



PHOTOGRAPHY AND CINEMATIC SURFACE

DAVID CAMPANY

The relationship between photography and cinema is as complex as it is long. The two have had a mutual attraction and repulsion for over a century, held together and held apart by similarities and differences. As many of the boundaries between the two media begin to disappear in the electronic ether, it is becoming possible to look back and consider what the two have been for each other. Part of this history can be traced through the fascination photographers have had with cinematic illusion.

In 1939, Edward Weston made a small number of photographs on the back lot of the MGM film studios in Hollywood. He shot architectural fragments, stunt dummies, and painted backdrops. A junkyard of fakes and substitutes was unusual subject matter for him; although Weston lived in California, the contrivance and artifice of Hollywood was a long way from his preoccupation with the truths of nature and platonic form. Nevertheless, he included the images in a solo show at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1946. There they came to the attention of the renowned art critic Clement Greenberg, whose primary concern was painting; he rarely discussed photography. For Greenberg, the subjects of painting should be paint, canvas, and surface, as epitomized in the Abstract Expressionism of Jackson Pollock. By contrast, photography

is inherently descriptive—lacking in surface—and should, Greenberg argued, show the world in detail, even if that is not necessarily a reflexive or self-conscious use of the medium.

Weston's MGM photographs were different. Greenberg wrote in the *Nation*:

The best pictures in the show are two frontal views of "ghost sets" in a movie studio. Here the camera's sharply focused eye is unable to replace the details left out by the scene painter or architect; and the smoothly painted surfaces prevent the eye from discovering details it would inevitably find in nature or the weathered surface of a real house. At the same time a certain decorative unity is given in advance by the unity, such as it is, of the stage set.

Weston's images presented visual fact as trompe-l'oeil: describing surfaces while reflecting on realism as a form of illusion. As high modernist photographs, they were descriptive, straight, and true. At the same time they were indirect and quotational, anticipating the more postmodern demand for the photograph to offer a commentary on its own status as representation and record.

OPPOSITE: John Swope, *Cities flourish for the duration of a production; a few brushstrokes wipe them out forever*, 1937; ABOVE: Edward Weston, *MGM studios (waterfront)*, 1939.

Swope: Courtesy Craig Krull Gallery; Weston: Courtesy Collection Center for Creative Photography/© 1981 Arizona Board of Regents



John Swope, an assistant film producer, also photographed those MGM back lots for his insider book *Camera Over Hollywood* (1939). He even shot the same backdrop as Weston, although Swope's camera is farther away and off to the side. We see the scaffolding behind the backdrop and a set builder with a wheelbarrow. The sobering caption reads: *Cities flourish for the duration of production; a few brushstrokes wipe them out forever.*

Swope's image was taken in 1937, the same year Margaret Bourke-White was shooting MGM's back lot for a *Life* magazine photo-essay titled "Sound Stages Hum with Work on Movies for 1938." By this year, the behind-the-scenes magazine feature had become a familiar part of Hollywood's well-oiled publicity machine. However, the accompanying text is more critical in this issue of *Life*. "By and large," it reads, "the movie moguls think that what the public wants during the next six months is about what it has been getting in the last six months." Swope and Bourke-White were using photography to show up the shallowness of cinema as an industry of mass spectacle. Weston was doing this, too, by playing it out as a formal game between depth and flatness.

The stark superficiality of film sets has attracted many photographers independent of the industry, and the results tend to be meditations on artifice. Diane Arbus's austere *A House on a hill, Hollywood, California*, from 1963, is the inverse of cinema's seductive trickery. The light is bleak and the framing stark. This is not a real house and it may not be a real hill. Her image is of course even flatter than the flimsy façade it records, but we trust it because it shows us something we patently cannot trust. "This *photographic realism*," it seems to say, "suspects that *cinematic realism*." Although Arbus is better known for her portraiture, *A House on a hill* was key to the publication on which her formidable reputation still rests. Her posthumously published monograph *Diane Arbus* (1972) is dominated by her direct and provocative depictions of people, but planted among them are three images of artifice. There is a night shot of Cinderella's castle in Disneyland, a lobby wall covered in a photographic mural of a forest, and *A House on a hill*. Together, these three photographs put the viewer on guard, warning against quick judgment of the people in the rest of her pictures, or of Arbus herself. Photography may promise depth—historical, sociological, even psychological—but it must trade in surface.

Even so, the back lot and the movie studio have been constant subjects for the still cameras of artists and documentarians

alike. For a long while the attraction was the untouchable power of the film industry, with its gargantuan scale, so far removed from the solitary life of the photographer. With the encroachment of television, video, DVD, and the Internet, the relation has become much more prosaic. Larry Sultan's *The Valley* (1999), his documentation of the Los Angeles porn industry, speaks more of the banality and tedium of the business than it does of the enigmas of flesh or the allure of the moving image. Similarly, Stefan Ruiz's *Factory of Dreams* (2003), a series shot on the set of a Mexican soap opera, shows it to be just what the title describes: an efficient and rationalized factory putting out product.



John Divola's series *Continuity* (1997) explores a very particular meeting point of the glamorous and the banal. Divola sourced high-quality stills taken on the sets of Warner Brothers' movies from Hollywood's heyday. They are not star portraits or publicity images, but documents of the arrangements of set decorations, props, and lighting. These records of minute detail allow a film to be shot out of sequence, sometimes with weeks between takes. Today such images are made quickly and digitally, but Divola has selected stills from a time when they were made by photographers every bit as skilled as cinematographers. The lighting is beautiful, but the subjects resemble the technical data of police forensics.

OPPOSITE: Diane Arbus, *A House on a hill, Hollywood, California, 1963*; ABOVE: Larry Sultan, *Mission Hills, Boxer Dogs, 1999*, from the series *The Valley*.

Arbus: Courtesy/© Estate of Diane Arbus; Sultan: Courtesy Janet Borden Inc., New York and Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco



This is most clear in his sub-set of the series *Continuity* called *Broken Furniture: Evidence of Aggression*. Here Divola has assembled stills from various films that all record the traces of pretend-violence: scattered chairs, broken tables, skewed pictures on false walls.

In Hollywood's classical era, most publicity stills were rigorously prescribed and controlled. However, as the economic power of the big film studios waned in the 1960s and '70s with the spread of television, in-house photography budgets were cut dramatically. Instead, photojournalists would be invited to shoot on sets, in the studios' hope of free publicity. At the same time the autonomy of certain directors and actors was growing, allowing on occasion for more informed pairings of photographers and the films they would document. The most celebrated is the extensive coverage of John Huston's *The Misfits* (1961) by nine Magnum agency photojournalists: Eve Arnold, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Cornell Capa, Bruce Davidson, Elliott Erwitt, Ernst Haas, Erich Hartmann, Inge Morath, and Dennis Stock.

The resulting images were effective publicity at the time. Since then the function of those photographs has changed. *The Misfits* had a particularly troubled shoot and turned out to be the last completed film for two of its stars, Clark Gable and Marilyn Monroe. The on-screen story and the film's production were dominated by strained relationships and emotional turmoil. Over time the film and the photographs have become inseparable in the popular imagination. As a result, many of the photographs work equally well as film stills and reportage—particularly of the fragile Monroe, since we cannot tell if she is in character or not.

An unusual experiment with photographers on a later Huston film is all but forgotten. For the 1982 film production of the musical *Annie*, set during the Depression, some of the best American photographers were invited by the producer to shoot whatever they wanted on set. Again there were nine, among them William Eggleston, Garry Winogrand, Stephen Shore, Joel Meyerowitz, and Mitch Epstein. The resulting folios were as distinct from one another as they were from the film. Eggleston ignored cast and crew to concentrate on quiet architectural details. His only concession to the film's context was to shoot from a low vantage—from Annie's point of view. Winogrand pursued his characteristic black-and-white street photography, catching chance moments on set. Shore focused on street

corners, shop fronts, and unnamed extras. These were the kind of everyday subjects he had documented on road trips across America in the 1970s. He shot with the same eye for detail, using the same large-format camera. Even so, he was acutely aware of the oddity of recording the everyday of the 1930s. Moreover, *Annie's* New York streets were built at Burbank studios under bright California skies. Shore acknowledged this by assiduously avoiding the "East Coast" light provided by the technicians. The detailed sets and costumes had been fabricated using old photographs of New York as reference, including images by Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, Berenice Abbott, and Paul Strand—all key figures from photographic history. Shore's interests and photographic style descend from theirs, so in effect he was shooting his own heritage.



The appeal of movie sets and of the spaces behind the scenes stems partly from the fact that they feel like three-dimensional photographs. Indeed, they are often built with obvious camera positions in mind. To wander the set is to wander a space both physical and virtual, real and imaginary. This of course has had its corollary in the spectacle of film-going itself. Think of epics such as *Cleopatra* (1963), whose trailer

OPPOSITE, TOP: John Divola, four images from the installation *Broken Furniture: Evidence of Aggression*, 1995, from the series *Continuity*. **Clockwise from top left:** #11, *Larceny Lane (Blonde Crazy)* (1931), Warner Brothers, directed by Roy Del Ruth; #8, *Miss Pinkerton* (1932), First National Pictures, directed by Lloyd Bacon; #1, *Unidentified* (ca. 1930); #10, *The Public Enemy* (1931), Warner Brothers, directed by William A. Wellman, art director Max Parker; **BOTTOM:** Stefan Ruiz, *Televisa's Studio 9: The Central Set #2*, from the series *The Factory of Dreams*, 2003. **THIS PAGE:** Eve Arnold, Marilyn Monroe learning her lines for a scene with Clark Gable during the filming of *The Misfits* (1961), Nevada, Utah, 1960.

Divola: Courtesy the artist; Ruiz: Courtesy the artist; Arnold: © Eve Arnold/Magnum

and poster boasted of the sheer size of the sets and numbers of extras. Conjuring up ancient Egypt was grand illusion, but at a photographic level *it was all there before the camera*, with no faking, and that was the attraction. For all its advantages, the technologies of computer-generated imagery do away with that tension. Today a movie set may appear on screen only, with almost no existence prior to its virtual one. To gaze at a movie with spectacular computer-generated imagery is to wonder not at moving photographs but at moving paintings (photorealist paintings, at that). Beyond a few foreground elements and a blue screen background, no sets need be built in real space and time. The contemporary film studio can be a barren place with slim pickings for photographers.



Consider the image taken by the artist Robert Cumming in 1977 of a mechanical shark's fin made for *Jaws II* (1978). There is a particular consonance between the physicality of the camera's encounter and the ingenious subaquatic machine. Who would make such a contraption now? And what would a behind-the-scenes photograph of a contemporary shark movie look like? I can imagine a portrait of a computer whiz-kid. She is in her officelike studio, endlessly poring over photographs and footage of real sharks in an attempt to get the virtual one to look right.

Gus Van Sant's 1998 "sixty-million-dollar art-movie" version of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* is a case in point. It is an almost shot-for-shot remake that takes for granted the audience's over-familiarity with the 1960 original. Van Sant's cinematographer Christopher Doyle is also an adept photographer. He regularly shoots personal stills on the sets of his films. In one

of these, the actress Anne Heche is seated in a car in a film studio, while a back-projection of a road can be seen behind her. It's a "real" back-projection, not a digital one added afterward—for authenticity, Van Sant was sticking to the old tricks, not using new ones. Heche is playing Marion Crane, a bank clerk on the run with stolen money (or is she playing the original actress, Janet Leigh, playing Marion Crane?). The actress's ambivalent face neatly expresses the dizzying layers of representation here. As with Monroe on the set of *The Misfits*, it is almost impossible to tell if Heche is performing. Perhaps she is preoccupied with the past projected behind her, or the future projection of her own performance.

We have become used to the ways in which fantasy and reality bleed into each other. It is a condition Simon Norfolk may have had in mind on a recent shoot in California. Away from his recent documentation of the aftermaths of military battles in Eastern Europe, Afghanistan, and Iraq, he has photographed on the sets of various war movies. The series includes a shot of a controlled explosion for the 2005 Fox TV production *Over There*. It is the story of a U.S. Army platoon in present-day Iraq, but it was filmed in Chatsworth, north of Los Angeles, in a semi-desert that can pass for Iraq's. North America hasn't experienced a real war on its own soil for a long time. Of course, countless Hollywood directors have compared the mammoth task of making movies with going into battle. Now that wars are so mediated, they are waged as much at the level of images as on the ground. And, chillingly, going into battle today can be akin to making a movie.

There is nothing *inherently* critical or dissenting about these behind-the-scenes photographs. In and of themselves, they guarantee no greater insight than any other image. Yet they do all speak of a desire, at least, to pierce the cinematic surface and shed some light on the other side. As documents, they have the potential to live on and become dense allegories that help us figure out the shifting role of the image in the assembly of what we choose to call reality. 📍

David Company's book Photography and Cinema (Reaktion Books, available through University of Chicago Press) is forthcoming November 2007.

THIS PAGE: Stephen Shore, *Untitled*, on the set of *Annie* (1982), Burbank Studios, California, 1981; OPPOSITE, TOP: Christopher Doyle, Gus Van Sant sets Anne Heche up on the set of the remake of the film *Psycho* (1998). OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Robert Cumming, Shark fin atop pneumatic underwater sled from *Jaws II* (1978), March 28, 1977.

Shore: Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York; Doyle: © Christopher Doyle; Cumming: Courtesy Howard Yezerski Gallery





Simon Norfolk, *Explosion75*, from the series *War Films* (for the *New York Times Magazine*). A controlled explosion of an American fuel convoy in Iraq being filmed on the set of *Over There*, a Fox TV production about the life of a U.S. Army platoon in contemporary Iraq. Chatsworth (north of Los Angeles), September 2005.

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