

The Photographic Construction of Kissing, Late 19th to Mid-20th Centuries

Jia Shen Lim

The couple *is*; the couple rarely *are*: this grammatical technicality would suggest that when we ask “what is a couple?” we are talking about two ones that have become a new one and thus should be addressed as an ontological unity. (Brilmyer et al. 223)

“The Photographic Construction of Kissing” contemplates the tension between intimacy, affection, and even antagonism while viewing the ‘couple’ as a unit through various photographic images from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century (see figs. 1-6 included at the end of this article). The trope of ‘kissing’ in photography allows viewers to gaze into others’ reality with a curiosity that also doubles as an intrusion. Yet, we are encouraged to view these photographs with resistance against an avid gaze to re-mystify the kiss, “[as i]f photographs are messages, [and] the message is both transparent and mysterious” (Sontag 86). Be it romantic or platonic, a kiss is an enthralling sight to see that without realizing it, tempts the social voyeur in us. But who is kissing who? And who is allowed to kiss? Does the couple see themselves in similar ways to that of the viewers? Susan Sontag points out that “[p]hotographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still. Or they enlarge a reality that is felt to be shrunk, hollowed out, perishable, remote” (127). Thus, despite the fleeting temporality of a kiss, the moment is made to last through photography, as a social documentation that simultaneously enthralls its viewer.

At times, the photographs discussed in this article portray literal expressions of kissing – as in Thomas Edison’s silent film *The Kiss* (1896), also known as the May Irwin Kiss (fig. 1). It is a reenactment of the final scene from the stage musical *The Widow Jones*. The 18-second silent film starring May Irwin and John C. Rice is considered as the first on-screen kiss in cinema, despite only lasting for about two seconds. In another, the literal kiss in Eadweard Muybridge’s *Two Models Shaking Hands and Kissing Each Other* (1887) is part of his larger experiment of motion studies (fig. 2). He invented moving images that capture animals and humans in motion imperceptible to the naked eye.

However, due to the social conventions of the time, Muybridge was restricted from photographing naked men in the same frame as naked women. The Muybridge Online Archive states that this is because “Victorians were extremely sexually prudish by modern standards and commonly considered male homosexuality a serious threat to their society [because] they believed women had little or no sex drive” (qtd. in Zolfagharifard). Additionally, Muybridge’s staging of women in their private moments can be understood as erotic. Cresswell argues that contrary to how the men that Muybridge photographed were being portrayed, women, however, “enact

curious interactions that come close to reflecting standard pornographic male fantasies of harems” (65).

On a similar note of staging photography, in *Antiseptic Kisses in Hollywood*, actors Betty Furness and Dennis Morgan (also known as Stanley Morner and Richard Stanley) pose for the cover of *Look* magazine during the flu epidemic in 1937 to promote the comedy film *Mama Steps Out* and also give the audience a behind-the-scenes of its rehearsal (fig. 3). “To fool the flu, during a recent epidemic, movie kisses were rehearsed behind antiseptic masks. Since each kiss must be rehearsed about 20 times before the cameras turn, it was said that four out of five flu germs would be prevented from spreading” (“Kissing and How It’s Done” 41). The photograph reminds us of how eerily familiar it is in light of the current COVID-19 pandemic and how it engages us to be critical of the kiss. One could argue that rehearsing a kissing scene while wearing a mask is counter-productive but amidst the irony, there is an underlying comic effect within the photograph that speaks to our otherwise restrictive times.

Elsewhere, what appears to be a romantic kiss between a couple to celebrate Japan’s surrender during World War II in New York’s Time Square on August 14, 1945, was, in fact, non-consensual. Alfred Eisenstaedt’s *V-J Day in Times Square* (1945) captures a young U.S. navy sailor impulsively grabbing and kissing a stranger in a white uniform (fig. 4). For the longest time, many came forth claiming to be in the photo, but it has been concluded in various interviews and consultations that George Mendonsa and dental assistant Greta Friedman is most likely the true pair. In an interview in 2005, Friedman said, “I felt he was very strong, he was just holding me tight, and I’m not sure I – about the kiss because, you know, it was just somebody really celebrating. But it wasn’t a romantic event. It was just an event of thank God the war is over. It wasn’t my choice to be kissed. The guy just came over and kissed or grabbed me” (Friedman). The advent of the #MeToo movement has prompted a reevaluation of the kiss, despite Friedman stating that the kiss was a “jubilant act.”

After Friedman’s passing in 2016, her son told the *New York Times* that his mother understood it as a case of an assault but did not view the kiss negatively as a matter of course (Rosenberg). Speaking on behalf of a photographer’s point of view, Sontag says that it does not matter what people see, “having a camera has transformed [the photographer] into something active, a voyeur: only he has mastered the situation [...]. It is an Event: something worth seeing—and therefore worth photographing” (Sontag 7). Here, we can conclude that the event – the kiss – stimulates Eisenstaedt’s active voyeuristic impulse, but we may also argue that the photograph similarly does so in rendering viewers as passive voyeurs, just like the spectators seen in the photograph who are very much aware of the pair kissing but without the ambition of a photographer. Thus, photographers “set up a chronic voyeuristic relation to the world which levels the meaning of all events” and their photographs allow viewers to experience the event as if they are participating (Sontag 7).

Shifting to a more figurative depiction, Man Ray’s *The Kiss* (1922) is a camera-less photogram (or Rayograph, as Man Ray called it) of him and his former lover Kiki de Montparnasse, created by placing different objects that acted as stencils on a sheet of photosensitive paper (fig. 5). Sontag regards Man Ray’s rayographs as “marginal exploits in the history of photography” (40). The artist juxtaposes a pair of hands, a pair of heads kissing and two darkroom trays, then exposes the paper to the light three times, with each exposure outlining their silhouettes in a gradation of negative tones. All things considered – the visual cues, the anonymous identities of the figures, and the clear artwork title – we are then left with Man Ray’s repertoire in his manipulation of photography’s surreal and avant-garde elements. Sontag reminds us that “[s]urrealism lies at the

heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision. The less doctored, the less patently crafted, the more naive – the more authoritative the photograph was likely to be” (40). Therefore, at the same time that May Ray blurs the line between the representational and abstraction in his rayograph, one may ask what purpose does the pair of hands serve in the image?

Lastly, Edward Weston’s *Pepper No. 30* (1930) occupies a similar line of thought that straddles between literal and abstract representations, in which the photograph has become one of Weston’s best-known works (fig. 6). When *Pepper No. 30* was made, Weston had already started working on his “still life” series as early as 1927. His partner at the time, Sonya Noskowiak, brought home several green peppers, and for four days from August 2–6, 1930, Weston shot at least thirty different negatives using different backdrops such as plain muslin and white cardboard but was unsatisfied with the results. *Pepper No. 30* “[is] by far the best,” he describes in his book *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, “[i]t is a classic, completely satisfying, – a pepper – but more than a pepper: abstract, in that it is completely outside subject matter. It has no psychological attributes, no human emotions are aroused: this new pepper takes one beyond the world we know in the conscious mind” (181). Weston suggests signs of a surrealist modernist at work when photographing the pepper placed inside a tin tunnel. Despite the flatness of the printed photograph, there is three-dimensionality as light within the funnel reflects against the pepper, accentuating the contour of the oddly-shaped and voluptuous form of the fruit that resembles a couple intertwining with each other.

However, Weston himself has voiced his frustration with descriptions that filled his peppers with sexual undertones, noting that “[t]he peppers which are more libeled than anything I have done, in them has been found vulvas, penises or combinations, sexual intercourse, madonna with child, wrestlers, modern sculpture, African carving, ad nauseum, according to the state of mind of the spectator: and I have a lot of fun sizing people up from their findings” (225). It is arguably true that *Pepper No. 30* does not illustrate a couple or a pair of individuals. Still, the human brain has a penchant for imagination to seek forms and attach meanings to abstraction. One cannot help but entertain such vivid imaginations of the brain and see the resemblance of a nude couple embracing each other, just like the romantic marble sculpture of Auguste Rodin’s *The Kiss* (1882).



Figure 1. Film still of *The Kiss* (1896), Thomas Edison.



Figure 2. Animal Locomotion, Plate Number 444. Two Models Shaking Hands and Kissing Each Other (1887), Eadweard Muybridge.



Figure 3. Antiseptic Kisses in Hollywood (1937), from *Look* magazine.



Figure 4. V-J Day in Times Square (1945), Alfred Eisenstaedt.



Figure 5. Rayograph, The Kiss (1922), Man Ray.

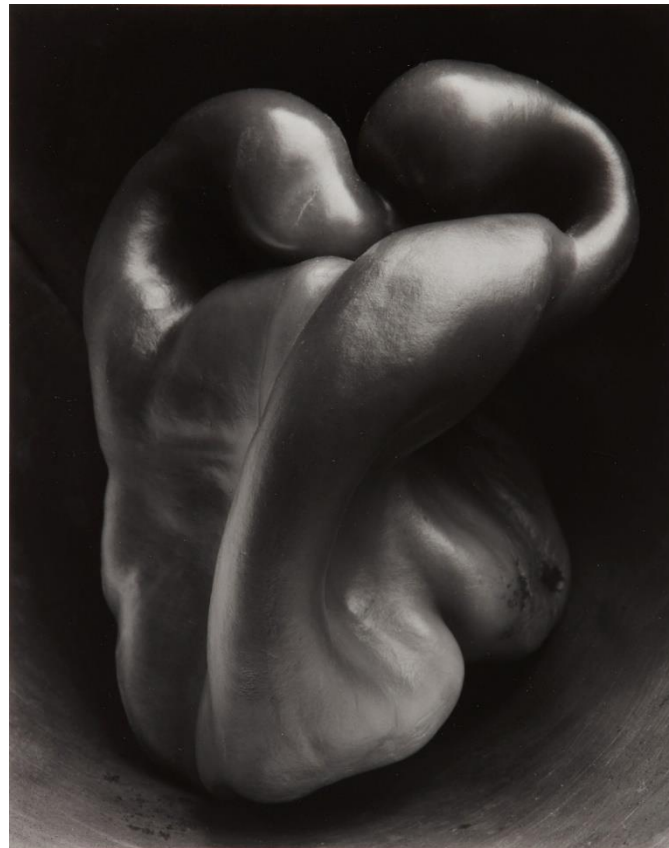


Figure 6. Pepper No. 30 (1930), Edward Weston.

Author Biography

Jia Shen Lim is a student in the MA North American Studies program at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH). Prior to his enrollment at LUH, he received his BA in Graphic Design and Art History from the University of Hertfordshire, UK, then went on to work as a fashion and art writer for a newspaper. His job was invigorating and fun but it was not enough – intellectually speaking –, so he decided to leave his job to study again. His research interests include gender and transcultural identities in visual art, periodical culture, and the combination of close reading techniques with critical theory.

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- Figure 3. Anonymous photographer, *Antiseptic Kisses in Hollywood* from *Look* magazine, U.S., 1937. Internet Archive: Look v01n12 "[1937-08-03] (BONES)" by zatoichi01 is marked with Public Domain Mark 1.0. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022.
- Figure 4. Alfred Eisenstaedt, *V-J Day in Times Square*, first published in *Life* magazine, U.S., 27 Aug. 1945. Openverse: "Alfred Eisenstaedt" by urcameras is marked with Public Domain Mark 1.0. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022.
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