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‘A Dynamic Attitude of the Gaze’: Basilico’s Sense of Vertical Space

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**Abstract**

High-rise architecture has provided a popular vantage point for urban photographers since the turn of the millennium. Amidst the diffusion of aerial imagery obtained from airborne cameras, the embodied view from above has witnessed a parallel revival. This mode of representation harks back to the early twentieth century when the modern city became a field of exploration for avant-garde photographers in pursuit of a ‘new vision’, as epitomised by Aleksander Rodchenko’s radical high-angle shots which captured Moscow’s spatial patterns from uncustomary perspectives. Eight decades later, the Italian photographer Gabriele Basilico revisited the Russian capital and produced a photo-book, *Vertiginous Moscow* (2008), that made reference to Rodchenko’s work. Basilico embraced the *vue en plongée* to depict the city of and from the Seven Sisters, the monumental towers built under Stalin after World War II. Multiple layers that constitute *Vertiginous Moscow* are unpacked here with a focus on the photographer’s sense of verticality, which he succinctly described as ‘a dynamic attitude of the gaze’. This attitude was not limited to the depiction of urban spaces from high vantage points but engaged a broader set of temporal relations with the city’s past – as well as intimations of possible futures.

## Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, there has been a global surge of interest in views of cities taken from high vantage points. Amidst the proliferation of aerial images produced by various types of ‘unmanned vehicles’, from satellites to drones, the early twenty-first century has witnessed a revival of embodied photographic practices that employ tall buildings as viewing platforms. The act of climbing towers in order to depict cityscapes from above has a time-honoured tradition in the history of urban photography. It emerged with force in interwar Europe through the work of avant-garde artists such as André Kertész, Germaine Krull, László Moholy-Nagy and Aleksander Rodchenko, who embraced uncustomary viewpoints offered by the modern city to explore visual patterns and spatial configurations. In the same period, leading modernist architects and critics – including Erich Mendelsohn, Le Corbusier and Sigfried Giedion – illustrated their publications with pictures taken from elevated viewpoints. The European experiments with the *new vision* were famously channeled to America by Berenice Abbott, who mastered the ‘roof’s eye view’ in her effort to document the transformation of New York throughout the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> This kind of imagery has echoed through to contemporary urban photography. Harking back to those historical precedents, several artists have sought to represent cities in ways that reflect, and reveal, their dizzying conditions. (Fig. 1)

A distinct genre that gained renewed popularity in the late noughties is the vertical view of the city from high up, in which skyscrapers serve at once as architectural subjects and viewing platforms. André Lichtenberg’s 2008 ‘Vertigo’ series, for instance, is a set of plumb views taken from the top of One Canada Square in London’s Canary Wharf (UK’s tallest building at the time) which harness the long depth of field to plunge the viewer’s gaze into the urban abyss. As in some of Abbott’s photographs of New York, here the simultaneous perception of the skyscraper’s façade receding from the foreground and the street in the background elicits a visual response that is akin to the sensation of height vertigo. Similarly, the destabilising effects of looking down from skyscrapers were explored by Navid Baraty in his 2012 ‘Intersection’ project, a series of plunging shots taken in New York that emphasise the vertical space formed by the high-rise, and high-density, built environment. Both Lichtenberg’s and Baraty’s works epitomise the re-engagement with perceptual vertigo in twenty-first century urban photography: their dizzying images obtained by leaning over the edge provoke a wide array of responses, ranging from elation to discomfort, which reflect the varying levels of height tolerance amongst different viewers.

Meanwhile, over the past decade the Internet has become awash with images produced by myriad urban explorers, also known as ‘roofers’ or ‘rooftoppers’, who climb, often illicitly, to summits of high-rises around the world and disseminate visual records of their feats on the web. The resulting photographs serve to validate these explorations while also exposing aspects of urban environments that are only visible from high up.<sup>2</sup> This type of sensational imagery rapidly spread across online photo-sharing platforms through the 2010s until it became a global phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> As high-rises have become pervasive features of cities around the world, the widespread circulation of ‘vertigo-inducing photographs’ – as they are often described in the media – signals the emergence of an image culture in which the transgression of boundaries is intertwined with popular modes of self-performance and self-presentation.<sup>4</sup>

This revival of the roof’s-eye view had an immediate precursor in the work of Gabriele Basilico (1944–2013), the late Italian photographer renowned for his analytical approach to the urban landscape. After studying architecture in his native Milan, Basilico took up photography in earnest in the 1970s and went on to develop a distinct method for ‘measuring up’ space with the

camera. His architectural training was manifest from his first major project, an inventory of Milanese industrial buildings that was inspired by works of early twentieth-century photographers, ranging from Eugène Atget to Walker Evans and Werner Mantz.<sup>5</sup> Basilico's systematic approach was also indebted to the postwar typological surveys of Bernd and Hilla Becher's, whose photographic work he admired. His main interest, however, was in urban landscapes and he took up a large-format camera to explore in greater detail the complexity of human environments.

A slow and contemplative gaze allowed him to interpret cities as living entities that bear traces of continuous transformation. This vision matured in the mid-1980s during an assignment in Northern France, where Basilico documented the coastal landscapes for the government-funded DATAR mission.<sup>6</sup> It was this project that honed his perception, triggering an intimate response to every place he photographed over the following decades. Not unlike Abbott's, Basilico's personal research began as a catalogue of buildings and gradually became a critique of urban transformation. However, his field of action was not confined to his home city: a relentless traveller, he read aspects of Milan everywhere he went, in a way that is reminiscent of Marco Polo's projections of Venice in Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. (Fig. 2 and 3)

While Basilico is best known for his monochrome images of buildings and cities shot from street level, in the latter part of his life he pictured a number of urban landscapes looking down from high vantage points. He had long been used to climbing to roofs of tall buildings in order to grasp the complex structure of cities. In his memoirs he reflected on how that vantage point had helped him to comprehend the devastated fabric in Beirut when, in 1991, he was invited to photograph the city centre in the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War.<sup>7</sup> Downward-looking views however became a central aspect of his photography only in the following decade and were the subject of the Turin exhibition 'Verticale' in 2007.<sup>8</sup> The work on display – produced during assignments in cities as diverse as Barcelona, Monaco and San Francisco – showed a lesser-known aspect of Basilico's photography. It constituted a conscious attempt to revive the twentieth-century *vue en plongée* by echoing, in particular, the giddy-making views of New York and Moscow captured respectively by Abbott and Rodchenko.<sup>9</sup> Some of these photographs were published in collective works such as the slanted views of Liverpool that feature in the 2008 volume *Cities on the Edge*.<sup>10</sup> While Basilico's pictures of Naples included in that book reflected his long-standing interest in the portrayal of industrial buildings from the ground, the shots of Liverpool from above testified to his newer experiments.

This photographic research culminated in a campaign that Basilico conducted in Moscow with the architect Umberto Zanetti. Their collaboration led to the publication, also in 2008, of the photo-book *Mosca Verticale*, edited by Zanetti himself with Alessandro De Magistris and issued in English, a year later, as *Vertiginous Moscow*. It remained one of the photographer's last international projects and his only one revolving around the depiction of a city from above.<sup>11</sup> A critical analysis of this work and the wider discourse surrounding it offers insights into Basilico's approach to the representation of cities which, as we shall see, reverberate across time as well as space.

### **Falling gaze**

*Vertiginous Moscow* is structured around the city's 'Seven Sisters', the tall buildings erected at Stalin's behest between the late-1940s and the mid-1950s in order to enhance the architectural profile of the Soviet capital. These monumental towers, largely constructed by forced labourers from the gulags, were part of the works undertaken for the amelioration of Moscow's historical centre ordered by the government in 1947 to mark the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the city's foundation.<sup>12</sup> Up till then, the capital had been radically transformed through the major expansion of mass housing and urban infrastructure dictated by the master plan approved by Stalin himself in 1935.

The Seven Sisters embodied the so-called Stalinist Empire style that became the trademark of post-war architecture in the USSR.<sup>13</sup> They were the smaller siblings of the Palace of the Soviets, the intended centrepiece of the 1930s' expansion of Moscow that was never built. This colossal edifice, whose construction was halted by the German invasion in 1941, was intended to rise in the vicinity of the Kremlin, on the site of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour that was demolished to make way for it. In Boris Iofan's monumental design, topped by a giant statue of Lenin, it would have become the tallest building in the world and likely the most imposing. Although the Palace never saw the light, seven other towers (out of eight that were initially planned) were subsequently built and promptly enlisted in the ideological struggle for world supremacy that marked the early phase of the Cold War.

The Soviet authorities were adamant that Russia's tall architecture should be distinct from its American counterpart. Their chosen name, *vysotnye zdaniya* ('high-rise buildings'), was at variance with the term skyscraper, which, as noted by De Magistris, 'came to be seen as impregnated with Americanism.'<sup>14</sup> To locals however the towers became known as *Stalinskie vysotki* ('Stalin's high-rises'), a sobriquet that captured the close association of this monumental architecture with the soviet leader. In line with the 1935 plan for the reconstruction of Moscow, those buildings were supposed to harmonise with the historical urban fabric, in contradistinction to the seemingly haphazard maze of skyscrapers that defined New York's skyline: its dark urban canyons were seen as a glaring symbol of capitalist greed. The distribution of the new towers across Moscow was meant to provide a web of orientation points unifying the city's centre with its edges. Nevertheless, the American architectural press defiantly pointed out how closely Moscow's high-rises resembled some prominent edifices in Manhattan. In 1954, the *Architectural Forum* remarked with irony: 'It was inevitable that the Russians would some day invent the Woolworth Building! And they have done it, not once, but eight times. And all in one place – Moscow!'<sup>15</sup>

Today, the Seven Sisters continue to house major public institutions, such as Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Moscow State University, along with various offices, hotels, and apartments. These landmarks hold a prominent place in the symbolic as well as physical fabric of the city. In Karl Schlögel's words: 'They stand in exposed, dominating positions, just as castles were formerly built on strategically advantageous sites.'<sup>16</sup> For this very reason, they provided Basilico with a series of privileged observation points to apprehend the scale and shape of Moscow's post-Communist transition. (Fig. 4)

The visual content of *Vertiginous Moscow* is characterised by a systematic alternation between pictures of the towers, mainly monochrome, and colour pictures taken from their summits. A variety of street views, low-angle shots and architectural close-ups constitute the former group, whereas the latter comprises high-angle shots as well as wide panoramic views of the urban landscape. Faithful to his method of slow composition, Basilico used a Linhof large-

format camera (5x4 in.) for the entire Moscow project, which posed logistical and practical challenges due to the chosen points of view. Throughout the photo-book, the angles of vision shift constantly so that straight shots are interspersed by oblique ones, creating an overall effect of disorientation. Abrupt perspectival changes, variations in tone and focal lengths all contribute to alter the viewer's position vis-à-vis the subject. This seemingly jumbled structure in fact reproduces, dialectically, the dual nature of the towers as architectural monuments and, at the same time, vantage points onto the city. The photographic sequence deliberately alternates between particular properties of the buildings and vistas they open up on their surroundings.

Stepping back from the Moscow project, it is worth noting that Basilico's empathic mode of observation characterised his mature approach to the photography of cities. He remarked: 'a sensitive, meditative, centred gaze can help to reveal what lies before our eyes and so often remains unnoticed.'<sup>17</sup> By means of his well-trained gaze, the photographer was able to establish a unique relationship with each place he explored. A patient contemplation drove his relentless quest for visual order in most diverse and heterogeneous environments. This process has been associated with Basilico's architectural education, and rightly so; however, he was himself keen to relate it further back to his childhood years, when he grew up playing amongst ruins of post-war Milan. Later in life, he reflected on the personal approach to cities that underlined his visual research:

For me, to photograph a city means to make a series of choices that can be typological, historical, or affective; but, above all, it means to look for places and create stories and relations with them, including faraway places locked in our memory, or even imaginary ones. These places are streets, buildings, squares, horizons, sometimes panoramic views, that merge into a journey through the city. The photographer's task is to work with distance, to take measures, to re-arrange space, to find an equilibrium between *here* and *there*, and, ultimately, to seek out the possible meanings of a place.<sup>18</sup>

In the Moscow project, Basilico used panoramic views to observe the alterations of the cityscape that had occurred since the early 1990s, when he had first visited the capital soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union. By framing the city as a landscape, he intended to establish a distance that would allow him 'stereoscopically' to recombine his memories with fresh impressions. In a feature published in *Abitare* in 2009, the photographer recounted that, upon returning to Moscow, he had been struck by the intensity of the traffic and the visible signs of a fast-growing, and blatantly uneven, wealth. His choice of architectural foci was partly in recognition of the enduring monumental power of the Seven Sisters but, over and above that, was determined by a fundamentally visual motive:

I also chose the towers because the most important thing they gave me was a 360° vantage point of the entire capital that would enable me both to document the city and to capture the alluring sense of mental and physical vertigo, as well as the visual dynamic that is all too easily attributed to artists of the Revolution like Alexander Rodchenko.<sup>19</sup>

These words echo those recorded on the occasion of the 2007 Turin exhibition, when Basilico explained that his photographic approach to verticality transcended the technical definition of plumb view and referred, more broadly, to 'a dynamic attitude of the gaze'. It was this attitude that prompted him to excavate in different cities the layers of spatial depth that are visible from on high. He considered the vertical as a distinctive 'way of observing the city' and went on to propose an original definition of the term: 'The attraction towards a vanishing point that makes one's gaze fall downwards and, with a near sense of vertigo, brings closer the movement and

flows that occur between the city's full and empty [spaces].<sup>20</sup> This passage gives an insight into the photographer's sense of space that crystallised in *Vertiginous Moscow*. While professing himself a 'convinced horizontalist', Basilico recognised the impossibility of fully discerning the structure of a city from street level.

The systematic nature of his approach was not based on repeating everywhere the same viewpoint or framing technique, but rather on the incessant search for a single point of view that would allow him to capture the character and the complexity of each subject. His way to go about this quest was to walk restlessly around a place 'like a water diviner in search of a source.'<sup>21</sup> This patient technique (*la tecnica del rabdomante*) allowed the photographer to internalise space by absorbing a number of 'hypothetical images' in his eyes while moving about, until he found the spot where his view would eventually be translated into a photograph.<sup>22</sup>

Experiments with high vantage points charged Basilico's gaze with a new tension. While he had been framing panoramic views from elevated platforms since his early encounters with French landscapes, the plunging shot added another dimension to the contemplative mode of vision he had patiently cultivated over the years. As noted above, this kind of perspective had long been explored by urban photographers to complement, expand or disrupt the coordinates of horizontal vision. Basilico acknowledged these attempts while focusing his attention on the visual dynamic of the gaze. He was interested in verticality not only as a geometric quality of architecture, that is, the perpendicular dimension of structures against the horizontal plane, but especially in visual terms as the process whereby the downward-looking gaze apprehends the depth of space that lies underneath. His repeated allusions to vertigo evoked the visceral sensation induced by the act of looking down from high viewpoints.

Interestingly, the original Italian title of *Vertiginous Moscow* was in fact *Mosca Verticale*. This shift reminds us that the words vertical and vertigo share the same etymology (from the Latin *vertex*, 'whirlpool', derived from the verb *vertere*, 'to turn'). Although the adaptation of 'vertical' to 'vertiginous' can hardly be considered a direct translation, it does bring out the perceptual disorientation that is the *raison d'être* of Basilico's project. His reference to 'a near sense of vertigo' evokes the ineffable lure of the void that may attract as well as repel onlookers. A brief digression into the notion of vertigo should help to contextualise the analysis of Basilico's photo-book.

Vertigo is a complex and ambivalent notion that denotes, at its simplest, an illusion of movement either of the subject or of the surrounding environment.<sup>23</sup> Our sensory apparatus may trigger sensations of dizziness when it fails to bridge the perceptual distance between what is near and what is far. This happens when there is a discrepancy between data supplied to the brain by the sensory apparatuses that regulate our sense of equilibrium: when looking down over the edge of a tall structure, in particular, the proprioceptive and the optokinetic systems may register conflicting perceptions.<sup>24</sup> The sensations of dizziness caused by this psychosomatic short-circuit have varying degrees of intensity that depend on the circumstances but also on where an individual sits in the 'height tolerance' spectrum.<sup>25</sup> Over the past decade, research in neuroscience has advanced our understanding of the links between visual perception and the fear of heights (acrophobia). As a result, a growing emphasis has been placed on the phenomenon of 'visual height intolerance', which defines a broad range of non-phobic states associated with the

experience of heights.<sup>26</sup> Preliminary research suggests that the act of climbing a tower remains the main trigger of this kind of intolerance.<sup>27</sup>

This evidence indirectly attests to the enduring relevance of the visual artwork that perhaps more than any other shaped the cultural imagination of rise and fall – Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*. While this film has been the subject of countless studies, including architectural ones, what is worth highlighting here is its capacity to represent the ambivalent nature of vertigo, which names the desire as well as the fear of falling (into time as well as space).<sup>28</sup> In Hitchcock’s masterpiece, the protagonist’s first ascent to the tower triggers his freezing acrophobia, whereas the second climb at the end of the film stages his final redemption. All throughout, architecture provides a spatial index of the simmering tensions between stasis and movement, fear and desire, life and death.

This classic film is one of the implicit references in *Vertiginous Moscow*. But there are deliberate ones too. Basilico’s choice of tilted camera angles was an explicit tribute to the New Vision: ‘A reference and also a homage to the memory of the *vue en plongée* that, from the Bauhaus experiments through to the 1930s, was an aesthetic and symbolic code of modernity as well as an original visual interpretation of space.’<sup>29</sup> This visual aesthetic enabled Basilico to depict certain aspects of Moscow that are visible from each of the *vysotki*: patterns of street traffic, variations in the urban fabric, and visual relationships with landmarks that punctuate the cityscape, including sister towers that are visible in the distance. As Zanetti points out, the lines of sight linking them were designed in the original urban plan: ‘The sites of the towers were carefully chosen to impress upon the silhouette of the city vertical features that embody Socialism, and at the same time to provide views of one another.’<sup>30</sup> Seen as a network of landmarks, the Seven Sisters became the structuring device of Basilico’s exploration of Moscow. (Fig. 5, 6 and 7)

The most dizzying shots are arguably in the closing section of the volume, dedicated to the complex of Moscow State University (MGU), the tallest sister at 240 meters of height. This massive building, whose central tower features on the cover of *Vertiginous Moscow*, was completed in 1953 on the basis of Led Rudnev’s design and was the tallest building in Europe for nearly four decades. It provided a unique vantage point over the city from Lenin Hills which, as Elisabeth Essaïan noted, somehow ‘compensated’ for the loss of verticality due to the aborted Palace of the Soviet.<sup>31</sup> With reference to this complex, Basilico himself wrote: ‘When you reach the topmost point of a skyscraper like the MGU university tower in Moscow and look down on the surrounding city, you experience two things: vertigo/instability, and a desire to contemplate.’<sup>32</sup>

Inside the photo-book, this architecture is typically introduced by a set of monochrome photographs from street level, moving from partial views of the main block to wide-angle views of the façade. The reader is then lifted up to the summit, as it were, and shown the surrounding cityscape at varying angles as though from a banking aircraft that gradually steadied its line of flight. This impression is further heightened by the close-up views of turrets in the foreground. Eventually the horizon line is straightened in the last two pictures, which restore a sense of balance to the overall composition. This is also the end of *Vertiginous Moscow* and gives the impression that, however destabilising the whole visual sequence might be, it is ultimately defined by a quest for equilibrium. Basilico’s meditative gaze, patiently cultivated over decades



of roaming urban streets around the world, was unperturbed by the challenge of high vantage points: in fact, the viewing angles provided a new compass for his journey through the city.

### Layers of time

So far, the analysis of *Vertiginous Moscow* has centred on the 'dynamic attitude of the gaze' that informed Basilico's exploration of verticality in the Russian capital. The photographer's sense of space is inseparable from a profound understanding of cities as living entities that exist in a state of flux and evolution. Indeed, a deeper interpretation of his Moscow project ought to engage with multiple layers of time that run through it, which in turn are inextricably bound up with the city's spatiality. A clue to this temporal dimension of Basilico's work is provided by his avowed interest in the narrative quality of places. As recalled above, to photograph a city meant for him, 'to look for places and create stories and relations with them'. *Vertiginous Moscow* unfolds as a multilayered visual essay in which the Seven Sisters are invested with a double role: at once subjects of the city's history and viewing platforms onto its present landscape. On a compositional level, the juxtaposition of views *of* and *from* the towers allowed Basilico to recombine these layers through pages of the photo-book:

So my intention was, on the one hand, to reinterpret the identity and history of the towers using front-on, black-and-white shots, and on the other to find a new meaning linked to a new perception of the towers within the city's larger plan, recording in colour photography the changes that had taken place, the construction sites, the advertising, and the coexistence and hybridisation of the architectural heritage. □<sup>33</sup>

This operation reveals a sensitive attitude towards the built environment based on close observations of places. Although Basilico often documented architecture, he considered himself to be primarily an urban landscape photographer. His conscious and critical method of research ran against the grain of a mainstream professional practice that, by celebrating the building as a timeless object, often erases the value of time as a constitutive aspect of architecture.

Coincidentally, writing in this journal around the same time of Basilico's Moscow project, Iain Borden called for a reconsideration of the process of imaging within architectural culture, pointing out the web of temporal relations in which buildings are produced and reproduced:

[...] buildings are neither fixed in time, nor are they a-temporal things. Rather they are part of social reproduction, part of the way people live their lives, of the way cities evolve, part of the way architecture itself changes; and so to bring out the meaning of this role, we need to bring out the temporality of architecture as it is imaged.<sup>34</sup>

Instinctively, Basilico appeared to have followed this principle throughout his career as a photographer. In front of his large-format camera, every city became a visual field charged with personal memories and associations as well as material and symbolic values. In fact, it might be possible to suggest that, in *Vertiginous Moscow*, the visual dynamic that underpins the observation of the city's spaces is also, in some way, transposed to the plane of temporality. Prompted by his impressions of the city's fabric after a period of rapid transformation, the photographer went in search of interpretive as well as optical viewpoints to make changes manifest. Further, this quest for visual relations and associations extended to precedents in the history of urban photography. (Fig. 8)

A notable example is a photograph taken from the Leningradskaya Hotel, one of the smallest 'sisters' at 136 meters of height, which casts its evening shadow over the adjacent

Komsomolskaya Square. Shortly before the Moscow project, Basilico reflected on what he called the *hypervisibility* of light with regard to the camera's ability to reveal subjects that lie outside the field of vision, such as buildings that are indexed by their shadows.<sup>35</sup> While capturing the silhouette of the tower on which the photographer was standing, the Leningradskaya Hotel photograph overtly references a famous view of New York's Madison Square Park taken by Alvin Langdon Coburn in 1912. The picture, titled 'The Octopus', was shot from the observation deck of the Metropolitan Life Tower, the tallest building in the world at the time, and was shown a year later in the exhibition 'New York from Its Pinnacles'. Coburn's artwork, couched in a pictorialist atmosphere, has been widely regarded as a key moment in the history of urban representation: not only for the abstraction of the elevated view but also for the dominant position embodied by Manhattan's imposing architecture.<sup>36</sup> The shadow cast by the tower may be read as an index of the power structure that shaped the metropolis in the early twentieth century; at the same time, the view from above came to define a privileged social position as much as a popular visual spectacle. More broadly, the towering gaze encapsulated the dual function of the skyscraper in architectural photography, at once viewing platform and viewed object. This twofold role is played out again and again in *Vertiginous Moscow*, where the modernist roof's-eye view is given a new lease of life. Although Basilico resisted attributing 'too easily' to Rodchenko his source of inspiration, the photo-book appears to reflect the latter's dynamic vision in more than one way.

Rodchenko's slanted views of the Soviet capital were among the most radical experiments in urban representation of the early revolutionary period, when photography became a prominent medium of socialist art and propaganda.<sup>37</sup> Against this background, members of the October Group set about exploring dynamic aspects of urban life that could be registered through new hand-held cameras with fast lenses that were introduced in the mid-1920s. These artists' mission was to dissect the visual world and reassemble it, dialectically, into a new image. Chief amongst them, Rodchenko maintained that multiple snapshots should be taken from viewpoints most appropriate to each subject, and these partial views should then be combined to attain a deeper understanding of reality. In 1928, he urged his fellow Soviet artists to abandon altogether the straight viewing angle: 'Photograph from all viewpoints except "from the belly button," until they all become acceptable. The most interesting viewpoints today are "from above down" and "from below up," and we should work at them.'<sup>38</sup> Hence, oblique angles became the photographic signifiers of a modern way of seeing, as the act of tilting the camera was meant to shake off the burden of bourgeois pictorial representation. As Peter Galassi has pointed out, this framing technique led to a variety of effects:

The oblique [perspective] can disengage the viewer from the scene, rendering it as a pattern of unfamiliar forms, unburdened of their worldly association. Or it can aggressively implicate the viewer in the scene, evoking a vertiginous plunge into an all too palpable space.<sup>39</sup>

Although in some instances Rodchenko managed to combine these effects, he was – unlike Kertész, for example – a master of the vertiginous plunge. His radical vision came to a head in the early 1930s, when he set about documenting the 'New Moscow' under construction.<sup>40</sup> Oblique camera angles allowed him to transfigure ordinary street scenes into dynamic views. This was a photographic exercise in the aesthetic of *ostranenie*: the art of defamiliarization theorised by the writer Viktor Shklovsky that aimed at making the world strange and 'unfamiliar'.<sup>41</sup> At a time when aviation and aerial photography were broadening the horizon of urban visuality, the *vue en plongée* became part of an expanded imagery of the modern city that sought to dislocate the viewers from their atrophied habits of perception.<sup>42</sup> Rodchenko's vertiginous views of the late

1920s and early 1930s marked the climax of an avant-garde movement whose vision of revolution was predicated on a revolution of vision.<sup>43</sup> Moscow's cityscape was reconfigured as a visual field that appeared to be spinning before the viewer's eyes.

The formal influence of Rodchenko's photography on Basilico's Moscow project is so explicit that one would be tempted to take it at face value. Critics were nonetheless quick to point out differences, too. In an essay published in *Vertiginous Moscow*, Christian Caujolle noted: 'You can't help being reminded that this was also the city of Rodchenko [...] Basilico, however, has not become a constructivist, and none of his images is meant to celebrate the buildings that he portrays.'<sup>44</sup> While the latter might not have become a constructivist, his distant and productive dialogue with his Russian predecessor is palpable: not only in the formal composition of the images but also in the structure of the photo-book, which is organised as a montage of visual fragments. Furthermore, the constant change of perspective from the Seven Sisters, coupled with the shifting distances and tonal alternations, manifests a visual dynamism that echoes Rodchenko's early constructivist work.

By framing each view from a particular angle, Basilico set out to measure up the city's landscape from the buildings that, for more than half a century, were the main architectural landmarks of Moscow and amongst the tallest buildings in Europe. In doing so, he worked with – and, arguably, worked out – a distance that was historical no less than geographical. His systematic use of oblique perspectives was more than a formal homage to the Russian avant-garde. While picturing Moscow from Stalin's towers, he effectively vindicated Rodchenko's vision at another crucial juncture in the history of the capital. It is as though Basilico had found an inspirational guide on his journey through the city and took over his photographic mantle. To quote Geoff Dyer, 'All the great photographers are capable of metamorphosing themselves, if only occasionally and accidentally, into other photographers.'<sup>45</sup>

### **Future projections**

A final aspect of *Vertiginous Moscow* emerges if we consider Basilico's project not only in light of its historical references but also as an intimation of possible futures. Indeed, in the process of capturing the transformation of the post-Soviet metropolis, the photo-book evokes its vertical growth impending in the background. At the time of writing, ten years after the project was first exhibited as published in book form, the Russian capital is home to five out of Europe's seven 'supertall' buildings exceeding 300 meters. They are all situated in the International Business Centre (MIBC), also known as Moscow City.<sup>46</sup> This high-rise district, planned during the rapid transition to the market economy, embodies the monumental ambitions of Russian capitalism and, today, lies partly empty as a consequence of the latest economic downturn. Prominent architects were enlisted to sprinkle global stardust over the area where a vast building site was opened in 1998. The flagship project was the Russia Tower, designed by Foster + Partners to become the tallest in Europe at over 600 meters. However, after construction started in 2007, the project became a casualty of the global financial crisis and was cancelled in 2009, in an uncanny repeat of the Palace of the Soviet's ill-fated epilogue. Other skyscrapers were built though. The cluster of buildings under construction that looms large in some of Basilico's photographs might be seen as an index of the corporate verticality that was reshaping the city's skyline. While searching the landscape for spatial relations between *here* and *there*, between the near and the far, at the same time the photographer conjured up a web of relations between the city's past and its future. (Fig. 9)

The afterlife of this project resonates through further attempts to represent Moscow's vertical growth that took place over the following decade. A notable example is the 'rooftopping' movement that burgeoned in the early 2010s. This phenomenon, which originated in North America, found a particularly fertile ground in Moscow where a group of young urban explorers caused furore by climbing to summits of tall structures and posting pictures and videos of their high-risk feats on the internet. The pinnacle of the Moscow State University building was a favourite location for these 'trophy shots', whose shock effect was augmented by the frequent presence of the climber-cum-photographer within the frame. By arousing the giddy sensation of being on the edge, the rooftoppers asserted the enduring power of the *vue en plongée* and its capacity to reconfigure the image of the city from new perspectives. What Galassi wrote about Rodchenko's tilted shots is all the more apposite for contemporary roof's-eye views from dizzy heights which 'aggressively implicate the viewer in the scene, evoking a vertiginous plunge into an all too palpable space.'<sup>47</sup>

This trend was born out of urban youth cultures that are far from the circuits of mainstream photography, yet their inroads in art galleries evidence a broader tendency towards the conflation of amateur and professional image-making practices in the digital age.<sup>48</sup> Two urban explorers who achieved popularity by sharing online photos and videos of their extreme stunts at MGU and other high points, Vadim Makhorov and Vitaliy Raskalov, later on scaled one of the tallest buildings of the Moscow City district, the Mercury City Tower (ca 340m), exploiting its jagged volume to climb to the summit. Their sensational camera work, which was swiftly co-opted for commercial uses, reflects a contemporary image culture fuelled by online social media that stands quite apart from Basilico's critical and meditative observations.<sup>49</sup> If the latter's vertiginous city views were highly controlled and craftily edited into an art book, the pictures posted by Russian rooftoppers on the web are intended to shock the viewer with their raw immediacy, shifting the attention from the image of the city to the performative act of the photographers-cum-climbers themselves. And yet, somehow this visual practice furthers and updates a long tradition of picturing cities from on high that Basilico himself contributed to revive by reclaiming Moscow's status as the vertical capital of Europe: a metropolis whose vertiginous pace of change calls for new visual explorations and interpretations.<sup>50</sup>

Recently, this challenge has been taken up by Dimitri Venkov, whose short film *The Hymns of Muscovy* transports the spectator on a slow-motion ride through the Russian capital.<sup>51</sup> The cityscape is shown upside down, so that the viewer has the impression of flying through alien objects as if in a sci-fi movie. Stalin's towers feature amongst a range of modern and contemporary architectures that appear to be suspended over the sky. The camera moves smoothly between industrial buildings, office towers, apartment blocks, and cruises all the way to Moscow City. As the high-rise district becomes gradually visible through a veil of mist, the epiphany evokes a dreamlike vision from another world. Having reached its final destination, the camera pans vertically across the cluster of skyscrapers, pulling our gaze down into the sky deep below. (Fig. 10 and 11)

By turning architecture on its head, Venkov's film destabilises the spectator's perception of urban space in a way that is strangely familiar: for the view of the city is not merely tilted off the vertical axis but completely overturned, thus establishing a mirror image similar to that of a landscape reflected off the surface of water. This aesthetic of inversion is reminiscent of other moving images, such as for instance Catherine Yass's giddy-making film *Descent* (2002), where

the upside-down camera moves slowly down a crane in London's business district of Canary Wharf.<sup>52</sup> And yet, the inverted vision of *The Hymns of Muscovy* also replicates the ground-glass focusing screen of a large-format camera, such as the Linhof that Basilico used in Moscow. Venkov's film might therefore be regarded as another exercise in the dynamic attitude of the gaze: one in which the uncanny effects of scale and distance produced by tall buildings are augmented by a visual representation that requires the spectators to let their gaze fall downwards.

Whether or not these representations of Moscow were directly indebted to Basilico's work, they do suggest a series of connections that make the Russian capital a fertile ground for engagements with urban verticality.<sup>53</sup> Over the decade since the Italian photographer re-viewed the Russian capital from the Seven Sisters, a dynamic attitude has informed new attempts to visualise the city that evoke a dizzying experience of space. As the essay has shown, *Vertiginous Moscow* resonates in multiple ways with works that were produced before and after it. In that project, Basilico sought out the potential of the view from above as another instrument for making visual sense of space: one that was complementary to his mode of contemplation from street level. Indeed, the two operate dialectically throughout the book. Yielding to the attraction of vertical depth did not mean, for the photographer, surrendering to perceptual disorientation but rather engaging with the spatial patterns of the cityscape in a carefully controlled way.

The roof's-eye view provided Basilico with an alternative means 'to find an equilibrium between *here* and *there*', which, despite the apparent anomaly of the chosen viewpoints, was in fact consistent with his sensitive observation of cities. By letting the gaze fall, upwards as well as downwards, he 'measured up' the depth of urban space while also representing the inherent contradiction of spatial vertigo: that is, the perceptual tension between a static, grounded body and the shock imagination of a sudden freefall. This complication of the photographic gaze offers a new language for visualising urban experiences that is particularly relevant to the age of vertical urbanism.

## Notes and references

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<sup>1</sup> This term was used by Elizabeth McCausland in her commentary on Berenice Abbott's 1930s photographs of New York's canyons from high up. Elizabeth McCausland, *Changing New York, Photographs by Berenice Abbott* (New York, E.P. Dutton & Company, 1939).

<sup>2</sup> Bradley L. Garrett, Alexander Moss, Scott Cadman, *London Rising: Illicit Photos from the City's Heights* (Munich and London, Prestel Verlag, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Davide Deriu, "'Don't Look Down!' – A Short History of Rooftopping Photography', *The Journal of Architecture* 21 (2016), p. 1033-61.

<sup>4</sup> Ashlee Humphreys, *Social Media: Enduring Principles* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Gabriele Basilico, *Ritratti di fabbriche* (Milan, SugarCo Edizioni, 1981).

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<sup>6</sup> Gabriele Basilico, *Bord de Mer. Mission Photographique de la DATAR 1984/85* (Bolzano, Forum AR/GE Kunst, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Gabriele Basilico, *Architettura, città, visioni: Riflessioni sulla fotografia*, edited by A. Lissoni (Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2007), p. 84.

<sup>8</sup> The exhibition was held at Turin's Photo & Contemporary gallery between 1 January – 31 December 2007.

<sup>9</sup> The French term *vue en plongée* is shorthand for *prise de vue en plongée*, an expression derived from the language of cinema. In English it translates, somewhat less suggestively, as high-angle shot, though the term 'plunging view' is also used.

<sup>10</sup> John Davies, ed., *Cities on the Edge* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008). The volume focused on six port cities that had demonstrated to be 'inventive and resilient' in the face of economic adversities.

<sup>11</sup> The project was first exhibited in Paris, at the Cité de l'Architecture / Palais de Chaillot, under the title: 'Gabriele Basilico. Moscou Verticale' (23 October – 30 November 2008) and later in Moscow at the State Museum of Architecture (20 December 2011 – 5 February 2012). The accompanying volume, edited by Umberto Zanetti and Alessandro De Magistris, appeared first in Italian as *Mosca Verticale* (Milano, Federico Motta Editore, 2008), then in English as *Vertiginous Moscow: Stalin's City Today* (London, Thames & Hudson, 2009). Henceforth, reference will be made to the 2009 English edition.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Anderson, *Russia: Modern Architectures in History* (London, Reaktion, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> This style, also known as 'socialist classicism', was often an eclectic amalgam of elements drawn from various architectural languages and historical periods.

<sup>14</sup> Alessandro De Magistris, 'Axis Mundi: A Vertical Moscow in Stalin's Shadow', in *Vertiginous Moscow*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> 'Moscow's eight new Woolworth Buildings', *Architectural Forum* 100 (1954), p. 160. The number in the title refers to the original plan, which included an eighth tower – the Zaryadye Administrative Building – that was never built.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Schlögel, *Moscow* (London, Reaktion, 2004), p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> Gabriele Basilico, 'Inhabiting the Metropolis', in D. Deriu, E. Shinkle, K. Kamvasinou, eds, *Emerging Landscapes: Between Production and Representation* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2014), p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* Italics in the original.

<sup>19</sup> Gabriele Basilico, 'Photography Programme. Lesson Ten: Vertiginous Moscow' in *Abitare* 496 (2009), p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> Gabriele Basilico, quoted on the 'Verticale' exhibition website: <http://www.photoandcontemporary.com/event.aspx?ev=1137&ar=10> (accessed October 7, 2018; translated by the author).

<sup>21</sup> Basilico, *Architettura, città, visioni, op.cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> In this paper the word *vertigo* is used to denote feelings of giddiness and dizziness associated with the experience of heights. The term has a more specific, and scientific, meaning in biomedical discourse where it defines a symptom of balance system disfunctions. Lucy Yardley, *Vertigo and Dizziness* (London and New York, Routledge, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Danielle Quinodoz, *Emotional Vertigo: Between Anxiety and Pleasure* (London and New York, Routledge, 1997), p. 3-4. A third apparatus involved in our perception of balance is the vestibular system, and vertigo may also be caused by an alteration of this sensory system.

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- <sup>25</sup> John R. Salassa and David A. Zapala, 'Love and Fear of Heights: The Pathophysiology and Psychology of Height Imbalance' in *Wilderness and Environmental Medicine*, 20 (2009), p. 378-82.
- <sup>26</sup> Thomas Brandt and Doreen Huppert, 'Fear of heights and visual height intolerance' in *Current Opinion in Neurology* 27 (2014), p.111-117.
- <sup>27</sup> Doreen Huppert, Eva Grill, and Thomas Brandt, 'Down on Heights? One in Three Has Visual Height Intolerance' in *Journal of Neurology* 260 (2013), p.597-604.
- <sup>28</sup> For an architectural analysis of this and other Hitchcock's films, see: Steven Jacobs, *The Wrong House: The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock* (Rotterdam, 010 Publishers, 2007).
- <sup>29</sup> Gabriele Basilico, 'Verticale' exhibition website, *op. cit.*
- <sup>30</sup> Umberto Zanetti, 'Moscow: Urban Transformations', in *Vertiginous Moscow*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- <sup>31</sup> Elisabeth Essaïan, *Moscou*, special issue of *Archiscopie* (Paris, Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine, 2009), p. 37.
- <sup>32</sup> Basilico, *Abitare*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- <sup>34</sup> Iain Borden, 'Imaging architecture: the uses of photography in the practice of architectural history' in *The Journal of Architecture*, 12 (2007), p. 66.
- <sup>35</sup> Basilico, *Architettura*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
- <sup>36</sup> See: Meir Wigoder, 'The "Solar Eye" of Vision: Emergence of the Skyscraper-Viewer in the Discourse on Heights in New York City, 1890-1920' in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 61 (2002), pp. 152-69. T. Stubblefield, 'The City from Afar: Urbanization and the Aerial View in Alvin Coburn's The Octopus'. *Journal of Urban History* 41 (2015), p. 340-53; Deriu, "Don't Look Down!", *op. cit.*, p. 1035-37.
- <sup>37</sup> Photography rose in prominence during the first five-year plan for the development of a centralised national economy that was undertaken by Stalin in 1928.
- <sup>38</sup> Alexander Rodchenko, 'Downright Ignorance or a Mean Trick?', in C. Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), p. 246.
- <sup>39</sup> Peter Galassi, 'Rodchenko and Photography's Revolution', in Magdalena Dabrowski, Leah Dickerman, Peter Galassi, eds, *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1998), p. 120.
- <sup>40</sup> Margarita Tupitsyn, *Aleksandr Rodchenko: The New Moscow* (Munich, Schirmer & Mosel, 1998).
- <sup>41</sup> Simon Watney, 'Making Strange: The Shattered Mirror', in Victor Burgin, ed., *Thinking Photography* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1982), p. 154-76.
- <sup>42</sup> The influence of Shklovsky's theories on Rodchenko's practice was greatest when the two worked together within the LEF group.
- <sup>43</sup> The creative impetus of the Russian avant-garde was largely defused after 1932, following the decree on the arts that was promulgated by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.
- <sup>44</sup> Christian Caujolle, 'Gabriele Basilico: Unexpected Moscow', in *Vertiginous Moscow*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
- <sup>45</sup> Geoff Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment* (Edinburgh, Canongate, 2012), p. 170.
- <sup>46</sup> The Council of Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat defines 'supertall' the buildings exceeding 300m of height, and 'megatall' those above 600m.
- <sup>47</sup> Galassi, 'Rodchenko and Photography's Revolution', *op. cit.*, p. 120.
- <sup>48</sup> Notable examples are the 'Cities of the Future' exhibition held by the first self-styled 'roof topper', Tom Ryaboi, at Canary Park Presentation Center, Toronto, in 2014; and the 'Up

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High' exhibition of photographs by urban explorers Vadim Makhorov and Vitaliy Raskalov shown at Erarta Museum, St Petersburg, in 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Banking on the sensation caused by their previous climbs, this ascent became the subject of a promotional video for a popular footwear company.

<sup>50</sup> The association of modern Moscow with verticality is further reinforced by the Ostankino Tower, the radio and television tower built in 1967 to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution: at 540m of height, it remains the tallest freestanding structure in Europe to the date of writing.

<sup>51</sup> *The Hymns of Muscovy* (dir. Dimitri Venkov, Russia, 2018). The film was presented at the 64<sup>th</sup> International Short Film Festival in Oberhausen, 2018, where it won the e-flux prize.

<sup>52</sup> Catherine James, *Falling for Gravity: Invisible Forces in Contemporary Art* (Bern, Peter Lang, 2017).

<sup>53</sup> Stephen Graham, *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers* (London, Verso, 2016).