‘A magical balance of opposites’: Reading Luigi Ghirri’s photography through Walter Benjamin

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Abstract

In this article I contend that Ghirri’s photography can fruitfully be read through Benjamin’s thought, in particular through his key notions of experience, montage, aura, beauty, mystery and the dialectical image, and at the same time I seek to redress a common misreading of Benjamin’s work in some art theory. This approach allows me to illuminate from a new angle Ghirri’s aesthetics and the change it underwent between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, and to demonstrate that his work effectively draws on Benjaminian dialectics to achieve a ‘magical balance of opposites’. Through a close analysis of selected Ghirri’s photographs from two of his main series from the 1970 – *Kodachrome* (1970–1978) and *Still life* (1975–1979) – and from two series from the 1980s – *Il profilo delle nuvole/The Outline of Clouds* (1980–1989) and *Atelier Morandi* (1989–1990) – I show that Ghirri’s photography moves from an early effort to deconstruct the assemblage of images that compose reality to an attempt to re-create an aura of places that are felt to be on the brink of disappearing. In so doing he both expressed a postmodern sense of loss of experience and history and challenged this by presenting photography as a means of achieving knowledge and experience of the world, before the onset of the digital age.

Keywords

Luigi Ghirri

Walter Benjamin

Italian photography

place and landscape

experience

montage

aura

dialectical image

Introduction

Luigi Ghirri (1943–1992) was an eclectic artist who drew on a variety of different sources, from Surrealist and Pop art to cinema, literature, music and photography, re-elaborating them originally in his work.¹ From the early 1970s until his death in 1992 Ghirri was extremely active as a photographer, curator, writer and as a catalyst of interdisciplinary ventures that redirected Italian photography, starting from the seminal collaborative project *Viaggio in Italia/Journey to Italy* (1984). With his individual and collective works he contributed to the growth of the photographic culture in Italy, while establishing close links with practitioners in other arts and disciplines, such as literature, architecture and music. Twenty years after his passing, Ghirri is increasingly being recognized as one of the leading Italian photographers of the late twentieth century, both in Italy and outside. While in Italy his photography has been exhibited regularly and studied extensively, giving rise to a vast bibliography in Italian, outside of Italy more artists and scholars are discovering the originality of his art thanks to a growing number of exhibitions,² and to recent, more visible publications in English and other languages, such as the new English edition of Ghirri's *Kodachrome* (2013) and the article by Maria Antonella Pelizzari on *Artforum* (2013). Among the extensive critical work on Ghirri, however, no study to-date has yet explored his photography through Walter Benjamin's thought and his theory of the technologically reproducible artwork. Ghirri did not openly comment on the impact of Benjamin's ideas on his art, but quoted him repeatedly in his writing and even dedicated to him a series of photographs, *Omaggio a Walter Benjamin/Homage to Walter Benjamin* – a portfolio of 25 images of Paris, taken between 1972 and 1987, and published in 1989 in the journal *Ottagono/Octagon* – which reveals his admiration for the German thinker. This and other evidence that I will discuss in the following pages suggest that Ghirri's photography was deeply affected by Benjamin's thought and that this influence should be explored alongside other influences on his work.³ Given the complexity of Benjamin's writing and of some of his main concepts, such as aura and dialectical image, here I do not aim to be exhaustive but rather to offer some initial thoughts on the constellation between Ghirri and Benjamin and to demonstrate that Ghirri's photography can be fruitfully read through Benjamin's notions of experience, montage, aura, beauty, mystery and the dialectical image.

Drawing on Benjamin's ideas will allow me to illuminate from a new angle Ghirri's aesthetics and the change it underwent between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, which has led many critics to postulate a *caesura* between the 'first' and 'second' Ghirri.⁴ Far from being a clear-cut divide, I believe that this shift is however central to his work and that a further investigation of this dichotomy will result in a better understanding of his photography. Importantly, this aesthetic shift coincided with the completion of most of his 1970s projects in 1979 and, in the same year, with his first major retrospective organized by Arturo Carlo Quintavalle in Parma, which gave Ghirri the opportunity to take stock at all of his output until then. It also corresponded with his moving from a small (24×36) to a medium-format camera (6×7), which led him to using more landscape formats in his 1980s production, as opposed to the vertical formats that are more common in his earlier work. As Ghirri reveals, his change of camera allowed him to relate in a completely different way to objects within specific spaces (2010: 74), gave him more time to watch and think (1997: 293), and directed him to new openings and reflections, including the observation of everyday life and places of entertainment as spaces of

contemplation (2010: 74). Moreover, within a broader context, Ghirri's aesthetic shift concurred with a noticeable change in the Italian sociopolitical and cultural setting, which led to a greater acceptance of photography within the arts and institutions in Italy.⁵ The development of his photography in those years, however, does not jeopardize the internal coherence of his *opera*, as he maintained the same open approach to the exterior and to his art, and continued his reflection on the perception and representation of everyday places and on seeing. In his 1984 text 'L'opera aperta'/'The Open Work', which now appears in the collection of his essays *Niente di antico sotto il sole/Nothing Old under the Sun*, Ghirri presents his photography both as dichotomic and as 'a single great work' based on the same 'bone structure' and on a 'search for unity, completeness', which strives to reconcile its inherent dualism through 'a magical balance of opposites' (Ghirri 1997: 75–79). These words describe an art that is at once coherent and dialectical, in the Benjaminian sense of opposites that coexist rather than being resolved into a synthesis, or as 'a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions' (Benjamin 2002: 475).

In the following pages, after outlining Benjamin's reception in Italy and introducing some of his key notions, I will explore selected Ghirri's photographs from two of his main series from the 1970s – *Kodachrome* (1970–1978) and *Still life* (1975–1979) – and from two series from the 1980s – *Il profilo delle nuvole/The Outline of Clouds* (1980–1989) and *Atelier Morandi* (1989–1990). Through my analysis I aim to demonstrate that, in parallel with Benjamin's work, Ghirri's photography is deeply informed by a dialectics between shock and aura, between distance and closeness, between rational or detective work and contemplation, imagination and memory. I believe that this dialectics co-occurs in Ghirri with a shift in his idea of art: contrary to Benjamin's overall aesthetic movement from an auratic to an anti-auratic concept of art, but in line with late twentieth century artistic practice and critical debates, Ghirri's photography moved from an emphasis on deconstructing the assemblage of images that compose reality to, in the 1980s, a greater preoccupation with re-creating an aura of places that are on the brink of disappearing. While acknowledging this overall trajectory together with leading scholarship on Ghirri, it is equally important to reiterate that this aesthetic shift is not definite, and that the late, auratic moment in Ghirri's photography does not completely erase the earlier deconstructive moment, but these two moments to a large extent live together dialectically – if, with G. Gilloch, we intend dialectics in the Benjaminian sense of coexistence of deconstruction and (re)construction (Gilloch 2002: 2) – realizing what Ghirri called a 'magical balance of opposites'.

It is well known that Walter Benjamin has undergone a critical revival in Europe and outside since the 1950s and 1960s, in concomitance with the post-war turn to cultural Marxism. His writing started to be systematically translated into Italian from the 1960s, including the essays collected in *Angelus novus/New Angel*, such as the Italian version of 'On some Motifs in Baudelaire' and 'The Storyteller', and the seminal essay 'The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility', to cite but some of his most influential works (Cavagna 1982). The interest in Benjamin in Italy and outside grew in the 1970s and 1980s – following a number of scholarly essays (e.g. Jameson 1984) and translations of his texts in Italian and other languages (such as Giorgio Agamben's editions for Einaudi) – and it continues to-date, within and beyond philosophy (Desideri 2013a).⁶ The reassessment of Benjamin's thought was linked to the theoretical debates on art, media and photography – from Umberto Eco's semiotic analysis of photography,

media and advertisement to Gillo Dorfles's reflections on kitsch. Ghirri was familiar with these debates, as evidenced in some of his writing (where, e.g., he discusses kitsch and mentions Benjamin's notions of experience and dialectical image)⁷ and in his personal library, which comprises many key art and theoretical texts, including a section on Benjamin.⁸

In the 1970s and 1980s Ghirri knew the work of many artists and intellectuals who had reflected on Benjamin's thought; for example he was familiar with the debate on neo-phenomenology and aesthetics on *Il Verri/The Verri*, led by Luciano Anceschi, who in those years was teaching courses on Benjamin at the University of Bologna. As he took up photography full-time, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Ghirri worked with a number of conceptual artists from Modena, and was particularly close to Franco Vaccari, who re-elaborated Benjamin's notion of the 'optical unconscious' in his book *Fotografia e inconscio tecnologico/Photography and the Technological Unconscious*, which Ghirri published in 1979 in his short-lived publishing house, 'Punto e virgola' (1977–1980). In the early 1980s Ghirri started to work with many photographers, and with the writer Gianni Celati on the project *Journey to Italy* and their collaboration continued throughout that decade. At that time Celati was engaged in the project 'Narratori delle riserve'/'Narrators of the reserves' and was starting to write his narrative trilogy of the plains – *Narratori delle pianure/Voices from the Plains* (1985), *Quattro novelle sulle apparenze/Appearances* (1986) and *Verso la foce/Towards the River Mouth* (1989); these texts are marked by an explicitly Benjaminian stance, as he sought to recover fragments of history through storytelling before their final vanishing. In his text for the twentieth anniversary of *Journey to Italy* (1984) Celati spells out the eclectic reading that accompanied the project, which included Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940); the main argument of this essay is the notion of salvaging the past before its disappearance by rescuing its remaining fragments, a task which engages Benjamin's key figures, such as the storyteller and the collector (Carchia 2000: 139), and which also informs *Journey to Italy*. If, as Giuseppe Traina suggests, Celati is perhaps the most Benjaminian among Italian writers (2008: 209), no less Benjaminian are Giorgio Messori and Beppe Sebaste, both of whom studied aesthetics with Anceschi and collaborated with Ghirri in the 1980s. Messori was particularly close to Ghirri and worked with him for his project in Morandi's studios (1989–1990) that resulted in the volume *Atelier Morandi*; this phototext includes the essay 'Le mattine del mondo'/'The mornings of the world' where Messori suggests that both Morandi's and Ghirri's art realize the Benjaminian notion of dialectical image and of aesthetic experience as appearance (Messori [1992] 2005: 63–64).⁹ Celati's and Messori's illuminating suggestions call for an in-depth analysis of Ghirri's work through Benjamin. Before examining Ghirri's photography, I will introduce Benjamin's thought by focusing on his key notions of experience and aura, and propose a number of consonances with Ghirri's aesthetics.

Re-reading Benjamin

Modernity introduced for Benjamin a 'groundbreaking [...] shift from authenticity to replication, from uniqueness to seriality, and from the original artwork to its "soulless" mechanical copy' (Duttlinger 2008: 80) – a preoccupation that is also key in Ghirri. The starting point of Benjamin's late aesthetics, which he powerfully conveyed in his most

influential work, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’ (1936–1939), is that all experience in modernity is essentially technologically mediated and that the introduction of a new technological apparatus in cinema and photography brings about a fundamental change in the nature of artworks and in our experience and perception of art and of the exterior. As Markus Ophälders (2001: 11) clarifies, experience is the empty core of Benjamin’s thought, in the sense that all of his work revolves around the decline of experience, namely aesthetic experience, in modernity. Benjamin juxtaposed the directly lived, shock experience of the modern city [*Erlebnis*], to *Erfahrung*, another German term for experience which refers to a deep and ‘long’ experience that is linked to tradition and that locates the subject historically in space and time. For Benjamin modern life produced a decrease of privileged inwardness – that is a loss of long experience [*Erfahrung*] and of aura. As we shall see, similarly Ghirri’s photography moves from the awareness of the ‘destruction of direct experience’ (Ghirri 1997: 30), which he foregrounds in the preface to *Atlante/Atlas* in 1973; this leads to a commitment to ‘recovering experience’, as voiced in the introduction to *Kodachrome* (Ghirri 1979: 67), a commitment that informs all of his work and parallels Benjamin’s effort to salvage phenomena from disappearing.

In Benjamin’s thought the decline of experience goes hand in hand with the withering of aura – a process that is as central to his aesthetics as the notion of aura is key and multifaceted. Benjamin variously and elliptically defined aura throughout his work and linked it to myth, beauty and mystery; as Stefano Velotti contends, ‘with “aura” Benjamin designates more a “family” or a “constellation” of phenomena, than a univocal concept’ (2013: 221).¹⁰ In a recent article of 2013 Andrea Pinotti usefully summarizes the main senses of aura; Benjamin outlined it in different essays in terms of distance and closeness (his primary definition of aura and also one of the most basic proxemic relations), as a shell or a veil to be removed from the object,¹¹ as ‘the experience [*Erfahrung*] which [...] inscribes itself as long practice’ ([1939–1940] 2003: 337) and as the ‘ability to look back at us’ ([1939–1940] 2003: 338). In the essay ‘Little history of photography’ (1931) Benjamin described aura as ‘a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be’ ([1931] 1999: 518); a few years later, in ‘The work of art’ essay, he similarly portrayed it as ‘the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be’ ([1936] 2002: 104–05, [1936–1939] 2003: 255),¹² evoking, as in the earlier essay, the aesthetic experience of viewing a mountainous landscape. In ‘The work of art’ essay Benjamin detected a ‘natural’ aura in bourgeois artworks, such as paintings, in that they are original and unique, and contended that works of art that are technologically reproducible (such as films and photographs) are not normally auratic nor beautiful, as they are not unique and do not invite a one-to-one, contemplative relation with the viewer, but call instead for a detective-like approach – as in Atget’s documentary photographs, which for Benjamin managed to ‘suck the aura out of reality’ ([1931] 1999: 518). However, as a number of Benjamin scholars have recently pointed out (Didi-Huberman 2005; Desideri 2013b), for the German thinker photography is not completely devoid of aura – as a common (mis)reading of his work would have it – but rather retains traces of it and ‘plays a more versatile and ambivalent role’ in contrast to film, which in his ‘thought is one-sidedly associated with the decline of the aura’ (Duttlinger 2008: 83).

While some critics emphasize the melancholic nature of Benjamin's insistence on the withering of aura, others like F. Desideri (2013a) stress that Benjamin saw in this shift a chance for a new aesthetics and political engagement. This is linked to the fact that in the 1930s Benjamin came to reject auratic art, which was being appropriated by Nazi mass spectacle, and celebrated instead Brecht's theatre as a model of self-deauratizing art, which, through alienation and montage, sought to dispel an auratic symbiosis with the work of art, to highlight the constructed and anti-naturalistic nature of art (and of Nazi politics) and thus to raise political awareness. Rather than arguing for one or the other take on Benjamin, I agree with Diarmuid Costello that Benjamin both 'celebrates *and* mourns the liquidation of the aura' (Costello 2005: 165) and that this depends on the specific sense that aura acquires in his essays.¹³ Moreover, as Costello claims, criticizing another common misreading of 'The artwork' essay in much art theory, the main issue is not that aura pertains to some objects (i.e. paintings) but not to others (i.e. photographs), but that 'a fundamental category of experience, memory and perception [of the exterior is] in the process of fading away' (2005: 165). Costello also explains that in this seminal essay Benjamin makes clear that 'aura pertains to the *subject* rather than the *object* of perception, namely to a particular modality of experience on the part of the perceiving subject' (2005: 166) and elucidates that aura is 'Benjamin's term for what is more generally called aesthetic experience: that is a mode of experience that is typically described as transcending our everyday ways of engaging with the world' (2005: 173). It is this sense of aura and of aesthetic experience that Ghirri seeks to recover with his photography, by focusing as much on the object as on the viewing subject's perception of the exterior (as evidenced through **his the** emphasis on seeing and perspective that informs all of his work), and by playing on the productive dialectics between shock and aura, between the immediacy of contemporary media and the slowing down of photography, to which he granted a 'revolutionary' role in that it 'still allows us to see things' (Ghirri 2010: 55). By drawing on Benjamin's reflection on the withering of experience in modernity, Ghirri understood the suggestive potential of aura and used it to convey photography's power of making everyday places worthy of aesthetic experience, and, in so doing, he succeeded in positing photography as art.

Besides the key notions of experience and aura, and those of montage, beauty and mystery, which I will discuss later, another striking consonance between Benjamin's and Ghirri's aesthetics is their 'thinking in images'. According to Sigrid Weigel, this notion 'constitutes the specificity of Benjamin's theory' in that it resolves 'the traditional *oppositions* within established epistemes' (Weigel 1996: viii) into a third element, the image. Although Benjamin's idea refers to mental images, I suggest that, while explicitly drawing on Giordano Bruno's claim that 'thinking is speculating in images' (Taramelli 2005: 25), Ghirri's work can be further illuminated through the Benjaminian notion of 'thought-images' for their power 'to counteract modes of perception and cognition that have become second nature' (Pensky 2004: 179). In the introduction to his first published book, *Kodachrome*, Ghirri defines his photography as 'thinking in images' ('pensare per immagini') and posits it as a 'reflexive, speculative moment', which shows us 'what we *think* we already know' (emphasis added), but in fact reveals reality as it has never been seen before, by reawakening our ability to 'see' (Ghirri 1978: 66). As Celati maintains (1992b: 189), Ghirri's thinking in images is not informed by a purely discursive and logical structure, but rather by a fragmented and analogic approach, which does not close

rigidly on itself but seeks to establish fresh links between objects and images. Similarly, Benjamin's 'self-consciously heterogeneous and anti-systematic' approach (Schmitz 2007: 160) emerged in a style based on analogy or 'adjacentism', which most clearly informed his unfinished *Arcades Project*. As Benjamin defined his work as 'literary montage' (Wolin 1994: xliii), as a mosaic made up of infinite tiles or as stars in a constellation, so Ghirri in 'The open work' describes his photography in terms of 'montage', 'mosaic' and 'puzzle' (Ghirri 1997: 77), namely as an archive that can be rearranged an infinite number of times, by reorganizing the images into different analogic constellations that trigger new meanings – a principle already espoused by Benjamin (Ophälders 2001: 19). In Ghirri's words, 'Photography [...] gives rise to infinite imaginary worlds. [...] Photographs refer to other photographs that have already been seen and these become flowing images, like those recorded by our memory' (1997: 47–48). Indeed throughout his career Ghirri continued to regroup his images in different series, which testifies to the open-ended and analogic nature of his work. At a micro-level this is apparent in the layout he chose for his photographic books and in the montage and fragmentation techniques used in many of his early photographs, which I will now turn to explore in some of his 1970s series.

The 'first' Ghirri

In the photographs he took throughout the 1970s Ghirri mostly embraced an estranged look onto everyday objects and places, in order to show that all experience in (post)modernity is mediated and constructed; this aesthetic position is similar to that of the late, 'Brechtian' Benjamin, who believed that art should disrupt the illusion of capitalist society, rather than perpetuating it. In this Ghirri also shared the conceptual art's focus on images and signs, its desire to demystify art and destabilize convention, and its theoretical practice 'to examine the nature of communication, and the nature of art and artists' (Campany 2003: 17). In the introduction to *Kodachrome*, seemingly echoing a Brechtian position, Ghirri defines his photographs as "'foto-deconstructions" [that] seek to witness a colossal fotomontage that already exists, that of the physical world' and argues that 'Photography is always already surreal, in its variation of ratio, its overlapping of different planes, its being a conscious (?) and unconscious (?) image of the erased real' (Ghirri 1997: 22). By coining the word 'fotosmontaggi', namely 'foto-deconstructions', playing on the idea of deconstructing or dismantling, Ghirri clarifies that his work is not an actual assemblage of objects, as some of his early viewers thought, but rather that it seeks to take reality apart to highlight its composite nature. As Quintavalle suggests, 'Ghirri breaks the objects; he does not simply exclude them from their context like the Dada, but he cuts them, he presents a fragment of these objects' (Quintavalle 1983: 437). Many photographs in *Kodachrome* show decontextualized objects or fragments in order to produce in the viewer a response similar to the Brechtian alienation effect, which aimed to lead the viewer to a new awareness by breaking the illusion of representation. This is the case, for example, of the photograph 'Paris, 1977', which shows a vast expanse of sky and, at the bottom left corner of the image, a small section of a block of flats next to a street lamp – a framing that invites the viewer to adopt a fresh perspective onto things and to imagine what is not visible. As evidence of Ghirri's

tendency to rearrange images in new constellations, this photograph was later used as the opening image for the series *Homage to Walter Benjamin*.

Figure 1: Luigi Ghirri, ‘Engelberg, 1972’, from *Kodachrome* © Eredi di Luigi Ghirri.

Other photographs in *Kodachrome* show a reflection on contemporary images, such as paintings, postcards and posters, and ironically play on montage in order to short-circuit reality and images. This is most striking in ‘Modena, 1973’, where a grass field and a small tree in the foreground clash with a landscape painted on the wall in the background, or in ‘Engelberg, 1972’ (Figure 1), where a Sprite publicity poster reproducing a natural scene partly covers the view of a mountain range and a building site, while three passers-by in the foreground seem oblivious to their surroundings. M. Mussini maintains that in this and other images Ghirri seeks to subvert the relation between signifier and signified by decontextualizing the poster and inserting it in a new context; this reframing encourages the viewer to read the publicity in the opposite way to the one intended (Mussini 1979: 28). Both photographs invite viewers to reassess the relationship between closeness and distance, to question the ‘overlap of different planes’ and to detect ‘the erased real’, which, as we have seen, Ghirri indicates as his aim in his introduction to this series. Ghirri’s use of montage here is not dissimilar from Benjamin’s, who in ‘The Author as Producer’ (1934) defined montage as a ‘superimposed element [which] disrupts the context in which it is inserted’ ([1934] 1999: 778). Susan Buck-Morss suggests that this technique for Benjamin has ‘special, perhaps even total rights’ as a progressive form, because by interrupting the context it ‘counteracts illusion’ (Buck-Morss 1989: 67), a lesson that he appropriated from Brecht’s theatre. What is important for Brecht and Benjamin, as for Ghirri, is that ‘the image’s ideational elements remain unreconciled, rather than fusing into one “harmonizing perspective”’ and that this ‘construction makes visible the gap between sign and referent’, without erasing it ‘in a deceptive totality’ (Buck-Morss 1989: 67–68). This is perhaps most apparent in the many photographs where Ghirri shows a gap between two images, most often two paintings or posters sitting next to each other, a technique that he used repeatedly in *Homage to Walter Benjamin* and in *Still life*. Like Benjamin’s analogic approach, and like the Surrealist assemblage of objects (which they both admired), Ghirri’s composition and framing foreground the intrinsically mediated nature of the exterior, make apparent the gap between image and ‘reality’ and challenge the viewer’s assumptions about the world, engaging them in a sort of detective work. Just as Benjamin used this method ‘to illustrate an historical shift in perception’ (Leslie 2000: 66) taking place in modernity as result of the introduction of new technologies, similarly Ghirri used fragmentation and montage to reflect on the all-pervasive nature of communication and the numbing effect of images, especially publicity, in postmodernity. Moreover, like Benjamin critiqued but at the same time embraced this aesthetic shift for its potential to raise awareness, so Ghirri both criticized the growing power of images in the media age and granted photography the ability to look afresh at the exterior, to reconnect with places and to recover a sense of aesthetic experience.

The techniques of montage and fragmentation also inform *Still life*, a series where Ghirri presented objects that he found in second-hand markets, such as old photographs, paintings and postcards, marked by signs of decay or abandonment, which conveyed a degree of nostalgia in Ghirri's operation.¹⁴ In one of his lectures, now collected in the volume *Lezioni di fotografia/Lessons in Photography*, Ghirri claims that this series revolves around the relationship with the image (2010: 78) and that it is a sort of synthesis of his first ten years of work.¹⁵ In his introduction to *Still life* he underlines the connection between the photographed objects and their context, which does not remain an inert backdrop, but interacts with the objects, as in the photograph of the ashtray with an image of Michelangelo's David covered with cigarette butts. As Mussini reminds us, here Ghirri does not seek to imitate Duchamp, but rather to signal that art has already been de-auratized by being reproduced on an ashtray (Mussini 1979: 86). Discussing Ghirri's appropriation of souvenirs, Nicoletta Leonardi reads this and other of his early photographs as examples of 'photographic trompe-l'oeil' (2013: 124), which seek to unveil the illusionary nature of images, like much seventeenth century Flemish painting which Ghirri admired. In the introduction to *Still life* Ghirri declares that the meaning of this operation and of his photography at large is 'the juxtaposition of a pre-existing image with the present moment, for an ultimate image that is *other*', and which 'opens before our eyes infinite possibilities of experiencing it' (Ghirri in Mussini 1979: 87). This seems to echo Benjamin's definition of the dialectical image as given in *Convolute N (Arcades Project)*:

It's not that what is past cast its light on what is present or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. (2002: 462)¹⁶

As Andrea Pinotti explains, for Benjamin 'where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions – there the dialectical image appears' (2002: 475); thus the dialectical image is a flash appearance that brings together different polarities and allows them to continue their dialogue rather than settling for unity (Pinotti 2013: 177).¹⁷ One of the most striking photographs that fits this definition, and that of montage, is one of the many images entitled 'Modena, 1978' (Figure 2)¹⁸ which shows a pile of old photographs and scrap paper notes in a box, as anonymous, forgotten fragments that have lost their connection to what they represent and to other images in our collective memory. This is apparent as the face of the lady in the old photograph on top of the pile of notes is partly covered by a slide, which hides her features, interrupts her gaze and prevents her from fully returning the viewer's look, thus disrupting her aura. In 'Little History of Photography' Benjamin detected the last traces of aura in early portrait photography, namely 'something that cannot be silenced, that fills you with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed in art' (Benjamin [1931] 1999: 510). Moreover, as we have seen, Benjamin endowed auratic objects with the ability to look at us in return,

and viewers with the capacity to auratize forgotten objects and give them a voice. Interestingly, in this photograph the woman's gaze invites a connection with the viewer by looking out at them, yet this connection is jeopardized by a superimposed object which disturbs the illusion created by the image (and, ironically, its claim to be art). In this light we can read in 'Modena, 1978' an attempt from Ghirri's part to both mourn and embrace the withering of aura, that is a lament for the loss of a direct connection between subject and object, past and present, and, at the same time, a commitment to raising a new awareness in viewers, and to recovering a sense of long experience. This and other images from his 1970s series show us that deconstruction is never the end point in Ghirri's photography, but rather the beginning of a constructive process, as he declaredly used his art as a means of learning 'how to see' and of reinstating an aesthetic and affective relation with the exterior.

Figure 2: Luigi Ghirri, 'Modena, 1978', from *Still life* © Eredi di Luigi Ghirri.

The 'second' Ghirri

Throughout the 1980s, while engaging with many commissioned and collaborative projects, Ghirri turned more insistently to the question of place and landscape, that became the leitmotif of his work, as testified by two of his main series which span from 1980 until 1992 (though both were published in 1989) – *The Outline of Clouds*, which focuses on the Po valley and includes a text by Celati, and *Paesaggio italiano/Italian Landscape* (1989), depicting different facets of the Italian landscape. In these series – and particularly in his later works – Ghirri no longer relied extensively on the techniques of montage and fragmentation in order to disrupt our perception of the exterior and to highlight its commodification, but rather embraced a more contemplative approach, which seemingly sought to re-auratize any-places-whatsoever, putting forward their mysterious and mythical beauty, and suggesting their uniqueness and singularity – features that Benjamin attributed to the aura and to non-reproducible artworks. Just as Benjamin was interested in recording vanishing phenomena (such as oral storytelling, experience or auratic art), Ghirri, like Celati, Messori and other writers or artists who worked with him in this period, set about recording places and experiences which were felt to be threatened by the spread of non-places and by loss of identity (Augé [1992] 1995), and in so doing renewed a tradition of narrating places that continues to-date.

Drawing on Benjamin, who saw in photography the last traces of aura, in the 1980s Ghirri increasingly used photographs to recreate an aura for the places he chose to depict, in order to make them inhabitable, albeit for a brief moment, and to endow them with the 'ability to look back at us', which Benjamin detected in an object's aura.¹⁹ In the late essay 'On some Motifs in Baudelaire' (1939–1940) Benjamin defined the aura of an object as 'the associations which, at home in the *mémoire involontaire* seek to cluster around an object of perception' and maintained that this aura 'corresponds to the experience [*Erfahrung*] which [...] inscribes itself as long practice' ([1939–1940] 2003: 337) – thus as the opposite of the shock, immediate experience of the city [*Erlebnis*]. In

the same essay Benjamin proposed that the techniques inspired by the camera help one 'retain an event' ([1939–1940] 2003: 337) in a society where long practice or collective memory passed on through generations is in decline. Similarly, in the essay 'The open work' Ghirri posited photography as 'an important moment of pause and reflection' (1997: 78), a 'chance for reactivating attention which has been short-circuited by the speed of the exterior' (1997: 79) and as a means of preserving both individual memory and collective past, whose last traces he detected in local, 'marginal', apparently indistinct places which Ghirri presented as remains of history.

With this aim, while continuing to experiment with montage in many of his 1980s photographs, in *The Outline of Clouds* Ghirri focused on seemingly empty landscapes and places, which however are filled with traces of human experience and work. These include farms or artisanal workshops, as in the photograph 'Gualtieri. Officina della cooperativa Santa Vittoria', which shows an old, dusty workshop full of old-fashioned tools and evoke a sense of nostalgia for a by-gone era. In this series many landscapes and interiors are presented as apparitions, as mythical places, suspended in space and time and soon to be recoverable only in one's memory. It is not coincidental that Ghirri chose to focus on the Po valley, photographing sites where he grew up or to which he felt a close affinity; in one of his essays he suggests that these places triggered his own Proustian memories²⁰ and thus, we can infer, appeared to him as auratic, as for Benjamin the images that emerge from *mémoire involontaire* have an aura (Pinotti and Somaini 2012: 21), as they return the viewers' gaze and engage them in inexhaustible contemplation.²¹ Yet these sites do not simply echo the photographer's autobiography, but rather stand for collective identity and history; for this reason too they can be seen as auratic and mysterious since, according to Ophälders, 'the auratic experience always carries a collective component' (2001: 112) and mystery is present only when shared by people (2001: 112).

While this theme is most striking in the photographs of local museums and famous houses, such as the 'Museo Fratelli Cervi' in Campegine, it also informs many other images in this series that reveals a sense of vanishing and 'atmospheric vision', as Celati defines it in his introductory text, 'Commenti su un teatro naturale delle immagini'/'Comments on a natural theatre of images'. Indeed, many of Ghirri's photographs use the weather conditions typical of the Po valley, in particular fog or haze, as well as snow in winter, to communicate a sense of beauty and suspension. The fourth image in the phototext, 'Formigine. Ingresso casa colonica, 1989'/'Formigine. Entry to a farm, 1989' (Figure 3), shows in the foreground two vertical pillars at each side of a central road, a framing that clearly indicates to the viewer a way of looking at this and other images in the series. This is one of the many realizations of Ghirri's frontal perspective and of his motif of 'natural frames', that is frames that already exist in nature, such as archways and gates, which he employed both to direct the viewer's gaze and to encourage a reflection on looking, as a way into his work.²² However, this invitation to look clashes with the fog that prevents us from seeing its central vanishing point and thus conveys the inexhaustible nature of this image and, in a Benjaminian perspective, its aura, beauty and mystery.

Another suggestive image is 'Riva di Luzzara. Cimitero, 1989'/'Riva di Luzzara. Cemetery, 1989', where the cemetery in the distance seems to be fading away in the same

snow-white shade of colour that unites earth and sky. This and the above-mentioned photographs, alongside many others, can be seen as auratic, as they thematize distance and closeness in space and time, they draw us into a mystery which we cannot fully decode, they seem to talk to us directly, even though we don't know these places, they remind us of a lost shared culture and experience and evoke a sense of enigmatic suspension, duration and beauty that cannot be exhausted in one viewing. An even stronger sense of mystery is conjured by photographs such as 'Tellaro 1982–'85' (from *Italian Landscape*), which presents a frontal, close-up view of two rocks framing the sea and a staircase that leads us outside the frame, and which calls to mind the sequence shot in Santa Panagia in *L'avventura/The Adventure* (1960), where the camera lurks forward in an empty space, creating a sense of *unheimlich*, of uncanny,²³ and, more generally, the disquieting nature of much M. Antonioni's cinema, which Ghirri admired. While strikingly rendering photography as mystery and enigma, which is how Ghirri talked about it in one of his lectures (2010: 25), I believe that this and similar photographs encourage the viewer's active engagement with the image, and with a signified that seem to be removed from the frame, while staging the polarity between the difficulty of belonging and the irrepressible longing for a 'home'.

Figure 3: Luigi Ghirri, 'Formigine. Ingresso casa colonica, 1989', from *The Outline of Clouds* © Eredi di Luigi Ghirri.

Alongside his reflection on a vanishing sense of place, tradition and aura, Ghirri's 1980s photographs, particularly his later ones, also explore the notion of beauty – namely artistic and aesthetic beauty, and that of natural sites – while addressing the question of stereotypically tourist sites. In the essay on 'Goethe's elective affinities' Benjamin defined beauty as 'in its essence bound up [...] with semblance' ([1919–1922] 1996: 350) and as the 'object in its veil' ([1919–1922] 1996: 351). According to Ophälders, for Benjamin 'to experience beauty means to perceive appearance as the cover of that which is necessarily veiled' (2001: 72); moreover, 'beauty is defined as the analogon of the inexpressible mystery of things, of life and of nature' (2001: 71). Similarly, G. Carchia maintains that in Benjamin 'the auratic experience is essentially linked to the category of mystery, veil and distance' (2001: 122). In a late interview with Carlo Dignola, entitled 'Landscape and revelation', Ghirri claimed that he wanted to represent the 'unrepeatable *apparition* [of things] that gives rise to a sense of mystery, of fascination' (Ghirri 1997: 300). Likewise, in the essay 'Nothing old under the Sun' he talked about

the air of disquieting tranquillity that inhabits places and landscapes, which seem newly filled by the mysteries and secrets that they still possess, aware that in the end all we can know, tell and represent is but a small crack on the surface of things, of the landscape that we inhabit and in which we live. (1997: 90)²⁴

All the photographs analysed in this section exemplify this sense of beauty and mystery and suggest that ‘for Ghirri the photographic image [...] reveals the things themselves as an apparition to be remembered, an image which stops them vanishing’ (Messori 2005: 77).

While mostly focusing on places and landscapes, in his later work Ghirri continued to explore indoor settings and objects and to reflect on art and photography. One of the artists he most admired and to whom he turned insistently from the early 1980s was Giorgio Morandi. As he published his series *The Outline of Clouds* and *Italian Landscape* in 1989, at the same time Ghirri was completing the series on *Atelier Morandi* (1989–1990), which originated as a commissioned project on Morandi’s studios in via Fondazza in Bologna and in Grizzana, on the Apennines near Bologna. In *Lessons in Photography* Ghirri acknowledges a deep affinity and affective relation with Morandi’s art (2010: 48) and reveals his admiration for its receptive attitude, its ability to ‘listen’ to the world, its unceasing focus on apparently insignificant objects, such as the bottles and vases he continuously rearranged and reproduced in his still lives. Similarly, in an 1984 essay on Franco Vimercati, Ghirri compares Morandi’s art to photography for its ‘infinite capacity to describe an object’ and to ‘give back to every image their uniqueness’, a feature that, as already mentioned, Benjamin detected in the work of art (Ghirri 1997: 62). Ghirri’s series on Morandi’s still lives presents both an interesting point of contrast with his earlier series *Still life* and parallels his contemporary photographs on landscape, revealing a similar painstaking approach to ‘listening’ to the same minor things – be it objects, artworks or landscapes – and showing the auratic turn of his late photography.

In the essay written to accompany Ghirri’s work on Morandi, his close friend and collaborator Giorgio Messori, who worked with him on this project, draws a parallel between Morandi’s and Ghirri’s art for their emphasis on the act of looking and their patient seeking an empathy with the object, and proposes that both could be read through the Benjaminian notion of dialectical image. Messori argues that for Ghirri photography is an act of knowledge, that ‘every work of art was essentially a *vision*’ and that these visions are invariably ‘apparitions’ (Messori [1992] 2005: 73) – a definition that echoes Benjamin’s definition of aura. Messori also suggests that Ghirri’s photography is not far from Benjamin’s idea of image ‘as ecstatic act in which subjectivity and objectivity cancel each other out and past and present are fixed in a visible constellation, revitalising and transforming the past which is always about to disappear’ (Messori [1992] 2005: 75). As we have seen, the dialectical image refers to the coexistence of present and past in a sudden and brief illumination, as a ‘dialectics at a standstill’.²⁵ Ghirri uses the phrase ‘dialectical image’ in an unpublished manuscript of 1987 entitled ‘Pensando a un’immagine necessaria’/‘Thinking about a necessary image’, where he voices his commitment to ‘continuing to think about photography as desire, dialectical image, and perhaps utopia, in order to show our wonder for the world to the other’ (Ghirri 1997: 119).²⁶ This sense of wonder, suspension and stillness is conveyed in his photographs of Morandi’s studios, which strike us for their focus on apparently insignificant corners of his homes in Bologna and in Grizzana, including various collections of objects and notes, as well as paint marks and light reflections on the walls. In their use of lighting and composition Ghirri’s photographs present these places as suspended in time and convey the dedication to salvaging the past and to an auratic idea of art in both artists. Consider for example the close-up of three objects, against the background of a wall covered in

splodges of paint, a photograph that was also chosen as the cover image for the volume *Atelier Morandi*, published posthumously in 1992 (Figure 4). As in the other images of the series, Ghirri finds a key to representing Morandi's studios in the light, a central component of both of their works, as he comments in the essay 'Una luce sul muro'/'Light on the wall' (1991; Ghirri 1997: 165–67). Another suggestive image is the photograph of Morandi's table on which sits a bowl full of small pebbles and which is covered by countless intersecting circles left by the bottles and by his pencil marks that are slowly fading away. Like the previous photograph, this offers a 'dialectics at a standstill' in its sudden coming together of past and present, and engages the viewer in an unlimited reading of the image, while suggesting a strong sense of absence and vanishing.

Figure 4: Luigi Ghirri, 'Atelier Giorgio Morandi, via Fondazza, Bologna, 1989–90', from *Atelier Morandi* © Eredi di Luigi Ghirri.

Conclusion

As Franco Vaccari reminds us, one of the distinguishing features of Ghirri's photographs is the presence of a double gaze that structures them dialectically (Vaccari 1983: 4). As I have argued in this article, Ghirri's work builds on a basic dichotomy, a binary structure whereby opposite coexist rather than being hidden and resolved. In the essay 'Dimenticare se stessi'/'Forgetting oneself' Ghirri argues that 'photography is realized within a perfect dualism [...] an unceasing dialectics' (1989: 23–24) and that this establishes a deeper 'relationship with a place' (1989: 54). Similarly, in 'Un cancello sul fiume'/'A gate on the river', which opens with a quotation from Benjamin's *Arcades Project* ('Boredom is the threshold to great deeds', Convolute D; 2002: 105), Ghirri portrays the Po valley as 'a great plain where memories do not disappear but are present in every corner, fill the space, in an unceasing and untidy movement' (1997: 87) and as a site that preserves 'a sort of miraculous balance, so feable and magical that it is not immediately apparent, nor it takes a fixed identity, but remains in equilibrium between past and present, still invisible and unknowable' (1997: 87). These words summarize Ghirri's aesthetics and convey its inherent tension between preserving a sense of mystery and looking for a clue to pierce the veil; this tension, which can be read as a realization of Benjamin's dialectics, seems to re-emerge in the shift from modernity to postmodernity, and to inform the work of many of Ghirri's contemporaries, such as Calvino and Celati.²⁷

As in Benjamin's case, Ghirri's work coincided with an epochal shift, even a double shift – first the passage from modernity to postmodernity and then to a globalized, digital age – which is accompanied by an environmental crisis; the awareness of these profound changes leads Ghirri, and before him Benjamin, to reflect on the disruption of accepted ways of seeing, on the decline of shared tradition, on the demise of a sense of aesthetic experience and commitment towards places, seen as repositories of history and identity. By challenging accepted views through montage, and by representing less known sites as mysterious and vanishing, particularly in his late work, Ghirri at one and the same time

disrupted the illusion of representation and granted these places an auratic and artistic quality; this is in line both with Benjamin's thought and with the latest aesthetic theory of landscape, which has sought to demonstrate that 'all places have an aesthetic valence' (D'Angelo 2009: 34). Moreover Ghirri endowed the photographer with a re-auratizing gaze, seemingly following Benjamin who argued that aura does not reside in the object but rather in the medium around it and in the relationship established between the object and its viewer (see Marchetti 2013: 13).

By drawing both on montage and on aura Ghirri posited photography firmly as an art, as an intrinsically dialectical art, which facilitates both contemplation and reflection, and brings together different approaches to the 'real', including indexical or documentary, iconic and symbolic. In so doing he gave a key contribution to redirecting the artistic practice and the theoretical debate within Italian photography, and to channelling the focus towards place, landscape and the environment within many Italian arts and disciplines. As argued throughout this article, Ghirri's aesthetic shift should not be read as a clear-cut, conservative or even regressive effort to reinstate a notion like aura that Benjamin redefined in the early twentieth century, but rather as a desire for an art that could allow for a fresh view of the exterior in order to counteract the spectacularization of the media age. If, for Massimo Cacciari, 'photography, following Benjamin, is really the *emblem* of an era of loss of experience' (2001: 343), in his work Ghirri both acknowledged this predicament and challenged it by presenting photography as a means of achieving knowledge and experience of the world – an epistemological drive that echoes that of Benjamin – and of recovering an auratic appearance of places before their final disappearance with the end of mechanical reproduction and the onset of the digital age.

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Notes

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Ghirri's archive, which is located at the Fototeca Panizzi, in Reggio Emilia Municipal library, can be accessed online at <http://panizzi.comune.re.it>. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the original Italian texts are mine.

² These include, among many, the exhibitions at the Matthew Marks Gallery in New York, in 2011 and 2013, and the retrospective of Ghirri's work exhibited at MAXXI in Rome in 2013 and then on tour in Brasil from November 2013.

³ In interview with Emanuela Teatini, talking about the many influences on his work, Ghirri claims that 'what determines things is a constellation of events' (1997: 298).

⁴ In his seminal 2001 essay Massimo Mussini divides Ghirri's output between his 1970s and 1980s work. More recently Nicoletta Leonardi (2013) focuses on the 'first' Ghirri and Quentin Bajac (2013) argues that Ghirri's early deconstructive moment leads to a more constructive phase in his later work.

⁵ 1979 was a watershed year for Italian photography, as evidenced, among other events, by the first Venice exhibition dedicated to photography ('Venezia 79. La fotografia') and by the publication of the two Einaudi *Annali* volumes on *L'immagine fotografica 1845-1945/The Photographic Image 1845-1945*, edited by Carlo Bertelli and Giulio Bollati.

⁶ The resurgence of Benjamin's studies in recent years and particularly since the 2000s – in philosophy as well as cultural/literary studies (Scurati 2006) and in media or visual studies (Bolter et al. 2006) – confirms the productivity of Benjamin's reading of

modernity for an analysis of later cultural shifts, such as those of postmodernity and the digital age.

⁷ See M. Mussini (2001: 22), C. Marra (2001) and A. C. Quintavalle (2012). Ghirri explicitly mentioned Benjamin in a few essays that now appear in *Niente di antico sotto il sole/Nothing Old under the Sun* (Ghirri 1997): 'Re Mida nel vicolo cieco' ([1982] 1997: 46); 'Un cancello sul fiume' ([1987] 1997: 100); 'Lo sguardo inquieto' ([1988] 1997: 134); and in the interview with Mario Curati 'Luigi Ghirri, fotografo dell'originale perduto' ([1984] 1997: 288).

⁸ Ghirri's library is located in his house in Roncofiesi (Reggio Emilia) and includes the following texts in Italian translation: *Immagini di città/City images*, *Infanzia berlinese/Berlin Childhood around 1900*, *Lettere 1913–1940/Letters 1913–1940*, *Metafisica della gioventù/The Metaphysics of Youth* and *Strada a senso unico/One-Way Street* (see Gasparini 2013: 87).

⁹ Here I quote from the 2005 edition of Messori's text, which appeared both in Italian and in English. This article was first published in 1992.

¹⁰ On Benjamin's aura I have found most useful the essays by Diarmuid Costello (2005), Georges Didi-Huberman (2005), Miriam Bratu Hansen (2008), Carolin Duttlinger (2008), and the essays published in the themed issue on aura in *Rivista di Estetica/Journal of Aesthetics*, 52:1 (2013).

¹¹ In 'Little history of photography' Benjamin talks about 'the peeling away of the object's shell, the destruction of the aura' (1999: 519); this phrase becomes 'the

stripping of the veil from the object, the destruction of the aura' in both the second and third version of 'The work of art' essay ([1936] 2002: 105, [1936–1939] 2003: 255–56).

¹² The same definition appears in both the second and third version; on this see Desideri (2012).

¹³ On this see also Marchetti (2013: 7).

¹⁴ Like Benjamin, Ghirri was an avid collector. Ghirri extends the notion of still life used in figurative arts to include old paintings, photographs, postcards and various other objects, such as fragments of notes, tickets or cigarette butts. This reminds us of Dada's effort to test art for its authenticity, and of Benjamin's reading of it in the essay 'The author as producer', where he claimed that for Dadaism 'a still life might have been put together from tickets, spools of cotton and cigarette butts, all of which were combined with painting elements. The whole thing was put in a frame' ([1934] 1999: 774).

¹⁵ This volume collects posthumously the lectures on photography that Ghirri delivered at the 'Università del Progetto' in Reggio Emilia between January 1989 and June 1990.

¹⁶ Like aura Benjamin's dialectical image is a notoriously ambivalent notion; for Rolf Tiedemann its meaning 'remained iridescent; it never achieved any terminological consistency' (in Benjamin 2002: 942).

¹⁷ Similarly, Giuliana Minghelli maintains that the coming together of present and past in a new constellation does not give rise to a harmonious totality but rather has the potential to unveil the optical unconscious (Minghelli 2013: 16), namely something that the camera, but not necessarily the eye, has seen.

¹⁸ Ghirri often entitled his photographs with a place name; most of the images in this series, shot in second-hand markets in Modena, simply bear the title ‘Modena’, followed by the year in which they were taken.

¹⁹ Ghirri’s work echoed Vaccari’s suggestion that, if photography dissolved the aura of the work of art, it substituted it with the aura of the unrepeatability of the moment (2001: 20).

²⁰ Ghirri defined the Po valley as ‘the place where I have to confront childhood ghosts and inevitable *rêveries*’ (1981: 278).

²¹ Proust was a key influence on both Benjamin and Ghirri, as he acknowledged in his essays. As Bratu Hansen suggests, for Benjamin Proustian memories can only be retrieved through ‘actualization, not reflection’; these memories are ‘unique: they are lost to the memory that seeks to retain them’ thus share the ‘essential inapproachability and unavailability’ and the unrecoverable nature of the aura (2008: 344).

²² In one of his photography lectures Ghirri claims that in his early work he was as interested in ‘natural frames’ (*‘inquadrature naturali’*) as in fotomontage (2010: 77).

²³ In a number of essays Ghirri uses the notion of the fantastic, which is closely related to that of the ‘*unheimlich*’ or the uncanny.

²⁴ A clear echo of Calvino – another key influence on Ghirri – is detectable here, in the use of terms such as ‘*smagliatura*’ (crack) and ‘*superficie*’ (surface) (see Ghirri 1997: 38).

²⁵ Ophälders draws a link between photography and dialectical images as arrested images that are immediately placed in movement through their own constellations (2001: 48, 54).

²⁶ Ghirri uses dialectical image also in an essay on the photographer Andrea Abati entitled ‘*Attraverso i villaggi*’/‘Through the villages’ (Ghirri 1997: 130–31).

²⁷ Like Philippe Dubois, Ghirri seemed to re-discover aura in photography as ‘the dialectical effect produced by the tension between closeness and distance’ (Dubois [1983, 1990]/1996: 263) – a dichotomy which, according to Marco Signorini, ‘generates an emotional tension in the viewer and a short circuit between reality and imagination’ (Signorini 2001: 110).