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OPINION

Between Decay and Decorum: Photographers' Awareness of the Urban Scene

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ABSTRACT

The development of the metropolis and the birth of photography are contemporary phenomena, but their relationship is not unidirectional; photography has not only represented the city, it has also suggested its best form and conditioned its ideology. In the dialectical opposition between decay and decorum, a powerful instrument of urban-social despotism, the photographers of the city have sometimes sided with the powers in place disciplining spaces and at other times with the critics of urbanism and its failures: but is a clear opposition between the two attitudes really possible? To what extent can showing the decay can incite the restoration of decorum, and how? Has the visual denouncement of urban social marginalization contributed to urge interventions of repression rather than rebalancing his situation?

By quickly retracing the history of urban photography from the 19th century to the present day, this text tries to identify its ambiguities and highlight some attempts at apprehending an image of the urban environment that includes a redemption in terms of inclusion, justice, and citizenship.

SICINIUS - What is the city but the people?

CITIZENS - True, the people are the city.

[William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*]

Many different cities overlap that physical, blunt and edgy thing that we call a city: the built city, the one that is lived in, the one that is simply looked at. The city of spaces and the city of bodies. At the end of the day, what we call a city is an image that is formed before our mental eyes, layer after layer, as if passing through multiple sheets of translucent drawing paper.

Long before 1927 when the German director Walter Ruttman crowned Berlin as the theophany of the metropolis in his cinematic homage

Symphony of a Metropolis, the contemporary urban experience had already become powerfully, almost exclusively visual. The very concept of metropolis asserted itself in the 19th century as a colossal show in which citizens are both the actors, or rather a jumbled mass of bit players, and the individual spectators. The *flâneur*, the hero of the metropolis, the animal that is most comfortable in that jungle, of which he is both the consumer and the defenceless victim, is in fact a hypertrophic eye that walks with hands in pocket, like the visitor at an exhibition in a famous drawing by Herbert Bayer.[1]

Sight is therefore the sense that the metropolitan man is required to develop to the highest degree if he wants to have a chance at social survival. This is why the modern city was the photographed city, to the point that these two expressions are practically synonymous. We can even say "this is a city" when looking at Paul Citroen's chaotic photomontages, whose spaces—if they were real—would be impossible to live in.

It is no coincidence that the metropolis and photography are contemporaries. Just as it is no coincidence that among the many inventors of photography the only one to achieve institutional recognition was Daguerre, who made his fortune with the Diorama, an illusionist show, a variant of the Panorama that in the 19th century was a very powerful albeit underestimated medium for consumption of the urban image as a visual commodity, as a show.[2]

It can safely be said that the metropolis could not have been what it was in the two long centuries of modernity without photography. Moreover, it can also be said that the birth of the latter required the existence of the former: the scientific, optical and chemical knowledge necessary to invent photography had already been available for two or three centuries. The right fire starter was missing to inflame the "burning desire" (Geoffrey Batchen) for mechanical reproduction of reality: there had to be something to look at. Something that was not only worth looking at, but that existed above all to be looked at. An object-simulacrum, therefore a commodity. But an absolute commodity, containing all the commodities. That total commodity was the metropolis.[3]

As a narrator of the modern city, photography has not simply lent itself passively to the game of spectacularisation. It was not just a medium. It did not merely offer the most efficient channel for mass distribution, acting as persuasive propaganda for urban ideology. Rather it established the discursive conditions of urban transformation, anticipated its evolution and in some cases dictated its solutions.

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1   https://i.pinimg.com/originals/8e/23/e3/8e23e3ba2ffcb57ccd74c36bb3a6835c.jpg

2   Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk Im Zeitalter Seiner Technischen Reproduzierbarkeit." In *Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955).

3   Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire. The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, Mass. - London: MIT Press, 1997).

Forty years ago at the University of Bologna I went to visit a luminary of space history, Lucio Gambi, to tell him that there were already too many graduates in letters, so I had thought of graduating in postcards. He accepted my joke, and my thesis project, without blinking. I wanted to try to demonstrate that illustrated postcards in the era of the great demolitions of the perimeter walls and the razing of the "unhealthy blocks" that the 19th-century city had inherited from the past were not only a small showcase of bourgeois pride, but an active workshop to experiment with the possible forms of a new city, and at the same time also an excellent advertising agency for the creation of consensus around it.

I have always been amazed that Michel Foucault—who described the (almost always visual) languages with which power structures political discourse, a theorist of the panoptic vision as a paradigm of that power, of the splendour of torment as the culmination of the repressive system—as an extraordinary reader of Velázquez's *Meninas,* paid so little attention to the role that power entrusted to urban photography from the beginning. Having the mission to make visible—and above all communicable—the idea of *decorum* as the prime urban virtue; and to condemn its infringement as perverse and threatening: *decay*. This is the pair of concepts that intertwine like *yin* and *yang*, one necessary and complementary to the other, one in the heart of the other, in the photographic images that urban culture feeds on and in which it is reflected.

It is worth mentioning a concept that will sound obvious: all the cities in history wanted to be seen. They all wanted to provide an optical-symbolic equivalent of their power scheme, a visual archetype of which each concrete city was a credible approximation. The ancient city, with the sacred distance of its acropolises from the wooden houses of the commoners. The medieval city, with the fortress of power set like a jewel in the chaotic labyrinth of the village of artisans. The Baroque city, with a linear perspective that forced all eyes to converge on the lord's palace. The bourgeois city, with the curtain of building façades aligned along the avenues, shield, embankment and insurmountable barrier for the proletarian quarters behind them.

Even when it was not done on purpose, the city was designed. Even a spontaneous city is somehow premeditated by the hierarchical relationships that underlie it. But its visual predictability does not reproduce the power it serves without contrast. The prince designs the city, but those who live in it then change it. The lived-in city is the result of an ongoing conflict between public space and private bodies. The function of urban planning, according to Lewis Mumford, is to transform power into form. The city is a power that takes the form of stone, steel, concrete and asphalt.[4]

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4   Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961).

But this formalisation takes place through conflict. Where urban power is not the arbiter. The planner is one of the players. His task is to organise the city's spaces in such a way as to make it possible to deploy the imperious projects of the dominant classes and interests. The city of the urban planner seeks to maximise the functions consistent with that project while minimising rival positions.

Urban conflict is not made up only of barricades: it is a long, slow underground battle between premeditated spaces and concrete bodies that ultimately produces a vision of the city that may not even match the one foreseen by urban planners. Images are both the battleground and the weapon of these conflicts.

In general, it is the established power that produces images of the city. It has the strength to produce more of them, and more powerful. The promotional and persuasive image of the city emanating from power affirms a principle of adequacy. The appearance of the city must confirm its character as a space maintained under the disciplined control of a project that is by definition beneficial. The bourgeois couplet decorum-decay finds its powerful medieval archetype in the series of frescoes by Ambrogio Lorenzetti for the town hall in Siena, in the form of an exemplary comparison (on the two opposing walls of the Hall of the Nine) between good governance and tyranny. According to Chiara Frugoni's interpretation, it is a powerful propaganda manifesto with which the government of the Nine promised well-being in exchange for consensus, exploiting the fear of citizens in the face of growing urban violence, in the innovative form of a powerfully visual political manifesto where the image of the real city is used both as a source of hope and as a threat. Perhaps for the first time in Western painting, a theory of power was affirmed not only by incarnating it in allegorical figures, but through the realistic representation of lived-in spaces. In Lorenzetti's frescoes, the image of the city and its ideology coincide, they are the same thing.

The city of good governance is therefore the respectable city. The idea of a city that sees any deterioration as threatening precedes the words of political theory with images. Finally formalised in the 1800s, Pierpaolo Ascari reminds us in his *Corpi e recinti* that the concept of *decorum* shows an extraordinary continuity and adaptability to different regimes, both democratic and authoritarian, from the rhetoric of 19th-century sanitation to the policies of social exclusion in today's cities.[5]

However, all the visual languages with which that concept has been put to work, shown and demonstrated, invoked and imposed in the last two centuries have yet to be analysed. From an iconological point of view, we should ask ourselves what role photography—the medium of choice for the

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5   Pierpaolo Ascari, *Corpi e recinti. Estetica ed economia politica del decoro* (Verona: Ombre corte, 2019).

modern city—played in this process of defining an urban commandment that is inviolable yet constantly subject to conflict.

Which side of the barricades were the photographers on? With the urban powers or the city dwellers? Rereading the history of urban photography under the bright light of that concept, decorum, can offer some surprises.

I am thinking of Eugène Atget, the photographer of early 20th century Paris, who in his own way was a late Baudelairian *flâneur*, barely masked by his utilitarian trade: producing images to sell them. Atget claimed to produce *useful* documents: for the museum curator, for the artist, for the collector, for the artisan. Atget did not work directly for the urban power, although he sold a considerable body of images to the libraries and archives of the city of Paris. Long commandeered by Surrealists, the recent return of his work to the field of documentaries has proven fragile: Atget does not document the Paris of his time. Indeed, he seems to want to avoid the Paris of his time. There is not a single image of the Eiffel Tower in his bottomless archive of thousands of images. Baron Haussmann's disfigurements are also almost completely ignored. It could only have been a specific choice. Atget's Paris is narratively and artificially selected: a city of pavements, shops, streets and corridors, which when animated are populated only with commoners, rag merchants[6] and prostitutes. On closer inspection, they are the same characters as those of Baudelaire.[7] Moreover, Atget and Baudelaire are united by the attention of Walter Benjamin, who see in the photographs of the former something he could have said in some ways of the latter: they seem to be clues collected at the scene of a crime.[8]

But it is not in this capacity, as an inspector on behalf of history, that Atget was embraced by contemporary and subsequent cultures. Collector of an anachronistic marginal city, an alternative to the modern version, he was relegated to being an element of his own scenario. His own biography was subjected to genetic mutation, made to correspond to the romantic narrative of the old photographer, a destitute former actor, dirt poor, who to survive stood on street corners selling his photographs reflecting an immense talent and depth that he himself did not comprehend. But that is not what Atget was. He had left the stage but was a cultured man who continued to lecture on Molière and also directed a satire magazine. He was a refined professional, he called himself an "author-editor," he had an excellent, qualified clientele of over 400 collectors and institutions who during his lifetime bought over 17,000 prints and a few thousand plates from him, he lived and worked in a well-furnished and dignified house-studio with a large library and a collection of high quality prints (which his

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6   https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/64726/eugene-atget-chiffonier-french-1899-1901/

7   Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: un poeta lirico nell'età del capitalismo avanzato*, ed. by Giorgio Agamben, Barbara Chitussi, and Clemens-Carl Härle (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2012).

8   https://www.moma.org/collection/works/54255

photographs show us).[9] Reduced to the caricature of a lame sidewalk photographer, converted into an "artist without knowing it," Atget was sterilised as a nostalgic visual narrator of that other city, fading, perhaps already lost.

The issue of Atget's ideological neutralisation raises a question that the text you are reading can only verbalise. By its nature, photography should more naturally be on the side of the second city, the city that resists, the inertial city of life lived by individuals. By its nature the photographic experience is refractory to the totality of urban vision. City photography works by scanning fragments, running along the border between the systematic and premeditated city and the city of anomie, uncertainty, improvisation. In search of the irregular, the disturbing, the transient, the accidental. The photographer contrasts the sweaty collar of the walker to the town planner's toilette. Urban photography is the irony of urban planning.

Have photographers understood this propensity? Did they indulge it? Did they put it to good use? If yes, which target did they choose, what resistance did they encounter? On the other hand, is there an opposite, compliant photography? Is there a propagandistic photography of decorum?

The answer to this last question must certainly be yes. Urban photography, in all its different genres, has often helped to build an ideology of decorum as a justification for social exclusion. But very often its authors have no names celebrated by the Vasarian stories of photography. They are lesser-known names, often completely unknown, of photographers of commercial urban views. Of illustrated postcards, the first great visual medium of the 20th century, humble and very powerful in their hammering, patient, meticulous work of affirming a bourgeois brand on the face of the historic city. The mosaic of an efficient, clean, decent city was composed of tiles produced in the back offices of stationery stores, tobacco shops and cafés, with cheap and efficient phototype machines producing small runs that allowed the constant updating of the views. Customers always found the latest version of their daily landscape on the racks, as if the images did not tolerate the past but rather urgently pushed towards the new, the healthy, the modern, constantly erasing the old, the dilapidated, the useless.

These vernacular producers, widespread, semi-anonymous, for the masses, obviously had their most famous champions, their models to emulate. In Italy it was definitely the Alinari brothers, whose plates were also used directly for countless series of postcards, as well as an infinite number of artistic-tourism publications dedicated to the "One Hundred Cities of Italy," sold in newsstands.[10]

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9   Jacques Bonnet, *Eugène Atget. Un photographe si discret* (Paris: Les belles lettres, 2014). See also *Photographies,* numéro hors-série "Colloque Atget" (Paris: March 1986).

10   Arturo Carlo Quintavalle, Gli Alinari (Florence: Alinari, 2003).

The Alinari, a powerful Florentine photography dynasty, also had an extensive selection of "genre" photographs, dedicated to scenarios that today we could call degrading: beggars,[11] common people, street workers. A production that was part of the very commercial *topos* of the picturesque, to which I will return. But the real contribution of the "Alinari style" to the definition of an ideology of urban decorum was the establishment of a norm, of a set of rules of "documentary" representation of urban artefacts, rules that were accepted as legitimate and inviolable for almost a century. More than a style, it was a system that exalted the uniqueness of the architectural artefact, whose epitome was the singular monument,[12] the palace, the architectural and historical edifice considered to be unique), its perfect legibility, its brilliant isolation from the urban context (accentuated through renovation when in reality it was less so), its transformation into a sort of ornament, a manageable, removable object. In short, the style clarified the hierarchical distinction of the city between significant excellence and minor construction, a sort of visual classism that transparently replicated the social layer. Distinguishing between noble and vulgar, unrepeatable and replaceable, the Alinari value scale morally authorised the liberal "sanitising" demolitions of the late 1800s followed by those of the destructive fascist pickaxe.

The implicit link between demolishers and photographers sometimes became apparent. Charles Marville,[13] for example, who a few decades before Atget photographed the chaotic old Paris with its cobblestone streets that continues to inspire nostalgia. Well, Marville's patron was Baron Haussmann, prefect of the Seine, who was simultaneously demolishing[14] that old Paris to make room for the very respectable *boulevards* (and ballistically convenient in the event of riots) of the world's capital. The aesthetisation of what was being erased served as an alibi for the radical generic mutation of the urban organism: Marville was the skilful builder of a picturesque city, unfortunately needing to be demolished because it was "unhealthy," but which could be preserved as a memory in images. Factory of preventive nostalgia, embalming offered as an alibi for real destruction.

Did someone take the side of those who still lived in the city that was about to be erased? Yes, on the other side of the barricade—at least this is what the common historical-photographic story tells us—there were noble photographers documenting the injustices and distortions of the bourgeois city. Humanitarian and reformist photographers who used their craft to denounce the miserable conditions of the city that the other photography ignored: the desolate city of the proletariat, the marginalised, the poor.

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11   https://www.alinari.it/en/detail/GBB-F-005614-0000

12   https://www.alinari.it/en/detail/GBB-F-007382-0000

13   https://www.moma.org/collection/works/51489

14   https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/307389

Strangely forgiving of the commonplace, Marshall McLuhan believed that "To see a photograph of the local slum makes the condition unbearable."[15] Who were the images of decay taken by those visual scouts really meant for? Not grassroots emancipation movements. The confidence in the effectiveness of reporting by means of images was based on an appeal to the conscience and perhaps to the prudence of the rich. They were warnings not to overly compress a spring that could snap back in unpleasant ways.

The mission of "bringing the light" to the dark ravines of society was explicitly taken on by the journalist and social reformer Jacob Riis in the vast investigation with which he denounced the conditions of the filthy tenements for immigrants in lower Manhattan. Riis brought that light with his magnesium flash (which sometimes set straw mattresses on fire and risked toasting the objects being photographed) in the slums of those same Italian immigrants that he had previously captured on film on Ellis Island. Riis justified his intrusive and aggressive view[16] with the conviction that he was a social explorer with a self-assigned mandate to blow the lid off of hell to reveal it to the eyes of those who would never enter the slums despite living in the same city, but rather feared the threatening[17] decay from afar.[18] Supported by a conservative populist president, Theodore Roosevelt, Riis is rightly defined by Antonello Frongia as an urban planner, albeit of a very particular kind, a sort of freelancer offering "a view that unfolds before the citizens without the mediation of codified representation systems."[19] The images that Riis projected with a magic lantern during his lectures worked as an incitement to a policy of slum clearance, of urban reclamation, conveying the problem of decay that previously did not exist as such through images. But in this way the images themselves became the real problem to be solved. It was the bothersome presence of those images in the public discourse that needed to be removed.

In fact, the eruption of images of decay in the consciousness of the wealthy classes helped to change the disposition of the urban objects, especially in an exemplary case: the crumbling block of Mulberry Bend[20] on the Lower East Side where Riis had focused his investigative efforts was demolished by the city and replaced with a nice park[21] after a long and controversial affair during which the photographer even ended up suing the city of New York, guilty of not removing the rubble that had

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15   Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 214.

16   https://www.moma.org/collection/works/51194

17   https://www.moma.org/collection/works/50859

18   Jacob A Riis, *How the Other Half Lives. Studies Among the Tenements of New York, with 100 Photographs from the Jacob A. Riis Collection, and a New Preface by Charles A. Madison* (New York: Scribner's, 1890). https://doi.org/10.1037/12986-000.

19   Antonello Frongia, *L'occhio del fotografo e l'agenda del planner. Studio su Jacob A. Riis* (Venice: Toletta, 2000), 269.

20   https://www.moma.org/collection/works/51022

21   https://collections.mcny.org/Collection/Mulberry%20Bend%20Park.%20%20New%20York-24U39Y24I5O.html

been left abandoned on the spot. In retaliation he was not invited to the inauguration of Mulberry Park but snuck in all the same, ironically getting reprimanded by a policeman because he walked on the newly planted grass. Nonetheless he proudly laid claim to the powerful effect of his *Battle with the Slum*: "Go look at it today and see how it is..., decent and orderly because sunlight can now enter and shine down on the children who had the right to play there."[22] But Riis's photographs did not follow the trail of the inhabitants evicted from that demolished block, probably marginalised in the Bronx, or in Brooklyn or other second-step migratory cities like Chicago. Once out of the frame, the problem disappeared simultaneously from the philanthropist's good conscience and the administrator's embarrassment.

In the same years as Hine, painter and lithographer Heinrich Zille[23] wandered around the miserable Mietskasernen of Berlin. For Gisèle Freund he was "the first 'concerned' photographer,"[24] but today we would call him a freelancer. Perhaps the first explorer of urban squalor on an explicit mandate from the community was the Scot Thomas Annan,[25] who in 1866 provided the Glasgow City Improvement Trust with visual documentation of the city's overcrowded slums. In contrast, in 1896 a package of ordered and numbered photographs was presented to the British Parliament by Dr. James Spottiswoode Cameron, the doctor in charge of monitoring the health conditions of the ultraproletarian block of Quarry Hill in Leeds. Sceptical, the honourable parliamentarians asked him if he intended to route people up with postcards."[26] This question was sarcastic but not without foundation: the photographs provided by Cameron were really postcards, almost completely devoid of people, his idea of renewal was a technical project entrusted to professionals of"sanitising enthusiasm" working on people who were required to remain passive objects of study and intervention. The residents of the neighbourhood to be renewed were never consulted.

This kind of photography, which was supposed to be clinical, investigative, classifying, cataloguing was obviously not so objective: it was the view of the bourgeoisie of the West that cast away the human consequences of industrialism from itself and from its responsibilities. With his presumption of mechanical truthfulness, photography was the perfect alibi for this alienation. For a curious paralogism, since photography reproduces nature as it is, everything that is photographed belongs to nature. And photography thus naturalises poverty as an element of the social landscape.

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22   Jacob A. Riis, *The Battle with the Slum* (New York: Courier Corporation, 2013), 291.

23   http://www.zeno.org/nid/2000191023X

24   Gisèle Freund, *Photographie et société* (Paris: Seuil, 1974); English translation *Photography and Society*, trans. David R. Godine (Boston: David R. Godine, 1980), 93.

25   https://www.moma.org/collection/works/50414

26   Cited in John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation. Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 143.

As written by Adolphe Smith, a socialist journalist, in the preface to *Street Life in London,* reportage by John Thomson,[27] 1877:

> The unquestionable accuracy of this testimony will enable us to present true types of the London Poor and shield us from the accusation of either underrating or exaggerating individual peculiarity of appearance.[28]

The message is clear: photographers do not create poverty, they only document it, with the most scientific and unassailable tool and method.

The moral mechanism of showing things to correct them tends to hide its most serious mystification behind a humanitarian alibi. This kind of photography establishes a linear link between two points: the victim of fall and his benefactor. As Roland Barthes observed while deconstructing the photographs of the Abbé Pierre,[29] when the image of the benefactor, the saviour, invades the iconography of suffering, then it becomes "the alibi...to replace the signs of charity with the reality of justice with impunity."[30] In fact, a third character is carefully kept out of the frame: the person responsible. The obliteration of the persecutor from the field of the image results in his concealment in public discourse. It is a well-known mechanism employed in the iconography of humanitarian agencies seeking funds. The hunger is visible. The benefactor acts. The person responsible for the conditions that produce the hunger is nowhere to be seen. As Luc Boltanski theorises in *Distant Suffering*, the dissymmetry between the two actors who remain on the field, the victim and the benefactor (who in our case enters the photograph as the author of the image: the unveiling photographer), functions as a powerful mechanism of impunity for those politically responsible for the inequalities.[31] Like bathtubs, the photograph of the decay seems to have an overflow drain: if the scandal produced should exceed the level of safety and transform reassuring philanthropy into rebellion, the photographer himself is blamed as the culprit. The pain and anger at what we see happening to the victim is unleashed on those who show it to us. Because who else is there in the scene? Nobody. The photographer would like to be a willing witness, but is often dismayed to be identified as the alter ego of the invisible executioner, his shadow. The photographer who shows the effects of social inequality is singled out by the viewer of the images as a profiteer, a speculator, an exploiter of poverty. Unable to detail the chain of causes and effects that generates misery, an aetiology that lies outside his images, the photographer becomes a pornographer. If pornography is defined as a representation

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27 https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/objects/lse:gox325doj

28 Cited in Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 146.

29 https://idata.over-blog.com/0/07/64/28/abbe-pierre/abbe-pierre3.jpg

30 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957); English translation *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972), 49.

31 Luc Boltanski, *La souffrance à distance* (Paris: Métailié, 1993).

that satisfies desire through the image itself that aroused it, photography depicting decay is pornography. It satisfies our need for moral compensation with the same images that created it.

In Italy, in any case, the institutions did not even want to run the relative risk of a consolatory and atoning photograph. Here, the great social surveys advanced by the parliament of the young unitary kingdom did without photographs, and not because they were not technically available, but because they were aware that photographs would not produce

those uniquely interpretable data that the statistical rigour of those in charge demanded.

Thus photography of misery remained the prerogative of two different but complementary photographic records. Postcard racks[32] and police records.[33] These were the two languages used to express post-unitarian decay in Italy, defusing its explosive potential. Picturesque and repressive.

In 1910, Gustavo Bonaventura wrote in *La Fotografia Artistica*, the flagship magazine of Italian photographic pictorialism:

> ...the immense human selfishness neglects to suffer seeing an old man sleep on a bench on a cold winter night and a mother feed her hungry, unruly children with tears. They are pains that are not thought of because they are pains that you look at without seeing them, worried by the thought of a good night's rest and a full stomach, while they could instead serve to produce an extensive series of images marked by the sad, bitter poetry of misery and martyrdom.[34]

The moral is very clear: woe to the photographer who turns away when he sees a wretch as it would be a gigantic waste of excellent artistic ideas! An excellent synthesis of the philosophy of that subgenre that runs throughout the history of photography, which someone has given the name of *miserabilism*. That is, the satisfaction of representing poverty in images, transcended in the poetics of rags.

The photographers finally ended up going there on behalf of the State, to the shadowy South, but following weapons and not the notebooks of the southerners. They went to photograph the peasants recruited by the brigand leaders, portraying them preferably dead,[35] dehumanised corpses, the inglorious trophy of a war against our Apaches and Sioux, who did not even have the ambiguous gift of being ennobled in an epic film of the far south.

32   https://i.pinimg.com/originals/29/92/e8/2992e813d1b8d79e9d0beb560197cfdf.jpg

33   https://www.italianways.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Mostra-Lombroso-9.jpg

34   Cited in Paolo Costantini, *"La fotografia artistica" 1904-1917. Visione italiana e modernità* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1990), 168.

35   https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1b/Nicola_Napolitano.jpg

Is it possible to escape the claws that twist photographs of social inequalities against themselves? What kind of photographic approach allows one to navigate between the twin rocks of decorum and decay without crashing against one of the two?

It is appropriate to acknowledge some photographers who in recent years were more aware of the risk, who fought against the complicit tendency of photography.

Martha Rosler,[36] an American feminist artist, devised an alternative kind of documentary reportage in the 1970s, with a now icastic work on the "road of drunks" in Manhattan: *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descritpive Systems*. The exhibition and accompanying book were structured in diptychs of words and images, side by side with each other. Both the "inadequate descriptive systems" explicitly rejected any evaluative rhetoric. The words were lists of nouns and adjectives related to the semantic cluster of marginalisation, while the photographs—devoid of human beings—frontally framed the fronts of the shops where homeless people lay to sleep at night. "They are not reports from a frontier, messages from a voyage of discovery or self-discovery,"[37] the author explained.

Rather than pretending to reveal something new about the precarious condition of an urban setting, the work was a radical criticism not only of the reformist ethics of revelation, but of the very possibility of a documentary photography of poverty: "The common acceptance of the idea that documentary precedes, supplants, transcends or cures full, substantial activism is an indicator that we do not yet have a real documentary."[38]

In short, when presented as a pure and simple documentation of decay, urban photography inevitably tends towards the side of urban power: what it depicts does not cause distress, but rather strengthens the security-related and exclusionary response of the powers that be, for which the representation of decay—far from being troublesome—is useful because it is exploited to support bullying requests for decorum.

In Italy, however, the trap to avoid was not the tradition of humanitarian and reformist photography. Here, as I said, the Alinari paradigm weighed on the view of the city, with its architectural metonymy of the social hierarchy and the picturesque vaccine of clothes hung out to dry. A generation of socially conscious photographers therefore chose to ignore the documentary-social genre and focus their criticism on sightseeing-monumental images. The effort was led by a group brought together by one of the rare Italian photography intellectuals, Luigi Ghirri.[39]

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36   https://journals.openedition.org/ideas/docannexe/image/5233/img-2.jpg

37   Cited in Steve Edwards, *Martha Rosler: The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012), 26.

38   Ibid., 81.

39   https://archivioluigighirri.com/artworks/italia-ailati

Viaggio in Italia,[40] published in 1984,[41] a rare example of balance between individual artistic sensitivities and collective projects, followed the trail of revolutionary anti-photographers of the contemporary American landscape: pop-sensitive photographers such as Stephen Shore,[42] whose raw depictions of car parks, intersections and highways oppressed by neon from the outset seemed like a fierce critique of a model of urban development based on products and cars. The images of the authors of that school even flummoxed the American radical scene: they deliberately renounced all ethical and political judgements on what they portrayed. They did not attribute value, but rather measured space. They did not say, "This is where we want to live." Nor did they say, "This is where you can still live." They simply said: "This is where we're living. Let's at least open our eyes." The intent of those photographers was not to show cynicism. To the contrary, they considered themselves the new realists, but in a specific sense: they knew that photography is not a reflection of the real world, but rather a new object that is placed in the world and that changes the way we perceive other objects. It is a sign among other signs. Terribly efficient.

But were those photos that contemporaries saw as trivial and boring really so anti-judgemental? Or, as seems to me to be better understood today, behind that apparent neutrality ("today our landscape looks like this…") was there still a barely concealed, sarcastic and even a little snobby aesthetic judgement ("…that is, it's squalid")?

The choice made explicitly by Ghirri's group during that celebrated yet not entirely understood *Viaggio* was the cancellation of value hierarchies, the discovery and affirmation that the real landscape is not just an "interesting" view but rather what we see on a daily basis, it is also the suburbs, apartment buildings with palladium and anodised aluminium, barns made with scraps of billboards cobbled together, the landscape that is *seen* but not *perceived*, which must be brought back to awareness, a necessary preliminary step for any possible cleansing of views overloaded with dirty signs. There was, therefore, at least in the intentions repeatedly expressed by Ghirri, a focus on the ecology of the view. And this somehow conveyed an ethical-aesthetic judgement: the condemnation of the "degraded" landscape was clearly implied, though no longer aimed at the landscape itself but rather at its perception. The degraded landscape is ugly because it is *disdained*, not perceived, not addressed.

This way, however, thrown out the door, the ghost of the Alinari came back in through the window. A change in sign, but not in direction. In a recent interview with the author, Guido Guidi,[43] who was part of that group and is

40   http://www.mufoco.org/digitalexhibitions/en/portfolio/1984-travel-photography-in-italy/

41   Luigi Ghirri and Gianni Leoni, *Viaggio in Italia*, edited by Enzo Velati (Alessandria: Il Quadrante, 1984).

42   https://www.moma.org/collection/works/165376

43   https://i1.wp.com/www.rivistastudio.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/4. jpg?resize=800,634&ssl=1

still the standard bearer for that approach, when asked about the aesthetic appeal that the non-monumental and non-interesting landscape aroused in the eyes of that group, replied as follows: "Suburbs that are aesthetically out of control are much more interesting, and true, than certain historic city centres dominated by the power of everything-in-its-place, the artifice of decorum."[44]

And so, without taking anything away from the disruptive value of that operation, which changed the approach to the Italian landscape and the very history of our photography once and for all, I think it can be said that it also included a form of landscape poetisation with inverted values. There was a choice by the authors of what might become interesting if looked at *in a certain way*, even if it had not been considered interesting before. That which was non-conforming was sublimated, transcended into poetic. After all, the suburbs are truly the place of social marginalisation, and their appearance is the warning light: metabolised as a sort of new sublime imperfection, this landscape of discrimination slipped towards the risk of being proposed as acceptable, metabolised, justified.

Due to disagreements about the project, at the last minute Roberto Salbitani[45] refused to be part of the *Viaggio in Italia* group. Ghirri had such a high opinion of Salbitani that his artisanal publishing house had published a crucial work by him entitled *La città invasa*, which in a hard, anti-lyrical black and white looked at the invasion, infestation and *decay* induced by wall advertising in the urban landscape.[46] Assertive, judgemental photographs, anything but aseptic, that rubbed salt on a wound, affirming that decay is not only that which is spontaneous, abnormal, irregular and illegal, but it is also designed, premeditated and functional to the mechanisms of the market.

Perhaps the time has come to ask ourselves the question if decay is the necessary complement to *decorum,* then photographically representing decay seems to leave only two alternatives, both worrying: invoking a policy of decorum, with everything it means in terms of gentrification, exclusion and class expulsion; or circumventing the problem on a purely aesthetic level.

This is the same dilemma that environmental photography has had to deal with in recent decades. And it does not seem to have resolved the issue. Think of the most advanced cultural product available to date, *Anthropocene,*[47] the multimedia work that in many ways can be considered epic, coordinated by Edward Burtynsky. It portrays a planet that has entered the geological era of its disintegration due entirely to human causes, and does so through cutting-edge technologies (visual

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44   Interview with the author, *Il Venerdì di Repubblica*, 21 February 2020

45   https://salbitani.it/la-citta-invasa/

46   Roberto Salbitani, *La città invasa* (Modena: Punto e Virgola, 1979).

47   https://anthropocene.mast.org/en/

hypertextuality, 3D, animations) that are the most advanced product of that same technical and scientific civilisation. The means seem to contradict the alarm and to affirm, unforeseeably in tune with developmental ideologies, that salvation from the climate catastrophe could come from greater investment in technologies rather than from some extreme idea.

The question stubbornly persists: might urban photography, whether it glorifies decorum or stigmatises decay, serve the interests of social exclusion? Will the photography of public spaces, with the weight of its seemingly inexorable relationship with the world as we see it, inevitably tend to have a reactionary core?

I believe that we must face an issue that photography has always avoided, fearing that it was unable to resolve it: how one can produce an image of the urban environment that includes a return in terms of inclusion, justice, citizenship. Unfortunately, photography is as good at conveying what exists as it is ambiguous at portraying what should be. To affirm a proposal photography needs a conversation, which the pure, simple visual language does not provide. Unfortunately, this limit is difficult to accept for those who have chosen this language as their intellectual weapon. Photographers are often wary of the words that accompany and condition the comprehension of their images. There is an ancient suspicion of captions, which in Walter Benjamin's—in truth logocentric—opinion was the only revolutionary avenue of redemption for the polysemy of the image. A vision that led to a long "progressive" submission of photographs to other people's words, from Bertolt Brecht's *Kriegsfibel*[48] to Edward Steichen's epochal exhibition *The Family of Man*.[49] Models the photographers soon moved away from. In the golden age of American street photography, compulsive hunters of sidewalk images like Garry Winogrand,[50] Lee Friedlander[51] and Diane Arbus[52] no longer oppressed their images with captions. But those images could be interpreted all the same, being part of a context of critical and anti-institutional counterculture that was opening up gaps of meaning in the walls of urban ideology. I think I can say that the photographs of those authors reveal their true meaning only if read in light of a hymn to street community resistance like Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.[53]

But when that context does not exist, when criticism of development models fades in public discourse, then what can photography do? How is it

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48   Bertolt Brecht, *Kriegsfibel* (Berlin: Eulenspiegel, 1955).

49   Edward Steichen, *The Family of Man*, prologue by Carl Sandburg (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1995).

50   https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/262308

51   http://fraenkelgallery.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/LF-79-06.jpg

52   https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/284712

53   Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).

possible to create a meaningful context around photographs that includes the critical role of the word without turning them back into illustrations?

Perhaps it is a task that no longer demands only the view of a photographer, but the thoughts of a relationship builder that go beyond the images. Let me conclude with an example that perhaps points us to a possible future. Délio Jasse[54] is a young Angolan photographer who dealt with the tormented story of the independence of his country in a surprising way.[55] Even the photographs he had accumulated over time portray deterioration: that of post-colonial construction and urban planning, in a country first devastated by civil war today attacked by the sparkling promise of reconstruction by the Chinese. But Jasse does not leave the photos in his archive in their pure, simple form attesting to a state of affairs. He juxtaposes them, weaves them, distorts them. The buildings of the Portuguese rulers overlap transparently with the skyscrapers of the Eastern construction companies. The inherited colonial decay and the neo-colonial decorum mingle and scream in a paradox: the decadence of the colonial age tells us of freedom conquered, the shining, new, clean neo-colonial order tells us of a return to possible oppression. And while the façades of the buildings tend to conceal the relations of domination, Jasse pulls them out forcefully in the form of the imprint (golden, presumptuous) of bureaucratic and commercial stamps of the Portuguese era, found by him, which gradually obliterate those images with arrogance: "sample without value," "paid," "unimportant copy."

Jasse's conceptual device is simple, understandable: decay and decorum are shown as two sides of the same coin, two useful ingredients of a continuous line of expropriation of a people's self-government.

If this is possible, then we can be hopeful that photography is not necessarily condemned by its nature and its limits to be placed at the service of urban powers. It is not necessarily the handmaid of decorum, under the guise of the chronicler of decay.

Indeed, images can unmask the stamp of power on the ideology of the beautiful, good and orderly city.

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54   https://www.fotoindustria.it/mostre/arquivo-urbano/

55   Francesco Zanot, "Délio Jasse. Arquivo Urbano," in *Arquivo Urbano Délio Jasse. Foto/Industria. IV Biennale Di Fotografia Dell'industria e Del Lavoro*. Tecnosfera (Bologna: Mast, 2019).

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