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The Spatiotemporal City: Unveiling Time and Space in *Metropolis*

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Abstract

Since its very conception, the medium of photography has been registering the unfolding of time and space in the urban space. The thinkers of photography, however, not always had the same stance on how this spatiotemporal representation is conceived by the photographer and perceived by the spectator. In his well-commended photographic exhibition, called Metropolis *(2016), Dutch photographer Martin Roemers has captured the quintessential time and space of diverse metropolises across the globe. Revitalizing the age-old photographic technique of long-exposure, his aim was to challenge the putative representation of time and space as being forever fixed in the frame. By focusing on the* Metropolis *photo series, this article examines how Martin Roemers's use of long-exposure accounts for a paradoxical embodiment of time and space in the city. To this end, it first explores how theoreticians of photography, such as John Szarkowski, Geoffrey Batchen, and Roland Barthes, have pondered on the representation of time with respect to long-exposure. Next, by discussing the work of André Bazin and Christian Metz, it discusses how long-exposure can reveal and register a segment of the city space. Finally, by drawing on Walter Benjamin's concept of "optical unconscious" and Michel de Certeau's idea of "lived space", this article proposes that Roemers's photographs have manifested the spatiotemporal city: a simultaneously transient and fixed, still and moving, thus ephemeral yet eternal urban environment.*

***Keywords**: photography, spatial, temporal, city, Metropolis, long-exposure, lived space.*

Introduction

By photographing the busy intersections, hectic bazars, and vivacious public spaces of twenty-two different metropolises across five continents, Dutch photographer Martin Roemers[1] has accumulated an extensive representation of urban life under the title of *Metropolis*. Focusing on the massive scale, rapid pace, and the immediacy of everyday urban reality, *Metropolis* allows viewer to observe the sustaining infrastructural details of various metropolises across the globe. The metropolis, British geographer Phil Hubbard notes, is "something that cannot be adequately prepared for: no matter how carefully scripted, urban life has a tendency to surprise, and we are constantly forced to improvise and adapt to events as they unfold around us."[2] By patiently waiting for the right moment and employing the long-exposure technique, Roemers has uncovered the internal vitality and external turmoil of the metropolitan life. This paper aims to investigate how Martin Roemers's use of the long-exposure technique accounts for a paradoxical unfolding of time and space in the city: a spatiotemporal quality that is concurrently ephemeral and eternal. To this end, it first explores how theoreticians and historians of photography have contemplated on the representation of photographic time with respect to long-exposure. By switching to the representation of space in Roemers's photos, it then discusses how long-exposure can reveal and register an invisible segment of the city space. Finally, by drawing on the ideas of Walter Benjamin and Michel de Certeau, this article puts forward that *Metropolis* has generated a representation of the city that is simultaneously transient and fixed: a contradictory spatiotemporal quality that is resonates with how live events unfurl in the city.

[1] https://martinroemers.com/

[2] Phill Hubbard. *City* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 95.

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The Convergence of Conflictual Temporalities

> To think about the city is to hold and maintain its conflictual aspects: constraints and possibilities, peacefulness and violence, meetings and solitude, gatherings and separation, the trivial and poetic, brutal functionalism and surprising improvisation. (Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*)

The history of photography has a long-lasting engagement with the preservation of time, even older than the representation thereof. As Art historian Hubert Damisch notes "the adventure of photography begins with man's first attempts to retain that image he had long known how to make."[3] The progenitors of photography, such as Joseph Nicéphore Niépce and Louis Daguerre, were not much concerned with making novel modes of representation; instead, they mainly aspired to preserve the images that were unexpectedly casted in the camera obscura. That is why for the early photographers the retention of the photographic image was closely interrelated with, and dependent on, the exposure time of the camera. As film theorist André Bazin argued in the 1950s, the most salient feature of photography was that it could provide humans with a "defence against the passage of time"[4]. By "embalming" time (to use Bazin's term), photography could eventually celebrate the victory of humans over the irreversible passage of time. In relation to the photographs taken by Martin Roemers, the noteworthy aspect is *how* photography has achieved this victory.

Looking at the *Metropolis* photographs, the conspicuous aspect is the artist's meticulous attention to the preservation of time and space as they have been unfolding in front of the camera (fig. 1, fig. 2, fig. 3, fig. 4). Since the advent of photography, it has been customary for urban photographers to either represent time as a frozen moment or to embody time as the progression of an instance. Thanks to an effective use of long-exposure, however, Roemers's photographs seemed to have managed to entwin the boisterous pace of the metropolis with a palpable sense of tranquility. They conjure up an ambience that is simultaneously dynamic and still. It is precisely this uncanny admixture that resonates with the inherent dispositions of the metropolitan life itself. As sociologist Georg Simmel has argued, the metropolis is an arena of "struggle" and "reconciliation" that is "pregnant with inestimable meanings". The metropolis, states Simmel, "reveals itself as one of those great historical formations in which *opposing streams* which enclose life unfold, as well as join one another with equal right."[5] Evidently, to capture the moment at which the contradictory forces of the metropolis coincide with each other requires a high degree of temporal exactitude. This precise moment, Roemers tells, is when "everything has fallen into place"[6]. Or, as it is usually referred to in the history of photography: it is the "decisive moment".

In the early 1950s, French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson coined the term "decisive moment" after the publication of a book with the same title. According to photography historian Liz Wells, the decisive moment is "a formal flash of time when all the right elements were in place before the scene fell back into its quotidian disorder."[7] In reference to Roemers's photographs, it is the instant when the photographer decides that "everything has fallen into place", that is: it is that serendipitous moment when the yellow color conquers the frame at Madan Street in India (fig. 1); it is when the vagrant at the 7th Avenue in the US have become the only perceptible human on the road (fig. 2); it is when all the passersby at Shibuya Crossing in Japan have turned into free-floating spectral figures (fig. 3); or, it is when a flock of camels at Outtake in Egypt have metamorphosed into some unidentifiable creatures (fig. 4). Still, none of the previously mentioned instances are fully grounded on the recognition of the decisive moment, in that they are also arranged and manipulated by the photographer. Elaborating on the structure of the decisive moment, Cartier-Bresson notes that "photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which gives that

[3] Hubert Damisch. "Five Notes for Phenomenology of the Photographic Image", in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2003), 88.

[4] André Bazin. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image", *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4. trans. Hugh Gray (1960): 4.

[5] Georg Simmel. "The Metropolis and Mental Life", in *The City Culture Reader*, ed. Malcom Miles, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 19.

[6] Interview with the artist, accessed on 25th of January 2023. Available on https://www.lensculture.com/articles/martin-roemers-metropolis

[7] Liz Wells. *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, 4th edition, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 73.

event its proper expression."[8] In other words, that exact moment when everything perfectly merges in the metropolis is not only captured in an instant, but it is also mediated by the photographer. In the case of Roemers's photos, the photographer decides about the light-exposure duration, thereby deciding *how* time is going to be shown in the photograph.

As curator and historian of photography John Szarkowski noted in *Introduction to the Photographic Eye*: "There is in fact no such thing as an instantaneous photograph. All photographs are time exposure, of shorter or longer duration."[9] According to Szarkowski, the decisive moment has often been misunderstood as "a dramatic climax" of live events in front of the camera, whereas it should be understood as a "visual one".[10] That is why he draws attention to another way with which the progression of time can be represented in photographs: the time-lapse. Although most of the accidental time-lapse photographs of the nineteenth century were ignored, this technique was later adopted by painters, such as Marcel Duchamp, to epitomize an uninterrupted depiction of time. The time-lapse is a method of showing the temporality of moving objects by illustrating a time segment of several seconds or more, which usually results in an almost total dissolvement of the represented figure. For example, the segmented bodies of the passersby in Romers's photos bear a striking resemblance to Duchamp's employment of time-lapse method in *Nude Descending a Staircase, No.2* (fig. 5). In both cases the visual elements have been disintegrated in order to convey a sense of temporal continuity. The time-lapse technique practiced by painters such as Duchamp, and to some extent by Roemers's long-exposure technique, aims to communicate a processual account of time. Nonetheless, while the painterly time-lapse mainly creates a progressive sense of time, the photographic long-exposure does not only create a dynamic sense of time, but it can also propel the viewer to focus on what has *not* been dissolved during the long-exposure. It is the case with the remaining facial details of the passersby in Romers's photos: the so called "visual leftovers" that accentuate the immobility of the given figures.

In *A Small History of Photography*, Walter Benjamin argued how the prolonged exposure time of early photographs resulted in a "more vivid and lasting impression on the beholder." This inevitable long-exposure time and concomitant inactivity of the photographed figures, writes Benjamin, "caused the subject to focus his life in the *moment* rather than hurrying on past it."[11] The "moment" that Benjamin is referring to here is fundamentally different from the decisive moment. Instead of conveying a processual time or a frozen split second of time, Benjamin's moment introduces time as stillness. For him, the early daguerreotypes could best characterize the stillness of time evoked in the persistent singularity of a moment. According to Benjamin, due to the "unaccustomed clarity" of the first daguerreotypes, "the human countenance had a silence about it in which the gaze rested", as if these portraits could "see us".[12] Although Roemers's photographs are not considered as portraits, the people who are not fully faded out in them can exemplify the Benjaminian account of stillness. That is why Roemers invites the viewers to "look at the photos from a distance and then get closer and find all the little stories."[13] For, in photographs with such a substantial degree of visual details, it is the only way witch which one can perceive time as stillness: by attending to what has not been dissipated during the long-exposure.

The emphasis on the singularity of time reached its climax in Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. For Barthes, the very essence of photography was, in fact, the "that-has-been" of the photographed person in front of the lens: the fact that the subject once and only once existed in front of the camera.[14] According to Barthes, realizing the unique existence of the photographed subject in front of the camera delivers time not as a "form" but as an "intensity" of experiencing time: as "its pure representation".[15] In other words, for Barthes the

[8] Henri Cartier-Bresson. *The Decisive Moment* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952), np.

[9] John Szsarkowski. "Introduction to the Photograher's Eye", in *The Photography Reader*, edited by Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2003), 101.

[10] Ibid., 102.

[11] Walter Benjamin. "A Small History of Photography." *Screen* 13, No. 1 (1972): 245. (Emphasis added).

[12] Ibid., 244.

[13] Interview with the artist, accessed on 20th of January 2022. Available on https://huismarseille.nl/interview-martin-roemers/

[14] Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida,* trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 77.

[15] Ibid., 96.)

uniqueness of the photographic time results from the immediate recognition of the pastness of photographs: the very irreversibility of time embedded and implied in each photo. To some extent, for both Benjamin and Barthes the photographic time is epitomized by the singularity of experiencing time and the stillness it causes in the photographed subject. On the one hand, Roemers's photographs can engender a progressive sense of time due to capturing the moving elements; and on the other, they present time as stillness, embodied by the immobile figures on the streets. A conspicuous example of this double embodiment is the confrontation of the rickshaw man with the passing car (fig. 1): while his fixed body displays time as stillness, the stretch of yellow lines facing his body present time as process.

Commenting on the unavoidable long-exposure time in photographs of Louis Daguerre, art historian Geoffrey Batchen notes that his photography should be understood as "the uneasy maintenance of binary relationships; it is the desire to represent an impossible conjunction of transience and fixity."[16] According to Batchen, *The Boulevard du Temple* photograph of 1838 (fig. 6), one of most prominent photographs in the history of the medium, not only marked

> the passing of time in terms of changing shadows and degrees of legibility, but also presented time itself as a linear sequence of discrete but interrelated moments. By bringing the past and the present together in the *one* viewing experience, Daguerre showed that photography could fold time back on itself.[17]

In both Daguerre's and Roemers's case, the juxtaposition of transience and fixity in one viewing experience is the direct corollary of long-exposure time.[18] Although in Daguerre's photograph all the passersby, except the person who is having his shoes shined, have vanished from the street, in Roemers's photographs a relatively larger number of moving objects have remained in the scene. Whereas in Daguerre's photograph the long-exposure was an inevitable shortcoming of photography, in Roemers's photographs this rather dated photographic technique allowed him to combine the uproar and serenity of the metropolis in one frame. Concurrently replete with pandemonium and placidity, it is therefore the long-exposure technique that has enabled Roemers to retain the dynamism and stillness of the metropolis in one viewing experience.

Having thus far discussed the temporal implications of long-exposure in Martin Roemers's photography, I will now turn to a unique spatial feature that has been disclosed by his photographs. As Batchen has proposed, "if photography is a mapping of bodies in time and space, then it is also a production of both".[19] Accordingly, in the following part I will discuss how Roemers's photographs of the metropolis have not only become means of temporal representation, but also spatial production.

The Lived Space of the Metropolis

> With the help of a new optical device one could finally see sight, one could not only view the natural landscape, the city, the bridge and the abyss, but could view viewing. (Jacques Derrida, *The Principle of Reason*)

In his book *Power and Knowledge*, Michel Foucault argued that the most salient problematic of space was that it was reduced to the static and inert and thus was deemed to be natural. Prior to this point, space used to be "dismissed as belonging to nature—that is, the given, the basic conditions", stated Foucault.[20] That is to say, for Foucault space was reduced into that which always exists regardless of humans' interactions, as a sort of receptacle in which things are placed. That is why geographer Nigel Thrift contends that to fully understand the notion of space one should abandon "the idea of pre-existing space in which things are embedded". Instead of viewing space "as a container within which the world proceeds", Thrift suggests that space should be seen "as a co-product of those proceedings."[21] This means, instead of viewing space as a static receptacle, it

[16] Geoffrey Batchen. *Each Wild Idea. Writing, Photography, History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 11.

[17] Ibid., 132. (Emphasis added).

[18] However, it should be noted that the exposure time of Daguerre's photograph is believed to be between 10-15 minutes. For Daguerre, a time exposure of less than one hour was in fact a great improvement from the first photograph of Joseph Nicephore Niépce's, *View from the Window at Le Gras*, which took about 8 hours to expose.

[19] Batchen. *Each Wild Idea*, 23.

[20] Michel Foucault. *Power and Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 149

[21] Nigel Thrift. "Space: the fundamental stuff of geography". In *Key concepts in geography* (Trowbridge: Wilshire, Sage, 2009), 96.

should be considered as an active element that can embody the dynamism of the world. While for cinema, theatre, and performance the creation and documentation of a dynamic space is of high priority, in Roemers's photography such an animating space has been revealed and registered, once again, via long-exposure.

As film theorist Christian Metz once noted, whereas film induces a "stream of temporality where nothing can be kept", the power of photography lies in its "silence and immobility" with which it conserves time and space, by somewhat cutting a piece of them.[22] According to Metz, in all photographs "we have this same act of *cutting off* a piece of space and time, of keeping it unchanged while the world around continues to change."[23] Similarly, for scholar Philippe Dubois what defines the medium of photography is the direct result of a "cut(ing)-out", which is not only limited to the temporal aspect of photography, but includes its spatial dimensions as well.[24] In Metz's words, the camera can "striptease the space" to which it is pointed at, referring to the way the optical apparatus can reveal the reality that we cannot see without the optical apparatus.[25] To visually perceive this point the viewers of Roemers's photographs simply need to pay attention to the long stretch of yellow and blue lines in figure 1. Evidently, such an instantaneous visualization of moving objects, which is caused by long-exposure, is not something that the artist could entirely foresee. To put it differently, considering that space is not a "pre-existing" container, thus "cutting off" or "cut(ing)-out" a segment of the metropolitan space cannot be fully anticipated by the artist.

In his influential article *The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* Walter Benjamin draws an interesting comparison between the cameraman as surgeon and the painter as magician. According to Benjamin, while the painter (magician) maintains a natural distance from reality, "the cameraman (surgeon) penetrates deeply into its web."[26] The main difference here is in the picture they obtain: that of the painter is a finalized one but that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments. Crucial in Benjamin comparison, and to the analysis of Roemers's photographs, is that for the artists who work with a mechanical apparatus, regardless of their intention and organization, the final picture cannot be wholly predictable. As Roemers notes, no matter how often he thinks that the visual elements have fallen into place, "there is a lot more happening which you can only see when you have developed the images."[27] It is true that, due to the prolonged exposure time and unmediated nature of the metropolis, Roemers cannot completely envisage the final photograph. Yet, by using long-exposure, he can elicit a latent spatial quality that would have been otherwise invisible to the naked eye: the optical unconscious. By means of slow motion and enlargement, Benjamin asserts, for first time we discover the existence of another kind of unconscious:

> It is another nature that speaks to the camera than to the eye: other in the sense that space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. Whereas it is commonplace that, for examples, we have some idea what is involved in the *act of walking*, if only in general terms, we have no idea at all what happens during the fractions of a second when a person *steps out.*[28]

Thanks to the invention of optical slow-motion, every detail of a person during a walk could be seen for the first time, that is: the spatial experiences between the starting and finishing point of the walk. Strictly speaking, Roemers does not use slow motion. Instead, by employing the long-exposure technique, he has managed to capture the invisible and in-between spaces that are created through the movements of the urbanites. As Benjamin notes elsewhere, our walking existence "is a land which, at certain hidden points, leads down into the underworld—a land full of inconspicuous places from which

[22] Christian Metz. "Photography and Fetish", in *The Photography Reader*. Edited by Liz Wells. New York: Routledge, 2003, 140-141.

[23] Ibid., 141. (Emphasis in original).

[24] Cited in Stephan Gunzel. "Photography and Space: Modes of Production", in *Experiencing Space - Spacing Experience*: *Concepts, Practices, and Materialities,* ed. Nora Berning; Philipp Schulte; Christine Schwanecke (WVT Scientific Publishing, 2014), Np.

[25] Metz, "Photography and Fetish", 143.

[26] Walter Benjamin. "Extract from the Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2003), 49.

[27] Interview with the artist, accessed on 25th of January 2023. Available on https://www.lensculture.com/articles/martin-roemers-metropolis

[28] Benjamin, "A Small History", 243. (Emphasis added).

dreams arise".[29] Benjamin's metaphor of a dream-like land hints at the fact that walking has the potential of creating a space that we cannot see with the naked eye. Looking at Roemers's photographs, the use of long-exposure not only has displayed the conflicting temporalities of the metropolis, but it also has shown the spatial movements of passersby during the act of walking: a corporeal space that could not have been discerned without the aid of the optical unconscious.

Outlining the connection between the provenance of space and the body's movement, philosopher Edward S. Casey notes that space is not to be found in "the world-building ambitions of a creator-god", nor in "an austere transcendental subject."[30] In other words, space is not a given element of the world, or in Thrift's term, space is not "a container within which the world proceeds". On the contrary, Casey asserts that the origin of space "is found straightforwardly in the body of the individual subject. Or, more exactly, it is found in the *movement of the body*. For space to arise, our body as geared into it cannot remain static; it must be in motion."[31] As Casey has put forward, space comes into existence when the human body starts to move, thereby conceiving and perceiving space take place simultaneously in bodily movements. Strikingly, one of the simplest ways to demonstrate the creation of space via the body is the act of walking. By looking at the passersby who have been turned into ghostly characters in Roemers's photos, the creation of space through walking becomes apparent. This space, which is created by the physical motions of the passersby, does not belong to the category of the inert or the static. Instead, this corporeally induced space is an apt demonstration of what philosopher Michel de Certeau has termed the "lived space" of the city: an ephemeral and untraceable space generated through moving in the city.

According to de Certeau, the walking residents of a city have the most fundamental way of experiencing the urban life, for city walkers "whose bodies follow the thick and thins of urban 'text', they write without being able to read it."[32] This means that, by simply walking in the city, the bodily movement of urbanites produces—or "writes"—a lived space that is imperceptible—or "unreadable"—for the ones who are creating it. De Certeau calls this specific way of walking through the city space as "spatial practice". In the era where city space is pre-determined by the city makers, de Certeau contends that the spatial practice of walking can "elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised (the city)", thereby constructing "lived space".[33] Consequently, for de Certeau lived space is not something that can be envisaged and organized by urban planners (i.e., it is not an existing space that walkers go into). Instead, the lived space is what is constructed precisely by the very act of walking in the city. Walking in the city, de Certeau remarks, creates "a strange toponymy that is detached from actual places and flies high over the city like a foggy geography."[34] Returning to Roemers's photographs at this point, the viewer is not simply confronted with a space that is conceived by the camera, or perceived by the photographer, but with a lived space that has been corporealized through the motions of city dwellers. Therefore, by reviving one of the oldest photographic techniques in capturing the city, Roemers has managed to immortalize a piece of the metropolitan lived space. This ethereal space that permeates through Martin Roemers's photographs would not have been visible without the spontaneous spatial practices of the city residents, that is: without their walking.

Conclusion:

By focusing on Roemers's photographs, this paper has demonstrated how his use of long-exposure techinque has contributed to a better understandng of time and space in the city. On the one hand, by using long-exposure, Roemers has succeeded to capture the conflictual aspects of the city, thereby making visible its dynamism and stillness in one viewing experience. In doing so, his photographs become an enigmatic conjunction of concurrence of transience and fixity, stillness and movement, thus ephemeral yet eternal embodiments of the city. On the other

[29] Walter Benjamin. "The Arcades Project", in *The Blackwell City Reader*, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 121.

[30] Edward S. Casey. *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 229. (Empahsis in Original).

[31] Ibid. (Empahsis in Original).

[32] Michel de Certeau. "The practice of everyday life", in *The Blackwell City Reader*, ed. G. Bridge, & S. Watson (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 153.

[33] Ibid., 158-160.

[34] De Certeau. "The practice of everyday life", 162.

hand, Roemers's perceptive attention to the walkers in the city has enabled him to monumentalize the lived space of the metropolis. As such, by using long-exposure and capturing the moving denizens of the metropolis, Martin Roemers has manifested the spatiotemporal city without reconciling its contradictory qualities, allowing us to view viewing with the aid of an optical apparatus.

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Metropolis Photography - Martin Roemers
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Figures

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Figure 5: *Nude Descending a Staircase, No.2,* 1912. Marcel Duchamp. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia USA.
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Figure 6. *Boulevard du Temple,* Paris 1838. Louis Daguerre. https://www.unjourdeplusaparis.com/en/paris-insolite/premiere-photo-etre-humain-paris-en-1838

Biographical note

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