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From Fear to Pleasure

Photographic Representations of Industrial Sites and Their Conversion into Recreational Landscapes Along the Industrial Heritage Trail

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Before coming to Essen for my fellowship at KWI, I had seen the industrial landscape of the Ruhrgebiet only through photographs.¹ In addition to black and white images from the 1920s to the 1970s – like Albert Renger-Patzsch’s, celebrating functioning mining architecture, or Bernd and Hilla Becher’s, representing abandoned industrial structures as “anonymous sculptures” – my visual imaginary also included colorful views of ancient industrial sites converted into recreational areas. The “Industrial Heritage Trail”² is indeed widely photographed. On Instagram³ and Facebook⁴ images are used to propose special visits of parks or museums and to promote events, while users document the architectures and their experiences.

From the perspective of photographic aesthetics, we can observe a move from an “industrial sublime” that seeks to harmonize industry and nature – the feeling of “fear” resonating from outside of the picture frame⁵ – to a “post-industrial sublime”, more related to a temporal dimension, representing the obsolescence and decay of industrial relics against the poetry of natural processes. In contemporary images, an aesthetics of playfulness seems to express a different feeling of pleasure in appropriating the ruins of ex-industrial sites for recreational activities.



Fig. 1: UNESCO-Welterbe Zeche Zollverein Essen © Ruhr Tourismus, Jochen Schlutius by Dein Nordrhein-Westfalen is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0



Fig. 2: File:Hochofen 5 Landschaftspark Duisburg Nord Abend 2013.jpg by Tuxyso is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0

Does visual aesthetics – in the form of the sublime, nostalgia,⁶ or something else – contain creative potential, providing critical looks at capitalist modes of production and alternative interpretations of modernity and progress? Or does it risk historically decontextualizing and commodifying industrial and postindustrial landscapes?

In 1934, Walter Benjamin commented on a certain developmental trajectory of photography, stating that:

[...] photography is unable to convey anything about a power station or a cable factory other than, “What a beautiful world!”. *The World Is Beautiful* – this is the title of the well-known picture anthology by Renger-Patzsch, in which we see New Objective photography at its peak. For it has succeeded in transforming even abject poverty – by apprehending it in a fashionably perfected manner – into an object of enjoyment. For if it is an economic function of photography to restore to mass consumption, by fashionable adaptation, subjects that had earlier withdrawn themselves from it (springtime, famous people, foreign countries), it is one of its political functions to renew from within – that is, fashionably – the world as it is.⁷

Benjamin’s criticism concerns Renger-Patzsch’s encyclopedic approach and aesthetic transfiguration. By documenting forms as such, removed from their historical context, his 1928 book would turn the photographic object into an object of consumer pleasure, therefore recapitulating the essential logic of capitalist modernity: “[...] a flagrant example of what it means to supply a productive apparatus without changing it”.⁸

For Benjamin, interested in photography’s potential for disrupting perceptual habits, beautifying the industrial world turned it into a mere commodity – an art object to be admired and purchased – instead of a tool for training a new kind of perception. This Marxist stance was later developed by Allan Sekula. Concerning an archive assembled in response to industrial demands, he explained how photography, in some cases, serves to legitimate and normalize existing power relationships.⁹

Photographic aesthetics can depoliticize photographic meaning by hiding the social and environmental realities of the sites represented. However, depending on the contexts of production, diffusion and circulation, aesthetic photography can also help to bring specific environmental issues to public attention, to change the perception of some landscapes even to serve as a stimulus for architectural conservation or land use actions.

A major exponent of the photography of German New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), Renger-Patzsch developed a clearly realist style, based on classical beauty, which celebrated the industrial subject rather than the formal experimentation made possible by the machine. At that time, photography was considered the best medium to represent industrial reality, and according to Sigrid Schneider (writing about the first photo books depicting the Ruhr from the 1920s): “[...] illustrating the beauties of the industrial landscape functioned like a summation on behalf of a new aesthetics of perception”¹⁰. In some of Renger-Patzsch’s commissioned works, the industrial structures are isolated from the architectural context. In addition to concrete function, many of his photographs are focused on formalistic composition, oriented according to the aesthetic demands of

the architecture to be portrayed. For instance, his views of the Zeche Zollverein Essen of the late 1920s and 1930s¹¹ emphasize the form of industrial architectures, which was determined by the requirements of function.

Renger-Patzsch's images can be compared to those by Bernd and Hilla Becher of the same subject around fifty years later (they photographed the Zeche Zollverein in 1976 and again in 1982).¹² While similar in their "objectivity",¹³ the industrial structures represented by the Bechers were emptied of their function. Moreover, following an aesthetic emancipation of photography from the late 1960s and 1970s – parallel to the deindustrialization process – their "industrial archeology"¹⁴ has been considered first as conceptual and minimal art, and only in a second step as art photography in the documentary style. As the result of an artistic project rather than industrial commissions, their typological series¹⁵ can be seen as a meditation on the end of the industrial age, illuminating the economic obsolescence of industrial subjects are now empty of all but the memory of the ambition they once housed. Presenting the remnants of heavy industry as objects of art, the Bechers contributed to setting new standards in perceptual aesthetics of abandoned factories, leading to historical preservation in practice: a new degree of appreciation helped to declare mines and blast furnaces part of cultural heritage.

One of the first industrial ruins to be saved from destruction by a local citizen's initiative was the Zollern II/IV colliery in Dortmund-Bövinghausen, which was closed in 1966. When wrecking crews began destroying the crumbling buildings three years later, a group of citizens – among them Bernd and Hilla Becher – publicly promoted the architectural value of the facility.¹⁶

While the abandoned water tower already had the characteristics of a ruin in succumbing to the natural forces of decay, the photographic record resurrected and elevated the defunct structure on aesthetic grounds, instilling in the viewer a new way of seeing that would extend beyond the gallery space and into the open of the changing industrial landscape.

The new aesthetic perception of the industrial landscape prompted by the Bechers' work was taken up by the organizers of the IBA (Emscher Park International Building Exhibition), which from 1989 to 1999¹⁷ created a series of cultural and recreational spaces, industrial museums and postindustrial landscape parks, like Zollverein in Essen,¹⁸ and the Duisburg North Landscape Park, which has been described as the "embodiment of post-industrial sublimity".¹⁹



Fig. 3: Zollverein Essen, photo by the author



Fig. 4: Zollverein Essen, photo by the author



Fig. 5: Landscape Park Duisburg Nord, photo by the author



Fig. 6: Landscape Park Duisburg Nord, photo by the author

Nature is in the act of reclaiming space; these postindustrial ruins represent a defunct industrial order. As Kerstin Barndt has indicated: “The slippage between the historical saturation of the postindustrial landscape on the one hand and its embeddedness in geological time is highly suggestive and speaks to our postmodern condition, in which playful, individual appropriation ostensibly trumps the discarded master narratives of history, the nation, the collective”²⁰.

For instance, the online platform “Visitor Photos Community”²¹ offers a glimpse of different visual appropriations of the Landscape Park Duisburg Nord, bearing witness to a lost industrial past in an expanded, postindustrial present.

Photography has accompanied the transformation of the Ruhrgebiet industrial sites, both in our perception and in reality. From celebration to detached contemplation – from fixing them in time as icons to showing their mutability and historicizing their obsolescence²² – and then to their representation as recreational landscapes, the conceptions and uses of photography have also changed and diversified. Created in the context of industrial or commercial commissions, artistic assignments, more independent projects,²³ or visitors’ experiences, photographs are variously regarded as promotional materials, historical documents, artistic works or common cultural artifacts.

References

1. This article provides a snapshot of a wider ongoing research project on postindustrial landscapes and ruins, which aims to investigate the role of photography in the perception and use of the environment, from constructing cultural visual identities to preserving and transforming abandoned sites. It proposes a comparative perspective through three case studies in Germany, France and Italy.
2. "Route Industriekultur". <https://www.route-industriekultur.ruhr/>. A project of the Ruhr Regional Association (RVR), the "Industrial Heritage Trail" is a 400-kilometer street circuit, which since 1999 allows visitors, tourists and bikers to explore the industrial heritage of the Ruhr area, connecting the main sites: 26 anchor points, the industrial-cultural "highlights" of the Ruhr metropolis; 17 panorama points of the industrial landscape; and 13 housing settlements. Formerly often seen as "cathedrals of work", today the anchor points are renowned as museums and event and cultural locations. For a geographical visualization on a map see the website "Standorte der Route Industriekultur". <https://www.route-industriekultur.ruhr/route-industriekultur/standorte-der-route/>.
3. "Route Industriekultur (@route_industriekultur)". https://www.instagram.com/route_industriekultur/.
4. "Route Industriekultur | Facebook". <https://www.facebook.com/RoutederIndustriekultur/>.
5. In the complexity of the site and the wider network of transportation, distribution and consumption constituting the industrial economy. The sublime in this sense would represent something within representation which nonetheless exceeds the possibility of representation.
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<https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.1997.10443827>
12. Heinz Liesbrock. *Bernd & Hilla Becher: Coal Mines and Steel Mills*. Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2010.
13. Renger-Patzsch and the Becher retrospectively seem to align themselves with the same "objective" approach that will be inherited by the Düsseldorf school of photography. See Stefan Gronert "Un difficile heritage. Sur l'importance d'Albert Renger-Patzsch pour la photographie en Allemagne après la Seconde Guerre mondiale", in Renger-Patzsch, Albert, Mah, Sérgio, Gronert, Stefan, *Albert Renger-Patzsch*. Madrid; Paris: Fundación MAPFRE: Xavier Barral, 2017.
14. Knappe, Gunilla, and Susanne Lange. *Basic Forms of Industrial Buildings: Bernd & Hilla Becher*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005.
15. The series include winding towers, processing plants, framework houses, factory halls, silos, blast furnaces, lime kilns, cooling towers, water towers, gas tanks, etc. They created a "visual taxonomy" through a rigorous archival method, while the use of a large-format camera provided technical quality in sharp focus and fine detail.
16. In 1969, the engine house of the colliery with its impressive Art Nouveau portal was the first industrial structure in Germany to be listed. Today, various exhibitions inform about history, technology and people in mining.
17. In ten years, 123 cooperative local projects were implemented, varying from the setting up of technology centers and the ecological restoration of a polluted river, to the renovation of apartments and the restoration of industrial monuments for cultural and touristic purposes. See Hospers, Gert-Jan. "Restructuring Europe's Rustbelt: The Case of the German Ruhrgebiet", *Intereconomics* 39, no. 3 (2004): 147–56.
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