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| **Your article** |
| Photographic Modernism |
| **[Enter any *variant forms* of your headword – OPTIONAL]** |
| The most well known discourse of photographic modernism is that initiated in the USA by Alfred Stieglitz, and developed around his New York journal, *Camera Work*, between 1903 and 1917. Other key modernisms in Europe include the constructivist ideas developed by Alexander Rodchenko in Russia, the surrealists in France, and a variety of versions of ‘new vision’ thinking about photography in Germany.  In New York, Alfred Stieglitz drew an amalgamation of ideas from Europe, partly from photographic pictorialism but also post-impressionism and cubist art alongside his new USA art criticism. Stieglitz took the basic premise from pictorialism that art photography is found in the subjective rather than objective aspect of the picture. He merged this idea into a specific set of characteristics to describe photographic realism, which he first identified in the work of Paul Strand in 1916; Strand had developed abstraction and a simplified view of subject matter. Stieglitz invested this new mode of seeing with feelings by the artist-photographer. A new ‘modern’ way of looking at ordinary life paved the way for a string of other photographers to identify themselves as modernists. |
| Modernism is a complex term in any field whether used either as a noun or an adjective. As a noun relating to photography, modernism is associated with the idea of advancing new aesthetic values beginning in the 1900s until the late 1930s. To be modern in this period was to be identified with new subject matter and new ways of seeing. Usually regarded as progressive and modern, there were several different versions of what this meant during this time. The most well known discourse of photographic modernism now is the one initiated in the USA by Alfred Stieglitz. Developed around his New York based journal, *Camera Work* between 1903 and 1917, this version is characterised by the ‘straight’ photograph. Other modernism movements in Europe include the constructivist ideas developed by Alexander Rodchenko in Russia, the dream-based surrealists in France, and a variety of versions of ‘new vision’ looking in Germany. In this respect we might be better to describe modernism as a series of different ideas about how to be modern in the photographic image. Composition and subject matter or content are the two key components of the modern photograph, but these are also related to the values and views of the photographer and their role in modern culture.  In New York, Alfred Stieglitz amalgamated ideas from Europe, partly from photographic pictorialism but also post-impressionism and cubist art, alongside his passion for a new USA based art photography. Stieglitz took the basic premise from pictorialism that art photography is found in the subjective rather than objective aspect of the picture, and merged this idea into a specific set of characteristics to describe photographic realism, which he first identified in the work of Paul Strand in 1916; Strand had developed abstraction and a simplified view of subject matter. Stieglitz invested this new mode of seeing with a symbolist idea of the artist-photographer’s feelings being invested in the picture. A new ‘modern’ way of looking at ordinary life paved the way for a string of other photographers to identify themselves as modernists. In the USA, this included the likes of Walker Evans, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham and of course Alfred Stieglitz’s own extensive work with photography. Central to this narrative of modernism is the way that photographers projected theories of artistic inspiration onto seeing photographic techniques. Edward Weston’s use of *f.64* deep focus, for example, metaphorically echoed the deep vision of the artist. Photographic modernism became a mode of personal expression mediated via the photographic form. More about the form of the picture than any specific subject matter or content, this type of modernism is usually called ‘formalism.’ Highly influential, this variety of modernism spread to Europe and in other parts of America too.  When Tina Modotti, an Italian woman accompanied by Edward Weston, arrived in Mexico in 1923 she adapted her formalist compositions to suit the values of the new post-revolutionary culture, creating photographic juxtapositions of traditional values with new modern ways of life, combining radical compositions with new types of social content. Mexican modernism was thus more closely linked to the features of a modernising culture; electrification, new machines and the realm of cultural politics became its explicit subject matter. Fresh ideas of what it meant to be modern were at work in the various strands of European photographic modernism too, with different developments taking place in Russia, Germany, France and Italy.  In Russia, then the centre of the new 1920s Soviet Union, Constructivist photographers like Alexander Rodchenko adopted radical new viewpoints and compositions of everything. These new compositions frequently made use of dynamic angles, which aimed to, quite literally, construct new ways of seeing the world through their revolutionary viewpoints. The dynamism of this practice changed attitudes towards photography as a modern art. For example, the snapshot, was no longer dismissed as an amateur form, but accepted as a means to democratise the vision of life. It gave each person the opportunity to depict his or her own reality. Eventually some of the features of these new Russian practices were adopted and taken over as part of an official realism of the state, as Socialist Realism. This official form of aesthetics was eventually imposed on all the arts as propaganda for the state under Stalinism. Nazi ideology in Germany adopted similar official aesthetic values during the late 1930s, with pictures showing idealised viewpoints of heroic leaders and happy citizens, workers and the military, all in harmony with one another. We do not like to think of a regressive regime developing ‘modernism,’ but this is nevertheless one part of the history of modernism, even if it promoted reactionary forms incompatible with modern values today. Modernism was indeed plural.  Other progressive forms of European modernism also emerged in France with surrealism, and in Germany with the Bauhaus school of design. Moreover, individuals in different parts of Europe developed a range of new modern practices and theories of photography. The writings of Walter Benjamin gathered together some of these currents, and still provide valuable and much discussed contextual insights into the medium. Some of these debates revolve around the new tension between art and commerce, advertising and politics. For Benjamin, the old aesthetics of ‘beauty’ should no longer apply to modern photography, because it was being used in the name of commerce. Modern photography, he argued, could be used to so many different progressive ends that it could even change the way we see what art or politics is. As photography became a technology more firmly integrated in the illustration of magazines, the idea of photography being modern had a popular resonance (along with cinema) as simply a technology of the modern man and woman.  The Second World War shattered many of these values, and afterwards a new attitude developed, which focused less on models of modern vision than a concern for the human in the human condition. The famous worldwide 1955 touring exhibition *The Family of Man* embodied this new attitude, embracing the plural traditions that had been established, as different ideas of modernism, constructivism, realism and formalism, but united into a grand photographic expression of the unity of the human condition. This new post-WW II sentiment was called ‘photographic humanism’. The term modernism is still applied to many of the photographers working after this time, but it was in a weaker sense, with no overall clear aesthetic. While street photography seemed to emerge as a new form of expressing modern life, adopting some of the compositional values of constructivism, the museological discourse on them, for example from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, still emphasised the seer and artistic vision of the photographer as the founding role in them. Conceptualism and other art movements were rapidly gaining momentum as alternatives to modernism, specifically the formalist idea of modernism that Clement Greenberg had adopted from the modernism of Stieglitz, which had also been informed the English modernist writings of Clive Bell and Roger Fry.  We would have to wait until the late 1970s for the currency of a new term, ‘post-modernism,’ to signal this mutation of values in art practice. Post-modernism named a new critical position capable of questioning ‘modernism,’ creating a rupture with its past and rejecting many of the craft-based values of modernist photography. Abruptly using the commercial values of advertising and other industrial photography, art and art photography renovated itself by integrating many of the attributes of these other practices that modernism had repressed: glossy large scale colour images, slick picture values and a sense of irony and parody, as well as the active role of women photographers. Until this time, modernist fine art photography had sought to exclude commercial photographic values from art photography. Whether these commercial photographic values were introduced as critique, pastiche or irony, they began to transform the views of the older modernisms as suddenly belonging to another time. Modernist photography was mostly handmade by the artist in small numbers of highly crafted photographs, whereas postmodernist photography was more often industrial and employed the tactics and rhetoric of advertising, cinema and the mass media. Modernism thus belongs to an older time and set of values surrounding photography. However, we can often find its discourse reappearing, for example, within the innovations of digital photography. If one modernist position was that photography is a specific medium with its own intrinsic values, the advent of computers is easily adopted to these same values. The pixel and its presence on the material surface of the display screen becomes the essential element of digital photography. Elsewhere, the fine print tradition of modernism is found returning in handmade papers used for inkjet and other more sophisticated digital printers. Modernism is thus not dead, but alive and revived with old ideas about new media. |
| Further reading:  (Benjamin)  (Bolton)  (Burgin)  (Rubén)  (Phillips)  (Stieglitz)  (Williams) |