

John Ruskin's Daguerreotypes of Venice

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Abstract

This paper explores the connections between travel, heritage and photography. It suggests that the increasingly restless and expanding audience for heritage is directed by a yearning for closeness. The heritage tourist is driven by the perception that what is longed for is not to be found in the immediate surroundings; indeed the heritage industry feeds on the fact of distance and the promise of proximity. And yet, as anyone will discern who has travelled to experience treasures from the past at close hand, the restrictions installed *in-situ* as protection – restricted access, barriers, prohibition to touch or even photograph the object in question – re-enact the delays of travel itself. The longing to be close is denied by distance; on the other hand without this distance played out in space and time, the old would be all too familiar to be desired. Using as a case-study the photographic documentation of Venice by the English writer and traveller John Ruskin, the paper speculates on how photography, since its emergence as a new technology in the first part of nineteenth century, has been implicated in generating this desire for the old.

Sundrawings

In 1880 John Ruskin acquired photographic negatives of Amiens Cathedral. He bought them from the photographer M. Kaltenbacher. The negatives were obtained to provide illustrations for *The Bible of Amiens* (1880–1885) the publication in which Ruskin was to use architectural photography most extensively, but the negatives were also acquired with the objective of producing photographs to be commercially sold by Ruskin's agent Mr Ward for four guineas a set.¹ This methodical, practical and even commercial use of photography stands in contrast to the emotional and shifting attitude to the media that Ruskin expressed during his life.²

Ruskin was early in his appreciation of photography; in his autobiography, *Praeterita* (1885–1889) he even claims to have been one of the first to obtain “*sundrawings*” in England, sent to him from a friend in France.³ However while initially embracing it fully, he later became more critical towards the new media, worried mainly by its monochrome nature, but also increasingly suspicious of its mechanical character, which challenged his definition of art

1 See Ruskin, John, *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols., George Allen, London, 1903–1912, hereafter referred to as *Works*, vol. 33, p. 13 (*The Bible of Amiens*).

2 See Ruskin, John, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 210, n. 2 (letter to father from Venice, October 7, 1845); vol. 11, p. 199 (*The Stones of Venice*, 1853); vol. 11, pp. 201–2 (*The Stones of Venice*, 1853); vol. 11, p. 312 (*The Stones of Venice*, 1853); vol. 19, p. 89 (*The Cestus of Agalia*, 1865); vol. 19, p. 150 (*The Cestus of Agalia*, 1865); vol. 20, p. 165 (*Lectures on Art, 6: Light*, 1870); vol. 14, pp. 357–59 (*The Black Arts: A Reverie in the Strand*, 1887); vol. 35, pp. 372–73 (*Praeterita*, 1886–89).

3 See *Works*, vol. 35, pp. 372–73 (*Praeterita*, 1886–87); Michael Harvey has noted that Ruskin's claim to be the first to obtain daguerreotypes in Britain is obscured by the date referred to. Ruskin claims to have seen them in ‘my last days at Oxford’, i.e. during 1841. Already in March 1840, however, daguerreotypes had been exhibited at the Royal Society. Nevertheless, the claim is interesting in itself in that it confirms the impact photography asserted on Ruskin in either positive or negative terms. See further Harvey, Michael, “Ruskin and Photography,” *The Oxford Art Journal* 7:2, 1985, pp. 25–33.

as a product created out of human labour.⁴ In his *Lectures on Art* (1870) Ruskin expressed warnings for the use of photography and argued that it had a negative impact on art:

Let me assure you, once and for all, that photographs supersede no single quality nor use of fine art, and have so much in common with nature, that they even share her temper of parsimony, and will themselves give you nothing valuable that you do not work for. They supersede no good art, for the definition of art is 'Human labour regulated by human design'.⁵

His original enthusiasm for photography arose out of this mechanical aspect, however, and the media's ability to deliver images with minimal involvement of human labour seems to be the very quality that impressed Ruskin deeply in his first contacts with daguerreotypes. In *The Stones of Venice* (1853) photography is enthusiastically presented as a labour saving media that would profoundly change the art of engraving:

A power of obtaining veracity in the representation of material and tangible things, which, within certain limits and conditions is unimpeachable, has now been placed in the hands of all men, almost without labour.⁶

Ruskin stayed faithful to his idea of a photographic record of endangered buildings even after his first enthusiasm for the photographic technique started to fade. As late as 1871, when he had expressed several doubts about the media, he was in Venice directing the work of photographers, artists and sculptors collecting examples for his St. George's Museum at Sheffield. And it was not just Venice that Ruskin 'collected' in Daguerreotypes. As Michael Harvey underlines in his article *Ruskin and Photography*, Ruskin had continuously, since he first began to collect Daguerreotypes in Venice in 1845, dispatched assistants to purchase, commission or take photographs of buildings he considered precious and crucially vulnerable.⁷

Ruskin's at first overwhelming enthusiasm for the technical invention and later more critical stand must be considered with the knowledge that the photographic media itself transformed to a great extent from its official inauguration in 1839 to 1870 when Ruskin expressed his dismay over photography in his *Lectures on Art*.⁸ What in retrospect looks like a smooth uncomplicated process of technical innovation to the photographic media involved a series of complex changes that each brought forth new questions and reservations. With Louis-Jacques-Mandes Daguerre's announcement in 1839 of the 'invention', the daguerreotype entered into the public realm; this was followed by an intense attempt to classify the new media. In *Burning with Desire, the Conception of Photography* Geoffrey Batchen has highlighted the unsettled and provisional status photography was afforded at its inception. Batchen points out that one of the unsettling issues of photography was that it appeared to belong neither fully to nature or culture, and he links this uncertain status of the photograph to the profound crisis of confidence that the concept of nature itself suffered at the time.⁹

As observed by several scholars, in the early nineteenth century the concept of nature inherited from the Enlightenment started to give way to a profoundly different understanding. As part of a gradual process of secularisation, the sacred myths that formed the earliest content of the western notion of nature began to be displaced by narratives that undermined the

4 See for example *The Black Art: A Reverie in the Stand*, 1887, and *Lectures on Art, 6: Light*, 1870, in Ruskin, John, *Works*, vol. 14, pp. 357–59 and vol. 20, p. 165.

5 Ruskin, John, *Works*, vol. 20, p. 165 (*Lectures on Art, 6: Light*, 1870).

6 *Ibid.*, vol. 11, p. 199 (*The Stones of Venice*, 1853).

7 Harvey, Michael, "Ruskin and Photography," *The Oxford Art Journal*, 7:2, 1985, p. 26.

8 *Works*, vol. 20, p. 165 (*Lectures on Art, 6: Light*, 1870).

9 See Batchen, Geoffrey, *Burning with Desire, the Conception of Photography*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1997, pp. 62–69.

religious authority of these mythical structures. The notion of nature as timeless and permanent, created by a single divine act, was slowly undermined by the rising conviction that the earth – and the creatures on it – developed through a history more complex than that of creation, deluge and the retirement of the waters. Nature began to be conceived as a living and active entity that had undergone profound changes since its beginning, and which crucially continued to change. Nature, in short, was understood to have a prolonged and continuous history.

In *Traces of the Rhodian Shore* Clarence J. Glacken identified this shift and pointed out that this notion of nature as an entity with a history profoundly came to change the perception of man's position in nature. Acting along with other agents of change in an historical continuum, man started to be seen as a designer effecting the environment. Employing the technologies of drainage, clearing, irrigation, canal building, firing, plant introduction and domestication man altered the historical destiny of the earth.¹⁰ Rather, then, than being God given, stable and harmonious, nature was changing and open to change. By the late eighteenth century nature started to be associated with the irruptive violence of time and this in turn, as Michel Foucault has emphasised, conditioned a radical new notion of history and time as synonymous.¹¹

The profoundly changed notion of nature, tentatively sketched here, was implicated in the desire to photograph, to use Batchen's term, which emerged at the turn of the seventeenth/eighteenth centuries and was underpinned by an objective of rendering permanent the evasive, flickering image of nature as it appeared in the *camera obscura*. Daguerre described his innovative process of fixing the moving images of the camera obscura as "*the spontaneous reproduction of images of nature*" and spoke of the daguerreotypes as an "*imprint of nature*". He went even further and concluded that the daguerreotype was not merely an instrument which served to draw nature but a "*chemical and physical process which gives her the power to reproduce herself*".¹² Henry Fox Talbot, who parallel to Daguerre refined the methods of rendering permanent the images of the *camera obscura*, similarly defined photography as a natural process, famously calling it "*The Pencil of Nature*".¹³ It is evident from these early comments that the enigma of photography was partly that it appeared to be at once 'natural' and 'mechanical' and that the very absence of 'culture' gave photography a certain 'authenticity' that only nature was thought to own.

Ruskin noticeably called his daguerreotypes 'sundrawings' and in later years when he was disappointed with the media he still saw a kinship between nature and photography, but then in more negative terms replacing the epithet 'sundrawing' with the darker sounding 'sun-stain'.¹⁴ In his warnings about the mechanically passive aspect of the photography quoted earlier, the affinity between nature and photography is maintained but turned into a negative sameness that prevents photography from being art; as nature/technology photography was not a result of 'human labour'.

10 I refer here to Clarence J. Glacken's reading of Count Buffon's *Des Époques de la Nature*, 1780, see Glacken, Clarence J., *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1967, pp. 655–705.

11 See specifically Foucault's argument on the formation of the scientific discipline of natural history, chapter 5, "Classifying", in Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Random House, Inc., New York, 1971, pp. 125–165.

12 See Daguerre, Louis-Jacques-Mandes, "Daguerreotype", in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg, Leete's Island Books, New Haven, 1980.

13 Talbot, William Henry Fox, *The Pencil of Nature*, (Brief historical sketch of the invention of the art), Longman & Co., London, 1844. Reprinted as *H. Fox Talbot's The Pencil of Nature*, anniversary facsimile, by Larry J. Schaaf, Kraus, New York, 1989.

14 Ruskin, John, *Works*, vol. 5, p. 40 (*Modern Painters*, 1856).

The Original

The first daguerreotypes that Ruskin came in contact with were not reproducible, giving them a certain unique relationship to the object photographed.¹⁵ As an ‘original’ copy the daguerreotype showed a kinship to the cast, the other method Ruskin used alongside photography and drawing to attain “facts” for his study of gothic architecture. The calotype, the reproducible paper-print, would later alter this, in some sense, exclusive relationship between copy and object that Ruskin first experienced in the non-reproducible daguerreotypes. By revolutionising the use of photography in publications the calotype would make photographs accessible to a new extent outside the realm of private or institutional collections.¹⁶ This development of photography is reflected in Ruskin’s increasingly hesitant attitude. At the same time as photography’s technical progress served Ruskin’s aim to document endangered gothic architecture and to spread the knowledge about it through publications, some of the original enigma of photography appears to have been lost with its increasing omnipresence.

Ruskin’s criticism of photography has led scholars to assume that his interest in it was of a temporary kind, without significant impact for his aesthetic theory.¹⁷ This assumption is also supported by Ruskin’s own account in *Praeterita* where he describes his first encounter with photography as ignorant, not realising its potential danger to art.¹⁸ However, if one looks beside the debate about photography versus art and considers the role of photography in Ruskin’s theory, or rather anti-theory, of restoration the full impact of the media becomes evident. Ruskin’s notion of architectural “effect” and his emphasis on the architectural surface are both informed, I will argue, by his photographic experience. Specifically, the uncertain and tantalising status of photography, as both nature and culture, can be related to the concept of patina that was crucial for Ruskin’s condemnation of restoration.

As Fox Talbot had noted in his photographic experiment, patina, the work of nature upon human labour, was carefully picked up by the photographic process. Describing his photograph of Queens Collage in Oxford he remarked: “*This building presents on its surface the most evident marks of the injuries of time and weather, in the abraded state of the stone, [...]*”.¹⁹ In Ruskin’s theory of restoration the authenticity of the monument is guaranteed by these very signs of time rather than by any ‘ideal’ historical form. This notion of the authentic residing in the weathered surface brought forward Ruskin’s argument that restoration was an act of destruction to be forcefully condemned.

15 In her suggestive article “Topographies of Tourism: Documentary Photography and *The Stones of Venice*” Karen Burns highlights this intimate relationship that the daguerreotypes established not least through their limited size and reflective surfaces. See Burns, Karin, “Topographies of Tourism: Documentary Photography and *The Stones of Venice*”, *Assemblage* 32, 1997, pp. 22–44.

16 *Ibid.*

17 See for example *ibid.*, p. 22. See also Hanson, Brian, “Carrying off the Grand Canal: Ruskin’s Architectural Drawings and the Daguerreotype”, *The Architectural Review*, February, 1981, pp. 104–109; and Harvey, Michael, “Ruskin and Photography”, *The Oxford Art Journal* 7:2, 1985, pp. 25–33. A different opinion is held by Lindsay Smith who has clearly shown the lasting and fundamental impact of photography on Ruskin’s aesthetic theories. See Smith, Lindsay, *Victorian Photography, Painting, and Poetry, The Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995.

18 Ruskin, John, *Works*, vol. 35, pp. 372–73 (*Praeterita*, 1886–89).

19 Talbot, William Henry Fox, *The Pencil of Nature*, Longman, Brown, Green & Longman, London 1844. *The Pencil of Nature* was published in six parts between June 1844 and April 1845 containing a total of 24 photographs. The quote is from the facsimile of Leopoldo II, Grand Duca di Toscana, which copy contains only plates 1–5, reprinted in 1976 by Mycron, Firenze. Another facsimile is published by Larry J. Schaaf, Kraus, New York, 1989, containing all 24 photographs. See *H. Fox Talbot's The Pencil of Nature*, anniversary facsimile, by Larry J. Schaaf, Kraus, New York 1989.

The Enchanted Land

In 1845 Ruskin travelled to Venice; he had briefly visited the city before but this was his first longer stay there. He would keep returning to document it ‘stone by stone’, but his first attempts left him in despair: “*I can find no expedient nor mode of getting at it that will give me what I want [...] the beauty of it is in the cracks & and the stains, and to draw these out is impossible and I am in despair*”.²⁰ Photography appeared as the solution to this frustrating drawing experience. In a letter a couple of days later to his father despair is replaced with delight:

I have been lucky enough to get from a poor Frenchman here, said to be in distress, some most beautiful though very small Daguerreotypes of the palace I have been trying to draw; and certainly Daguerreotypes taken by this vivid sunlight are glorious things [...]. I am very much delighted with these, and I’m going to have more made of pet bits. It is a noble invention- say what they will of it – and any one who has worked and blundered and stammered as I have done for four days, and then sees the thing he has been trying to do so long in vain done perfectly and faultlessly in half a minute, won’t abuse it afterwards.²¹

According to Ruskin’s autobiographical account in *Praetoria* it was during his travels in Italy in 1845 that he discovered architecture. In Lucca he was taken by the smoothness and the close fittings of stones in the medieval buildings and he saw, for the first time, what medieval builders were and what they meant and “*thereupon literally began the study of architecture*”.²² It was also the Italian tour of 1845 that resulted in a change in his approach to drawing.²³ He moved away from the picturesque mode of depiction and what he started to consider to be a superficial concern of making pleasing compositions. When his old master in drawing, the artist Harding, joined him and they travelled together to Venice the change became evident. Comparing his drawing with Harding’s he noted in a letter home:

His sketches are always pretty because he balances their parts together & considers them as pictures – mine are always ugly, for I consider my sketch only as a written note of certain facts, and those I put down in the rudest and clearest way as many as possible. Harding’s are all for impression mine are all for information.²⁴

The fact that it was on this tour also that Ruskin came to realise the possibilities of the daguerreotype in documenting architecture suggests that Ruskin’s ‘discovery’ of architecture and photography can be seen as interdependent encounters in which the one stimulated the other. The photographic imprints offered something that his own carefully executed studies of the Venetian palaces could not. Their exquisite detailing paired with their minuteness proposed the possibility of a direct relation to the ‘original’ that was not mediated by the hand of the artist. As Ruskin enthusiastically wrote to his father when he had bought one of his first daguerreotypes: “*It is very nearly the same thing as carrying off the palace itself, every chip of stone and stain is there*”.²⁵

20 Shapiro, Harold L., ed., *Ruskin in Italy: Letters to his Parents, 1845*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972, letter nr. 139, p. 218.

21 Ruskin, John, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 210, note 2 (letter to father from Venice, October 7, 1845); see also Shapiro, Harold L., ed., *Ruskin in Italy: Letters to his Parents 1845*, letter nr. 142, p. 220.

22 *Works*, vol. 35, p. 350 (*Praetoria*, 1886–89).

23 Bradley, John Lewis, ed., *Ruskin’s Letters from Venice, 1851–52*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1955, p. 180.

24 Shapiro, Harold L., ed., *Ruskin in Italy: Letters to his Parents, 1845*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972, letter nr. 115, p. 189.

25 *Ibid.*, letter nr. 142, p. 220.

The enigmatic attraction of the photographic media lay in its ability to carefully document the decay, the ‘chip of stone and stain’, at the same time as it denied the critical outcome of such disintegration by replacing the reality of the decaying Venice with an intimate world of collection and control. In *Praeterita* nearly 40 years later Ruskin recalled the event:

A French artist producing exquisitely bright small plates which contained, under a lens, the Grand Canal or St Marks Palace as if a magician had reduced the reality to be carried away into an enchanted land. The little gems of picture cost a Napoleon each; but with 200 francs I bought the Grand Canal from the Salute to the Rialto; and packed it away in thoughtless triumph”.²⁶

The daguerreotype collection gave access to a Venice in miniature; in its accuracy it promised the possibility of a *reunion*, a promise that, however, could never be kept, giving the photography a specifically melancholic character that can be noted in Ruskin’s varying attitude to the media.

Instrument of Conservation

Ruskin’s discovery of architecture on the 1845 tour was accompanied by the acknowledgement that the Gothic architecture he had just started to appreciate was threatened; the buildings were not just crumbling away through neglect and maltreatment but they were, in Ruskin’s terms, “*vandalised*” by “*diligent restorers*”. Writing from Venice in 1845 Ruskin despises the restorers’ intervention in saving Venetian palaces:

You cannot imagine what an unhappy day I spent yesterday before the Casa d’Oro, vainly attempting to draw it while the workmen were hammering it down before my face. [...] The beauty of the fragments left is beyond all I conceived, & just as I am becoming able to appreciate it, & able to do something that would have kept record of it, to have it destroyed before my face.²⁷

Just at the point they were vanishing, Ruskin discovered a visual beauty in the crumbling façades of the Casa d’Oro. The very notion that the palaces were changing, that their weathered surfaces were soon to be replaced with the newly cut stones of the restorer, triggered a desire to record. Ruskin identified the important role the daguerreotype would play in visually ‘saving’ endangered architectural masterpieces: “*It is certainly the most marvellous invention in the century; given us, I think, just in time to save some evidence from the great public of wreckers*”.²⁸ The camera thus offered Ruskin an expedient way of documenting buildings. The very speed of photography suggested that it was possible to hold on to what was in the process of being lost; photography appeared as an instrument of conservation in a world that seemed marked by an overwhelming disintegration. This ‘conservative’ aspect of photography partly explains why Ruskin, who so wholehearted despised the new mechanical innovations of the nineteenth century, embraced the media: “*Among all the mechanical poison that this terrible 19th century has poured upon me, it has given us at any rate one antidote – the Daguerreotype. It’s a most blessed invention; that’s what it is.*”²⁹

When returning to Venice in 1849 Ruskin brought his own camera to document the buildings of the city with the help of his assistant George Hobbs. During this stay and the follow-

26 Ruskin, John, *Works*, vol. 35, pp. 372–73 (*Praeteria*, 1886–89).

27 Shapiro, Harold L., ed., *Ruskin in Italy: Letters to his Parents, 1845*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972, letter nr. 130, p. 209.

28 Ruskin, John, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 210, note 2 (letter to W.H. Harrison, August 12, 1846).

29 Shapiro, Harold L., ed., *Ruskin in Italy: Letters to his Parents, 1845*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972, letter nr. 149, pp. 224–225.

ing one in 1851 he both made and commissioned daguerreotypes. The photographic material was used as the basis for the illustrations drawn for *The Stones of Venice* (1851–3) and the accompanying folio *Architectural Examples of Venice* (1851). The illustrations were drawn with a technique that emphasised shadows and highlights over outline, mimicking photography to such an extent that, as Ruskin proudly remarked in the foreword to the *Architectural Examples of Venice*, they been mistaken for daguerreotypes.³⁰ This method had already been explored in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) where, as Ruskin informed the reader, the plates were “either copies of memoranda made upon the spot or enlarged and adapted from Daguerreotypes”.³¹

The impact of the daguerreotype on Ruskin’s drawing methods has been remarked upon by several scholars. The favouring of shadow over outline, the cropping of the drawing and attention to detail is without doubt due to his visual experience of the daguerreotype.³² But there is more to Ruskin’s encounter with the daguerreotype than drawing technique. The daguerreotype seems both to suggest and undermine the possibility of a ‘true’ representation. The simultaneous sharpness and obscurity of photography opens a play between proximity and distance that becomes the driving force in Ruskin’s obsessive desire to record the crumbling architecture of Venice down to its minute details. Writing from Padua on his 1845 tour Ruskin tells about a fictional return to the scene of Venice:

I have been walking all over St Mark’s place today, and found a lot of things in the Daguerreotype that I never had noticed in the place itself. It is such a happy thing to be able to depend on everything – to be sure not only that the painter is perfectly honest, but that he can’t make a mistake.”³³

The daguerreotype as painter appears to have seen more; it has more attentively been at the *scene*, recording it all without discrimination. In the ‘sundrawing’ nothing was omitted, nothing overlooked out of prejudice or habitual mode of looking. But this sharpness of the camera also makes it uncertain what can be seen, generating a desire to return to the scene to reconfirm the already ‘seen’. The very ‘realism’ of photography sowed a seed of doubt about vision that in Ruskin’s study of architecture is turned into a doubt about every aspect of representation. Indeed, as Brian Hanson has suggested, Ruskin’s diaries and letters can be read as a chronicle of failure to depict what he saw.³⁴

Writing from Venice in 1852, working on last parts of the *Stones*, Ruskin expressed his frustration over his drawing activities:

And now I have got to such a pitch of fastidiousness that no drawing will satisfy me at all as regards its expression of mere facts – but I must have a Daguerreotype or a cast- and

30 Ruskin, John, *Examples of the Architecture of Venice, Sketched and Drawn to Measurement from the Edifices, Sixteen plates with descriptions*, Smith, Elder & Co., London, 1851, “Preface” to vol. 1. See also Harvey, Michael, “Ruskin and Photography”, *The Oxford Art Journal* 7:2, 1985, p. 25–33.

31 Ruskin, John, *Works*, vol. 8, p. 4 (*The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 1849).

32 In his article “Carrying off the Grand Canal: Ruskin’s Architectural Drawings and the Daguerreotype”, *The Architectural Review*, February, 1981, pp. 104–109. Brian Hanson traced several examples where the illustrations by Ruskin’s hand can be linked to specific daguerreotypes in his photographic collection. See also Haslam, Ray, “‘For the Sake of the Subject’ Ruskin and the Tradition of Architectural Illustration”, in *The Lamp of Memory, Ruskin, Tradition and Architecture*, ed. Michael Wheeler and Nigel Whiteley, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1992.

33 Shapiro, Harold L., ed., *Ruskin in Italy: Letters to his Parents, 1845*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972, letter nr. 149, pp. 224–225 (Padua, October 15).

34 Hanson, Brian, “Carrying off the Grand Canal: Ruskin’s Architectural Drawings and the Daguerreotype”, *The Architectural Review*, Feb. 1981, p. 107.

even grumble at those, at the one for exaggerating the shadows – at the other for losing the sharpness of the hollows.³⁵

The kinship of photography and cast is proximity, they both *imprint* their object. But in both means of representation Ruskin sees lack – a gap, a loss in translation – that both undermines and directs his documentation of Venice “*stone by stone*”. Ruskin’s re-drawing of the daguerreotypes and sketches “*made on the spot*” aimed to overcome that gap by drawing truthfully, not in the simple sense of realism but with the objective of grasping the “*true effect*” of architecture; the very visual impact architecture exerted upon on its beholders.³⁶ With that objective the exploration into the *topos* of Venice turns into a project in which the process of perception itself becomes in one sense the primary object of vision.

Stone to Stone

The commercially produced daguerreotypes of Venice from Ruskin’s time often show carefully chosen and balanced compositions with a great depth of field; Ruskin’s own commissioned daguerreotypes favour by contrast close viewpoints that result in unusual cropping and wayward perspectives which undermine the conventional picturesque organisation of the pictorial motif.³⁷

When in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) Ruskin makes a plea to the general public to document medieval architecture by the means of photography he encourages the photographer to ignore any perspectival conventions:

I would particularly desire to direct the attention of amateur photographers to this task; earnestly requesting them to bear in mind that while a photograph of a landscape is merely an amusing toy, one of early architecture is a precious historical document; and that this architecture should be taken, not merely when it is present itself under picturesque general forms but by stone to stone, and sculpture to sculpture; seizing every opportunity afforded by scaffolding to approach it closely, and putting the camera in any position that will command the sculpture, wholly without regards to the resultant distortions of the vertical lines; such distortions can always be allowed for, if once the details are completely obtained.³⁸

The issue here is about coming ‘closer’, to faithfully record the ‘stones’ by letting the camera ‘touch’ every part of the deteriorating architecture. In order to obtain “*a precious historical document*” Ruskin emphasises that the photographers should act at close range and not miss any opportunity to be *near* their object. Indeed the suggestion that the photographers should

35 Bradley, John Lewis, ed., *Ruskin’s Letters from Venice, 1851–52*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1955, letter 256, p. 297. See also Ruskin, John, *Works*, vol. 10, pp. 466–467, and vol. 8, p. 13 on the importance of the cast.

36 See John Ruskin’s comments on effects in the ‘preface’ to *Examples of the Architecture of Venice, Sketched and Drawn to Measurement from the Edifices, Sixteen plates with descriptions*, Smith, Elder & Co., London, 1851, vol. 1.

37 Hanson has suggested that there exists a noticeable difference in composition between the first daguerreotypes that Ruskin acquired and the daguerreotypes he himself ordered to be taken. However in Ruskin’s collection of daguerreotypes held in the Ruskin Library, Lancaster University (The Bembridge collection) it is not possible to distinguish between the commercially bought daguerreotypes and the later commissioned ones. The daguerreotypes are not dated and can not with any certainty be linked to Ruskin’s own catalogue of daguerreotypes (which do not, in any case, indicate date of acquisition). See further Hanson, Brian, “Carrying off the Grand Canal: Ruskin’s Architectural Drawings and the Daguerreotype”, *The Architectural Review*, Feb. 1981, p. 104.

38 Ruskin, John, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 2nd ed. George Allan, Kent, 1880, Appendix I. In the preface to the first edition of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* this plea for photographing Gothic architecture is also included, in that case with a specific reference to Notre Dame. See Ruskin, John, *Works*, vol. 8, p. 13.

not hesitate, in the name of history, to climb the scaffolding, reflects Ruskin's own obsessive activity in ascending architecture: "I have been up all over it [San Michele, Lucca] and on the roof to examine it in detail".³⁹

The intimate position of the camera that Ruskin recommends acutely reveals the limitations of the geometrical perspective: to obtain the architectural detail in full the amateur photographers are requested to allow unfamiliar linear distortions to enter into the photographic image. Photography here acts to change the relation between observer and object. The distant position from which architecture presents its "picturesque general forms" appears less important than the possibility of interacting with architecture at a near distance, so close in fact that the overall composition is lost and the space of the (depicted) object and the beholder starts to merge.

In *Victorian Photography, Painting and Poetry*, Lindsay Smith identifies a shift from a Romantic to a Victorian account of visual perception. The conventions of the eighteenth-century 'picturesque' visualisation of landscape give way, during the nineteenth century, to a new emphasis on the optical agency of the spectator.⁴⁰ The invention of photography contributed to this shift by altering the understanding of what it meant to 'see'. By revealing perspective as a system rather than a natural visual experience, photography would undermine the dominant role of perspective both as a 'true' model for vision and as a ubiquitous technique for representing three-dimensional space. Smith argues convincingly that Ruskin's persistent inquiry into the visual, his pervasive desire to understand the process of seeing and perceiving evident in *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice*, can be read as a critique of the apparent certainties of a perspectival account of space. Photography, as Smith emphasises, caused Ruskin to continuously re-evaluate the limits of optical fidelity.⁴¹

Investigating the possibilities of representing the 'seen', Ruskin put forward a more unstable and uncertain model of vision that explored those aspects of space that geometrical perspective failed to address. Indeed in Ruskin's *nearsighted* observation of the 'stones' one is given a sensation of a space fundamentally different from the geometrical space of perspective. Looking at architecture with Ruskin involves a notion of time and place that fundamentally reconfigures aspects of perspectival vision and its space.

The implication of perspectival vision for the concept of space since its 'rediscovery' in the Renaissance denies any easy summary, but crucial to point out here is that its subsequent dominance in western cultures was, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty has argued, at the expense of any concept of embodied vision.⁴² The monocular vision of one point perspective presumed only a static, unblinking eye, an abstract point, in fact, as its privileged beholder. In *Downcast Eyes* Martin Jay develops this argument to suggest that this model/presumption led to a visual practise in which the living bodies of both the painter and the viewer were withdrawn, irrevocably divided from that which is to be represented by the screen of the picture plane. In the emptied homogenous space of perspective, Jay suggests, any "specular intertwining" of likenesses between viewer and viewed was suppressed and lost.⁴³

39 Shapiro, Harold L., ed., *Ruskin in Italy: Letters to his Parents, 1845*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972, letter nr. 26, p. 54.

40 Smith, Lindsay, *Victorian Photography, Painting, and Poetry: The Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, p. 19.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 18–52.

42 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, transl. Alphonso Lingis, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1968. See also Jaques Lacan's critique of Merleau-Ponty's argument in Lacan, Jacques, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, transl. Alan Sheridan, Penguin Books, London 1994, seminar 6 and 7 pp. 67–90.

43 Jay, Martin, *Downcast Eyes*, University of California Press, Berkley, 1993, p. 55.

The Pleasure of the Surface

In a letter to his father from the 1845 tour Ruskin tries define his desire for drawing architecture:

There is the strong instinct in me which I cannot analyse to draw and describe the thing I love – not for reputation, nor for the good of others, nor for my own advantage, but a sort of instinct like that for eating or drinking. I should like to draw all St Mark's and all this Verona stone by stone, to eat it all up into my mind, touch by touch.⁴⁴

This ingestion of architecture by a tactile and hungry gaze suggests a fusion of subject and object that challenges the empty and homogeneous space constructed by perspectival vision. The desire to be everywhere, to visually incorporate architecture 'stone by stone' at a close range, makes uncertain the clear cut division between viewer and viewed. The disembodied observing eye of perspectival vision begins in Ruskin's drawing and visual descriptions of architecture to be replaced by a set of tactile, corporeal and desiring eyes.

Ruskin's drawings and descriptions of the disintegrating architecture of Italy divulge a visual pleasure in the study of surfaces; he immerses himself in the weathering surfaces of gothic architecture and loses himself in the study of its minute details. Architectural surfaces are studied as if they have a depth, a depth however that has nothing to do with the structures of their actual insides but an 'elusive depth'. Searching for its inner character, Ruskin reads the building as a face, watching the cuts and the gaps on the body's surface where the differentiation between the inside and outside of the body are made complicated: "*I do with a building as I do with a man, watch the eye and the lips: when they are bright and eloquent, the form of the body is of little consequence.*"⁴⁵

In this exegesis the surface becomes the location of the building's meaning. Ruskin's strong rejection of restoration and his emphasis on patina is part of a visual argument in which the authenticity is what you *see* not what you know:

Do not let us talk then of restoration. The thing is a Lie from beginning to end. You may make a model of a building as you may of a corpse, and your model may have the shell of the old walls within it as your cast might have the skeleton, with what advantage I neither see nor care: but the old building is destroyed.⁴⁶

Visuality becomes here the argument against restoration at the very same instance as visuality itself is made complex. Ruskin's strong rejection of conservation and his emphasis on the surface as the 'site' of the building is part of an argument that at the same time as it emphasises what you can see – the surface rather than the skeleton – makes that which you see the very thing that disguises. Indeed in Ruskin's argument the truth of the building resides in the veil that shades it, its patina accumulated through age. This, I would argue, points to the significant relationship between Ruskin's emotionally coloured campaign against restoration and his experience of photography.

⁴⁴ Ruskin, John, *Works*, vol. 10, p. xxv (letter to father from Verona June 2, 1852).

⁴⁵ Ruskin, John, *Works*, vol. 12, p. 89. Ruskin's emphasis on the surface of the body can be read against Jacques Lacan's analysis of the erogenous zones of the body: the lips, eyelids, mouth etc. Lacan suggests that these cuts or apertures allow the sense of edge, borders or margins by differentiating the body from the organic functions associated with such apertures. Because they are described as being on the very surface of the subject they have no specular image, no "outside" that they represent. It is this which enables them to be "the 'stuff', or rather the lining [...] [of] the very subject that one takes to be the subject of consciousness". See Lacan, Jaques, *Écrits: A Selection*, Routledge, London, 1997, pp. 314–15.

⁴⁶ Ruskin, John, *Works*, vol. 8, p. 242 (*The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 1849).

In *Modern Painters* (1856), Ruskin writes in capital letters as if to underline his point: “*WE NEVER SEE ANYTHING CLEARLY*”.⁴⁷ In the chapter On Turnerian Mystery he develops his thoughts on ocular obscurity by drawing a parallel to photography:

[...] why is it that a photograph always looks clear and sharp, – not at all like a Turner? Photographs never look entirely clear and sharp; but because clearness is supposed a merit in them, they are usually taken from [*sic*] very clearly marked and un-Turnerian subjects: and such results as are misty and faint, though often precisely those which contain the most subtle rendering of nature are thrown away, and the clear ones only are preserved.⁴⁸

The text quoted is part of a longer apology for Turner’s controversial paintings that Ruskin passionately defended throughout his life. Ruskin makes a crucial point here that relates to the notion of truth and vision implicated in the study of architecture and his criticism of restoration. The choices of photography and subject, he proposes, are made out of convention, a convention, one can add, inherited largely from the dominant tradition of geometrical perspective. What can be read in Ruskin’s comments is the idea that vision is neither neutral nor without history. However despite his critique of visual habits of the perspectival tradition Ruskin maintains, in his exploration into its more shadowy landscape, an ocular bias inherited from that very same tradition.

Ruskin is in search of transcendental vision beyond the habitual; to see truthfully, to see with an “*innocent eye*” to use Ruskin’s term, means to leave visual convention behind and really *see* the misty and the faint. To see, in one sense, that which obscures clear vision. This will mean the negation of the fiction of a distant spectator, able to see objects in a perspectival space from afar, and replace it with eyes that see with body in context.

Conclusion

This paper has studied John Ruskin’s criticism against restoration focussing specifically on the notion of the authentic and its relation to the new technology of photography. It has been argued that the camera not only called into question the concept of the faithful transcription of the external world but that its transformation of the method of reproduction also affected the very category of the *authentic*. In Ruskin’s visual interrogation of Venice photography acted, it has been argued, as a catalyst in developing his critical stance towards architectural restoration. In his study of disintegrating architecture the cool observing eye of perspective gives away to an intimate feeling eye that blurs the space separating the viewed from the viewer. In this ‘blurred’ space history as master narrative will start to dissolve; reinterpreted and personalised by the beholder it will begin to lose its authority. This loss of the grand narrative will change the notion of the monument from an object of knowledge into one of sentiment. Ruskin’s view can be seen to foreshadow the sentimental approach to the monument that would dominate the discourse of conservation during the 20th century, and that would open up conservation to popularisation and mass-consumption.

47 Ruskin, John, *Works*, vol. 6, p. 75 (*Modern Painters*, 1856): “there is a continual mystery caused throughout all spaces, caused by the absolute infinity of things. WE NEVER SEE ANYTHING CLEARLY.” (original emphasis).

48 *Ibid.*, pp. 81–82. See also Smith, Lindsay, *Victorian Photography, Painting, and Poetry: The Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 202.

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