



## The city as a construction site — a visual record of a multisensory experience

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, I consider the reception of images that are present in a city space. I focus on the juxtaposition of computer-generated images covering fences surrounding construction sites and the real spaces which they screen from view. I postulate that a visual experience is dependent on input from the other human senses. While looking at objects, we are not only standing in front of them but are being influenced by them. Seeing does not leave a physical trace on the object; instead the interference is more subtle — it influences the way in which we perceive space. Following in the footsteps of Sarah Pink, Michael Taussig and William J. T. Mitchell, I show that seeing (to paraphrase the title of an article by the last of the above mentioned scholars) is a cultural practice. The last part of the article presents a visual essay as a method that can contribute to cultural urban studies. I give as an example of such a method a photo-essay about chosen construction sites in Poznań, which I photographed between December 2014 and June 2015.

### KEYWORDS

visual essay; vision; visibility; architectural photography; computer-generated images

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Everyday practices are based on iteration.<sup>1</sup> We wake up around the same time, we go through similar daily activities, and finally — we lead our lives in comparable, parallel ways. While living in a city we are focused on individual goals and tasks and we seldom consciously notice the architectural changes which surround us. From time to time however, we experience a sort of a shock when our tram or a bus changes its route as a result of urban construction or when — after a long absence in a certain area of a city — we see a completely new building which has filled a void or replaced a ruin. Therefore, unconsciously we notice changes and we interpret them as symbols of either the city's rise or its decay.

This year, from late winter to early summer, twice a week I walked between Poznań's Old Market and Garbary Street. I observed new investments springing up in the area. The first stage would be marked by fences appearing around construction sites. Then advertising posters would cover the fences. Among all the advertising chaos, what attracted my attention were computer-generated images (CGIs) of future buildings. Later on, concrete pillars, scaffolds, and eventually, walls and glass surfaces would emerge from behind the fences. Finally, all the images (and fences) would disappear and a new building would emerge. The question is, did I see the same building as the one promised in the images designed by architects and investors?

The aim of this article is to verify whether the method of photo-essay is effective in analysing urban changes and whether photography can provide a language to describe not only visual experience but also experiences of the other four senses.

Therefore, there are two main characters in this article: the first is the city which I experience everyday; the second is photography, which supplies us with images. In the text I argue that our seeing of a city is based both on looking at the streets, buildings and people but also on images presented in public spaces: advertisements in which CGIs and schemas show structures which have not yet been built. Computer-generated imaging by confronting a 3-D city space with a flat surface of a 2-D illusory image, makes the image, as Sean Cubitt says, seem 'more solid than real world' (Cubitt, 2014: 163).

I wonder what happens when our eyes move from the illusory images and rest on the physical space around? To answer this question, we need to reflect

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth remembering that the concept of iteration read as a particular kind of Derrida's 'repetition with a difference' is seen in the contemporary theory of performative research as one of the fundamental rules creating the frame of everyday activities, not only in the sphere of real actions but also their cultural meanings (see: Butler, 1993; Irigaray & Burke, 1980). Butler writes: 'This is citation, not as enslavement or simple reiteration of the original, but as an insubordination that appears to take place within the very terms of the original' (Butler, 1993: 54). Repetitive acts shape the identity of an individual and designate its social boundaries. In the article iteration refers to the nature of visual experience shaping our awareness of space.

on vision itself. Referring to the concept of Hal Foster I make a distinction between vision and visuality. His concept is crucial to the research presented here, as it draws our attention to the cultural nature of photographic images and stresses that what we see is a result of a transformation of sensual experience into a cultural code. We should also remember that Rudolf Arnheim presented a fundamentally similar concept of seeing, stressing the difference between 'passive' and 'active' seeing (Arnheim, 1997: 14). Foster states that vision refers to a physical quality of sight, and visuality to a cultural construction of seeing (Foster, 1988: IX). It is essential to my argument that both are inseparable. To the question: What is being seen? one might answer, referring either to the object or to the cultural meanings and individual experiences of the beholder. What did I see when looking at the posters on the fences around construction sites? Edifices? Or perhaps the future shape of the city?

The text is divided into three sections: two of them present theoretical concepts and consider multisensory features of urban experience as well as photography as a method of recording it. Further on, the issues of visual essay as a method of analysis of city spaces are described and relevant examples of documentary urban photography are recalled. Theoretical sections lead to a photo-essay which analyses the relationship between CGIs of architecture and the physical space in which they are located. In the photo-essay I have used photo-documentation taken between December 2014 and June 2015, along Solna Street and Garbary Street in Poznań.

## CAN PHOTOGRAPHY BE A RECORD OF A MULTISENSORY EXPERIENCE?

The history of research on image (especially in the Rudolf Arnheim's school of thought on seeing) was focused on visual perception, regarding it a basis for experiencing the world. What is interesting is that Arnheim, while stressing the importance of the active perception of the world, concentrated on visual impressions and omitted to take into account the evidence of other senses.

As I open my eyes — the researcher writes, I find myself surrounded by a given world: the sky with its clouds, the moving waters of the lake, the wind-swept dunes, the window, my study, my desk, my body — all this resembles the retinal projection in one respect, namely it is given (Arnheim, 1997: 14).

We could ask a question; what about the sound of the wind and a river flowing? Do we not perceive them while looking? This gap is being filled by research which has started forty years after Arnheim. In 2005 William J. T. Mitchell was convinced that pure visual experience did not exist (Mitchell, 2005: 264).

Thus we could say that the concept of an image which is a result of a transformation of a three-dimensional perception of space onto two-dimensional surface has been continually challenged since the second half of the twentieth century, at least. We can find the echoes of this dilemma in post-structural reflection on the ocularcentric character of Western culture which discussed 'scopic regimes' in the philosophy and art after the Renaissance (Jay, 1988: 3–20). They are also present in the contemporary interest in the cultural order of senses (Classen, 1993; Taussig, 1991), which was initiated by philosophers such as Walter Benjamin or Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In consequence of these disputes an awareness of senses in history grows. Researchers try to find an answer to the question why Western culture was dominated by sight? To quote Martin Jay: 'When, if ever, does the prevalent "ocularcentrism" of so many cultures cede pride of place to other senses? Can one locate "audiocentric" or "tactocentric" cultures, let alone "gastrocentric" or "olfactocentric" ones?' (Jay, 2011: 310). A deeper message follows this reflection, because Western culture, although it gave sight prominence, never disavowed the other senses entirely. Word had its visual and audible form; François Rabelais described the pleasures of eating (as did Anthelme Brillat-Savarin and Italo Calvino), touch was important for the texture of painting and, finally, space as experienced in architecture and sculpture, although subordinated to sight, was perceived by all the senses. How about photography? To invent photographic technologies Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, William Henry Fox Talbot, Louis Jacques M. N. P. Daguerre and others had to touch the chemicals and smell their vapours.

Before we consider photography as a record of multisensory experience we should discuss what vision is. As I mentioned at the beginning, researchers distinguish between vision and visuality. Hal Foster has stated:

Yet neither are they identical: here, the difference between the terms signals a difference within the visual — between the mechanism of sight and its historical techniques, between the datum of vision and its discursive determinations—a difference, many differences, among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein (Foster, 1988: IX).

Where does photography belong? Is it a tool of vision or a construct of visuality? The constraints of the format of this article will not allow me to provide an exhaustive answer to this question. In order to do it I would have to go back to the origin of the invention. Therefore I will only draw on the notions of the theoreticians inspired by post-structuralism. Martin Jay, Svetlana Alpers, Rosalind Krauss, Goeffrey Batchen, John Tagg (just to mention the most prominent representatives) almost uniformly pointed out the links between photography and other visual devices which had been created since the Renaissance (Alberti's intersector, the nineteenth century *camera lucida* or the closest cousin

of photography — *camera obscura*). Each of them shaped perception and what is even more important, provided models of thinking.<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this article I assume therefore that photography belongs to the sphere of visibility.

Parallel to the ‘culturalist’ school of thought on the matter there exist notions of a more ‘realistic’ bent. I will endeavour to highlight the differences between the two approaches by referring to one of the ‘realistic’ concepts formulated by Roger Scruton. Within the framework of realistic theory, an ideal photograph shows only that which is located in front of a camera’s lens (Scruton, 1997: 208). However, to agree with Scruton’s assumption is to state that photography is only the result of the causative relations of an optical process and is, as purely tool of vision, without capacity for representation (Scruton, 1997: 23). Should we agree with Scruton’s concept?

At this point, to argue with Scruton’s opinion, I will consider one of the most influential photographic theories — the idea of ‘decisive moment’ by a French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson. In a famed sentence, Cartier-Bresson called photography (or a picture-story to be precise) ‘a joint operation of the brain, the eye and the heart’ (Cartier-Bresson, 1952: 3). How to interpret his words? Although in another text he wrote about a photographic image as ‘an extension of the eye’ (Sontag, 1973: 55), he undoubtedly meant more than that. If we analyse the photojournalist’s thinking and visual practice, it becomes clear that photography is not only a tool of vision, but a way of expressing individual human experience in a message understandable to the community. A message which is constructed and coded, and as a part of cultural tradition can be interpreted by a recipient. Although it seems that we ‘just look at’ a picture while decoding visual meanings, we instinctively, and to a certain extent unconsciously, recall individual memories and connotations.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, when seeing, we are using the inventory of memory. However, is there room in photography for the experience of the rest of the senses: for tactility? Hearing? Smell? A photograph which we can touch is silent although surrounded by sounds and tasteless as well as odourless, although photographic emulsion has flavour and smell.

William J. T. Mitchell in *What do pictures want?* stated: ‘There are no purely visual media because there is no such thing as pure visual perception in the first place’ (Mitchell, 2005: 264). In the process of seeing we do not ‘turn off’ taste and touch — that is obvious, but the problem lies elsewhere — something interferes with our sensual perception. Each human sense can be characterized by

<sup>2</sup> I explore the history of photographic visibility in my book *Niepewność przedstawienia. Od kamery obskury do współczesnej fotografii* [Uncertain representation: From camera obscura to contemporary photography] (Michałowska, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> The concept of Anette Kuhn which distinguishes between ‘texts of memory’ and ‘work of memory’ could also illustrate a process of transforming an image into an experience (Kuhn, 2002: 4–5).

a degree of proximity or distance from the object that is perceived. It is said that sight distances viewers from the object of observation (that is the reason why the narrator of Marcel Proust's novel is able to feel as a photographer, an unconcerned observer, when he is looking at his dying grandmother). However, the issue of the distancing quality of sight should be considered anew. Again I will turn to Cartier-Bresson's images. It seems that the concept of 'decisive moment', which lies at the foundation of a modern figure of a photographer, was interpreted incorrectly. The photographer is not insulated from material reality by the lenses of his camera — as was stated in modern theory of photography, but rather he is immersed in the world because of the power of a mediating machine. Although sight still dominates the other four senses, a five-dimensional, sensual experience is translated into an image. Cartier-Bresson was too much of an experienced artist not to know that a photograph has to be constructed from captured elements of reality to mean something to the viewers and to touch their emotions. French philosopher, François Soulages was convinced that the photographer questioned the structures of materiality, a tendency parallel to Plato's idea (Soulages, 2005: 39–42). In Cartier-Bresson's images art, not philosophy, was the tool of knowing. His ideal photograph would not just display an object in front of his camera, but would also be a meta-reflection on it. Photography, therefore, belongs to the group of images which are constructed from cultural meanings and, at the same time, talk about those constructions. 'A joint operation of the brain, the eye and the heart' should be understood differently. The image is a record of the very essence of an experience, where the brain represents the reason, the eye refers to the testimony of senses and the heart denotes emotions.

We must remember that perception of space differs depending upon the environment we are in and on each individual participant. Experiencing nature (filled with specific fragrances of plants and the earth covered with undergrowth) differs from experiencing cities. Distribution and the type of light is different in both spaces — nature is filled with sunlight while in cities artificial light comes into the mix. While experiencing each of these realities (each of them is filled with specific strong sensual stimuli) we not only see them, but we smell them, hear the sounds and feel the ground under our feet. Moreover, we must not forget that physiological properties of sight and possible visual impairment determine the fact that not everyone experiences space in the same way. In a city space, which surrounds walkers with acoustic, olfactory and taste sensations, our senses cooperate supplying information of a diverse kind. Since the beginning of the twentieth century scholars have been writing about a multisensory character of urban experience and, in the domination of one sense over the others, they saw the birth of modern mentality. Georg Simmel claimed that eyes let us perceive those features of social interaction which are universal for all people, while hearing and smelling direct our attention to that

which is individual (Simmel, 2006: 199). If the dominance of visual stimuli leads inhabitants of a metropolis to alienation, it is touch that forms and transforms human experience of city space, as Walter Benjamin noticed. Michael Taussig commented as follows:

To the question How in our everyday lives do we know or perceive a building?, Benjamin answers through usage, meaning, to some crucial extent, through touch, or better still, we might want to say, by proprioception, and this to the degree that this tactility, constituting habit, exerts a decisive impact on optical reception (Taussig, 1991: 149).

Thus differently to Simmel's, Benjamin's optical experience is seen as a derivative of a holistic sensual experience of the human body.

So far it has been quite easy to find confirmation for my thesis in literary testimonies of urban experiences (for example in books by authors like Fernando Pessoa or Italo Calvino), however a statement that a visual record can be multisensory is questionable. One has to admit that films are more than just visual (they are audiovisual) or hypertexts can be multisensory, as they are audiovisual and tactile (we can touch them with a mouse or on a touch screen). How could photography (or painting) be multisensory? The authors, who aim to persuade us about the multisensory character of everyday experience, invite us to treat images as objects. The tradition of visual interpretation ignored the fact that photographs (to limit the range of images to those which are the theme of this article) are material objects and focused mainly on the content of the images (Edwards & Hart, 2011: 255). Whereas they are also physical objects we can touch and are produced by a particular technical process. They are looked at, stored and, sometimes, lost or destroyed (Batchen, 1997: 7). Taking physical qualities of images into consideration lets us analyse a dynamic interplay between things and people (or between different, non-human agents if we think about surveillance cameras, which observe and record actions of humans and things in space). Talking about physical properties of images I do not limit my analysis to photochemical media only. Edwards and Hart remind us that digital images have to be viewed on various devices: computer screens, mobile phone display screens and all of them have their own physicality (Edwards & Hart, 2011: 254). What consequences do the above considerations bring to the reflection on photography which in Western modernity is recognized as visual?

I will follow two phases of the photographic process: the first refers to the act of photographing, the second — to the reception of a finished image. Visual ethnographer, Sarah Pink noted: 'The act of taking photographs involves the convergence of a range of different social, material, discursive, and moral elements in a multisensory environment, rather than being a solely

visual process' (Pink, 2011: 602). An analysis of the moment of taking a photo includes bodily practices connected with body movements such as: moving the whole body in front of the photographed object, gestures of hands and legs (lowering or raising arms, bending knees to lower a vantage point, standing on tip-toes) and head movements, which depend on the type of camera. The difference lies in how we look through the camera — through a viewfinder or when we look at an LCD display. Those purely physical activities are influenced by other stimuli coming from the outside world such as: feeling warm or cold, noise, silence. Equally important are the remembered emotions linked with the space such as a feeling that the space is seen for the first time or well known, the emotional engagement at the moment of photographing (*e.g.* boredom or delight) and activation of visual competence in using the conventions of frame composition or appropriating the elements of well known visual icons into images. All these factors influence the way we take a photo and the emotions which come back to us when we look at the picture. To quote Pink again: 'The visual dimensions of the magazine should not be separated from its materiality, its smell, or its other sensory qualities' (Pink, 2011: 602).

As I mentioned earlier, photographs are material, copied in a particular technological format (photographic paper or LCD screen). This feature is present not only in photosensitive or printed pictures but also in digital images (seemingly completely virtual). Depending on the material processes these images undergo, we catalogue them in photo-books or move files with a touch of a keyboard, a mouse or a touch screen. What is essential however, is the fact that images recall memories of physical experiences. Once more I will return to Pink's words: 'When I see the photograph of the cyclists going over the country terrain, I begin to imagine, based on my own past experiences of cycling, what it might feel like to engage in the same practice myself' (Pink, 2011: 602).

Testimonies of senses are meaningful both from an individual and a collective perspective. It is not about remembering something which happened to ourselves, but about an ability to reconstruct our own experiences using images which were taken by somebody else.<sup>4</sup>

An observation that, looking at drawings, paintings and photographs, we are able to reconstruct the experience of all five senses is vital for the issue of perception of urban space. Although we experience spaces primarily physically, we also see cities through image-objects and image-ideas, which are based on materiality. How many cities do we know although we have never physically visited them?

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<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon is essential, for example, for culinary photography. When looking at a photo the viewer should smell the aroma of food, which induces a physical reaction of the body — increased production of saliva.

## HOW DOES PHOTOGRAPHY RECORD THE MULTISENSORY URBAN EXPERIENCE?

In the previous part of the article I considered how effective photography is in registering non-visual experiences. I highlighted a link between seeing and evoking that what comes from the realm of hearing, smelling and touch. Photography cannot be the source of sounds (hence perhaps the recent trend to enhance it with soundtracks in the form of photocasts), or flavours, it can however, refer us to these experiences. If we accept assumptions that visual experience has its multisensory dimension as well, we should consider how to translate information and feelings coming from our senses into discursive means. The problem here is not how to show city views, but how to represent with visual means those features of a city which are invisible: ways of thinking, prejudices and dreams; public zones and spaces which are hidden from public view — everything which constitutes a basis for visibility. What means and methods should be employed to achieve this goal? To answer this question I will analyse some specific examples from the history of urban photography.

When looking at the historical representations of a city, one may observe that images were usually used to symbolise cultural meanings. Since the Renaissance images of ideal cities and urban planning have not only been a functional aid for city builders but have also represented social ideas. These representations have narrated different tales of a city which could be described as, for example, a concept of an industrial modern city or an idea of a garden city. Nevertheless, there are at least two eminent narrations in urban photography: the first one could be called a narrative of progress, the second — a narrative of decay (or a ruin).

Although similar visual tools (convergent perspective or focus on structural elements of a building) are employed to tell these stories, each of them evokes different emotions. The first narration is told by Elvire Perego in her essay on photographic documentation of early modernism. In *The urban machine* (Perego, 1998) the author postulates that in the nineteenth century photographers were supposed to present 'new ways of seeing' (Perego, 1998: 197) by means of visual representation. Urban photographs by Philip Henry Delamotte, Achille Delmaet and Louis-Émile Durandelle, the Bisson brothers and Édouard-Denis Baldus accustomed audiences to the progress of modern times. Even so, viewers could have felt bewildered when they were looking at photographs of nineteenth century iron and steel constructions. While commenting on Dalamotte's documentation of Crystal Palace, built by Joseph Paxton for the Great Exhibition in London of 1851, Perego realized that the goal of photographs 'was not so much to enclose space but to liberate it' (Perego, 1998: 203). Pictures were supposed to give an impression of harmony consisting of 'impossible fluids of light and space' (Perego, 1998: 203). They were, therefore,

recalling an experience, which Lothar Bucher during his visit to the place described as 'a midsummer night's dream seen in the clear light of midday' (Perego, 1998: 203). The composition of these photographs which exposed the geometrical forms of the edifice and referred mostly to the spatial experience, was later on developed in avant-garde abstract photography. The vantage point of these images is distanced from the objects to give the viewer a wider perspective of the buildings and forms. It is worth remembering, however, that the aesthetic values of those breath-taking pictures were less important than their cultural significance. The images presented and praised the glory of the modern era with its promise of social change, belief in scientific approach and engineering, and promised the coming of a new, technological and industrial world. Geometry and the cult of machines depicted in photographs symbolised progress which led to a better future.

Since photographic documentations of progress usually refer to rationality, images which represent decay explore varied kinds of 'spirituality' and 'magic'. Instead of rational analysis, they propose following the traces of the past and memories. Often, they try to reconstruct the meaning of lost places using their *genius loci*. It would, however, be misleading to think that one narration has replaced the other. They were both born at the same moment in time and they both still exist. Charles Marville is said to be one of the first photographers able to express the feeling of a city that had already disappeared. Graham Clarke convinces us that such a reception of images is the result of the location of the vantage point in photography. Marville situated vantage points on the level of the human eye, thus viewers have an impression that they are in the place of the photographer (Clarke, 1997: 76). In the frame we see converging lines of perspective, represented by the walls of buildings, the lower part of the still is filled by wet, glistening pavement. The city seems to be abandoned and full of shadows.<sup>5</sup> Both Perego and Clarke identify the photographer's sight with the experience of a *flâneur*, a figure representing the nineteenth century urban walker (Perego, 1998: 198; Clarke, 1997: 76).

To be a walker in the city is to engage in a very distinctive relationship with the urban scene [...]. Extremes of visual unity and disunity which suggest part of larger dialectic as to how the city has been seen: the public and the private, the detail and the general, the exterior and the interior, the historical and the modern, the permanent and temporary (Clarke, 1997: 76).

The nineteenth century photographs provide the twentieth and the twenty-first century imagination with images of a romantic and melancholic past.

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, these shadows are a result of long exposure. These are the traces of the presence of people and moving objects, which stayed in front of the camera lens for too short a time to be exposed.

What is interesting, within the frame of aesthetics of decay, is that we look at the same structures which previously praised progress. This time we see them in a state of ruin. Two examples could be instructive here: the first one is a series of photographs entitled *Silesia* (2004) by Wojciech Wilczyk, the second — *Inventory* series (2000–2004) by Ireneusz Zjeżdżałka. Both artists document post-industrial areas in black and white photography. In their compositions, they use the regular rhythm of vertical and horizontal forms, well known in the nineteenth century instrumental photography. However, instead of the smooth surfaces of brand new objects they expose cracks and swollen layers of paint. Their goal in those pictures is to transmit the feeling of emptiness and loss, to express the feeling of coldness of those abandoned places. Wilczyk and Zjeżdżałka did not want to create romantic landscapes but rather tried to analyse the social conditions which were the consequences of political and economical changes, as Benjamin believed was the aim of Atget's photographs. The images are simple, reduced to the most significant elements. They are silent but touching.

Another approach can be found in the practices of contemporary Instagram photography described by Małgorzata Nieszczerzewska. The author noticed that publication of an image on the web allows for supplementation of a visual message with sounds which direct our experience to soundscape (Nieszczerzewska, 2013). The figure of a viewer is replaced by the figure of a participant who does not have to refer to the memory to recall the sounds once heard but who is able to listen to the sounds now, in real time and thanks to this experience may be transported to the place presented in photographs.

In the second half of the twentieth century a new form of scientific representation was added to the repertoire of visual forms, which from the very beginning of the invention of photography, were developed to convey the experience of wandering among urban structures. This hybrid of visual, textual and, sometimes audible forms will be described in the next part of the article.

Although visual essay has its tradition both in art (at least from the late 40s of the twentieth century) and humanities, for many years scholars' attitude towards it was suspicious as a result of questioning the scientific status of this form of presentation of research. Nowadays, however, as Douglas Harper observes, prejudice against publishing visual material in scientific sources has decreased. As a result, there is an increasing number of journals with the adjective 'visual' in their title (*i.e. Visual Studies, Visual Anthropology*) which are open to presenting images (Harper, 2009: 155). Nevertheless, the question of the scientific status of a visual essay is valid. What kind of knowledge is produced by this form of research? I postulate that due to their hybrid, intertextual, visually-textual and theoretically-empiric structure, visual essays enable an insight into experience which is unavailable for both quantitative research and approaches that are inspired by natural sciences. A visual essay brings us closer

to qualitative, uncountable knowledge of human experience. It is so because, as scholars have realised, images open our minds to a larger extent than words, to a preverbal experience and become useful as a research method (*photovoice*, *photo-elicitation*) and a technique of art presentation.

In the opinion of a Belgian visual sociologist, Luc Pauwels, the power of visual essay lies in its appropriation of the contemporary way of thinking which is hypertextual and fits well into life within proliferating images. To quote Pauwels:

For indeed the visual essay, boosted by new media technologies and networking opportunities has developed into a contemporary vehicle for voicing and visualising all sorts of personal reflections, new ideas, arguments, experiences, and observations, thereby taking any possible hybrid variation or combination of a manifesto, a critical review, a testimony or just a compelling story (Pauwels, 2012: 2).

Pauwels distinguishes between two genres of visual essays, ‘mimetic’ and ‘expressive’. The first one aims to represent reality in an objectified and distanced way and features in the approaches which are focused on data and knowledge about the world around us (as in projects by Charles Suchar, Tim Edensor or photo-narratives by Jean Mohr). The second genre, which takes into consideration the subjective vision of an author, is representative for research which combines scientific and artistic practices (Pauwels, 2012: 2). Moreover, from the perspective of art a form of visual essay was utilised both by photographers who had chosen a sociological approach (e.g. Marrie Bot), or a photography-expression (*photographie-expression*) approach (e.g. Robert Frank), to use a phrase introduced by André Rouillé (Rouillé, 2007: 185–189). We should remember however, that visual essay presents a challenge both for artists and publishers, as it requires a high level of visual competency and skill of expressing thoughts in a visual way and it should be designed thoroughly, without abridgement.

Authors of visual essays often dedicate their works to urban space. This is the case of Pauwels’s research entitled *Street discourse: A visual essay on urban signification* (2009), or Charles Suchar’s *Amsterdam and Chicago: Seeing the macro-characteristics of gentrification* (2004). Each of them uses photographs differently. Pauwels’s photographic vision opens a field of impressive combinations of signs and forms to suggest implied meaning. The image entitled *The right way, Minneapolis / USA* could be an example here. In the picture we see a road sign. There is a building with a mural of Jesus and a slogan ‘Love Power’ in the background. In the caption, we read

Religious and traffic control discourses both aimed at showing citizens the ‘right way’. The divergent origins of messages and the unpredictable blend of signifiers of all kinds

create unanticipated 'third effects' and turn the modern urban area into a surreal spectacle par excellence (Pauwels, 2012: 9).

Gillian Rose calls photography supportive and excessive in reference to the accompanying text (Rose, 2010: 240). Both elements: the caption and the image support each other. At the same time, photography exceeds the range of information included in the commentary. Suchar's work is less complicated. It is not based on connotations as Pauwels's work but on the juxtapositions of images which provide the recipient with additional knowledge about the content. The last example here may be the book *Industrial ruins* by Tim Edensor (Edensor, 2005). The author uses another approach to visual essay. His work, which presents the consequences of industrial modernism, is visually sophisticated and metaphoric. However, it is worth noticing that the visual language of his photo-essay derives from urban imagery as well. All these examples prove that the method of visual essay corresponds well to a multiplicity of urban experiences.

#### PHOTO-ESSAY *THE CITY AS A CONSTRUCTION SITE*

In the following part of the article I will present a photo-textual experiment, which considers the relationship between the reception of computer-generated images of future buildings and the material space of a city, where they are presented. In the essay I have used methods of rephotography (Klett, 2011: 114–131) and a simple juxtaposition of photographs, which repeats similar visual motifs. I used inspirations coming from autoethnographic photo diaries which confront subjective experience with objectified information about the object of reference (Chaplin, 2011: 242–262).

Undoubtedly, the status of autoethnography as a research method is ambiguous. The matter in dispute is, inevitably, the subjectivity which follows the observation and interpretation. However, remembering that the goal of my essay is an attempt to record both what is objectified by vision, and what comes from a subjective sensual experience, autoethnography may prove to be the right method to connect these two contrasting attitudes towards knowledge. Although the consecutive parts of the essay are linear, they are not chronological and do not have to be read in the proposed order. The arrangement of the photographs and text was designed to allow for the comparison and analysis of images taken on different occasions.

Although, in the visual dimension of the photo-essay I refrained from using many artistic means which are conventionally recognised as appropriate for conveying urban narration, such as shallow focus, images out of focus or wide lens, I borrowed from the repository of architectural photography an

ultimately neutral, unabridged composition. Using frames which are comparable in composition and which feature similar visual motifs enabled me to create the rhythm of the narrative. The photographs presented here, however, do not represent exactly the view of my camera lens. I digitally corrected the foreshortenings, remembering that this is the kind of improvement which is representative of architectural photography taken with large-format cameras.

The textual content of the photo-essay, on the other hand, contains a record of my experience of photographing and then, 'reading' the photographs. I am using the concept of photo-text, where the commentary does not provide information about an image but, rather, builds a narration by suggesting interpretation through the description of associations and contexts as well as by evoking the sensual experience.

## THE PERSPECTIVE



13.12.2014



24.06.2015

In the second half of 2014 some small buildings which had been located on the corner of Bożnicza Street and Solna Street disappeared, and were replaced by a construction site run by one of Poznań's developers — Ataner. When I took the photo, the building was covered in scaffolding. There were no signs of any activity on the other side of the street which would suggest a future development. The area was fenced off, but there was no information about the investment. In March a skeleton of 'Quadro Office' by Monday Development was visible and in June the building process was advanced.

The juxtaposition of images taken in December and June directs our attention towards the perspective of the street. In the photo from the winter the building on the right, without a counterpoint of the edifice situated opposite, dominates in scale the building of a former synagogue in the background. In the second picture, the construction of the 'Quadro' building almost obscures the historical building. However, the eye of a viewer, like the sight of a walker in the city, is led by the lines of perspective, deep into the composition.

## URBAN UTOPIA



13.12.2014



13.12.2014

When I photographed the corner of Ataner's building for a first time, advertising slogans displayed on fences surrounding the construction site caught my eye. They were encouraging me to: 'Live in the rhythm of the city'. The message was accompanied by dynamic, black and white photographs which presented joyful, young people enjoying themselves in Poznań's Old Market. Placed next to this vision of happy consumers was a computer-generated design of the future building. It was presented in blue and green. The greenery around the building was enhanced. There were no cars on the road in front of the building which suggested that the place would be quiet and safe. What do these images promise? A harmony of urban utopia, intended for the young and active, a perfect representation of Richard Florida's 'creative class'.

## THE CONVENTION OF ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY



13.12.2014



24.06.2015

The convention of architectural photography is a construct which was born almost two centuries ago and, although new tools have appeared, it has not changed in its essence. In order to present a building in a way which would catch the viewer's eye, all the accidental elements (such as human figures, road signs and vehicles) have to be eliminated. What is difficult to achieve by means of photography is quite easy to create in computer-generated images. They are 'photorealistic', look like photos, but their creators were not restricted by material reality. Designers did not have to take the surrounding landscape into account — buildings and elements of greenery. It is impossible to see a building in a city in the same way as such projects present them. Usually they show the object as a whole and exaggerate its scale. Photography suggests elements that are invisible, the presence of movement — a delivery van in front of the building. Looking at the photograph I can reconstruct its soundscape which was filled with the constant noise of the nearby main road.

## CITY VIEWS



13.12.2014



24.06.2015

The point from which I chose to take the photograph presented on the right, was supposed to simulate the imaginary point designers had in mind when they created their project. (In fact, it should have been moved a little bit more towards the front of the building). The comparison between the two is striking. The building in the digital image seems to be located in an empty field, the other objects are blurred which gives an impression of an open space around it. The eye of the viewer stops in the foreground, on the facade of the building consisting of black and transparent elements. Whereas, the photograph displays those elements which are not present in the digital design — the huge billboard on the right corner of the building, due to the camera's vantage point, seems to be bigger than it was in the three-dimensional reality. Also, the building is situated a little lower than in the advertisement. The view is further obstructed by a strip of greenery running parallel to the facade. As a result the building is hardly visible.

## THE EMPTINESS



13.12.2014



24.06.2015

These two images present a building located on Garbary Street, which was designed by a well known architect from Poznań, Jerzy Gurawski. Due to the last financial crisis the investment was suspended for a few years. When it was eventually finished, it seemed to be a bit out of architectural fashion. Adjusting the camera vantage point to the model of the computer-generated image was not so complicated this time — Garbary Street is wide enough to simulate digital vision. I could distance my eye to see almost the entire edifice. I could also imitate the foreshortening. However, in the architectural design the vantage point is situated higher than mine. The street is loud and busy. To give an impression of the empty street I had to choose the right time of day and I waited for a suitable change of the traffic lights. I also had to fit my body between the cars parked along the street. I achieved a result comparable to the famed *View of Boulevard du Temple* by Daguerre — heavy traffic is invisible, the street seems to be abandoned. In this case it is not an effect of a long exposure (as in the daguerreotype) but, paradoxically, a very short exposure that caught a gap between moving vehicles. The photograph does not show the truth of reality, but echoes an opinion by Samuel Morse about Daguerre's work 'The boulevard, though constantly crossed by a flood of pedestrians and carriages, appeared completely deserted' (Frizot, 1998: 28). I find this artificiality of vision intriguing.

## THE PROGRESS — EXPECTATIONS



13.12.2014



13.12.2014

Each time I pass by a construction site I start to wonder why there are fences around it. From the functional perspective the answer is easy — fences protect pedestrians from the dirt and dust of a building site. However, they also protect the building site from the nosy eyes of passers-by. The sounds coming from behind the fences are particularly important, because they give us an indication as to what is happening on the other side. Noises suggest that the construction is progressing, while silence bothers us, suggesting some delay in the process. Nevertheless, do we treat fences as elements of urban aesthetics or a necessary evil which interferes with it? Posters displayed on fences are used to screen this unwanted ugliness. However, no matter how thoroughly a construction process was planned, sooner or later the dirt and decay will deteriorate the fences as well. It may be that the function of the images on the fences is different? They announce the future. The investment by the owner of Poznań's waterworks was announced on the fence along the Garbary Street. Posters contained both an image of the new design and historical photographs which documented earlier views of the area. In this case we deal with a multilayered interplay of time. We can see a construction process which is happening now and in the past at the same time. Thus, we may observe the progress and look forward to what will be built soon.

## THE AESTHETICS OF UNFINISHED



13.12.2014



24.06.2015

A juxtaposition of a poster with a view of a building under construction is a kind of a visual shock which is created by the contrast between an image of something finished and perfect, and a view of imperfection. On the one hand we find such a comparison disturbing but, on the other hand, a view of an unfinished structure, similarly to a view of an urban ruin, is picturesque. The charm lies in the rhythmical order of vertical and horizontal lines and in the entity which could be called the aesthetics of unfinished. The photographs which document a poster of a building on the front of a construction site do not repeat the actual view (like in Magritte's paintings), but move the repetition in time. Because we assume that the construction process will be finished, we can see what the building will look like. On the basis of digital visualisation, we project the building into the future. However, the view of the edifice under construction leaves the interpreter feeling uncertain. When will the building be finished? Is it still a work in progress or are we dealing with a ruin already? Unsuccessful investments come to mind, lost and forgotten. Such was the case of an apartment block in Garbary Street — the investment started with a lot of fuss, was then abandoned and revived again. From the state of architectural death a building came back to life.

## CONCLUSION

The decision to make the visual essay a tool of talking about urban experience seemed to me attractive for a few reasons. Firstly, in history urban photography always meant more than presenting urban views. It visualised certain urban ideas, symbolised progress and the glory of architecture (in modernism), or praised its former grandiose (in aesthetics of a decay). It was also politically employed to show social development or, to the contrary, to stigmatize its moral degradation. Secondly, I wanted to emphasise pre-visual mental factors which influence photographers. Michael Taussig considers a concept of 'optical tactility', recognizing it as the foundation of urban experience. The author refers here to Benjamin's idea of 'optical unconsciousness' (Taussig, 1991: 149), which is an ability to unconsciously collect images of experiences. They can be extracted from memory either due to shock (as it happens with Proustian involuntary memory) or consciously, during the 'work of memory'. Optical unconsciousness is not only an ability of sight but it also makes use of all the human senses: sounds evoke images, images — aromas. In this concept, modern urban experience is a capability of a collective, not individuals. To quote Taussig: 'As for architecture, it is especially instructive because it has served as the prototype over millennia not for perception by the contemplative individual but instead by the distracted collectivity' (Taussig, 1991: 149). Photography belongs to the same domain of distracted attention. It sends us to material referents and lets us touch them with an eye in order to recall memories of the phenomena that affected our hearing, smell or taste.

When photographing with a digital reflex camera (a digital matrix which replaced the format of 35 mm cameras) I encountered some technical problems, such as finding a vantage point which could imitate the point of view of digital designs. In a few instances I had to give up presenting the view of the camera and I used digital correction to adjust the perspective. While selecting the frames for the photo-essay I realised that I automatically copied the visual convention I had chosen at the beginning. Due to this automatism I had sets of comparable frames. The biggest challenge was to reconstruct the experience of photographing and to translate the emotional, the visual and the reflective into a discursive language. Photography, although it cannot emit sounds or smells, due to the work of associations it may suggest them (for example, temperature through the image of a cloudy sky, or silence in a view of an empty street). The reader will decide if I accomplished the goal.

At the end of the text I would like to come back to the question I put forward at the very beginning of the article. What did I see while watching computer-generated images of future buildings? And to add another question to the one above; what do I experience now, when looking at the photographs. The pictures transport me to a third space, beyond a vision of a future and

a record of a particular moment in time. CGIs look ‘solid’ (Cubitt, 2014), but I know that they are only Baudrillardian simulacra. For a moment I am in between, in the limbo of a city which has already been built but does not yet exist. Structures are material and potential at the same time, built out of imaginary and physical elements. A photo-text is the kind of representation which, apart from using photographs, creates a space for verbal descriptions of fragments of memories and experiences. Visual essay cannot be seen as a document of existing reality, but should be viewed as a mixture of visuality and the author’s reflection on it.

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