Is it not strange how some events are fixed in the memory – silhouetted, sharp, distinct, like one of Mr. Aubrey Beardsley’s “latest latitudes”?

– Emily Soldene, “How the Alhambra Was Shut,”
The Sketch, January 30, 1895

Photomechanically reproduced pen-and-ink line drawings were hugely popular in the magazines of the 1890s. Illustrators such as Phil May, Maurice Greiffenhagen, Leonard Raven-Hill, Bernard Partridge, and Fred Pegram produced social caricatures that, above all, explored the everyday in late-Victorian society. These sketches depicted aspects of the social scene that the photograph could not. The modern illustrator was a knowing observer of the contemporary scene differentiating in minimal drawings the meaningful details of the bodies and dress of city dwellers. Furthermore, their sketches could depict subject matter that would have been unacceptable if shown in photographic halftones. The photograph was considered too direct and too detailed to show poverty, carnage, or sex. Critics saw the sketch as a radical new art form able to portray contemporary life directly to a modern audience unfettered by academic conventions. The sketch was characterized as an immediate, subjective impression, its speed and authenticity attested to by the supposed autographic qualities of process reproduction. These sketches gave magazine readers a reassuring sense that the city and its denizens were knowable, legible. Rapid minimal sketches were deployed in the press as the antithesis to the overdetailed, static photograph, yet, as we will see, these illustrations were influenced both directly and indirectly by photography.

Photorelief reproduction enabled many kinds of illustration to be printed in the books and magazines of the 1890s. Although the daily papers could only print simple line images on their presses, the longer production cycles of weekly and monthly magazines produced a rich pictorial mixture. The amount of detail, the style, and the presence or absence of tone varied according to the text that the illustration accompanied. A certain style of illustration was associated with the imaging of news and different ones with fiction or fashion. It was usual for detailed tonal images to be used with
fiction and bold line images to be used in social caricature. These handmade drawings and paintings appeared alongside the halftone photographs that were now becoming more prominent in periodicals.²

Photography and the distribution of photographic images through the halftone, influenced the way in which the handmade imagery was perceived and created. Wash images, used in the press, for example, became more factual, detailed, and tonal, a shift Walter Crane referred to as the “photographic effect.”³ The pen-and-ink sketch, also in response to the photograph, became more minimal and gestural, whereas decorative pen-and-ink images by Beardsley and the followers of Crane and Morris depicted fantastical worlds entirely removed from the factuality of the camera. Yet all of these different genres of image, including Beardsley’s ersatz wood engravings, were reproduced using photorelief processes.

As far back as the 1870s, photorelief line processes had enabled line drawings to be reproduced. Yet it wasn’t until the 1890s, with the increasing use of photographic halftones by the press, that there was an explosion of line illustrations. It is clear, then, that the variety and number of images in the press were not just technologically determined and that all of these methods were interrelated. Moreover, because they were all embedded in specific media and directed at specific audiences, they were not simply free-floating technologies. The publisher and illustration pioneer Henry Blackburn noted that mechanical processes had been “neglected and despised” by illustrators before the “sudden freak of fashion” for them in the 1890s.⁴ Indeed, part of the reason for this craze in publishing was that the dynamic black and white of the sketch provided a relief from the repetitive monochrome rectangles of the halftone. While photographs in the press were static, the sketch was, in contrast, lively, even frenetic at times. The photograph was highly detailed, the sketch minimal and incomplete. The halftone was mechanical, and the sketch emphatically asserted its handmade qualities. However, there were other cultural factors that link the photograph and the sketch. I suggest that the sketch and the photograph were both particularly suited to the fragmented editorial structures of the illustrated magazines of the 1890s, that both genres provided viewers with a swift reading of the surfaces of modernity, and that both could be inexpensively and rapidly reproduced.

The process imagery of the 1890s can be divided into two major camps in terms of their placement and style – realist and decorative. Decorative illustration included the work of Beardsley and Charles Ricketts, the Birmingham School, and other illustrators associated with the Aesthetic and Arts and Crafts Movements. It was often highly detailed and ornate and appeared to be slow, heavy, deliberate, and time consuming in its making. Its subject matter was historical, mythological, or symbolic, and it used distorted figures, organic forms, and fantastic events. Its various styles looked back to the archaic or the exotic, as distinct from quotidian modernity. Gleeson White wrote of the illustrator and wood engraver Ricketts: “Emotion, passion