

Jeff Wall: The Connection Between Photography and Cinematography

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the dialogue between photography and cinema by evaluating film theories used in Jeff Wall's photos. In order to break the restrictions between different media and art forms, Wall expanded the space of photography and breaks the shackles of conventional art, thereby gaining greater freedom of expression.

Keywords: photography, contemporary culture, static, dynamic, film, cinematography

1. Introduction

Jeff Wall is a Canadian artist best known for his large-scale back-lit Cibachrome photographs (Note 1), his early photography shows his passion of the history of image-making by creating different works of art, such as *Picture for Women* (1979) recalls Édouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882) and brings the implications of that famous painting into the context of the cultural politics of the late 1970s. (Note 2) *Picture for Women*, not only linked art history but also combined many themes and motifs from different artistic expressions. This work contains the depth of field theory, the role of mirrors in photographic history and film history, and light source in works. He later began to study how to express his "near documentary" by capturing the instantaneous influence in life and uses the technique of drama and film narration, for instance, this direction can refer to another photo *Mimic* (1982). Meanwhile, Wall used cinematic observations to create more mood and emotions in photography. For example, in his work *A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947* (1990), he creates different characters and shows their different emotions in the works, which is like a careful designed scene. While a great shoe of the literature a Jeff Wall's photography focuses on his reference to art history, a close reading of his photography shows that he also uses film theory in the making of his image. In this paper, I argue that Jeff Wall uses film theories effectively to create his art. To support my thesis, I will analyze his creative method of constructed sets for frame arrangement, the narration of the image and cinematic observations in *Picture of Women*, *Mimic* and *A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947*.

2. Picture of Women

In the context of contemporary culture, photography art presents painting and other types of long-established art forms. Pre-existing of many types of art elements such as film, drama, and digital technology, some are inclusive, and the involvement of film elements in photography is the use of the integration of media has broadened the visual representation of photography space. From a functional point of view, photography and film are seen at the beginning of the invention that it is a tool for recording images, and they are all record image content through film or modern electronic imaging technology. Whether it is a static or dynamic art form, they both bring to the viewer because of their different means. The visual perception is also the difference that makes them have a space that can penetrate and interlace. French film director, photographer and artist Agnes Varda, said in her article *On Photography and Cinema*, "I like films where the photographic image is one of the subjects-and the very substance of emotion." (Note 3, Note 4) She believes that in all photography, there is a suspension of movement, and ultimately the rejection of movement. However, in all movies, they are eager to capture the dynamics of life and refuse to move. Film and photography may be the richest and most strange relationship between art. Sometimes the connections between them are so deep that we can hardly distinguish them. Nevertheless, there seem to be many very obvious differences. David Company, who is a British writer, curator, artist and teacher, working mainly with photography. (Note 5) He has mentioned the relationship between cinematic and photography in his book *The Cinematic* that "In order to make things even more complicated, throughout the twentieth century, film and photography have maintained important interrelationships in technology, aesthetics, and art." (Note 6, Note 7) It has evolved a new articulation of time very different from the

decisive snap and the photo-sequence. Talking its cue from cinema's frames and film stills, a narrative stage photography emerged in art at the end of the 1970s. The collision of film art and photography evokes a new way of expressing time, which is completely different from decisive snapshots and photo sequences, and they draw clues from cinema frames and film photography to build the formation of narrative photography at the same time.



Figure 1

2.1 Picture for Women With Depth of Field Theory

Jeff Wall used depth of field theory and mirror layout to productively express his creation in *Picture for Women*. By explore David Campany's article *A Theoretical Diagram in an Empty Classroom: Jeff Wall's Picture for Women*, describes Jeff Wall's photograph, *Picture for Women* (1979) is perhaps one of his most discussed works. This work has the earliest Jeff Wall's understanding of the concept of photography, a senior curator of photography Jennifer Blessing, said in her organized book *Jeff Wall: Exposure* that "it also marks his engagement with the cinema as a model for his form of photographic production." (Note 8) Meanwhile, it is also the first time he has placed the position of the camera, the idea of the mirror and the relationship between the person being photographed and the audience into his work. In Hoday King's article *The Long Goodbye: Jeff Wall and Film Theory*, he discusses how Wall deals with the relationship between still images and powerful feelings by giving the example of *Picture for Women*. (Note 9) The image reveals a reflection in a mirror of a sparse studio room, furnished with metallic office chairs, a work table, uncovered lightbulbs, pipes, and cinderblock. Despite the mundane scenery, the composition of the image follows traditional aesthetic rules of photography, such as dividing the picture into thirds, balancing the composition both horizontally and vertically. In the left third, a woman stands with her hands on a long table or strip and solemnly faces the audience. Wall's camera is at the center of the image, while Wall's own is located in the right third. His body is facing the camera and he holds the camera's shutter release cable in his visible hand, confirming his authorship of the image before us. Campany said in his article that "Wall was concerned with the kinds of theorization of spectatorship that had come to characterize the advanced art and film of that time." (Note 10) Although this work is also installed in a light box, it is important to remember the visual quality of a movie or a large advertisement (such as a billboard), but the photographer's presence in the final image is contrary to the creators of popular culture and modern elements.

In order to explain about the depth of field theory, in the book *Depth of Field : Stanley Kubrick, Film, and the Uses of History*, the authors give a description of this kind of philosophy with the illustration of the renowned director Stanley Kubrick, "who use an effect of lens and lighting that makes everything in the composition, from the closest object in the frame to the farthest, appear to be equally clear." (Note 11) In photography this

technique is called “depth of field”, and is a way of expanding the visual choices open to both photographer and viewer. In film, “it is most closely associated with a vital means of opening up the space created by the visual image for the inclusion of the many details of setting, lighting, color, property, and action that would allow the director to commination with his or her own ideas.” (Note 12)

Picture for Women addresses the male gaze, a topic increasingly analyzed, debated, and often resisted within the art world in the years surrounding this picture’s creation and display. The work is also an homage to one of the most famous paintings by Édouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882), which Wall would have seen in the collection of the Courtauld Institute of Art’s Gallery - where Wall studied art history in London. (Note 13) In Manet’s painting of this famous Parisian cabaret, where patrons could not only purchase drinks but also sexual encounters from the barmaids, a female bartender stands in the center of the frame confronting the viewer with an emotionless expression, as if waiting to hear her patron’s order or request. Since the viewer can clearly see the back of her body reflected in the mirror along with the face of a man facing her, the viewer is directly implicated in the scene by supposedly occupying the very space of the patron. Not only do we see the male gaze in action, we are also participating in it. Similarly, Wall’s photograph puts viewers in the center of the image by aiming the camera lens directly at us, highlighting our participation in the observation of the woman in the photograph while also witnessing Wall fix his male gaze upon her too. The viewers then also fall victim to the male gaze, as the photographer supposedly captures our image with the camera as well.



Figure 2

3. Mimic

Furthermore, cinematic imagery-whether narrative or non-narrative-need not always presents itself as an object of consumption for its spectator. In Jeff Wall’s *Mimic*, the inverse relationship between white men and Asian men on the street creates a narrative of the whole picture. To combine cinematography with photography, Wall took his camera out of the studio along with lights and actors with the intention of making pictures with the look of films from the 1970s that would lend a sharp and documentary style to his pieces. He often cites Neo-Realist cinema as an influence in his work. Particularly, his interest in filmmakers like Buñuel are notable, partially because of both artists’ use of non-actors in their fictional portrayals of real life. But, unlike other quick, grainy street images (both moving and still, like those by Winograd and other street photographers often 1960s), Wall set out to make very clear, vivid pictures that “resembled street photography, or at least had an interesting relationship with what street photography was attempting. For example, one of the chapters of David Company’s *Photography and Cinema* discusses cinema at a standstill, Company gives an example of this photo, by introducing the narrative and the composition of the performance, linked to film theory. (Note 14) Wall had seen the gesture of racial disdain embodied in *Mimic* and reproduced it by hiring and training actors to re-do the event he had witnessed. Blessing said, “the result has kind of truth one finds in a novel or a film, where lived experience incorporated or re-created in a fictional account conveys a sense of authenticity.” Furthermore, the

special relationship the cinema has to reality, the capacity for viewers to lose themselves in the narrative of the film, is one that is encouraged by the scale and the photographic realism of the image on the screen. In this picture, a white man and his girlfriend are walking slightly behind an Asian man. On the edge of each other's fields of vision the white man makes a loaded gesture as his middle finger pushes back his eyelid. Wall selected the street and the players, rehearsing the scene before shooting it. Achieving convincing narrative gestures in photographs is notoriously difficult. Wall tried everything from paying people to perform things over and over for long periods before attempting to shoot, to filming rehearsals on video then freeze-framing the ideal gestures and replicating them on location. Company mentioned that "such disavowal of the camera's frontal presence is standard in mainstream narrative cinema because it inherited the implied 'fourth wall' of realist theater." (Note 15) Another prominent feature of Jeff Wall's shooting is that he really likes to use the camera to observe the shooting pair like a movie director. After carefully scheduling the scene to be filmed, he will let the actors follow him asked to perform, then he hid behind the camera seriously and observing the actors' every move. Here it is necessary to mention Wall's interest in the history of art. An art historian by degree and practice, Wall had a long involvement in the scholarly aspects of the art world before working primarily as a photographer. Along with broader references to the history of photography, there are also strong ties to the history of painting in the way that he approaches photography. Pieces like *Mimic* are meant to be hung on the wall like a painting, and not stored in an album or looked at solely as plates in a book. The sheer size and luminosity of the lightboxes makes sure that one cannot ever get the full effect of Wall's art from a reproduction.



Figure 3

4. Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947

After we talked about Wall's photography and added cinematic scene layout and film narrative elements, Jeff Wall also used the film-like dynamic observation method to break the original single static image observation object of photography. In the article of Lisa Joyce and Fred Orton's *Always Elsewhere: An Introduction to the art of Jeff Wall*, the study *A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947* in detail and combined it with a series of observation methods used in work to further understand the meaning. (Note 16) It is a large picture on the scale of its beholder's body, and also a representation; objects and characters were arranged to illustrate an imaged scene, and then they were photographed with a large format camera. *A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947* is easy to see but difficult to know, its ostensible subject is a moment during a child's birthday party, the children have abandoned the party food, toys and games, for the entertainment. There is a space in it, between the two groups of children, that has been kept clear to afford us an uninterrupted view of the ventriloquist and her dummy. It centers the eye along a path of seeing and understanding. Beholders are invited

to position themselves in front of this space at a sufficient distance away from the picture to make the figures in it seem to be about the size they would be if the beholder were looking at the actual tableau. Joyce has a statement in her article, she thinks that Wall has several times staged this drama and took a picture of it. Wall shifts the audience's attention to the center of the picture, which is precisely what he wants to achieve. In film and television works, the director will focus the audience on the protagonist, through a series of different an accelerator, such as a light, a show, or a line of sight for a character. In this work, we can first see that all children's eyes are concentrated on the beholder and her dummy, which makes it very easy for the audience to ignore the other details in the picture, which is the current line of sight processing in the movie. Besides, the two windows in the photo played an essential role as a representative of the time and place of the show, and the night scenes that emerged also set the atmosphere of the entire scene. Joyce mentioned in the article that Wall thinks that cinematic is very like ventriloquism. He uses the film's narrative in the narration of the story in this photo. The audience has much imagination to think about the story told by the beholder.

5. Conclusion

Wall reveals racial discrimination, sexuality, and violence through the subtle expressions of the characters' subtle expressions and gestures, backgrounds, props and communication lack such social realities, which leads to the depth of the viewers' thinking. By analyzing his three works *Picture of Women*, *Mimic*, and *A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947*, it can be seen that Wall was influenced by these three cinematic film theories while applying photography and related these theories to his own works in an effective way. Among *Picture of Women*, he used the mirror to face, and the position of the camera and the characters, and the position of the entire frame was uniquely displayed. In the *Mimic*, Wall joins a cinematic narrative element, reinterpreting it from a realistic piece into a story-like work. Finally, in *A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947*, he arranges objects and characters in an imaginary scene, using film-like observations to express the true meaning of the works he has given.

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Notes

- Note 1. Jeff Wall, "Jeff Wall-Artist" Accessed October 09, 2019. <https://gagosian.com/artists/jeff-wall/>
- Note 2. David Campany. A Theoretical Diagram in an Empty Classroom: Jeff Wall's Picture for Women, *Oxford Art Journal*, Volume 30, Issue 1, March 2007, p18.
- Note 3. Agnes Varda. *On Photography and Cinema 1984*, Campany, David. *The Cinematic*. London, Whitechapel/Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2007 p.62.
- Note 4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Campany, 2018.
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- Note 6. Jeff Wall, Jennifer Blessing, *Jeff Wall: Exposure* (Gardners Books, 2007), p33.
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Note 8. David Company. *A Theoretical Diagram in an Empty Classroom: Jeff Wall's Picture for Women*, Oxford Art Journal, Volume 30, Issue 1, March 2007. p10.

Note 9. Cocks, Geoffrey, Diedrick, James, and Perusek, Glenn, eds. *Depth of Field: Stanley Kubrick, Film, and the Uses of History*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. Accessed November 4, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, p3.

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Note 11. David Company. *Photography and Cinema*. (London: Reaktion, Reaktion Books Ltd, Reaktion Books, Limited, 2008) p137.

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Note 13. David Company. *Photography and Cinema*. (London: Reaktion, Reaktion Books Ltd, Reaktion Books, Limited, 2008) p180.

Note 14. Lisa Joyce/Fred Orton. *Always Elsewhere: An Introduction to the art of Jeff Wall, Jeff Wall: Photographs*, p14.

Note 15. Lisa Joyce/Fred Orton. *Always Elsewhere: An Introduction to the art of Jeff Wall, Jeff Wall: Photographs*, p18.

Note 16. David Company. *Photography and Cinema*. (London: Reaktion, Reaktion Books Ltd, Reaktion Books, Limited, 2008) p42.

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