

# Visual Storytelling in Hypermodernity: The Transformative Construction of Symbolic Realities Through Staged Photography

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## Abstract

Visual storytelling plays a fundamental role in contemporary art and culture. Staged photography, with its fictional and theatrical nature, turns into an accurate metaphor of photography as “mirror of reality”, since it can reflect contemporary concerns beyond the appearance of things. In the context of hypermodernity, there are some recurring themes in photographic storytelling which explore various facets of the relationship between individuals and their social environment. Through the use of staged photography, artists like Gregory Crewdson, Sarah Hobbs, Mitra Tabrizian, Jeff Wall, Tom Hunter, Taryn Simon are shaping narratives and representations of reality beyond what is noticeable in our everyday experience, offering new perspectives that foster critical analysis and ethical implication.

**Keywords:** Staged photography, Storytelling, Contemporary Art, Hypermodernity, Representation

## 1. Staged Photography in Contemporary Art

Although classical photography, the so-called “documentary”, was based on the idea that the photographer did not collaborate with the subject of the image or interfere with what appeared in front of the camera, today we can affirm that photography has substantially changed, including many other possibilities.

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the context of postmodernity, photography is redefined as a new artistic genre, exploiting the documentary, plausible appearance allowed by the direct registration of a reality that has been, however, connotatively arranged. Nowadays photography is constituted as an intense territory of experimentation and projection, in search of a conscious and necessary adaptation to what we could call the “symptoms

of the present". Within this context, a type of photography stands out, which enables a conscious simulation while retaining traces of the "reality effect" while becoming a preferential vehicle in contemporary aesthetic experience.

The work of artists featured in this study – for instance Jeff Wall, Gregory Crewdson or Mitra Tabrizian – belong to a context of discussion of the photographic theories and developments of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Critics and theorists such as Roland Barthes, Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, David Company or Philip Dubois were interested in these new practices that presented intricate layers of associations and relationships between author, subject, history, memory and spectator. Photography, in its expanded field, has become a prominent medium in the art world (Edwards 2002).

The large scale of these photographic works becomes significant, in terms of engaging the viewer. As Jean-François Chevrier explains: "They are designed and produced for the wall, summoning a confrontational experience on the part of the spectator that sharply contrasts with the habitual processes of appropriation and projection whereby photographic images are normally received and consumed". (2003, 116)

Since the 1970s photographic images have become self-consciously theatrical, utilizing devices that would make viewers aware of the staging of the subjects and objects before the camera . The use of cinematic and theatrical effects has led to the rise of a new genre in art photography in which the "self-conscious strategies" free artists from the burden of photographic truth that defined the previous era. According to Lori Pauli, these tableaux use theatricality as a device to reflect on social experience (2006, 134).

This type of theatrical or staged photography is the object of this study. These photographs are not used to speak of the artist's experience, but rather imply a distance, say literary, between the author and what is presented. They bring in perspectives that draw away from the documentary enunciation of spaces and situations, in images that present different layers of meaning and some sort of estrangement or enigma, in a narrative tension. Kathleen Edwards explains thereon: "The progression by which we generate emotions and feelings while observing narrative involves intricate hypothesizing, which entails the entire range of mental activity from perception and cognition" (2002, 6).

The photographic pictures of a significant number of artists that have been working since the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century show scenes set in a theatrical layout, spaces where things are happening or have happened, always with a central point of view designed for a viewer. The fictionalization of the ordinary and human relations involves the use of the signs of our apparent reality.

Andy Grundberg (2003, 173) points out that photography is a very common currency in the cultural exchange of images, and because of that, it avoids the aura of authorship that poststructuralist thinking calls into

question. At least, it does so to a greater degree than painting or sculpture and is more linked to the mass culture and consumer image production, so the public is more acquainted with it. Thus, postmodern photography moves away from the modern inscrutability and from the tyranny of self-referentiality, incorporating the cultural world of which it is a part of.

As an artistic style, staged photography is a permeable and hybrid format that flirts with disciplines such as cinema, advertising, theatre, painting and literature. The authors analyzed below use conventions and genres of photography to reach different places through allegorical strategies, subliminal and symbolic messages and social engagement contents.

In staged photography, the documentary is always a mere appearance, a resource that precisely exploits the so-called “paradoxical documentary” of the photographic what seems “to have been there” (Del Río 2002, 44-55). However, this artistic photography involves a real, concrete, independent, self-contained visual affirmation. Basically, what really defines postmodern and hypermodern photography is the potential for analysis, especially in relation to the criticism of representation.

## 2. After Postmodernity: Towards a Hypermodern Narrativity

Postmodernity currently overlaps with what is already considered as the overcoming of postmodernity – the so-called “hypermodernity”, or “supermodernity”. A sociological and aesthetic inflection point takes place, implying a change in the way of living, in the way of understanding images, in the way of producing and receiving them; images are means that allow to establish new relationships with the world.

It is important to bear in mind that the ambiguity of the terms “modernity” and “postmodernity” has been inherited by the new terms “supermodernity”<sup>1</sup> – according to Marc Augé – or “hypermodernity”, coined by Gilles Lipovetsky and Sébastien Charles (2004). Both concepts come to announce a new era of synthesis that is worth analyzing. At the beginning of the millennium, after postmodern apathy or hopelessness, hypermodernity – we will use Lipovetsky’s term – recovers, among other things, ethics and the sense of future vision, as well as the possibilities of generating networks of information from different sources when building discourses.

When Lyotard defined the concept of postmodernity in the late 70s and announced the end of metanarratives<sup>2</sup>, a remarkable feeling of liberation took place in developed societies, generating a narcissistic, consumerist, *cool* individual that forgets about the past and does not care about the future. As an example, in *The hypermodern times* (2004), Lipovetsky points to the end of this euphoria: in hypermodernity, elements such as unemployment, health concerns, the economic crisis and other multiple factors take on special significance, causing individual and collective anxiety. The growing fragility and emotional destabilization of individuals make them less and less prepared

to withstand the misfortunes of existence, once the structures and frameworks of yesteryear have been lost. Hence, the proliferation of psychosomatic disorders, depression, neurosis and anguish.

Within this context, hypermodern society is founded on three principles: human rights and pluralistic democracy, market logic and technoscientific logic. According to Lipovetsky (2004), these logics no longer have a fundamental opposition; for this reason, he does not speak of postmodernity, but hypermodernity. The hypermodern society is one in which alternative objectives have disappeared, a time when modernization no longer finds organizational and ideological resistance in the background.

Social practices have been altered, and the same can be applied to new forms of control. Capitalism is different, nonetheless it is still capitalism; the poor have television, but they are still poor... For this reason, it can be claimed that the dream of totalitarianism has been realized: societies control themselves.

Lipovetsky admits (2004) that in today's societies numerous objective injustices exist, however, he affirms that values have not died; hypermodernity is not only the realm of the market and technical performance, but that it is also accompanied by a reinforcement of humanistic and democratic values. Therefore, we should not be totally pessimistic about the future. The new epistemology of hypermodernity could represent a new era of humanity. This would be an epistemology of synthesis, of conciliation and dialectic between opposites, between the modern and the postmodern, between the individuals and the system, between moment and history, between the conscious and the unconscious, between the rational and the emotional.

As explained in *The hypermodern times* (Lipovetsky and Charles 2004, 344), in our time the devaluation of all values is not as present as the reactivation of the moral question, which is connected to the decrease of the influence of the political and great frameworks of meaning. As the power of technology and the market increases, the ethical domain expands – dignified and reactivated. Values have not catastrophically disappeared, but conflicting moral ideas proliferate instead leading to the multiplication of value systems. This situation implies diverse conceptions of good, which we could interpret as an intensification of the autonomy of the moral sphere. And that would be a sign of a liberal and pluralistic society – as opposed to heteronomous moral rules – and of an individualization of the ethical sphere: now it is the individual who must determine what to do and regulate her own behavior.

The dynamics of individualization in hypermodernity reinforce the identification with the other; the cult of wellness and wellbeing leads, paradoxically, to individuals becoming more sensitive to the suffering of others.

The new social and aesthetic conditions have their correlation in artistic photography. A common denominator in the works of the artists analyzed

in this study is a singular interest in dramatized, theatrical stories centered on people, inscribed in themes that surround identity and intimacy issues. This approach plays in what could be called *double code*: on the one hand, these photographs work actively from the artifice of postmodern narrative constructions in a meta-linguistic way, referring to the photographic images' own condition, exploiting and radicalizing the relationships we have with these images. On the other hand, these artists are not limited to a mere conceptual exercise, since they directly appeal to personal, individual and collective factors which may influence our values and our existence.

Since the 80s, photography has become a sort of self-reflective mirror that reveals the nature of contemporary representation. Within this context, the best work is that which is capable of reaching beyond its own artifice and showing itself as relevant to social circumstances. Joan Fontcuberta writes<sup>3</sup>: "Today, however, the real merges with fiction and photography can close a cycle: return the illusory and prodigious to the plots of the symbolic that are generally, in the end, the actual hotbeds where the interpretation of our existence is cooked, that is, the production of reality" (Fontcuberta 1997, 17).

Through simulations we consume experience, and in the case of staged photography, it is possible to acquire experiences and develop emotions and thought. The hyperconsumption society raises a set of myths, dreams and imaginary that offer an alternative world to a hopeless present. In this sense, simulations can be ways to happiness, as they encourage to renew the elements of our insistence on "changing life", proposing new perspectives and some sort of alternative consumption.

Among the endless artifices surrounding us, current narrative photography is capable of providing experiences which, through characters that are always others, also give back reflections of ourselves.

Based on numerous examples of contemporary staged photography, it becomes clear that personal issues turn into a discursive category, emphasizing the concepts of intimacy, daily life and subjectivity. Photographic works by artists such as Jeff Wall, Tom Hunter or Mitra Tabrizian have the ability to offer constructive and necessary criticisms about how we live in our daily lives, making visible other ways of relating to the environment and to the other.

The photographs featured in this research constitute critical responses to socialization processes and to the way in which the individual internalizes and incorporates social structures. These works challenge reasonable behavior, common thinking and the established social order. With works focused on close emotional relationships of the subject, the artists unveil the violence – literal or symbolic – which is consciously or unconsciously exercised and suffered in relationships with others or with the environment, questioning schemes and commonplaces that conceal the different forms of dominance – which, although increasingly invisible, do not become less powerful.

Recent photographic stories stage and dismantle power relations that are difficult to disrupt and even recognize as such, either because there is a degree of complicity, because they are mixed with emotional feelings, or because they are shown through the smallest gestures. The idea of photography as the “mirror of reality” turns into an accurate metaphor of how staged photography works, since it can reflect contemporary concerns beyond the appearance of things.

### **3. Photographic Tableaux as Metaphors of Contemporary States of Mind: Gregory Crewdson, Sarah Hobbs, Mitra Tabrizian**

Staged photographs are intellectually constructed images and can convey contents and meanings that exceed the literal depiction of physical elements, including metaphorical approaches and narratives. This reflective nature of images is present in the works of Gregory Crewdson, Sarah Hobbs and Mitra Tabrizian. Their photographic tableaux transmit invisible, intangible concepts through visual arrangements.

Gregory Crewdson’s exquisitely staged photographs raise contemporary emotional and existential issues through the relationship between individuals and the spaces they inhabit. Crewdson develops these relationships with the domestic space in scenes that eloquently illustrate loneliness, helplessness, confusion, meaningless life in the modern city. The artist’s narrative strategy is to show a single, isolated scene of a possible and unknown story that the spectator tries to understand through a profusion of details in the image, projecting a particular story of suspense or horror. Crewdson’s large-scale tableaux are of great methodological and emotional complexity, frequently inspired by cinematographic sources such as David Lynch, Hitchcock and Spielberg films.

Crewdson explains

“I try to base my work on the American sensitivity that deals with the concepts of beauty, theatricality, sadness, uprooting and desire. There are also certain contrasts that are revealed in my photographs. They seem to induce a psychological feeling of loneliness and alienation, which at the same time is presented with an underlying sense of hope and possibility. (...) You cannot run away from yourself (...) My images exist in then clash between my irrational need to make a perfect world and the impossibility of achieving it. I want to trigger a psychological tension with certain anxieties, fears of desires”<sup>4</sup> (in Martin 2006)

In the series “Dream House” and “Twilight”, Crewdson depicts domestic spaces affected by the anxieties of anonymous inhabitants of an American residential neighborhood. Rooms and objects are filled with details that drive the narrative content: A book, a bed, a car, a box of sleeping pills on the bedside table... Displaying elements of the hyperconsumption society, the artist creates a recurring vocabulary, unveiling obsessions and internal

struggles. The homes depicted by Crewdson are appealing, spacious and comfortable. However, they suddenly seem to have turned unfamiliar and uncanny. The artist produces dense and contradictory images, at the border between domestic order and psychological disorder, between the realistic and the surreal, between the beautiful and the repulsive.

The viewer approaches the image as a sort of *voyeur*, peeping through the window curtains, discovering private scenes onto which to project their own narratives. It is difficult to fully understand every meaning in Crewdson's tableaux, since they seem to hide traumas and repressions: the characters in the scenes look lost in their problems. They share a physical space, but they are not emotionally connected. Somehow, the photographer points out that something dark that is now feared lurks at the heart of the American dream – where the ideas of property and privacy play a fundamental role.

Brilliantly, Gregory Crewdson builds in his works an emotional and psychological landscape in which the everyday acquires excessive and exceptional features, and the repressed and the inexplicable come to life with an elaborate hyperrealism.

In addition, Sarah Hobbs stages and photographs scenes in interior spaces that seem to have been infected with the symptoms of their occupants, always missing. Objects operate as extensions of those people: they absorb twisted energies, expressing them in their stillness, inviting to experience these encounters with everyday fears. The artist works as a storyteller through careful stagings, inviting us to project stories about the fears and obsessions of others, but also about our own. Hobbs deals with genuinely intimate matters of frustration, apprehension, indecision: emotions that trouble the soul as well as some psychological pathologies. In her photographic series "Small Problems on Living" (1999-2004) apparently familiar and harmless scenes become threatening or overwhelming, in the way they could be perceived by someone suffering from paranoia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, phobias or neurosis.

In some of her photographs, Sarah Hobbs exploits the potential of accumulation and chaos of elements to accentuate the weight and the burden of some of our everyday worries. In "Untitled (Insomnia)" (2000), dozens of sticky notes hang over an unmade bed. They silently remind us of all those urgent tasks that are still to be done, and that will unavoidably make us lose our sleep (especially when these tasks might not be ever done). In the same line, another work, the delicate photograph titled "Untitled (Perfectionist)" (2002), depicts a warm and sunny room that seems to have become a writer's nightmare, in an eloquent metaphor of the fear of the blank page. A massive avalanche of discarded, crumpled pieces of paper occupy the whole room, surrounding an empty chair beside a desk with a remaining pile of unused paper. Indeed, there is an atmosphere of distinct desperation, of compulsive attempt to start over and over in search of the perfect page without result.

In a concise, subtle and accurate way, Sarah Hobbs' photographs speak of some psychosocial pressures related to hypermodern life, using a visual language of great power based on empathy<sup>5</sup>. The artist invites the viewers to experience some of her own irrational fears. Sometimes the lack of empathy in those who do not suffer from a disorder can be more harmful than the disorder itself.

Interestingly enough, all photographs by Sarah Hobbs have a common denominator: isolation, the hard confrontation with mental obsession. The phobias addressed spread throughout the place through the objects representing them. The images have a seductive scale and precise titles that round off Hobbs' fine metaphors, awakening our empathy towards complex states of mind, towards people whose psychological particularities turn their daily lives into an incessant horror.

Among those artists who take advantage of the possibilities and resources of fiction to expose social, political or human realities, Mitra Tabrizian definitely stands out. Tabrizian's photographic tableaux act as triggers for rethinking analogous situations from today's society, making an intelligent use of an economy of signs. The artist uses resources such as distance, staging and gaze to direct the viewer into a disturbing space. In general, every one of Mitra Tabrizian's visual stories is a forceful attempt to break the silence related to the direction in which the current corporate world is progressing, and to reveal, through artifice, the hidden relationships in everyday processes (Hall and Pacteau 2004). For example, in her "Lost Time" series (2002), Tabrizian finely exposes some of the tensions of the individual with urban life, in particular with working life. The artist portraits middle-aged men and women who have lost their jobs. The characters in this series are dressed in formal business attire, but they appear in non-work places during their working hours. These office workers continue to leave their homes early in the morning and do not return until the evening, since they are not able to come back home and admit what happened to their jobs. They feel out of place, and they do not know what to do with their time: some may stay in a hotel, others wander in the streets... They all seem to blame themselves for their failure. Ironically, when these characters are dismissed from a company and lose their corporate identity, they no longer know who they are.

As we can see, what these images show refers to Gilles Lipovetsky's analysis of the current professional world. Lipovetsky points out that today, identity and culture classes diluted, everything is referred to an individual responsibility, and therefore, the setbacks in the professional work increasingly feel like personal deficiencies and failures. To these means, the characters in "Lost Time", hypermodern individuals, live what is a socio-economic reality as a personal matter, and issues like job loss are experienced as humiliation, as individual disgrace, thus increasing the feeling of having being used and scrapped, of having failed (Lipovetsky 2007, 160). The narrative in "Lost Time" therefore criticizes a corporate culture which



privileges the young and the new and rejects the middle-aged, increasingly pushed into early retirement. The works in the series reflect on the concept of aging and obsolescence in the hyperconsumption society, a society where not succeeding is a real failure.

#### **4. Symbolic Stagings for Social Awareness: Jeff Wall, Tom Hunter and Taryn Simon**

Some recurring themes in photographic storytelling explore various facets of the relationship between individuals and their social environment. Through the use of staged photography, artists are shaping a discursive trend that proposes representations of reality beyond what is noticeable in a context of information and image overload, offering new perspectives that favor critical analysis.

Underlying the appearance of normality, we can detect some crucial moments for the analysis in the works of Jeff Wall, Tom Hunter and Taryn Simon. In large-scale, tableau photographs, characters often isolated or alienated appear against everyday backgrounds that are characters in themselves; figures are often paralyzed in the representation of their everyday lives. In this context, theories of the everyday are an important element to consider in the works of Jeff Wall and Tom Hunter. Their subject matter covers everyday landscapes – both urban and suburban – highly recognizable for the spectators. As a result, Jeff Wall's photographic *mise-en-scène* often raises key issues through scenes of specific situations that, despite their apparent insignificance, become recognizable and revealing. A perfect example of how enacting a small gesture – frequently unnoticed – can turn into a powerful symbolic device is one of Wall's most celebrated works: "Mimic".

This early image from 1982 represents and magnifies a racist gesture Wall witnessed in his hometown. The background of this scene is a street in Vancouver, Wall's hometown, where he was born and where he lives and works. We witness a Caucasian couple and an Asian man walking down the street. The Asian man – on the left – looks sideways at the couple, to discover the boyfriend, who is mockingly pulling at his eye with his middle finger. By reproducing this frequently overlooked gesture Wall "...can lift the veil a little on the objective misery of society" (Chevrier, de Duve, Pelenc 2002, 77). The position of the three figures is as relevant as the directions of their eyes. The three characters seem to walk almost at once, although the couple is about to overtake the Asian man.

As they pass by, the bearded man makes the mocking gesture provocatively looking at the Asian, who realizes that the woman does not seem aware of her partner's hostile gesture. The scene holds an undeniable tension: there is something intensely cinematic in the image – as if it was part of a larger narrative – and at the same time, the visual feel of the

photograph suggests a “decisive moment”, according to Cartier Bresson’s concept. To these regards, “Mimic” is a good example of Jeff Wall’s work as “painter of modern life”<sup>6</sup>. Photographic tableaux like this one shows an evident commitment to social issues of the present and the artist’s context. On this occasion it is related to racism: the rejection of “foreigners” and the humiliation they repeatedly suffer.

This carefully staged tableau replicates the signs and conventions of traditional “straight photography”; that is, the action happens in the street, and the composition gives the impression that the people in the image are not aware that they are being photographed. But there is no such “decisive moment”; it is deliberately constructed and registered multiple times until the perfect shot is achieved. The framing of the image reinforces the casual appearance, making fake documentary authenticity more credible.

Jeff Wall draws on the conventions of street photography and its anti-theatricality to reach a different place. When the artist selects an offensive gesture – often automatic and unconscious–, re-stages it and produces the image in a monumental scale, that gesture becomes significant. It turns into a symbol of the continuous automatic and compulsive micro-gestures that occur in real life and that are a manifestation of a problem of a wider and universal scale. The purpose of this strategy is to make the unconscious conscious, make the apparently anecdotal visible for a potential analysis.

As we have seen, photographic theatricality at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> does not strive to deny the audience, nor does it deny its own constructed fictions. Moreover, it invites the spectator to participate and get imaginarily involved with the representation itself and with the state of social affairs in general. If painting was what most evidently raised the reflection on the social in the era of modernity, photography and its digital incarnation do the same today.

A flawless example of the virtual opening of the picture space can be found in another Jeff Wall’s photograph: “Bad Goods” (1984). The character in this tableau faces the viewer directly, looking out from the picture.

“Bad Goods” raises a sensitive social issue in a suburban, marginal environment, pointing to a social reality in the city of Vancouver and, by extension, to so many other Western cities. In the foreground, there is a box of iceberg lettuce, piled on the dusty ground, still covered with plastic. In the background, an Indian man stands still, standing a few meters away from the lettuces and looking to the camera. In the background, it can be seen a bleak suburban industrial landscape where that character probably inhabits.

The composition and point of view in the picture includes us in the scene as interloper, involving us in an order of deceiving participation that is surprisingly awkward: with our unexpected, unwanted, and to some extent coercive presence, we interrupt that man who was about to pick up the vegetables in the foreground. That would be a licit act – the lettuce has been

dropped, perhaps from a transport truck – and a necessary one, since we guess the man is in a situation of social exclusion, probably immigrant and poor. Fresh vegetables are goods he or his family cannot afford very often. However, with our presence, the man hesitates and keeps waiting, putting his dignity before his poverty and need... Jeff Wall exploits the resource of an uncomfortable theatricality that opens up to the viewer, favoring a poignant positioning.

In relation to an evident social denunciation aspect, and to works that pose issues of exploitation, violence, power relations, Wall also shows a counterpoint when presenting stories of resistance, survival, communication and dialogue, empathy... However, Wall in no way intends to directly coerce the viewer. Instead, he feels a special predilection for the grey area, in which people can find different reasons to open up to the experience of the image and get carried away anywhere, even to the aesthetic realm. The artist does not criticize situations by making judgements, giving answers or making mere illustrations, but dramatizing relationships between individuals, in a critical dimension understood as speculative sociology.

Just like Jeff Wall, Tom Hunter works with genres of art history in order to monumentalize the everyday. Whereas Wall works mainly within the city of Vancouver, Hunter lends a particular aura to the most entrenched aspects of the daily life in Hackney, the London district where he lived and worked.

Through this visual narrative, Tom Hunter finds a singular significance and iconicity in the most unfortunate – and sometimes unnoticed – events. Hunter is a storyteller that takes headlines from the Hackney Gazette as a starting point, articulating them with classic imagery and scenes of urban East London. In his photographs the intellectual conception is as important as the technical finesse, despite their documentary appearance. Hunter is famed for his outstanding combination of political remarks, references to art history, and his impeccable photographic technique.

In this line, Charlotte Cotton suggests that nowadays, when historical visual themes are used in a photographic subject, they act as a confirmation that contemporary life carries a degree of symbolism and a cultural concern parallel to other periods in history. The role of art as chronicler of contemporary fables is thus reaffirmed (2004: 5).

Hunter's "The Way Home" (2000) is an undeniably beautiful composition that remakes, from a tragic real event published in the local press, the iconic image of Ophelia, painted by the pre-Raphaelite Millais. It includes elements such as the secluded place in nature, the bridge, the pond, the female figure, and an arrangement of flowers and petals that represent the regenerative and continuous power of life. The romantic idea is achieved in a prosaic and ordinary context, devoid of poetry or magic, which is temporarily assigned a poetic meaning.

"Living in Hell and Other Stories"<sup>7</sup> (2003-2005) includes a set of photographs that present a dark, desolate and miserable Hackney. Each photo

is created through the combination of local newspaper headlines, classic paintings from the permanent collection of the National Gallery, and Hackney lifestyle, characterized by a long squatting history and a strong community of people.

Hunter explains that the pictures he takes of his neighbors are part of a campaign to show that those people are valid members of society who should not be neglected or evicted. What the artist intends is to represent squatters as worthy people in society, in contraposition with the way they were presented in the *Hackney Gazette*, as “scum of the Earth” and destructive citizens (UAL 2014).

A notable example of the transformative power of photographic fiction can be found in Tom Hunter’s “Woman Reading a Possession Order” (1997). At the time this photograph was taken, Hunter was living in a street full of houses inhabited by squatters. These neighbors – and Hunter himself – would constantly receive letters addressed to Unknown Persons, and this is precisely how the artist titles the series to which this picture belongs to. In order to understand the context in which this photograph is produced, it must be noted that at that time, the Hackney Council intended to demolish the street to build new houses and warehouses. In addition, every time a photograph of a squatter was published in the press, it would be next to a caption or a story about how antisocial they were, and therefore, squatters had become a highly unpopular community in the eyes of others. The artist explains:

I had got very sick of seeing people I knew, travelers and squatters, presented in the media in black-and-white images with captions saying, ‘These people are scum’. I was saying, ‘We’re not scum, we’re just people like anyone else and we need to be shown’. Even though I lived in a squat, I never thought I was outside of society. I always felt I was part of this country and that my voice should be heard. I thought by using colour and by using certain ways of depicting people I could create more empathy (Hunter and Smyth 2010, 55)

Hunter is fascinated by 17<sup>th</sup>-century Flemish painting, especially in the way painters represented figures of ordinary characters, whom they endowed with great dignity, comparable to that of kings, queens and nobles. Tom Hunter takes Vermeer’s “Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window” (1657) as a reference for “Woman Reading a Possession Order”. He applies the style and composition of Vermeer’s painting to a specific situation, dignifying a real person: his next-door neighbor, who is in the photograph, enacts a real fact. The woman poses by the window of her actual house with her 2-month-old baby, reading a real eviction letter she had just received from the Administration, notifying she would have to leave her house any time soon.

This photograph serves as a wake-up and awareness call which would finally save the houses from demolition. The photographic representation Tom Hunter proposes is a stylized, dignified reconstruction, but true to a

fact. It is artifice and document at once. The documentary capacity of this photograph goes beyond the particular case to which it refers; this picture is actually a portrait of a whole group, of a whole community, overstepping the local and temporary reference. In this case, fiction works brilliantly as a document, as a dignification and as a symbol.

In the words of Javier Panera:

To give a historic-pictorial aura to his 'unknown persons' is a way of reaffirming their dignity within the community and inserting them into the cultural heritage that we all carry within our subconscious. In this way, Tom Hunter re-establishes a poetic idea of photography as an allegorical mannerism with the value of truth and the capacity to make a critical "opening" in history and time, demonstrating that art from whatever period can be perceived as 'new', according to our experience (2004, 4)

The historical and pictorial component that became a signature in Tom Hunter's work should not be seen as simple post-modern references. Each photographic scene is re-constructed critically, overlapping with everyday events that take place in a specific local context, charged with political and social implications.

Taryn Simon's work also presents a strongly critical and political approach using photography. However, 90% of Simon's photographic process is not exactly photographic; it involves researching, defining the focus on the topics, searching for people, places and data, collecting information, obtaining permission to access subjects, analyzing.

In "The Innocents" series, Simon documents in a singular way the stories of men who had were wrongfully convicted of violent crimes they did not commit. In this way, Taryn Simon questions the role of photography as a credible visual witness and as evidence of truth in judicial proceedings. In the cases she addresses, mistaken identification through photographs was the primary cause of their wrongful conviction. A victim or eyewitness identifies a suspected perpetrator by means of images. This procedure assumes the accuracy and infallibility of visual memory. But through exposure to facial composite images, line-ups and Polaroids, memory and eyewitness testimony may change. In the stories presented, photography served the criminal justice system as a tool that can turn innocent citizens into criminals, by assisting officers in obtaining positive identifications from eyewitnesses and, subsequently, convictions.

Taryn Simon photographs these men in places with a particular significance in their illegitimate convictions: the scene of the wrongful identification, the scene of the arrest, the crime scene – where they never were – or the alibi location. All these locations carry contradictory meanings for the subjects. The scene of the arrest marks the starting point of a reality based on fiction. The crime scene is both arbitrary and crucial: a place where they have never been, which nonetheless changes their lives forever. In the words of the author:

Photography's ability to blur truth and fiction is one of its most compelling qualities. But when misused as part of a prosecutor's arsenal, this ambiguity can have severe, even lethal consequences. Photographs in the criminal justice system, and elsewhere, can turn fiction into fact. As I got to know the men and women in this book, I saw that photography's ambiguity, beautiful in one context, can be devastating in another (Simon 2003, 4)

In a challenging tone, each of the photographs in "The Innocents" is made to recreate a fantasy, contradicting photography's traditional role as evidence of truth. In every one of these staged photographs, Taryn Simon goes further, fabricating fiction, using photography to document a lie. In this way, the artist stimulates critical thinking about the truth we associate certain images of evidence with, whose falsity can have dramatic, even lethal consequences.

## 5. Conclusions

The culture of the image is, in some way, a guide that helps to determine our values. In this sense, we must consider the question about the image of ourselves that the culture gives back.

The hypermodern idea of life as a fictional object creates a need for substitutes of experiences and new ways of knowledge. In this context, we find an essential utility in visual storytelling, capable of embodying survival alternatives, and also of potentially revealing contents and simulated realities that contain social or existential truths.

One of the lines of thought that have become more solid in the artistic photography of recent years is one that puts forward the reinvention of photography through narrative staging. Between fact and fiction, this artistic typology serves multiple purposes. On the one hand, it can raise awareness of the conventions of objectivity assumed in the medium. On the other hand, it demonstrates how photography may not only refer to a reality, but also produce and authorize a new identity, consciousness or experience by its visualization.

The concept of theatricality in staged photography is shaping a new genre of self-conscious strategies. Theatricality is a value that has the potential to reflect social experience. Photographic storytelling of artists such as Gregory Crewdson, Sarah Hobbs, Mitra Tabrizian, Jeff Wall, Tom Hunter or Taryn Simon invites us to question about the "truth" of representation. In this sense, reality and fiction, in constant interaction, experience a continuous feedback.

Fictions can help, comfort, enlighten and promote valuable ideas. They can also remind us of our human condition, rising above the superficial appearance of things, and offer a special knowledge that arises from confrontation with someone else's voice.

Photographic storytelling allows the viewer to experience and dissect facts and feelings through the reception of the constructed image. The created

image acts as a photographic equivalent, as a spontaneous symbol, by virtue of projection and empathy. Images establish semi-conscious links with other images from memory, and with all those other realities surrounding the image, without being part of it. Staged photography narratives work as a question about reality and its position with respect to us, proposing answers that challenge us symbolically, therefore fostering critical analysis and ethical positioning.

With artifacts and fictions, staged photography liberates the spectator from the need to find something resembling reality. It is possible to enter an iconographic universe where metaphor and allegory critically subvert strictly documental reference in order to enter territories which are more purely symbolic. The *construction* in staged photography can lead to a critical *reconstruction* in our reality, through a certain fictional and sociological distance. These photographic constructions may be making one thing clear: if we want reality to exist, it must be constructed.

In staged photography, the image itself is not as important as the openness to reality to which it invites. We should not believe in fiction as reality, but as fiction. That a photograph is fictional does not mean that it is a lie. Fiction can be positively true, and, above all, definitely meaningful and transformative.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more detail, see Augé, Marc (2009). *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso Books.

<sup>2</sup> See Lyotard, Jean François (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>3</sup> My translation.

<sup>4</sup> My translation.

<sup>5</sup> Theodor Lipps formulates a theory about aesthetic *empathy* as a process of affinity between object and subject, where the subject recognizes herself and sympathizes with her, in a process that allows the subject to find real knowledge about herself that up to that moment she ignored. See Lipps, Theodor (1903). *Ästhetik. Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst*. Hamburg/Leipzig: Voss.

<sup>6</sup> Jeff Wall's has been often described as *the photographer of modern life*, a modern *painter of modern life*, a term coined by 19<sup>th</sup> century French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire. Jeff Wall's photographs, apparently a fusion of documentary image, historical tableaux and colourful advertisements, do fit Baudelaire's definition,

especially in relation to the idea that the city is an exemplary site for aesthetic experience. See Baudelaire, Charles (1964). *The painter of modern life and other essays*. London: Phaidon Press.

<sup>7</sup> This body of work was exhibited at the National Gallery in 2006. It was the first photographic exhibition in the museum.

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