



**Citation:** G. Carter (2018) Cinematic Intertextuality and the Aesthetics of Ambiguity from Antonioni to Aldridge. *Aisthesis* 11(2): 63-73. doi: 10.13128/Aisthesis-23396

**Copyright:** © 2018 G. Carter. This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<http://www.fupress.com/aisthesis>) and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

**Competing Interests:** The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

## Cinematic Intertextuality and the Aesthetics of Ambiguity from Antonioni to Aldridge

GERRARD CARTER

(University of Melbourne / Aix-Marseille Université)  
gerrardpcarter@gmail.com

**Abstract.** In order to interpret the work of British photographer Miles Aldridge and gain insight into the semiotic ambiguity of his photographs, this paper relies on the capacity to decipher the photographs' relationship to other arts such as Italian cinema and in particular, to the work of Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni. From the perspective of this present study, the decisive role of semiotics in relation to photography is that it promotes an interactive process between artist and spectator. The methodology employed in this study to demonstrate how previous systems of *language* inspire a semiotic dialogue and produce multiple interpretations is a combination of Umberto Eco's concept of open work and French narratological theories of hypertextuality. Through an examination of the Italian cinematic influence in the work of Miles Aldridge, this paper demonstrates how generating interpretations becomes an essential element of a photograph's aesthetics.

**Keywords.** Aesthetics, ambiguity, intertextuality, open work, photography.

---

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The parallels of attraction and aversion in the work of British photographer Miles Aldridge invite the viewer to engage in a mysterious world where beauty often meets an enigmatic and disturbing femininity. In this manner, there is an overriding characteristic of ambiguity. This notion of ambiguity sets him apart from his realist contemporaries in the way that his images promote a unique interactive response between the photographs and the viewer. The photographer's sense of strange beauty cries out for elaboration as enticingly it beckons the viewer to participate in his artistic narrative. The result is often the beginning of a dialogue between photographer and spectator, and the spectator's individual story as he or she discovers their own personal and unique interpretation of it. Whether the subject matter is a girl in a night car, a topless woman seated at a banquet or a constrained Stepford wife lighting a cigarette from a gas jet of a stove, these women possess distinct personalities that

draw you into their uncommon and perplexing lives. Though their worlds are vastly different, they share the same qualities of beauty, mystery and intrigue.

Considering this aspect of his art, Aldridge is the embodiment of *opera aperta* or *open work*; a term first coined by Italian novelist and literary critic, Umberto Eco. Open Work considers the artist, in this case the photographer, to offer an element of multiplicity and plurality in art, insisting on an interactive response between artist and spectator. However, this hermeneutic theory provokes one to ask from where does the photograph's aesthetic condition stem? When we consider that intertextuality can often radically challenge established accounts of non-literary art forms (Allen [2011]: 171), it seems plausible that artists such as Aldridge have often engaged in a semiotic dialogue with any number of cultural and artistic creations to therefore, prompt reflections on the nature of intertextuality<sup>1</sup>. Allen reminds us that it is possible to speak of the *language* of painting as it is also possible to use this term when examining the intertextual relationship of cinema, architecture and photography ([2011]: 169-172).

In order to interpret the work of photographer Miles Aldridge and gain insight into the semiotic ambiguity of his photographs, this study relies on the capacity to decipher the photographs' relationship to other arts such as Italian cinema and, in particular, to the work of Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni. A cross-disciplinary approach allows theoretical interests to overlap. In this regard, applying theories of intertextuality to the study of non-literary arts offers a valuable insight into Aldridge's dominant influences and the way in which such influences engage in a critical dialogue with one another. From the perspective of this present study, the decisive role of semiotics in relation to photography is that it promotes an interactive process between artist and specta-

tor. The methodology employed in this study to demonstrate how previous systems of *language* inspire a semiotic dialogue and produce multiple interpretations is a combination of Umberto Eco's concept of open work and French narratological theories of hypertextuality. Through an examination of the Italian cinematic influence in the work of Miles Aldridge, this study will demonstrate how generating interpretations becomes an essential element of his photograph's aesthetics.

## 2. INTERTEXTUALITY: DECIPHERING CINEMATIC TRANSPARENCY

Born in London in 1964, Miles Aldridge studied at Central St. Martins working briefly as an illustrator before turning his attention to fashion photography. His photographs have appeared in gallery and museum exhibitions worldwide as well as numerous international publications. An enigmatic personality, Aldridge is a true English gentleman who possesses a sharp intellect and is an artist who is able to challenge any preconceived notions of traditional female stereotypes. Interviewing him from his London studio, Aldridge generously spoke at length and offered a fascinating insight into his art and his evolution as a photographer. When Aldridge started his career producing work in fashion magazines during the early nineties, photographs often appeared safe, presenting a world of happiness and beauty, wealth and success: «They (photographs) were without any irony, kind of implying that the world and everything in it was a happy place but then of course you read the newspapers, you realize it is not»<sup>2</sup>. Miles reacted to this notion of safety by gravitating towards:

*Women who were in a way questioning this world that they were in, even if it were a world of extreme glamour and extreme success and having everything but I liked the idea that they were questioning it. That*

<sup>1</sup> See Genette, G., (1997). See also Worton, M., Still, J., (1990), especially pp. 1-45; Allen, G., (2011), especially pp. 92-121.

<sup>2</sup> Interview: Miles Aldridge, (London) July 20, 2017. Please note all subsequent quotations are taken from this interview.

*started to create a kind of fictional woman who was a kind of heroine of my ideas in as much as she could express the disease and unhappiness and the questioning of all the trappings of modern life and in that way I thought that she was far more interesting than just a pretty girl.*

Aldridge's conscious departure from photographing the pretty and the natural, preferring to question «the trappings of modern life» finds its genesis in its ability to parody styles and gestures found in cinema. Aldridge began to see a place of cinematic vision in his art whereby he found the opportunity to elucidate his distinct aestheticism and experiment with the kind of woman who is not merely content with the conventional adornment of success but is actually questioning contemporary society, questioning everything about her life. In this respect, the work of Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni served as a great inspiration for Aldridge and his photographs.

Aldridge described his love of cinema as «quite broad» stretching from the early silent films through to the 1970s. However, it was his relationship to the work of Antonioni and the existentialist heroines present in his films that inspired the Aldridge aesthetic. As Aldridge started to create more complex narratives and scenarios in fashion photography he turned towards impressionable scenes in Italian cinema of the 1960s. When we examine the work of Miles Aldridge we see that his photographs take on an intertextual nature providing the images with an accessible palimpsest (a parchment that has been written on twice). Genette's detailed taxonomy of intertextuality explores the relationship of a text to other texts. When applying Genette's theories of intertextuality to Aldridge's fashion photography, we see that within the image, Antonioni can still be recognized and visualized in transparency.

Gaining prominence on the international cinema scene in the 1960s, the central thematic of the *Antonionian film* – most notably his acclaimed tetralogy *L'avventura* (The Adventure, 1959), *La notte* (The Night, 1960), *L'eclisse* (The Eclipse, 1962) and *Il deserto rosso* (Red Desert, 1964) – is

to present the female protagonist submerged in a restlessness of feminine psychology. Seymour Chatman, author of *Antonioni or, the Surface of the World* (1985) views the tetralogy's central theme as «the perilous state of our emotional life» (55) and cites Antonioni's emergent understanding of what the director came to call his «“fragility” (fragilità) of the emotional life – its unstable, shifting, amorphous character, in which one feeling passes without rhyme or reason into another, so that people do not know themselves why or how it is that they behave as they do» (56). Chatman also points out that early on, critics perceived the first three films as a trilogy but he accurately extends the group of films to include *Il deserto rosso*, which «differs from the earlier films only in its use of colour but not significantly in theme, plot structure, or character type» (51).

For the purpose of this paper I focus on the character of Lidia in *La notte*, the melancholic beauty played by French actress Jeanne Moreau, in order to illustrate the way in which Aldridge engages in a semiotic dialogue with Antonioni. In doing so, Aldridge produces a daring visual narrative that beckons the viewer to decipher multiple interpretations of the photograph reinforcing Umberto Eco's concept of open work.

*La notte* stars Marcello Mastroianni as Giovanni Pontano, a disillusioned Milanese novelist and his wife Lidia (Jeanne Moreau) whose perceptive yet melancholic gaze speaks of her fractured marriage. Set during a single day and night, the film centres on a day in the life of an unhappily married couple and their deteriorating marriage. Antonioni's camera seductively follows Lidia as it lingers on her sad and troubled demeanour. A despondent mystery of femininity appears beautiful as Antonioni's cinematic images create curiously inconclusive narrative structures. In other words, Lidia's expression, like the vast majority of Antonioni's films «continually offer the promise of meaning [...] tantalizing the viewer and yet always withholding any unambiguous signification» (Brunette [1998]: 4).

Brunette offers an insightful observation of Antonioni's films when he describes them as «col-

lections of signifiers that turn out to have ambiguous signifieds [...], and this impetus, this need to interpret, to make sense of experience, occurs even on the level of the shot. Important narrative or even cognitive information is often withheld» (4). The very ambiguity of Lidia's expressions invites the viewer to derive his or her individual interpretation of the female protagonist's desires and even obsessions. Brunette's theory of Antonioni's films coincides with my analysis of an open interpretation of the Aldridge aesthetic of ambiguity.

Appearing in *Vogue Italia* in 2015, Aldridge's exquisite image entitled *Night Car #3* (Fig. 1) features Australian fashion model Madison Stubbington. Although the photograph was shot over fifty years after the release of Antonioni's *La notte*, Lidia remains as a restless ghost who lingers in the margins of the photograph (Fig. 2). Aldridge consciously or unconsciously takes from the scene Lidia's pensive desire of longing and replaces it with a modern refashioning. In this case, *La notte* acts as a *hypotext* to Aldridge's *hypertext*. In *Palimpsests*, Genette refers to the *hypotext* as an earlier text, on which another text, the *hypertext*, is grafted. Genette describes such a relationship as *hypertextuality* (Genette [1997]: 5). As we delve further into the intertextuality of Aldridge's work, we see that the element of ambiguity is decisively

heightened. For Genette «every hypotext is ambiguous» (Worton & Still [1990]: 39). Worton and Still explain Genette's notion of hypertextuality while highlighting its ambiguous nature:

*Objecting to Riffaterre's belief that intertextual reading is essentially sylleptic, Genette prefers to maintain the term and the concept "ambiguity": for him every hypertext is ambiguous in that it can be read as an autonomous text and also as a relational text which is dependent in one way or another on its hypotext. The difference between these two positions is not simply one of terminology: for Genette hypertextuality is a form of bricolage, whereas for Riffaterre an awareness of intertextual functioning confers unity upon the text. (Worton & Still [1990]: 39)*

Since Aldridge employs a number of varying influences anywhere from fashion to film in order to construct a hypertext, «an earlier text that it imitates or transforms» (Prince [1997]: ix), his photograph *Night Car #3* appears more ambivalent in its innate mysterious and intertextual nature. When one considers that «any writing is rewriting; and literature is always in the second degree» (Prince [1997]: ix), when applying Genette's theory of intertextuality to the work of Miles Aldridge, one is reminded that although «all literary texts are hypertextual, some are more hypertextual than



**Figure 1.** Miles Aldridge, *Night Car #3*, 2015, *Vogue Italia*. Model: Madison Stubbington.



**Figure 2.** Moviestore collection Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo.

others, more massively and explicitly palimpsestuous» (Prince [1997]: ix).

Taking the above comments into consideration and applying Genette's theory of intertextuality to Aldridge's *Night Car #3*, we see that the photograph is explicitly palimpsestuous. For example, the model (Madison) seated in the car is reminiscent of Antonioni's Lidia. Early in the film, Lidia is an uncomfortable passenger adjacent to her husband as he drives to an elegant book party in honour of his recent publication. They exchange troubled looks between one another unable to look directly into each other's eyes. As the car stops at the traffic lights, Lidia gazes out the window, her eyes speak of indifference, her passive and stoic expression conveys her feelings in regard to the approaching demise of her marriage. At this precise moment she is exquisite, her beauty captured in her impassive gaze. Lidia's curious beauty acts as an eternal echo to Aldridge's *Night Car #3*. In this photograph, Aldridge manages to produce an enigmatic image possessing a striking cinematic influence that is not often seen in fashion magazines. Aldridge explains: «Working within the very strict confines of my own visual language, I still like to kind of stretch as much as I can within that universe. It's always the universe of a woman who is deeply focused on her life, deep contemplation, deep anxiety».

Aldridge captures this sense of deep contemplation in the way the model places her hand on the window, her eyes peering out, pondering her life in deliberation. Similar to Lidia's distinct gaze, there is a longing, a desire in her eyes. Aldridge creates a narrative whereby the viewer is left to complete his story. Does she want to escape her life? Is there a sadness in her eyes that represents her current situation? She is clearly not in control and seems to submit to someone, to something. The car, in which she is encased, can seem symbolic of her life, contained by unknown restraints. These restraints are, of course, unrevealed to the viewer. They are nameless influences of which we are not aware. The narrative alludes to a particular melancholia, a *soleil noir* or black sun to borrow from Julia Kristeva's expression, reminiscent



Figure 3. Miles Aldridge, *A Dazzling Beauty #1*, 2008, Vogue Italia. Model: Masha Novoselova.

of her servitude and lack of independence<sup>3</sup>. One wonders if there is a hint of cruelty, lurking under shadows of her stylish veneer. Her innocence of youth appears vulnerable as if someone plucked her from obscurity and poverty, styled her, fashioned her and made her into a commodity. She is beautiful but her beauty destabilizes the viewer as he or she is drawn into her unspoken yet compassionate plea.

In keeping with the theme of Aldridge engaging in a semiotic dialogue with film director Antonioni, we now turn our attention to a photograph, which appeared in *Vogue Italia* in 2008 entitled *A Dazzling Beauty #1* (Fig. 3). Once again, Aldridge has chosen a female protagonist shot from the inside of a car. However, unlike Antonioni's Lidia who sits in the front seat adjacent to her husband, Russian model Masha Novoselova is alone in the backseat of the car. Conforming to a recurring theme indicative of a complex and mysterious feminine psychology, her expression is mysterious and in this case, eerily erotic. The model's positioning within the frame is not the only departure from Antonioni. This time, Aldridge has decided to shoot his model completely naked except for a feather boa. Stripping the model bare points to the manner in which Aldridge initiates thematic changes to his hypotext by engaging in the

<sup>3</sup> See Kristeva (1989).



ambiguous practice of what Genette terms *transvaluation*<sup>4</sup>.

In Aldridge's *A Dazzling Beauty #1* (Fig. 3) the hypertext takes the opposite side of its hypotext and thus the transvaluation of devaluing what was valued. For example, the clothed 1960s fashioned Lidia is the obedient wife who, although unhappy in her marriage, accompanies her husband to a book party in his honour. By departing from this stereotypical 1960s married woman and placing a naked female figure alone in the backseat of a car, Aldridge has *transvalued* or transgressed the civilized norms of feminine behaviour and ideals during the decade of *La notte*. It is not simply the case that he has chosen to place a naked woman inside an automobile but that he has decided to present her in an uncannily or uncomfortably strange way. For example, the model is devoid of all emotion and looks completely spent. Possessing the stare of a defeatist, her naked body is slumped in the back seat as if to portray the impression of a consumed commodity. In this manner, there is a clear indication of an inversion of values. As an ambiguous figure, the model invites a fascinating and ambiguous desire.

Undoubtedly, Aldridge seeks to create an unsettling image and his photographs have the ability to capture a considerable amount of storyline in a single shot. What is even more impressive is the way Aldridge extends this ability to a photographic series. His expertise in achieving such remarkable results was bolstered by his passionate collaboration with renowned Editor-in-Chief of *Vogue Italia*, Franca Sozzani. Ms. Sozzani allowed Aldridge an unprecedented *carte blanche* in which to work. Her success as the greatest Editor-in-Chief of her time was that she realized the uniqueness of her magazine. *Vogue Italia* is, of course, published in Italian and therefore the number of readers proficient in that language

limited her audience. It was crucial to attract an international audience and in particular Anglophones to be able to compete with British and American *Vogue*. Month after month Sozzani created a visual language while publishing outstanding editorial work. Renowned Photographers such as Bruce Weber and Steven Meisel joined her on this quest.

Aldridge's photography thrived while working with Sozzani and he relished in the amount of freedom with which she allowed him to work. Sozzani afforded him the flexibility to work on images that were not derived from fashion and then connect the photographs to fashion by the necessary clothing. Aldridge described the exhilaration of that period when magazines were particularly animated about the art of photography, «I think realistically, that period will never come back because of many things but because the digital revolution has meant that everything now, for the time being anyhow, is online and everything is about social media and magazines can't really exist in that world in the same way».

Since the onset of social media, the excitement surrounding fashion photography has diminished. No longer is there the thrill of anticipation of an upcoming release since, more often than not, photographs are released on Instagram and Twitter prior to being published in magazines. Aldridge describes fashion magazines during the time as a certain kind of «diamond merchants» because «they had all these diamonds but they weren't going to release them all at once. So the magazine, had these great photographers working for them but they would only release say eight pictures a month and that was what made photography seem really special».

Photographs today may certainly appear prematurely on social media however, when photographs are aligned in sequential order in the way that Aldridge is famous for, they initiate a distinctive narrative and original plot. Decisions as to where certain photographs are placed sets up relations between individual photographs, which perhaps may not have been part of their original design, and intention (Allen [2011]: 172). Fur-

<sup>4</sup> Transvaluation is the substitution of values that «can be roughly described as axiologically homogeneous» (Genette [1997]: 367). Genette's definition of transvaluation is the rewriting of a text «as a double movement of devaluation and (counter) valuation bearing on the same character» (Genette [1997]: 367).

thermore, the series of images create a short film whereby the cinematic influence is made even more apparent. Aldridge describes his relationship to cinema and how it has influenced his distinctive approach in attaining the desired image:

*The parallels with cinema are very very clear for me. It's the way I approach everything. It's the casting of the model, it's very much like casting an actress, my direction of the hairdressers, the makeup artists are also very much in keeping with who is the character and what's her world and what do we have to say with the hair and how does the hair say those things? In that respect, it looks like it is all from the same kind of movie because I've had this same kind of consistent approach to my way of making pictures. Kind of like, these are my films and these are my stories, this is my protagonist and let's put them in a situation that is interesting and let's put them somewhere the audience wouldn't expect them to be and still be beautiful and put them in a position where it's unusual but fascinating.*

Aldridge may not be heavy handed with visual clues, but that is where his genius lies, as it does not dictate what his audience should think. The audience is left to decode the meaning of his work, engage in the practice of ambiguous interpretation and succeed in the satisfying role of co-authorship.

### 3. STRANGE BEAUTY AND THE AESTHETICS OF AMBIGUITY

The intrinsic obscurity of Aldridge's photographs triumph as his fundamental aesthetic feature. Such ambiguity is the key element that heightens the viewer's aesthetic experience. Eco explains the function of ambiguity as it incites an active participation of the addressee:

*Ambiguity is a very important device because it functions as a sort of introduction to the aesthetic experience; when, instead of producing pure disorder, it focuses my attention and urges me to an interpretative effort (while at the same time suggesting how to set about decoding) it incites me toward the discov-*

*ery of an unexpected flexibility in the language with which I am dealing. (Eco [1976]: 263).*

When applying Eco's notion of the reader's active participation in formulating interpretative possibilities to the work of Miles Aldridge, one is compelled to grapple with the visual ambiguity in order to construct a meaningful analysis and subsequently a creative interpretation. Aldridge supports Eco's concept of the active role of the reader when he states:

*For me, the great joy of a great photograph is the mystery of it. So in a way, I don't really like to explain it. You want it to be an enigmatic image that people are intrigued by and stare at it and question the idea of the pictures. You are meant to look at them and question what's going on in the picture and then hopefully in some way even question your own world. That's what I'm aiming for in the work.*

To achieve such a conversation in his work, Miles prefers «to leave clues or symbols, allegorical references, just anything in there that they (the viewer) may try to interpret but in the end I'm hoping that there's never a single interpretation. It's trying to effect people in a subliminal way».

When the viewer is in a position to move freely amid a multiplicity of various psychological and aesthetic interpretations, then the work in question initiates a greater degree of collaboration between the artist and the reader; or using Eco's term, «the receiver» or «the addressee». Eco states, «Any work of art can be viewed as a message to be decoded by an addressee. But unlike most messages, instead of aiming at transmitting a univocal meaning, the work of art succeeds precisely insofar as it appears ambiguous and open-ended» (Eco [1989]: 195). In this manner Aldridge succeeds in forcing the reader to engage in an act of co-authorship since the work of art is «constituting an open product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity» (Eco [1989]: 4). Eco's notion of open work requires the collaboration of interpreters to derive meaning from the text's inherent ambiguity and incom-

pletteness. He states: «Every work of art, from a petroglyph to *The Scarlet Letter*, is open to a variety of readings – not only because it inevitably lends itself to the whims of any subjectivity in search of a mirror for its moods, but also because it wants to be an inexhaustible source of experiences which, focusing on it from different points of view, keep bringing new aspects out of it» (Eco [1989]: 24).

The second instalment in *Vogue Italia's* 2008 *Dazzling Beauty* series is *A Dazzling Beauty #2* (Fig. 4). The photograph is the perfect example of a work of art that declines to transmit a univocal meaning but instead allows the viewer to focus on it from different points of view to therefore devise new aspects out of it.

Seated topless at an opulent banquet consisting of multi-coloured seafood and bottles of chilling champagne encased in a frosty bucket of ice, Masha's penetrating stare becomes unduly formal and almost perverted or frightening. She flaunts heightened and exaggerated makeup as her eyes are perturbingly encircled in dark smoky rings. Blood red lips highlight her clown like rouge with matching pigment displayed on her fingernails. She holds a glass of wine as she feigns a bleak toast. Male patrons who have their backs turned are oblivious to the woman banqueting except for one male model that glances over his shoulder. His eyes are veiled from view by the cropped photograph to mysteriously invite the viewer to imag-



**Figure 4.** Miles Aldridge, *A Dazzling Beauty #2*, 2008, *Vogue Italia*. Model: Masha Novoselova

ine his intention and desire. All who are dining are clothed except for the female protagonist that begs one to question why? Aldridge manages to force the reader to not only confront the model's nudity but also to challenge his or her own desire.

Never one to shy away from a sense of erotic transgression or a model's subversion into a dubious world, Aldridge allows the viewer the freedom to experience a suspension of the safe, the known and the natural. In this regard, Aldridge's photographs can be disturbing and perhaps even frightening. However, this strange beauty appears alluring and captivating. In *A Dazzling Beauty #1* and *A Dazzling Beauty #2* we inherently explore a particular darkness in the beauty of the gaze. Aldridge creates women to play roles in his complex narratives and scenarios as the viewer partakes in a journey to plunge into an abyss of decadence and desire. With this in mind, *A Dazzling Beauty #2* shows the central character lose the warmth of her desire to profit from the chilling indifference of the *femme fatale*. Once again, Aldridge's foray into decadent aesthetics invites the reader to complete the work, elevating the role of the reader to that of co-author.

The reader may embark on any number of pathways to explore this notion by questioning Aldridge's ambiguous employment of transgression. In this respect, he fascinates strange desire as he takes models that customarily appear pleasant and light-hearted swiftly morphing them into unsettling objects of infatuation. Masha, like the traditional *femme fatale* who «comes in many guises, but she is always Other» (Stott [1992]: 37), transmits a desire that crosses the boundaries of fashion to promote an aesthetic of destabilization. Stott elaborates further on the meaning of the *femme fatale*:

*She is always outside, either literally [...] or metaphorically, for as a sexually fatal woman she represents chaos, darkness, death, all that lies beyond the safe, the known and the normal. In effect, the major common feature of the femme fatale is that of positionality: she is a multiple sign singularized by her position of Otherness.* (Stott [1992]: 37-38)



Aldridge seeks to unearth all that «lies beyond the safe» present in fashion or what society considers «the known and the normal» to confront traditional social norms and challenge a publication's regular readership. This rebellion against conventional customs and dress of the time began early in Aldridge's career as the photographer was drawn towards an exciting revolt against traditional fashion photography of the 1980s and 1990s. During this time he explored and developed the notion to engage models in becoming co-creators.

#### 4. DYNAMIC INTERPLAY: MODEL AS CO-CREATOR

Proposing an anti-glamour, almost documentary approach to fashion photography, the period of *grunge photography* that Aldridge describes as «falling into» was an exciting alternative movement in 20<sup>th</sup> century counterculture that at first evolved from Seattle's underground music scene. Photographers such as Juergen Teller, David Sims and Glen Luchford delighted in exhibiting models that were strikingly at odds with the era of the supermodel. This manner of representation was a direct and almost violent reaction to the message that fashion magazines periodically presented. No longer interested in showcasing the fantasies of rich, glamorous and successful individuals, photographers were bringing their focus to an underbelly of rejects, and even drug addicts. Heroin chic was shockingly being championed during this time. Magazines such as *The Face* in particular were month after month publishing compelling photographs.

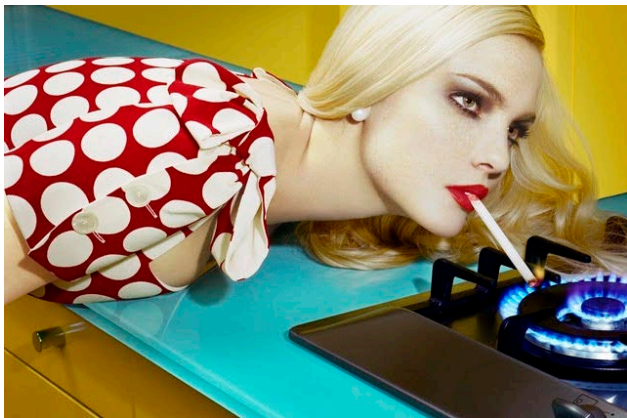
Following the honeymoon with grunge, which lasted for approximately two years, there was a reaction back towards glamour, which meant that the door for Aldridge was once again open to new ideas in fashion photography. This next movement heralded a change for Aldridge as «magazines were so interesting and so exciting that I could see a place of cinematic vision which was nothing to do with grunge at all but I got a chance to say something that I wanted to say». Once the door

was open, he followed his distinctive formula to create his compelling images as he discovered the intrinsic and indispensable role of the model as a co-creator: «I've worked with models and with actresses and I find the models are much more easy to get into a certain state of mind that I want to photograph and the actresses, they often need a lot more explanation, a back story as to why is she here and what does that mean?».

In this manner, models can possess a very pliable ability to arrive on the set of a photo shoot without any preconceived ideas. With models as natural and impulsive co-creators, Aldridge could envision a distinctive cinematic aesthetic and the opportunity to express what he wanted to convey. As Aldridge evolved as a photographer he became interested in «this kind of woman who is not just happy with all the trappings of success but is actually questioning them, questioning everything about her life». Possessing the ability to transform the everyday universe of a woman into a photograph infused with intrigue, his images have the power to draw one into their beautiful yet perplexing world, often challenging society's norms. His fondness for working closely with models becomes a collaborative effort as together they create characters that are often inexplicable and acquire a distinctive cinematic quality.

One photograph, which illustrates the collaborative effort between photographer and model, is *Home Works #3* (Fig. 5), a fashion story published in *Vogue Italia* in 2008. Brazilian model, Caroline Trentini, bathes in a kaleidoscope of intense bright colours as she delicately yet fearlessly approaches the gas jet from a stove in order to light a cigarette. Her pseudo reptilian reach to the flame invokes a world of fantasy as her alluring eyes beckon one towards the light. She seems oblivious to the danger of the fire so close to her long blonde hair and exquisite features. Aldridge describes the freedom of creating such an extraordinary image:

*When I asked this model to light the cigarette from the stove, she took that direction and she transformed it in her own way into the most, not really sexual, but*



**Figure 5.** Miles Aldridge, *Home Works #3*, 2008, Vogue Italia. Model: Caroline Trentini.

*extraordinary beauty or female beauty. To take this one mundane act of lighting a cigarette and make it so incredibly and aesthetically beautiful, visually beautiful, was remarkable. I thought it was the length of her neck, the expression of her eyes, the way the cigarette is held between the lips.*

The mundane and the banal become beautiful as the model is transformed into what could be described as a siren of the cinema. Through a collaborative effort, Aldridge is able to elevate the model to that of an actress whereby his images become *mises-en-scène* encompassing intriguing storylines. Together, photographer and model collaborate to compose stories that have the ability to represent an entire film in a single image. This creative power morphs into cinematic brilliance, as his images never date because they represent his unique era of cinema capable of leaving a lasting legacy in fashion photography. Like Antonioni, he is the director of his *short films*, photographs that constantly challenge the viewer to partake in an exciting act of co-authorship and to derive multiple interpretations.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that when we examine the *Antonionian film* tapestry to identify the prior *bricolage* in the creation of Aldridge's hypertextual work, we initiate a captivating semi-

otic discourse that leads to a strong sense of ambiguity. Faced with such ambiguity the reader is subsequently free to interpret the photograph elevating the role of the reader/spectator to that of co-author. Such an exploration provides a window into Aldridge's interpretation of contemporary culture as he incites the reader to take the initiative to engage in a variety of legitimate readings through an examination of his unique and captivating aesthetic. The semiotic codes within the photograph are illuminated through the *intention* of Aldridge's ambiguous hypotext, that of the *Antonionian film*. In other words, the intention «is not displayed by the textual surface... One has to decide to "see" it» (Eco [1992]: 64).

In deciding to *see* or *seek* the photographer's intention, no matter how implicit or explicit such an intention may be, is to unearth the profound impact that Michelangelo Antonioni had on Aldridge as a photographer. A photographer who is capable of creating dramatic *mise-en-scène* and who initiates a captivating discourse with the spectator or addressee. In the introduction to the 2006 limited edition *Miles Aldridge: The Cabinet*, controversial American singer-songwriter Marilyn Manson, who also features as one of the models in the collection, astutely describes Aldridge's ability to transform a fashion photograph into a dramatic *mise-en-scène*:

*Miles Aldridge is a director at heart. His images are anything but "portraits" of a subject. They are his actors, his actresses. There is a certainty in his mise-en-scène that has drama, tension, panic and tragic desire. Each photograph has a very sacred pathology to every angle and obsession to detail. There is genius in the very deliberate blankness on the face of his models that enables a transference of identity. (Manson [2006]: 5)*

Possessing a beautiful collection of iconic work in the domain of fashion photography, Aldridge creates a unique world that mysteriously serves as a mask to his phantasms. Each photograph is not simply a story but an entire film as he demonstrates his ability to push the boundaries of fashion, art and culture. What is undeniable is the

fact that the work of Miles Aldridge leaves us with more questions than answers and the prospect of delving into a vast array of visual and intellectual stories infused with his brilliant creativity.

#### REFERENCES

- Aldridge, M., 2006: *Miles Aldridge: The Cabinet*, introd. by M. Manson, Reflex New Art Gallery, Amsterdam.
- Allen, G., 2011: *Intertextuality*, Routledge, New York.
- Brunette, P., 1998: *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Chatman, S., 1985: *Antonioni, Or, The Surface of the World*, University of California Press, Berkley.
- Eco, U., 1976: *A Theory of Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- Eco, U., 1989: *The Open Work*, transl. by Anna Cancogni with an introduction by David Robey, Hutchinson Radius, London.
- Eco, U. et al., 1992: *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. by S. Collini, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Genette, G., 1997: *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, transl. by C. Newman and C. Doubinsky, foreword by Gerald Prince, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln-London.
- Kristeva, J., 1989: *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Manson, M., 2006: *Introduction*, in *Miles Aldridge: The Cabinet*, Reflex New Art Gallery, Amsterdam, p. 5.
- Stott, R., 1992: *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Worton, M., Still, J., 1990: *Intertextuality Theories and Practices*, Manchester University Press, Manchester-New York.