

STREET PHOTOGRAPHY AS A MORAL AND REALISTIC WAY TO UNDERSTAND THE WORLD

“Our relations with cities are like our relations with people. We love them, hate them, or are indifferent toward them. (...) We go down the street around that corner. We are aware of the faces of the passers-by. But the city eludes us, and we become uncertain whether we are looking for a city, or for a person.”¹

Humans become easily mesmerised. The city, the streets, the people. We become immersed into their world; hoping to understand them, hoping to understand ourselves. Street photography allows us to become a bystander of this world and allows us to try and understand its people without a physical involvement. It then allows us to see our reflections in them, and thus get to know ourselves.

Susan Sontag describes a street photographer as “an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitring, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes.”² In simple words, street photographers are wanderers, urban observers living the flâneur life. They are often fascinated by people and their lives, documenting their social behaviour as an exercise in looking, and an exercise into looking at ourselves without having to face ourselves.³ The street is the second home for these artists, for them “... the street has continued to hold an inherent fascination as a theatre of human activity”.⁴ They stroll down the streets to “discover the authentic life of the city teeming underneath”⁵, searching for something more than just people and architecture. They desire to discover the real that is hiding behind the visible, looking for the answers to humanity and its meaning, often hidden from the subject to not

¹ V. Burgin, *Some Cities*, London, Reaktion, 1996, p.7;

² S. Sontag, *On Photography*, London, Allen Lane, 1978, p.55;

³ Paraphrased from M. Parr and V. Williams, *Martin Parr*, London, Phaidon, 2002, pp.5 – 8;

⁴ K. Brougher and R. Ferguson, *Open City: streets photographs since 1950*, Oxford, MOMA Oxford, 2001, p.184;

⁵ S.Sadler, *Situationist City*, London, MIT Press, 1998, p.15;

disturb their reality. A Danish photographer Nils Jorgensen said “I don’t really want to disturb the flow of life around me. (...) For me the whole point of photography is not to interfere with what is happening, or might be about to happen. It could be more interesting that what I have in mind anyway”⁶, specifying that without disturbance, the street will create its own story.

Street photographers are captivated by the beauty of the street and the people that create the identity for the street, which absorbs them into another world; the world that these streets and people belong to, the world that the artists themselves want to understand. “Although the situation is innocuous, the image itself is ambiguous in an unsettling way. Emotions this paradoxical are glimpsed only deep within the self, where the landscape is symbolic rather than actual. It is the psyche, as much as the street that speaks to us here.”⁷ It is about knowing and understanding oneself and others, rather than about the street itself.

Artists wander around the streets because of a desire to witness reality, a desire to see. Observing and documenting the streets allows one to witness life and record it, allowing others to engage in the event and discover their own reality as well as create their own stories based on what is seen and what is believed. Humans enjoy creating stories based on assumptions and the visible, and street photography allows the viewer to do exactly that.

Street photographers can be seen as sociologists, studying the reality and people in their natural environment. “Photography as a process, in both public and personal use, is one of the customs of our society. (...) the set of social interactions that come under the heading of photographing have the quality of a ritual. As a ritual they can be the subject of a kind of social-anthropological study.”⁸ One of the key ideologies of street photography is a study of humanity, study of oneself and others, and the relations between us and the artists’ fascination can be satisfied by observing and

⁶ Nils Jorgensen in an interview with Michael David Murphy, 2006;

⁷ C.Westerbeck and J.Meyerowitz, *Bystander: A history of street photography*, London, Thames&Hudson, 1994, p.156;

⁸ H. Beloff, *Camera Culture*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1985, p.205;

photographing. Street photography “should ideally be considered as a form of social exchange.”⁹ The unaware people exhibit to the photographer the real them, and the photographer empowers the viewer to see the real, thus enabling them to see themselves through others.

It is not only street photographers that are fascinated by the world around them. All of us sometimes turn into sociologists, psychologists and philosophers. We try to understand what is going on around us, how reality affects us and how we affect the world and others. Watching others can bring pleasure, it can be a way of facing our personal problems without actually trying to conquer them. An example could be a character from Alfred Hitchcock’s ‘Rear Window’ – L.B. Jefferies who’s “only means of escaping from examining his own condition is by spying on other people (...) his gazing gives him a sense of power over those he watches, but without any accompanying responsibility.”¹⁰ Jefferies observes others to run away from his own problems, however the voyeuristic lifestyle allows him to understand his personal issues and resolve them proving that observing others can allow one to understand them and, as an ultimate, understand oneself.

Although street photography is a fascination of many, there is a large number of people that look down on it and criticize the artist’s approach. The greatest criticism of street photography is its moral side. It is argued whether photographers have the right to capture images of strangers without their knowledge to allow others to experience the streets and understand the philosophical fascination. People do not want their photographs being taken without their knowledge. Is it because they are afraid of showing their real self to the camera? Is it because they do not want to be seen doing certain things? Or is it simply because they are afraid of what the image is going to be used for? All these are reasons why street photography is becoming more difficult and even dangerous for the artists, especially in the age of viral media. Who “knows whether the ‘informal’

⁹ H. Beloff, *Camera Culture*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1985, p.206;

¹⁰ R.Wood, ‘Rear Window’ Hitchcock’s Films Revisited, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002, p.101;

photographer does not hide some other motive?"¹¹ People on the streets do not trust photographers. They are afraid of the reason the photograph is being taken, where and how the image will be published and who will be able to see it. "Even when photographers are most concerned with mirroring reality, they are still haunted by tacit imperatives of taste and conscience."¹²

However, even though the moral side of the arts may keep the photographer awake at night, "it reveals the poetic possibilities that an inquisitive mind and camera can conjure out of everyday life... in a single frame, it can distil a remarkable amount of truth, showing the everyday with such wit or honesty that it will time and again amaze, delight or move us"¹³ which makes street photography so important and fascinating, and simply - worth it.

Unfortunately, moral issues are not the only problem street photography has to face. Another issue is its reliability. The purpose of street photography is to photograph the real, to photograph people when they are unaware of the image being taken to allow the camera to capture the real. However, many say that is not necessarily the case. Street photography is criticised, as people that are being photographed in public are in fact, aware that they are being watched; not necessarily by the camera. Therefore they are still performing as their public identity and thus street photography cannot be a true representation of reality. In the book 'Portraiture', Richard Brilliant discusses how portrait art is created only as an illusion of the subject's real identity rather than a truth representation.

Although the author talks more about studio portraiture rather than the street, it can be guessed that streets are similar. People are aware they are being looked at, so possibly still act and create an image of themselves and how they want to be perceived. On the other hand, camera needs to see

¹¹ H. Beloff, *Camera Culture*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1985, p.207;

¹² S. Sontag, *On Photography*, London, Allen Lane, 1978, p.6;

¹³ S. Howarth and S. McLaren, *Street Photography Now*, London, Thames&Hudson, 2010, p.10;

exactly what is in front of it to record it therefore it is seeing the real, it is seeing the world as it is hence it is a reliable representation of reality.

Yet another criticism of street photography and its reliability is photographer's perception and interpretation "because photographs are reified things – reified things in a world of other reified things – their relationship to truth and the real is unstable and suspect."¹⁴ The camera can record exactly what is in front of it, but it is the photographer that chooses what is in front of the camera therefore can the real be recorded without suspicion of photographer's perception and manipulation? Acclaimed street photographer Martin Parr would argue that, indeed, the camera can record the real. It is because the world the camera is pointed at is the reality in the artist's eyes and therefore it is the reality in front of the photographer¹⁵. This reality that is chosen to be recorded and shown to the viewer is "a still, two-dimensional image acting as a mirror to the way we live"¹⁶, allowing us to understand ourselves and the world better and thus becoming our reality.

There are many examples of street photography that will allow one to understand its fascinating story and correlation with reality. Eugène Atget's work explores humanity and its existence based on assumptions and presence. "Atget's streets are frequently empty of people, his interest in the traces of human activity is conspicuous."¹⁷ In 1899's photograph taken by Atget titled 'Rue des Nonnains-d'Hyères' (PLATE 1) we can understand the fascination. This particular photograph is perfectly angled, focusing on the architecture. However, in the bottom-right corner, a movement of ghostly-like figures can be noticed. The photographer captured the movement of people which symbolises the traces of humanity that are left on the street and thus create a certain, personal identity of the street.

¹⁴ J. Roberts, *Photography and its Violations*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014, p.26;

¹⁵ Paraphrased from M. Parr and V. Williams, *Martin Parr*, London, Phaidon, 2002, p.155;

¹⁶ M. Parr and V. Williams, *Martin Parr*, London, Phaidon, 2002, p.10;

¹⁷ A. Krase, H.C. Adam and E. Atget, *Eugène Atget's Paris*, Köln, London, Taschen, 2001, p.14;

Another street photographer, Joel Meyerowitz, who took a different approach to Atget in photographing the streets, can also be an example of the philosophical interest in the subject. One of Meyerowitz' most famous photographs taken in 1975 in New York, titled simply 'New York City' (PLATE 2) shows the extraordinary reality of the streets. Looking almost like a still from a movie, this particular photograph proves that the streets need people to create their identities, people need streets to manifest their existence, and photographers need both to understand themselves.

As a conclusion; although some will always say it is immoral and unreliable; street photography allows us to get to know each other, ourselves and the world around us. "Street photographers elevate the commonplace and familiar into something mythical and even heroic. They thrive in the unexpected, seeing the street as a theatre of endless possibilities, the cast list never fixed until the shutter is pressed. They stare, they pry, they listen and they eavesdrop, and in doing so they hold up a mirror to the kind of societies we are making for ourselves. "¹⁸ Street photography is a truth representation of the human nature and street photographers are philosophers that are simply trying to understand morality and reality of others and themselves.

¹⁸ S. Howarth and S. McLaren, *Street Photography Now*, London, Thames&Hudson, 2010, p.10;

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PLATE 1.



PLATE 2.

