A WINDOW ON TIME

Michael C Coldwell
I like the word “medium” here.

It speaks to me of specters, of ghosts and phantoms, like these images themselves.

From the first “apparition”, it’s all about the return of the departed.

It is there in black and white, it can be verified after the fact.

The spectral is the essence of photography.

Jacques Derrida
This is a book about failed time travel. It is also a collection of ghost stories without words. Most importantly, however, the book is a study of failed and successful time travel, and the photographs that mediate those failures. It is about the uncanny ability of photography to bring back the dead — or with regard to landscape photography, to show us views of a world which has long disappeared.

Looking at vintage photographs of places we know well, one is struck by the strange, evocative, even disconcerting power of these images. With our backs to the past, we have a hard time reconciling an image of the past with what we see today. The ‘then-and-now’ picture, sometimes called ‘rephotography’, attempts to address this problem by showing us a view of the past carefully alongside the same view in the present, so that we can compare them, make connections, and become aware of how the same street or building has changed, through juxtaposition with what has stayed the same.

These types of images only really work when enough of the scene remains for us to recognize it in the same place. I became fascinated with the impossibility of rephotographing spaces which have changed fundamentally, where a lasting sense of place has been totally destroyed. I became equally captivated by the gradual decay of photographic artefacts themselves. It seems we can lose the same scene twice.

There are many such lost places in my hometown, and these photographs present two of them — and two very different views of the same city.

One view is seen through the crumbling glass plate of Godfrey Bingley, a photographer and industrialist who lived in Leeds from 1842 until his death in 1927. He took many thousands of photographs and donated them all to the local University in 1913, when he went blind and could no longer work. Not a great deal is known about the man, but what we can see of the city in his images tells us something about him. His view of Leeds centres on the natural and the bucolic, the woodlands and fields, the historic landmarks and the wealthy suburbs of a largely rural district just prior to its rapid urbanization. Bingley stole his view in the transformation which is happening all around him. There was a nostalgic quality to these selective views, even in the time in which they were taken.

The other view re-presented in these works is of a slum called Quarry Hill. While taken at approximately the same time (c. 1900), and only a couple of miles away from Bingley’s old haunts, the Leeds we see here is antithetic. In these murky views we see largely deserted streets, devoid of any vegetation or other signs of life. Occasionally we see a glimpse of a hazy face at a window, a haunting sign that people still lived in these condemned buildings. The original photographs were taken as evidence — commissioned to prove the area had become uninhabitable and needed to be cleared in its entirety. However, these two sets of images are also notably similar. They both present views of places on the cusp of disappearance. They both invoke the passage of time, as much through their own disintegration as objects, as through the historical scenes they depict. Their strange juxtapositions also hint at the presence of a world once seen and brought — precisely because of their profound temporal limitation — their inability to erase the past for ever.

Some of the artefacts are no longer intact, but it has become impossible to view through them in the same way they were created. The photographs’ disintegration thus mirrors that of the landscape it once revealed.

In this book I attempt to take these scattered traces back to where they came from, and project each image back into the same landscape as it exists today — regardless of whether we can tell it is the same place, or even see much of the original image. In these photographic works no one scene through the other, or they become each other completely. The intention here is not to provide an effective view of the past, a working then-and-now picture for us to play ‘spot the difference’, but to haunt the present with the forgotten changes which have taken place, the huge upheavals the city has undergone, and to place a hazy window on time itself — its relentless passage and the inevitable passing of all things.

Even landscapes and photographs...
In the two figures opposite are two examples of the original archival images used to create these new photographic works of Leeds.

The top photograph was taken by Godfrey Bingley in 1888, and depicts the rolling fields of what is now bustling suburban Headingley. The second image was taken by an unknown photographer in 1908. It represents the condemned buildings of the slum on Quarry Hill.

This is not the first work to directly contrast these two locations. In an essay by John Tagg on the photographic misrepresentation we see of Quarry Hill in these images, he compares the two districts in his discussion of the slum’s demonization.

"From the heights of Headingley, Quarry Hill seemed a nether world lost in satanic fumes, the breeding place of infernal beings" (Tagg, 1988)
THE SPECTRAL FOREST

This city was once an ancient forest called Elmet.

With these images we return to Godfrey Bringley's bucolic Leeds looking for spectral traces of this lost verdant landscape.
In front of this tablet there existed the

SHIRE OAK

which collapsed from old age on
the 26th of May 1941

This is believed to be the place of meeting
where the Head of the Saxon Wapentake,
the Local Government Unit, regathered
with his chief men.

Leeds was in the Wapentake of Skyrack,
or Shire Oak.
One of the interesting things revealed by these ‘failed’ rephotographs, is that there is actually more urban woodland and wild areas in the city today than there was in Bingley’s time. The legendary forest of Elmet was long gone by the 19th century, most of the wooded areas had been cleared for farmland and industry. It is in these post-industrial quarters that it can feel like the ancient forest might now be returning, the landscape shapeshifting once again.

The question no one in Bingley’s photographs have been asked is, the game fields built on, and the country estates have since become modern suburbs. But this area is still haunted by its past as an affluent village, a refuge from the smog and the chaos of the city below. Even as that city has enveloped it, pockets of a rural world have survived, even thrived. And in many ways, despite the urbanisation that has taken place, the ‘village’ is still much more prosperous than the deprived inner city neighbourhoods that now hold the east.
THE NETHERWORLD

Returning to Leeds’ East End, how much of its history as a notorious slum has survived the clearing?

Can the photograph haunt this recently regenerated area with troubling spectres from its past?
Despite the recent moves to regenerate and rebrand Quarry Hill, the area still feels haunted by its troubled past, even without these photographic interventions. This process is still ongoing, the area is still contested, and the urban landscape depicted here was changing weekly, even as I tried to document it as it stands today. By the mid-1990s photographing any urban landscape, as you can see on pages 54-55, no photographic image really characterises or definitively captures such ongoing change. As soon as you have one representation, it is out of date.

A simple narrative of urban squalor is not only reductive but wholly inaccurate. This negative characterisation is what John Tagg warned us about. We see pockets of nature emerging out of the rubble of land left fallow—a small section of woodland has appeared here in the city centre, since the final ‘slums’ were demolished in 1978. These new trees provide refuge from the pollution and noise, for birds and other creatures, and privacy for daytime drinkers and heroin users.

Things are certainly changing, though. Who can say what will really happen next on this hill, or whether this ‘today’ will be forgotten, like so many others.
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This is a book about failed time travel.

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Most importantly, however, this is a body of work about photography itself.

A Window on Time presents the final outcomes of a three year photographic research project published as a thesis under the title Aura and Trace: The Hauntology of the Rephotographic Image. The work deconstructs the practice, revealing its spectral and temporal anomalies, through the rephotography of lost landscapes.

These images were also exhibited as The Remote Viewer, a site-specific video installation at the Treasures of the Brotherton gallery, as part of Light Night 2018.

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