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Abstract: The examination of still/motion has been a longstanding subject within the realm of art history, but its significance has gained greater prominence in the field of film studies since the 1970s. However, it appears that the focus has predominantly been on the aspect of motion, overshadowing the exploration of stillness. This paper examines Gregory Crewdson's use of stillness to create narrative and emotional effects in his photography, specifically in the series An Eclipse of Moths. Drawing on theories of still/motion and intermediality, and situating his work within the broader context of contemporary photography, the paper demonstrates how Crewdson's work reflects and contributes to debates and trends within the medium. Crewdson's static lens captures moments of emotional and psychological intensity, offering a remarkable exploration of the power and complexities of photography in narrating. First, this paper delves into how Crewdson blurs the boundaries between photography and cinema, and the consequent impact on the narrative power of his photographs. Second, it explores the role of cinematic techniques, such as lighting, composition, and staging, in enhancing the narrative quality of Crewdson's photographic works. Finally, it examines how Gregory Crewdson employs stillness and stasis to convey narrative depth and evoke emotional resonance in his photography.

Keywords: intermediality, still/motion, narrative, lacunae, Gregory Crewdson, photography

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Narrative, Stasis, and Intermediality in the Photography of Gregory Crewdson

1. Introduction

"For the 'stilled' art of Gregory Crewdson isn't a mystery to be solved but a mystery to be experienced."

(Joyce Carol Oates)

The examination of still/motion has been a longstanding subject within the realm of art history, but its significance has gained greater prominence in the field of film studies since the 1970s, as noted by Røssaak (11). However, it appears that the focus has predominantly been on the aspect of motion, overshadowing the exploration of stillness. There are various factors that may have contributed to this disparity, one of which is the perception that photography, as a medium, is inherently devoid of narrative depth, lacking in time, meaning, and fictional qualities (Baetens 143-144). Consequently, film, or the moving image, has often been regarded as having a distinct advantage over photography, garnering more attention in scholarly analysis. While film has superseded photography as the dominant visual medium in the 20th century, this shift has resulted in a cinematic turn and a decline in the popularity and appreciation of still images and photography in general. This trend can be attributed, in part, to photography's perceived limitations as mentioned earlier, as well as to the preference for motion and speed that align with the demands of a capitalist society. It is important to acknowledge that photography does not neatly align with these capitalist tendencies. Consequently, cinema, with its emphasis on motion, has taken precedence, resulting in a cinematic turn rather than a photographic one. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that the foundation of the moving image is composed of individual still images, with 24 frames meticulously merged together per second.

This paper examines Gregory Crewdson's use of stillness to create narrative and emotional effects in his photography, specifically in the series *An Eclipse of Moths*. Drawing on theories of stillness and motion and situating his work within the broader context of contemporary photography, the paper demonstrates how his work reflects and contributes to debates and trends within the medium. Crewdson's static lens captures moments of emotional and psychological intensity, offering a remarkable exploration of the power and complexities of photography in narrating and meaning-making. First, this paper delves into the ways in which Crewdson blurs the boundaries between photography and cinema, and the consequent impact on the narrative power of his photographs. Second, it explores the role of cinematic techniques, such as lighting, composition, and staging, in enhancing the narrative quality of Crewdson's photographic works. Finally, it examines how Gregory Crewdson employs stillness and stasis to convey narrative depth and evoke emotional resonance in his photography.

In addition, it is important to introduce Gregory Crewdson and his approach to photography. Crewdson is a contemporary photographer recognized for his elaborately staged and cinematic depictions of American small-town life. Through his work, he delves into themes

of isolation, detachment, and the darker side of the American psyche. His photographs have gained international acclaim, being exhibited in major museums and galleries worldwide, which indicates his position as a highly influential figure among his contemporaries. Crewdson's distinctive technique and style involve the meticulous construction of cinematic tableaus, employing intricate sets and artificial lighting. Notably, his creative process encompasses a collaborative effort, engaging a team of skilled professionals such as set designers, makeup artists, and cinematographers. Each element within his compositions is carefully selected and positioned to evoke maximum impact, resulting in visually immersive and richly detailed images.

2. Intermediality and Still/Motion Field

Intermediality theory explores the connections and interactions between different media forms within an artwork. In recent decades, the theory has gained significant popularity, reflecting the increasing remediation of images and the growing interplay between various media in production and consumption. Pethő, a prominent scholar in film studies and intermediality, states that "[t]he benefit of thinking cinema in terms of intermediality consists, however, not only in a more flexible way of looking at the changes occurring within the mediality of cinema, but also . . . in the way in which the poetics of cinema and specific stylistic effects can be described" (2). While Pethő's analysis primarily focuses on cinema, it is crucial to recognize the relevance of stylistic effects in photography as well. Thus, a reciprocal examination of the relationship between photography and intermediality also needs attention.

Verstraete defines intermediality as encompassing "the crossovers and interrelations between the arts and the media" and highlighting "the linkages within and between the various media that have intensified with the arrival of the digital (hyper)medium" (7). How does this definition apply to photography in the present context? Photography engages in complex relationships both with other mediums and within its own domain, resulting in an intermedial practice. However, this does not diminish the impact of the still image. As George Baker suggests in his article "Photography's Expanded Field," the traditional forms of photography may be disappearing, but the photographic effect remains and has expanded into a new altered form, which must be mapped and deconstructed to understand its complex and self-evident effects (123). Consequently, the current state of photography, characterized by intermedial practices, may be interpreted as a moment of crisis due to the emergence of novel forms, definitions, and logics that demand examination.

The interpretation of the ontology and relationship between still and moving images encompasses various approaches. One such perspective is the classical view or the apparatus theory, which argues that "there is no such a thing as the moving image, neither in photographic, celluloid-based moving images nor in post-photographic video or digital images" (Elsaesser 117). According to this theory, motion is an illusion created by a succession of still images, a construct influenced by the limitations of human perception. In contrast, the Heraclitean view, as called by Elsaesser, argues that "the cinema (as moving image) is not an illusion, simulation or imitation of life but its approximation, by other (mechanical, mathematical) means" (Elsaesser 118). These opposing viewpoints offer distinct vantage

points for comprehending the intersections and dynamics within the realm of still and motion imagery.

The perpetual interplay and dynamic between still and moving images have remained consistently significant. I contend that there exists an inseparable relationship between photography and cinema, in which photography is the foundational element and origin of cinema. The moving image relies on the inherent qualities of stillness and the temporal encapsulation within photographs. Accordingly, as noted by Røssaak, "the still image was the hidden or even repressed basis behind the industrial illusion of cinematic motion" (11). Roland Barthes also "comes close to asserting that the essence of cinema is found in the still" (Røssaak 14).

With technological advancements and the evolution of mediums, the intersections between stillness and motion have grown increasingly intricate yet conspicuous. This is exemplified by the utilization of various techniques in contemporary moving image artworks, such as stops, still frames, freeze effects, slow-motion effects, stuttering, and deliberate delays, as highlighted by Røssaak (12). Furthermore, Røssaak argues that the experience of the moving image is no longer confined to a traditional 90-minute screening in a darkened movie theater (13). While Røssaak and other scholars predominantly emphasize the transformations within the realm of moving images and film, a more comprehensive exploration is necessary to understand the changes occurring within the realm of still images and their significance within this dynamic field. Having stated the underestimation of still images and examined the intricate interplay between stillness and motion in this chapter, the focus now shifts toward exploring the relationship between narrative and stasis in photography.

As mentioned earlier, George Baker explores photography's expanded field and argues that photography has always been approached through oppositional thinking:

. . . whether we look to the photograph as torn between ontology and social usage, or between art and technology, or between what Barthes called denotation and connotation, or what he also later called punctum and studium, between "discourse and document" (to use an invention of Benjamin Buchloh's), between "Labor and Capital" (to use one of Allan Sekula's), between index and icon, sequence and series, archive and art photograph. One could go on. This tearing of photography between oppositional extremes is precisely what we need to begin to map an expanded field for its practice, and indeed any one of the above oppositions might potentially serve as this field's basis. (124-125)

Drawing on these oppositions, Baker raises an intriguing inquiry by contemplating the potential intersection of narrative and stasis within the photograph, questioning whether it is possible to conceive the photograph as existing in a state between these two realms. Traditionally, the photograph has been defined by what it lacks—it is not-narrative and not-statis. However, Baker proposes that alternative, more nuanced perspectives are worth exploring. He suggests that "[the] opposition of negative terms easily generates a similar opposition but expressed positively," which are narrative and stasis in this context (Baker 127).

In the contemporary context, it appears increasingly feasible to consider photography through the lens of narrative and stasis. Baker employs a greimas square as a tool for examining various forms of visual representation, including the "still film" or projected images, digital montage or "talking picture," "film still" or cinematic photograph, and modernist photography. By mapping these categories onto a combination of narrative, stasis, notnarrative, and not-stasis, Baker provides an opportunity to delve into the interplay of narrativity and stasis within photographs, enabling a more comprehensive exploration of their dynamic qualities.

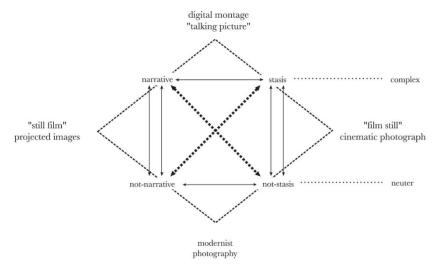


Figure 1: George Baker's Greimas Square of Narrative and Stasis (Baker 131)

Within this complex framework, Baker situates artists like Gregory Crewdson and Jeff Wall, among others, at the intersection of narrative and stasis, forming what he refers to as the digital montage or "talking picture." Baker argues that photography can create both a sense of movement through narrative or sequencing, and a sense of stillness through freezing a moment in time. These effects are in tension with one another. Moreover, the way we experience time and space in photography may be influenced by the tension between narrative and stasis (Baker 125-126). Building upon this background, I examine the dynamic interplay between narrative and stasis within Crewdson's photography. Subsequently, the following chapter delves into the process of narrative construction within a photograph.

As previously mentioned in the Introduction, Jan Baetens asserts that "photography is still considered to be an essentially dull medium at a narrative level" (143). This perception has persisted since he expressed these views in 2009. Photography is often seen as lacking the capacity for generating a "fiction-effect," as argued by Roger Odin and others who claim that photography cannot contain fiction. However, Baetens provides a compelling counterargument to this notion, which also aligns with the arguments of this paper. In his essay titled "Is a Photograph Worth a Thousand Films?," Baetens makes a comparison between still images and moving images, ultimately concluding that "the power of a fixed image may exceed, under certain circumstances, that of a mobile image" (143). He further contends that "the contact with certain images throws the viewer, often brutally, into the universe of a story"

(Baetens 145). This assertion is particularly applicable to Crewdson's photography, which will be illustrated in the forthcoming sections of the analysis.

Another assertion posited by Baetens is the significance of "lacunae" in understanding the narrativity in photographs:

In order to understand the narrative potential of fixed photographic images, it is thus not enough to underline the possible acquaintances with the aesthetics of the "decisive moment." What needs to be stressed is the position that "lacunae" (vacancies, blanks, uncertainties) have acquired within the narrative impulse, becoming the foundation of any narrative reading. On the other hand, it is to the extent that photographs explain, say or show that their narrative powers diminish. (146)

Thus, the missing information, together with the emotional impact, creates the narrative effect in photographs. This aligns perfectly with Crewdson's fictionalized and constructed photography which consists of many vacancies. There is a sense of loneliness, disconnection, and alienation, while the passing of time is alluded. After laying the groundwork with relevant theoretical concepts, the following chapter delves into a comprehensive analysis of Gregory Crewdson's captivating photo series titled *An Eclipse of Moths*.

3. Narrative and Stasis in An Eclipse of Moths



Figure 2: Red Star Express (2018-19, 127 × 225.7 cm) in An Eclipse of Moths

The first photograph under analysis is titled *Red Star Express*, a visually striking and expansive composition that presents a juxtaposition between the scale of human figures and the vastness of the surroundings. The photograph captures a scene reminiscent of an abandoned or desolate

town, perhaps an industrial or suburban area. Immediately drawing attention is a trailer engulfed in flames on the right side of the image, prominently labeled with the same title as the photograph, "Red Star Express." The billowing smoke from the fire drifts both towards the road and the town, creating a sense of movement and atmospheric tension. Positioned in the center of the road are three individuals, all fixated on the spectacle of the fire. Adjacent to the road, we observe two additional parked trailers and a car in motion, advancing forward. Along the left side of the road, a cluster of houses further complements the sense of place within the photograph. This detailed examination provides a foundation for unraveling the visual narrative and symbolic implications embedded within Crewdson's composition.

Crewdson employs a muted color palette dominated by shades of blues, greens, and grays, effectively evoking a pervasive atmosphere of melancholy, sadness, loneliness, and alienation. The deliberate selection of location and timing becomes evident as crucial elements in establishing the image's mood and ambiance. The photograph captures a moment characterized by transition and unease, skillfully highlighted by the presence of fire and smoke, which introduce an additional temporal dimension to the composition. The interplay between the smoke and the gentle breeze imbues the scene with a subtle sense of motion and movement. Notably, the image purposefully lacks clear reference points, adding to the sense of mystery and unease. The viewer is left questioning the origins of the fire, the activities of the three boys present, and the absence of shirts and shoes on the two individuals in the foreground. These deliberate omissions and uncertainties create open spaces for the viewer to construct their own narratives, further amplifying the photograph's narrative power. Thus, lacunae play a significant role here. Crewdson's strategic use of visual and narrative devices in *Red Star Express* demonstrates his mastery in eliciting emotional and intellectual responses from the audience.

As Røssaak also suggests, "immobility may produce a movement of emotion or the intellect not available in the movement-image" (14-15). Despite the frozen and sharply rendered figures within the image, a dynamic sense of movement is still created through smoke and breeze. The photograph presents a compelling paradox of stasis and not-stasis, capturing a moment seemingly frozen in time yet imbued with a profound temporality through the presence of fire. The location, lighting, props, and costumes (or the lack of them) indicate the constructedness of the photograph. It is a narrative image that makes the viewer think in a way that something seems to have happened or is about to happen. The deliberate choices made in the composition encourage viewers to engage with the story unfolding.

Overall, the image, in its entirety, exhibits characteristics reminiscent of a film still. Crewdson's approach to photography is different from the notion of capturing a snapshot or attempting to seize the decisive moment, as exemplified by Henri Cartier-Bresson. Instead, he intentionally constructs the photograph, drawing upon the principles of intermediality that encompass elements of film, photography, and film stills.



Figure 3: Starkfield Lane (2018-19, 127 × 225.7 cm) in An Eclipse of Moths

The next photograph under analysis is titled *Starkfield Lane*, which, like the previous one, is also a large format image and employs a similar camera position and angle. Once again, the strategic implementation of lacunae plays a pivotal role in the narrativity of the image. These deliberate omissions create a sense of suspense, further intensified by the meticulously chosen elements, including the setting, characters, props, lighting, mise-en-scène in general, and the composition of the photograph. Within the scene, several intriguing components contribute to the evocation of suspense and the presence of gaps in the narrative. The solitary figure standing still in the middle of the road, his gaze lost in an indeterminate direction, the stationary car with its open door, the broken and fallen streetlight, the woman seated in the passenger seat, and the woman standing on the balcony to the right of the frame—all of these elements converge to amplify the atmosphere of suspense and the lingering sense of lacunae. Additionally, the shrouding fog that covers the town adds another layer of intrigue to the image.

As viewers engage with the photograph, they find themselves drawn into the visual enigma, actively seeking clues to unravel the underlying narrative. The deliberate incorporation of lacunae stimulates a sense of curiosity and compels viewers to construct their own interpretations and meanings from the available visual cues. In this manner, the photograph functions as a catalyst for individual narrative creation, inviting each viewer to contribute their unique perspective and understanding to the image. It is worth noting that the techniques employed in *Starkfield Lane* resonate with those observed in the previous photograph, *Red Star Express*. Both images share a common thread of empowering viewers to actively shape the narrative through their own subjective engagement. Thus, the viewer assumes an active role in extracting meaning and weaving a story from the visual tapestry presented in these photographs.

As previously discussed, Crewdson's artistic style bears a resemblance to film stills, which is characterized by a relation between stasis and not-stasis according to Baker's greimas

square. Nevertheless, it transcends the confines of traditional film stills by using and creating narrative elements. It is important to note that Crewdson's photography diverges from the conventional definition of film stills, which typically feature scenes directly extracted from a film or portray actors posed for stillmen on film sets. However, this departure should not be seen as a complete disassociation between Crewdson's work and the realm of film stills. In fact, Steven Jacobs examines the relationship between contemporary photographers such as Jeff Wall, Cindy Sherman, and Gregory Crewdson, and the film still genre:

In the photographs by Wall, Crewdson and many other contemporary practitioners of staged photography, the instantaneous or the fleeting, which have been long-standing hallmarks of street photography, are tempered by something frozen. Given this perspective, Wall not only refers to film stills but also to the tableau and its problem of finding the most convincing positions, gestures and facial expressions to convey a significant moment in the narrative. Thus, Sherman, Wall and their many followers not only bring cinema and photography together, they also resurrect the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tableaux depicting charged dramatic moments in theatrically staged scenes. (143)

Thus, their style is rooted in the great film still tradition which became a source of "inspiration, motif, strategy or frame of reference" (Jacobs 142). By exploring this correlation, Jacobs illuminates the connections and intersections between Crewdson's photography and the traditions of film stills. This analysis provides valuable insights into the ways in which Crewdson's work engages with and reimagines the essence of film stills, contributing to a broader discourse on the evolving relationship between photography and the cinematic arts, as well as on stillness and motion.

The film still genre inherently embodies intermediality and explores the intricate relationship between stillness and motion. As noted by Jacobs, "When related to film, however, photography evokes the uncanny stillness of tableaux vivants in many ways" (121), a characteristic that is also observable in Crewdson's photographic compositions. Crewdson's photographs, as in *Starkfield Lane*, display an unsettling stillness, conveyed through the alienated and frozen figures, as well as the use of lighting, colors, and intricate details. Jacobs further suggests that the uncanny character of the film stills "is not only the result of their excess of visual details but first and foremost from their particular compromise between movement and stasis" (135).

In line with this perspective, Crewdson's work exemplifies the captivating interplay between stillness and motion within the film still genre. Through the amalgamation of frozen elements and subtle hints of potential movement, his photographs encapsulate the uncanny essence that emerges from the delicate balance between these two contrasting states. Crewdson works with a crew of technicians and stylists who prepare the setting and mise-enscène. It might take days to shoot a single photograph. The process, overall, is similar to the one of film production. However, "instead of making a still for the publicity of a motion picture, an entire cinematic construction has been deployed in order to make a single still photograph" (Jacobs 143).

4. Critical Reception of Crewdson's Photography and a Reflection on Broader Trends

Gregory Crewdson's meticulously staged and enigmatic photography has garnered significant acclaim within the art world, leading to numerous prestigious exhibitions and capturing the attention of discerning collectors. According to Britt Hennemuth, the editor of *Vanity Fair*, Crewdson is "a favorite among some of Hollywood's more esteemed collectors, including Cate Blanchett" ("The Photography of Gregory Crewdson—And Why Cate Blanchett Is Here for It"). As Crewdson says, he feels like a part of a continuity of artists who "explore the intersections between everyday life and theatricality" (Palumbo, "Gregory Crewdson's Photos Reveal Melancholy and Mystery in Small-Town America"). His photography has also influenced many cinematographers and TV shows, which is a sign of circular continuity in visual culture according to Jacqui Palumbo: "The German mind-bending time-travel saga *Dark* was reportedly influenced by his photographs, while its fellow Netflix drama *Ozark*, set in the titular rural region, is also decidedly Crewdsonian" (Palumbo, "Gregory Crewdson's Photos Reveal Melancholy and Mystery in Small-Town America").

Furthermore, Joyce Carol Oates expresses her own admiration for Crewdson's oeuvre, providing insightful commentary on his artistic vision and impact. Oates articulates her perspective as follows:

Under the spell of the haunting images of Crewdson's "Cathedral of the Pines" and "An Eclipse of Moths" the viewer is moved to think not only of the "stills" of films but of the distillation of poetry. . . . Legendary as an artist who creates unrehearsed-appearing scenes with the painstaking precision of an obsessive filmmaker, Gregory Crewdson is the antithesis of the serendipitous "street photographer"—one who, in the tradition of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Weegee, (the occasional) Walker Evans, Lee Friedlander, Gary Winograd, Vivian Maier, among others, takes photographs spontaneously and unposed, of usually anonymous subjects, on the proverbial "street." ("The Visionary Art of Gregory Crewdson")

The comparison between Gregory Crewdson's staged photography and the traditional practice of street photography is a testament to the evolving landscape of the still/motion field. This observation underscores the broader trajectory within photography, highlighting its increasing convergence with cinematic principles in terms of production processes, techniques, composition, qualities, and mise-en-scène. Photographers now demonstrate a shift in their artistic priorities, moving away from the pursuit of capturing the elusive "decisive moment" and spontaneous snapshots. Instead, there is a discernible inclination towards carefully curated and elaborate imagery. This brings cinema and photography closer than ever. This convergence marks a significant development in the field, with Crewdson serving as a notable and influential example of this trend.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined how Gregory Crewdson's photography evokes narrative and emotional effects. Through an exploration of the theories of still/motion and narrativity in photography, the research has shown how his work reflects and contributes to the debates within the medium and the field of still/motion. Baker's theory that photography can create both a sense of narration and a sense of stillness, and Baetens' use of "lacunae" in displaying the narrative power of photographs, are particularly relevant to understanding Crewdson's work. Ultimately, Crewdson's photographs offer a remarkable exploration of the power and complexities of photography in narrating and meaning-making, creating emotional impact through the tension between stillness and narrative construction.

In conclusion, Gregory Crewdson's photographic practice represents a significant departure from traditional notions of photography as a medium confined to capturing fleeting moments. By meticulously constructing elaborate scenes and imbuing them with narrative potential, Crewdson blurs the boundaries between photography and other visual arts, such as cinema and painting. Thus, his photography is a great example of intermedial practice. His work challenges conventional notions of stillness and motion, inviting viewers to engage in a process of interpretation and narration.

Moving forward, further research in the field of still/motion could explore the broader implications of Crewdson's approach and its influence on contemporary artistic practices. Additionally, investigating the reception and interpretation of his work among diverse audiences and the critical discourse it has generated would contribute to a deeper understanding of the significance and impact of his contributions. Moreover, a comparative analysis of Crewdson's work alongside other artists working in the intersection of still/motion would shed light on shared themes, techniques, and aesthetic approaches.

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