From Pictorialism to the Document: Critical Conceptions of Artistic Photography in Interwar France

Morgan L. Middleton
FROM PICTORIALISM TO THE DOCUMENT: CRITICAL CONCEPTIONS OF ARTISTIC
PHOTOGRAPHY IN INTERWAR FRANCE

By

MORGAN L. MIDDLETON

A Thesis submitted to the
Department of Art History
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Degree Awarded:
Spring Semester, 2011
The members of the committee approve the thesis of Morgan Middleton defended on March 31, 2011.

__________________________________
Adam Jolles
Professor Directing Thesis

__________________________________
Karen Bearor
Committee Member

__________________________________
Lauren Weingarden
Committee Member

Approved:

__________________________________
Adam Jolles, Chair, Department of Art History

__________________________________
Sally E. McRorie, Dean, College of Visual Arts, Theater & Dance

The Graduate School has verified and approved the above-named committee members.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Developing this thesis has been an extremely rewarding experience. I wish to thank Dr. Adam Jolles for believing in my scholarly ability and encouraging me to embark on this journey. I am extremely grateful for all the guidance, encouragement, and patience he has shown me as my advisor during this process. I would also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Karen Bearor and Dr. Lauren Weingarden, for their thorough readings and insightful commentary. Beyond this project, I am deeply appreciative of everything that my committee members have taught me during my time at Florida State. Finally, I would like to thank my wonderful friends and family, especially my best friend Tyler, for their continual love and support.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. CHAPTER ONE</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE SHIFT AWAY FROM PICTORIALISM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. CHAPTER TWO</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE MODERN MEDIUM: PHOTOGRAPHS AS DOCUMENTS AND SNAPSHOTS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. CHAPTER THREE</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VISUAL POETRY: PHOTOGRAPHS AS POEMS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS AS POETS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. APPENDIX: IMAGES</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

1.1 Otto-Kurt Vogelang, La Mediante. XXIIe Salon international d’art photographique de Paris (Braun & Cie, 1927), p. 20. ...........................................................................................................41

1.2 Rembrandt Van Rijn, Seated Begger and His Dog, 1631. Etching,108 x 81 mm. Retrospective conversion of The Illustrated Bartsch (Abaris Books) by Artstor. .................42

1.3 René Lamaree, Bouleaux. XXIIe Salon international d’art photographique de Paris (Braun & Cie, 1927), p. 29.........................................................................................................................43

1.4 Gustave Caillebotte, Sailing Boats at Argenteuil, 1888. Oil on canvas, 2’1 ½” x 1’9 ¾”. Musée d’Orsay...........................................................44

2.1 Johan Helders, “The Only Two. XXIIe Salon international d’art photographique de Paris (Braun & Cie, 1927), p. 23.........................................................................................................................45

2.2 Paul Nadar, Portrait of French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842 - 1898), 1895...46

2.3 Berenice Abott, Marie Laurencin, 1925. Silver gelatin print from a glass negative. © Berenice Abbott/Commerce Graphics, NYC.................................................................47

2.4 Laure Albin-Guillot, Portrait de Pompon. XXIIIe Salon international d’art photographique de Paris (Braun & Cie, 1928), p. 28.........................................................................................................................48

2.5 F. Bignon, La Lessive. XXIIe Salon international d’art photographique de Paris (Braun & Cie, 1927), p. 3.........................................................................................................................49

2.6 Eugène Atget, Lamphade Venor, rue Lepic, Paris, 1901. Albumen print, 8 3/4 x 7 in. ©J. Paul Getty Trust................................................................................................................40

2.7 Achille Bologna, Il Crocifisso. XXIIe Salon international d’art photographique de Paris (Braun & Cie, 1927), p. 4.........................................................................................................................51

2.8 Figure 2.8 Man Ray, Magnolia Blossom, 1926. Gelatin silver print, 11 5/8 x 9 in. Source: Christie’s Sale 1893/ Lot 240.................................................................52

2.9 Albert Renger-Patzsch, Barocktreppe. XXIIIe Salon international d’art photographique de Paris (Braun & Cie, 1928), p. 46.........................................................................................................................53

3.2 Eugène Atget, Metalworker’s Shop, passage de la Réunion, 1911. Albumen print, 8 ½ x 7 in. ©J. Paul Getty Trust………………………………………………………………………………………55

3.3 Eugène Atget, Chiffonier (Ragpicker), 1899-1901. Albumen Print, 8 3/4 x 7 1/8 in. For his “documents for artists” collection. ©J. Paul Getty Trust…………………………………………………………56

3.4 André Kertész, Fork or La Forchette, 1928. Data from University of California, San Diego. Artstor Collections…………………………………………………………………………………………………57
ABSTRACT

In May of 1928, the Premier salon indépendant de la photographie opened to the public. This exhibition, better known as the Salon de l’Escalier, was the first occasion at which modern photography was critically recognized in France. French art critic and publisher Florent Fels (1893-1977) organized the show because of his dissatisfaction with the annual salon of photography, the Salon International d’art photographique de Paris, and its support of pictorialism. In this thesis, I expand upon current scholarship on these exhibitions by comparing the 1927 and 1928 writings of Fels and Pierre Mac Orlan with those of Luc Benoist and René Chavance. The former writers are both generally associated with modern photography while the latter authors introduced the annual salon catalogues of 1927 and 1928, respectively, and are thus connected with pictorialism. Through this comparison I discovered that, though traditionally set at odds with one another because of the exhibitions with which they are associated, these critics were nevertheless uniformly interested in steering photography away from pictorialism and advocating a new conception of the medium.

To illustrate this, I consider those aspects of the style with which each critic took issue and what they offered as alternatives. I have organized this thesis into three chapters. Chapter one addresses the terms by which these authors rejected pictorialism. In chapter two, I introduce what these critics suggested as alternatives to pictorialism—the photograph as document and snapshot—to delineate their conceptions of what modern photography should become. In chapter three, I discuss Fels’ and Mac Orlan’s conception of photography as poetry, which provided a way to distinguish the medium not only from the photography that came before but also from all other media. Pictorialists strove to distance photography from its mechanical or scientific nature to show that the medium was an art. In contrast, the critics Fels, Mac Orlan, Benoist, and Chavance argued that photography could and should be both a mechanical medium and a conduit of subjective expression. My analysis of their primary documents illustrates that two groups of critics that have been assumed were opposed, in fact, had much in common. This not only shows that this period, considered crucial in the history of French photography, cannot be reduced to a simple series of events but that other transitional moments in the history of photography deserve closer scrutiny.
INTRODUCTION

In May of 1928, the Premier salon indépendant de la photographie opened to the public. This exhibition, better known as the Salon de l’Escalier, was the first occasion at which modern photography was critically recognized in France. Following the exhibition, and largely because of it, the new style of photography proliferated, as did such innovative modes of presenting it to a general public as photo-essays in popular illustrated magazines, photobooks, and other publications devoted to solely to photography. French art critic and publisher Florent Fels (1893-1977) organized the show because of his dissatisfaction with the annual salon of photography, the Salon International d’art photographique de Paris, and its support of pictorialism. Despite the instrumental role the Salon de l’Escalier played in spreading modern photography in France, historians of photography have yet to undertake a sustained examination of the terms by which critics abandoned pictorialism and endorsed modern photography. Those critics who wrote about the Salon de l’Escalier—especially Fels and the author Pierre Mac Orlan—and those associated with the annual salon—especially Luc Benoist and René Chavance,—are assumed to have had significantly different conceptions of photography. This paper will demonstrate that these authors’ positions were not so antithetical. To illustrate this, I will consider those aspects of pictorialism with which each critic took issue and what they offered as alternatives. Pictorialists strove to distance photography from its mechanical or scientific nature to show that the medium was an art. In contrast, the critics Fels, Mac Orlan, Benoist, and Chavance argued that photography could and should be both a mechanical medium and a conduit of subjective expression.

One of my main contentions is that the transition of art photography from the pictorialist to the modern style was gradual both in practice and concept. I have limited my study to a twelve-month period surrounding the opening of the Salon de l’Escalier. I expand upon the research of contemporary scholars on this exhibition by comparing the 1928 writings of Fels and Mac Orlan, who are generally associated with modern photography, to the writings by Luc Benoist and René Chavance. The latter authors wrote the introductions to the Salon International d’art photographique de Paris catalogue in 1927 and 1928, respectively. These two catalogues and the exhibitions they document fall chronologically on either side of the Salon de l’Escalier. Because of their contributions to the annual salon, these authors have been
connected to pictorialism by default. Nevertheless, this project will show that Benoist and Chavance were also interested in steering photography away from pictorialism.

Pictorialism was an international style that emerged in the late nineteenth century. Its practitioners were concerned with elevating the status of photography to an art, largely by emulating the visual effects of other arts. From the collection of essays in the catalogue *Impressionist Camera: Pictorial Photography in Europe, 1888-1918*, it is clear that pictorialism had a complicated and diverse history during its thirty years of ascendency. Generally, photographers practicing pictorialism in France strove to make photographs that looked like drawings, paintings, and watercolors. Often, they employed elaborately constructed settings and used costumes and props to tell a story. They used soft-focus lenses for blur, textured papers to imitate the effects of prints, and pigment-printing techniques to resemble painting. Other popular techniques included such darkroom manipulations as combining and retouching negatives. Pictorialists favored handmade materials over the industrial camera equipment and supplies that developed at the end of the twentieth century.

The two leaders of French pictorialism were Robert Demachy (1859-1936) and Constant Puyo (1857-1933). In 1906, Demachy and Puyo published *Les procédés d’art en photographie*. In this document, they argued that the treatment of the subject was far more important than its selection. Contemporary scholar Michel Poivert calls these photographers “anti-modernists” because of their rejection of such technical advances as prepared papers, corrected optics, and easily managed cameras, all of which led to the production of unique photographic prints. Demachy and Puyo dismissed the technologic aspects of photography for many reasons. They disparaged the practice of photography by amateurs. By the beginning of the twentieth century photography was no longer dominated by professional studios and clubs of affluent amateurs. The development of new technologies simplified the process of making photographs and allowed for a wide range of amateurs, with diverse social backgrounds, to practice the medium.

---

Pictorialists, like Demachy and Puyo, conceived of themselves as artists, emphasizing their skills of interpretation. They formed such clubs as the Photo-Club de Paris and the Société française de photographie to separate themselves from the masses practicing what they considered mechanical photography. Each club had a journal to circulate their ideas and display their members’ best work. These organizations and their publications greatly influenced the public and what style they favored.

By the 1920s, perhaps due to the general popularity of the style, pictorialism had moved into a baroque phase, resulting in a singular visual style that was practiced by photographers without the more dynamic range of approaches associated with it at the beginning of the century. Many photographers and critics strove to reinvent art photography, in contrast to the staid, traditional style with which pictorialism had come to be associated. In the two decades following World War I, new experiments with photography flourished in France, as well as throughout Europe. Avant-garde artists, commercial illustrators, critics, and journalists experimented with such burgeoning photographic techniques and forms as photograms, fragmented images featuring new angles and close cropping, and new publishing methods that combined photographs and typography. For many, photography became a tool to be used to cultivate a new way of “seeing” that better correlated with the rapidly developing modern world.

Many events contributed to the rise in popularity of modern photography at the end of the 1920s in France, including the Salon de l’Escalier. Throughout 1927 Fels expressed dissatisfaction with the annual photography salon in his journal, L’Art vivant. In 1928 he collaborated with Lucien Vogel, editor of the illustrated magazine Vu, filmmaker René Clair, writer Jean Prévost, and Georges Charensol, editor of Les Nouvelles littéraires, to open the Salon de L’Escalier exhibition, which showed from May 24 to June 7, 1928. The exhibition included work from such emerging photographers as Man Ray, André Kertész, and Germaine Krull, and contained a historic section, featuring the work of Félix and Paul Nadar and Eugène Atget.

---


5“Catalogue Premier Salon Indépendant de la Photographie. Bernice Abbott, American, former assistant to Man Ray, 12 portraits; d’Ora, pseudonym of Dora Kalumuss, Austrian portrait photographer, 12 portraits; Laure Albin-Guillot, French portrait photographer and photographic illustrator; 11 photographs, still lifes, nudes, portraits; George Hoyningen-Huene, Russian-born leading fashion photographer in Paris in 1920, 12 photographs, 7 of which were portraits; André Kertész, Hungarian born, active in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s. 15 photographs, 6 portraits,
Fels and Pierre Mac Orlan (1882–1970) are the two critics whose responses to this exhibition have generated the most secondary scholarship. Fels’ journal, *L’Art vivant*, addressed the manifestation of modern culture in the arts and everyday life. Although best known as a critic of modern art, Fels became increasingly interested in contemporary photography toward the end of the 1920s. In addition to authoring numerous novels that centered on marginal characters coming into conflict with the modern world, Mac Orlan wrote several essays and prefaces on photography. Mac Orlan’s primary contribution to photographic criticism during this period was his concept of the *social fantastic*, a variation on the nineteenth-century literary genre. In short, he proposed that photography was essentially a literary medium. Both of these critics examined the intersection of the arts, literary and visual, and the modern world. They applied similar terms to photography, such as *documentary*, and favored many of the same photographers, including Atget, Krull, and Kertész.

The scholarly attention given to this exhibition and these two critics illustrate their importance in the history of modern photography in France and explains why they are central to my project. The first major scholarly publication on the *Salon de l’Escalier* was Maria Morris Hambourg’s “Atget, Precursor of Modern Documentary Photography,” published in 1984 in a collection of essays titled *Observations: Essays on Documentary Photography*. Hambourg stated that Fels called for an antidote to the sentimental photography presented at *Salon International d’art photographique de Paris* in 1927. She argues that the critical success of the *Salon de l’Escalier* transformed French modern photography and led to other exhibitions of

---

still life, landscapes; Germaine Krull-Ivens, German, 13, landscapes, portrait, nude; Man Ray, American 10 photographs, 4 portraits, 5 rayographs, still life; Félix Nadar and Paul Nadar, 11 photographs, 10 portraits; Paul Outerbridge, American, 9 still lifes. Eugène Atget, French, number of photographs not specified.” See Sophie Lévy, *A Transatlantic avant-garde: American artists in Paris, 1918-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 209. Though there were many portraits shown, critics most often mention the other types of photography present and the photographers whose images were not limited to portraits.


---

Pierre Mac Orlan’s birth name was Pierre Dumarchey. He published under several pseudonyms, particularly in the beginning of his career. Mac Orlan is his most well-known pen name.

In this study I am not interested in the biography or the intentions of the photographers, nor am I focusing on the formal aspects of the images or their use in historical or political movements, per say; however, I am interested in how critics in Paris during this time conceived of and dealt with these aspects of photography.
modern photography. For example, the Galerie de l’Epoque, in Brussels, arranged an exhibit of new photography in October 1928. Mac Orlan’s essay, “The Literary Art of Imagination and Photography,” was published as the preface to the exhibition catalogue.

In an essay entitled, “Resurrecting Vision,” published in the catalogue for the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s exhibition The New Vision (1989), Christopher Phillips also argued that the Salon de l’Escalier represents the first important recognition of modern photography in France. Like Hambourg, he explained that Fels was driven to organize the show by his dissatisfaction with the pictorialist photography still shown prominently by the annual salon and concludes that the show made great strides in creating a sympathetic audience for modern photography in Paris. Phillips notes that, though small, this exhibition received plenty of news press because of publisher Lucien Vogel’s involvement. The wide attention the exhibit attracted, among other things, caused the production of Photographie, an annual published through Arts et métiers graphiques.

More recently, scholar Peter Barr discussed the role of this exhibition in the reception of Berenice Abbott’s photography in his essay, “The Reception and Sources of Berenice Abbott’s Paris Portrait Style, 1925-1929,” published in 2010. In addition to citing the exhibition as the first show of modern photography in France, Barr emphasizes the primary importance of the critical writings by Fels and Mac Orlan surrounding the event. He argues that these two critics had opposing opinions on Abbot’s photography and, by extension, modern photography in general. Like Hambourg and Phillips, Barr notes that Fels rejected pictorialist techniques and aesthetics. Furthermore, Fels argued that photography had returned to a French photographic tradition of bold and unaffected images, exemplified by the work of predecessors like Nadar and

---

9 See Christopher Phillips, “Resurrecting Vision: The New Photography in Europe between the Wars,” in The New Vision: Photography Between the World Wars (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), p. 102. Phillips’s article “Resurrecting Vision” is one of the seminal works on interwar photography. He outlines some of the major developments in European photography, focusing on those artists working in Russia, Germany, and France, during the 1920s and 30s. He focuses on the artists, their interaction with other artists, and how the ideas about the new vision were disseminated. Phillips argues that until the late 1920s new vision photography had no great impact in France and the “gravitational center” of avant-garde photography, even for those who had little connection with the movement, was surrealism; I am also indebted to the translations of contemporary primary sources by Christopher Phillips from Photography in the Modern Era. Christopher Phillips, Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940 (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture, 1989).
10 For a complete list on Mac Orlan’s publications on photography see Peter Barr, “The Reception and Sources of Berenice Abbott’s Paris Portrait Style, 1925-1929” History of Photography 34: 1 (February 2010): 43-59.
Atget. Fels’ nationalistic approach circumvented pictorialism by placing Nadar and Atget as forefathers of new, modern photography. Barr argues that, although both Fels and Mac Orlan appreciated documentary qualities of the new style of photography, Mac Orlan’s views were not linked to French tradition, nor were they based on the medium itself. Instead, they were rooted in a tradition of “Flemish” literature from which his own fantastic writing developed.

Each of these scholars argued that Fels’ primary incentive in organizing the Salon de l’Escalier was both to diminish the prominence of pictorialism in the annual French salon and to promote modern photography in its place. They also place Fels and Mac Orlan within certain camps of thought concerning modern photography. Hambourg argues that Fels advocated for photography as a fine art and she groups Mac Orlan with the surrealists. Barr calls Fels a classicist and a nationalist. Both Phillips and Barr define Mac Orlan’s position through his interest in the fantastic literary genre. But they do not discuss the precise concerns these authors voiced about the annual salon in general and pictorialism in particular. In this thesis, I argue that the annual salon did not completely align itself with pictorialism in the late 1920s. This is evident in the photography displayed and the writings of the authors who were selected to introduce the catalogues of 1927 and 1928.

The annual Salon International d’art photographique de Paris was organized by the Société française de photographie. Founded in 1854 by a group of amateurs, artists, and scholars, the Société is the second oldest photography club in Europe, after the Royal Photographic Society (founded 1853). Both the 1927 and 1928 salons were juried by painters, sculptors, and engravers, emphasizing the club’s investment in traditional artistic media. The head juror was Paul O. Chabas, president of l’Académie des Beaux-Arts. Each member of the jury was identified as an artist; none were identified as a photographer, if any of them practiced the medium. Not surprisingly, the exhibitions were dominated by pictorialist photography. Demachy and Puyo, the dominant practitioners of pictorialism in France at the turn of the twentieth century, featured prominently in these exhibitions.

Yet, shocking examples of what would later be considered modern photography were included as well. For example, Albert Renger-Patzch, a key figure in the style that would come to be called the New Objectivity in Germany, featured in both exhibitions. Furthermore, the essays by Benoist and Chavance published in the 1927 and 1928 annual catalogues were not devoted to pictorialist aims. Benoist’s 1927 essay begins by discussing the merits of
photography that emulate other such art forms as painting and engraving. Then, however, he proclaims that this practice, useful for a time, is currently outdated. Similarly, in 1928, Chavance asked why photography need remain in the shadow of the other arts. He argues that since each artistic medium has begun embracing its unique qualities, photography should follow suit. Even more than Benoist, Chavance insists forcefully that photography abandon pictorialism.

My goal is to contribute to the scholarship on the transition in France from pictorial to modern photography by comparing the writings of Fels, Mac Orlan, Benoist and Chavance. Through this comparison I discovered that, though traditionally set at odds with one another because of the exhibitions with which they are associated, these critics were nevertheless uniformly interested in steering photography away from pictorialism and advocating a new conception of the medium. I am specifically concerned with how these authors worked to define the aesthetic criteria and significance of what would shortly be recognized as modern photography.

Two scholarly approaches are particularly helpful in this endeavor. Hambourg clarifies the crucial role Atget played in the trajectory of modern French photography, demonstrating that after his death in 1927, Atget’s work was adopted by three types of proponents: those who argued photography was a surrealist art (Mac Orlan), those who claimed it as a fine art (Fels), and those who conceived of it as a technological art (German photographers and critics Lazló Moholy-Nagy and Albert Renger-Patzsch). Each group used Atget, who had his own intentions as a photographer, to further their purposes for photography. Hambourg’s work illustrates how critics of this period interpreted a single style of photography in different ways. Similarly, I will closely examine the writings of the critics under discussion to determine what their conceptions of the medium were. In a more recent article, “‘Photo-Inflation’: Image Profusion in German Photography, 1925–1945,” published in 2008, Olivier Lugon delineates changes in reception and use of photography in Germany using critical writings, contemporary events, and the rise in numbers of photographic books, venues, and illustrated press to develop what the particular understanding of photography was at this moment. Though my focus is not as broad as Lugon’s study, I will emulate his article, which closely analyzes a conception of photography at a particular moment.

11 Hambourg, 29.
I have organized this thesis into three chapters. Chapter one addresses the terms by which these authors rejected pictorialism. I discuss which aspects of pictorialism they took issue with, particularly the emulation of other artistic media and the use of antiquated photographic techniques. All of these critics argue that photography should have, and follow, its own aesthetic principles. In chapter two, I introduce what these critics suggested as alternatives to pictorialism—the photograph as document and snapshot—to delineate their conceptions of what modern photography should become. Through the analysis of these terms one can identify certain aesthetic and ideological principles critics associated with modern photography. These critics argued that both the mechanical and the expressive potential of photography could be realized by rejecting pictorialist practices. In chapter three, I discuss Fels’ and Mac Orlan’s conception of photography as poetry. This is a slight departure from the previous two chapters because it does not explicitly discuss the rejection of pictorialism. However, it does continue to investigate how the critics Fels and Mac Orlan conceived of modern photography during this phase of development. To contextualize the connection made between a literary and a visual art by these critics, I introduce an essay on Atget by surrealist poet Robert Desnos as a comparison. Fels, Mac Orlan, and Desnos praised the photographer’s ability to imbue seemingly mundane things with mystery and romanticism and equated the resulting images with poetry. This provided a way to distinguish the medium not only from the photography that came before but also from all other media.

In late 1920s France, a distinct change in photographic style can be seen. Soft-focus genre scenes that dominated photography were replaced by sharp focused, innovative visual experiments. This development is typically described as the arrival of modern photography and the simultaneous demise of the pictorialism popularized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Retrospectively, the differences between these two styles are often apparent. Yet, there was no such singular break in photographic style at the time. Instead, a new style emerged gradually and with it a complex critical discussion on how it should look and function in contemporary society. At this point in the history of French modern photography, critics’ ideas had not fully coalesced into a decisive movement with specific aims. Instead, the critics Fels, Mac Orlan, Benoist, and Chavance were striving to redefine photography and present it to a larger public. My analysis of their primary documents illustrates that two groups of critics that have been assumed were opposed, in fact, had much in common. This not only shows that this
period, considered crucial in the history of French photography, cannot be reduced to a simple series of events but that other transitional moments in the history of photography deserve closer scrutiny.
CHAPTER ONE
THE SHIFT AWAY FROM PICTORIALISM

The Premier Salon Indépendent de Photographie of 1928 is cited as a pivotal event in introducing modern photography to France. According to Christopher Phillips, Florent Fels organized the exhibition largely because of his dissatisfaction with the “retrogressive pictorial photography displayed in the annual Salon of Photography.”12 Following Fels, contemporary critics posit the Salon de l’Escalier as the foil to the annual salon, the Salon International d’art photographique de Paris. It is cited as representing and perpetuating the antiquated style of pictorialism.13 Indeed, Luc Benoist, author of the preface for the 1927 catalogue, begins his essay by discussing the merits of artistic photography, especially photography that emulates painting. He claims, “Which most salient character at first [seduced] us in the most captivating photographs on display, if not their pictorial nature, so artistic?” He continues, “The painters who first conceived of a photo as a painting deserve our recognition. [T]his tradition has given us some of the best finds that we admire in the Exposition.”14 Yet, Benoist’s laudatory language concerning pictorialist photography is misleading because, ultimately, he argues that, though there are merits to photography that emulates painting, the correct path for photography is to

13 For more information on European Pictorialism see Impressionist Camera: Pictorial Photography in Europe, 1888-1918 (London: Merrell, 2006). From this collection of essays, it is clear that Pictorialism has a complicated and diverse history. Nevertheless, by the 1920s this movement could be condensed into a more singular visual style and ideology.
14 The annual exhibition was organized by the Société française de photographie. Founded in 1854 by a group of amateurs, artists, and scholars, it is the second oldest photography club from France, after the Royal Photographic Society. The society’s website is http://www.sfp.photographie.com/asso/asso-presen.html. Accessed 8 March 2011; Patrick Daum explains, “Photographic societies acted as centers of debate where the places of photography in the world of art was discussed. The international exhibitions organized by these societies brought together personalities who, though very different shared the sense that they were inventing a photographic art. In many European capitals, salons for photography were set up, modeled on the salons for painting. Theses attracted amateur photographers from across the whole of Europe, including Russia, and the United States, strengthening the international reach of Pictorialism.” Patrick Daum, “Unity and Diversity in European Pictorialism,” in Impressionist Camera: Pictorial Photography in Europe, 1888-1918 (London: Merrell, 2006), 15; Luc Benoist, “Introduction,” in XXIIe Salon international d’art photographique de paris (Braun & Cie, 1927), vii-xi. The annual exhibition was organized by Société française de photographie, located at this time on 51 Rue de Clichy, Paris, viii. All translations from this text are the author’s. “Quel caractère plus saillant au premier abord [séduit] dans le plus attachantes des photographies exposées, sinon leur caractère pictural, donc artistique?...Les peintres qui, les premiers on conçu une photo comme un tableau ont droit à notre reconnaissance. [C]ette tradition nous a valu quelques-unes des plus belles trouvailles que nous admirons à l’Exposition. Passons en revue en effet les photographies qui nous rappellent le style de certains tableaux.”
divorce itself from other artistic media. He states, “Undoubtedly photography imitating painting has provided charming works. Daguerre himself was a painter. But with resources as different as the painting and the photographic plate, it seems illogical to try to get the same result.”¹⁵ Similar sentiments can also be found in Pierre Mac Orlan’s essays of 1928 and the preface of the 1928 Salon International d’art photographique catalogue written by René Chavance.

This does not mean that each critic praised the same images and photographers or that they shared ideas for the contemporary uses and implications of photography, issues I will address in chapters two and three. Not every critic held pictorialism in the same disdain. Fels and Mac Orlan were more aggressive in dismissing pictorialist photography, while Benoist and Chavance, associated with the traditional salon, were more conciliatory in their critiques of the style. Nevertheless, there was a general move away from pictorialism and to illustrate this I will consider which aspects of the style each critic took issue with. This will show that all of these critics were equally concerned with rejecting pictorialism, particularly the extent to which it involved imitating other media and relying on antiquated photographic practices that resulted in unique prints.

In 1927, before there were evident alternatives to pictorialism, Benoist expressed his dissatisfaction with the style. He stated that art photography, or pictorialism, was no longer a viable, provocative option for photography. After discussing several photographs from the exhibition, he explains that “it is, in short, without too much stress on the works of these artists we have attached their photographs to paintings. I even believe that this was their goal: to give the illusion of a painting. My feeling is they do not have any reason to do this step and art photography is passing and is even already outdated.”¹⁶ He then takes this idea further by explicitly saying photography has its own laws, distinct from other media, especially painting. He declares that “it seems to me however that as the Impressionist painter fled nascent photography, photography should confine itself to its own means, or rather must give us only

¹⁵ Benoist, ix. “Sans doute la photographie imitant le peinture a donné des œuvres charmantes. Daguerre lui-même, était peintre. Mais avec des moyens aussi différents que la peinture et une plaque sensible, il me paraît peu logique d’essayer d’obtenir un même résultat.”
¹⁶ Ibid., ix. “C’est, en somme, sans trop solliciter les œuvres de ces artistes que nous avons rattaché leurs photographies à des peintures. Je crois même que ce fut là leur but: donner l’illusion d’un Tableau. Mon sentiment est qu’ils n’ont pas tout à fait raison et que cette étape de la photographie artistique est passagère et même déjà dépassée.”
what it can give us.‖ Benoist begins formulating photography as a medium with its own aesthetic, independent from the painterly effects pictorialists emulated.

In a 1928 article on the *Salon de l’Escalier*, published in the journal *L’Art vivant*, for which he regularly wrote art reviews, Fels emphatically rejected pictorialism, or what he calls artistic photography. He states, “Above all we wished to avoid ‘artistic’ photography, photography inspired by painting, engraving, or drawing.” As this exhibition was meant to be in direct contrast to the annual salon, I will compare several of Fels’ statements to examples from the 1927 *Salon International d’art photographique* catalogue to illustrate the style of photography he was rejecting. Benoist describes Otto Kurt Vogesang’s photograph titled *La Mediante*, featuring an old woman with a furrowed brow, carrying a basket (Fig. 1.1). He writes, “Mr. Vogelsang, German, calls to mind Rembrandt. What a tragic figure, the beggar!” The hazy photograph is deeply shadowed, and its surface texture and dramatic lighting evoke the work of the Baroque painter Rembrandt, a common reference point for pictorialist photographers and critics. There is a strong visual similarity between Vogelsang’s photograph and an etching by Rembrandt, titled *Seated Beggar and His Dog*, from 1631. Rembrandt’s image features a hunched man clasping his hands in front of a softly mottled, non-descript background (Fig. 1.2). A bright white light falls on the figure’s face. Similarly, Vogelsang’s work features an isolated woman with a strong shaft of light illuminating her face, while the textured surface of the photograph evokes Rembrandt’s crosshatchings.

Though the beggar (*mendiante*) was popular among many of the photographers Fels endorsed, including Atget, Krull, and Kertész, this photograph is an example of the kind of work Fels emphatically rejected the following year. Fels states, “Certain English practitioners have a mania for treating their subjects in light and shadows, and labor to give their works the look of Rembrandt or [Eugène] Carrière.” Fels takes issue not with the subject matter of these

---

17 Ibid. “Il me semble cependant que comme le painter impressionniste a fui la photographie naissante, la photo doit se borner à ses propres moyens, ou plutôt doit nous donner ce qu’elle seule peut nous donner.”
19 Ibid. “M. Vogelsang, germain, se souvient de Rembrandt. Quelle tragique figure que celle de la mendiante!”
photographers, but rather with the painterly style they imitate. As previously stated, Benoist was not as emphatic in his rejection of pictorialism. Thus, equating photography with a Rembrandt was not explicitly unfavorable. For Fels, however, such a comparison is indubitably negative. In considering René Lamarre’s *Bouleaux* (Birch Trees), Benoist argues that Lamarre “has transposed through a respite from oil a lovely wood of birches, light like a watercolor” (Fig. 1.3).22 Again, this picturesque photograph represents the exact opposite of the photography Fels championed. Fels states, “Others go back to the technique of the Impressionist painters and adapt it to photography, and so we get sunsets on the banks of the Seine, sunlight through the branches of a bosky grove, all an aesthetic that finds its proper outlet in painting but has nothing to do with the strict laws of photography dedicated to two tones, white and black.”23 Lamarre’s photograph features a sunlit grove with strong shadows that alternate with bright swaths of sunlight. The viewer’s eye follows the curved path into the blurred distance. The picturesque subject matter, the dappled light, and the textured grass of Lamarre’s photograph have a similar effect to the boating scene and painted reflections in the river of Gustave Caillebotte’s *Sailing Boats at Argenteuil* (Fig. 1.4). Both are scenes of leisure in a world softly textured by light and shadow. According to Fels, this kind of visual similarity was not appropriate for photography.

Mac Orlan indirectly dismisses pictorialist photography and its imitation of painting by advocating that artistic photography embrace the mimetic abilities of the medium. He writes in his article “The Literary Art of Imagination and Photography,” published in September of 1928, three months after the *Salon de l’Escalier* exhibition, that “the photographic art, at the point where it is now, can be divided into two classes that are more or less the poles of all human artistic creation. There is plastic photography and documentary photography.”24 My reading of “plastic photography” concurs with that by Peter Barr, who extends the term to cover not simply the pictorialist photographs of the previous decades but more recent abstract work, such as Man Ray’s rayographs, as well. Therefore, in this dichotomy that Mac Orlan sets up, the pictorialist

22 Benoist, ix. “M. Lamarre a transposé par un report d’huile un joli bois de bouleaux, léger comme une aquarelle.”
photography that Fels disparages is not even included in the future of photography. Mac Orlan praises photography that documents reality (although not an exact reproduction of reality, as I discuss in chapter two). Because one of photography’s inherent functions is to reproduce an image of the world, it is connected to physical reality and is further separated from painting, which according to Mac Orlan “is sufficient unto itself...for reasons that escape critics.”

In “La Photographie et le Fantastique Social,” an article published in November 1928, Mac Orlan again rejects photography that emulates painting and champions photography that documents. He argues that “it is not a matter here of the kind of photography made popular by the taste for the postcard and the watercolor portrait. The photography which I hold as the greatest expressionist art of our time is still only sought by a few studios and workshops and in the collections of the agencies that provide documents to the mainstream press.”

Mac Orlan privileges documentary or journalistic photography over the picturesque and the artistic.

In addition to criticizing photography that mimics the effects of painting, Fels and Mac Orlan encouraged the use of modern photographic technology and, by extension, discouraged antiquated photographic techniques associated with pictorialism. Of the photographers participating in the Premier Salon Indépendent de Photographie in 1928, Fels wrote approvingly, “All of them take pains to be exact, clear, precise. All of them shun the blurring that can only be justified in the cinema. They play no tricks with either the model or a métier which, to qualify as art, must have laws of its own.”

Pictorialist often emulated the effects of other arts by employing such methods and tools as soft-focus lenses, lens coatings and filters, and the manipulation of negatives in the darkroom. Typically, the desired result was a softer line, or, as Fels states, blurring. “Tricks” with the métier would include those methods practiced by the pictorialists.

---

25 In referring to Mac Orlan’s division of photography into plastic and documentary, Barr states, “The former category included abstractions, photograms and ‘photoplastiques’ of Man Ray, and the latter encompassed more straightforward styles of photography produced by Berenice Abbott, Germaine Krull-Ivens and André Kertész.” Barr, 47.
26 Mac Orlan, “The Literary Art of Imagination,” 27.
27 Pierre Mac Orlan “La Photographie et le Fantastique Social.” Les Annales Politiques et Littéraires 2321 (1er Novembre 1928), 413. “Il ne s’agit pas ici de la photographie telle que le goût de la carte postale et du portrait aquarelle l’a vulgarisée. La photographie que je tiens pour le plus grand art expressioniste de notre époque n’existe encore que dans quelques studios et ateliers où l’on cherche et dans les collections des agences qui procurent des documents à la grande presse.”
Scholar Ulrich Pohlmann notes that for pictorialists the moment when the photograph was taken was not nearly as important as the printing process. The dark room was the center of artistic creation in which a photograph was transformed into a work of art.\(^{29}\) Instead of emphasizing photographers’ work on a photograph during the printing process, Fels praises their ability to create photographs using contemporary photographic equipment. He states, “[It] was Man Ray who rehabilitated amateur photography and who, using a modest portable camera like the standard Kodak, found a way to recreate moments of intense life.”\(^{30}\) Michel Poivert calls the French pictorialists at the turn of the twentieth century “anti-modernists” because of their deliberate rejection of the technological advances in photography. This was their attempt to turn photography into an “artisanal production” and make each print as unique as possible. He explains that the pictorialists purposefully rejected prepared papers, instant images, corrected lenses, and easy-to-use amateur cameras. They chose to use delicate handmade papers, lenses that intentionally blurred focus, and professional cameras.\(^{31}\) Though the pictorialist movement was started by amateur photographers, as time went on, they had to become knowledgeable and practiced with their preferred materials to work with them effectively. No longer amateurs, they were steeped in academic training. Man Ray’s use of advanced technology indicates a break from this tradition and a fresh approach to photography or, as Fels states, a rehabilitation of the amateur. Fels does not celebrate the photographer’s skills in employing complicated and delicate materials to produce unique prints. Instead, he celebrates the photographer who embraces the tools of modernity which allow for a new way to see the world.

In “The Literary Art of Imagination and Photography” Mac Orlan provides an anecdote that exemplifies the power of photography to capture life, “caught in the act.” He states, “[I spent an evening in London] in the Chinese quarter, Pennyfields. A thick fog conferred a dignity and a horror worthy of a wax museum on the drunken girls in front of the doors of their brick houses. My presence, at five in the afternoon, in that wide short street, seemed to have immobilized life. The sight of those wax figures lost in the fog could cause certain ideas to be born. I hurried to take several snapshots, rapidly, haphazardly. Then I had them developed.

---

\(^{29}\) Pohlman, 89.
\(^{30}\) Fels, “The First Salon Indépendant de la Photographie,” 25.
They were bad and [yet] they gave me marvelous prints.” He goes on to say that the developed photographs revealed details that were not evident to him while at the scene. No amount of staged lighting or tampering with the negative would have revealed them to him. The spontaneity provided by the portable camera, freed photography from complex staging and story lines common in pictorialism. This allowed unexpected moments of inspiration and revelation such as those described in Mac Orlan’s account. Fels, directly, and Mac Orlan, indirectly, took issue with much of the material exhibited in the annual Salon of photography in 1928. The Salon de l’Escalier thus provided an opportunity for models of artistic photography that departed from the pictorialist tradition to emerge in France.

Chavance’s preface for the 1928 Salon International d’art photographique de Paris exhibition was published after the Salon de l’Escalier. Perhaps he is more confident in his rejection of pictorialism than Benoist from the previous year because of the visual alternatives presented by the Salon de l’Escalier. In a manner similar to that of Fels and Mac Orlan, Chavance argues that that photography should not emulate painting and that photographers should not employ the technical approaches typical of pictorialists. After discussing photographs that he considers similar to paintings, Chavance notes, “But like the others they do not escape the specter of the tableau. Is this subordination inevitable?” He answers his own question by stating that almost every art movement is becoming more frank about its means of production. Artists and photographers are embracing and emphasizing the unique qualities of their individual media.

With this idea, Chavance picks up a thread of thought begun by Benoist a year prior, which was then also discussed by Fels. Photography should have its own set of aesthetic rules. Chavance writes, “The acute perception of the lens, the sensitivity of the plate permits one to seize and fix almost unsuspected aspects that go unnoticed by insufficiently attentive eyes….If [a photographer] uses the snapshot, or if, with poses, he gets to choose camera angles of view which offer unusual perspectives, what a world so unknown and yet so very close, can it reveal

---

33 René Chavance, “Introduction,” in XXIIe Salon international d’art photographique de paris (Braun & Cie, 1928), ix. “Mais pas plus que les autres celles-la n’échappent à la hantise du tableau. Cette subordination est-elle donc inévitable? Si l’on s’en réfère aux directions actuelles, on constate dans presque tous les arts un mouvement très net vers la franchise du procédé. Montrer ouvertement ses moyen d’exécution, ne rien dissimuler de la matière qu’on emploie, laisser apparaître dans sa pureté, telle est la règle générale: principe qui se recommande au reste des plus vénérables traditions.”
Chavance urges photographers to embrace and pursue the snapshot, or the instantaneous photograph, and unusual perspectives. This statement is evidence of the turn away from pictorialism and the search for fresh approaches to photography occurring during this period.

In the late 1920s, French photography critics began to challenge the dominant influence of pictorialism, particularly the extent to which it led photographers to emulate other artistic media and to adopt antiquated photographic techniques. In its place, these critics advocated on behalf of a photography that looked more spontaneous and rejected the artifice they associated with pictorialism. Beyond these common objectives, however, these critics had different goals for modern photography. In the following chapters, I explore in greater depth how different conceptions of contemporary photography emerged in France following the critical abandonment of pictorialism, attending to both commonalities and nuances of difference.

34 Ibid., xi. “L’acuité de perception de l’objectif, la sensibilité de la plaque permettent de saisir et de fixer des aspects presque insoupçonnés qui passent inaperçus à des yeux insuffisamment attentifs, que l’on voit sans les regarder, mais qu’un opérateur subtil est à même de capter. S’il use de l’instantané ou si, avec la pose, il s’entend à choisir des angles de prise de vue qui lui offrent des perspectives inusitées, quel monde inconnu et pourtant tout proche de nous, ne peut-il nous reveller!”
CHAPTER TWO
THE MODERN MEDIUM: PHOTOGRAPHS AS DOCUMENTS AND SNAPSHOTS

In November 1928, René Chavance wrote, “Without attempting to reduce the photograph to a purely documentary role, can we not wish it to return to a more faithful mirror of nature? Everything is in the choice of the motif, in the manner of capturing. It is a matter of sensitivity. To make it interesting there is no need to contrive a genre scene or simulate moonlight.”35 This passage clearly reiterates Chavance’s renunciation of pictorialism, but it also indicates what he considers more appropriate to photography. His thoughts represent an important transition in the understanding in photography in general. The critics under discussion—Fels, Mac Orlan, Benoist, and Chavance—are rejecting photography that participated in the traditions of the plastic arts, particularly painting and drawing. In its place these authors argued for photography that acknowledged the mechanical and technical aspects of the process while still allowing for personal expression. Benoist and Chavance call this type of photograph a snapshot, Fels insists that a good photograph is a document, and Mac Orlan argues that documentary photography is paramount.

As Chavance states, for these authors photography that mirrors nature does not result in images that are purely documentary or direct transcriptions of reality. Nor does it preclude the interpretation of the photographer. They still promote the importance of the photographer, but not because of their skills in the darkroom. Instead, they praise photographers for their ability to use modern photographic tools and techniques and choose appropriate subject matter to better capture, or mirror, modern life. They use words like poignant, precise, and spare to describe good photography. And they argue that the result of a good photograph was the revelation of deeper meaning. Nevertheless, modern photography meant and resulted in different things for each of these authors. In the following pages I will discuss each of their understandings of the

---

35 René Chavance, “Introduction,” in XXIIe Salon international d’art photographique de paris (Braun & Cie, 1928), x. “Sans prétendre ramener l’épreuve à un rôle purement documentaire, ne peut-on souhaiter qu’elle redevienne un plus fidèle miroir de la nature? Tout est dans le choix du motif, dans la façon de la saisir. Affaire de sensibilité. Pour le rendre intéressant point n’est besoin de combiner une scène de genre ni de simuler un clair de lune.”
medium to further elucidate what they had in common and what was distinctly different. All of
these authors believe in the emotional power of photography. Fels and Chavance argue for a
certain type of visual clarity and precision and Mac Orlan’s conception is deeply connected to
his construction of photography as a literary medium.

A year prior to Chavance’s statement, Benoist asked, “What is the principal domain of
[photography], if not the snapshot? Bringing back the snapshot as a form of art, this is the
difficult goal, but the personal one of the art of photography.”36 The snapshot, or l’instantané,
can be defined in many ways. So what does the term mean specifically to Benoist? He describes
an image taken by Johan Helders, titled The Only Two, from the 1927 salon (Fig. 2.1). He states,
“With Mr. Helders, we come very close to the snapshot, a slice of real life. In a private
conversation in an elegant restaurant, a man and a woman finish a meal; the discrete lamps leave
the whole in shadow and create privacy, an interim intimacy…an intimacy of beginning and
testing.”37 Immediately this image strikes the viewer as more natural in appearance when
compared to the genre scenes of pictorialist photography, which used elaborate backdrops,
costumes, and props. In the middle ground of this image a man and a woman sit across from
each other at a small table covered in white linen. The viewer must look past other tables and
chairs in the foreground to the couple situated slightly to the right of center. They are facing
each other and, in mid conversation, are seemingly oblivious of the camera. This lack of interest
in the camera gives the impression that the couple is sharing a personal moment and is not aware
of being photographed. There is a feeling of that this moment is “a slice of real life.”

Nevertheless, that does not mean this photo is not staged. The shot is carefully framed to
give the appearance of spontaneity. Therefore, I argue that Benoist would apply the term
snapshot to images that have the feeling of real life situations. It does not seem to be important
whether the scene is captured through chance or, alternatively, composed by the photographer.
What is important is the photographer’s choice of subject matter. By rejecting elaborately
composed genre scenes and selecting an exchange between a man and a woman as the focus of
his image, Helders was able to evoke the energy Benoist associated with the snapshot. This

36 Luc Benoist, “Introduction,” in XXIIe Salon international d’art photographique de paris (Braun & Cie, 1927), ix.
“Quel est le principal de ses domain, sinon l’instantané? Faire rentrer l’instantané dans la forme de l’art, c’est là le
but difficile, mais le but personnel de l’art photographique.”
37 Ibid., ix. “Avec M. Helders, nous frôlons l’instantané, la tranche de vie réaliste. En tête à tête dans un restaurant
elegant, un home et une femme finissent de souper; des lampes discrete laissent l’ensemble dans la pénombre et
creent l’intimité, une intimaté provisoire, passe-partout, une intimaté de début et d’essai.”

19
attitude toward content is in direct contrast with pictorialists, whom repeatedly argued that it was the treatment of the subject matter not its selection that was of prime importance.

Benoist implies that appropriate subject matter is important. In addition to this, several qualities that he attributes to the snapshot could be defined as the opposite of pictorialist aims and practices. Benoist explains further what a snapshot means to him in the following statement: “So I have a certain fondness of photography that is simple and poignant, that is taken on the spot.” The snapshot is “simple” and does not allow for elaborate props or staging. It is “taken on the spot,” which indicates the spontaneity of modern cameras and insinuates, again, that the subject does not require significant staging or, even more extreme, that the photographer is not working in a studio. His snapshot evokes the idea of the amateur photographer whose lack of pictorialist training results in images free from traditional framing and lighting, as well as darkroom manipulations. It is “poignant,” evoking a strong reaction from the viewer. Benoist elevates photography that would be seen as unskilled or mechanical by the pictorialists by emphasizing the emotional quality of the snapshot. He states, “The snapshot is an art because it can be fixed forever, a beautiful fugitive.” Beauty is in (seemingly) fleeting subject matter, not in a constructed scene or in extensive manipulations of a photographic print. Similarly, Chavance argues that there is a move away from elaborately constructed mise-en-scène and staid visual tropes to tell a story in a photograph. He argues that “the art [of photography] is refined and raised as it resorts to less direct appearances, it is more internal. The emotion which it causes gains in quality.” Both authors argue that the snapshot is more emotionally powerful because of the photographer’s choice of subject matter and the simplicity in which he or she deals with it in the image.

In 1928, Fels closed his article on the *Salon de l’Escalier* describing the photographers in the exhibition and their photographs with this definitive statement: “All of them take pains to be exact, clear, precise….A good photograph is, above all, a good document.” A document is generally defined as a piece of evidence or an item of factual or informative nature. It is an

38 Ibid., x. “J’ai donc une certain prédilection pur la photographie qui garde un caractère émouvant et simplifié, tout en étant prise sur le vif.”
39 Ibid., x. “L’instantané est un Art parce qu’il peut fixer pour toujours, une beauté fugitive.”
40 Chavance, ix. “L’art s’affine et se hausse à mesure qu’il recourt à des apparences moins directes, qu’il se fait plus intérieur. L’émotion qu’il provoque y gagne en qualité.”
inherently more scientific or logical term than had been applied to photography by the
t pictorialists, as they were trying to distance the medium from its mechanical connotations. Fels,
who was advocating a new style of photography, was open to the mechanical or scientific nature
of the medium. He calls a good photograph a document, which has connotations of authenticity.
Fels describes photographers as reporters, arguing that they find “truth in subjects,” “recreate
intense moments of life,” and produce “precious and living documents.” These descriptions
signify the importance of a photography that mirrors life, but also, like the snapshot for Benoist
and Chavance, indicate more than a dry transference of physical reality onto film. There is an
emotional quality, a poignancy, as Benoist would say, in Fels’ descriptions. For all three of these
authors the document seems to fall somewhere in between factual information and artistic
expression. Each argues that through the use of purely photographic technique, the photographer
reproduces more than just the physical world and conveys the inner life or energy of the subject.

Fels begins his discussion of the photographers presented in the Salon de l’Escalier with
Nadar. With this exhibition Fels was working to construct a new history for French
photography, essentially arguing that the works of Nadar and the recently rediscovered Atget
were historical precedence for the modern style and, in this way, shifting the focus from
pictorialism. He states, “[Nadar] sought the truth of his subject less in attributes than by
reproducing the particular character of each of his models.”42 In the nineteenth century, it was
typical to describe the career or personality of a sitter through costume and props. Here Fels
praises Nadar for being able to capture the character of a person without these extraneous items.
In Paul Nadar’s photograph of nineteenth-century poet Stéphane Mallarmé, the photographer
eliminated all immaterial information (Fig. 2.2).43 The close-cropped image shows only the
author’s face and a small portion of his upper body. The right half of Mallarmé face is
contoured by shadow and in direct contrast with the brighter, nondescript background. This
focus on the author’s visage and intense gaze seems to depict the complex and piercing intellect
of the poet, whom Dadaists and surrealists claimed as a forefather. Nadar’s photograph does not
convey the life of the sitter through the documentation of objects he used every day. Instead, as

43 This may be a photograph actually presented in the exhibition. Fels states, “There is a ‘Nadar style’ which the son
of the creator of the ‘gallery of famous men’ realized in his turn in the portraits of Stéphane Mallarmé, Dierx, and
Goncourt.” Fels, “The First Salon Indépendant de la Photographie,” 24. The poet and critic known as Stéphane
Mallarmé (1842 –1898) was a symbolist. Dadaism, Surrealism, and Futurism claimed him as a forefather.
Fels argues, through the photographic techniques of lighting and framing, Nadar was able to reveal the interiority of the sitter. The resemblance between the photography of Mallarmé by Nadar and Berenice Abbott’s portrait of the painter Marie Laurencin from 1925 is apparent (Figs. 2.2, 2.3). Similar to Nadar, Abbott places the sitter close to the picture plane. The strong lighting pushes her even further into the foreground of the image. This, in combination with the frontal view of her face, creates a strong feeling of intimacy. By including Laurencin’s hand, Abbott was able to evoke the spontaneity of personal expression even more effectively than Nadar. Fels argued that Abbott, along with d’Ora, Huene, and Albin Guillot, “give[s] us precious and living documents of elegant style and of the most beautiful faces in the world.” “Living documents,” a seemingly oxymoronic phrase—living implies change, while document denotes fixity—articulate that these photographers move beyond reproductions of physical likeness and impart the psychological presence and personality of their sitters through strictly photographic means.

Chavance describes the power of photographic portraits similarly and with an example from Laure Albin-Guillot, whom Fels also praises (Fig. 2.4). In fact, she is the only photographer found in all three shows. Chavance states, “What is more worthy of attention than a good very simple and very honest portrait?” He continues, “A beautiful photograph by Mme. Albin-Guillot…stands up to all of the painted portraits of any exhibition. Nothing is truer or more vivid than the figure of the sculptor [François] Pompon. It is not only the resemblance—a secondary quality—but it hints at his character. His eyes are sparkling with a mischievous kindness.”

Albin-Guillot’s photograph of the sculptor Pompon also eliminates extraneous information. The sitter directly engages with the lens. His face is turned toward the camera and

---

44 Fels, “The First Salon Indépendant de la Photographie,” 25. Phillips explains, “Madame d’Ora was the pseudonym of Dora Kallmuss (1881-1963, an Austrian portrait photographer who established a studio in Paris in 1925 and became well known for her celebrity and society portraits….George Hoyningen-Heune (1900-68), a Russian-born photographer, was a leading fashion photographer in Paris during the 1920s. Laure Albing-Guillot (d. 1962) was one of the most active French portraitists and photographic illustrators of the 1920s and 1930s.” Phillips, 26. Albin-Guillot is the only photographer in all three of the exhibitions under discussion, the 1927 and 1928 Salon international d’art photographique de paris and the Salon de l’Escalier of 1928.

45 Peter Barr, “The Reception and Sources of Berenice Abbott’s Paris Portrait Style, 1925-1929” History of Photography 34: 1 (February 2010): 51. Barr argues that Abbott participated in “her generation’s fascination with psychological naturalism.” Abbott credits her intuitive approach for the success she had in drawing out her sitters’ personalities.

46 Chavance, x. “Quoi de plus digne de retenir l’attention qu’un bon portrait tout simple et tout loyal?...Une belle photographie de Mme Albin-Guillot—celles surtout où elle n’abuse pas du fondu—tient tête à tous les portraits peints d’une exposition. Rien n’est plus vrai ni plus vivant que la figure du sculpteur Pompon. Elle n’est pas seulement ressemblante—qualité secondaire—mais elle laisse deviner le caractère. Les yeux sont pétillants de malicieuse bonté.”
his head leans slightly to the left, taking up the entire shot. His eyes stare out at the viewer with a gentle intensity in such a way that one understands Chavance’s description “mischevious kindness.” Chavance argues that photography, which is often thought of as directly reproducing reality, is better at revealing the inner life and character of a sitter than painting. It is both photography’s mechanical ability to reproduce a visual semblance of reality and its potential for personal expression, by both the photographer and sitter, that allow such revelation.

Though Benoist, Fels, and Chavance had similar ideas about the emotional and revelatory power of photography, there are visual differences in many of the photographs they praised. For example, Benoist cites several photographs that have the qualities of a snapshot: “It is only fair that the most difficult is the most prized. These are, for example The Laundry (la Lessive) by Mr. Bignon, in which a surprised gesture remains from a wide and rare sculptural arrangement of lighting. Such as The Crucifix by Mr. Bologna which is winged by the shadow of the roof.”

F. Bignon’s photograph La Lessive features a woman standing over a large tub in the midst of her washing (Fig. 2.5). She concentrates on her work, keeping her face turned away from the camera, giving the viewer a feeling that this image is authentic, taken instantaneously, like a snapshot. The strong lighting Benoist mentions comes from a bright square of sunlight cast from a window to the right, outside of the frame. It falls on the woman’s lower half and continues to the floor, leaving in shadow most of her body and the basin in the foreground. Nevertheless, besides the contrast created by the window light, the predominant visual effect is haziness. Clouds of steam rise from the wash bins obscuring the brick backdrop and the laundress’ facial features making this work more in the style of the pictorialists.

Bignon’s photograph seems much less modern when compared with one by Atget, interestingly from several decades earlier. In the photograph, titled Lampshade Vendor, from 1901, the man, carrying all his wares, stands alone in the middle of a cobbled street (Fig. 2.6). This image also has a snapshot quality—the man looks as though he has suddenly stopped, possibly to read a sign or enter the residence of a potential customer. But more than a feeling of instantaneousness, there is a sense that Atget has documented this moment completely. The clarity of detail and the range of tonal qualities make this an example of “photography dedicated

---

47 Benoist, x. “J’ai donc une certain prédilection pur la photographie qui garde un caractère émouvant et simplifié, tout en étant prise sur le vif. Il est bien juste que le plus difficile soit le plus prisé. Telles sont par exemple, “la Lessive” de M. Bignon, où un geste surpris reste cependant d’une largeur sculpturale et d’une rare entente de l’éclairage. Tel “le Crucifix” de M. Bologna à qui l’ombre du toit met des ailes.”

23
to two tones, white and black.” Though we do not know who he is beyond his profession, this man remains an individual. His physical person is described in minute detail, which works to evoke an inner personality or a life outside this photograph. This is contrast to the laundress who “lives” in a nondescript location. Her face is obscured both by the position of her head and the style of the image.

The second photograph Benoist praises is _The Cross (Il Crocifissio)_ by Achille Bologna (Fig. 2.7). This image features a crucifix underneath a tiny pediment surrounded by a stuccoed wall. Intense sunlight casts a shadow on the wall, as Benoist says, giving the impression that Christ has angelic wings. An example by Man Ray, _Magnolia_, possibly displayed at the _Salon de l’Escalier_ serves to illustrate that Bologna’s image seems closer to pictorialism than work by his contemporaries (Fig. 2.8). Both photographs are close cropped shots of singular objects, with strong lighting. Yet, after looking at the intensity of contrast in Man Ray’s work, Bologna’s shadow seems weak in comparison. The light in Bologna’s image emphasizes the subject matter, while the graphic quality of the patterns created by the shadow on the wicker basket in Man Ray’s photograph emphasizes form. Fels states, “Moreover it was Man Ray who rehabilitated amateur photography and who, using a modest portable camera like a standard Kodak, found a way to recreate moments of intense life.”

Man Ray’s photograph of a single blossom and the strong graphic impression of the image is a small moment of intense, distilled life.

Closer to Fels’ adherence to visual clarity are the opinions of Chavance. The precision of Fél’s document is reflected in the following statement by Chavance: “Moreover, contemporary trends decidedly incline towards a spare style….We condemn pointless detail, superfluous ornament, and the anecdote or the short story to limit ourselves to the great lines, great masses that are read all at once, which suggest without specifying.” For both Fels and Chavance visual clarity, including a simplification of subject matter and sharp focus, results in emotional clarity.

---

49 For more on Bologna, see the recent exhibition _Photo20esimo. Maestri della fotografia del XX secolo_, by Marco Antonetto and Bruno Corà, Museo d’arte (Lugano, Switzerland) (Silvana, 2008).
50 “Still lifes on display included compositions by Outerbridge, a close-up of a single fork by Kertész, a magnolia by Man Ray, part of his series of flowers little-known today, and also four ephemeral rayographs.” Sophie Lévy, _A Transatlantic avant-garde: American artists in Paris, 1918-1939_ (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 209.
51 Fels, “The First _Salon Indépendant de la Photographie_,” 25.
52 Chavance, ix. “Au surplus, les tendances contemporaines nous inclinent résolument vers un style dépouillé. Nous réprouvons le vain détail, l’ornement superflu, l’annecdote et l’historiette pour nous en tenir aux grandes lignes, aux grandes masses qui se lisent tout d’un coup, qui suggèrent sans préciser.”
that reveals more about the subject and has a greater impact on the viewer. Chavance describes Albert Renger-Patzsch’s photograph Baroque Staircase (Barocktreppe), featuring a close-cropped view of a cascading staircase in strong outdoor light, as “austerely noble” (Fig. 2.9). The viewer is struck by the stark contrast between light and dark and the rhythm of the dark curving lines of the stairs, crossed by bright white grout lines. This photograph has a similar visual force and clarity to Man Ray’s Magnolia. Benoist, Fels, and Chavance argue that choosing appropriate subject matter and simplifying the composition results in a striking, emotionally powerful photograph. However, only Fels and Chavance advocate images with strong clarity of focus.

These authors find that photography can visually imitate reality and through the use of photographic techniques unique to the medium, such as lighting, cropping, and framing, more cognitive impressions can be extracted. Mac Orlan’s conception of photography is related to these authors because he also emphasized the documentary functions of photography and argued that the medium causes a viewer to respond emotionally. But his opinions are also distinctly different because he conceives of photography as a literary medium. Like Fels, he uses the word document. He argues that documentary photography is literary “without knowing it, because it is no more than a document of contemporary life captured at the right moment by an author capable of grasping that moment.” This sounds much like the instantaneous snapshot. Nevertheless, it becomes clear that Mac Orlan’s construction of documentary is not the same as Fels’ document nor the snapshot of Benoist and Chavance.

In “The Literary Art of Imagination and Photography,” Mac Orlan argues that writers rarely create their own “literary energy” or inspiration. The source of their creativity is from incomplete forces of the world, “whether they surround a human figure, an ocean horizon, a

53 Ibid., viii-ix. “M. Renger-Patzsch se contente plus austèrement encore de la noble courbe dessinée par les degrés d’un perron monumental ou des combinaisons insitées qu’il tire du rapprochement de quelques verres à boire et de leur reflet sur une surface brillante.”

feeling, a prejudice, or any act precisely defined by law.” 55 A photographer, like a writer, documents these scraps and fragments found in the real world and transforms them into something else. For Mac Orlan, photographs are more than just images that resemble reality; they reveal forces of emotion hidden in the world.

Like the other authors, Mac Orlan privileges the role of the photographer. He and Fels praise many of the same photographers. Mac Orlan states, “For those who look for the often subtle details of modern society, photography is an incomparable revelation. People like Man Ray, Kertész, Berenice Abbott, and others, in their portraits, give a totally new meaning to the interpretation of the lens. At this moment photography is the most accomplished art, capable of realizing the fantastic and all that is curiously inhuman in the atmosphere that surrounds us, and even in man’s very personality.” 56 Documentation involves the interpretation of the photographer. Furthermore, the medium has the ability to actualize previously unrecognizable emotions that are present in ourselves and in our environment. It is not the amateur photographer using photographic techniques that produce haunting and powerful images. Instead, it is the combination of the writer-as-photographer’s mind, especially adept at transfixed certain details, and the revelatory nature of the medium of photography itself. He privileges the medium and the talents of the photographer, like these other authors, but not for the same reasons.

All of these authors argue that photography is a unique medium that should not emulate the plastic arts. The fundamental nature of photography is in contrast to the plastic arts precisely because it reproduces reality in some form—it documents. Benoist, Fels, and Chavance believe that skilled photographers that employ purely photographic techniques, such as framing, cropping, and lighting, produce images that profoundly affect the viewer with their emotional power. A sense of immediacy, spontaneity, and, by extension, authenticity, is important to all of these critics. Clarity is of particular importance to Fels and Chavance. Both the simplification of

56 Ibid., 29. A similar idea is expressed in his article “La Photographie et le Fantastique Social” from November 1928: “Et c'est ainsi qu'apparaît l'art photographique : un révélateur d'une puissance merveilleuse. J'ai déjà dit par ailleurs en quelle estime je tenais des artistes comme Mme Bérénice Abbott et comme Man Ray, le plus audacieux de tous, comme Kertész, comme Mme Germaine Krull et comme certains anonymes de la grande presse, qui, ceux-là, sont les plus saisissants témoins d'une époque. Ces témoignages, s'ils ne valent pas mieux, valent tout autant qu'un plat de pommes ou d'oranges quand le génie d'un artiste n'intervient pas afin d'accorder un « je ne sais quoi » de surnaturel ou de fantastique à des pommes ou à des oranges. Il ne s'agit pas, dans ce cas, d'imposer un élément dramatique à d'honnêtes fruits qui ne le supportereraient pas.” Mac Orlan, “La Photographie et le Fantastique Social,” 413.
subject matter and the use of sharp focus raise the emotional impact of the photograph, while remaining true to photography’s white and black nature. Mac Orlan, as a writer of contemporary fiction, has a slightly different view on photography. He conceives of the photographer as a writer and photography as a literary medium. His unique conception of the power of literature to extract and reveal the hidden anxiety present in the world around us is applied to photography. Though each writer has slightly different take on photography, they are united in the idea that photography has the ability to reveal emotional truths that cannot be equated directly to the physical world in front of us. In the following chapter, I will further discuss the ways critics, specifically Fels, Mac Orlan, and Robert Desnos, connected literature and photography to emphasize the uniqueness of the medium.
CHAPTER THREE
VISUAL POETRY: PHOTOGRAPHS AS POEMS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS AS POETS

In 1928, Florent Fels wrote, “Steel is transforming our landscapes. Forests of pylons replace age-old trees. Blast furnaces supplant hills. Of this new look of the world here are few elements caught in fine photographs, specimens of a new romanticism. Germaine Krull is the Desbordes-Valmore of this lyricism; her photographs are sonnets with sharp and luminous rhymes. What an orchid, this Farcot engine, and what disturbing insects those regulator mechanisms!”

In this passage, from the preface of Métal, a book by Germaine Krull featuring sixty-four photographs of industrial fragments taken in Holland, France, and Germany, Fels finds the photographer’s “fine” work evidence of a “new romanticism.” Equating Krull with the famous nineteenth-century romantic poet Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, known for poetry that evoked the beauty of nature, Fels calls her photographs “sonnets” and likens her mechanical, industrial subject matter to organisms found in nature.

According to Fels, in the modern world nature is replaced with the mechanical and the industrial. Similarly, the nineteenth-century romantic poet is replaced by the twentieth-century photographer who “writes” her sonnets with


the visual medium of photography. Her images are rhythmical and energetic, the visual equivalent of lyrical poetry.

Fels was not the only critic to make these kinds of comparisons in 1928. In an article on the recently rediscovered photographer Eugène Atget, Robert Desnos stated, “For thirty years, Atget has photographed all of Paris with the marvelous objective of creating a dream and a surprise. These are not the albums of an artist left to the libraries, but the visions of a poet, bequeathed to poets.... He has seen all with an eye which well deserves the terms sensitive and modern.” Though discussing photographs from the turn of the twentieth century, Desnos finds them modern and, like Fels, calls the photographer a poet. Mac Orlan argues that “if our age leaves on the literary history of our time the very clear impression of a new school dedicated to European Romanticism and social fantasy, and produces lasting works, we will have to add to the names of writers the names of draftsman-writers like George Grosz and Masereel, and those of photographer-poets like Man Ray and Kertész, the newcomer.” Like Fels, Mac Orlan talks about a new romanticism within literary history. He equates both artists and photographers with the literary arts and, more specifically, connects writing with drawing and poetry with photography and argues that these figures are key to developing a new literary history.

The terms poetry and lyricism have long been applied the visual arts, dating back at least to the eighteenth century. Nineteenth-century critics typically equated poetry and lyricism with intense individuality and the expression of self through painterly images. Some of these associations were carried over into the twentieth century. Lyricism, or significant emotional engagement by the artist, was typically identified by thick paint, visible brushwork, and slightly

61 George Grosz was a Weimar Republic artist most famous for his drawing satirizing the German government. He is also associated with the Berlin dada movement. For more on Grosz see the recent exhibition catalogue George Grosz: Berlin—New York. Ralph Jentsch, George Grosz: Berlin—New York (London, Thames & Hudson, 2008); Frans Masereel was a Flemish artist who during the interwar period lived and worked in Berlin, becoming friends with Grosz. He is most well known for his woodcuts. For more information on Masereel see David A Beronä, Wordless Books: The Original Graphic Novels (New York, Abrams, 2008) and Neil H. Donahue, A Companion to the Literature of German Expressionism (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005).
distorted forms. This description recalls pictorialist photography, the kind that emulated painting, which the critics of 1928, like Fels and Pierre Mac Orlan, specifically rejected as I discussed in chapter one. According to poet and critic Pierre Reverdy (1889-1960), a true artwork is divorced from mimetic concerns and is the result of poetic thought, a pure creation of the mind. A pure artwork succeeds in creating a genuine aesthetic emotion in the viewer; this is what he called lyricism. I argue that these critics would contest Reverdy’s definition of lyricism in relation to photography. Photography had the ability to be both mimetic and a conduit for subjective expression.

As I discussed in the two previous chapters, critics in 1928 were trying to define what modern photography should be and attempting to separate new images from the pictorialism that, according to them, had dominated artistic photography of the previous decades. Interestingly, in rejecting artistic photography, Fels and Mac Orlan used such terms as poetic and lyrical, which one would generally associate with pictorialism. Also of note is the fact that the critics Luc Benoist and René Chavance did not apply these terms to photographs. Robert Desnos, neither primarily an art critic nor specifically associated with photography, did connect the photographer with the poet. His association with the Surrealists adds another layer of meaning to his discussion of Atget. Poetry was used in imprecise ways and reflected multiple meanings specific to each author, but, generally, critics defined poetic images as either revealing the aesthetic appeal of industry and the modern city or encouraging the discovery of the fantastic within one’s own mind. Fels, Mac Orlan, and Desnos praised the photographer’s ability to imbue seemingly mundane things with mystery and romanticism and equated the resulting images with poetry. Discussing the image as poem and the photographer as poet provided a way to distinguish the medium not only from the photography that came before but also from all other media.

Often critics’ descriptions of modern photography were exercises in poetry themselves. Occasionally, one can decipher some ideas about photographic composition in their words. For example, in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, Fels states, “Her photographs are sonnets with sharp and luminous rhymes.” This phrase evokes aggressive, metallic machinery with its repetitious parts and movement that create visual rhythm. It also implies a certain amount of framing and cropping that emphasizes this kind of rhythm. The dramatic upward

---

63 Ibid., 48.
64 Pierre Reverdy is typically known for his contribution to formalism. He argued that a work of art was pure and autonomous. Ibid., 24-5. For more on Reverdy see Grant, 25-31.
angle and the close cropping of one of Krull’s photographs of the Eiffel Tower from *Métal* emphasize the visual rhythm that can be found in the construction of the structure (Fig. 3.1). Nevertheless, critics are not interested in specifically defining “rules” of photography, unlike Moholy-Nagy in Germany, for example. More important to French critics is an emotive, intangible quality, alternately called *poetry* or *lyricism*, present in good photography. This quality is associated with subject matter and, to use Mac Orlan’s term, the ability of the photographer-poet, who can transform the subject matter to reveal the aesthetics of the modern world or encourage imagination in the viewer.

One way in which the critics’ abstract idea of a photograph as a poem was translated into concrete visual terms is through subject matter. Though these critics never expressly say what is appropriate subject matter for modern photography, two categories can be discerned, the mechanical or industrial and contemporary modern life, particularly images of the city. Florent Fels puts particular emphasis on modern subject matter. He writes, “The great cities of Europe strike us as dilapidated and anachronistic. Provincial towns with their avenues to promenade in, their pleasant fountains, a bandstand, suddenly take on an antiquated look. Meanwhile the lyricism of our time puts its name down in streams of cement, in cathedrals of steel.” Again, Fels argues that it is no longer nature or traditional architecture that moves modern minds. Instead, inspiration comes from distinctly modern materials, like concrete and steel. In his review of the *Salon de l’Escalier*, Georges Charensol stated, “With Germaine Krull we approach mechanical lyricism, that of industrial landscapes, boats, metal constructions.”65 Both Fels and Charensol equate lyricism, or poetic, inspired expression, with industrial subject matter. Even more revealing is Fels’ statement: “The industrial activity of our time presents us with sights to which we are still unaccustomed. Their newness grips and frightens us as the great phenomena of nature do. In their turn they generate a state of mind to which painters and poets sometimes pay tribute.”66 Here Fels reveals that modern subject matter is fundamental to a poetic state of mind. Christopher Phillips argues that Fels finds Krull’s photographs compelling, not only because of their unusual perspectives and graphic qualities but also because of their detection of a “modern sublime.”67 The beauty and power of nature has traditionally provided viewers with the awe-

---

inspiring, transcendent feelings, as well as fear, typically associated with the sublime. But in an age when nature is being replaced with machines, industry provides this kind of response in a viewer. The appropriate subject matter allows photography, without imitating the plastic arts in form, to represent an artistic or poetic state of mind and produce it in the viewer.

Fels does not limit appropriate subject matter to the industrial. In Métal, Fels argues that the “great cities of Europe strike us as dilapidated and anachronistic.” In contrast, in explaining the allure of Atget photographs for the Salon de l’Escalier, he moves to the opposite extreme, finding beauty in nostalgic views of the city. He states:

Atget’s name is little known to the general public. There were only a few of us, writers and painters, familiar with his works and with the strange dwelling of this surprising man who sold, at a hundred sous the print, the most beautiful still lifes and the most hallucinating views of Paris…he belonged to that now vanished world which knew the Boulevard du Crime, the Quinze-Vingts, the Paris Revolution, the cheap bath houses, the Funambules, and Tortoni’s….It is perhaps this Romanticism that we rediscover and love in his work, work of pure poetry through which we can glimpse the smile divine Gérard de Nerval, that other lover of the mysterious beauties of Paris. Here romantic, poetic photographs represent a past life and a world “now vanished” and characterized by mystery, gore, sideshow entertainment, and places of former glory. This is seemingly in direct contrast to the “modern sublime” or technological sublime, as it is called today, which reveres current, modern technology. Fels calls the scenes in Atget’s photographs “hallucinating” and “mysterious,” however, offering the same feelings of fear and awe of approaching the unknowable. Compare these sentiments to Atget’s

68 Lap-Chuen Tsang explains, “The concept of the sublime is an important concept in aesthetics much discussed in the eighteenth century….Burke, the most influential writer on the sublime before Kant, characterizes the experience of the sublime as some kind of intense delight acquired upon our escape from the privations of the condition, like utmost danger, or suffering and death. To give the concept a theoretical grounding, Kant draws our attention to the transcendent moral and religious reality we catch sight of in the experience of the sublime, though he denies any direct knowledge of it, arguing for a very rigid, universal form of cognition, cross-culturally identical for all human beings.” Lap-Chuen, Tsang, The Sublime: Groundwork Towards a Theory (Rochester, NY, University of Rochester, 1998), xiv-xv.


photograph *Metalworker’s Shop, passage de la Réunion* from 1911 (Fig. 3.2). The photograph features a narrow cobblestone street. The old French buildings press together, up and over the narrow path. A male figure stands to the right of the image, dwarfed by the scene. The rough finishes and shadowed alley makes one think of a bygone era. The bright white light at the top of the image almost dissolves the distance, evoking an irretrievable past. Upon closer inspection, two other figures are in the image, one in the window above the standing man and another at the end of the street. They almost merge with their surroundings, and like their environment, they are lost to the past. As he did with Krull, Fels compares Atget to a famous nineteenth-century romantic poet. The poetry of Gérard de Nerval, the pseudonym for Gérard Labrunie, is characterized by a passion for the spirit world, which is perhaps why Fels connects him with Atget and photographs of a Paris that no longer exists.

Similarly, Desnos emphasizes the subject matter as the source of poetry in photography. He states, “Atget is now no more. His ghost, I was going to say ‘negative,’ must haunt the innumerable poetic places of the capital.” In his description of Atget’s work, he states, “Without ever sacrificing to the picturesque or to the merely anecdotal, Eugène Atget has focused life. His work is composed of many series comprising tens of thousands of photographs: bourgeois homes, homes of working men, homes of luxury including that of Mlle. Sorel, the booths of street fairs, grocery store windows, barbershops, stairs stocks of street merchants, etc.” Desnos lists Atget’s subject matter, yet the success he attributes to the photographer lies in his ability to condense scenes of everyday life into something essential, without falling prey to the trivial. For example, a photograph by Atget, *Chiffonier (Ragpicker)*, features a man pulling a cart stacked high with bursting burlap sacks (Fig. 3.3). Ragpickers were notorious for being fiercely independent, living on the fringes of French society. This man, going about his daily task, is central to the scene; in fact, he seems to be the only man on the street. This

71 Desnos, Ibid., 16.
compositional emphasis individualizes him. He conveys the universal dignity of man. Desnos goes on to say that, “I should like to see an edition of Fantomâs brought out (and someday someone must decide to publish again this epic of contemporary life), and it should be illustrated by Atget’s photographs.” Fantomâs was a detective crime fiction series by Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre appearing in 1911. Forty three volumes were published in which the mastermind criminal Fantomâs performed mystifying feats within the city of Paris. Surrealists like Desnos became fascinated with the series. Desnos emphasizes contemporary life. His phrase “epic of contemporary life” seems to apply both to Fantomâs, including the length of the series and the “heroic” tales it contained, and to the monumental nature of daily life, which Atget was an expert at capturing.

Mac Orlan’s idea of poetic subject matter is complex. In his article “Literary art of Imagination and Photography,” as the title notes, he compares photography to the imagination and argues that photography is essentially a literary medium. He states,

It is enough to look at any daguerreotype to experience the creative force of which literature is an incomparable conductor….Phonograph, photograph, all the graphs, after being thrown far from delicate, sensitive existences, are reinstated in the lives of those who marvel at seeing and hearing. They take a unique revenge in restoring to the things whose limits they mechanically reproduce the presence of that universal mystery of which everything possesses a part that confers on it both its personality and its interest in the world.

His examples do not exactly convey what photograph’s subject matter should be. Instead, his subject matter seems to be the poetry of revelation. Every object has a certain amount of mystery and the literary medium of photography reveals this to the viewer. He goes

---

73 The photographer Atget, working at the turn of the twentieth-century, was concerned with types and purposefully categorized figures this way in his collections. Nevertheless, as scholar Maria Morris Hambourg notes, Atget was used in different ways by future authors.


75 Desnos, “Spectacles of the Street—Eugène Atget,” 17. Phillips notes, “Fantomâs was the mysterious hero of a pulp book serial by Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain which was popular in France before World War I. His adventures set in contemporary Paris, formed the basis for h film director Louis Feuillade’s serial films of 1913-14. Both the written and the filmed exploits of Fantomâs were extravagantly praised by the surrealists.” Phillips, 17.

on to describe an evening he spent in London in which something about the exact moment inspired him to take several photographs. He states, “They were bad and they gave me marvelous prints.” To his surprise, when viewing one of the prints, the most striking element was a single detail, unnoticed by him while taking the photograph. The entire scene called to him as he was taking the images, but what resulted in poetry was an unexpected detail.

When Mac Orlan is more specific, he is at the same time broad. For example, he writes that the “most beautiful compositions contain...traces of the sentimental activity of speed, light, and woman, which are the three most appropriate elements to express our anxiety over the end of Europe, and perhaps of the world.” The “sentimental activity” that is revealed by photography are the anxieties and emotions that are left by people passing through the world. He also states, “We must contemplate these documents of social activity of our time and stretch our thoughts to their extreme limits, so that we can search the thousand faces that make up a crowd, captured by a lens, for the traces of our own end, that is, our own anguish.” Ultimately, good photography reveals the hidden mystery in the world or reflects our own anxieties about a rapidly changing society. There is no concrete subject matter. Mac Orlan’s photography is a melancholic poetry that reveals all the inner fears and stresses of humanity, while Fels’ is more open to the sheer wonder of the world, and Desnos, as a writer with Surrealist connections, is concerned with constructing a world of dreams in the midst of developing modernity.

A good photographer is a poet. Perhaps these critics could agree on this statement, but they would not agree on what exactly makes the photographer a poet. Their conceptions of the photographer as poet are connected to their ideas concerning poetic subject matter, as previously discussed. For Fels, the most important thing is subject matter. A photographer must have the ability to convey what is poetic about the subject itself, modern or nostalgic. For Desnos, however, the eye of the photographer is paramount. A photographer-poet has the ability to see the poetic that exists in the world already and, through photography, places his vision, his soul, onto the scene. Mac Orlan is primarily concerned with the medium itself being literary.

---

77 Ibid., 29.
78 Ibid., 30.
photographer is a conduit of that medium; he or she must be interested in looking and observing subtle details.

Though Fels gives agency to the photographer, photographic poetry still occurs on the outside of the camera. There is no magical transformation with either the spirit of the photographer or the object as with Desnos and Mac Orlan. For example, Fels claims, “What Man Ray brought to photography was the ability to give a plastic feeling to inanimate things and to create dramatic portraits with faces entirely devoid of lyrical expression, using nothing but judiciously employed lighting.” The critic praises Man Ray for his ability to alter the viewer’s perception, seemingly giving life to inanimate objects and subtracting life from individuals, through lighting. This is a physical alteration of the subject matter before a photograph is taken. Fels also states, “Kertész is a marvelous creator of poems, and his metaphors are humble objects, the skies, trees, and roofs of Paris.”

Similarly, Fels acknowledges the photographer’s skill in using physical subject matter to compose his images. Because of his indirect emphasis on the physicality of subject matter, one can infer that Fels would argue that a photographer-poet is skilled in using photographic techniques, like cropping, framing, lighting, and camera angles. André Kertész’s photograph of a fork exhibited at the Salon de l’Escalier features a metal fork delicately placed on the edge of white dish (Fig. 3.4). The close cropping alters the scale of the everyday utensil, making the fork seem monumental. Both the dish and the fork cast dark shadows resulting in a vivid contrast of tone. Similar to the “skies, trees, and roofs of Paris,” the fork is an ordinary or “humble” object that Kertész uses to create poetic images.

Desnos even more forcefully promotes the importance of the photographer in creating poetic images. He begins his article on Atget by talking about the “gods” of science. He states, “There is a modern Olympus where, in the midst of scientific instruments, certain modern sorcerers sit gravely—Niépce, for example, and Daguerre, Nadar, Ader, Sauvage, and others, whom Jules Verne, Santos-Dumont, Voisin, and the two Lumières will join. However, it is not there that I see Eugene Atget, in the relative immortality of the encyclopedias.” Desnos lists early pioneers of photography, aviation, film, and engineers, as well as the author Jules Verne. Desnos argues that all of these historical figures, including famous photographers like Nadar, are

---

80 “Still lifes on display included compositions by Outerbridge, a close-up of a single fork by Kertész, a magnolia by Man Ray, part of his series of flowers little-known today, and also four ephemeral rayographs.” Sophie Lévy, A Transatlantic avant-garde: American artists in Paris, 1918-1939 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 209.
essentially scientists.81 Atget is not a scientist, nor, interestingly, is he an artist: “These are not the albums of an artist left to the libraries, but the visions of a poet, bequeathed to poets.”82 His use of the term visions elevates Atget’s work to something beyond documents, to something surpassing art. Returning to a quote used in the beginning of this chapter, Desnos argues that “He has seen all with an eye which well deserves the terms sensitive and modern…his viewpoint of the world, determined by an apparently mechanical medium, is also the vision of his soul.”83 “Apparently” means both obviously and seemingly. Therefore, photography is certainly a mechanical medium, making it all the more interesting that Atget, through this medium, also presents a reflection of his soul. Alternatively, it is questionable that photography is considered a mechanical medium because it has the ability to convey such interiority. Either way, Desnos privileges Atget over photography as the creator of interior fantasy. He states, “The city dies. Its ashes are scattered. But the dream capital, created by Atget, raises its unconquerable ramparts under a gelatin sky. The maze of streets pursues its course like a river. And the crossroads serve always for pathetic rendezvous.”84 Atget is the architect of the “dream capital” of Paris. Unlike the purely mechanical skills that Fel’s promotes, Desnos praises Atget’s almost magical skill to take physical subject matter and transform it into visions and dreams.

More than either Fels or Desnos, Mac Orlan privileges the medium of photography as the primary agent in revealing poetry hidden in modern society. Nevertheless, he does argue that the photographer, as a writer, has the intuition to focus on the subject matter that will reveal the mystery and the anxiety present in all things. Mac Orlan argues that there are two types of photography—plastic, or artistic, and documentary, or literary. He explains, “This second category [documentary] is literary without knowing it, because it is no more than a document of contemporary life captured at the right moment by an author capable of grasping that moment. The artist sometimes has to search for six hours to find the unique second when life, in some way, is ‘caught in the act.’” A photographer-poet is patient and finds interest in what the rest of the world ignores. Mac Orlan argues that “an illustrator and an imaginative writer think and are stimulated in the same way. They can seek their inspiration in the same scraps or in the same

81 Phillips, 17, n. 1. “Joseph Nicéphore Niepce (1765-1833) was an early French experimenter in photography. Clément Ader (1841-1926) was a French engineer and inventor; Alberto Santos-Dumont (1873-1932) and Gabriel Voisin (1880-1973) were pioneers of aviation. August Lumière (1862-1954) and his brother Louis Lumière (1864-1948), inventor of early cinema technology, made some of the first motion pictures in the 1890s.”
83 Ibid., 16-17.
84 Ibid., 17.
cerebral and plastic riches.” Unlike Fels’ photographer-poet, who deals with the monumental, or Desnos’ version, who constructs the fantastic, Mac Orlan argues that true illustrators work with subtle, hidden details that already exist and then are amazed at what is revealed through the medium of photography. Though each of these critics had a different understanding of photography, each equated modern photographers with the poet and their images with poetry to underscore the importance of photography in the modern world.

CONCLUSION

Scholarship argues that the Salon de l’Escalier played a pivotal role in introducing modern photography to France. While this is true, the emphasis on this exhibition’s importance has obscured the transitory nature of the period. Modern photography did not arrive instantaneously. In 1927, Benoist, associated with the traditional annual salon, the Salon International d’art photographique de Paris, voiced his frustrations with pictorialism. This annual salon is cited as Fels’ primary reason for organizing the Salon de l’Escalier. That Benoist articulated an interest in modern photography before this influential exhibition signifies that the transition from pictorialist to modern photography was a complicated series of events.

The Salon de l’Escalier and the writings associated with it were not the only cries for a new style of photography at this time; however, they were the most influential. The organizers of this exhibition were publishers of and writers for mainstream journals. Fels published L’Art Vivant, Georges Charensol was the editor of Les Nouvelles littéraires, and Lucien Vogel began publishing Vu in 1928. In addition to organizing this show, Fels, Mac Orlan, and Vogel were active in disseminating and promoting modern photography for many years after this event. Their support of modern photography had a great impact on public reception of this new style. Vogel used innovative publishing techniques that combined text and images in new ways. He employed many of the photographers from the Salon de l’Escalier, including Kertész, Krull, and Man Ray, to take images for the photo-essays in his magazine. Fels wrote the text for many of these essays, for example, “Les mystères de la foire aux puces” of 1928. He also wrote the preface for two of Germaine Krull’s photobooks: Métal (1928) and 100 x Paris (1929). Mac Orlan published one of his most famous essays on photography, “Elements of a Social Fantastic,” in Le Crapouillet in March of 1929. Like Fels, he introduced several photobooks. An essay by Mac Orlan opened the famous catalogue Atget Photographie de Paris, published in 1930. In 1931, he contributed to Photographes Nouveaux Germaine Krull. He also introduced Paris vu par André Kertész from 1934.86 After the Salon de l’Escalier, these publishers, authors,

---

and photographers worked hand in hand to promote modern photography. Before this moment, however, the trajectory of photography had not been decided. This is why my discussion of the debates surrounding photography in 1927 and 1928 is a pertinent contribution.

In the late 1920s, French photography critics began to challenge the dominant influence of pictorialism. To critics Luc Benoist, Florent Fels, Pierre Mac Orlan, and René Chavance, pictorialist photography represented an elitist, staid form of art that had lost its relevancy. Each of these authors was grappling with what a new style of photography should look like and what that style signified. Indeed, modern photography was defined primarily through comparing and contrasting a new style of photography to the tradition of pictorialism.

Through a close analysis of their writings, I have been able to discern that, while there were distinct differences between their approaches, in general these critics advocated on behalf of a photography that rejected the artifice they associated with pictorialism. In the place of artifice, critics wanted both visual and emotional clarity. A sense of immediacy, spontaneity, and, by extension, authenticity, was important to all of these critics. These qualities were encompassed in words they used such as document, snapshot, and poetry. Overall, critics found that pictorialism was better suited to a past era and were looking for a fresh approach to photography that better reflected an experience of the modern world.

APPENDIX

IMAGES

Figure 1.1. Otto-Kurt Vogelang, *La Mediante. XXIIe Salon international d’art photographique de paris* (Braun & Cie, 1927), p. 20.
Figure 1.2. Rembrandt Van Rijn, *Seated Beggar and His Dog*, etching, 1631. 108 x 81 mm. Retrospective conversion of The Illustrated Bartsch (Abaris Books) by Artstor.
Figure 1.3. René Lamaree, *Bouleaux. XXIIe Salon international d’art photographique de Paris* (Braun & Cie, 1927), p. 29.
Figure 1. 4. Gustave Caillbotte, *Sailing Boats at Argenteuil*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 2’1 ½” x 1’9 ¾”. Musée d’Orsay.
Figure 2.1. Johan Helders, “The Only Two. XXIIe Salon international d’art photographique de paris (Braun & Cie, 1927), p. 23.

45
Figure 2.2. Paul Nadar, Portrait of French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842 - 1898), 1895.
Figure 2.3. Berenice Abott, *Marie Laurencin*, 1925, silver gelatin print from a glass negative. © Berenice Abbott/Commerce Graphics, NYC.
Figure 2.4. Laure Albin-Guillot, *Portrait de Pompon. XXIIIe Salon international d’art photographique de Paris* (Braun & Cie, 1928), p. 28.
Figure 2.5. F. Bignon, *La Lessive. XXIe Salon international d’art photographique de paris* (Braun & Cie, 1927), p. 3.
Figure 2.7. Achille Bologna, *Il Crocifisso. XXIIe Salon international d’art photographique de Paris* (Braun & Cie, 1927), p. 4.
Figure 2.8 Man Ray, Magnolia Blossom, 1926. Gelatin silver print, 11 5/8 x 9 in. Source: Christie's, Sale 1893/ Lot 240.
Figure 2.10. Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Barocktreppe. XXIIIe Salon international d’art photographique de paris* (Braun & Cie, 1928), p. 46.
Figure 3.2. Eugène Atget, Metalworker’s Shop, passage de la Réunion, 1911. Albumen print, 8½ x 7 in. ©J. Paul Getty Trust.
Figure 3.3. Eugène Atget, *Chiffonier (Ragpicker)*, 1899-1901. Albumen Print 8 3/4 x 7 1/8 in. For his “documents for artists” collection. ©J. Paul Getty Trust.
Figure 3.4. André Kertész, *Fork or La Forchette*, 1928. Data from University of California, San Diego. Artstor Collections.


“Exposition de photographie (Galerie de l’Epoque).” *Cahiers d’art,* no. 8 (1928).


___, *Atget Photographie de Paris*. New York City: E. Weyhe.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Morgan Leigh Middleton was born on August 6, 1987 to John and Tyra Middleton. She received a Bachelor of Arts in Art History with a minor in Architecture from Tulane University in 2009, where she graduated magna cum laude. In the spring of 2009 she received the Outstanding Art History Major Award from Tulane University. In the fall of 2009, Morgan began her graduate studies at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida. While at FSU, Morgan received the I. N. Winbury Award for the Best Graduate Student Paper in the spring of 2010 and served as the Art History Association’s president from the fall of 2010 through the spring of 2011. This thesis is part of her completion of a Master of Arts at FSU.