In an essay written in 2004 for the twentieth anniversary of *Viaggio in Italia* [Journey through Italy], photographer Gabriele Basilico argued that ‘Among the many merits of Luigi Ghirri and of those who worked closely with him, [was] the capacity to detect a moment of great socio-cultural transition in Italy between the late 1970s and early 1980s’. Basilico also praised Ghirri’s ‘ability to give new impetus to the critical debate on photography by linking this debate both to literature and to the visual arts, and by bringing together descriptive language, narrative form and symbolic value’.1 In the same essay, by offering a comparison with the French DATAR project to which he was invited to participate, Basilico suggested that Ghirri played a central role in re-viewing the Italian landscape and Italian (landscape) photography.2 The double opening that Ghirri’s photography afforded to both place and landscape and to literature is not coincidental, but rather central to his art, and to the cultural change undergone in Italy and outside in those years. This shift saw Italian culture at the end of the 1970s gradually move away from a neo-avant-garde, experimental approach to a new engagement with mass media and consumption and, at the same time, a growing environmental sensitivity and a resistance to the

---


increasing speed of post-industrial societies. While Italian photography and particularly Ghirri’s work in the 1980s has been often investigated with reference to a ‘shift in the collective sensitivity’ towards landscape,3 less attention has been paid to what Claudio Marra defines photography’s ‘special Stimmung – both implicitly and explicitly – with other narrative forms, especially literature’.4 With this notion the art historian describes the consonance that he detects in both arts’ adoption of a lower tone and a more descriptive and minimalist style, as a means of going ‘in controtendenza’, namely ‘against the grain with respect to the increasing spectacularization of the cultural industry at the beginning of the 1980s’ (Fotografia e pittura (2012), 249). Like Basilico, Marra argues that at that juncture Ghirri was pivotal in establishing a closer dialogue between photography and narrative literature, and that his example had a long-lasting impact, giving rise to a growing number of interdisciplinary collaborations and photobooks (222). In this chapter I build on the above suggestions to explore the consonance between Ghirri’s photography and a number of writers active in those years who were particularly sensitive to questions of spatiality, visuality and aesthetic experience.5 Far from suggesting a blanket approach that puts forward similarities at the expense of differences, with my analysis I seek to assess the aesthetic consonance between Ghirri and the selected writers and their contribution to renewing photography, literature and the reflection on place and landscape in the 1980s.

In his critical writings Ghirri repeatedly posited photography as closely linked to other artistic languages, highlighting their mutual influences; indeed he encouraged viewers to read his photographs within a broader context that takes into account other languages and arts; in his words:

4 Claudio Marra, Fotografia e pittura nel Novecento (e oltre) (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2012), p. 222.
‘I think that many values cannot be read strictly within a specific code; I believe that my photography is imbued with many other images, including cinematic, literary, musical, creative images’. Similarly, in his work he exploited the narrative potential of photography by envisaging all his projects as series that are open to continual rearranging and by regularly inserting written texts in his photobooks. For this reason, Arturo Carlo Quintavalle defined Ghirri ‘a great narrator’, ‘for he builds minor narrative systems, namely his photographs, which, like short stories, he remembers clearly and can always retrieve in his mental archive, and which he employs repeatedly combining them in contexts that are always new’. In his essays collected in the volume *Niente di antico sotto il sole* Ghirri openly acknowledged his debt towards literature and many writers, poets and intellectuals, including Walter Benjamin, Gianni Celati, Peter Handke (mentioned four times); Pessoa (three times); Calvino, Borges, Caillois, Rilke (twice); Messori, Sebaste, Musil, Goethe, Arbasino, Ballard, Collodi (once), alongside his favourite writers from the Po Valley, such as Zavattini (in primis), Ariosto, Guareschi, Bacchelli. Texts by these and other writers feature in Ghirri’s library in his last house in Roncocesi, including various *Meridiani* (Calvino, Hemingway, and others), most of Handke’s books and texts by Proust, Perec, Queneau, Thomas Bernhard and many others. Ghirri actively


7 In his lecture ‘Dimenticare se stessi’ Ghirri claimed that his aim was to think about a form of narration through images, rather than the construction of single images; Ghirri, *Lezioni di fotografia*, ed. Giulio Bizzarri and Paolo Barbaro (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2010), p. 27; from now on indicated as *Lezioni*.


9 The *Meridiani* series, published by Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, is Italy’s equivalent of the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade.

10 I was able to check this in Ghirri’s library in a recent visit to his house. My thanks to Maria Fontana (who looks after Ghirri’s house and library) for her kind hospitality.
Marina Spunta

collaborated in a number of interdisciplinary projects with writers such as Gianni Celati, Giorgio Messori, Daniele Benati, Ermanno Cavazzoni, Beppe Sebaste, Giuliano Scabia, Gino Ruozzi, Marco Belpoliti, Carlo Bordini and Corrado Costa. Many of these writers were based in Reggio Emilia and participated in the seminal conference on *La rappresentazione dell’esterno* [The representation of the exterior] at the Casa dell’Ariosto in 1984, which gathered the reflections on the description/narration of the exterior by many of the above writers, as well as Calvino and Daniele Del Giudice, and which in turn led to the collaborative project *Esplorazioni sulla via Emilia* [Explorations along the Via Emilia].

What emerges from the above list of Ghirri’s favourite writers is an interest in both classics (such as Proust) and contemporary writers who were widely read at the time, such as Calvino and Handke, or were being rediscovered, such as Benjamin, and a close affiliation with writers and intellectuals with whom he collaborated at length since the early 1980s, namely Gianni Celati – whom Ghirri invited to take part in the projects *Viaggio in Italia* (1984) and *Il profilo delle nuvole* [The outline of clouds] (1989) – and Giorgio Messori, with whom, most notably, he worked on Morandi’s studios (*Atelier Morandi*, 1992). These collaborations had a noticeable impact on their individual works as Ghirri, Celati and Messori acknowledged in their writings. Ghirri claimed to have learnt from both writers an interest in narrations and, in the introduction to *Paesaggio italiano / Italian Landscape*, he praised Celati for ‘adding doubts to my perspective’ and Messori for ‘his candid way of looking at things’. Both Celati and Messori maintained that Ghirri and other photographers taught them a new, more patient approach to looking at the exterior and to establishing an affective relationship with places, in particular with their places of origin.

Many of Ghirri’s photobooks include texts written by writers with whom he worked or whom he admired.


which both writers had left in the 1980s for foreign countries. Although much has been written on the collaboration between Ghirri and Celati, no work to date has considered the aesthetic consonance between Ghirri’s work and that of the other writers. By this I do not only mean conscious and direct references, as in the many quotations of these writers found in Ghirri’s essays, but also indirect references and echoes, which, according to Rocco Capozzi, ‘derive from the Zeitgeist, that is from the spirit of the age, and thus can include a web of mutual influences’. Without seeking to be exhaustive, given the broad focus of this essay, I aim to offer some initial thoughts on this ‘constellation’ of artists, in order to contextualize Ghirri’s work within a broader setting and to demonstrate how both Ghirri and these writers, in different yet consonant ways, contributed to the ‘epochal shift’ taking place in the 1980s. Like Ghirri, Calvino, Handke, Celati and Messori extensively considered in their work issues of visuality, spatiality, experience, subjectivity and the (changing) role and status of their own art, in dialogue with the visual arts and photography. Through an analysis of some of their critical essays, I contend that, in line with these writers, Ghirri reflected on the difficulty of experiencing an over-codified exterior and sought through his art to ‘give new relevance to the things that are around us’, by positing photography as the ideal means of seeing

things anew, and to recover a meaningful, if not ‘authentic’ experience of the exterior.17

In his book *Architetture, città, visioni* [Architectures, cities, visions] Gabriele Basilico singles out Handke, Calvino and Celati as the most influential writers for him and for the photographers of his generation; Ghirri shared these preferences and repeatedly quoted them in his essays and photobooks.18 These writers wrote extensively on photography and the visual; Calvino, for example, reflected on those issues in a number of short stories and perhaps most notably in his Harvard lecture on ‘Visibility’;19 Celati and Handke collaborated with photographers or film directors (Handke with Wim Wenders), practiced cinema (Celati), or photography and drawing (Handke).20 While the choice of Calvino and Celati may seem obvious in the Italian context, as they were and still are two of the most influential contemporary writers, the reference to Handke requires some explanation.21 In the essay ‘Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto’ [The written and the unwritten world] Calvino pointed out a similarity between Handke and a number of contemporary Italian writers in the shared visual/descriptive

---


19 Ghirri often quoted extracts from Calvino in his work, including ‘L’avventura di un fotografo’ in his essay ‘Pensier su Jacques-Henri Lartigue’ [Thoughts on Jacques-Henri Lartigue], *Niente di antico*, pp. 91–93 (p. 91); *The Complete Essays*, p. 129.

20 Similarly, Messori reflected extensively on painting and photography in his work and collaborated with photographer Vittore Fossati for *Viaggio in un paesaggio terrestre* [Journey in an earthly landscape].

21 There is no evidence that Handke knew the Italian authors, apart from Calvino, whose work he claimed to know well in a 1986 interview with Anacleto Verrecchia, *Incontri viennesi* (Genoa: Marietti, 1990), pp. 91–111 (p. 105).
focus on the exterior and on landscape.22 Similarly in the essay written for *Esplorazioni sulla via Emilia*, Daniele Del Giudice claimed the importance of Handke in offering ‘a re-education of the senses through a re-education of the gaze’.23 As Rolando Zorzireminds us, since the 1970s Handke’s texts were readily translated into Italian (and other languages) and exerted a deep, yet to date unexplored, impact on contemporary Italian culture24 – particularly his tetralogy published in the late 1970s and early 1980s, including *Lento ritorno a casa* ([*The Long Way Around*] ([1979] 1986), *Nei colori del giorno* ([*The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire*] ([1980] 1985); *Attraverso i villaggi* ([*Walk about the Villages*] ([1981] 1984); *Storia con bambina* ([*Child Story*]) ([1981] 1982).25 Alongside Calvino and Del Giudice, there is ample evidence that Celati, Ghirri and Messori read Handke extensively in those years, either in German, French or Italian translation, as soon as his texts became available: both Ghirri’s and Celati’s libraries include all the main texts by Handke;26 Messori wrote his undergraduate dissertation on ‘Forme narrative in Peter Handke’ [Narrative forms in Peter Handke], graduating with Luciano Anceschi in 1982. Ghirri was aware of the growing interest in Handke within Italian culture and mentioned him repeatedly in his writing. In an interview with Sergio Alebardi in 1982 Ghirri claimed that Handke

25 I have given in square brackets the date of publication of the German original, and in brackets that of the Italian translation. In English *Slow Homecoming* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1985; 2009) includes these three texts: *The Long Way Around*, *The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire* and *Child Story*.
26 Ghirri’s library is located in his last house in Roncocesi and its catalogue can be consulted through the Ghirri Estate. Celati’s library was recently donated to the Panizzi Library in Reggio Emilia and is accessible through their online catalogue. There is no evidence that Ghirri read German or French. Both Celati and Messori read (and translated) from German and Celati also read French, as evidenced in his library.
was his favourite foreign writer; in other essays, which I will later discuss, he quoted key passages from Handke’s seminal texts, such as *L’ora del vero sentire* [*A Moment of True Feeling*] ([1975] 1980) and *Lento ritorno a casa*. So far a few commentators have suggested – but not explored – a link between Ghirri and Handke: Michel Nuridsany in *Le Figaro* (31 October 1978) argued that Ghirri played within photography the same role that Wim Wenders played in cinema and Peter Handke in literature, a suggestion that was followed by Marco Belpoliti in 1984; Paolo Costantini compared the gaze of Guidi, Ghirri and Basilico to that of Sorger, the protagonist of *Lento ritorno a casa*. In his book *Mistici senza Dio* [*Mystics without God*], Michele Cometa argues that the key issues in Handke’s writing include the Heideggerian notion of ‘Gelassenheit’ [*releasement* or, in Italian, ‘abbandono’], which gives rise to a poetics of patience, waiting, duration, seeing, close observation of landscape, repetition as ‘finding again’, the in-between and the threshold. I believe that all these issues variously resonate with the work of Ghirri, and with that of Celati and Messori from the 1980s, and underline their effort to recover an experience of place before its vanishing, that is before the loss of a sense of tradition and community rooted in a place as opposed to postmodern non-places.

Besides Handke, Ghirri was also aware of the role played by Calvino and Celati and other contemporary Italian writers in giving rise to a new,

---


slow approach to seeing, describing and narrating places, as evidenced by his statement in interview with Claude Nori in 1985: ‘Apart from a few intellectuals such as Calvino, Celati and others, the description and the sense of place, the waiting, are normally forgotten. Now, at least, there is this renewed interest’ (Niente di antico, 293). After Calvino’s death in 1985, Celati was to become one of the leading proponents of a new aesthetics of place, an approach that he developed by challenging Calvino’s all-encompassing, rational model, as evidenced in his last text, Palomar,31 and by opening up to the exterior through his collaborative work with Ghirri and other photographers, most notably in his 1980s Po Valley trilogy, including Narratori delle pianure [Voices from the Plains], Quattro novelle sulle apparenze [Appearances] and Verso la foce [Towards the river mouth].32 Almost in parallel with Handke, in the 1980s Celati inaugurated a similar ‘homecoming’ to a slow observation and narration of minimal and apparently non-descript places, and a lowering of the position of the author to a mere narrator—an aesthetic position that resonates with that of Ghirri and later Messori.33 The narrative of Messori, who was a generation younger than the other writers, engaged in a close dialogue with many artists, in particular Handke and Ghirri, as the friend and ‘maestro’ to whom he paid repeated homage in his texts, especially Nella città del pane e dei postini [In the city of bread and postmen] (2005) and Viaggio in un paesaggio terrestre [Journey in an earthly landscape] (2007) (in collaboration with photographer Vittore Fossati),34 texts which stem from a declared commitment to continuing Ghirri’s work—a poignant example of Ghirri’s legacy in contemporary Italian narrative. While offering an attentive reading of Ghirri’s photography in many of his essays, with his interest in (German)

31 Calvino, Palomar, new edn (Milan: Mondadori, 1994).
33 In Viaggio in Italia for example, despite gathering artists with different styles, Ghirri and the other photographers chose a non-authorial, thematic approach, in order to underline a common, albeit varied, approach to places.
34 Giorgio Messori, Nella città del pane e dei postini (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2005); Messori and Vittore Fossati, Viaggio in un paesaggio terrestre (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2007).
aesthetics and in the work of Benjamin and Handke, Messori played an active yet little acknowledged part in Ghiрri’s circle of collaborators, making an important contribution to their work on spatiality and visuality. It is against this context that I will now turn to reading Ghiрri’s work and that of these writers, in order to show some analogies between their aesthetics and their approach to narrating the experience of place.

Challenging the ‘vertigo of precision’

In his essay ‘Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto’ Calvino claimed: ‘Perhaps the first thing to do in order to renew the relationship between language and the world is the easiest: to fix one’s attention onto a whatsoever, banal, familiar object, and to describe it meticulously as if it was the newest and most interesting thing in the universe’ – a method that he declaredly used in Palomar, where he tried ‘to make sure that description becomes narration, while remaining description’.35 In his last book the eponymous character (named after a Californian observatory) continually ‘zooms in’ on different objects and situations, in the ever-eluded hope of finding a model that could explain the universe.36 This approach resonates with Ghiрri’s aesthetics, particularly with his early photography, where ‘taking photographs […] means […] reflecting on perception and on the understanding that it generates’, and with his early interest in cataloguing the everyday and the banal, which, besides Calvino, he shared with neo-avant-garde artists, such as Ed Ruscha and Franco Vaccari.37 Calvino’s approach

35 Calvino, ‘Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto’, p. 1873.
also parallels Ghirri’s commitment to using photography to see things anew, which he stated repeatedly in his essays, including the introduction to Paesaggi di cartone [Cardboard landscapes]: ‘In “my” photographs the subjects are everyday objects, things found in our ordinary field of vision – images that we are used to looking at passively. Isolated from the reality which surrounds them and presented in a photograph as part of a different discourse, these images become charged with new meaning’ (Niente di antico, 17; The Complete Essays, 17, translation modified). Just as Calvino adopts in many of his texts an estrangement technique to describe/narrate things and to expose the saturation of an over-codified exterior, similarly Ghirri, in many of his photographs, particularly in his early series, isolates or decontextualizes the objects he portrays – often signs and posters, as in Engelberg, 1972 – through unexpected juxtapositions that remind one of montage or trompe-l’œil (as in Luzern, 1971), with a view to exposing reality as a construction, or as reproduction of a reproduction, a method that Ghirri borrows from pop art and uses to reflect on representation and on authenticity.

This approach is perhaps most striking in the series Atlante [Atlas] (1973), where, as in Calvino’s Palomar, Ghirri’s reflection on the hyper-codification of reality is carried out by zooming onto fragments of signs to such a degree that this close viewing explodes the very purpose of cartographic representation, such as in Oceano, a photograph that leaves its referent elusive. In the introduction to Atlante (1973), by employing the suggestive metaphor of the atlas, Ghirri explained that all reality has already been ‘mapped out’ and described, and argued that ‘the only journey that is still possible [is] a journey within the signs, the images: through the

---

38 Both images are reproduced in the catalogue of the 2013 exhibition held at the MAXXI in Rome, Luigi Ghirri. Pensare per immagini, p. 124 and p. 121. In the introduction to Kodachrome Ghirri defines his photographs as “photo-demontages” […] Reality is being transformed into a colossal photograph, and the photomontage already exists: it’s called the real world’; Niente di antico, p. 22; The Complete Essays, p. 24.

39 Oceano can be seen in Mussini, ed., Luigi Ghirri (Parma: Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione; Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979), p. 163.
destruction of direct experience’ (*Atlante*, no page number). This position is consonant with Calvino’s aesthetics, and with that of Celati and Handke, who repeatedly voiced their impatience for the spreading of signs, in particular publicity posters. In Celati’s *Verso la foce* [Towards the river mouth] these ironically appear in bold letters;40 in *Intervista sulla scrittura* [Interview on writing] Handke talked about a ‘world of signs, which can also be defined as Americanized, where every sign is enlarged’.41 In line with these writers, Ghirri sought to counteract what he perceived as the growing inability of seeing that affected contemporary societies, especially contemporary American photography, which he believed was too intent on objectively describing the exterior, leaving little room for imagination. In the essay ‘Mondi senza fine. Su William Eggleston’ [Endless Worlds: On William Eggleston] (1984) Ghirri defined this approach a ‘vertigine della precisione’, literally a ‘vertigo of precision’ (*Niente di antico*, 50; *The Complete Essays*, 71), namely an excess of seeing, and argued that Eggleston was exempt from it for ‘having intuited, in the “hyper”-precision of much contemporary photography, that the gaze runs the risk of becoming anesthetised’ (*Niente di antico*, 52; *The Complete Essays*, 72).42 In Ghirri’s work, not unlike Calvino’s, this is conveyed by repeated references to seeing and seeing implements, such as binoculars, which Ghirri uses either as *trompe-l’œil* – as in *Modena, 1978/80*, from *Still Life* (*Niente di antico*, 228)43 – or to problematize the tourist gaze, as in *Capri, 1980* (in Mussini, ed. (2001), 193). A similar obsession with seeing is criticized by Celati in *Palomar*’s

40 For example: ‘Signs along the road: MERLI SOFAS COLORNO; CATFISH SOLD HERE; ASTREA ADVERTISEMENT; RESTAURANT STENDHAL’ (*Verso la foce*, p. 39). Similarly, one of Messori’s stories concludes by juxtaposing a publicity poster of a golf course with the view of a mountain, in a way that recalls Ghirri’s photograph *Engelberg, 1972*; ‘Forse l’esilio comincia nei sogni a occhi aperti’, in Celati, ed., *Narratori delle riserve* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1992), pp. 179–84.


42 A similar zooming-in approach informs Andrea Di Carlo’s 1981 novel *Trenodi panna*, which Calvino, in his introduction to the novel, likened to the work of American hyper- or photo-realists.

43 The same image appears as the cover image of the catalogue for Ghirri’s first exhibition at the CSAC in 1979, so the date 1978/80 is either arbitrary or incorrect.
hyper-descriptive, semiotic, catalogic approach, an approach that is regularly frustrated and leads to the final impasse of Palomar’s death. Just as Celati moved away from Calvino’s model, similarly Ghirri, after his early experimentation, challenged a method that focused exclusively on the surface and that sought to exhaust the visible, and put forward instead a model of photographic narration as ever-changing and elusive, highlighting instead the ‘infinite readings that are always possible, even within the most codified world’ (Atlante). In a late interview with Quintavalle, Ghirri defined as ‘catalogic’ his former way of taking photographs and suggested a shift of emphasis from description to narration in his later work: ‘[earlier] I wanted to analyze everything, to capture everything and store it. Now I’m perhaps more interested in narrating everything’ (Niente di antico, 307). According to Celati, Ghirri challenged the assumption of objectivity that lies behind documentary/reportage photography: ‘Ghirri did the same thing with his really unique photographic practice: he finally got rid of the rules of social documentary, which fixed our gaze on a sort of abstract objectivity’. In line with contemporary debates on representation and on photography’s relation to knowledge since the 1960s, including Franco Vaccari’s idea of the visual arts not as mimesis and representation, but rather as experience, Ghirri questioned the assumption of photography as visual mimesis of the real, while at the same time voicing a residual desire to access ‘reality’, albeit by short-circuiting representation, thus embracing a notion of photography as contingency, perception and imagination of the exterior.46 In his


45 Celati, ‘Qualche idea sui luoghi e il lavoro con Luigi Ghirri. Intervista con Marco Sironi’, in Marco Sironi, Geografie del narrare (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2004), pp. 221–9 (pp. 222–3).

46 On these debates cf. Claudio Marra, ed., Le idee della fotografia. La riflessione teorica dagli anni ’60 a oggi (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2001) and Roberto Signorini, Arte del
words: ‘photography is not a mere duplication or the eye stopwatch that freezes the physical world, but rather the language in which the difference between reproduction and interpretation, albeit minimal, exists and gives rise to infinite imaginary worlds’.

From the innerworld to the outerworld

Reviewing *Narratori delle pianure* in 1985, Calvino highlighted ‘an interior acceptance of the everyday landscape in what would seem less conducive to stimulate our imagination […] and especially that turn from the inside to the outside that seems to me the most distinctive shift of the 1980s’. For Paolo Costantini a similar shift occurred in Ghirri’s 1980s photography, which increasingly represented the subject as an uncertain trace and which, in line with Handke’s narrative of the same period, sought to ‘attribute a meaning to a world that was far too full of meanings and to retrieve forms to what they used to be, with their secrets and ambiguities created by nature’ (Costantini, 6). In his review of *Narratori delle pianure* Ghirri praised this collection of stories for highlighting the ‘magical and mysterious side of existence’ and Celati as ‘the only Italian example of an attention that is not superficial nor discontinuous to the images of the external world, such as photography and cinema’, for not entering the ‘dead alley way of obsessive description’ (as could be said of the late Calvino), but rather offering ‘a

---


very personal and original synthesis between seeing and feeling, in an autonomous narration that does not owe anything to other languages’.49 Although talking about Celati, here Ghirri seems to reveal some of his own aesthetic concerns in those years. While continuing to engage with deconstructing an over-codified exterior, in the 1980s Ghirri’s photography afforded a greater opening to the exterior, carrying out an in-depth exploration of the landscapes of the Po Valley, as in the series and volume *Il profilo delle nuvole*, and investigating other Italian landscapes, for example in *Paesaggio italiano / Italian Landscape* (1989). In these landscapes Ghirri focused on revisiting iconic places and, mostly, ‘marginal’ places,50 which he posited as places of duration, as both suggestive and mysterious, in the awareness that ‘paradoxically, the most familiar corners, the conventional ones right before our very eyes seem to mysteriously become full of novelties and unforeseen details’ (*Niente di antico*, 125; *The Complete Essays*, 169). This shift corresponded to his moving in the early 1980s from a small (24×36) to a medium-format camera (6×7), which led him to using more landscape formats in his later production and, as Ghirri himself revealed, allowed him to relate in a new way to objects within specific spaces (*Lezioni*, 74), gave him more time to watch and think (*Niente di antico*, 293) and to observe everyday life and places of entertainment as spaces of contemplation (*Lezioni*, 74).51 This is evidenced in many of the photographs in *Il profilo delle nuvole*, particularly in the final ones which approach the mouth of the river Po and show a greater opening to a vast and seemingly indistinct exterior, for example in *Verso Lagosanto* [Towards Lagosanto].

It is on similar places—empty, apparently uneventful reserves—that Ghirri, like Celati, focused his attention in those years, in an effort to recover


50 I use ‘marginal’ in inverted commas here (only in the first occurrence) to highlight the fact that this is a cultural construction, as discussed in David Forgacs, *Italy’s Margins. Social Exclusion and Nation Formation since 1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

traces of the past and a sense of *Stimmung* with the exterior, which Celati, drawing on Benjamin, glosses as the atmosphere, the affective tonality of places that we only see by chance when we are lost, or in those empty hours or days; in ‘places that nobody goes to see on purpose, places that are normally considered desolate’.52 Besides Celati, in the 1980s Ghirri’s aesthetic stance is consonant with that of Handke’s narrative, which, according to Marton Marko, similarly moved ‘from a deconstructive posture toward one of conscious reconstruction’, shifting the emphasis from the ‘critical examination of habit, pattern and cliche’ to ‘connection, affinity and harmonious flow’.53 This emerges most clearly, though not solely, in Handke’s tetralogy of the late 1970s and early 1980s, all texts that, in different yet parallel ways, are concerned with narrating the aesthetic experience of what-so-ever places, mostly empty places, through visual and auditory epiphanies, and which stage a return to Handke’s places of origin in Austria.54 As the old character states in Handke’s *L’assenza* [*Absence*], ‘I believe in those places without fame nor name, best characterized perhaps by the fact that *nothing* is there, while all around there is something’ (*Absence*, 43–4).55 It is in these seemingly empty places that for Ghirri, as for Celati and Handke, we can experience duration and re-establish a connection between inside and outside, between individual and collective memory, allowing objects and places to ‘return our gaze’.56 In Ghirri’s words, his photography focused on “the exterior”, which is not only a classical place of photography but is first and foremost the “place”, the landscape, the topographic space

54 The auditory is equally central in Ghirri, Celati and Messori; cf. Ghirri’s essay ‘Immagini per la musica’ [Images for Music], in *Niente di antico*, pp. 145–57, in particular p. 145; *The Complete Essays*, 197.
that looks at us and that we look’.57 Indeed, in one of his essays he suggests that these places triggered his own Proustian memories and thus, we can infer, appeared to him as aural, as for Benjamin the images that emerge from mémoire involontaire have an aura, as they return the viewers’ gaze and engage them in inexhaustible contemplation.58

The experience of place as vanishing appearance

It is in the places and objects that are normally taken for granted and could appear obvious that Ghirri, like the writers discussed here, sees the potential for a new perception of the exterior and for the possibility of a revelation, an epiphany (Handke), an appearance (Celati), a sense of harmony or pacification with the exterior (Messori).59 In line with these writers, in order to show that ‘nothing is old under the sun’, in his photographic work as in many of his essays Ghirri posits his art as a means of ‘revealing’, uncovering, seeing things for the first time. In the essay ‘L’opera aperta’ [The Open Work] he claimed: ‘I have always felt that photography is a language for seeing and not for transforming, hiding, or modifying reality. I allow its intrinsic magic to reveal to our gaze the spaces, objects, and landscapes I want to represent’ (Niente di antico, 78; The Complete Essays, 111). Similarly, in an interview with Carlo Dignola, suggestively

59 Ghirri often talked about the ‘enormous power of revelation that our gaze may withhold’; cf. ‘Il museo diffuso’ [The Diffuse Museum] [1987], in Niente di antico, pp. 125–6 (p. 125); The Complete Essays, p. 169 (revelation here has no religious undertone). These themes emerge perhaps most strikingly in Handke’s L’ora del vero sentire (Milan: Garzanti, 1980); Celati’s Quattro novelle sulle apparenze, and Messori’s and Fossati’s Viaggio in un paesaggio terrestre.
titled ‘Paesaggio e rivelazione’ [Landscape and revelation] (1990), Ghirri talks about the lesson of Giorgio Morandi and Wim Wenders, claiming: ‘Instead, I want to represent that unrepeatable appearance/apparition that creates a sense of mystery, fascination’ (Niente di antico, 299). In the 1986 essay ‘Non c’è niente di antico sotto il sole’ [There is Nothing Old Under the Sun (1)] Ghirri refers to a revelatory moment when seeing an hourglass with the inscription ‘nothing new under the sun’ while walking around in some Parisian gardens, and links this occurrence with his later reading a passage about the same object in Handke’s L’ora del vero sentire [A Moment of True Feeling] (Niente di antico, 87; The Complete Essays, 119). In this novel the protagonist – a modern ‘flâneur in crisis’ by the Kafkian name of Gregor Keuschnig – experiences an epiphany while walking in Paris, as he suddenly sees three non-descript objects in the sand as ‘miraculous’ and full of mystery:

In the sand, at his feet [Keuschnig] saw three things: a chestnut leaf, a piece of a pocket mirror, a child’s barrette. They had been lying there the whole time, but then suddenly they came together and became miraculous objects. ‘Who said the world has already been discovered?’ (A Moment of True Feeling, 63)

I believe that Ghirri’s reference to Handke’s epiphanic moment points to a shared interest in freeing objects from being flattened by language and signs, to seeing them anew and restoring them to the wider realm of aesthetic experience. Similarly, in the essay ‘Mondi senza fine. Su William Eggleston’ [Endless Worlds: On William Eggleston] Ghirri quotes at length a review of Lento ritorno by J. Pierre Velio (which appeared two years before Handke’s text was translated into Italian), which reflects on the notion of the trace, on an insistent and estranged gaze on everyday objects, on the impossibility of penetrating what lies behind the forms and yet a

---

60 Cf. also L’ora del vero sentire, p. 84.

commitment to continually rethinking those forms. The novel, which opens Handke’s ‘epic series’, stages Sorger’s slow homecoming from Alaska to Europe, his reflection on a sense of space, and his continuous search for ‘a possible connection’ (Lento ritorno, 75) with nature. Just as Handke in Lento ritorno (and in other works) sought to ‘reassign a sense to a world that is overburdened with meaning, in order to recover its forms, with all their enigmatic secrets, which continue to become and appear’, similarly Ghirri with his photographs sought to put forward ‘the capacity of the image to reveal the invisible to us – not exposing the unknown or the unseen, but rather discovering an aspect in things and objects that is lost in the depths of our own perception’ (Niente di antico, 62; The Complete Essays, 86).

Comparing his work to that of Ghirri, Celati suggests that ‘my problem in Verso la foce was precisely this: to dismantle the discursive apparatus that surrounds places and recover them to the experience of “seeing”, of appearance’ (in Sironi, 222–3); ‘what I was trying to focus on were the facts of sensorial, visual, perceptual order; and then the main fact that we grasp the aspects of a place as apparitions’ (ibid. 221). Similarly in the 1980s Ghirri’s photography reveals an effort to recover an experience of places that are felt on the brink of disappearing (a position that, like Celati, draws on Benjamin’s aesthetics), and an effort to let them ‘appear’ again.

62 I have been unable to retrace J. Pierre Velio’s original review. Interestingly, Ghirri quotes Lento ritorno two years before Handke’s text was translated into Italian (1986), perhaps after reading the French translation, which Celati owned (Paris: Gallimard, 1982). In this essay Ghirri compares Eggleston’s need to ‘reconstruct the “simple forms”, an attempt to establish a continuity with everyday language. His work could be compared to the character Sorger, in Peter Handke’s 1979 novel Slowhomecoming’ (Niente di antico, p. 52; The Complete Essays, 72).


to our eyes, or, in Celati’s words, in his commentary to the film *Il mondo di Luigi Ghirri*, ‘to read things as they desire to be read’. Revealingly, in his 1988 essay ‘Niente di antico sotto il sole’ [There is Nothing Old Under the Sun (2)], while referring to Wim Wenders, Ghirri links vanishing with appearance: ‘In a recent interview Wim Wenders said that photography is like “a last look onto the world”. I think that this rather grand and epic sense of disappearance should be accompanied by another sense, that of apparition’ (*Niente di antico*, 138; *The Complete Essays*, 186, translation modified). In *Il profilo delle nuvole* this emerges in the choice of places depicted, nearly all empty, which show by-gone rural or artisanal activities, portray local museums, villas or theatres (such as *Casa Fratelli Cervi*, *Villa Albergati* or *Teatro Verdi* in Busseto), as well as family houses with traditional furniture (such as *Boretto*, or *Casa Benati*), local feasts or places of entertainment (including *Scandiano*, *Fiera di San Giuseppe*, *Nogara*, *Bar della stazione*). All these places and objects are depicted frontally and mostly at a distance, through various framing devices and in different lighting conditions that both draw the viewer in and make them aware of something outside the frame, as in the diagonal light dividing the frame in *Parma, Interno della Chiesa* [*Parma, church interior*].

In his essay ‘Il mio incontro con *Viaggio in Italia*’ [*My encounter with Viaggio in Italia*], Messori defines the photographs by Ghirri and the other photographers involved in the project as ‘illusions, vanishing appearances’, and celebrates the sense of intimacy they trigger in the viewer, despite depicting ‘places that are often so common: city or country roads, public gardens and village bars, places that have already been seen so many times and where there seems to be nothing to see’ (Messori, 104). A similar stance emerges in Messori’s narrative, and in his essay ‘Il foglio bianco, gli spazi bianchi’ [*The white paper, the white spaces*] he argues that the strength  

(translation modified). This view is in line with Benjamin’s notion of the vanishing of aesthetic experience in modernity, as argued in his seminal essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility’ [1936–9]. I have discussed these issues in my essay ‘A magical balance of opposites’. Reading Luigi Ghirri’s photography through Walter Benjamin’, *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies* 2/2 (June 2014), 215–35.
of writing in words or images lies precisely in rendering perceptions and making visible again things that we often take for granted. It is indicative that one of the key chapters of Messore’s and Fossati’s Viaggio in un paesaggio terrestre focuses on Cézanne’s Sainte-Victoire, the mountain range that he painted for the last twenty years of his life and which has a clear intertext in Handke’s The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire.66 For Handke, as for many great artists, like Cézanne or Morandi, the repetition of a motif can lead to seeing it in a new light and thus to a ‘ritrovamento’, a renewed finding, or an epiphany. As Rita Felski reminds us, ‘Recognition is not repetition; it denotes not just the previously known but the becoming known’.67 Similarly, Ghirri’s insistence on depicting the same types of places close to home can be read as a ‘ritrovamento’, a becoming known (a recurrent word in Ghirri’s essays), thus as a means of joining the fragmentary dots of our experience of the exterior and, as in Handke, as a ‘remembering that opens to the future’ (Cometa, 254), that is far from being locked into a nostalgic past.

Thresholds

All that you see lives only in the frame. Even the sea, how can I capture it without framing it like a picture? If you like, it is like a window through which you look at the phenomena, and you are like a child who has to write a composition describing what he has seen. You look out of the window, but who is actually doing the looking? It reminds me of a story by Italo Calvino that says: it is the world that looks at the world. (Il profilo delle nuvole, no page number, in Sironi, 189)

With these words by Ghirri, Celati concludes ‘Commenti su un teatro naturale delle immagini’ [Comments on a natural theatre of images], his introductory text for Il profilo delle nuvole; Ghirri chose to reproduce the final

part of this extract under the opening image of his photobook (*Veduta di Fellegara. Scandiano. Dipinto di Walter Iotti* [View of Fellegara, Scandiano. Painting by Walter Iotti]), thus suggesting to the viewer a way of reading this series. In the text entitled ‘Il mondo guarda il mondo’ [The world looks at the world] Palomar reflects on the dichotomy between inside and outside—a common topic also in Ghirri’s essays—and on the impossibility of reaching an objective view of the world ‘leaving aside the I’, and concludes that it is the object that calls and attracts our gaze—a position that, as we have seen, is shared by Ghirri and Celati.68 However, if in Calvino there remains an emphasis on the subject (as epitomized by Palomar), in Ghirri there is a repeated effort to find a balance between inside and outside, or, ‘at least a balancing point between my own subjectivity and the exterior world’, in order to ‘leave room for the outside world to reveal itself’ (*Niente di antico*, 126; *The Complete Essays*, 170). This balance, which parallels the dichotomy between showing an over-codified exterior and suggesting the mystery of things, is rendered through the image of thresholds, frames or ‘inquadrature naturali’ [natural frames], a favourite expression of Ghirri’s to indicate doorways, windows or grids found in nature, which he repeatedly photographed as *objets trouvés* (Mussini, ed. (2001), 29). In his lecture entitled ‘Soglia’ [Threshold], Ghirri quoted architect Christian Norberg-Schulz for whom the threshold points to a ‘balancing point between inside and outside’ (*Lezioni*, 152) and defined ‘inquadrature naturali’ as ‘those signs or boundaries within which the space is represented; they are the margins of something, the thresholds which allow us to reach something’ (157), thereby suggesting the importance both of what lies outside the frame and of what lies within the frame but at a distance, hidden to the naked eye or covered by buildings, fog or snow, as in *Formigine. Ingresso casa colonica*. Through this topos Ghirri revealed his commitment to photography as a means of knowledge—a knowledge, that, in line with Handke and Celati, can only translate as an ‘andare verso’, a movement towards something. This is conveyed, among many other images, by the photographs that open *Il profilo delle nuvole*, in particular *Pomponesco, 1985* (Figure 10.1), where the

car tyres tracks in the snow suggest a vertical movement forward that is negated by the horizontal whiteness of the snow that covers the horizon, which remains invisible. As Mussini reminds us, thresholds or frames do not simply highlight distance, division, but also continuity between ‘photographic space and reality’ (Mussini, ed. (2001), 156) and represent for Ghirri ‘the tangible sign that photography is only a portion of space that presupposes a continuity beyond the physical margins of the frame and that must invite the viewer to extend this space through their imagination’ (157). For Celati, Ghirri’s thresholds ‘turn chaos into order’ and thus give the viewer a sense of relief; they reinforce a ‘frontal view, with a constant balance between all its parts’, but also remind us that borders are not fixed but rather evanescent.69


69 Celati, ‘Soglia per Luigi Ghirri’, in Paola Ghirri and Ennery Taramelli, eds, Vista con camera. 200 fotografie in Emilia Romagna, and Sironi, p. 190 and p. 188.
As in Ghirri’s photographs, thresholds like frames and windows are a recurrent *topos* in the chosen writers, who often stage characters looking out of windows – for example in the opening of Handke’s *La donna mancina* and in many of Messori’s *Storie invisibili* [Invisible stories], where the window allows the viewer to see outside while remaining inside, protected.70 Messori reflected at length on the role of the window as threshold in *Viaggio in un paesaggio terrestre*, especially in the chapter ‘Finestre in Engadina’ [Windows in Engadina] and in the essay ‘Le mattine del mondo. L’incontro di Luigi Ghirri con l’opera di Giorgio Morandi’ [The mornings of the world. Luigi Ghirri’s encounter with the work of Giorgio Morandi], where he compares Ghirri’s contemplation of minimal objects to Morandi’s art and posits both as an ‘aesthetic or ecstatic experience that allows us to reactivate our perception of the world’.71 Similarly, in *Intervista sulla scrittura*, Handke claims that the threshold, the in-between, is the space where epiphanies can occur (46) for the writer, for whom staying ‘on the margins’ is a form of pain and pleasure at once (Cometa, 267–8).72 Besides marginal places, Handke maintains that the threshold is created by the very fact of slowing down (*Intervista sulla scrittura*, 68); this is the space inhabited by most of his characters, from Sorger in *Lento ritorno* to Andreas Loser in *Il cinese del dolore* [Across] who is defined in the text as someone in ‘search of thresholds’. In the essay ‘Il ritorno del flâneur’ [The return of the flâneur], Walter Benjamin posited the new flâneur as a new Baudelairian, engaged in the act of taking photographs, and as an expert of thresholds.73 Drawing on Benjamin and in line with the other writers, as a contemporary flâneur Ghirri focused on peripheral places and repeatedly

72  According to Christopher Parry, ‘Handke is very concerned with the space between inside and outside, the “Zwischenräume” and the thresholds’. Christopher Parry, *Peter Handke’s Landscapes of Discourse* (Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 2003), p. 88.
used natural frames as a means of slowing down the gaze and of reflecting newly on the act of seeing and photographing, on landscape as a subject’s framed view of a given territory, on the limits of our perceptions and on the infinite potentiality of our imagination.74

Conclusions

In this chapter I have highlighted a number of consonances between Ghirri’s work and that of Calvino, Handke, Celati and Messori, writers with whom Ghirri shared key aesthetic concerns and who, in a way not dissimilar from Proust (another of Ghirri’s favourite writers), challenged both the notion of ‘mimetic’ representation through photography and writing, and ‘the simplistic idea of separating description from narration’.75 In different yet parallel ways their work is informed by a reflection on what it means to represent or narrate the exterior through images and words and through a bottom-up approach that, in line with Benjamin’s aesthetics and with Luciano Anceschi’s neo-phenomenological approach to philosophy that was put forward in those years, sought to challenge preconceived ideas and schemata and to rediscover ‘marginal’ objects and places, and those traces of a past that in the 1980s was felt to be swiftly vanishing behind an increasingly fast, consumerist, mediatic world. Like Ghirri’s photography, these writers’ work stems from a dialectic coexistence between disrupting an over-codified world and an opening to the exterior that assumes the possibility to perceive things anew without seeking to exhaust their meaning, a temptation that perhaps still lurks behind the primacy of visibility in Calvino’s fiction. In


74 Gianpaolo Nuvolati, Lo sguardo vagabondo; il flâneur e la città da Baudelaire ai postmoderni (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006).

this, their approach can be read in line with recent theoretical reappraisals of literature, such as Rita Felski’s neo-phenomenological manifesto *Uses of Literature*, which argues for a rediscovery of enchantment and epiphany alongside an analytical approach, indeed for a ‘co-dependence of mimesis and magic, of enlightenment and enchantment’ (133).

In the essay ‘Il foglio bianco, gli spazi bianchi’, Messori refers to a note in Handke’s diary: ‘avoid thinking through language, remain with things and their splendour’ and concludes that ‘writing […] can give new evidence to the world, perhaps contributing to giving sense to one’s life’. If for Handke ‘there are rare moments when spaces become narratable’ (*Intervista*, 37), for Ghirri photography still affords one the chance to seize vanishing moments and to narrate the exterior afresh:

> Through a continuous practice not to consider anything insignificant, in these years photography has taught me to look at the outside world and to see a point in space, a moment in life, as well as a slight change in lighting, as possibilities for a new perception. The act of photography is for me like observing the world in an adolescent state; it daily renews my wonder. It is a practice that turns upside down the saying of the Ecclesiastes: there is nothing old under the sun. (*Niente di antico*, 296)

Despite the growing awareness in the 1980s that shared and lived experience (*Erfahrung*) was rapidly losing value, an aesthetic position that is underpinned by a line of theoretical thinking which draws, among others, on Benjamin’s idea of the vanishing of experience and of ‘aura’ (or aesthetic experience) in modernity, in line with the chosen writers Ghirri’s photography both addressed the current loss of ‘authenticity’ by focusing on representations of representations and at the same time conveyed a continuing faith in the possibility to narrate the exterior, namely to ‘evoke, describe, reinvent a place’ through memory and imagination, thus positing the experience of place as duration and as ‘auratic’, namely inexhaustible.

76 With *Erfahrung* Benjamin referred to a deep and ‘long’ experience that is linked to tradition and that locates the subject historically in space and time and that can be shared by a collectivity through narrative, as opposed to the fragmented and incommunicable shock-experience of urban modernity (*Erlebnis*).