

# **Analysis of the causes and connotations of photography style on *Twilight* series works of Gregory Crewdson—the other side of dream**

**Kan Qing**

School of Fine Arts,  
Nanjing Normal University,  
Jiangsu Province, China

## **Abstract:**

*Under the influence of his father and Freud's psychoanalytic theory, Gregory Crewdson was good at psychological expression; He can not only arouse the audience's mental shock, but also keep the picture cold. What's more, the works of the painter Edward Hoopes, film directors Alfred Hitchcock, Steven Spielberg and other some photographers also had played an important role in the formation of Crewdson's creative style. Twilight series works had revealed the alienation, materialization and obsession of modern life. This paper has analyzed the connotation of Twilight series works on the combination of the theory of mass consumption society and Simulacra of Jean Baudrillard, a postmodern critical scholar.*

**Keywords:** GregoryCrewdson, Twilight, Photography, American art, Jean Baudrillard

## **1. Analysis of the causes of style formation**

### **1.1 Impact by Psychoanalysis**

Crewdson once mentioned in an interview that: his creation was rooted in American sensibility; this sensibility comes from the social environment, meanwhile, there are also other sources. His father was a psychoanalyst who studied the theory of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. He used to diagnose patients at home. Crewdson was often lying downstairs and listened to the conversation diagnosis of father patients on the floor, such conversation made him understand the strange dreams of other and the analysis on these dreams. Dreams are not illogical, but symbolic, it needed to be scientifically revealed that it had a specific connection with reality. Freud believed: “dreams are not, in essence, a mental activity, merely a physical movement, expressed in symbols through the senses..... so, as long as we can

find the "substitute" correctly, we can correctly find the 'meaning' of the dream." Such conversations overheard by his father, as well as the dreams of the patient, were the source of Crewdson to get symbolic meanings, and the treasure of later creation. The experience and the influence of his father had made the fantastic fantasy rooted into Crewdson's mind from childhood. The deep branding of such experience can be seen in his works, for example, the seventh piece work of *Twilight*, in the picture, a man over 40 years old sprawled on the floor of the living room of his house. The floor was cut out by his saw with 3 fist sized circular holes, and the light from the lower room was revealed from the hole. The man stared under the floor, apparently peeping and eavesdropping. This was the portrayal of Crewdson's eavesdropping on his father's diagnosis in childhood, therefore, it can be inferred that Crewdson's childhood experience is directly related to his father's influence on his work.

## **1.2 Impact from photographers**

Crewdson's photography creation was inspired by many photographers, including Thomas Ruf, Cindy Sherman, Taylor Wood, among them, the influence of Diane Arbus (1923-1971) and Germany master Andreas Gursky (1955-) on the photography creations created by Crewdson was of particular importance.

Crewdson visited Diane Arbus's photo exhibition with his father in 1978, and he was deeply shocked. Arbus's photographs were based mostly on the lives and scenes of ordinary American figures, she shot of thought-provoking works from freaks, the poor, the homeless, the gay, the sick and those marginal population, thus forcing viewers to re-examine social morality and mainstream culture. Although she was born in a very wealthy family, she devoted herself to using photography to care about the people living on the edge of society who needed to be cared for. Her work was both "aggression" and "respect". It was both evil and justice, ugly and beautiful. As the first photographer to participate in the Art Biennale in the United States, she won the affirmation of both the public and the interior of photography circles, and was worthy of the reputation of Van Gogh in photography field. Unfortunately, she ended her life in her own home in 1971. Arbus's work deeply moved Crewdson, stimulated his attention to the marginal and vulnerable groups, and also made him understand the mission and responsibility as a photographer.

Andreas Gursky's works were one of the inspiration to Crewdson's works. Gursky was the student of Bernd and Hilla Becher of Kunstakademie Dusseldorf, he inherited the objective and aesthetic orientation of Kunstakademie Dusseldorf and the quality of high-tech standards, and used super large size photographs to shoot contemporary social landscape. The scene he shot was not a famous place, but a common living space, such as large supermarket, stock exchange hall, factory workshop. The characters in the works seemed very small, who were generally busy at work like ants; while business, industry, technology, finance seemed "huge and noble", as if controlling the world in the picture. The works of Crewdson had some similarities with those of Gursky, gorgeous style, magnificent style, bright colors, fine quality; In terms of the connotation of the works, both of them avoided the limitations of "technology first" and "aestheticism", and tried to discern and uncover the hidden essence of modern society by photography.

### 1.3 Impact of modern art

Since its birth, photography seemed quite distinct from each other with traditional art categories, Crewdson did not approve of the classical representation of photography in other traditional art categories, which meant the influence of modern art on him was beyond doubt. Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), a photography theorists and photographer, who was hailed as “the father of modern American Art”, actively introduced European avant-garde art into the United States and created the *Camera Work* magazine to extend influence. He organized the Armory Show in the United States in 1913, after which a group of outstanding modern American artists emerged, including the later American modern realist painting master, Edward Hopper (1882 -1967). Hopper was once regarded as an outstanding American painter by the art circle", but he believed that the so-called American style needed no effort to create, and that American style should be an inherent characteristic of American artists. He painted scenes of everyday life in city people, which were very similar to American paintings, but his works were more inclined to conceal the inner feelings in the pictures. This kind of emotion was not only simple and pure loneliness, but also contained the thinking and worries about the modern life style. In his writing, he emphasized the use of light to express his inner feelings, and used architecture and environment to set off people's character, which was a careful interpretation of the loneliness, grief and desire of the city people in American. Under his artistic work, loneliness seemed solemn, dreariness seemed calmness, and common customs seemed elegance. There were many similarities between "Twilight" series of photographs and paintings of Edward Hopper. They all cut off the narrative in the picture, they explained why things happened, but they did not explain the cause and effect of things; It also described scenes of everyday life, the picture was compact, with a calm, sad atmosphere, showing the inner loneliness of American city people. In contrast, Crewdson's works were more emotional, oppressive and mysterious. In 2006, Crewdson and Hopper's solo exhibition was held in Massachusetts in the United States. The art circles made a thorough study on the commonalities in their artistic creation and Crewdson's inheritance of Hopper's creation.

The Hollywood film is a crucial part of American culture and art. It has a powerful influence on the aesthetic taste, fashion trends and art of the United States and even the world. The influence of Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980), a famous suspense master, on Crewdson shall not be ignored either, especially in the suspense setting and the discussion of human nature. Hitchcock's films were mostly thriller, crime and suspense, his works were closely related to Freud's psychoanalytic theory, he films were full of pathological, nightmare, depressive, peering features, and sexual instincts, criminal desires, etc.. He was good at using the movie language to elaborate the hidden layer of human nature, the plot was up and down, mysterious and the rhythm was tense, scary and satisfying. And, a lot of Hitchcock like suspense arrangements could be seen in "Twilight" as well, it was just that Crewdson did not narrate the film as a movie and unlock the riddle, nor did it satisfy the curiosity of the audience. Crewdson was more cautious about the horror and morbid state, and controlled them to a more appropriate level to avoid breaking the cool style of the works.

Works of the famous American director Steven Spielberg (1946-) also had great inspiration to Crewdson. The expression of worry and fear in the bottom heart of people, the revelation of alienation of human nature, the protection to the family, and film framing, solemn sense of color in his works can be

observed in Crewdson's *Twilight* works. Spielberg is also a master of making terror, in *Jurassic Park*, the suffocating silence of Athlon's capture to kids in the kitchen was much more horrible than Rex roaring. He not only arranged horror from the visual and auditory levels, but also attacked people's psychological weakness from psychological level, thus releasing the fear that lurked in the subconscious of the viewers for a long time.

An expression of divine redemption can be seen in *Twilight* and Spielberg's films. For example, in the work *Alien ET*, children saved extraterrestrial visitors together, as well as the self righteous adult world. In *Schindlers List*, Spielberg described the awakening of human conscience, the protagonist Schindler, at first, gained fortunes on war, but later, he woke up from blood. He risked his life to rescue a large number of persecuted Jews, and saved his soul with his once bloodied hands. Viewers can also find a shadow of divine salvation in *Twilight*. For example, in fifth Work, the mysterious beam of light shined from the sky to the residents. And the Twenty-second work, the sleeping wife with her husband suddenly woke up from her dream, as if she had heard the call of the divine, and gained the epiphany.

## 2. Analysis on connotation

### 2.1 Alienation

There are no busy streets, beautiful scenery, handsome men and beautiful women in *Twilight*, but the silence that frightened people. What exactly was the author hiding between the reality and the illusion? In the ninth work, what did the woman think standing in front of the bedroom mirror? In the lamplight, she had no clothes, and we could see her body and her cold expression in the mirror. While her husband was sleeping in bed, unaware of his wife's inner feelings. The photographs revealed the inner loneliness and worry of the character, which exposed the alienation of people in contemporary cities, and the alienation between the ID and ego. In this era, many people are accustomed to efficient access to information, watching TV, reading newspapers, making phone calls and surfing the internet. People are busy with their careers and their future, but in this uproar, people have reduced their inner communication. Even the husband and wife, brother, mother and child, there exists no familiarity relationship.

In the sixth work, a housewife sat quietly on the floor of the house, the floor was covered with soil and planted with flowers of all colors. The light shined obliquely to the living room from window, the hostess looked cold and numb in her pajamas. The flowers in the picture symbolized the richness and variety of material life. But so many flowers failed to make the hostess happy, but more strange. The strange atmosphere in the living room and the numbness of the hostess's face showed the worries and losses of the family, it unintentionally implied that some American middle-class families had empty spiritual life although the material conditions were superior. "Twilight" series of works were created during 1998 to 2002 years. In 1990s, the United States pulled out of the quagmire of the Vietnam War; Gorbachev announced the breakup of the Soviet union. The American economy was at its zenith, industry grew rapidly in all fields, and traditional industries had also been successfully improved, the standard of living had been greatly improved. But the superior material life could not quickly repair the trauma caused by the turmoil of war, nor could it prevent the wavering of people's values and beliefs. Excessive publicity, sexual freedom, family breakdown, firearms, drug abuse, violent crime and other

social issues highlighted. As described in *Desperate Housewives* shot based on American town, everyone had his own secret, people seemed very close, but their hearts were becoming more and more estranged.

## 2.2 Materialization in consumer society

In the modern society surrounded by dazzling commodities, people have possessed more and more goods, but it still cannot satisfy their own desires. In the thirty-third work, young people in the town were trying to collect goods for everyday use and pile them on a lawn. Among them, there were TV sets, stereos, computers, car lubricants, mattresses, vacuum cleaners, sofas, toys and so on. The goods were piled up a small hill. This odd behavior was like a ritual of religious worship, what worshiped in this ceremony was not the god, or the saint, but the merchandise.

From a sociological perspective, they were more than simply exchanged goods. They were chains that were linked together to form a full set of forms, implying a purchase of higher quality goods. In everyday life, they were symbols encoded by each other, symbolizing status and social rank. Although these household commodities could make life richer, they also alienated people. As Baudrillard's inference in *Consumer*: "since the consumption century is the historical result of the accelerated productivity process under the capital symbol, it is also a thoroughly alienated century. The logic of commodity has been popularized, now it not only dominates the labor process and material products, but also dominates the whole culture, sexuality, interpersonal relationship, and even the illusion and impulse of individuals".<sup>2</sup> People need to buy goods to get satisfaction, which requires more money. With television, computers, washing machines, refrigerators, mobile phones and other products updated, people habitually follow their rhythm, and constantly buy new models of goods. "We are in a situation where consumption controls the whole life. All the activities are tied together in the same way, and the context of satisfaction was sketched out an hour by an hour ahead of schedule."<sup>3</sup> Obviously, such consumption increases the degree of exploitation and even controls people's behavior and ideals. Are people who are surrounded by overly rich commodities also becoming as apathetic as goods? Can they get rid of the fate that is bound and controlled by the chains of consumption? Crewdson did not directly criticize social issues, but he posed questions with his work to let each viewer think objectively and calmly through his own image.

## 2.3 Simulacra desert

The loneliness, alienation and panic of people in "Twilight" were a direct challenge to the modern way of life. People were indulged in the mechanization of life, materials and commodities, the image world in television, movies, and the Internet; they continuously manufactured simulacra and consumption simulacra in daily life, thus, people missed the true colors of life and society, while reality was obscured or even "murdered".

Since the bourgeoisie had stepped onto the stage of history, the symbols originally with fixed directions were liberated from the cage of the class, it can be copied, produced and consumed freely. After the rise of the industrial revolution, the production mode of mechanical replication accelerated the production speed and made the products on the assembly line highly unified. In this busy industrial era,

capital accelerated production, and also led to the alienation of life and human beings. As the light series showed, people were living in the siege of the imagination. These imaginary visions were even more wonderful than reality, such as colorful flowers, advanced home appliances, brand-name cars, standard American style villa, luxury living room. "A new generation of symbols and objects came with the industrial revolution, these were symbols with no caste tradition, they never experienced status restrictions, so they never needed to be copied, and they were mass-produced at once".<sup>4</sup> They were all produced from industrial production, and there was no natural prototype, nor was it something that really belonged to a particular individual. While the expression of numbness or indifference of the character in *Twilight* made the only emotion in the works that belonging to the human being absent, thus leaving only empty and empty thoughts.

Jean Baudrillard warned with the assumption that the Gulf War never burst: People were disturbed by the simulacra in mass media, everyday life, the truth had not yet arrived, but already obscured, with only the simulacra substituted for the reality, and copied constantly. From the perspective of simulacra theory, people's lifestyle was facing crisis and photography cannot be spared, because the subject was likely to have been replaced by simulacra. Photography itself was now descended to the means of generating images, it produced countless images, graphics, symbols, which were massively copied and launched to the public by various media, many people were indulged in it. Simulacra was copied from one another and generated by "mode differential modulation". Simulacra replaced reality, and reality was replaced by hyper reality.

### 3. Peroration

Crewdson's *Twilight* series works had striking appearance and deep connotation. The directing layout in his creation was itself a simulation of reality, so these photographs were simulation images, that is, multiple simulation. Crossing the simulacra desert was state after recognizing and getting into the simulacra, this state may be true or closer to reality. Works of *Twilight* had torn apart the simulacra world by critique of reality, and revealed people's inner problems in surreal contemporary American society. What was worth pondering was that this kind of exposure and criticism was a common function achieved through photography, aesthetics, psychology and art, and finally transmitted by the simulation itself as media. A bridge was needed to pass through simulacra to real world, Crewdson effectively erected this hidden bridge. Whether or not the viewer can see the reality after passing through simulacra still stayed looking for visual stimulation on performance, this varied from person to person. People who were reluctant to grand simulacra and insensitive unable to pass through simulacra, nor recognize the simulacra and reality, they would be lost in the dream and accompanied with nothingness.

### References

1. written by Freud; translated by Li Y; The Interpretation of Dreams; Shanxi Normal University Press; 2011.3; P5
2. Jean Baudrillard; Consumer; Nanjing University Press; 2014-10;P197
3. Jean Baudrillard; Consumer; Nanjing University Press; 2014-10;P5
4. Jean Baudrillard; Symbolic Exchange and Death; Yilin Translation Publishing House; 2012.6; P70.