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TITLE

'Don't Look Down!': A Short History of Rooftopping Photography

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...the photographer, like an acrobat, must defy the laws of probability or even of possibility...¹

INTRODUCTION

The idea that photography plays a crucial role in mediating our understanding of the built environment has permeated the architectural discourse for over two decades. From Beatriz Colomina's seminal study of 'architecture as mass media',² to Claire Zimmerman's more recent examination of 'photographic architecture in the twentieth century',³ a substantive body of scholarship has expounded the productive agency of photography in relation to modern architecture. Further contributions to this debate are comprised in the anthology *Camera Constructs* (2012), whose editors, Andrew Higgott and Timothy Wray, dispense with the idea that photography can ever provide a neutral representation of architecture and maintain instead that, 'the camera invariably constructs what it depicts.'⁴

While it is essential to recognise the transformative agency of photography, just as important is to eschew the temptation of one-way technological determinism. For the emphasis on visual practices and procedures risks overshadowing the materiality of the built environment itself as the irreducible *subject* of photographic representation. In fact, the relationship between photography and architecture might be regarded, in historical terms, as a mutually constitutive one. As the camera frames and symbolically 'constructs' architecture, the latter in turn provides photographers with the physical infrastructures that enable them to apprehend their subjects from ever-different vantage points. Rather than merely standing as objects to be represented, buildings are often integral to the visual apparatus itself: they may extend the photographer's capability to engage with architectural space by serving, in certain circumstances, as viewing platforms or framing devices.

A particular alliance between architecture and photography is manifested by the practice of *rooftopping*, which is defined, at its simplest, as the pursuit of 'gaining access to the roof of a building for the view.'⁵ As its composite name suggests, rooftopping photography is a mode of representation that arises from the confluence between a spatial practice and a visual medium. This phenomenon gained wide recognition in 2011, when a picture taken by Toronto-based photographer Tom Ryaboi (also known in the blogosphere as 'Roof Topper') became an immediate sensation upon its release on the Internet.⁶ The online media have since become awash with

sensational city views taken from improbable vantage points. What are the circumstances in which this photographic practice emerged? How does it relate to the longer tradition of picturing urban landscapes from above? And what does it reveal about the ways in which contemporary cities are experienced and represented? With these questions in mind, the essay sets out to explore the rise of rooftopping from a historical-critical perspective.

It begins by charting, in few broad strokes, the development of architecture as a viewing platform on the modern city, a function that was eagerly embraced by avant-garde photographers during the interwar period. Whilst a comprehensive historical account is beyond the scope of the present study, this background provides a reference point for the analysis of a contemporary trend which, as we shall see, often harks back to the urban imagery of the New Vision. The practice of rooftopping is discussed with respect to the social and cultural conditions in which it emerged. The essay then zooms in on distinct types of images in order to interrogate, with the aid of selected theories, their visual properties as well as the affective responses they arouse in the viewers.

Architecture as viewing platform

Since the nineteenth-century heydays of photography, architecture has offered an endless array of static subjects as well as viewing platforms from which those subjects could be observed. This double function presided over the very dawn of the medium. Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre's pioneering experiment with a silver-plated sheet of copper, carried out in 1838, depicted a street view taken from his Parisian studio on Boulevard du Temple over the surrounding buildings and roofs. As Shelley Rice has pointed out, this experiment showed that the modern city – and Paris *in primis* – was in every sense the laboratory for the development of photographic vision.⁷ From the 1850s onwards, it became popular to depict cityscapes from rooftops and terraces, as panoramic photography revived (and largely replaced) the painterly tradition of vedutismo. Around the same time, the invention of aerostatic photography paved the way for the rise of the mechanised airborne gaze, with far-reaching consequences for the representation of modern cities.

The view from above attained new heights, along with mobility, in 1858 when Nadar captured a series of photographs of Paris from a lighter-than-air balloon, thereby turning his floating basket into the first aerial viewing platform. Nadar's 'first results' are

unique documents not only of the radical transformation wrought by Haussmann on the French capital, but also of a romantic longing for the sublime that found expression in the spectacle of the city from the air.⁸ Aerostatic photographs were complementary to the early trials with artificial lighting that Nadar carried out in the Parisian catacombs. André Rouillé has observed that both sets of experiments with the camera, underground and in the air, reflected the photographer's engagement in a broader 'quest of the absolute' that was influenced by the utopian currents pervading the scientific and artistic circles of 1850s France: 'Whether it be associated to aerostation or electricity, in either case the photographic act derived from the temerity and discovery of a technical exploit.'⁹

To some extent, the idea that photography evolved in conjunction with, and in response to, the challenges posed by other modern technologies might be applied to architecture as well. A case in point is the parallel development of photographic techniques and modern building construction over the second half of the nineteenth century. At the same time as in Paris the Eiffel Tower gave material (and monumental) form to the aerial imagination of the city, in Chicago the first steel-framed skyscrapers inaugurated the era of vertical urbanism. For Roland Barthes, the Tower epitomised a 'new sensibility of vision' that made the bird's-eye view, hitherto the province of imaginative writers and artists, a widely accessible mode of vision.¹⁰ Under its towering gaze, the city unfolded like a text to be read and deciphered. Concomitantly, ever smaller and more versatile cameras were introduced that afforded new means of depicting the modern metropolis. By coincidence the year 1889, when the Eiffel Tower beamed over the Parisian World Fair, also marked the advent of the rollfilm revolution on the other side of the Atlantic. The first Kodak camera, which George Eastman launched on the market the previous year, paved the way for the development of amateur photography. Those simultaneous yet distinct developments were bound to intersect over decades to come.

The skyscraper boom of the early twentieth century reshaped the material and symbolic landscapes of the American metropolis, whilst opening up an expansive visual field to urban onlookers and image-makers alike. In New York, in particular, there emerged a new type of spectator which has been characterised as the 'skyscraper-viewer'.¹¹ The contemplation of the cityscape from high points became a popular leisure activity for the corporate elites, and did not fail to attract photographers eager to capture hitherto unseen views of the city. Among them was Alvin Langdon Coburn, who trained his camera on the urban landscape following a trip to the American West that included a visit to the Grand Canyon. His 1913 exhibition 'New

York from Its Pinnacles' included *The Octopus*, a much-celebrated picture taken from the observation deck of the Metropolitan Life Tower the previous year, which set a milestone in the photography of the modern city (Figure 1).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

This winter view of Madison Square Park is defined by the abstraction of the urban subject reduced to a pattern of crisscrossing lines. As Meir Wigoder points out, this artwork reflects not only Coburn's photographic aesthetic but also, importantly, an 'elitist social attitude' that found expression in the detached vantage point.¹² Above and beyond his avowed interest in the formal geometry of the composition, the photographer identified with skyscraper-viewers who sought refuge from the hustle and bustle of the city streets in New York's rooftops. The massive shadow cast over the park makes the building's towering presence all too manifest. Recent interpretations of this picture have reiterated its significance in relation to the modern urban experience it alludes to, with its implications of anxiety and alienation.¹³ The tower here acts at once as viewing platform *and* as viewed object, its silhouette anticipating a visual trope that was to recur in the photography of cities during the interwar years.

That was the period when the architecture of skyscrapers came into full swing, whilst the possibility of viewing cities from above was vastly expanded by the development of aviation and aerial photography.¹⁴ Adnan Morshed has shown that the modernist 'aesthetics of ascension' embodied by the heroic figure of the aviator reflected 'a new type of "aerialized" spectatorship'.¹⁵ The advent of this spectatorship, in the 1920s, was accompanied by the wide dissemination of aerial photographs in illustrated books and magazines. Along with the contemplation of cityscapes from tall buildings, another viewing subject was born out of the rise of powered flight and the diffusion of aerial images – the modern *planeur*.¹⁶ Although the views from the tower and from the air constituted fundamentally distinct modes of spectatorship, they shared in the pursuit of a visual pleasure that became widely popular through the agency of photography.

In a passage from his first major book, *Sticks and Stones* (1924), Lewis Mumford commented on the popularity of high-rise buildings amongst American art and architecture critics.¹⁷ The skyscraper, he argued, was the wrong place to look for the aesthetic achievements of modernity. For Mumford, a characteristic of architecture in 'the age of the machine' was that it was often interpreted on the basis of visual representations rather than through 'the human arts of feeling, seeing, and living'. Photography provided the technology whereby the architecture of the new age might be grasped and exposed to critical praise. Yet Mumford protested: 'What our critics

have learned to admire in our great buildings is their photographs [...] In short, it is an architecture, not for men, but for angels and aviators!’¹⁸ This polemic was directed at the ‘tall, cloudward’ buildings that did not invite direct experience but required, instead, ‘the vicarious agency of the photograph’ to be appreciated. Much as the skyscraper epitomised, for Mumford, the mechanical achievement of a ‘thoroughly dehumanized civilization’, the type of vision it demanded was that of a superhuman aerial gaze.

The notion of an architecture ‘for angels and aviators’ resonates through the body of works that recorded the rise of Manhattan in the interwar years. Both of those figures are evoked by Margaret Bourke-White, whose famous 1934 portrait on a gargoyle of the Chrysler Building captures the adventurous urban photographer hunting for spectacular city views. Before she set about taking photographs from the air in the aftermath of the Second World War, Bourke-White was commissioned by Chrysler to document in detail the construction of the skyscraper that would become, for a short while, the world’s tallest building. Having set up her studio inside one of the gargoyles, between 1929 and 1930 she photographed the site on open scaffolds and in all weather conditions, wholly unafraid of heights. Such was her fascination with the scenery that she ‘often crawled out on the gargoyles, which projected over the street 800 feet below, to take pictures of the changing moods of the city.’¹⁹ Other photographers focused their attention on social aspects of Manhattan’s vertical growth. Lewis Hine’s renowned photographs of the Empire State Building under construction, from 1931, form at once an extraordinary social portrayal of building workers and a unique representation of the vertiginous views over the city that were opened up by the new tallest building (a world record the Empire would retain for over four decades). Hine’s photographs compel us to experience the cityscape in a vicarious state of suspension, as we watch the so-called ‘ironwalkers’ balance themselves over the urban abyss.

The utilization of tall buildings as viewing platforms became systematic in the work of Berenice Abbott, whose downward shots of Manhattan’s skyscrapers prefigured the recent trend for ‘vertigo-inducing’ photographs. In her major documentary project that spanned the 1930s, *Changing New York*, Abbott depicted the emerging cityscape as a triumph of corporate architecture.²⁰ In the 1939 book that brought this project to the public, Elizabeth McCausland employed the term ‘roof’s eye view’ to describe Abbott’s now-classic shots of Wall Street from on high, which she likened to pictures of natural landscapes: ‘In the roof’s eye view of the financial district, serrated roof-lines create a pattern like that of the West’s vast canyons, in which soil erosion has carved out abstract sculptures of earth and stone.’²¹ Abbott’s plunging perspectives enhanced the

overwhelming presence of the skyscraper as one of the chief symbols of what David Nye has called the 'American technological sublime'.²² In its dual function of visual subject and viewing platform, the skyscraper epitomised a quintessentially American brand of modernity: 'this modernity', Nye observes, 'emphasized how the businessman's gaze dominated the new man-made landscape.'²³ By seizing possession of that dominant gaze, Abbott revealed the contrast between the rampant high-rise constructions and the historical buildings and streetscapes that were dwarfed by them. This tension between old and new is rendered with dizzying intensity in a photograph like 'Broadway and Rector from Above', where Trinity Church (formerly the tallest building in town) is pushed to the edge of the frame by the imposing office blocks that encircle it (Figure 2).

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

Abbott was influenced by the aesthetics of New Vision that emerged in 1920s Europe. Here were mainly iron structures – such as Berlin's Radio Tower, Marseille's Transporter Bridge, and the ever-popular Eiffel Tower – that provided avant-garde photographers with viewing platforms on their surrounding cityscapes, as well as on the structures themselves. Above and beyond any differences between their artistic sensibilities, modern photographers such as László Moholy-Nagy, Germaine Krull, and André Kertész – to name but a few – were united by a quest for what critics of the period often referred to as 'unaccustomed perspectives'.²⁴ At the same time, the high-angle view (*vue en plongée*) became a favourite of Alexander Rodchenko and fellow Soviet artists who experimented with oblique vantage points as means of challenging the canon of bourgeois photography. Architecture became an extension of the optical apparatus, as playfully illustrated by the protagonist of Dziga Vertov's 1929 film, *Man with a Movie Camera*, who climbs up on cranes and bridges then sets up his tripod on a rooftop to film the urban scene that unfolds down below.

Whether they were associated with surrealism, constructivism, or other avant-garde movements, these 'new visionaries' shared an impetus to reconfigure the city through a modern visual language.²⁵ The new generation of fast and versatile cameras that appeared in the mid-1920s precipitated this urban aesthetic, at a time when the boom of the illustrated press catalysed the mass production and reproduction of public images. For interwar European and American photographers alike, architecture often performed the double function that was mentioned above: it was not only an inexhaustible subject but also a stage that allowed them to explore the manifold visual patterns of the modern city. The avant-garde of New Vision and the Modern Movement

in architecture (or, in German, *Neues Sehen* and *Neues Bauen*) shared a fertile common ground. As Robert Elwall remarked: ‘This visual and philosophical kinship saw photography and architecture move into a relationship that was closer than at any stage previously.’²⁶ It might be argued that a similar kinship has not been achieved ever since either, especially in philosophical terms. The recent practice of rooftoping photography does, however, bear analogies with certain trends in contemporary architecture while, at the same time, referencing historical precedents from the interwar period.

Picturing urban exploration

In 2011, nearly exactly a century after Coburn pictured ‘The Octopus’ from a Manhattan tower, Tom Ryaboi perched on the edge of a Toronto skyscraper to capture the shot that marked a new step in the photography of cityscapes from above (Figure 3). The latter’s emotive subject matter, however, is a far cry from the former’s disembodied abstraction. Let us now take a closer look at Ryaboi’s photograph – a vertical view of a vertical city. High-rises shoot up in all directions punctuating the visual space of the image. A straight street provides the oblique horizon line for the one-point perspective. The eye-catching subject, however, is undeniably the truncated human figure in the foreground: dangerously seated on a skyscraper roof with one leg dangling off; the sneaker as a focal point. The subject appears to be contemplating the view from that incongruous position with a child-like nonchalance that makes the picture all the more uncanny. Whilst viewers familiar with Toronto’s financial district might recognise the architecture depicted here, the power of the image transcends its specific location. By placing us vicariously not only atop a skyscraper but right at its outer edge, the wide-angle photograph draws us right into the vertical space of the city and thereby compels us to face its dizzying heights, as it were, head-on.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

This picture propelled a spate of web features heralding the advent of a new photographic trend, often referred to simply as ‘rooftopping’. As the online media began to publish the work of like-minded photographers, a scattered body of images that had previously been circulating mainly through photo-sharing platforms was brought out to the wider public. Amongst the first mainstream media to register this trend was the *Daily Mail* online, which presented a set of Ryaboi’s ‘thrill-seeking’ images in dramatic fashion:

[A] new heart-stopping photography craze is sweeping across the globe. [...] These urban images are revolutionising the way photographers capture images, though they must brave the heights to get spectacular results.²⁷

Although the feature did not fully explain the purported revolutionary aspects of this imagery, it clearly signalled a new momentum. Few months later another front in the rooftopping movement opened in Russia following the sensation caused by the acrobatics of a teenage student.²⁸ His photos and videos, showing wide-angle views of Moscow from elevated structures, sparked off what a leading photography blog hailed as 'A dangerous new photo fad popular among Russian teens'. This variant of rooftopping, promptly dubbed *skywalking*, was described in emphatic terms:

Skywalking basically involves a photographer making his way up to a death-defying height, and snapping a photo that's meant to give you both a perspective you've never seen before, and that feeling like your stomach just made its way into your throat.²⁹

With all its blunt and gender-biased language, this passage sums up the essence of a practice that combines a visceral experience of space with the visual spectacle it affords. The fact that the resulting pictures are regularly exhibited online is as much a reason for as a consequence of the act itself. Amongst the favourite locations for the skywalkers' early stunts were Moscow's Seven Sisters – the monumental tall buildings erected under Stalin between the late 1940s and the early 1950s. As the movement picked up momentum, a group of self-styled 'Crazy Russians' began to take on ever-higher peaks in vertical cities like Dubai, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, attracting increasing levels of media attention.³⁰ After getting off the ground in the late Noughties, by the onset of the 2010s rooftopping had rapidly burgeoned into a global phenomenon. What were the specific conditions in which this photographic practice emerged at a particular time and place?

Not unlike the 1920s, the first decade of our century witnessed parallel shifts in the built environment and in the cultures of visual representation that coalesced into a new tendency in urban photography. A catalyst for the advent of rooftopping was the development of new media technologies and, in particular, the evolution of the Internet into a medium that enabled increasing forms of collaboration and interaction, widely known as Web 2.0. This shift occurred in tandem with the diffusion of consumer digital cameras and camera phones, which vastly propagated the vogue of amateur photography around the globe. Under these circumstances, the notion of photography as a *middle-brow art*, posited by Pierre Bourdieu in the 1960s, has been complicated

by the diversification of social practices and uses that have been spawned by the digital revolution.³¹ While social norms still inform the popular aesthetic of photography, the increasing pervasiveness of image-making and image-sharing technologies has blurred the class-based conventions that used to dictate how photographs were generally produced and consumed below the threshold of 'high art'. As media scholars have pointed out, self-imaging practices reflect increasing social tendencies towards 'self-objectification' and 'self-voyeurism'; hence the ubiquitous selfie has become emblematic of how the symbolic exchanges mediated by photography have been globalized through the agency of new media.³²

It has been noted that online social networks encourage a particular form of self-presentation that operates under the exhibitionary mode.³³ Since every step of our lives can be recorded and displayed online, the possibility of managing the visual narrative of our daily experiences turns us all into 'virtual curators'. Risking oversimplification, one might argue that the ever-increasing proliferation of photographs on the Internet has caused two opposite yet complementary effects: on the one hand, the incessant stream of visual information has promoted a mode of spectatorship that occurs in a state of distraction, resulting in a tendency of digital images to be reduced to the status of ephemera;³⁴ on the other hand, this banalisation coexists with, and in turn fosters, a collective appetite for sensational pictures that stimulates the activity of image-makers in search of internet fame. The introduction of photo- and video-sharing platforms based on user-generated content, such as Flickr and Instagram, further contributed to blur the line between amateur and professional photography – a line often straddled by the rooftoppers.³⁵

Another contextual factor to be considered is the growth of vertical cities, which has rapidly accelerated since the turn of the twenty-first century. A new wave of skyscrapers has been sweeping over the urbanised world, most notably in the Persian Gulf region and in South-East Asia. This trend has also had a noticeable impact on the landscape of western cities such as London, traditionally resistant to high-rise development, and is also affecting the historical birthplaces of the skyscraper as suggested by the controversial plans for new 'supertall' buildings in Chicago and New York.³⁶ The new paradigm of urban verticality has coincided with the popularity of vertigo-inducing structures, such as glass bridges and Ferris wheels, alongside a plethora of extreme sports and thrill-seeking activities at altitude.

Arguably, the parallel developments of new media and vertical cities had a bearing on the rise of rooftopping photography. Its specific origins are to be found in the spatial

practice known as 'urban exploration', which broadly refers to the transgressive act of infiltrating spaces that are abandoned, derelict, or out of bounds to ordinary people. While this movement stemmed from urban youth subcultures in Europe and North America between the 1970s and 1990s, the term itself came about only in the mid-2000s to denote the formation of a networked community.³⁷ The Web 2.0 facilitated meet-ups of different groups, initially in New York and Toronto, as well as the possibility of sharing the visual records of their activities online.³⁸ It is not surprising then that rooftopping arose in the epicentres of urban exploration.³⁹

The political significance of this movement have been the subject of debate. Urban exploration is often regarded as an attempt to reclaim the 'right to the city' by asserting the values of freedom, play, and adventure that are denied by the spatial logic of neoliberalism.⁴⁰ In *Explore Everything: Place-Hacking the City*, the geographer-cum-explorer Bradley Garrett has suggested that this transient reappropriation of urban space amounts to a veritable 'cultural renaissance'. Garrett's ethnographic study reveals that urban exploration is a diverse movement and, whilst some of its exponents are driven by explicit political motives, others are primarily moved by the sheer pursuit of thrill. Indeed, the play element is key to understanding what brings explorers to scale buildings or roam abandoned tunnels 'simply for the joy of doing so' – a ludic experience that may nonetheless carry an inherent political significance.⁴¹ The means of recording urban explorations varies as much as the motivations behind them. It is, however, a common practice amongst explorers to take photos and videos and share them on the Web in order to extend their actions beyond the immediate moment:

By sneaking into places they are not supposed to be, photographing them and sharing those exploits with the world, explorers are recoding people's normalised relationships to city space. It is both a celebration and a protest. It is a melding, a fusing of the individual and the city, of what is allowed and what is possible, of memory and place.⁴²

As Garrett notes, a dilemma surrounds the use of cameras to document these explorations. If the overt aim of 'place-hacking' the city is to sabotage the culture of passive consumption that underlies the society of the spectacle through the active reappropriation of spaces, this situationist spirit risks being undermined by the growing emphasis on visual (self-)representation. Will the same media that allowed urban exploration to move out of its niche and into the public realm become the source of its undoing? Garrett, himself an active photographer, suggests that the typical 'hero shots' posted by explorers on the Web might 'just create a different kind of spectacle', yet one

that allows viewers to connect with their actions and feelings. This alternate type of spectacle has rapidly evolved, and its modes of dissemination have expanded from the Web to the sphere of exhibitions and publications. Visually documenting a decade of explorations in a city that has eagerly embraced the model of corporate verticality, the 2016 volume *London Rising: Illicit Photos from the City's Heights* is at once a homage to an ever-changing metropolis and a critique of the rampant neoliberalism that underlies its emerging landscapes. This glossy photo-book sanctions the popularity of a class of images that, in Garrett's words, 'contain a kernel of power inversion' – a symbolic reappropriation of the city's 'corporate heights' that draws its power from the acts of trespassing which make such photographs possible.⁴³

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

From Russia with thrill

For rooftoppers whose avowed goal is to capture city views from above, the camera is not an addendum but the primary medium that validates the exploration itself. As mentioned above, the increasingly blurred line between amateur and professional photography has been crossed by explorers who gained a reputation from posting sensational pictures on the Web. The Russian 'skywalking' movement is an interesting case in point. Two of its pioneers, Vadim Makhorov and Vitaliy Raskalov, assert that photography and urban exploration have been indissolubly linked in their work since their partnership began.⁴⁴ Although the locations of their free climbs include historical monuments, such as Cologne Cathedral, their main targets are contemporary 'supertall' buildings. In 2014, a small online furore was caused by the release of video and photos that showed their stealthy ascent of the Shanghai Tower, the second tallest building in the world at 632 metres of height (Figure 5).⁴⁵ These 'camera-wielding Russian daredevils', as *The Guardian* dubbed them,⁴⁶ might be seen to revive the feverish quest for new vantage points on the city that animated their avant-gardist predecessors. The skywalkers' stunts, however, are firmly rooted in the present zeitgeist that binds the visual vertigo of the images with the embodied experience of the spaces they negotiate. While extraordinary city views are their avowed goals, Makhorov and Raskalov also systematically record their climbs with head-mounted cameras in such a way that video images become complementary to their photography. Alongside the 'trophy shots' obtained with digital reflex cameras, the videos document these extreme explorations in the making and thereby give them currency as cinematic feats.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]

It was not long before the electronics industry seized upon the popular appeal of those feats, and Makhorov and Raskalov were cast as poster boys. In 2015, a leading camera manufacturer released a commercial video featuring the two ‘city climbers’ scaling the JW Marriott Marquis Hotel in Dubai – the world’s tallest hotel at 355 metres of height.⁴⁷ A place-hacking mission was staged to evoke the sense of living on the edge. The two-minute clip starts with the protagonists on the city’s busy streets: they then reach the scene by taxi; hack their way into the building; climb onto the roof; explore its sharp edges; and finally scale the slender vertical mast at sunset. The closing shot, filmed from an airborne camera, celebrates their apparent triumph. Night has fallen and, from the high vantage point they have conquered, the climbers can eventually train their cameras on the cityscape spreading all around. The closing slogan, ‘come and see’, tantalisingly promotes the camera as the ultimate mediator of this thrilling spectacle.

This clip is a sign of the rapid mutation of rooftopping from a transgressive spatial practice towards a normalised, and increasingly commodified, event.⁴⁸ The advertising discourse taps into the heroic imagery of adventurous young explorers who put their lives at risk by climbing tall structures without harness to capture arresting views. In spite of the invariable trigger warnings urging viewers not to emulate these dangerous stunts, the press coverage has repeatedly extolled the virtues of those who ‘brave the heights to get spectacular results’. The worthiness of these results, however, has also been questioned in light of the all-too-real hazards they involve.

This ambivalence is encapsulated by a heading published by *The Sun* online in 2012, when the pictures posted by Russian teens on the Web caused a sensation: ‘It’s the absolute height of bravery – or possibly stupidity.’⁴⁹ The last word might in fact have more nuance than it appears in this context if one considers its Latin etymology (from *stupere*: ‘be amazed or stunned’). What was presumably intended as a moral quip thus calls to mind the nonrational instincts that underlie, broadly speaking, any practice driven by the pursuit of extreme visceral thrills. In this respect, rooftopping is aligned with a plethora of gravity-defying practices, from rope walking to free climbing, that entail serious bodily risks for those who perform them, and therefore confront the spectator with the ‘death drives’ that, in Freud’s classic definition, lie beyond the pleasure principle.⁵⁰ Is it not precisely the reckless audacity of their makers what gives rooftopping photographs their ability to *stupefy*? The moral undertones that permeate the conservative media discourse echo the reactions that were reported in the Victorian

press to the craze for gravity-defying stunts in the late-nineteenth century.⁵¹ Unlike those performances, which were carried out in front of spectating crowds, the rooftoppers mostly act away from the public gaze and their images enter the realm of spectacle through the agency of new media. The technical apparatus that brings viewers in deferred contact with the subject shields them, at the same time, from witnessing the trauma of a potential fall.

The hazardous nature of rooftopping is part and parcel of its controversial appeal. Fatal accidents have indeed occurred, as reported by the same photography blogs that contributed to diffuse rooftopping imagery in the first place.⁵² These casualties have been assimilated to the broader risks involved in taking self-portraits in dangerous places and circumstances (the ‘Safe Selfies’ campaign launched by the Russian government in 2015, for instance, specifically cautions against leaning over a roof with a camera in hand amongst other warnings).⁵³ And yet, the prevailing response to the publication of these photographs is one of astonished contemplation akin to that prompted by urban acrobatics such as , Philippe Petit’s legendary highwire walk between Manhattan’s Twin Towers. Today’s explorers somehow revive the guerrilla spirit of that performance, which managed to cast a fragile aura of humanity over the towers.⁵⁴ By so doing, as critic Philip Nobel notes, they also put forth an alternative to the hyperreal imagery of skyscrapers produced by digital designers and visualisers:

Humanizing vectors – a troupe of young Russians, popularizing its illicit feats through the deft manipulation of social media, has made images of supertall spire-stands and cornice-hangs as much a part of the story of those buildings as the architects’ own cloud-piercing sunset renderings.⁵⁵

At a time in which we still lack a clear narrative to make sense of the rapid vertical growth of cities around the world, the rooftoppers have been producing a body of images that, disturbing though they may be, exert a powerful hold on the collective imagination. What are the visual properties that distinguish these images? And how do they relate to the longer tradition of urban photography that was outlined above? The last section of the essay addresses the constitutive aspects of this imagery along with their main historical resonances.

Into the image: bodies and spaces

It ought to be premised that 'rooftopping photograph' is a generic category designating a broad and diverse class of images, hence any attempt to codify it in terms of a single consistent genre would likely be inadequate. The pictures posted by teenage explorers to display their adrenaline-pumping acrobatics, for instance, differ in many ways from the work of professional photographers who climb up tall buildings in order to frame cities from new perspectives. Most of these images, however, share what is often described by the media as 'vertigo-inducing' properties. This rather indefinite term alludes to the affective responses that, to varying degrees, photographs taken from great urban heights may elicit in their viewers. Here vertigo should be understood not in medical terms but, far more loosely, as a sensation of thrill or anxiety that reproduces vicariously the feeling of looking down from a high spot.

In a visual culture saturated with CGI and digital manipulation, the broad appeal of these images seems to restore the irreducible realism of the photograph, or, more accurately, our enduring perceptual faith in it. Roland Barthes's classic argument on photography's power of authentication finds renewed relevance here. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes posited that our encounter with the *spectrum* of a photograph (that is, its referent or subject) takes place under the spell of an evidential force that emanates from the image itself.⁵⁶ This force is what makes us imagine that the subject *has been there*. Hence, the distinctive property of photography is not so much to immortalise a subject and record its perpetual absence, but rather to stage a magic emanation of the real which Barthes evocatively called the 'return of the dead'.⁵⁷ To sum up with a classic phrase: 'Every photograph is a certificate of presence.'⁵⁸

This argument has been seminal to the phenomenology of photography, a field of enquiry that has developed in particular in France under the influence of Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception. Drawing on this intellectual tradition, Edouard Pontremoli expanded upon Barthes's insights to argue that the photograph participates in the flesh of the world by means of a 'silent complicity' with it.⁵⁹ Accordingly, when we look at a photograph we engage with a perceptual experience in which our gaze meets the presence of a visible Other, as it were, 'in person'. For Pontremoli, the medium's enduring ability to surprise us lies in a 'corporeal presence' that is akin to our direct perception of the world. Writing in the midst of the digital revolution, this author stressed the importance of recovering 'the raw amazement of perceptual evidence' that photography uniquely engenders.⁶⁰

Such a raw amazement is arguably what endows rooftopping photographs with their distinct photogenic quality, as the corporeal presence of the subject makes them stupefying. In order to comprehend how this imagery stimulates our perceptual imagination, the notion of *vicarious kinaesthesia* may offer a useful interpretative category.⁶¹ This concept initially appeared in the literature on digital media to describe a key component of action computer games, namely the ‘heightening of sensation [...] and the resulting impression of kinaesthesia induced by illusory participation in acts of particular risk.’⁶² A less intense yet still comparable effect is induced by rooftopping photographs, which often frame the photographers themselves (or fellow explorers) in the guise of heroic figures that resemble the characters of action-adventure films and video games. Whilst the physical stimulation may not be the same, the realism of the photograph nevertheless augments the viewer’s sense of participation in the scene: after all, it is a human subject that we encounter and not an avatar.

The emotional temperature of rooftopping images varies considerably depending on the relationship between body and space they articulate. Indeed, their vertiginous effects derive not only from the environments depicted but from the viewer’s awareness of the photographer-cum-climber within the frame. Whilst in all visual representations the human figure tends to become the focal point of a spectator’s attention, in rooftopping images this focus is charged with dramatic intensity by the incongruous position of the subject in space. The body acts as a foil for our affective response to the scene and, in turns, affects our reading of the urban landscape. Whether the presence of the operator be partly or fully displayed in the frame, or merely evoked, this bodily indexicality is arguably what endows rooftopping photographs with their brute evidential force. Crucially, these are not detached views that freeze architecture out of time, but rather embodied views that frame buildings and spaces in the precarious instant of an event. In other words, rooftopping invests its architectural subject with a lived (and often dramatic) temporality.⁶³

These general ideas should be tested through the consideration of specific images. By adjusting the general distinction between oblique and vertical views from the field of aerial photography, we can identify two analogous types with regard to rooftopping imagery – *panoramic* and *plunging* views. While the former reproduce the customary space of perspectival vision, and usually include the horizon line, the latter designate the high-angle shots obtained by pointing the camera with its focal axis oriented towards the ground. There are obvious differences too, for aerial photography entails not only different altitudes and mobile viewpoints but also a more detached relationship between the apparatus and the subject. Nevertheless, the analogy appears justified by

the main patterns of rooftopping photographs, which in the main tend to replicate the oblique and vertical viewing angles typical of aerial imagery. These categories are further complicated by the frequent presence of human figures in rooftopping photos, a recurring feature that largely distinguishes them from their early-twentieth-century precedents. In the following two sections, the key properties of panoramic and plunging roof's-eye views are outlined on the basis of their framing patterns and their respective perceptual intensities.⁶⁴

Panoramic views

A common type of view is that which embraces the cityscape as a broad horizontal expanse: mostly shot through wide-angle lenses, they often include the buildings from which they are taken and/or adjacent structures. This urban genre, which has a long history stretching back to the birth of panoramic photography, received a new boost from rooftoppers in the early 2010s. In a series of photos taken from high vantages in Dubai, for instance, Makhorov and Raskalov depicted the jumble of styles and scales that define the city's landscape, where the vertical lines of the skyscrapers contrast with the horizontal spread of the road infrastructure (Figure 6). Furthermore, optical effects are sometimes accentuated by the use of technical devices such as fish-eye lenses: in pictures of this kind, however, the sense of disorientation caused by extreme distortions tends to override the vicarious vertigo of the actual spaces depicted.

[INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE]

A subset of panoramic views have a rooftopper posing as a character within the frame, mainly standing or sitting on the edge of a tall structure. These selfies at height place the emphasis on the hazardous position of the human figure in space and induce us to perceive the cityscape from that position. The degree of kinaesthetic intensity is further amplified by our identification with the camera's standpoint: we see the scene from the point where the photographer set up the apparatus (usually with a self-timer), and are led to imagine their walk and to feel the dizzying space in-between. This trend was spearheaded by Ryaboi and other photographers who depicted themselves and fellow explorers in the act of performing dangerous balancing acts on the edges of tall structures. Makhorov and Raskalov, likewise, published numerous shots of each other 'skywalking' on suspended structures or standing at the edges of high-rises – a vogue whose global popularity is proven by countless examples on the Web.

These affective pictures are reminiscent of Hine's photos of building workers, and some of the rooftoppers' poses do seem to echo the ironwalkers' routines at great

heights. Yet both intent and subject are altogether different. By reclaiming a liminal space on the edge, rooftopers subvert the symbolic power relations between the tower and the street, and use their own bodies to assert a fleeting mastery over the city. As Garrett notes, the very fact that the photographer is *there* implies a subversive action, and the visual images that result from it ‘have the effect of dissipating privileged scopic power.’⁶⁵ This sense of sovereignty is further reinforced in images that depict the photographer as a solitary figure beholding the cityscape. ‘Highlife’, a night shot of Toronto taken by Ryaboi in 2014, is emblematic of this panoramic self-portrait (Figure 7). Typically shot from a low oblique angle that includes the horizon line, this picture harks back to the nineteenth-century tradition of romantic landscape painting epitomised by Caspar David Friedrich (Figure 8). Standing on a tower crane, today’s urban wanderer is intent on contemplating the city as urban nature, couched in the atmospheric effects of lights and haze. The urban vista is reenacted as the highest expression of the technological sublime.

[INSERT FIGURES 7 & 8 HERE – IDEALLY PLACED NEXT TO EACH OTHER]

There are further variations on the theme of the selfie at height, as shown for instance by the series realised by British rooftoper Lucinda Grange atop a gargoyle of the Chrysler Building (Figure 9). These carefully staged pictures reference not only the famous 1934 portraits of Bourke-White on the same spot (taken by her dark room assistant Oscar Graubner) but also Erwin Blumenfeld’s legendary portrait of the model Lisa Fonssagrives balancing on a beam of the Eiffel Tower in a 1939 photo shoot for *Vogue* – one of the earliest examples of fashion photography at altitude. Grange, who climbed and photographed a number of tall buildings around the world, has keenly asserted her place in a predominantly male field.⁶⁶ The Chrysler series, in which the photographer herself features smartly dressed up, challenges the gendered stereotypes about rooftopping practices while at the same time evoking the illustrious historical precedent of the female photographer who turned that place into a viewing platform. These images therefore imply a symbolic continuity with the tradition of urban photography from above that emerged in the early twentieth century. Furthermore, the striking contrast between the subject and the scenery gives them a surplus of meaning that transcends the common regularities of an increasingly codified genre.

[INSERT FIGURE 9 HERE]

Plunging views

Vertical roof's-eye views, on the other hand, are characterised by dramatic plunging perspectives. This genre has enjoyed renewed popularity since the late 2000s and gained traction especially in the early 2010s through the work of photographers such as Tom Ryaboi, Lucinda Grange, and Navid Baraty.⁶⁷ Initially inspired by Tokyo's cityscape, Baraty went on to explore New York's canyons in his 2012 project, 'Intersection', which explores converging lines, mirroring surfaces, and the lights and colours of the streetscape seen from skyscrapers' rooftops (Figure 10).⁶⁸ These views somehow transpose the one-point perspective of early architectural photography on to the vertical axis of vision. By distancing the camera from the edge of the building, Baraty makes us feel as though we were hovering over the ground, thus echoing some of Abbott's 1930s views of New York but also the visual experiments conducted by Bauhaus photographers such as Umbo and Moholy-Nagy in the late 1920s. While other pictures from the 'Intersection' series, taken with tele lenses, flatten the perspective and abstract the geometric patterns of the street, the wide-angle plunging views arouse an altogether more visceral response.

Similar results are achieved by Ryaboi, who often plays with reflections in his vertical photographs. The simple rotation of the main axis can make these views all the more destabilising, as is the case with images that are deliberately flipped upside down (Figure 11). When the building that serves as viewing platform is displaced to the upper side of the image, it becomes harder for viewers to find their visual bearings within the frame. As Rosalind Krauss pointed out, the rotation of the viewpoint was one of the procedures employed by surrealist photographers in the 1930s, in their attempts to break down the perceptual boundaries of reality through various doubling and mirroring effects.⁶⁹ Today's rooftoppers may not be driven by the same desire to assault reality, in aesthetic terms, but they still borrow some of these strategies in their vertical views of cities. Ryaboi's flipped photographs, in particular, signal that vertical cityscapes are not only found objects to be marvelled at but spatial configurations that can be manipulated and distorted at will.

[INSERT FIGURE 10 HERE] + [INSERT FIGURE 11 HERE]

The same effect of distortion was used by the archetypal Roof Topper in the photograph 'I'll make ya famous', which epitomises a particular subset of plunging views with a human figure inside the frame – usually the photographer or, as in this case, a fellow explorer (Figure 3). An uncanny effect is produced by the tension between the vertical perspective and the sitting pose, which somehow domesticates

the unhomely scene. This point-of-view shot is perhaps the most distinctive trademark of rooftopping and has been used by many of its practitioners. The degree of vicarious kinaesthesia is arguably at its highest in the cases where a lower body is framed in close-up from overhead: here the viewers are enticed to put themselves, almost literally, in the subject's shoes. Combining the vertical city view with the aesthetic of self-portraiture, this particular genre makes palpable the visceral experience of rooftopping.

The two categories examined above are intended to shed light onto a broad class of images rather than constitute a strict dichotomy. In many cases, rooftopping photographs adopt one or the other of these framing procedures. There exists however a whole range of views that straddle them, notably horizontal or oblique shots in which the angle of vision stretches to include the vertical axis. A picture of New York taken by Makhorov in 2014, for instance, combines aspects of both panoramic and plunging views whilst including a figure that humanises the landscape: it also confirms that the vertical metropolis par excellence, which sparked off the rise of urban photography from above over a century ago, continues to exert an enduring appeal among today's rooftoppers (Figure 12).

[INSERT FIGURE 12 HERE]

Conclusions

This short history has attempted to explore the rise of rooftopping photography and the contentious imagery of vertical cities that it has brought about. Rooftoppers have contributed to reconfigure the field of urban vision by capturing the disorienting experience of the contemporary built environment. Their images often show architecture in relation to its surroundings, and to the human body, in ways that call into question the shifting spatial conditions of urban life around the globe. For at the core of rooftopping lies an inextricable link between the act of visual representation and the embodied spatial practice that makes it possible. In fact, this convergence is arguably what makes these photographs truly *architectural*: not so much in the canonical sense of a detached and aestheticised view of buildings, but rather as an immersive representation of space that rests on architecture itself as a viewing platform.

Within a few years from its public recognition, this movement began to show signs of fatigue as the spirit that animated its beginnings was felt to be waning under the lure of

sensationalism ('The bottom line', lamented a successful rooftoper, 'is you're being admired for your antics, not for your photography.')⁷⁰ The practice of exploring urban heights became rapidly normalised: its imagery entered the space of the contemporary art museum and was co-opted for commercial purposes.⁷¹ By 2016, there emerged the sense that 'a particular era of rooftopping may be coming to a close.'⁷² Whether rooftopping will turn out to have been a short-lived fad or a phenomenon with lasting consequences, it has marked a shift in the urban photography from above. This practice, which crystallised during the interwar period, was revived and taken to new extremes by a generation of urban explorers in the early 2010s. The romanticised figure of the 'daredevil' rooftoper portrayed by the mainstream media is perhaps akin to the angelic figure evoked by Mumford nearly a century ago. Much as the early skyscrapers could only be apprehended through 'the vicarious agency of the photograph', the vertical cities of the twenty-first century have been dramatically visualised by free climbers armed with digital cameras. In the process, the role of photography itself has shifted from a medium employed to document and interpret buildings to an instrument for recording and displaying a visceral experience of space.

The usual intimation that precedes such photographs in the media, 'Don't look down!', should be reversed then: these pictures do want us to look into the urban abyss and, by inducing a vicarious sense of vertigo, alert us to the dizzying environments they depict. How are we then to comprehend this twenty-first century phenomenon?

Rooftopping may be regarded as an attempt to reclaim inaccessible spaces and to reenchant the image of vertical cities; or as a means of exposing the relentless pace and scale of urban growth; or, indeed, as an act of bravery dictated by the imperatives of the spectacle in the Internet Age. This essay has shown that each of these factors plays a part in the formation of an imagery that, whilst very much a product of the present moment, has deeper roots in the history of urban photography. It can be argued that rooftopping has revived and even reinforced the power of photography to mediate the perception of architecture and urban space. By reconfiguring the summits of high-rise buildings as unintended viewing platforms, the rooftopers have not only disclosed a new field of vision but provoked us to expand our understanding of architectural photography beyond its canon.

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