



ANALYSIS OF FINE-ART PHOTOGRAPHY AS A TOOL FOR SELF-REPRESENTATION: FROM MAN RAY TO ANDY WARHOL

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Abstract. *This article analyzes how photography has evolved from being a technical recording medium into a complex form of artistic expression within fine art. This process has not been linear; rather, it has been shaped by various currents and movements that have constantly redefined what photography is, what it can represent, and what its relationship with reality is. Through the study of movements such as Pictorialism, Straight photography, Surrealist photography, Humanist photography, and Contemporary photography, this work seeks to understand the evolution of photography as an artistic medium, as well as its expressive transformations and possibilities.*

Keywords: *Pictorialist photography, photographic periods, Straight photography, Surrealist photography, Humanist photography, Contemporary photography, Generative image.*

The investigation starts from the Pictorialist movement, which emerged in the late nineteenth century and opened the door to the idea that photography could aspire to an aesthetic value comparable to that of painting, privileging subjectivity, manual intervention, and the construction of interpretive rather than documentary images.

Pictorialism is a photographic movement that developed internationally – particularly in Europe, the United States, and Japan – from the late nineteenth century until the First World War. Its name derives from the word “picture,” reflecting its intention to bring photography closer to the visual language of painting [1].

For the Pictorialists, what mattered most was not objectively documenting reality, but transforming it through a subjective gaze. The aim was to create images with their own aesthetic value, where visual appeal and personal expression carried more weight than literal content. In other words, photographers were not seeking to show reality as it is, but to reinterpret it in order to generate an aesthetic experience.

Influenced by movements such as Romanticism and Impressionism, these artists placed greater importance on sensibility, inspiration, and emotion than on technical precision [2]. They frequently used effects such as soft focus (flou), gentle lighting, and compositions that evoked atmospheres rather than concrete details. In terms of subject matter, landscapes in atmospheric conditions – fog, rain, or overcast days – predominated, as these helped avoid excessive sharpness. Portraits (especially of women) and scenes with symbolic or allegorical significance were also common (Figure 1, a).

Straight photography emerged as a way of making full use of photography’s own inherent capabilities. It focuses on producing sharp, detailed, and technically precise images, setting aside manipulations or post-processing interventions. This approach is grounded in the idea that the camera can represent reality as it is. For this reason, straight photography is also known as “pure photography,” as it avoids alterations both



at the moment of capture and in the darkroom. The intention is for the image to remain faithful to what was seen at the time it was taken.

One of the key elements of this style is its relationship with time. Straight photography can be understood as a means of capturing a specific instant within the flow of reality. Compared to Pictorialism – which sought to imitate painting through effects and manipulations – straight photography embraces photographic language: clarity, precision, and in-camera composition.

From a historical perspective, straight photography arose as a reaction against Pictorialism, which dominated the late nineteenth century and was characterized by the excessive use of manipulations and aesthetic effects. Critics such as Sadakichi Hartmann advocated for a more direct, reality-faithful photography, as reflected in his essay *A Plea for Straight Photography* (1916) (Figure 1, b).



Figure 1 – a) Pictorialism b) Straight Photography (source: own elaboration)

Surrealist photography works almost like a magic trick. We know that what we see is not entirely real, yet it draws us in nonetheless. The image seems to conceal something beyond the obvious, and that is where interpretation enters: it is not simply about representing reality, but about questioning what we understand by it. It is like taking fragments of the world, rearranging them, and constructing a new reality – one closer to the imagined than to the seen.



Surrealism in photography draws inspiration from the dreamlike, the unconscious, and everything that escapes everyday logic. Through techniques such as photomontage, images are created with an unsettling or even disturbing quality. Rather than showing the real, Surrealist photography seeks to explore the strange, the illogical, and what would normally make no sense. In this movement, image manipulation is valid and essential. Photography ceases to be a faithful record and becomes a space of creative freedom, where the rules of reality can be broken. Compositions approaching the impossible and the imaginary thus emerge.

Surrealism champions an almost “raw” expression of the imagination, unfiltered by reason. It departs from the idea that there exists a deeper reality linked to dreams and unconscious thought, setting aside strictly aesthetic or moral concerns. Beyond its artistic character, Surrealism also had a broader dimension in terms of the generation of ideas (Figure 2, a).

Humanist photography developed over several decades [1], particularly in the years following the Second World War – a moment that left a profound mark on society. In the aftermath of that conflict, a need arose to place the person back at the center, highlighting human dignity, spirit, and value within everyday life. This movement is characterized by observing and portraying the human from a sensitive perspective, understanding the person as part of their environment and of nature.

Although it began gaining momentum from the 1930s onward, its consolidation responded to the desire for emotional and social reconstruction after periods of great difficulty. Humanist photography moves between two approaches: on one hand, a poetic vision of daily life, and on the other, a more social intent, at times linked to critical or political stances. Yet beyond documenting the ordinary, these images reflect a hope of recovering normalcy and finding meaning in the everyday. Photographers began to see in the small moments of daily life a form of resistance, harmony, and optimism. For this reason, this movement can be understood as a poetic strand of photojournalism, also related to Poetic Realism. While retaining its documentary character, its focus is on those instants that remind us that life, even in its simplicity, continues to have value.

Within this photography, naturalness, simplicity, and spontaneity predominate. The everyday ceases to be commonplace and becomes something significant (Figure 2, b).



Figure 2 – a) Surrealism b) Humanist Photography (source: own elaboration)



Postmodernism can be understood as a reaction against the ideas and values of Modernism, as well as a way of describing the period that followed it. This concept is associated with skepticism, irony, and a critical stance toward notions such as universal truth and the idea of an objective reality. The term came into use around 1970 and, as an artistic movement, encompasses multiple approaches. It includes currents such as Conceptual art, Neo-expressionism, and Feminist art. Rather than a single style, Postmodernism is characterized by its diversity and by its questioning of the established foundations of art.

Unlike Modernism – which was grounded in ideals of progress, rationality, and utopian visions – Postmodernism emerges from doubt and distrust of those ideas. It questions the existence of absolute truths and proposes that individual experience and its interpretation may be more meaningful than universal principles. As a result, art takes on multiple, even contradictory, meanings.

One of the most significant changes introduced by this movement is the elimination of boundaries between high culture and popular culture, as well as between art and everyday life. From this, a greater creative freedom arises, in which practically anything can become artistic material (Figure 3, a).

Today, it is very important for an artist to be clear about what they wish to communicate and how that discourse can be constructed through the image, thus generating reflection. Our reality is constantly fed by a large quantity of images that we consume daily in an era marked by information overload. Although it is no longer questioned today that photography can be considered art, blurred boundaries do exist within the discipline – particularly between what an artist produces and what is within anyone's reach, such as a photograph taken with a mobile phone. Even so, contemporary photography continues to evolve thanks to improvements in devices and the use of tools that make possible images that were once unthinkable [4].

Today, photography has become fully integrated into cultural production, interacting with new technologies and digital platforms that transform the way we perceive the world. In this context, the traditional boundaries of the medium have expanded, incorporating other disciplines and techniques. Artists constantly seek to push those boundaries and develop proposals from a variety of approaches.

There is thus talk of an “generative” photography, oriented toward reflecting on the transformations, interferences, and new dynamics of the image. In a society that produces and consumes images incessantly, artists working with the photographic medium want to distinguish their artistic work from the everyday image (Figure 3, b).



Figure 3 – a) Contemporary b) Generative (source: own elaboration)

Throughout history, photography has evolved from being solely a technical recording medium – first acquiring aesthetic value with Pictorialism – into a form of artistic expression with multiple creative and discursive possibilities. Each photographic movement has contributed new ways of understanding the image, constantly transforming the relationship between photography, reality, and artistic interpretation, generating new perspectives and expanding the boundaries of the medium. As technological development advances, so too does photography – for example, through its integration into digital platforms and other artistic disciplines. This places ever greater importance on intention, discourse, and what the artist seeks to communicate through the image, understanding photography as an open medium in constant transformation.

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