

MULTIPLE VIEWS OF THE METROPOLIS. THE NEW YORK OF JACOB RIIS AND ALFRED STIEGLITZ IN JOHN REED'S POETICS AND WRITING

Marzia Dati*

In this paper I investigate how John Reed's poetics and narrative of the city perfectly blend Jacob Riis and Alfred Stieglitz's views of New York. Though they used two different kinds of artistic media, word and image, they captured the metropolis from "below" (the poverty in the slums), and from "above" (the wealth and the idea of progress expressed by the skyscrapers). New York had a tremendous impact on artists, writers and intellectuals. In *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*, an interesting example of photo-text, Riis describes the awful conditions of the old and new immigrants settled in New York: his camera sneaks into the slums and the sweatshops of the Lower East Side revealing an infernal underworld made up of poverty and degradation; by contrast, Stieglitz points his camera to the heights of the skyscrapers which, like gothic cathedrals, tower to the sky as harbingers of a radiant future. This dichotomy is found in John Reed's poems and in some relevant articles published in the radical newspapers of his time. Reed as a young poet and journalist arrived in New York in 1910 and was fascinated by the city: new spaces, and new perspectives opened before his eyes but also a world of suffering. Through the analysis of the poems "A Hymn to Manhattan," "Proud New York," "America, 1918," and the articles "Immigrants," and the "Tide flows East," and the comparison with the photography "The Bent" by Riis, "The Steerage" and "City of Ambition" by Stieglitz, I will try to highlight how the two photographers' visions of New York and John Reed's writings can be brought into a mutual dialogue that sheds light on the tight relation between literature and photography.

Keywords: metropolis, photography, literature, below and above, Riis, Stieglitz, Reed.

The close relationship between literary language and photography has been extensively investigated. As is well known, many scholars have illuminated how, through time, this connection has originated a formal and thematic congruence due to a common aesthetic and cultural substrata that they both share, and to the fact that they experience the same tastes and sensitivity of an epoch (Rizzardi & Bassi 11). In this article, I try to set up a dialogue among three prominent figures in the North American cultural, literary and artistic scenery, which was

* Independent Scholar.

characterized by striking social contrasts, and examine how they shared and conveyed the same ideas. By using different aesthetic devices (image and word), and apparently similar means of capturing the reality (the camera lens and the human eye), Riis, Stieglitz and Reed similarly provide us with the ambivalence of New York as a city of dreams and a place of poverty and hardship.

The importance of the eye above the other senses has always been shared both by Western European and North American cultures (Clayton 7). In line with the Greek word *θεωρία* (*theoria*)¹, beholding implies both seeing and knowing. At the same time the British astronomer Sir John Herschel coins the term photography as a practice of recording visual images, whilst on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean Ralph Waldo Emerson in *Nature* (1836) creates the philosophic metaphor «transparent eyeball» (Emerson 14) which conveys a view of life that is absorbent rather than reflective, in this context the «transparent eyeball allows the individual to become one with nature, namely, the «transparent eyeball» becomes a means to reach knowledge: it captures nature and allows us to be a part of all of nature and its motion. In *The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet's Mind; An Autobiographical Poem* (1850) William Wordsworth states that the eye is «the most despotic of our senses» (Wordsworth 322). According to the poet, visual information shapes our understanding and interpretation of the world and potentially overrides other senses. The relation between the human eye and the camera lens and how they capture the reality has always been a *vexata quaestio*. In the early Nineteenth century, the Hungarian painter and photographer, László Moholy-Nagy,² suggests that photography reproduces the visibility of the world that is impermeable to the intellectual and psychological interferences the human vision is contaminated by. In *Little History of Photography* (1931) Walter Benjamin introduces the concept of the «optical unconscious» according to which the camera is meant as a psychoanalytic device that allows access to the unconscious of the subject being photographed (Benjamin 510-512). Once again, Benjamin highlights that photography captures a variety of aspects which are often beyond the sensorial spectrum.

Let us come now to New York City. Since its foundation, it has always had a tremendous impact on writers, poets, photographers and artists. The idea of

1 In ancient Greek *θεωρία* refers to a person sent to consult the oracle or to attend a religious ceremony. So, the term took the double meaning of contemplation and knowledge.

2 László Moholy-Nagy (1895 – 1946) was born in Hungary to a Jewish family; he became a naturalized American citizen in 1946. He was a professor in the Bauhaus school, and he strongly believed in the integration of technology and industry into the arts. He moved to Chicago in the 1930s where he became the director of the New Bauhaus.

New York as an ever-growing city projected into the future had already been anticipated by Walt Whitman. The American Bard traces the history of New York to the present drawing on a mythical past as is clearly shown in *Mannabatta*. By combining the past and the present, he conveys his perception of the city as if the two time dimensions coexisted. In fact, on one hand, he brings back the old word “Mannahatta” which is rooted in the Algonquian language and refers to the culture and geography of those indigenous peoples, and on the other, he gives a picture of a fast growing and modern city:

I was asking for something specific and perfect for my city,
Whereupon lo! upsprang the aboriginal name.
Now I see what there is in a name, a word, liquid, sane, unruly, musical, self-sufficient,
I see that the word of my city is that word from of old
Because I see that word nested in nests of water-bay, superb (Whitman 404).

The skyline of the city that Whitman captures in 1860's *Mannabatta* anticipates the verticality of the 20th century metropolis: «high growths of iron, slender, strong, light, splendidly uprising toward clear skies» (404-405).

Gotham City, the City that never sleeps, the Big Apple, the Empire City, Metropolis are some of the most famous metaphors by which it has been known. Alexander Wood in his latest work *Building the Metropolis* highlights how, between the 1880s and the 1930s, New York City experienced an explosive growth: new buildings, tunnels, bridges and streets were built to meet the needs of a growing population. The author lays special emphasis on the skyline of New York which rose to new heights and shows how the city prospered more than any other from the deep economic transformations of the era. The city's vertical profile confirmed its role as the headquarters of an emerging world of corporate enterprises. It was in the late 1860s that New York produced the world's first skyscrapers erected by insurance, telegraph, and newspaper companies, the only type of businesses that could afford such extravagant architectural experiments. The skyscraper came to represent a bold and distinctive intrusion into the cityscape. However, at the same time tenements were being built in Manhattan which became the most populated area of the city. The term “tenement” was officially used to describe low-cost, multi-family working-class housing. A typical tenement was a five-story brick building with four apartments per floor and a stairwell running up the middle; they were built with poor quality bricks and unseasoned lumber. In the light of this, we may say that New York was wildly expanding along both a vertical and horizontal axis: the former can be viewed as a metaphor for wealth and power, the latter for poverty and social deprivation. Unlike their different backgrounds and purposes, Jacob A. Riis (1849-1914) and Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) caught at their best these two opposite views of New York.

Jacob A. Riis arrived in the United States from Denmark in 1870, he is mainly known as a muckraker journalist and as the first photographer to have adopted the photographic flash. He combined these two different means of expression to provide the reader with a scathing view of a New York that did not have anything to do with the idea of economic growth and progress which the United States of America flaunted and which appealed to many immigrants. As soon as he arrived in New York, Riis – himself experiencing poverty – was attracted by the conditions of the poor and immigrants. His seminal work *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1890) deserves our attention. In my view, it can be considered as a photo-text that anticipates *Bruques-la-Morte* (1892) by Georges Rodenbach and *The People of the Abyss* (1903) by Jack London. Riis is undoubtedly a pioneering figure in the US social reform movement of the late 19th century: he was among the first photographers to see the potential of the photograph as a direct means of social criticism.

Conversely, Alfred Stieglitz had a different approach to photography: to him it was a form of personal inquiry that continued throughout his life. As an artist, intellectual, and leader of avant-garde movements in art, Stieglitz responded to a less tangible problem and sought to teach a more evasive principle, in fact he worked outside of the mainstream of popular culture and established his own alternative network for monitoring cultural changes. Although Stieglitz worked on many fronts, the years between 1890-1917 are considered the most relevant for his career: he founded the radical photographic group, the Photo-Secession, published the innovative quarterly *Camera Work*, and directed the controversial art gallery 291 which played an important role in exhibiting the works of art of the European and American avant-garde.

Let us now consider John Reed (1887-1920) the author of the famous reportage on the Russian revolution *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1919)³. After graduating in English Literature from Harvard University in 1910, John Reed settled in New York. The young poet was flabbergasted by the “metropolis” as he writes in his autobiography *Almost Thirty*. In the following passage, what emerges is how Reed caught the ambivalence of the city: on the one hand «the soaring imperial towers of downtown», on the other, the «swarming East End – alien towns within towns», and «the ebb and flow of human tides sweeping to work» (269):

3 John Reed is mainly known as a journalist and as the co-founder of Communist Labour Party of America in 1919. He was born in Portland (Oregon) in 1887 and died in Moscow in 1920. After his experience in Mexico and on the Eastern front of World War I as a war correspondent, he witnessed the seizure of the Winter Palace in Petrograd. Acclaimed as the American journalist who embraced the Russian Revolution, John Reed was also a poet. His poems were completely neglected and brought back into life only recently with the publication of my work cited below.

New York was an enchanted city to me. It was on an infinitely grander scale than Harvard. Everything was to be found there – it satisfied me utterly. I wandered about the streets, from the soaring imperial towers of down-town, along the East River docks, smelling of spices and the clipper ships of the past, through the swarming East Side – alien towns within towns – where the smoky flare of miles of clamorous pushcarts made a splendour of shabby streets; coming upon sudden shrill markets, dripping blood and fish scales in the light of torches, the big Jewish women bawling their wares under the roaring great bridges; thrilling to the ebb and flow of human tides sweeping to work and back, west and east, south and north. I knew China-town, and Little Italy, and the quarter of the Syrians; the marionette theater, Sharkey's and McSorley Saloons, the Bowery lodging houses and the places where the tramps gathered in winter; the Haymarket, the German Village, and all the Tenderloin (269).

Reed captured that crawling heterogeneous mass of people that wiggled through the streets of Manhattan, the same crowd described in vivid detail by Riis in his famous photograph “The Bend” which is also the title of Chapter IV in his book: «the home of tramps as well as the rag picker», «the outpost of Israel», in a few words, an alien place made up of a polyphony of language where «the Italian tongue is infinitely sweeter than the harsh gutturals of the Russian Jew around the corner» (68). In the poem “America, 1918,” John Reed condenses in a very few lines Riis's snapshots included in his works, containing “At the Cradle of the Tenement” (18), “The Bend” (59), “The Tramp” (79), “Bohemian Cigarmakers at work in their Tenements” (143), just to mention a few:

The East Side, worlds within a world, chaos of nations,
Sink of the nomad races, last and wretchedest
Port of the westward Odyssey of mankind . . .
At dawn vomiting colossal flood of machine-fodder,
At evening sucking back with terrible harsh sound 5
To beast-like tenements, garish nickelodeons, gin-mills . . .
Kids hanging round the corner saloon, inhaling cheap cigarettes,
Leering at the short-skirted girls who two by two go giggling by
Picking their way between crawling babies, over the filthy sidewalk . . .
Children at shrill daring games under the hoofs of truck-horses- 10
Gaunt women screaming at them and each other, in twanging foreign tongues-
Old men sitting on the crowded stoop in shirt-sleeves,
smoking an evening pipe,
Glare of push-cart torches ringer with alien faces . . . (Reed 1935, 19).

The «chaos of nations» and the «westwards Odyssey of mankind» call into question what America really represented for the many immigrants arriving at Ellis Island, which is also a recurrent topic in *How the Other Half Lives*:

The metropolis is to lots of people like a lighted candle to the moth. It attracts them in swarms that come year after year with the vague idea that they can get along here if anywhere; that so-

omething is bound to turn up among so many. [...] Many of them with honest hopes of getting a start in the city and making a way for themselves (Riis 70).

Both Riis and Reed share their concern for the living condition of the immigrants which raise a number of moral questions far from being solved. In the article “Immigrants” published in *Collier's Magazine* in 1911, John Reed captures the arrival of immigrants to New York:

Whistles! A faint exultant chorus —first welcome from that America of their dreams. In how many tongues it seemed to say. “Wealth is freedom and happiness. My streets are paved with gold. My mountains and rivers and forests are strewn with gold. They are yours for the asking. I am El Dorado, the Western country of the blessed, the end of the rainbow.” They couldn't see, yet they believed. [...] The immigrants tumbled out into the thick, bitter night. The whistles were all around now, shrill, menacing, sullen, mingled with other monstrous noises. Quite suddenly the sleet drove seaward and the fog began to thin away. High up in the night the immigrants saw lights upon lights; rows upon rows of lights, set in the brow of a jagged mountain range that blotted out the stars; lights full of the yellow sheen of gold, mountains pierced to show the riches within. For each one of them the lights were kindled in separate welcome; behind every light were food and warmth and clothing. For every starving woman and every weary muzhik and every cringing Jew was his heart's desire. Some were on their knees, thanking their several gods; others sang and shouted, which was just as much a prayer; many wept. Everybody said the same thing in twenty different tongues, and everybody understood. For this was America, and happiness lay just across the river (1911, 10).

Some years later (one year before his death in Moscow), in the article “The Tide Flows East” a disillusioned Reed puts forth a fierce criticism against American immigration policy:

One the principles expressed in the foundation of the American republic was that of “providing an asylum for the oppressed on the earth.” Under its grandiloquent wording, the poverty-stricken horde of Europe were induced to come to America, and take the place of Anglo-Saxon workers industry, for which no man could live decently. In America there was work for all – brutal, degrading work, at pitiful wages- but still work. And by living like animals, by scabbing, submitting to nameless brutalities, the foreign-born could hope to scrape together enough, not to live in the United States, but to return to his country and live there. The fact is that they returned broken in spirit and health did not matters. This then was the spirit in which America welcomed “the oppressed on the earth”. Lured not only by gold, but by the talk of freedom, by the picture of the Statue of Liberty on the steamship companies advertising mattress, the aliens poured into our port at the rate of hundreds of thousands a year. They were bullied and cheated at the port of entry, hurled into fetid slums, drawn into the lowest strata of machinery of industry, sweated, clubbed by the police, shot in strikes, and at the end, worn-out before their time, their lungs rotted with tuberculosis, were spewed out into the jails, or back across the sea. [...] Their hope is no more America. She lies on the dark side of the earth. Her torch of Freedom is gone out of her hand. [...] Several men were secret-

Carthage that flickered out where we begin.
 London? A swirl of mud in Shakespeare's time;
 ten Troys lie tombed in centuries of grime! 15
 Who'd not have lived in Athens at her prime,
 or helped to raise the mighty walls of Rome?
See, blind men! Walls rise all about you here at home!
 Who would not hear once more
 That oceanic roar 20
 "Ave! Ave Imperator!"
 With which an army its Augustus greets!
Hark! There's an army roaring in the streets!
 This spawning filth, these monuments uncouth,
 are but her wild, ungovernable youth. 25
 But the skyscrapers, dwarfing earthly things –
 Ah, that is how she sings!
 Wake to the vision shining in the sun;
 earth's ancient, conquering races rolled in one,
 a World beginning– *and yet nothing done!* 30
 (1913, 9).

The text is characterized by a series of rhetorical questions that reinforce the idea of the greatness of the city which is in no way inferior to any other city in the world, even to Byzantium, Athens and Ancient Rome. An optimistic view of New York pervades all the poem. According to the architect J. Monroe Hewlett, for an artist to take a picture of New York required a prophetic vision, for it was an image «of something not yet realized» (10-11), which is well expressed in the last line of the poem «A world beginning – *and yet nothing done*» (10-11). If we compare the "City of Ambition" by Stieglitz⁵ and "Proud New York," (a short poem merged later in "America, 1918") what resulted is an example of how the poet and the photographer captured the same essence of New York City's modernity and the ambition of its growth, particularly evident in the towering skyscrapers that dominate the skyline.

By proud New York and its man-piled Matterhorns,
 The hard blue sky overhead and the west wind blowing,
 Steam-plumes waving from sun-glittering pinnacles,
 And deep streets shaking to the million-river-
Manhattan, zoned with ships, the cruel 5
Youngest of all the world's great towns,
Thy bodice bright with many a jewel,
Imperially crowned with crowns . . . (Reed 1919b, 18).

5 Stieglitz took this photo in 1910 but first circulated this image in the October 1911 issue of his journal *Camera Work*.

Both titles “Proud New York” and “City of Ambition” include two words “proud” and “ambition” which are strictly related on a semantic level: they convey the idea of an impulse of longing and eager desire which generally characterize adolescence, it is not by chance that Reed in “A Hymn to Manhattan” compares New York to a girl (highlighted by the use of “her”) and to «her wild, ungovernable youth» (1913, 9). At the same time, «proud» and «ambition» seem to mark that New York aspires to become the most magnificent city in the world; Reed uses a synecdoche and so Manhattan represents New York itself as it is highlighted in the last four lines: «Manhattan, zoned with ships, the cruel/Youngest of all the world's great towns, /Thy bodice bright with many a jewel, /Imperially crowned with crowns» (1913, 9). What's more, in “Proud New York” both «A vision shining in the sun» celebrates its vitality and beauty, and «the steam plumes waving, from sun - glittering pinnacles» (1919b, 18), compared with “City of Ambition,” reflects the same vision of New York by means of two different semiotic systems. The ship in the foreground matches with the view of Manhattan described by Reed. However, though indirectly, the city perceived from above and below is evident in the juxtaposition between «man-piled Matterhorns» and «deep streets», «every tower and pinnacle», and «spawning filth» (1919b, 18).

The ambivalence of the “metropolis,” the *City of Violent Contrast* (Monroe Hewlett 10) is recorded by another famous photographer, Alvin Langdon Coburn, in *The Relation of Time to Art*:

New York is a vision that rises out of the sea as I come up the Harbor on my Atlantic liner, and which glimmers for a while in the sun for the first of my stay amidst its pinnacles, but which vanishes, but for fragmentary glimpses, as I become one of the grey creatures that crawl about like ants at the bottom of its gloomy caverns (72).

In conclusion, what stands out is how Riis, Stieglitz and Reed share the same aim, to show a two-dimensional city which reveals the contradictions inherent in what America has really represented in the early twentieth century. At the same time, it is evident that by using different media, the three of them tried to isolate the moment by snatching it from the flow of time and from the oblivion of memory. However, it is not just an analogy as to the city perceived from above and from below: in my view, Reed's poems reveal many references to the photography of his time. His poems are mainly visual: they are made up of a series of snapshots taken by the poet's keen eye while walking through the streets of Manhattan. Like a camera lens, Reed's eye selects meaningful details in an urban frame and creates a kind of visual aesthetic monologue which, on a poetic level, translates the relation between the space and its perception. We can confidently

say that his poems can be traced back to the «straight photography» that played an important role in American Modernism as Silvia Albertazzi puts it in *Letteratura e Fotografia* (2017). As one of the most outstanding figures in the thriving world of Greenwich Village, we cannot exclude the possibility that Reed might have been influenced by artists and photographers, in particular by Stieglitz himself. All Reed's writings are visual, even his famous reportages *Insurgent Mexico*, *The War in Eastern Europe* and *Ten Days that Shook the World* reveal his indisputable mastery in representing the moment as a whole. The pupil of his eye can be compared to a camera diaphragm, and as Riis's and Stieglitz's snapshots of the urban scenery of New York freeze the image and project it in a timeless dimension, Reed does the same by capturing the moment that is both word and icon. Reconnecting to what I have illustrated at the beginning of this article, here we are dealing with the poet's eye and not merely with the human eye. The poet's eye has the capacity of reading into the light, the colours, the shapes of reality and translating them into a world of words. As Charles Baudelaire puts it, the poet belongs to that «tribu prophétique», whose eyes are «prunelles ardentes» (Baudelaire 33) which are able to grasp any metaphysical entity and inner reality. Finally, I would like to conclude by mentioning P. B. Shelley who, in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) focuses on the role of poets and poetry whose main task is to unveil the truth, and highlights that a poem is but «the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth» (Shelley 12). What Riis, Stieglitz and Reed conveyed, though by using different aesthetic devices, was the same view of New York destined to become the Metropolis *par excellence* in all its ambivalence and duality.

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