed in photography that aspired to art. Rather than simply aiming to be 'painterly', pictorialist photographers also shared subject matter with the impressionists in France, the Pre-Raphaelites in Britain and, later, the Secessionists in Vienna. And internationally, its reach was even broader and more popular, developing preoccupations with nature, domestic life and the body through different ways of representing local life. For all the problems that it involved, the issues at work in historical pictorialism are wider than Galassi's cursory view admits, since it began to generate new themes and interpretations of art that varied across different places, making it worth examining further.

2 Robinson 1869. For a history of Robinson's work and life see Harker 1988.

3 Nochlin 1978.

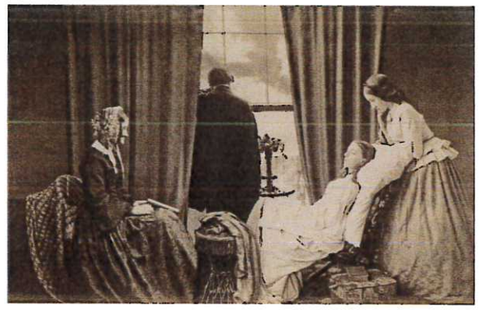
Figure 15
Andreas Gursky, *May III* 1998
C-print, 132 × 167

Figure 16
Henry Peach Robinson, *Fading Away* 1858
Albumen silver print from glass negatives, 23.8 × 37.2

In this picture, five separate images were shot and combined into one seamless assemblage: much the same technique is used today in 'Photoshop' and other image manipulation software. 'Fading away' refers to death from tuberculosis, common at the time of the image.

The Pictorial Effect

Photographic pictorialism was developed in the nineteenth century after the English photographer Henry Peach Robinson argued for a set of techniques that would render photography as art. Robinson announced these techniques, after fifteen years of work as a photographer, in his book *Pictorial Effect in Photography: Being Hints on Composition and Chiaroscuro for Photographers*, first published in 1869.[2] His early picture *Fading*



Away 1858 (fig.16), showing a young woman dying of consumption, or tuberculosis, as we know it today, had been highly successful and gave strong critical credentials to his working method.

Early death was a commonplace in nineteenth-century European life, with high infant mortality rates and tuberculosis rife even among wealthy or middle class families. But besides this, *Fading Away* also tells us something about Victorian family values and social roles. The photograph shows an angelic death watched over by the girl's mother and sister. The father turns away towards the outside world, his arm signifying that he hides his grief from them, and us. The women are facing towards this death, a domestic event inside a room that is thus defined as a feminine space. The models are posed to create a harmonious composition, implying a good and beautiful death. This, the picture suggests, is a spiritual event, a saintly sleep, which was often how tuberculosis was viewed in art and literature – far from the reality of bodies ravaged by disease.[3] One version of Robinson's print is accompanied by a lyric verse of the English romantic poet Shelley, which reinforces the idea that one might die well. This sentiment adhered to the aesthetic belief that art must be beautiful to be true, which is the basic argument advanced by H.P. Robinson:

Shelley's verse

Must then that peerless form,

Which love and admiration cannot view

Without a beating heart, those azure veins

Which steal like streams along a field of snow,

That lovely outline which is fair
As breathing marble, perish!

Figure 17
Henry Peach Robinson, *A Gleaner* 1872
Albumen print from two negatives, 55.9 × 40.6

that the beauty of pictorial composition is necessary for any photograph to be art. This involved montaging ideal parts together into one coherent pictorial composition. *Fading Away* is composed of five separate negatives, the final picture creating a coherent composition and an idealised depiction of death. The fact that death was of course a real preoccupation in everyday life was not new, but this 'staged' photographic interpretation was. To some, even today, such fabricated staging of a scene defies and betrays the realist depiction that photography is capable of by using artifice to create a 'fake' photographic reality. Yet this is to misunderstand the ideals of beauty that inform such a practice.

Robinson, for example, drew on the theory of the picturesque, already prevalent at that time. He was well educated in art and admired the landscape paintings of John Constable and J.M.W. Turner. Curiously, he even advised students of photography to go and study Turner's paintings –

an acquired taste for some people even then.[4] Such works were part of a re-evaluation of rural life in the wake of the industrial revolution, and it is worth remembering that romantic aesthetics began initially as a critique of new developments in societal values introduced by industrialism.

Robinson was also familiar with the influential aesthetic writings of the English art critic John Ruskin, and often referred directly to his volumes of *Modern Painters*.[5] In Ruskin's view, beauty was truth and the role of the artist was to reveal it. Robinson argued that the way to achieve this was through combining whatever components needed to be used in their ideal form. With nature and landscape a new tendency in painting, partly in response to industrialisation, Robinson subscribed to this new romantic attitude towards rural life, and applied it in his staged pictorialist photography. However, in this early photographic technology different exposures were required to achieve the effect of the combined picture. The correct sky might have to be photographed separately from the land

4 Harker 1988, pp.44–5.

5 Robinson 1902, p.64.

and combined in the darkroom. This procedure generated not only the acceptability of image manipulation, but also its necessity in attaining the ideal 'pictorial effect', as Robinson called it. His ideas about landscape and everyday rural life resonated with themes emerging in modern art movements elsewhere, especially in France.

Figure 18
Jean-François Millet, *The Gleaners* 1857
Oil paint on canvas
83.8 × 111.8
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Millet's painting shows three peasant women 'gleaning': having been authorised at sunset to pick up quickly the ears of corn left over by the harvesters in the fields. The austerity of the gleaners' work is contrasted with the abundant harvest in the background distance, the three figures echoed by the three huge haystacks.

Impression of Life

In Paris, the acknowledged centre for avant-garde art at the time, the realists and impressionists were discussing new ideas about landscape and nature, particularly the effects of new urban and rural ways of life. Often handled critically and sometimes sentimentally in painting, these new and different attitudes towards country and city life can also be found in pictorialist photography. Robinson's later photographs act out rural scenes according to a romantic view of rural life. In *Wayside Gossip* 1882 and *A Merry Tale* 1882, for example, he drew on themes popular in French painting.

Robinson's *A Gleaner* 1872 (fig.17) unmistakably takes the theme of Jean-François Millet's painting *The Gleaners* 1857 (fig.18), but he treats it very differently, bringing a new interpretation to its subject. Unlike the

moral dignity of the three toiling figures in Millet's picture, Robinson places a single woman centrally, as if it were a portrait. She poses on a stile between two spaces and we suppose she has gleaned the twigs she is holding from the forest behind her. Robinson offers an allegorical reading of the position of the woman, hovering between the forest and the garden: she is pivotal in the 'natural' order of things. Her manual work is situated just on 'one side of the fence', between the wild nature of the forest and the nurtured garden. Unlike Millet's earthy and strong working women, Robinson's cheerful rustic models often do look rather fake today. The pictures seem artificial and theatrical, not just because we can see that the models are acting the characters, but because they also look as if they are posing for the photograph. Robinson's gleaners seem to mock Millet's women, their manual work and their toil to survive, domesticating the issue of rural poverty by turning it into a picturesque cliché. But Robinson was also articulating the new potentials of leisure for his class, which the burgeoning railway network was making possible. His pictures portray an idealised version of what a middle-class family might enjoy on a daytrip to the country: gathering twigs for a cosy fire.

6 Robinson 1902, p.57.

7 Emerson 1890.

8 Robinson 1896, p 81.

9 Harker 1988, p.42.

Figure 19
Henry Peter Emerson, *Poling the Marsh Hay* 1886
Platinum print from glass negative, 23.2 × 29

Robinson explained his method, describing how a subject would 'arise before my mind's eye in a most inexplicable manner, and remain there till I lay the ghosts by making sketches of them'.[6] These sketches then became the basis for his photographs, with each part photographed as a separate element and composited together in the darkroom during the printing stage. This was the best way, Robinson argued, to achieve harmony of composition and beauty as the pictorial effect. Robinson's method of merging separate elements to create a whole - like that of Oscar Rejlander, also working at this time - prefigures the later techniques of photomontage developed in the early twentieth century. Today, Robinson's method is of course a common basis for the production of commercial images, with idealised elements seamlessly montaged through the widespread use of Photoshop and other digital software.

In 1889 Peter Henry Emerson, Robinson's famous rival, published *Naturalistic Photography*, in which he made hostile comments about Robinson's 'academic' allegorical scenes.[7] Emerson argued that photographs should employ selective focus, as the human eye does, to reflect the subjective vision of an individual. So whereas Robinson's pictures tended to be sharper all over, Emerson's employed differential focus and soft tones. Emerson also departed from Robinson's montage method and use of models, instead photographing the people who actually worked the land directly, and the difference in effect is clearly visible.

Subjective and Objective Composition

The arguments between Robinson and Emerson echoed the discussions in Paris on painting, in which studio-based art was seen as artificial, and the new plein-air painters, such as Claude Monet, argued that art must be derived directly from nature. This dichotomy between studio and street is still common today, albeit in a technically modified form, with studio-based photography distinguished as 'manipulated' or constructed, as opposed to the 'real observation from nature' of land, street and documentary-orientated photography. Another historical debate around painting concerned the overall effect of the picture, positing that this should be more important than its constituent details. Emerson's use of partial focus adhered to this idea too, as seen in his naturalistic views of rural life on England's Norfolk Broads (fig.19). Even though he eventually renounced his assertion that photography could be art, his ideas stuck, and other pictorialists developed the notion of a diffused focus replicating human subjective vision. However, some introduced Robinson's techniques of studio manipulation to emphasise this, even explicitly orientating their pictures towards an impressionistic, painterly effect.

The differences between these pictorial tendencies of Robinson and Emerson are sometimes exaggerated though. Robinson, for instance, stated that if the artist copied nature faithfully, there was no art.[8] He worked with lens maker J.H. Dallmeyer, who had developed the Portrait Triple Lens, which softened focus by diffusing the hard focus of the lens, except in one plane.[9] The aim was beauty, a pictorial effect, rather than any putative truth to nature, for which Emerson had argued. These different strategies produced various understandings of the value of photography as art: was it the construction of an ideal meaning or the reporting of an optical fact? Pictorialism never resolved these issues, tending instead to

merge and mix them gradually together in different ways. Perhaps what made the aesthetic dispute between Robinson and Emerson more acute is their position at opposing ends of the political spectrum: Robinson was a conservative while Emerson expressed concern for the conditions of the working people he photographed and their ways of life. We should remember that the awful conditions of rural workers in France had made them important subject matter for Millet and other painters. Pictorialists were sometimes in dialogue with these same themes, but were developing their own approaches to them, opposed or similar, and sometimes alongside concurrent painting movements.

As others have already noted, pictorialists such as Emerson and Robinson always seemed to be squabbling, with factions splitting off, appropriating, evolving and mixing techniques from all the various technical tendencies and aesthetic values available. In this way, pictorialism evolved differently across the international landscape of pictorialist activity. Technological developments eventually rendered Robinson's lengthy composite technique less relevant, but his painterly manipulations in the darkroom remained a legitimate process in the pictorialist's repertoire. Selective focus and composite techniques could be used together or applied individually to areas of a print, which would then be re-photographed to enhance and emphasise the dark and light tones of the image. Such artistic reworking of negatives and prints was common. Some even made their own photographic paper to mimic the texture of canvas. Just as the techniques evolved, so did new themes and attitudes towards nature, leisure, work and the human body. The city and the industrial landscape also began to provide a new photographic subject matter, which differed strikingly from the mythical rural leisure of Robinson and the working life themes of Emerson, while having much in common with the copious impressionist paintings of city life and leisure.

While debates about painting and photography have often sought to identify them as radically different media, the historical links between impressionism and pictorialism are clear, not only because they were simultaneously developed alongside each other, but also because their practitioners shared an aesthetic of the imagination, that is, a common aim to invoke the perceptual impression of a scene, with the image as the view of a subjective instant. As with the new painting of this period, pictorialist photography constructed an optical experience of seeing something 'directly' but infused with an imagined human experience of looking. This aesthetic invites the viewer to imagine what it is like to be in the scene, and to identify with its subject as a pictorial composition and scheme.

Figure 20
Zwelethu Mthethwa,
Untitled 2003
From the series *Sugar Cane*
Digital c-print, 63.6 × 85.6

In this series Mthethwa photographs the contemporary rural sugar cane workers in his native South Africa.

Photography of Modern Life

Just as the ideas of the impressionists provided a clear reference point for pictorialist photographers, so too did photography for painters. This is visible in Gustave Caillebotte's impressionist painting *Rue de Paris, temps de pluie* 1877 (see the painting in fig.22). Caillebotte's painting is striking in many ways, not only for its apparent photographic quality – the wide-angle lens view (an angle approximately equivalent to a 24mm lens on a 35mm film camera) associated with photographic vision[10] – but also the casualness of the moment depicted. The painter seems to have chosen

10 Caillebotte's pictures are thought to be based on camera views, from which he then made sketches that altered the perspectival dynamics of the scene. See Kirk, Varnedoe and Lee 1976.

Figure 21
Alfred Stieglitz, *Snapshot* 1911
Photogravure printed in 1912, 13.8 × 17.4

an instant like a snapshot photograph, with no significant event, only the passing by of anonymous figures in the rain. We see the people go about the damp streets, promenading in the rain, perhaps unwillingly from necessity, their spatial isolation evoking both the charm and the desolation of modern life.[11] The painting exudes a 'photographic' quality in its form and through the apparent non-specific frozenness of the moment. Painting and photography exchanged these aesthetic codes and themes of representation back and forth between one another.

11 See Clark 1990, p.15

Now compare Caillebotte's painting with Alfred Stieglitz's pictorialist photograph (fig.21), made three decades later, also on a damp day in Paris. The rain softens the feel of the photograph and the atmosphere of the scene. Stieglitz was brilliant at using the weather to achieve plein air impressionist effects and developed these with great effect, especially in his later photographs of New York in snowy winter. He would let the impact of rain, snow, steam and heat generate an atmospheric effect when the photograph was being taken, and enhance this afterwards during processing and printing.

However, Stieglitz would eventually drop the pictorialist mood and techniques altogether, favouring photographs that were bold in their sharpness, with clean, stark compositions. He would claim the 'straight photograph' as a modern art form with a new confidence, and on its own terms rather than those of painting. We can gain an understanding of this relation between impressionism and pictorialism by considering a more recent photographic work by the contemporary German photographer Thomas Struth.

Struth's series of museum photographs re-examines the theme of modern leisure in city life, but in a completely new way and through a very different treatment. Struth centres his photograph on Caillebotte's painting housed in its museum setting, incorporating it into the pictorial space as a spectacle for the viewer. This viewing space is doubled. Struth's image shows how museum visitors, as strolling spectators, become an extension of the space in Caillebotte's painting and thus in the museum too. The life-sized tableau is integrated within the contemporary art museum, which is shown to be a site of leisure and spectacle, and presented to us through the form of modern pictorial photography. The leisure space of the contemporary urban museum is quite literally in this

12 This media image is what Jacques Rancière calls the *metamorphic* images. See Rancière 2007, pp.23-4.

photograph the space of a history of art remediated via contemporary art photography. This mediation renews art photography as a large-scale pictorial form, absorbing impressionist painting and its audience into a tableau photography based on its descriptive capacity. It is photography that has revived and revised the old function of the classical pictorial tableau, which had been left behind by the turn towards abstraction in modern art.

Figure 22
Thomas Struth, *Art Institute of Chicago 2, Chicago 1990* 1990
Chromogenic print, 184 × 219
© Thomas Struth

New Pictorial Photography

Nineteenth-century pictorialist photography was heavily intertwined with the values, themes and trends of modern painting. The new pictorial art photography of the late twentieth century took its metamorphic values from an admixture of other visual arts and media, painting, cinema and television, alongside techniques from other types of photography, such as photojournalism, documentary and advertising.[12] Unlike pictorialism, which was primarily monochrome and handmade, most contemporary pictorial art photography is colour and printed on a large industrial scale that rivals painting, and sometimes even advertising billboard images. The result is a new pictorial photography, contemporary in appearance and with subject matter remediated into

13 See Wall 2005.

14 Baudelaire 2012.

different forms, flanked on one side by the moving cinema image, and by painting, sculpture and art history on the other. This hybrid form sometimes brings together the compositional strategies of 'low' popular culture and 'high' art, embodying aspects of each but belonging to neither. The pictorial aspect of this new photography recognises that artists are immersed in and influenced by the complex contemporary media environment, which the new pictorial practice filters and remediates through individual experience.

It should be stressed that whereas nineteenth-century pictorialism was a coherent movement with its own independently organised events, exhibitions and international competitions held in parallel with established art salons and exhibitions, new or neo-pictorial photography work exists and operates as an international visual art integrated within the contemporary art market. It is not a movement as such, but a set of identifiable ideas and attitudes that has emerged through artists working in similar ways, in different places and under disparate conditions. In some ways these pictorial images may be considered as an international

Figure 23 (Opposite)
Jeff Wall, *Mimic* 1982
Transparency in lightbox, 198 × 228.5
Photographed in Vancouver on 8 × 10-inch film

Figure 24
Jeff Wall, *Cuttings* 2001
Transparency in lightbox, 115 × 143
Photographed in Vancouver

photographic 'language', using the basic conventions of photographic apparatus to produce large pictorial images, which are legible to anyone familiar with perspectival images and photographic vision.

Jeff Wall, a key figure in this type of photographic art practice, is explicit about his art historical training, particularly in nineteenth-century art. Based in Canada, he is well known for his long-held fascination with the decisive instant in photojournalism and documentary photography, which he combines with an interest in the aesthetics of the cinematic image.[13] Wall's different-sized tableau pictures usually draw on incidents, events or things he has seen but, like H.P. Robinson, he also re-stages them, using locations, props, actors and models to idealise the photographic meaning through composition. The look and feel of his pictures have something in common with nineteenth-century painting or even, to some extent, with Robinson's pictorialist genre scenes. A sense of frozenness pervades some of the image, so that its artifice may be hinted at but not revealed. Wall's concern and interest in these contemporary scenes from everyday life also recalls Charles Baudelaire's idea of the modern artist as a 'painter of modern life'.[14] The contemporary artist or

painter, Baudelaire proposed, is like a *flâneur* who wanders the streets of a city with the detached gaze of an outsider and constructs certain views of 'modern' life from this experience.[15] The ordinary scenes that result offer the viewer a set of quasi-philosophical arguments or framing of ethical problems and questions about how we live. The camera obviously has a similar potential to occupy this role of *flâneur*, with the photographer as a philosopher of modern life.

As in earlier pictorialism and tableau painting, Wall's photographs are usually conceived as single pictures, rather than as a series – the most common mode of modernist photography. However, themes recur and overlap, pointing to three key pictorial genres in Wall's work: still lifes, landscapes and social tableaux.

Mimic 1982 (fig.23) is a tableau that depicts a specific social instant: a racist insult from one man to another as he passes him on the street. Wall's *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* 1993 is a complex composite image of an instant that makes explicit reference to Hokusai's woodblock print *The Great Wave* c.1830. The water is substituted for sheets of paper blowing in the wind from a businessman's open brief-

15 See Griselda Pollock's critique of the male flâneur in her book, *Vision and Difference*, London 1988, pp.70–1.

Figure 25
Claude Monet, *Railway Bridge, Argenteuil* 1873
Oil paint on canvas, 54.3 × 73.3
Philadelphia Museum of Art

Monet lived in Argenteuil when he painted this picture, giving the river Seine and railway crossing the impression of a calm and tranquil space.

case. In *Cuttings* (fig.24), neat bundles of freshly cut twigs are stacked before a neat wooden fence in a Canadian suburb, showing two uses of the same natural material, wood. The scene is so banal and literal that we lift it into allegorical meaning. Everything is so neat and clean that, surely, something must be wrong here? All of Wall's pictures speak directly and obliquely about concepts and conflicts in everyday life: social discontent between ethnic groups; a business transaction going wrong; the ephemeral character of contracts, and the cyclical reuse of wood in the suburban battle for tidiness. Wall's motifs are distinctly contemporary, but they also draw on the modes and themes of classic nineteenth-century tableau painting, seeking ideal meanings through composition and a sophisticated description of actual experience. Some of his more recent monochrome pictures also explicitly use the heavy formal qualities of mid- and dark tones so often characteristic of pictorialist photography. While the critical social content of Wall's work might generally seem at odds with this, it is in fact this critical dimension of earlier pictorialism and impressionism that is often obscured by the retrospective 'postcard' ideals attributed to them.

Tableau

Look at Claude Monet's *Railway Bridge at Argenteuil* 1873 (fig.25), composed in pretty, soft colours. Today it might seem like an ordinary, banal scene, but it explicitly addresses the impact of the industrial revolution on landscape. Wall's photograph *The Storyteller* 1986 (fig.26) has a similar formal composition, although its content and the epoch depicted are clearly different. Monet's painting describes the industrial railway's presence at a natural river scene. The painting itself does not condemn or praise the railway crossing over the river, but it draws attention to it, integrating it as a central element of the picture. Set in the suburban outskirts of Paris, the only apparent movement is the train, signified by its billowing smoke, as it carries people across the river and through the calm, depopulated scene. Indeed, one can imagine that all the local people might be on this train. The painting provokes contemplation on the

16 The French anthropologist Marc Augé coined the term 'non-place' in his popular book, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of SuperModernity*, London 1995.

Figure 26
Jeff Wall, *The Storyteller* 1986
Transparency in lightbox, 229 × 437
Photographed in Vancouver

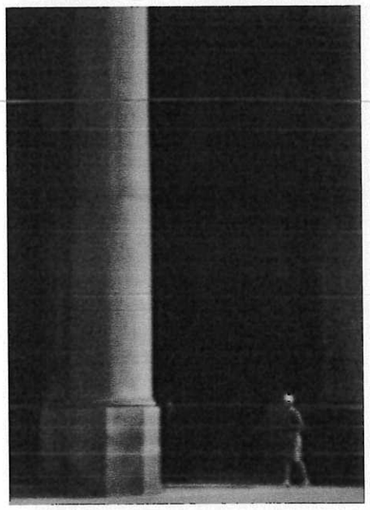
impact of technological progress at this intersection of river and railway and transit of passengers. The historical viewer would have recognised that trains improved transport to the outskirts of Paris or enabled a faster commute to work, which changed the relationship between country and city. The picture does not seem to judge whether this change was good or bad, it merely depicts a contemporary condition for consideration, as reflected in the picture's factual title.

Now look at Wall's photograph *The Storyteller* 1986, where a highway supplants the railway. Monet's flowery river embankment and pretty, mottled sky have been exchanged for the stark bank and a drab concrete bridge. In this modern 'non-place' there is no idyllic nature.[16] The picturesque has vacated Wall's desolate scene, which is charged with a different factual tension. The only sign of movement is what may be construed or imagined from the gestures, poses and expressions of the people

Figure 27
John Vanderpant, *Untitled (Union Station II)* 1930
Silver gelatin print, 35.3 × 27.8
Vancouver Art Gallery

sitting alone or in small groups, all scattered throughout a space that has been landscaped only as a by-product of the highway. We might imagine these characters also to be by-products of this modern transport society, social outcasts who, like the space itself, appear to be doing nothing in particular. Like Monet's painting, the picture does not really seem to judge its subject, but merely creates a compositional form and pictorial space in which a viewer may contemplate and consider these meanings.

Yet such bridges are also familiar to any modern road traveller, loaded with meaning through their ubiquitous use in cinema too – a connection that is suggested by Wall's choice of aspect ratio (the frame shape of the photograph), which itself produces implications of narrative. Usually located near the edge of a city, such movie scenes are typically linked to urban crime; they are a hangout for drug users and adolescents; or used by those on the margins, felt to be outsiders. In short, the underpass signifies a space where those with nowhere to go can congregate, a place



for the homeless. However, Wall's title, *The Storyteller*, also suggests that something is going on here, that there is some form of dialogue, exchange or community fostered through one of the figures, who seems to be narrating a story. Thus Wall proposes a positive event in the scene, drawing our attention to the individuals and prompting the question: how and why did they arrive in this space? The picture does not offer us any answer. Wall leaves us to ponder these people, neither knowing their stories nor their destiny, yet perhaps recognising something of our own alienation in modern life.

On further inspection, a horizontal cable stretches across the foreground of the picture, interrupting this whole scene and hinting at the presence of an electric railway passing across the frontal axis of the pictorial space. This cable suggests, metonymically, that the tableau we see here is not private, but is also visible to passengers on passing trains. We find ourselves positioned alongside these transient voyeurs, who witness a fleeting impression of lives not investigated further, never really

17 Hill 1976, p.3.

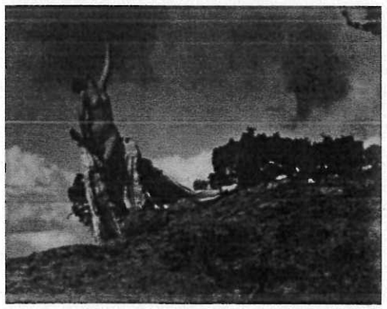
18 Cited from the *Photographic Journal*, Volume LXVIII, Nov 1928, p.449, quoted in Hill 1976, p.19.

knowing what any of this 'means'. In this sense, Wall points to our own isolation – as spectators – from such marginalised groups.

Both Monet and Wall's pictures are pictorial studies of modern life, of the 'something' in their respective modernities that makes them particular to their times. For Monet it is the calm, picturesque river and rail embankment disturbed by the train and the smoke of industrial traffic; for Wall it is the makeshift population on a motorway embankment. Despite the historical differences and varying methods of pictorial construction, a suburban reality shapes both artists' constructions. The scenes, while apparently innocent in appearance, both present images for reflection on contemporary existence and life in different subtle ways. They both ask spectators to imagine themselves at these scenes, and to consider the meaning of the events they portray, which is what constitutes their common pictorial effect.

Figure 28
Anne Brigman, *Soul of the Blasted Pine* 1907
Photogravure, 15.4 × 20.8

Published in *Camera Work*, no.25 (1909)



The Pictorialist World

We can also start to see in the internationalism of the early pictorialist movement something of the growing diversity of attitudes towards modern life. Wall's critical sensibility is prefigured in work by pictorialists like John Vanderpant, who moved to Canada from Holland in 1910.[17] Vanderpant later aligned himself with Edward Weston's pictorial project and f/64 group in California, with the aim of developing a west coast aesthetic. His series of grain elevator pictures, however, exemplify a different taste. Avoiding the sentimental clichés of rural myths, these dark, soft-focus pictures locate tiny figures and human-scale objects alongside vast concrete grain elevators, the individual diminished beside the industrial architecture. The images belie an ambivalence: they are at once beautiful in their formal poetry, and austere and bleak in their social connotations. Curiously, despite this apparent criticality, Vanderpant's photographs were highly successful in the later established international pictorialist movement, not known for its radicalism. He even had a solo exhibition at the Royal Photographic Society in London in 1928, which was a generosity not afforded to merely anyone.

Vanderpant countered European criticism that his work was drab by saying he was 'looking for the forms, contrasts, proportions and designs which belong to Canada and to no other country'.[18] Similar stories can be found elsewhere, with pictorialism expressing new broader pioneering views on modern culture. Harold Cazneaux, a New Zealand-born studio

Figure 29
Laura Gilpin, *A Visiting Nurse* 1924
Platinum print, 19.5 × 24.7
© 1979 Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas

Gilpin studied photography in New York before returning to her native Colorado, where she alsophotographed American natives of the Navajo.

photographer based in Australia, also contributed to the international exhibitions of pictorialist photography with his iconic images that identified emerging modes of Australian lifestyle. His pictures *Razzle Dazzle* 1910 and *Sydney Surfing* 1929, for instance, show something of the coast's dynamic modern leisure activities. Cazneaux later became renowned for his new landscape visions of the Australian bush and habitat.

Even in Soviet Russia, with the 1917 Russian Revolution and the appearance of radical avant-garde constructivist photography by Alexander Rodchenko and others, pictorialism continued to have a currency, despite the later official imposition of socialist realism as an orthodoxy.[19] Indeed, pictorialism could be seen internationally as a community that offered an alternative space to those who rejected both modern avant-garde and commercial photography. Pictorialism was proud of its 'amateur' status, since this released it from commercial or professional burdens, in favour of aesthetic autonomy. In Soviet Russia pictorialist scenes such as Sergei Lobovikov's *Wandering Across Russia* 1909–10 or Sergei Ivanov-Alliluev's *Vagrant Russia* 1922 could be interpreted along the lines of earlier critical realist painting

19 See Sviblova and Misalandi 2005.

20 See Pyne 2007, p.63.

21 Sandweiss 1986.

22 See the crucial work on women impressionists by Linda Nochlin, 'Mary Cassatt's Modernity', *Representing Women*, London 1999; Linda Nochlin, 'Morisot's Wet Nurse: The Construction of Work and Leisure in Impressionist Painting', in Nochlin 1989; and Griselda Pollock 'Modernity and the spaces of femininity', in Pollock 1988.

Figure 30
Gertrude Käsebier, *The Road to Rome* 1902
Platinum print, 23.8 × 34
Museum of Modern Art, New York

by Millet, Jules Breton or Gustave Courbet as showing the harsh reality of rural life in the previous regime, which new Soviet ideology claimed it would transform.

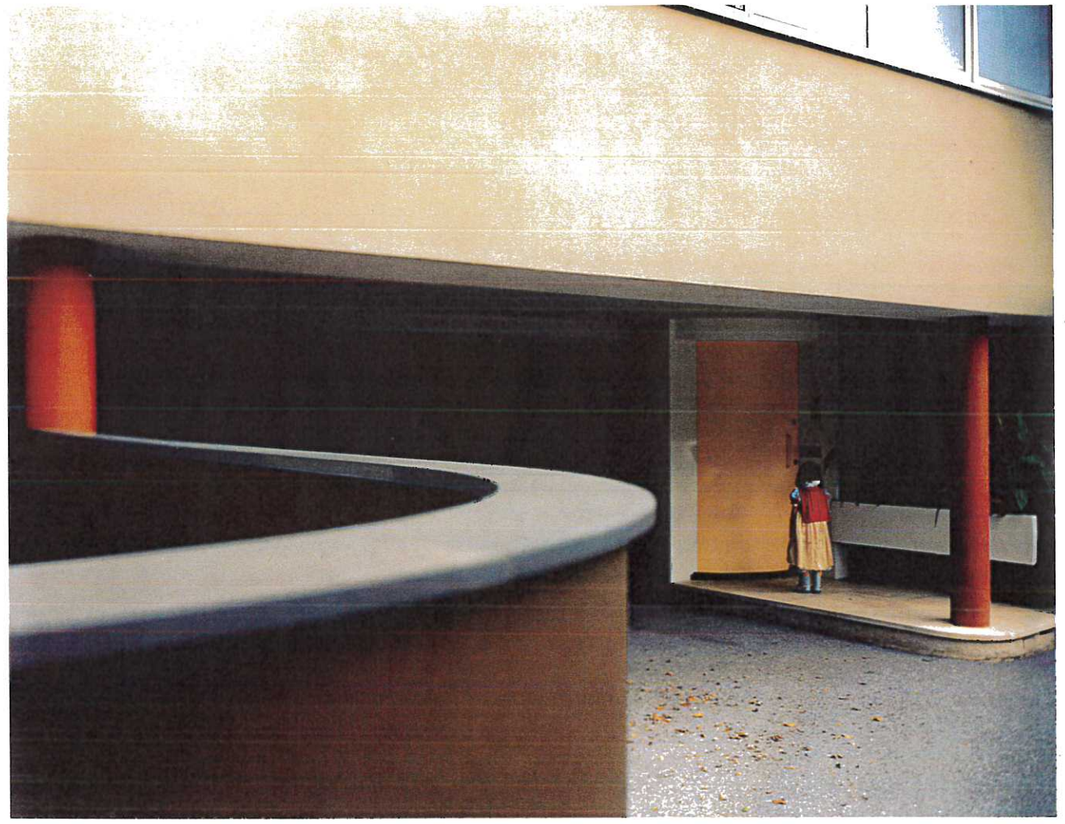
Although male photographers tend to dominate the history of early pictorialism, there were also many women photographers, who introduced new subject matter too. One of these was Anne Brigman from Oakland, California.[20] Championed by Alfred Stieglitz and a member of his Photo-Secessionists group, her work with nudes appeared in *Camera Work* magazine and suggested a highly independent attitude to the female figure. Situating the female body within nature and natural forms, her work began to envision an allegorical feminine sublime, where the time of nature was linked to the time of the female body. Brigman's work prefigures the use of the body in performance art, as an element within the pictorial scene, as seen in her famous picture, *Soul of the Blasted Pine* (fig.28).

Laura Gilpin was a younger generation pictorialist, who studied photography for a year in New York and went on to produce stunning pictures of her native Colorado.[21] Already a successful turkey farmer, Gilpin's photography explored the different situations of a woman's life on

23 Michaels 1992

the prairie. Like the women artists among the impressionists in Paris, such as Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot,[22] Gilpin depicted domestic scenes peopled not by fanciful erotic nudes, as was common among the male pictorialists, but considered from the social position of a mother. In *A Visiting Nurse* 1924 (fig.29), a nurse tends a boy in bed while other children, presumably siblings, look on with concern, the camera's low vantage point positioning us among them. Gilpin had little interest in city life, addressing instead her own immediate environment. As such, her work offers a critical alternative to Robinson's earlier sentimental views of women and rural life.

Figure 31
Hannah Starkey, *Untitled*, October 2004
Framed c-type print, 122 × 152



Gertrude Käsebier's photographs were featured in the first issue of Stieglitz's *Camera Work* magazine, although she and others later broke away from him because of his didactic values, setting up the Pictorial Photographers of America group in 1910.[23] Käsebier was familiar with Cassatt's impressionist works and also addressed the viewpoint of children in her work. *The Road to Rome* 1903 (fig.30), featuring her grandson, was painted over and the print rephotographed to achieve a tonal effect that focuses the viewer on the road that winds away into the distance – a metaphor for the twists and turns of life that lie ahead of every child.

We might contrast this poetic pictorialist image of a child's future with Hannah Starkey's contemporary urban tableau image of a child (fig.31). The

poignancy of Käsebier's singular figure is still relevant, but here there is a quite different emphasis or attitude. A good deal of Starkey's work pictures young women circumscribed by social spaces. In *October* 2004, a solitary young girl stands at the threshold of a home, but instead of facing an open space with a horizon, as in Käsebier's *The Road to Rome*, she inhabits a claustrophobic urbanism, cluttered with modernist architecture. Whether the door that she contemplates brings respite and comfort from those external forms or not is unknown, but the pathos of her future is hinted at in the pose of her peripatetic hesitation.

There are many other international examples of historical pictorialism that could be discussed here, but the point is that the pictorialist paradigm of photography enabled a different kind of art image to emerge.[24] Since photography was less cumbersome to learn and practice, the camera became a symbol of democratic art, a tool that could be used by those who had little or no skill in drawing or draughtsmanship, but who had a way of seeing, nonetheless. The camera could be used to picture things and places that others had not yet visited, that artists had not yet thought of picturing or that were difficult to access. In this way, pictorialism lent a common, if broad, aesthetic framework to the project of visioning the modern world. If today we can find some of the same themes as this older pictorialism in modern neo-pictorial art photography, it is nevertheless inflected and judged in comparison with other visual representations in circulation. The functions of the pictorial image have been not to contest these media images directly, nor to mimic them, but to reposition art photography and create a distance in relation to them.

24 See, for example, the section on Japanese photography in Padon and Nordström 2008.

25 There is no reference at all to Gregory Crewdson's work in Michael Fried's extensive book on pictorial art photography. The arguments by Fried about the theatrical and anti-theatrical relate back to the eighteenth-century writings on painting by Denis Diderot. See Fried 2008.

26 Brecht's writings relate to aesthetic strategies of acting in the theatre, but have been widely adopted for cinema and photography. See Willett 1964.

27 See, for example, the reading of Brecht's theories by Elizabeth Wright in Wright 1989.

Critical Distance

Gregory Crewdson's tableau images relate directly to cinematic and televisual expectations of narrative and drama, often suspending the moment at strange in-between instants (fig.32). The faces and bodies of the characters in his 'Twilight' series seem to be lit by the very objects that preoccupy them, as if they are drawn to some lurking hypnotic 'thing' that we can only imagine.

This overt theatricality is roundly condemned by some, such as the formalist art critic Michael Fried, whose pictorial taste is informed by principles from eighteenth-century pictorial tableau painting, although the uncanny effects of Crewdson's lighting is more modern.[25] Fried prefers naturalistic imagery (he uses the term 'anti-theatrical') over staged and visibly artificial-looking scenarios, arguing that theatricality interferes with the viewer's ability to identify and empathise with characters in the scene. Although the terms of the argument are different, there is an echo of the debate between Robinson's theatrical aesthetics and Emerson's 'naturalistic' subject matter, of idealism versus realism.

Attitudes towards the aesthetic value of these staged scenes have fluctuated over time. For Bertolt Brecht, writing in the 1930s, artifice and theatricality was essential to any critical drama or image, since it distanced and disrupted the illusion of reality. The spectator is forced to ask questions about what it is they are being shown.[26] We should be reminded that images are constructions, he argued, that they are ideologically motivated and purposefully charged with specific meanings produced for our consumption.[27] Jeff Wall employs this type of critical

28 For a summary of the late 1970s New York-based group see Eklund 2009.

artifice, or Brechtian device of distanciation, in his work to stage scenes that seem to freeze the action, like a film still or photojournalist picture. Given the high-quality definition in the images, their sharpness and frozenness makes them look staged, but they leave room for uncertainty, a hesitation, which the spectator can explore.

It is curious that these historical arguments about theatricality repeat themselves in different epochs with positive and negative values attached to them. The mode of photography developed by Robinson and others in the mid-nineteenth century re-emerged among the photo-artists of the 1930s, whose Brechtian, explicitly theatrical aesthetic was intended to

Figure 32
Gregory Credwson, *Untitled* 1999
Chromogenic print, 127×152.4
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

interrupt the ideology of realism. Artists like John Heartfield or Hannah Höch created photomontages that purposely dislocated these values of realism, with a considerable aesthetic and political effect. Theatricality clearly surfaced again in the 1970s, in work by artists associated with postmodernism, such as Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine.[28] These artists drew on a variety of media images, sometimes copying or re-presenting them unchanged, as pastiche, or others redeploying or remaking them with a critical difference, as parody. A strategy of explicit fakeness in photography tends to disrupt, ruin or even disintegrate any clear meaning. Artificiality highlights conflict inside

the picture, in its very form. Becoming allegorical, such pictures engage with the 'ruin' of photographic meaning in a way that makes the spectator ask more questions, rather than giving them answers.

In an interesting departure from the dynamics of these tactics, the Argentinian photographer Alejandro Chaskielberg uses very slow exposures on a large-format camera to dislocate the naturalism that Emerson had argued was necessary in photographs of real rural communities. Chaskielberg was formerly a director of photography for film, and he brings this sensibility to each scene, carefully lighting and sharply focussing it, balancing and blending artificial and natural light sources. The photographs are made at midnight, and the islanders pose, standing still for the long exposure. The resulting effect is a combination of focus and blur, a mix of both artificial and natural lighting, in effect reconfiguring the old pictorialist polemics between Robinson and Emerson. The series *La Creciente* (fig.33) creates a wildly visual atmosphere for these rural island communities, situated around the watery arteries of the Paraná River Delta in Argentina.[29] Chaskielberg also makes us

Figure 33
Alejandro Chaskielberg, *The Paraguayans* 2007
From the series *La Creciente*
Digital c-print, 110×140

29 Chaskielberg 2011.

see that there is value in rethinking the techniques of photography as a means to disrupt the all-too familiar patterns of visual thinking that inhabit the wider social forms of representation. The aesthetics of Chaskielberg's images challenge the viewer's perception of a subject and its meaning, which is what tends to be forgotten as a more critical aspect of the history of pictorialism.

Historically, pictorialist photography had implicitly asked aesthetic questions about photographic meaning through use of different techniques and visual strategies. Yet, like painting, pictorialism in all its forms had not resolved these issues, but only advanced them in relation to the subject matter of particular pictures. As such, the conclusions to arguments over theatrical or naturalist tendencies are no more resolved today than the scenarios they refer to. These aesthetic debates relate to different ideas about art, and were re-articulated in the late twentieth century in a reconfigured understanding of the role of the viewer, who in one model is interrogative, actively producing meanings from an image, and in another passively consumes a preconceived message. The outcome of these strategies is crucial to contemporary art, and is perhaps nowhere

more acutely present than in the field of documentary photography, which increasingly turned towards art discourse. In effect, pictorialism suppressed the documentary aspect of photography, although it remained implicit to the work, and it was the aesthetics of the document that would return and come to dominate twentieth-century art photography.

Straight Images

Traditional histories of photography usually date the decline or even the end of pictorialism as 1917, when it was overshadowed by Stieglitz's New York group, who had broken from pictorialism in the final issues of *Camera Work* magazine. Yet in some ways this is something of a myth, because many photographers around the world continued to develop pictorialist ideals in their work long after Stieglitz had dumped it. In the final issue of *Camera Work*, Stieglitz promoted 'straight photography' in the work of Paul Strand, which developed from pictorialism. In the USA this straight photography was still aesthetically minded (via post-impressionism and cubism), but increasingly developed a conscious and confident view of a new modern 'photographic vision'. This vision literally saw a new role for sharp focus, depth of field and the abstraction of subject matter. Suddenly, photographic visuality was accepted on its own terms, and the painterly effect of the pictorial scene was gradually rejected for a purer 'photographic seeing'.

Today, a return to those older motifs and techniques of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century pictorial art can be found here and there in contemporary photography. Photographers, perhaps even unaware of this older history, return implicitly to some of the aesthetic techniques and values of these earlier practices, from the *f*/64 deep-focus and sharpness of Andreas Gursky's 1990s work to the pictorialist 'fuzzography' of modern photography, like Sarah Moon's symbolist aesthetics or the middle-ground romanticism of Deborah Turbeville's pictorialism. As photography is digitised and automated, new inspiration for subject matter is found not only in photographic practices beyond art, such as fashion, photo-journalism, the internet, cinema and televisual drama, but also through a renewed interest in older historical forms of photography. Photography, once the outsider of art, has found its place at the centre. No longer a wolf in sheep's clothing, it has thrown off the coat it was given by painting and is now fully acknowledged as a default medium in contemporary art. Yet, paradoxically, photography also still dominates the non-art field of visual culture with a vast array of different uses. Art photography cannot be defined by the specificity of the medium or measured by any simple craft value, since these are all practised elsewhere in amateur and professional fields. Instead, a new art definition would evolve, picking out certain characteristics to define photography as an art of the document.