

The Expression of Photographic Art from the Perspective of Magic Realism

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Abstract

This paper discusses the development and expression of magicrealism in photography and analyzes its concept from the three aspects of historical development of magicrealism, the difference between realism and surrealism and the application in the field of art. Through the aspects of shooting techniques, expression techniques, compositional modeling and emotional thoughts, the art photography works with magicrealism styles in each period are analyzed, and the artistic value as well as expression of magicrealism in photography are discussed. Finally, this paper explores the importance of critical thinking in magicrealism photography and how to deal with the crisis that contemporary photography faces from the application of magicrealism photography.

Keywords: magic realism; art; contemporary photography

1. Magic Realism and Photography

“Magic Realism” first appeared in “*Magic Realism, Post-expressionism, Current Issues of European Painting*” in 1925 by the German literary critic Franz Roh. When the seeds of the magicrealism flower fall in the magical soil of Latin America, blooming is its inevitable result. The innate magicreality of Latin America is an important reason for the magical fever of magical realism. Although magic is an indispensable factor in the creation of magicrealism, reality is the nourishment for the blooming of the flower of magicrealism.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (Aristotle 384 BC to 322 BC) elaborated his understanding of realism in his book “*Poetics*”: “Realism is described according to what it should be”, “It should be like this” is the “objective nature law”. Perhaps we can sum up the principles of the art of realism - affirming the authenticity of the real world. However, realism and magicrealism are not the relation of equal signs. The artistic principle of realism is the basis of magicrealism, without which there will be no profound meaning and massive power in works. If so, magic will lose its brilliance.

In the process of development, magicrealism absorbs some of the surrealist artistic methods, which are mainly the unconscious arbitrariness that surrealist artists pursue and stubborn thinking. Surrealists admire dreams madly and creatmagicdeliberately, trying to create an absolute self-ideal utopia in the other world. The “*Eternal Memory*” is the most representative work of Salvador Dalí (1904-1989). The flowing expression of watch in this work expresses the author’s desire to get rid of the control of time as well as space. The artist puts the images that have nothing to do with each other together and randomly juxtaposes them to present a magical and transcendent Dali Universe.

Looking back at one of the China’s four great classic novels, “*A Dream in Red Mansions*”, Cao Xueqin borrowed Jia Baoyu’s “state of vision and emptiness” to induce the readers into a magical world. In “*A Dream in Red Mansions*”, there are obvious characteristics of varioius religious imprints and Chinese culture. For example, some characters in “*A Dream in Red Mansions*” are derived from the Manchu mythology “*The Tiangong War*”. In the land of Yunnan and Mexico, two magical realitic painters, Zhang Xiaogang and Diego Rivera (1886-1957) were born. There are similar cultural aesthetics and faith in these two lands- the original worship of the sun and the snake, the stubborn preference for the thick and childish lines. Therefore, the two paintings reveal similar magical atmosphere. The magicrealism has the artistic expressiveness which has impact on the film field gradually. The masterpieces of Emir Kusturica (1954-), “*The Sun Also Rises*“ and “*Underground*” both reflect the rich magical realism. The two directors put the viewer in an absurd and magical story environment through the magical lens language, exaggerated and varied photography techniques, rhythm-rich background musics, saturated colors and other methods.

The relationship between photography and magic can be analyzed from many dimensions of photography. The magical nature of photography can be summed up as a special medium which breaks through the limitations of past reproduction. The view of the world of photographers from the current standing ground. It is just this magic that makes the importance of the viewer stand out. In the long run, photography is nothing but a “small fantasy from the object”. The reality will continue. Once the phantom is chosen by photography, it will be separated from the huge disorder of reality and becomes knowledge. Meanwhile, it can transcend knowledge and become a magic realism of self-fulfillment. Roland Barthes (1915-1980) thinks that photography is art instead of magic.

2. Pattern of Manifestation

According to the analysis in the previous two chapters, photography and magic realism are inextricably linked. Next, how photographic works express magical realism is analyzed from the four parts of technical skills, expressional language, compositional modeling and theme thoughts.

The Australian photographer, Andreas Bitesnich (1964-), who is famous for taking the Pola films, uses the Bora films to photograph the human body. These photos make the body shrink between the squares through “simple magic” which are born in the black box of the Pola, the perfect light and composition. Occasionally, some light leakage and damage appear on the edge of the picture can be found, but that does not influence or interfere with the attention to the model. Even these imperfections are still fascinating, which are just like the curiosity that are raised behind the scenes. Therefore, each photo is unique which can't be copied. As Bitsnich said: “People who have ever used the Pola film all know that the process of waiting is magical”.

In term of techniques, artistic photography by means of darkrooms, computers or devices, etc., is more direct, clear to a large extent, which can truly express the creator's body and mind for one's own than original photography. And the position of the world on which the creator lives. Jerry Uelsmann, known as the “black and white metallurgist” has the photographic developer which is like a magical potion - humor and seriousness, illusion and reality, exaggeration and truth, temptation and sincerity which are perfectly mutually absorbed and dissolved in every detail of the image. Jerry Uelsmann (1934—) uses eight magnifiers and excellent darkroom techniques to recombine the scenes of multiple negatives into a single pair of images without any seams or flaws so as to show the real and illusory world of images which are hidden in the subconscious as a dream. He often used dimensional sense of the palms, bodies, birds, footprints and other elements that ordinary people are very familiar to create an incredible and absurd visual impression. In this way, he tries to arouse the comprehension of modern people, reflect on the dependence of life on technology, make people more affirm the perception and induction of the real world as well as self-introspected

uniqueness in the face of obsessive mechanics and increasing desires, and keep one's mind unfettered.

If the skill and technique are classified as a post-visualization category of art photography, then the artistic expression of combination and deformation belongs to pre-visualization. There are two kinds of combinations, one is the random combination of singularity for the artist to make the picture, which is commonly seen in surrealist works. The other one is a purposeful secondary combination of the structure of the photography objects according to the creators' intention, which is similar to the director's photography concept to some extent. The Chinese contemporary photographer Ma Liang has ever said: "I have two identities. One is a director and the other one is a photographer". Ma Liang grew up in the family of drama and grew up while playing in the dressing room, stage, rehearsal hall and so on. As a matter of fact, these places used to be an amusement park where he grew up. In his series photos "Mobile Photo Studio", the overall style of each photo has a utopian dreamy mood. The banter performances of "My Circus" series seem to be funny, but they present the contempt and confrontation of restraint in human nature. Without the accumulation of life, Ma Liang's works can't resonate with the viewer. In these fictional scenes, the different kinds of elements seem to be combined freely which are like garbled pieces, but they are in fact merged into a seamless whole. Perhaps the fiction may be closer to the truth of the fact, which is the image transcends obtained by negating the truth of photographers and the truth of photography. It is better to say that Ma Liang is a surreal photographer than a magical realist photographer.

Exaggeration and distortion are also the common artistic expression techniques which are adopted by artists. The exaggeration and distortion based on the original image, whether before or after imaging, not only stimulates the viewer's visual experiences, but more importantly, the creators' emotional thoughts don't generate confusion in concept due to the change on the subject. Bill Brandt (1904-1983) is undoubtedly the most significant figure in the history of British modernist photography, who showed the magical potential of photography in the photography career for half a century. Brandt's body works don't look like any woman, but they can be any woman. The vision which is far from the focus may leave more thoughts and memories, turn into an atmosphere, and form a tension in a clear focus after turning the plane image into a deep space. Or, the magic of an instant which are farther away. Through appreciating Brandt's work, the viewer's attention will unconsciously move with the line rhythm in the work. They get the same pleasure as the photographer in the limited frame. In the picture, the skin of the female is like a soft silk and the body shapes are like soft waves, making us have a deeper perception of the beauty of women. Brandt opens up a gap between reality and illusion by using the technical language of photography under the rational expression of personal intuition and provides us with a pipeline which spans this crack. The pre-visualization means of combination of deformation and exaggeration is just

like scissors and glue which cut out the original appearances of life for the viewer.

The common artistic expression techniques of magicrealism include symbols, metaphors and metaphors. Photographers often use such techniques to express their artistic ideas or thoughts and emotions. That is, express moods through things.

Laurent Ehring Bades said in the magazine “*SKIN*”: “The existence of plants, rocks, mountains, beaches, salt, water, animals and human beings are all natural elements, which are created in photos. Nature is surprising and perfect. And everything has its own unique charms.” Edward Weston (1886–1958) had a pair of magical eyes which can discover magical connections from ordinary things. Shells, green peppers, cabbage, rocks, and dead trees are common things in most people’s eyes, while Weston has discovered the ordinary beauty of everyday life with a keen and unique look and endowed the beauty of deep metaphor through art reprocessing. “Seashell” by Weston is considered “a great work of immortality in the history of world photography”. The rounded curves of the shells and the layered rotation to the center, in addition to Weston’s unique perspective and the match of light and shadow make them seem like lovely girls who are gentle and implicit. Weston’s photos need people to calm down and slowly taste it. In the process of gazing, the time continues and penetrates into the viewer’s mind, making it to detach from the surrounding objects immediately and be endowed with life by the viewers. Both things and the living bodies are the root of the meaning of the photos. Understanding the category of Weston’s work lies in implicit and metaphor, that is, the transformation from a source of relatively clear content to another relatively vague source. Metaphor is an abstract accessory, which can arouse the unspeakable feelings in people’s mind.

The father of art photography, Oscar Gustave Rejlander (1813 - 1875), applied complex stage art and literary metaphors to photography – “*Two Ways of Life*” is a 16*31-inch photograph which tells a story about enlightenment. The picture’s structure is stable, balanced and harmonious with obvious classical meaning, while the characters who have strong conflict and catharsis are on the picture. “Two Ways of Life” is more than just a photographic work, which is more like a Shakespeare literary work. Relander acted as a choreographer to let the paint-like image composition, film-style storyline, philosophical thinking transferred from words to his photographic scene’s by means of his understanding of photography and high artistic quality. Oscar Gustav Leland realized the textual imagination as the real image, transformed the two-dimensional plane into a three-dimensional space, and changed the magic of literature into a photographic work, giving the viewers another identity—reader. Visual reading is a higher form of human beings - they conduct a deeper interpretation of the meaning of the photos about the image and symbols, and the so-called deep reading mentioned here is just the interpretation of the inner will of the image.



“Two Ways of Life” Oscar Gustav Leland

Cindy Sherman (1954—) believes that the power and depth of the work is the carrier of meaning compared with the technical quality of the image. In the past more than 35 years, Sherman’s artistic exploration has revealed the ability of art to penetrate social values. Michelangelo Merici de Caravaggio’s “Sick Bacchus” is the most alike one of the series of Cindy Sherman’s “Historical Portrait”. Sherman’s work is a metaphor for herself. She created a triple fantasy: a 20th-century female artist who imitated a 16th-century male artist, while this female artist imitated the mythological objects of ancient times. Sherman omitted some details of the original work, enlarged the ivy wreath and set it at a distorted angle. In this way, she imitated the sleek visual symbols as well as techniques. However, these subtle exaggeration methods are very effective, which are a metaphor for the ironic inclination of the original appearance of history to the work with a clear modern attitude. The fictional features of all Sherman’s works as well as their external camouflage aroused a common problem for human beings: in order to understand life, we must seek explanations from its self-expression as well as images produced by the society.

The proposal of “decisive moment” is a breakthrough in documentary photography, which seems to have nothing to do with art photography. But in the eyes of magic realism, the decisive moments have different interpretations. The reality is irreversible, and time can’t be stopped. Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004) defined the ever-changing world into a dream of magic, and explored the original magical reality of photography by using the characteristics of the camera. For example, Bresson’s classic work “Behind the St. Lazar’s Station” affirms his weight of “decisive moment”.

The perfect combination of light and shadow: the figure of the man who is wearing the hat is solidified in mid air. And the jumping action is just like the posture of the female dancer on a poster. It is echoed in tandem with each other. The sensation of the movement of the man who is jumping with a hat on his head on the screen becomes a visual pleasure in the viewer’s unconscious. And this common feeling becomes aesthetic every time it reappears in memory.

The decisive moment put forward by Henry Cartier Bresson is actually the perfect moment of coordination between the status quo, expression and content of the moving objects, which is both a perfect moment and a magical moment. The perfect unity of the three is full of a magical color.

3. Magic Realism Photography and Criticalness

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) views our process of viewing a piece of art as a behavior with no purpose. The words “view and admire” focus on “admire”. “View” is the instinct of biological visual movement. “Admire” is the ability to enter the deep space through the presentation. This ability is also called resolution. Therefore, “viewing and admiring” is not a glimpse of examining a thing hurriedly, but the creator’s ideas as well as emotions which are reflected in the works in the intricate photographic context constructed by the creator who completes and analyzes the work without distractions. The viewer completed the exchanges and communications between the photographer’s will and the world of imagery unconsciously. At the same time, they also switch identity or conduct the combination of multiple identities. The magical property of the viewer identity under the magic realism photography can be reflected, such as bystanders, imaginers, puzzle-solvers, participants, merrymakers and readers.

Many of Cindy Sherman’s photographic works are characterized by magic realism. The work is like a guessing game, so the viewer must look for clues in the visual information alone and wait the viewer’s own imagination and experience to reveal the mystery. However, there is always no answer to a riddle. In Ma Liang’s meticulously fictional game feast, we turned from viewers to merrymakers, looking for the lost beauty in memory. British photographer Don McCullin (1935-) said: “The photos are just there, which can be obtained by anyone. But they don’t belong to anyone”. The tone will not change, the color will not fade, and the meaning will be neither increased nor reduced. And the viewers act as translators. The first thing to view and admire photos is to view, then to admire it, which is a process from visual activity to psychological activity and which is a deep reading from the image surface to beyond words. The viewers complete the transformation of the reader’s identity unconsciously.

At the same time as multiple identities switch, critical thinking has always been accompanied by the process of gaze. In other words, the identity of the critics and the eye movement have emerged from the beginning of viewing and admiring. The critical viewing of art photography is actually an art criticism of art photography. Artistic creation and art criticism are the two wheels of art development, which are indispensable. The lack of criticism is likely to make art creation vulgar and lose its vitality. If sensibility and ideals are the raw materials for the chemical reaction between magic realism and artistic photography, and the eye and brain are the containers of chemical reactions, then the critical thinking is the

catalyst for generating big boom thinking. According to Plato's fantasy of the ideal country, from the perspective of magic realism, explore the magical connection between the elements inside the frame and the elements outside the frame and excavate the philosophy in the erratic life. Maybe a utopia with pure thought and spiritual freedom can be established in this real world which is unpredictable.

The systematic form which is made up by the spiritual creation activities of photographers in the long-term shooting activities reflects the social value of photography in the whole modern society as well as the aesthetic norms which have universal guiding significance. This requires photographers not only to have a pair of eyes of magic realism, but also to cultivate the thinking spirit of Chinese Taoism to press an influential shutter in the rapidly changing life. Although "Chuang Tzu" was created more than 2,000 years ago when photography was invented, the spirit of Taoism penetrated into all dimensions of photography. In Taoism, non-affiliation has always been emphasized. Maintaining a non-affiliated state enables photographers to realize the eternal flow of life and to conduct a synchronous and independent thinking about new changes, to maintain a "psychological distance" for the surrounding environment and to avoid falling into the mire of imitation.

Ancient Chinese artists and many contemporary photographers are striving to pursue the realm of "aestheticism". If blindly pursuing perceptual "aestheticism" and neglecting rational critique, photographic works can't reach a higher artistic standard. "Chuang-tzu" said: "Forgetting things and forgetting about heaven is forgetting oneself". Inaction is the state of acceptance. Acceptiveness is a state of total openness which maintains a non-discriminatory attitude in all areas of life. Today, the traditional cultural inheritance is losing more and more fixed space in the context of globalization. Under such an environment, the importance of cultivating the eye of magic realism is even more prominent. Otherwise, the artistic creation which is lack of imagination and criticalness can certainly create a period of good time and can not stand the test of time.

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