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English Aestheticism and American Photography

Oscar Wilde had opinions on nearly everything but had remarkably little to say about photography. Save for a few (often condescending) lines about the popular studio portrait, all of his epigrams, fiction, and essays practically deny the existence of cameras in favor of the ‘eternal’ arts of painting, sculpture, and literature¹. And though Wilde was not the only voice of aestheticism, he was certainly the most prominent, at least until his imprisonment in 1895 and death in 1900. Indeed, by the end of 1905, the major figures in the Anglophone world had all but died off, including John Ruskin (d. 1900), Walter Pater (d. 1894), James A. McNeill Whistler (d. 1903), and Aubrey Beardsley (d. 1898). Without them, English aestheticism would not have anything to say about photographs in the 20th century. Instead, the term gained a more pejorative connotation (“mere” aestheticism) and the slogan of “art for art’s sake” came to symbolize all that was old-fashioned and superficial. Yet if we examine the actual philosophies espoused by the English aesthetes, we see that they were far more enduring than popularly understood. Furthermore, their personal attitudes towards photographs, especially Wilde’s, have a distinctly modern flavor that deserves greater recognition.

Whether consciously or not, American photographers in the 20th century embodied several key principles within the aesthetic movement. Pictorialists like Alfred Stieglitz, documentary photographers like Lewis Hine, and postmodernists like Cindy Sherman, all demonstrate a certain approach to their art and life that can be found in writings of Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde – the ‘founding texts’ of English aestheticism. Their photographic practice resonates strongly with aesthetes’ ideas on the relations between art and nature, art’s effect on our perception of the world, and how

¹Dobson (2020) notes the links between spirit photography and Dorian Gray’s portrait, and that Wilde was quite an enthusiastic amateur photographer in the few years before his death

the self is conveyed through art. Taking such a perspective makes irrelevant each photographer's movement or style, instead turning the focus towards ways of looking, both behind the camera and at the final product. Liberated from the burden of categorization, we shall have a framework that asks us not whether an image is true or beautiful, but rather asks how the image's claims to truth or beauty may change the way we see.

This essay therefore aims to broaden English aestheticism beyond its moment in time to certain American photographs of the 20th century. In Section I, we outline the history and tenets of aestheticism with attention to Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde. In Section II, we explore how the aesthetes, and Wilde in particular, perceived and used photographs in their lives, with notes on the work of Francis Galton and the infamous Napoleon Sarony portraits of Wilde. In Section III, we discuss how the various styles of American photography intersect with aesthetes. We then summarize and conclude.

I.

The origin of aestheticism as a coherent movement is generally associated with Théophile Gautier's 1835 preface to *Mademoiselle Maupin*, in which he declares that the only things which are really beautiful are entirely useless ('il n'y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien'). Contrary to his later views, John Ruskin echoes this in his essay collection *Stones of Venice* (1851-53), urging his readers not to rationalize the pleasures of beauty, and that 'the most beautiful things in the world are the most useless.' These statements would be repeated with minor variations in later years. The inutility of art, the basis of "art for art's sake", has become the defining cliché of aestheticism and has done much to discredit it as a meaningful and even profound artistic philosophy. Critics point to decadent wilting-lily practitioners, the hundreds of nymph-like figures prancing in unnamed paradises on paintings considered representative of the aesthetic movement, or passages of purple prose that say nothing in as many words as possible. These examples are held as purely decorative

objects with no deeper meaning. While the decorative arts were indeed important, the philosophies of aestheticism never really formed an artistic movement; it was about art and how to see it.

No one lives up to the label of aesthete more than Wilde. We can gain a better understanding of what ‘serious’ aestheticism meant, in practice, through his writing and influences. In 1874, Wilde entered Oxford University and would be significantly influenced by two of his mentors: Ruskin, professor of art, and Pater, professor of classics. English aestheticism, at its core, would be the synthesis of their ideas with the personality of Wilde. What Wilde gains from them is a particular way of looking that echoes the medieval philosophies of nominalism and realism in their emphasis on surface and substance.

Later revising his words, Ruskin in his 1870 Oxford lectures would passionately insist on art serving life, that its ‘sweetness and pleasure’ could only result from ‘truth and utility’ practically serving everyday life (Daley, 1997). Yet he is not advocating for things like realism or geographic surveys; while he calls for truth, he champions Turner, the notoriously hazy painter of light and architecture. Ruskin’s aesthetic truth is the essence of an object, not its surface; an artwork is useful if it helps us perceive this essence. ‘WE NEVER SEE ANYTHING CLEARLY’, wrote Ruskin (all-caps) in *Modern Painters IV* (1856), referring to Turner’s ability to obscure and suggest the mysterious substance of his landscapes, as opposed to a photo-realistic rendering. Ruskin reiterates this point in 1870, declaring that the ‘graphic arts begin in keeping the outline of shadow that we have loved, and they end in giving to it the aspect of life’. Our eyes can only give us the shadow of what we see. So what is true is not actually seen, and what is useful cannot actually be used, except in some metaphysical sense. These are, to say the least, unconventional definitions of truth and utility.

Pater’s 1873 essay collection *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* formalizes much of the terminology of aestheticism while seemingly opposing Ruskin’s methodology. For Pater, the aesthete

can only perceive an object's essence by looking inwards, by dissecting their personal impression and disengaging it 'as a chemist notes some natural element'. These impressions are 'unstable, flickering, inconsistent'; they 'burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them...the whole scope of observation is dwarfed to the narrow chamber of the individual mind.' No longer is there a mysterious essence lurking beneath the object's appearance; the surface and its sensual qualities generate within us the raw data which we must then analyze and process to understand our perception of it. Pater's version of artistic 'truth' is thus entirely linked to how the observer responds to the various stimuli of the artwork.

Neither Ruskin nor Pater are satisfied with the mere aesthetic of the artwork. Both are convinced of some deeper truth – beauty – that transcends the material qualities. Ruskin sees this beauty as external to us, an inherent quality of nature which art can train us to better perceive, while for Pater this beauty is internal, a function of our personalities modified by the presence of art. Wilde synthesizes both ways of looking and promotes them with more style than either of the two older men could ever have mustered.

Wilde's aestheticism is best summarized in his 1891 essay-dialogues 'The Decay of Lying' and 'The Critic as Artist', first published in the collection *Intentions*. With punchy statements from charismatic interlocutors who take breaks for dinner or music, Wilde lays out directly the implications of Ruskin's and Pater's ideas on life. Quite simply, 'what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us'. In one fell swoop, Wilde elevates art to life, dilutes the power of individual artworks, and implies an instability to the world we experience. Elaborating further, he describes Nature as our creation; 'people only discover in her what they bring to her.' Similarly, our concept of 'Japan', for example, is the 'deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists... There is no such country, there are no such people.' Describing how we should approach life, Wilde writes 'there is no mood with which cannot sympathize... to discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to which we can arrive.' In short, beauty *is* because art *is*. What follows are

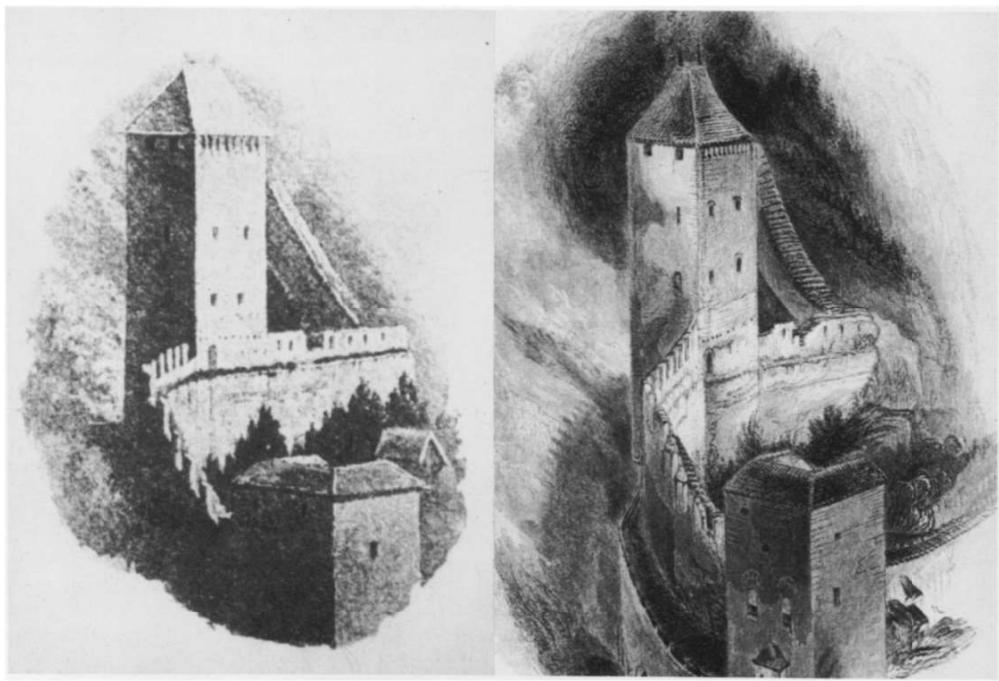


Figure 1: Ruskin's daguerrotype and sketch of Friborg

what we may consider to be the core tenets of English aestheticism: (1) All beauty derives from other sources of beauty, (2) Beauty is a human invention, and (3) Anything has the potential to be beautiful. Ruskin and Pater may not agree with my particular phrasing here, but these shared principles govern their writing and are implied, if not stated outright, by Wilde.

II.

Before turning to American photographic practice we shall examine how the aesthetes themselves thought of photographs. Ruskin was one of the early users of the daguerrotype in England: his initial reactions were ‘immensely favourable and concentrated largely on its almost magical ability to capture a scene in sharp detail’ (Harvey, 1984). While he valued them for archival purposes, he later rejected the idea that photos could be artistic: ‘this truth of mere transcript has nothing to do with Art’. In an amusing illustration of his beliefs, his sketch of the tower of Friborg (Fig. 1) deliberately exaggerates the curvature of the staircase, which he stated to be ‘a truer idea of

Friborg...the sketch has a certain veracity wanting in the daguerrotype'. Again we see that Ruskin's idea of truth is disconnected from reality and more dependent on his understanding of the so-called 'deeper' truth (which, in its subjectivity, links him with Pater). Yet his dismissal of photography is largely coupled with his loathing for mechanization and industrialization. His 1870 definition of art as 'human labor regulated by human design' requiring 'evidence of active intellect in choice and arrangement' does not specifically exclude photography, though Ruskin's personal dislike of the medium would lead him to ignore innovations from figures such as Julia Margaret Cameron (though he would sit for Frederick Hollyer in 1896).

Pater was much more indifferent towards photos. His main use of the medium was limited to middle class portraiture, in which he became the standard 'intellectual gentleman', and he wrote little, if anything at all, about photography. Østermark-Johansen (2022) links this to Pater's sense that the self could not be captured in a single moment, and so did not believe a photo could possibly show anything but a mask. Østermark-Johansen also finds affinities between Pater and the composite portraits of Francis Galton. In Pater's 1864 essay 'Diaphaneité', he describes his ideal type of person, emphasizing its transparency and breadth, 'a mind of taste lighted up by some spiritual ray within', a sort of wistful Renaissance man longing after all the world's knowledge. Galton, meanwhile, superimposed numerous faces over each other to achieve an imaginary portrait that, in Østermark-Johansen's analysis, resembles the visual equivalent of Pater's diaphanous type.

Galton's work, however, is tied more to the statistical archive work of Alphonse Bertillon. He made photos that, 'in seeking the apotheosis of the optical, attempted to elevate the indexical photographic composite to the level of the symbolic, thus expressing a general law through the accretion of contingent instances' (Sekula, 1989). This would seem to resonate more with Wilde, who writes in *De Profundis* (1897) about truth in art being 'the unity of a thing with itself: the outward rendered expressive of the inward: the soul made incarnate: the body instinct with spirit'. Friedman (2014) argues that Wilde subscribed to Galton's thesis of the outward appearance reflecting

an inner truth. Though Wilde clearly entertained the idea, there is little evidence he really believed it himself. Wilde's novel *Dorian Gray* (1890) uses the separation of body and soul to allow Dorian to debauch himself without affecting his eternally good-looks, granting him an invincibility in society. Wilde was clearly aware of how appearances could create a misleading impression of the truth. In fact, this was how Wilde exploited photography to achieve celebrity.

In 1881 Wilde had no occupation, had failed to obtain an academic position, and had self-published a negatively-reviewed book of poems. Yet he was notorious enough to be the spokesman of aestheticism, for which he was chosen to make a year-long lecture tour of it across America, which began January 9, 1882. Though ostensibly there to prepare the American audience for his unflattering caricature in the opera *Patience*, Wilde emerged from the year more famous and successful than ever (Cooper, 2024). Key to this ascent were the Sarony photographs taken shortly after he arrived in New York. Though the US Supreme Court in 1884 would essentially declare Wilde to be an invention of Sarony in the portraits² (Ginsburg, 2020), Wilde clearly commanded the performance with his outfits and poses, developing the persona of the aesthete while also establishing his status as an Oxford man, London dandy, and serious man of letters (Fig. 2) (Mendelssohn, 2018). Though Sarony may have won his copyright case, beating out arguments that he was a mere 're-arranger' of the 'melody' that was Oscar Wilde, in practice Wilde seemed glad to have his likeness reproduced without limit. Wilde gave signed portraits to celebrities such as Walt Whitman and Jefferson Davis, had his portraits distributed in cities before his arrival, and was on put on more trade cards than anyone else at the time, where his likeness was advertised on various products including 'bosom beautifiers' (Fig. 3) (Friedman, 2014).

Wilde allowed his mass-produced image to enhance and establish his celebrity. His 'effeminate

²The decision, which established copyright for photographs, was especially curious considering Sarony apparently did not ever attempt to learn the chemistry behind photography, preferring to 'devote his energies to the work in front of the camera'. The copyright appears to have been awarded on the basis that Sarony's posing, costumes, lighting, etc met the standard for originality, making Sarony more of a set designer than a photographer. The Supreme Court was later given the 'full Oscar Wilde treatment' in 1890 when they visited Sarony's studio (Ginsburg, 2020)



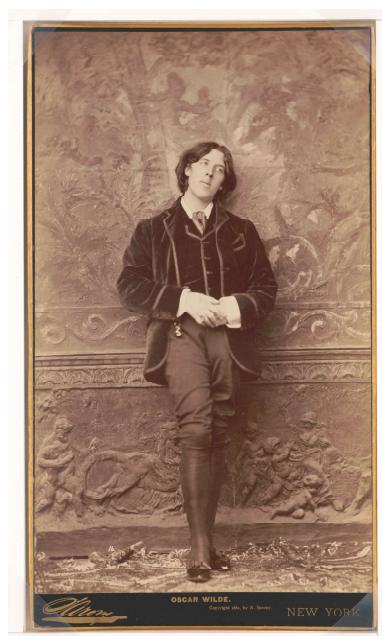
(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Figure 2: Napoleon Sarony's portraits of Oscar Wilde, showing (a)-(d) numbers 5, 13, 14, and 16



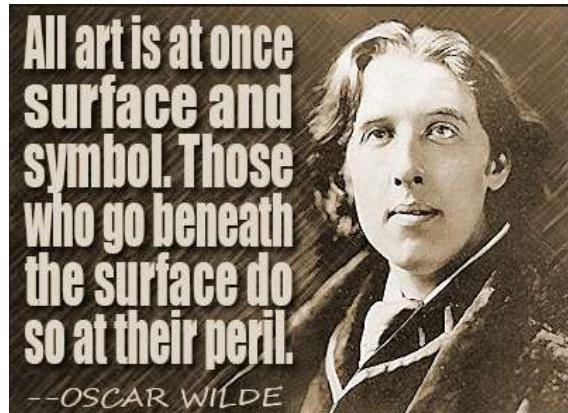
(a)



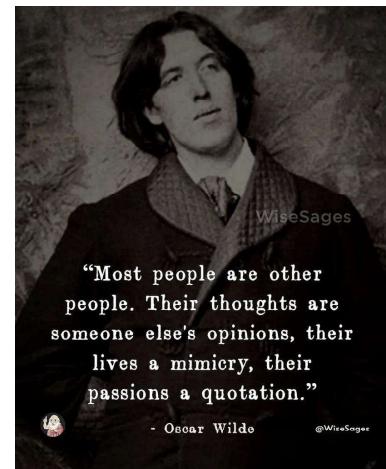
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Figure 3: Trade cards of Oscar Wilde, (a) by the Burrow-Giles Lithographic company, 1883, and (b) for 'Madame Marie Fontaine's Bosom Beautifier,' 1880s

'aesthete' persona was but one of the many he would assume over his life, and his 1882 depiction as the pensive writer and man about town would not be fully substantiated for at least another decade. Like a reversed spirit photo, Wilde's photographic portraits represented a man who did not really exist, at least not yet; they were not an 'index which could be traced back to a unique original' (Gunning, 1995). Even today, the images we see of him are almost invariably the Sarony portraits and the internet is filled with images of them paired with (often dubiously attributed and cringeworthy) inspirational quotes (Fig. 4a-b). The Wilde in the 1882 portraits would not say these things for many years and it was only from around 1888 that Wilde began to formulate the epigrams we know him for today. Wilde, by this time, was considerably more rotund (Fig. 4c-d) and no longer the svelte, elegant aesthete. He was living up to his earlier projected image. His later success, in this sense, is an instance of life imitating art.



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Figure 4: (a)-(b) Modern digital images of Oscar Wilde with inspirational quote, (c) Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Bruce Douglas by Gillman & Co, May 1893 ©National Portrait Gallery, London, and (d) Caricature of Oscar Wilde by Max Beerbohm (?), 1894, ©estate of Max Beerbohm

III.

Though the aesthetes themselves were not photographers, we have seen that Wilde exploited photos of himself for personal gain. Only in the following century, in America, would we see how the principles of aestheticism could be applied to photographs. Since English aestheticism, as defined here, was predominantly a way of looking at the world in relation to ourselves, it would seem natural to have a photographic counterpart. The photographers we shall discuss did not, however, overtly claim any link to the aesthetes. We will show that their practice nevertheless provides compelling examples of aestheticism ‘in action’.

Stieglitz, champion of photography as art, is perhaps an obvious example of aesthetic photography; indeed the label has been applied to him directly (Berger, 2014). He made art photos that reproduced painterly forms with a camera, earning him a reputation for pretentiousness. Stieglitz himself wrote that pictorial photography required the photographer to be ‘as familiar with the laws of composition as is the landscape or portrait painter; a fact not generally understood. Metropolitan scenes... have been presented in such a way as to impart in them a permanent value because of the poetic conception of the subject.’ Critics such as Moholy-Nagy (1926) have used this to accuse Stieglitz of aesthetic conservatism, saying that the photographer has ‘become a painter instead of using his camera photographically’. Stieglitz’s well-known Flatiron photo exemplifies this tendency, as shown in Fig. 5, drawing on Japanese ink paintings which were popular with aesthetes such as Whistler. But Moholy-Nagy too follows a strong painterly tradition, albeit a more abstract one (Fig. 6). The photos of Stieglitz and Moholy-Nagy, both of whom decried retouching, are fundamentally governed by the light that enters the camera and development of the print. Their particular choice of subject is a textbook-aesthete’s application of art to life, finding beauty in the real world by capturing the moment when their internal artistic vision aligns, seemingly by chance but really by design, with the reality presented before them. Trachtenberg (1990) describes how



(a)

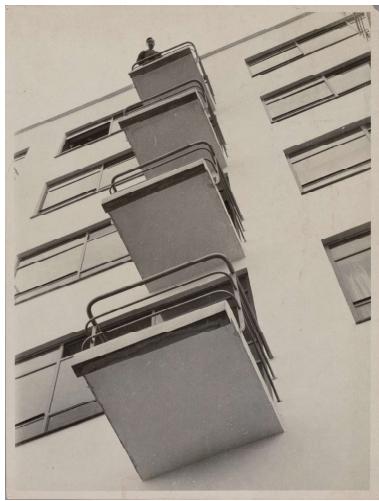


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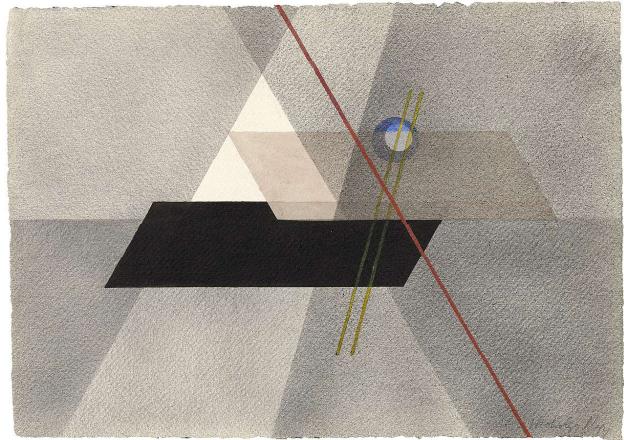
Figure 5: (a) Alfred Stieglitz, ‘The Flatiron’, 1903 ©Alfred Stieglitz Collection and (b) Taihō Shōkon, ‘Bamboo in Snow’, 1774 (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Stieglitz displayed, in ‘Picturesque Bits of New York’ the ‘ fleeting impressions caught by a highly selective eye, the crystallization of experience’ – the language of Pater. Unlike Ruskin, Stieglitz and Moholy-Nagy cannot alter their photos by producing a curve that is not actually there (Fig. 1); the photographers are forced to view life as art.

Documentary photography exhibits a different principle of aestheticism: finding the latent beauty in anything by simply looking in the right manner. As argued by Trachtenberg (1990), documentary photography was never the anthropological social work it sometimes claimed to represent; ‘art and document are arbitrary terms that describe a way of looking at photographs, rather than the qualities intrinsic to them’. Lewis Hine sought out working-class subjects in tenements, factories, and sweatshops (Fig. 7). While his photos were often accompanied with long captions, he was perhaps aware that they were fundamentally incapable of capturing the actual pain or tediousness



(a)

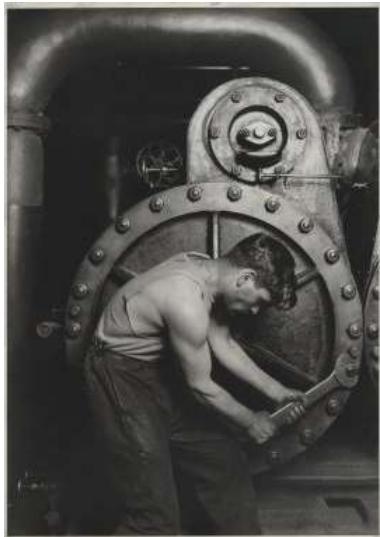


(b)

Figure 6: (a) Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, ‘Balconies’, 1926 ©President and Fellows of Harvard College and (b) Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, ‘Composition’, 1927. ©2023 Hattula Moholy-Nagy / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

of the work. He even writes that the picture of his newsboys under the Brooklyn Bridge ‘is often more effective than the reality would have been, because, in the picture, the non-essential and conflicting interests have been eliminated’. Here Hine is inventing both the beauty of the scene and the social reality of it. The group of boys with their orderly formation and almost dazed, deer-in-the-headlights expressions, display a dignity and individuality that they almost certainly did not have, if glanced at on the street. Their complete dissociation from the papers they are selling, whose front page depicts a woman a world away, demands from us a greater empathy that Hine achieves with aesthetic principles. In so doing, however, the newsboys lose their status as real child laborers and become objects for aesthetic contemplation – the aesthete’s conversion of life into art.

Our final aesthete-photographer is Cindy Sherman, considered a postmodernist. Crimp (1980) describes the postmodern mode of photography as relinquishing the photo’s claims to an original truth, accepting it as fiction, and embracing its status as a copy with an aura of its own. ‘The desire of representation exists only insofar as it is never fulfilled’, Crimp writes, suggesting that the entire



(a)



(b)

Figure 7: (a) Lewis Hine, 'Power House Mechanic' 1920–1921 (Brooklyn Museum), and (b) Lewis Hine, '3 A.M. Sunday, February 23rd, 1908. Newsboys selling on Brooklyn Bridge. Harry Ahren-preiss, 30 Willet Street. (Said was 13 years old). Abe Gramus. 37 Division Street. Witness Fred McMurray. Location: New York, New York (State)' Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.



(a)



(b)

Figure 8: Cindy Sherman, 'Untitled Film Stills', 1978 (a)-(b) numbers 12 and 16 © 2024 Cindy Sherman

appeal of art is its ability to distance itself from reality. This gap between art and life is fundamental to the aesthete's understanding of the world, which has always understood photographs to be at odds with life as we perceive it. Like Wilde's portraits, Sherman's 'Untitled Film Stills' (Fig. 8) create multiple selves and identities which have an entirely fictional past and an implied future. For Sherman, however, the film stills are not necessarily aspirational or aiming to present a curated image of herself; she rather embraces their untethered nature, scenes from an fictional performance. 'There is no real Cindy Sherman in these photographs; there are only the guises she assumes', writes Crimp. Sherman embodies Lord Henry's remark in *Dorian Gray*: 'Being natural is simply a pose, and the most irritating pose I know'. By rejecting the stable self, a key principle of the aesthete's 'continual vanishing away, that strange perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves' (Pater, 1873), Sherman finds a comical beauty in being stock characters, the ideal types of her age, becoming a housewife in one moment and a femme fatale in the next. She proves Pater's suspicion that a photographic portrait cannot truly represent the self, and that any attempt to do so is bound to fail.

IV.

We have studied how the English aesthetes Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde defined their aestheticism and how it may have influenced their understanding of photography. Even though they wrote relatively little about photos, their convictions – that art defines life, that beauty derives from our personalities, and that beauty can be found anywhere – would come to characterize the practice of American photographers in the 20th century. Through the examples of Stieglitz, Hine, and Sherman, we showed that the ostensibly quite different movements of pictorialism, documentary, and postmodernism share certain aesthetic principles which were first formalized in 19th century England.

We have not attempted to explain the complete trajectory of these ideas, which no doubt have a

much longer history (probably extending to ancient Greece), but it is clear that the ideas promulgated by the aesthetes did not die out with them in 1900. Perhaps aided by Wilde's extensive lecture tour of America, the more serious side to aestheticism would have much more in common with American modernist philosophies. In Susan Sontag, aestheticism found wide acceptance ³ and, more recently, Harold Bloom often wrote fondly of his love of Wilde and Pater as aesthetic critics.

To be sure, not every photographic movement can be understood in terms of aestheticism. Scientific, archival, and survey work as represented by figures such as Anna Atkins, Alphonse Bertillon, Timothy O'Sullivan, and Étienne-Jules Marey largely treated their photos as true documents of the world with a beauty that was inherent in their nature. Meanwhile, consciously 'artistic' photographers who retouch or compose their scenes (Oscar Rejlander), deliberately stage their photos to reference art-historical sources (Jeff Wall), or re-photograph (Richard Prince), cannot be seen as aesthetes. They work entirely within the sphere of art and do not exhibit reality, or at least the semblance of reality, which the photos Stieglitz, Hine, and Sherman do. For the aesthete unites the physical experience of the world with the metaphysical, drawing on both domains to derive beauty.

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³Sontag's essays in *On Photography* (1977) implicitly take an aesthete's view of photos

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