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The World Under LockDown
Empty Photographs in a Corona-stricken World

Abstract

The year 2020 is marked as a critical year witnessing some of the most urgent global health challenges following the COVID-19 pandemic which left many countries under lockdown. Concurrently with the strict regulations on entering public spaces, photos were published of empty metropolises all over the world. In this thesis, by analysing these photos, I will explore the meanings behind them and the issues that are reflected by means of them. I will argue that the absence of human beings in these depictions hints to a broader range of socio-cultural issues that are embedded in the zeitgeist of our era. Drawing on Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space, in the first chapter of my thesis I will focus on the relationship between individuals and public spaces following the crisis. In the second chapter, I will delve deeper into the ontological roots of the feeling of uncanniness and fear as captured by the photos, aiming to unravel those deeper existential issues that are connected to the depiction of the pandemic.

Keywords: semiotics, discourse analysis, public spaces, social production of space, uncanny, nature-culture dualism

Introduction

On December 31, 2019, China reported the emergence of a previously unknown virus as the main cause of a number of pneumonia cases in the city of Wuhan. Proven to be highly contagious, the new virus immediately attracted global attention alerting officials throughout the world for its potential to turn into a pandemic. Soon, the city of Wuhan with its eleven million

inhabitants went under complete lockdown. In an article published on the 24th of January, The Guardian has described the lockdown as the following: “in hospitals across Wuhan, the city at the centre of the new coronavirus outbreak, there is panic and despair. Patients wearing masks queue for hours, waiting to be called by nurses. Staff who have worked endless shifts are forced to turn many away. Pharmacies are running out of supplies”. These descriptions accompanied by images of people wearing masks as part of their daily outfits, health workers in protective coveralls and overcrowded hospitals in contrast to peculiarly emptied streets evoked an almost apocalyptic sense. The outbreak, however, didn’t stop in China and in the space of a few months, the world came to witness one of the most surrealistic events of the twenty-first century, leaving many countries in complete lockdown. Photos were published of great capital cities in the world, all of them sharing a common quality: being empty. The New York Times, for instance, sent dozens of photographers out to capture the images of a changed world, the result of which was an article published on March 23, 2020 titled “The Great Empty”. The emptiness in these photographs seemed to spread like the virus itself, from one city to another, regardless of the geographical and cultural boundaries that separate them from each other.

For the purpose of this thesis, I aim to delve deeper into the metaphoric role that empty spaces play in the photos of metropolises published following the coronavirus outbreak. I will argue that the absence of human beings in these depictions hints to a broader range of socio-cultural issues that are embedded in the zeitgeist of our era. By analyzing The New York Time’s photo series, I will have a closer look at the ways that emptiness is depicted, appropriated and produced. The questions I intend to answer are: What kind of metaphoric role does empty space play in these photos? What do these empty spaces tell us about the ways that individuals

relate to public space in modern cities? What do these photos reveal about our contemporary conditions of living?

Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, I will adopt a semiotic approach in analyzing the photographs. Signs are building blocks of semiotics. Semiotologists argue that “anything which has meaning _ an advert, a painting, a conversation, a poem _ can be understood in terms of its signs and the work they do” (Rose 74). The semiological understanding of the sign rests in part on the works of French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Based on his theory, the sign as the basic unit of language consists of two components: the signifier and the signified. The signified is “a concept or an object”, while the signifier is a “sound or an image that is attached to a signified” (Rose 74). Similarly, an image consists of signs that communicate the message of it. Semiotics then is concerned with “the ways that the meanings of an image are produced through that image” (Rose 70). It assumes that meaning lies behind the apparent surface of the things and needs to be uncovered by careful examination. In the case of NYT’s photos, the depictions emphasize the lack of human presence in the face of the crisis. In this sense, the emptiness becomes a signifier and what it signifies are complex socio-cultural issues in need of closer investigations. Treating the visual and verbal descriptions of the crisis as signs, the semiological approach allows for asking questions such as: why public spaces have been central in the depiction of the outbreak? Why were popular tourist sites chosen to emphasize the dimensions of the crisis? What issues and ideas are communicated through the use of visual and verbal

language? Answers to these questions can assist us in understanding the meaning behind the images which in part will lead to answering the aforementioned research questions.

Roland Barthes, one of the prominent figures of semiology, argues that unlike the myth of photographic objectivity, a photograph is not what it literally represents and there are other culturally-embedded layers of meaning that need to be taken into consideration. When looking at an image, we are encountered with two layers of meaning. On the first layer, we have the literal representation of the object that is photographed and on the second layer, we are dealing with the symbolic message that is made possible through the composition of the image.

Highlighting the importance of linguistic messages, Barthes explains that “the structure of the photograph is not an isolated structure; it is in communication with at least one other structure, namely the text - title, caption or article - accompanying every press photograph” (16). As he further explicates the linguistic message anchors the visual message helping in interpreting the symbolic message contained within the image. Through analyzing the use of language one can grasp the hidden ideologies, concerns and issues that lie behind them. In NYT’s photo series, the subtitles play a crucial role in translating the feelings that are evoked in light of the crisis. The kind of methodology that is mostly concerned with the use of language in relation to its socio-cultural context is known as discourse analysis. As Fran Tonkiss explains, “Language is viewed as the topic of research . . . Rather than gathering accounts or texts so as to gain access to people's views and attitudes, or to find out what happened at a particular event, the discourse analyst is interested in how people use language to construct their accounts of the social world” (247-8). Through the use of text, the photos communicate a particular understanding of the

coronavirus-stricken world. Applying discourse analysis, will help in deciphering the meaning behind the photos and the kind of issues that are embedded within them.

Literature Review

As it becomes evident from Barthes' explanation, a photograph as a part and parcel of culture reflects on societal norms and rules and symbolizes the ways we experience the world around us. By the same token, the photographs that have been taken during the global coronavirus pandemic, are spatial visualization of a disaster that projects our contemporary conditions of living as well as our angst and fears. Space, as depicted in the photos, provides a lens through which abstract aspects of the crisis become tangible and easier to comprehend. What I mean by space, throughout my analysis is a definition of it as theorized by the French sociologist, Henri Lefebvre who puts emphasis on the social dimensions of space. In his book, *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre explores the underlying social structures of space, arguing that beyond the material and physical reality of landscapes, space is socially produced. He describes the tripartite production of space consisting of "representation of space" ("conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, etc"), "representational space" ("space as directly *lived* through its associative images and symbols") and "spatial practice" ("which embraces ... the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation") (38). Lefebvre's analysis accentuates the social patterns that produce the space of our contemporary world as well as showing the ways in which spatial experiences change over time. The most striking aspect of NYT's photo series is that they depict those well-known places that are usually chockablock with people as almost abandoned, deserted sites.

It goes without saying that emptiness in these photos is relational and it only gains significance when compared to the previous state of the depicted subjects in which they were populated with people. Thus, it is the social dimension of space that is captured in the photos and strikes the viewers.

In line with Lefebvre's ideas, Campell et al, in their analysis of the ways that spatial meaning is constructed, explain that emptiness is "deeply rooted in how places are imagined and, ... a potent tool in the articulation of power between individuals and collectives" (1). According to them, "emptiness in the social imagination is connected not simply to an absence of the usual 'content' of life – buildings, people, objects and so forth, but also to a lack of, or disruption to, more abstract qualities that we usually observe in our surroundings". Put it another way, emptiness "becomes a cipher for broader projects of self-, collective-, national- and imperial fashioning and is, therefore, deeply implicated in our economic, political and social systems" (6). The ways that space has been visualized throughout NYT's photo series hints to the fact that our perception of space surrounding us is closely tied to our social lives. By depicting the absence of humans in places known to be public and accessible for everyone, the photos comment on the way we relate to and interact with our surroundings. In the first chapter of my thesis, drawing on Lefebvre's analysis, I will elaborate on the relationship between individuals and public spaces as captured in the photos of the emptied sites. Doing so, I will delve deeper into the kind of imaginations provoked and reinforced by the photos of the coronavirus pandemic.

Of particular theoretical interest here is the notion of uncanny as first introduced by Sigmund Freud in his 1919 essay "The Uncanny". According to him, the uncanny is the "fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become

defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream” (Vidler 7). The depiction of familiar spaces that are abnormally left abandoned and look unfamiliar evokes an eerie, unpleasant feeling that can be best described as uncanny in its Freudian sense. Throughout my analysis, I will further explore this feeling to uncover the deeper issues that are related to and stem from our contemporary culture.

The representation of empty spaces as we see in the NYT photos may be unique in the sense that, since the invention of photography, never ever the medium has captured a global pandemic on such a large scale. The uniqueness of these photographs is inevitably met with a lack of theory about what empty space photographs in times of global pandemic might mean. Therefore, there is a need in finding inspiration in other fields that are concerned with depicting a global calamity. The fear of a viral outbreak which will rapidly contaminate the whole world has been projected into other art forms, most notably in the post-apocalyptic and dystopian cinema. Not surprisingly, depopulated, void landscapes play a prominent role in these movies as well.

Therefore, drawing a parallel between the post-apocalyptic cinema and the photos depicting the current crisis is extremely fruitful in exploring the nature of the fear that arises from looking at the images that very much resemble a post-apocalyptic scenery themselves.

By analysing the American zombie series *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–) and the British production *Survivors* (BBC, 2008–10), Martin Walter has looked into the appropriation of empty space in post-apocalyptic landscapes. As he argues, “as part of a wider renegotiation of social orders, fragmented and disintegrated urban and rural spaces work as a means to comment critically on contemporary social formations” (133). According to him, “the repeated motif of journeying through empty landscapes conveys ideological viewpoints on capitalist spaces. These

spaces increasingly address both a ‘perturbed familiarity’ and discourses of global (in)security” (134). As it becomes evident in Walter’s analysis, the emptiness in the post-apocalyptic landscape indicates the disruption in the seemingly natural everyday social practices which in turn comments on and questions the efficiency of the capitalist system which has left us vulnerable to many threats including a global pandemic.

In a manner connectable to Walter, Robert Wonser and David Boyns explore the ways that zombie movies are connected to our cultural anxieties. By drawing an analogy between zombie movies and infectious disease outbreak, Wonser and Boyns delve deeper into the ways that fear of pandemics and their possible social consequences are projected into the movies. As they explain, “[t]he modern zombie films’ emphasis on global pandemics illustrates that the socio-historical particulars (technology, air travel, cities, and increased permanent cities) that brought about a globalized society also allow for the rapid transmission of the zombie virus and to humanity being overrun by zombies” (649). Mirroring the concerns over our contemporary conditions of living, the twenty-first-century zombie narrative puts emphasis on not only the threat of the loss of individual self but also “the possibility of the extermination of cultural selfhood, and of the extinction of human selfhood as a marker of the species” (633). Wonser and Boyn’s analysis highlights those specific fears and concerns (such as the consequences of globalization, the fear of human extinction, the distribution of power, etc) that although are projected in fictional stories have a very tangible and real source.

In a similar fashion, by analysing the American movie *Contagion* (2011), Dahlia Schweitzer explores the ways that outbreak narratives are produced and reinforced in movies that depict viral infection. As she discusses, such movies are representative of contemporary anxieties

rooted in our twenty-first-century culture. According to her “films like Steven Soderbergh’s *Contagion* (2011) depict the now traditional outbreak narrative in which the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) struggle to keep up with a terrifying epidemic, demonstrating both the failure of global boundaries and our anxieties surrounding the revelation that these constructed barriers are not as real as we wish them to be” (79). In her analysis, she mentions how movies such as *Contagion* “demonstrate the increasingly globalized nature of disease and its inevitable integration into—and impact upon—contemporary life” and raise concerns about issues such as security (and how to maintain it), public health, boundaries and technological advances (81). These fears and concerns projected in apocalyptic movies and discussed by these scholars are very relevant when it comes to analysing the photos published by NYT. After all, both the photos and dystopian movies reflect our fears of the invisible, uncontrollable forces that infect us and disturbs our social organizations.

Finally, in the last part of my analysis, I will inquire into the ontological roots of the feeling of fear, trying to unravel those deeper existential issues that are connected to the depiction of the pandemic. To this end, I will look into nature/culture dichotomy and the way it is represented in NYT’s photos. Furthermore, by drawing on Jacques Lacan’s theory of gaze I will argue that the photos work as mediators by means of which we come to identify ourselves as subjects. Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage explains the process in which infants identify themselves as a unified totality by drawing a distinction between the self and the other when facing their images in the mirror. As I will argue, in a similar way the photographs act as a mirror that invites us to ruminate on the interspecies relationship and the way that we as human beings define ourselves in relation to non-human “others”.

The Battlegrounds of the Fight Against the Invisible Enemy

Public Spaces in Times of Corona

“I trust that everyone washed their hands before they entered the conference today.

Unfortunately, I’m only half-joking. Infectious diseases once thought to be controlled are re-emerging worldwide. They endanger the health of Americans and our national security interests. These diseases are the silent enemies of economic growth, national well-being and stability around the globe, as infectious diseases know no borders.”

(Wendy R.Sherman, Department of State Counselor, 1998)

On March 23, 2020, The New York Times published an article titled “The Great Empty”, accompanied by photos that depicted metropolitans from every corner of the world following the coronavirus pandemic. What was striking about these photos was the fact that from London to Tehran, they all shared a common quality: they were surprisingly empty. The photos did not stand alone. They were accompanied by subtitles provided by the photographers. These subtitles cast light on the emerging crisis. They create a discourse around the pandemic which together with the photos conceptualize it by showing its hidden dimensions. Analyzing these words can shed light on our understanding of the social and cultural aspects of this predicament. In the discussion that follows, I will delve deeper into the ways that the pandemic is framed through the use of words and visual elements.

In almost all the photos, we are encountered with aesthetically-pleasing settings. With their careful choice of colours, contrast and composition, the photographers break from the documentary photojournalism tradition that usually depicts the subject matter in black and white giving it a classic and serious look. The choice of colour photography impacts the ways that the photos are perceived and the message is communicated. By choosing lively colours, the

photographers emphasize the “nowness” of their depictions. In doing so, they visualize an ongoing crisis that simultaneously allures and unsettles the viewers.

Take for instance Andrew Testa’s photo of London. We see high buildings densely set next to one another as an emblem of a modern metropolis. However, almost no one is present in the scene. Instead, we recognize the presence of people by the bright lights inside the buildings. The warm colours highlighting the marble buildings add a mysterious aura to the photo that invites the viewers to constantly ask themselves what is going on in the city? What is the mystery behind the peculiar absence of people in the streets? It is almost like watching a scene of a movie waiting for closure. In a similar manner, Laetitia Vancon’s photo of Munich vacant subway station, employs colours such as red, yellow and purple in high contrast which by calling sci-fiction and tech movies to mind gives it a futuristic look. However, the depiction of these vast, oddly empty spaces fashioned with delightful colours creates tension. Something is significantly missing in these photos which disrupts the pleasure that might be taken from their aesthetic qualities. The subtitles guide our reading of the photos and help in understanding the meanings behind them.

A good point of departure for analyzing the subtitles is analyzing those phrases that are closely tied to the title of the article: “The Great Empty”. Phrases such as “without commuters”, “a lone diner”, “without tourists”, “without passengers”, “no standees”, “few seat takers”, “no visits” and “no Pub Street toasts” all single out an unprecedented situation that has driven us away from our everyday spaces. The words here, reverberate the aftermath of a calamity that has created this great emptiness. Moreover, it is through these words that we understand the meaning of emptiness. Clearly, emptiness in this article does not equal blank space. “The Great Empty” is

not a title of a scientific article that explores a mysterious supervoid somewhere in the universe. The emptiness as referred to in this article is relational. The depicted spaces are still filled with objects, buildings, animals, etc. What we define as being empty is directly linked to our homocentric understanding of the world. Emptiness equals the lack of human presence. Take Philip Cheuns's photo of the Santa Monica beach in Los Angeles for instance, which is described as the following: "An unchanging ocean, a barely recognizable beach in Santa Monica". This usually overcrowded beach is depicted as unsettlingly empty that has granted it the quality of being "barely recognizable". It hinges upon the fact that for the beach to be recognizable, to occupy a place in our mental maps, it needs to be filled with humans (as it was before). The same also applies to London, Munich, Barcelona, Rome, Tehran, Siem Reap, Sydney, Yogyakarta and all the other cities that are depicted without human presence.

We define spaces around us based on our own connections to them. If the connection is lost, if we are somehow deprived of entering our everyday-life spaces or their normal function is disrupted then the meaning attributed to these spaces also changes. Lefebvre's ideas on the social production of space help to understand what these photos are conveying by means of depicting empty public spaces. Lefebvre's analysis elucidates the fact that the way people engage with and use the space of their environment affects the way it is shaped and organized. As Lefebvre puts it, "[s]pace is social morphology: it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism, and just as intimately bound up with function and structure" (94). Therefore, space needs to be understood as a contested terrain closely bound to everyday-life practices that assign meanings and values to it. NYT's portrayal of "the great empty" echoes our disturbed relationship with public spaces after the outbreak. The article represents a phenomenon that has

shifted our understanding of public spaces. The photos accentuate the fact that public spaces as sites accessible to everyone where often social relations are crystalized, seem not to be “public” anymore. We know that in some countries, the lockdown resulted in regulating public spaces and blocking free access to them. Besides, by blurring the boundaries between home and workplace, the lockdown altered the meaning of “home” for many. Clearly, the way that spaces are socially arranged and constructed has undergone significant changes following the pandemic. That is one of the main reasons why NYT’s photos strike us. They show us a contrast by means of which we come to terms with the new meaning of our everyday-life spaces.

While looking at these photos, we are confronted with two different spaces that are connected via a mediator. First, the space that we are located in as the viewers. Second, the public spaces that are captured in the photos where previously we had free access to. Communal spaces that are now a threat to the community. They are filled with the “enemy” that our eyes are not capable of observing. The presence of this enemy is visualized by our absence. The camera is the only way to imagine ourselves there where we are absent. It becomes a tool that fills the gap between these two spaces. It is the modern age’s tool that we rely on to provide us with the vision of the outside world. It becomes the extension of our bodies, almost becomes our eyes. The photographer becomes the one who takes our place. While prior to the lockdown, our presence was the defining feature of the public spaces, now our absence is what relates us to them. They become non-virtual spaces that are experienced virtually. Previously, our bodies could freely roam around these spaces, fill them, use them and produce them without needing a mediator. The photographs reflect the fact that we have lost direct contact with our everyday-life spaces having no choice but experiencing them through images.

Through their depictions, the photographers show the new reality of those popular destinations that once were identified by their flock of visitors. We are encountered with accompanying texts such as, “Nothing to see here: Tourists used to come for the panoramic view” (Yangon), “The view is still there, the viewers far less so” (Paris), “Only the buildings needed guarding at a temple complex” (Yogyakarta), “A popular viewing point, but few takers” (Hong Kong), “A hot dog was as unlikely as a visit to the Space Needle”, “No visits to Angkor Wat, and no Pub Street toasts afterward”, “Even cherry blossom season did not draw visitors to the Lincoln Memorial”, “Pigeons had Las Ramblas to themselves”, “A day at the fair in Red Fort”, “The view from the Spanish Steps” and “The Navigli, where the Milanese often gather at the end of the day” (all with almost no visitors). By referring to actual places we know and using familiar iconography, the photos together with the texts evoke an unsettling, eerie feeling that stems from the confrontation between old and new visuals. They all provide us with a form of recognizable familiarity while at the same time insinuate the fact that there is something weird and unfamiliar going on, namely the population is missing. Sigmund Freud’s notion of “uncanny” may shed light on our understanding of this feeling. Freud used the term ‘uncanny’ (‘unheimlich in German, literally ‘un-homely) to refer to a mysterious, eerie and strange feeling that concerns “a sense of unfamiliarity which appears at the very heart of the familiar, or else a sense of familiarity which appears at the very heart of the unfamiliar” (Bennett 34). He called this feeling “a fear of something uncanny”, a phenomenon that is ‘an affair of ‘reality-testing’” (qtd in H. Cixous 639). The lack of human presence in the everyday settings of our lives creates the same uncanny feeling that is almost like the feeling evoked by looking at an apocalyptic scene. By putting emphasis on the peculiar absence of human beings, the subtitles heighten this

sense of fear and anxiety. On the other hand, we are encountered with very attractive and appealing images full of lively colours that if stood alone, could make a pretty postcard. The contrast between the aesthetics of the photos and the story told by means of the words intensifies this feeling of uncanny. There is a tension lying at the heart of the visualization of this disaster. On the one hand, the images accentuate our human civilization's achievements while on the other they are emblematic of one of the main twenty-first century's great tragedies.

The question that arises here, is whether this fear stems from the contrast between the aesthetics of the images and the context in which they are produced or whether it is a sign of some deeper concerns that are embedded in our era. To answer this question, we may look into the ways that disastrous events have been visualized in contemporary culture. It is not a coincidence that a viral outbreak, the one that has the potential to destroy humanity, has always been an attractive plot for science-fiction and post-apocalyptic movies. It seems that the fear of a global pandemic is inherited in the DNA of our time. These movies are reflective of the concerns that are part and parcel of our century. As Dora Apel argues, by instantiating “the fear of a dystopian futurity” and “by depicting our technologically advanced civilization in states of ruination and decay, postapocalyptic narratives render our own society as other and encourage us to ask whether the empire of capital represents lasting progress or a road to decline” (152). The movies usually follow a more or less similar plot. A dreadful global event (climate change, nuclear disaster, pandemic, etc) is threatening our civilization. Humans die in large numbers and the social structures collapse. Although fictional, these stories provide us with a portrayal of the challenges and threats upon the infrastructures of our contemporary global world. The recurring themes in post-apocalyptic fiction raise serious questions about the efficiency of the capitalist

system we are living in now and express anxieties over globalization, the rapid technological advances, public health, safety, surveillance, lack of resources, (in)security and maybe most importantly the possibility of human extinction (Walter 2019, Wonser and Boyns 2016, Schweitzer 2016). It is therefore not surprising that the kind of imagery visualizing the novel coronavirus pandemic is strikingly similar to the ones that are used in the post-apocalyptic movies. Empty spaces devoid of human beings play a prominent role in shaping the aesthetics of this genre (Walter). By employing vast and empty spaces, post-apocalyptic movies engage with and comment critically on contemporary social formations. As Walter explains “empty spaces in post-apocalyptic television series serve to comment on the complex dynamics of spaces under the logic of late capitalism, apparent in the fact that the substantial recreation of order is shown to be increasingly complicated and any alternative ultimately rendered a form of phantasm and uncanny endeavour” (149).

One of the valid concerns that is well projected in post-apocalyptic movies and is very relevant to the case of pandemics is globalization as we are experiencing it today. In no time in history, humans could travel so easily and rapidly between the continents. No place on earth is hidden from human vision. However, this mobility does not come without a price. What makes the viral outbreaks a global issue is their ability to spread so quickly in an extremely interconnected world. The concern over globalization is well amplified in the NYT’s article as well. What makes “The Great Empty” a suitable title for the article and what makes this emptiness “great” is the scale of the crisis. The distress over living in such a highly interdependent world is best captured in Amanda Mustard’s photo of Bangkok described as “[s]treets of fear in a city popular with Chinese visitors from Wuhan”. The photo emphasizes the

fact that this fear is not a local matter anymore. Although the outbreak first started in Wuhan, it did not stop there. What Mustard's subtitle implies is that with the rapid growth of globalization infectious diseases are just a plane away. The New York Time's decision to put the photos from every corner of the world together underlines the universal dimensions of this crisis. The one that beyond borders, has targeted the humanity itself. In this way, NYT's article visualizes contagion in the twenty-first century. As Bashford and Hooker argue, among many things contagion implies "absorption, invasion, vulnerability, the breaking of a boundary imagined as secure, in which the other becomes part of the self" (4). Therefore, we could argue that the fear that is evoked by looking at the NYT's photos does not only come from the uncanniness of the scenery. It also, as it is the case with post-apocalyptic movies, mirrors deeper concerns over the fate of humanity and contemporary social, economic and cultural structures.

On the Brink of Extinction? Humans Versus Viruses

"Some people think I am being hysterical, but there are catastrophes ahead. We live in evolutionary competition with microbes ... There is no guarantee that we will be the Survivors".

(Joshua Lederberg qtd in Schell 94)

In the previous chapter, I have drawn parallels between post-apocalyptic movies and the photos published by The New York Times depicting the current pandemic. Empty spaces appropriated by the movies and captured by NYT, mirror deep concerns about the structures of our contemporary society and the challenges and threats ahead of our modern infrastructures. Although there are some important similarities between the post-apocalyptic fiction's aesthetics

and pandemic photos, there is an essential difference between the two, namely the medium that is used for conveying the message. While the movies provide a good overview of the kind of concerns and anxieties that are inextricably linked with our contemporary culture, we must not forget that they are all based on fictional stories. The photographs, on the other hand, are real. The distinction between “fiction” and “reality” shapes the different ways we interact with the mediums and experience them. In watching the movies, we are comforted knowing that what we are encountered with, only happens on the screen. It is an imaginary plot that will eventually end. The mere thought of an ending is reassuring. As Tamborini and Stiff put it, “we are aroused and upset by the threats of dire consequences presented during the course of the film. When a just ending is provided, or, when the dreadful events are removed, we experience this arousal in a pleasurable form” (417).

However, when it comes to photography, it is a whole different story. From its onset, photography was perceived as a medium in service of truth and veracity. It was mainly due to the fact that photographs, with their references to reality, were thought of as the duplication of it. Besides, photography was the modern age’s invention and a sign of scientific and technological advancement. It was intensively used by scientists as a source of evidence to prove their research findings. A famous example of photography’s integration into the realm of science is James Nasmyth and James Carpenter’s photo of the moon which was made out of plaster models based on telescope observations (Marien 146). The discourse of photographic truth was (and still is) tightly bound to the discourse of scientific objectivity. However, this is a problematic approach to the medium since by no means it is merely a relic of reality. As it is evident with the case of Nasmyth and Carpenter, the photos were only a replication of the moon based on the knowledge

of the day. A number of scholars have questioned this notion of objectivity situating it in the broader cultural and social context. For instance, John Tagg explains that “[w]hat gave photography its power to evoke a truth was not only the privilege attached to mechanical means in industrial societies, but also its mobilisation within the emerging apparatuses of a new and more penetrating form of the state” (60). Even though the idea of transparency has been proved to be wrong, the myth of photographic truth is highly rooted in our understanding of the medium (Burgin). Unlike the movies, the power of NYT’s photos lies in the truth-value associated with them. They remind us that something terrible is happening outside. If we dare to step out, the emptiness of the streets will haunt us. As I have mentioned before, the scale of the crisis is well captured in the depiction of the “great” emptiness. The striking effect of the photos comes from their ability to picture the world without us, human beings. This, in turn, evokes an uncanny sense of fear. It became evident that this fear is well connected to a range of broader issues that are building blocks of the global arena. However, there are many more aspects that shape our experience of these photos and are in need of closer observation. In what follows, I will delve deeper into the ontological roots of the feelings of fear arguing that these photos provide a lens through which we identify ourselves as subjects. I will argue that these photos situate themselves in sync with those existential issues that are deeply rooted in the zeitgeist of our time.

As I have discussed earlier, what we define as “empty” in NYT’s photos is linked to our homocentric point of view that values things based on their relation to humans. It also became clear that there is a tension lying at the heart of visualization of this pandemic. On the one hand, we have pictures of those sites that are emblematic of human civilization and all the notions attributed to it (among which “progress” significantly stands out). On the other, they project a

frustrating situation that has left us desperate and challenges our perceptions of advancement. Progress, modernity, civilization and culture are almost synonymous in the contemporary capitalist culture in contrast to underdeveloped, barbaric and natural. Conceptualizing nature and culture as dichotomous is not a new phenomenon. In fact, its origins can be traced back to Descartes' philosophy (1637) who claimed that human minds and bodies were separate (Vining et al. 1). In a broader sense, our biological lives (bodies) belong to the realm of nature in contrast to culture (minds) that distinguishes humans from other species. Body and mind as two poles of this binary opposition become distinctly separated from each other. Humans who are in possession of "mind" come to define themselves as against "nature" or the non-human "Other". Anthropocentric point of view "is expressed either as a charge of human chauvinism, or as an acknowledgment of human ontological boundaries. It is in tension with nature, the environment and non-human animals (as well as non-humans per se)" (Boddice 1). This line of thinking that has alienated humans from nature has also resulted in picturing the non-human "other" as dangerous and bloodcurdling. By depicting urban spaces, NYT photos show how the boundaries between nature and culture have been broken. The urban is the site of culture and order that belongs to humans in contrast to the wild nature that is the realm of the non-humans. This new pathogen has somehow sneaked in the forbidden realm, disturbing its function. It indeed provokes fear.

A closer look at the ontological roots of fear can shed light on our understanding of its function. Fear comes from our confrontation with a threat (or what we perceive as one) from outside that provokes a reaction. As Lars Svendsen puts it "in fear we are met by something outside ourselves, and what we meet is a negation of what we want" (12). By confronting us with

this external “Other”, fear provides a lens through which we come to terms with our own existence. In the case of pathogens such as coronavirus, the fear of falling ill reveals our vulnerability and our mortality while at the same time bringing our biological lives into the attention. The truth that we often tend to forget is that we share the world with non-humans, from giant animals to microorganisms not visible to bare eyes. From biological perspectives, there is no difference between our lives. The New York Time’s photo series pictures our co-existence with non-humans that takes place in an odd fashion, costing the absence of the human side.

As Lacan puts it “we are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world” (73). Ruth Iskin takes it a step further by explaining that “what makes the human subject unique is not producing an image, as some animals also do through their body display or grimacing. Rather, it is in separating the mediating object from the body. Thus comes into existence the mediatization □the screen□ within which one inevitably maps a positionality for oneself and for the ‘other’” (51). Drawing on Lacan’s psychoanalysis, Iskin investigates the relationship between imaging technologies and notions of human subjectivity. Her interpretation of Lacan’s “mirror stage” plays a crucial role in her analysis. The mirror stage in Lacan’s theory describes the stage in which an infant, by looking at his/her image in the mirror, identifies him/herself as a unified totality. As Lacan himself emphasizes, the mirror stage should not be regarded as “simply a moment in development”, since its implications are far beyond this (74). Iskin explains that “[t]he young human (of six to eighteen months), whose notions of subject are as yet unformed, encounters an image in the mirror and identifies with it while distinguishing it as an image "of itself, and therefore "other" than itself” (51). She further argues that we can postulate that “visual images work in constituting socialized ‘selves’ in the era of the photographic paradigm much as

they do in the mirror stage. If early stages of human identity-formation are image-bound, gaze-mediated, and predicted on an act of projection/ recognition of self vis-a-vis images, then later encounters with iconic visual representations, whether painting, photography, or other media, must also play a specialized role in the constitution of self and the social body” (52). According to Iskin’s analysis, by looking at photographs we come to define ourselves as subjects. By extension, NYT’s photos are so powerful because by means of them we recognize our own existence there where we are absent.

An important element of Lacan’s theory is that it questions and shakes up those beliefs that take human subjectivity for granted and apart from his/her interaction with the surrounding world. If human subjectivity does not exist as given, the anthropocentric points of view that draw a dividing line between humans and non-humans, positing the former in a superior position are called into question. This dilemma that has been captured in NYT’s photos is confronting. These photos by depicting a battle that has driven us out of our everyday-life spaces mirror the old-fashioned nature-culture dualism. The shocking, uncanny feeling sensed by looking at these photos also arises from this confrontation that reminds us of our own biological lives. The images embody the human gaze on a non-human pathogen, though not by depicting the pathogen, but by not depicting humans. In this way, we come to identify ourselves in relation to the virus. We realize, despite the fact that humans for centuries have placed themselves at the center of the world, we are only animals among the others. From an evolutionary perspective, what has been described and visualized as a battle between humans and viruses is simply the survival run of a microorganism. From a biological point of view, illness is just a pathogen fulfilling its biological needs. What we define as an illness is culturally constructed and is the

way we translate a biological situation for ourselves. NYT's images act as a mirror by gazing at which we realize we are not the only inhabitants of the earth. By breaking the nature-culture binary opposition, they face us with our vulnerabilities. By looking at them we are confronted with the limits of our lives that tend to be forgotten in the glamour of the twenty-first century's capitalist culture.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most crucial events of our era. It has effectively visualized what it means to live in a highly connected world where one person's infection can make a global pandemic in just a few months. This crisis has caused an unexpected radical disruption in the ways things used to function.

Public spaces best exemplify the way that new norms and regulations emerged following the outbreak. In many countries the measures were significant. While some regulations prohibited people from "unnecessary" gatherings and outdoor activities, others basically told them where to sit, where to stand and where to move. Soon, everywhere was filled with marks that reminded people to keep a distance of at least one and a half meters away from each other. As I have discussed throughout my thesis, the current crisis has challenged the ways individuals used to relate to and interact with public spaces. Public spaces are sites where a citizen's right to the city is best crystallized. Everyone, rhetorically, has a share of them. However, the vacated public spaces challenge our notions of them as sites accessible to everyone. COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed our relationship with our public spaces. Will the pandemic result in building cities more resilient to future outbreaks? If so, then how will it affect the

function of public spaces? Who decides the changes and how will individuals interact with new spaces? These are important questions that remain with us even when the hassle is over. Only time will tell if we make the right decisions and if citizens' right to their communal spaces remain intact.

Public spaces are not the only new reality of the coronavirus-stricken world. However, they are sites where the “fight” against the new “enemy” is visualized. As the pandemic ripped through the world, people became more and more aware of the suffering and deaths. Death plays a pivotal role in turning the eyes back to life itself. As has been discussed in my thesis, the photos of empty cities, while provoking the feeling of uncanny, make us aware of our biological lives. They make us question the so-called nature/culture binary opposition which has been deeply rooted in the vision of modernity. By doing so, they challenge the anthropocentric points of view, reminding us that we are not the only inhabitants of the world. The coronavirus pandemic has once again reminded us that we are vulnerable beings with no immunity against natural disasters. Climate change is a real threat of our age that is pushing species into the brink of extinction. The current storm will pass and humankind will survive this crisis. However, as the photographs of empty streets indicate, a post-apocalyptic closure is now more real than it ever was. The concerns over the potential natural disasters are inextricably embedded in the twenty-first century's culture. The challenge remains of how to overcome the consequences of climate change. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic acts as a constant reminder that the Doomsday Clock is ticking and we only have 100 seconds to midnight.

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