Representations of Post-Industrial Shanghai: Industrial Chronotopes in Documentary Photography

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Abstract

This article explores how vernacular aesthetics have been re-appropriated from pictorial to modern documentary photography over the past century to bring about a modern collective imagination of the industrial disintegration in the Chinese urban milieu. Within the scope of a discursive visual process, Jean Philippe Gauvrit (b. 1963) documents the departure of the industrial urban society in his photo-essay *Shanghai in JP Gauvrit* (2008). The paper claims that Gauvrit’s documentary photography can be understood as a visual critical discourse of several representational perspectives of time that render visible anachronistic and new social structures that come into being: between utopias of the past and visions of the future in an alternative chronotopic ‘present’ cartography. Drawing on Bakhtin’s (1981) conception of chronotope, in this study the sublime industrial comes to be represented as an intelligible reconfiguration of linear and cyclical time. By linking that socio-economic reality of that time with a collective consciousness, documentary photography can serve as a chronotope that reveals both the tension and the assimilation relating to the historical myths that lie between the fall of an industrial mode of production and the birth of a post-industrial cultural city in an era of de-industrialization.

**Keywords:** documentary photography, chronotope, time, modernity, post-modernity and socio-cultural semiotic representation

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Reprezentacija postindustrijskega Šanghaja: industrijski kronotopi v dokumentarni fotografiji

Izvleček


Ključne besede: dokumentarna fotografija, kronotop, čas, modernost, postmodernost in družbenokulturna semiotična rezprezentacija

Introduction to the Industrial and Post-industrial Chronotopes of Suzhou Creek

The French amateur photographer Jean Philippe Gauvrit (b. 1963) documents the departure of industrial urban society in his photo-essay book, Shanghai in JP Gauvrit (2008). His camera portrays the abandoned factories and warehouses in the corridor between Zhongshan East Road and Zhongshan West Road along Suzhou Creek's industrial waterway. The article undertakes a chronotopic reading of Gauvrit's post-industrial geographical locations, and by developing the concept of a chronotope as a tangible conceptual tool that reorganizes space-time relations between sociocultural understandings of events and narratives, we argue that the viewer can be challenged to visualize a variety of images within these landscapes. The notion of a creative chronotope was first proposed by Bakhtin (1981) and refers to the reconfiguration in time and space of a novel, whose knots and twists invigorate its plot or storyline. Bakhtin's chronotope has already been adopted in visual studies to elucidate the means of how concepts of time and spatial practices in cinema transform the socio-cultural and historical identities of place through narrative screening texts (Ganser, Puhringer and Reindorf 2006). We extend Bakhtin’s study of the chronotope in literature to documentary
photography to determine that knowledge can be brought about in the interstices of Suzhou Creek’s industrial landscapes by addressing the associations between identity, marginalization, and privilege.

When it comes to documentary photography, and as a body of cultural theory, previous studies have shown that there is an apparent lack of mediation of an intentional agent behind the creative process that distinguishes the camera work, capable of recording reality, from pictorial representations (Bazin 1960; Savedoff 1997 Walton 1984). Along with this embedded automatism of the camerawork, there is a subjective abstract constructivism that privileges blurred aesthetics and ‘creative images’ over reality (Jay 1993; Sontag 1977; Berger 2013). Yet alongside these two outlooks, which emphasize the dual characteristics of documentary photography, runs another argument, which encourages the reading of the photographic text as a cultural product with the capacity to permeate a wide range of socio-cultural relations with the outside world. However, there is limited discussion of the representational theory of documentary photography from a literary and cultural studies perspective (Sekula 1986; Tagg 1988; Clarke 1997; Watney 1999).

This article aims to discuss this chronotopic approach, which can supplement the understanding of material found in Western photography in China by bringing attention to the nexus between the chronotope metaphor and myth-making creation. Suzhou Creek’s riverfront between 2000–2008 offers different insights with regard to chronotopic thinking and sub-concepts related to semiotic and social devices, which are rediscovered systematically throughout the critical analysis of Shanghai’s post-industrial landscapes as they were documented by the French photographer.

In order to fully realize the active role of chronotopes in our dialogical single case study, the paper first highlights the importance of the historical past of Suzhou Creek in the industrial development of Shanghai. By looking at the industrial history of Suzhou Creek’s geography, this section traces its cityscapes as a purveyor of ideological and even allegorical meaning. The industrial city of Shanghai first came to greater prominence as a colonial port, forcibly opened to foreign settlements and trade during the First Opium War (1839–1842) (Wang 2010). In the second half of the 19th century, the city thus became the hub of China’s import-export trade and its gateway to the world. The new British enclaves and their political administration were subjected to the policy of extraterritoriality, which gave way to the rise of the bourgeoisie class. As an elite was formed under semi-colonial rule, social privileges went not only to foreigners, as “[m]any of the original investors in Chinese-owned shipping, financial and manufacturing enterprises were men who had grown wealthy as compradors of the leading foreign firms in Shanghai” (Fairbank and Liu 1980, 57). China’s opening up meant
that the initial heavy steel and iron industries in the area had almost disappeared by the end of the 19th century, whilst cotton and silk mills continued to operate. Within this historic context, Suzhou Creek, in the north of the city, began to flourish with a seemingly endless array of British-style warehouses within the district of Zhabei, facing the international concessions across the Suzhou River. Textile factories and depot outlets amounted to almost half of the industrial presence in Shanghai (Bracken 2019). Yet it is also interesting to note that other symbols of modernity, such as the Waibaidu bridge (built in 1906) by the English architect Howard Erskine in addition to the famous Sihang storehouse, grew into important landmarks of the city’s rampant industrialization within the embankment building area constructed in 1932 (Bergère 2009). At this time the treaty system adopted by the foreign powers was also splitting China into two antagonistic halves, in which the interior’s self-sufficient and hermetic economy could not compete with the dynamism found in the coastal cities (Wakeman 1995).

Shanghai’s reliance on foreign protection came to an end with the arrival of Communist China in 1949, although the city remained the principal source of tax revenues during the Maoist Period (1949–1976) (Cheng 2020). Although Shanghai was the most industrialized city in China from the 1930s on, with the post-Mao reforms of the 1980s the metropolis suffered a slow decline in manufacturing activities as these moved into the industrial districts of Suzhou Creek over the course of the 1990s (O’Connor and Gu 2012). One of the most immediate consequences of this was the deindustrialization of the city centre. Driven by the urban economic policy, Shanghai’s most central industrial zone went through dramatic physical changes (Zheng 2010). Interestingly enough, the discourse of nostalgia embedded in the defunct factories’ visual allure tapped into a transnational cult narrative of “the age of machinery”, which injected fresh vitality into the newly built post-industrial atmosphere. This cult of the factory could also be interpreted as a landmark of neoliberal progress that called for capital investment and the attraction of the so-called creative class (Niu at al. 2018).

Our case study focuses on the M50’s post-industrial arts district on the south bank of the Suzhou River, which was just a serious of progressively abandoned built structures in the 1980s until their operations were definitively closed in 1999. The company which was operating the site (Shangtex), a state-owned enterprise (SOE), was gradually being put up for sale, in order to compensate for the costs of rehabilitating the Suzhou riverside waters (Zhong 2012). M50’s arts district arose as a bottom-up organic model, and: “since the early 1980s, many international artists came to Shanghai and they soon joined those artists based in these warehouses—or as they were soon to be known, “creative industry clusters”. These connections allowed Chinese artists to extend their networks outside China” (Gu 2012,
199). This revival of an artist-led cultural alternative also mirrored the rapidly growing economy of the coastal metropolis. As a cultural product in its own right, industrial renewal was seen as a way to carry out both ecological inner-city development and population control in the overpopulated central districts of Shanghai (Evans 2009). Indeed, these landscapes of post-industrial Shanghai eventually captured the attention of the public and media, and the authorities began to commit to supporting these new post-industrial processes. In 2005, the Shanghai municipal government adopted a strategy focused on 14 creative clusters aimed at enhancing the industrial enclosures to attract tourism and real estate development (O’Connor and Gu 2012). As a result, several “art factories” were converted into reusable post-industrial buildings, a process that then expanded to other old mercantile sites with funds and subsidies from the government (Wu Weiping 2004).

However, even if the official discourse of the Chinese government was to carry out harmonious urban regeneration, the emergence of these cultural clusters attracted a new upper-middle class, a process which very often excluded local residents and low-skilled “rural-to-urban” migrant workers (mingong) from state planning (Yu and Francis 2018). These two antagonistic positions engendered and deepened the myth of identity creation and the understanding of Suzhou Creek’s deindustrialization process. Gauvrit’s photography attempts to capture the impossibility of both parallel worlds, in a moment where their trajectories were intersecting with each other. This article explores how documentary photography as an object of representation can also bear witness to the broadest and most profound socio-cultural changes, and specifically the historical links between the industrial and post-industrial cityscapes in Shanghai.

The Notion of Time in Documentary Photography and the Evolving Representation of Industrial Landscapes

From the outset, the history of documentary photography has been associated with institutional endeavours that sought, since the end of the 19th century, the apprehension of reality as a positivist effort for capturing the telos of progress (Newhal 1982; Berger 2013). As a matter of fact, during most of the history of photography, there was also a predominant trend to depict both natural and human-altered landscapes. One of the first artistic movements triggered by the new technology, pictorialism, grew as part of the colonial apparatus and its expansion toward the American West. In the search for beauty, the earliest pictorialist artists set their hearts on seizing every detail in the visual interpretations of pristine and virgin natural locations, laying the foundations of early photography. Their
photographic canvasses thus reinforced sanctioned discourses of American civilization as opposed to the newly found wilderness (Cronon 1992). Apart from this link between the camera and America’s nation-building, there was also a parallelism between photography and modernism, which originates from Baudelaire’s publication (1859) *On Photography, from The Salon of 1859*, and relates to the fact that photography was humbly serving both the sciences and the arts. This was a departure point and inspired a debate around the new medium as a space for reflection situated halfway between positivism and the artistic issue of representation. Scientific knowledge and artistic actions have constantly adapted to the historical development of the industrial world. In this regard, documentary photography has not only been concerned with puritanism and conservatism in terms of building the nation via the picturesque in rural, old, and natural settings but it has also been involved with the dangers of industrialization in terms of dislocation, landscape transformation, and countryside’s depopulation.

More specifically, there was also a great interest in photography focusing on the manufacturing process, partly because industrialists understood the power of such visuals to promote both their industrial manpower capabilities and products to the public (Peterson 1992). Photography thus contributed to creating strong bonds between cultural identity and the memory of the state-of-the-art of the largest industrial undertakings. For example, Ford Motor Company commissioned a photographer to document its engineering facilities in Michigan in 1927. Such photography was concerned with the rhythms and forms of production, to accentuate technological developments and astonishing structures with colossal machinery, large workshops, vast production lines, and towering chimneys (Nye 1985). This objectivist epistemology embodies what Paul Strand termed “straight photography” in *Camera Work: A Photographic Quarterly* (1917) which turned its back on the pictorial movement to produce simpler and flatter photography. Strand’s modern selection and framing of suspension bridges, urban scenes, and industrial ecosystems forged the identity of documentary photography in the years between World War I and the 1929 stock market crash (Langford 1977).

Against the historical background of Fascism and Communism, the modernist photographers were interested in the power of technology, using the medium’s technical applications to combat authoritarianism through propagandistic visual messages, knowing that their utopias were promising a better present: “By the 1920s, aesthetically ambitious photographers abandoned the painterly imperative and followed divergent paths—some embraced pictorial rhetoric influenced by Dadaism and Surrealism (e.g. Man Ray) while others (e.g. Eugène Atget) were closer to realist paradigms” (Ray 2020, 141). Photography and the visual representation of cultural heritage thus underwent significant changes during the
post-World War II period “From the singular ‘historical-cultural’ to the plural adjective, the patrimony unfolded in urban, industrial, genetic, natural, scenic, environmental, archaeological, covering a semantic declension that no longer confines themselves to the limits of the material world” (Nedel 2011, 7). To some extent, the new objectivity of photography laid emphasis on the depth of field and froze the most extraordinary industrial landscapes to reveal their “nowness”, whilst mediating with a transformative modern experience (Toth 2015). For this purpose, the camera’s possibilities guide us into Benjamin’s (1968) term “aura”, which designates time as a temporal permanence that haunts the image itself. This reflection about the aura offers a genuine concept of time in photography, since Benjamin thought that the mass reproduction that photography enabled destroys the auratic values of unrepeatability and singularity.

From these art critics and artistic revelations, the ‘new vision’ photography was born, and its embrace of abstraction rejected the ‘real’ photography of the New Objectivity: “While with the New Objectivity the referent object was accorded priority, the pure visuality of the New Vision dematerialized the object, which circulated through the aesthetic social form of the photographic. A further challenge to temporal fixing was apparent in critical social realism, for example in workers’ photography, whereby the representation of the real was embedded in a utopian temporality” (Ray 2020, 152). With reference to the second point of this quote, it was necessary for the photography of factory workers to engage in some sort of transparent realism, even though it was arbitrated by beautiful arrangements that could, simultaneously, suggest more than was directly evident. And yet as Barthes (1980) states, this temporal and formal realism is joined with an emotional punctum, as an expansive temporal response that endorses a past experience or action that is temporally extended into the present. Barthes affirms that both the formal and temporal punctum go beyond the image, to yield a blind spot that allows the viewer to revisit the past, even if it is as a fleeting moment that allows us to recall something. In other words, the power of authentication is more crucial than the one of representation, because it maintains the referent itself in the image. This intersubjective breaking point or punctum can be enacted through a glitch in the lighting composition of those iconic objects and other coded devices, which renders the visible industrial transformation before World War II into naïve realities (Ray 2020). As such, the emotional punctum that Barthes mentions is recorded in the smoke rising from colossal machinery and large metal pipes that shrink the labourer.

A new practice that emerged in the US and Europe was the development of institutional documentary projects between the 1930s and 1960s, which principally bore witness to the social problems among poor farmers (Newhall 1982). The Farm
Security Administration’s (FSA)\(^1\) photographic project directed documentary photography to provide epistemological validity to the reality of poverty in America, and it was carried out under the non-explicit propagandistic control of the state (Tagg 2003). Davis (1996) insisted that FSA photographers were not only giving dignity to ordinary people by recording their domestic circumstances, anchored the reality of the Great Depression, but their active and investigating cameras were also blending the pictorial and humanistic virtues in a distinct and socially aware manner. Without completely eschewing the world outside of the photographs, the visual documents created under the FSA locate their point of view in the unintentional relationship between the index and the object (Dubois 1986).

From the 1960s to the end of the 1980s, the Western industrial landscape was changing. This reconfiguration process emptied the city of industries and caused a subsequent industrial restructuring and conversion of old properties (Palmer 1990). The disappearing cultural memory of the industrial city proved that the manufacturing landscape was awakening and succumbing to the new productive paradigms (Lynch 1960). Bernd (1931‒2007) and Hilla Becher’s (1934‒2015) images of steel mills’ tanks and plants in silver gelatin typologies (1970‒1985) captured the last moments of these industries, which became outdated in the Ruhr wastelands. These photographers were not interested in the functionality of these compositions but in highlighting the obsolescence of industrial production in West Germany in those years. What is in fact highlighted on these archaeological sites is Europe’s most essential rustbelt, since: “the Bechers’ archive brings a new visual layer to the landscape of memory associated with the Ruhr district, challenging our perceptions of this region as a landscape of labour, coal, and smog” (Barndt 2010, 276). Regardless of their scientific rigor, the Bechers’ direct documentary photography with frontal shots, orthodox lines, and a certain distance of the infinite combinations of buildings and machines, obtained fascinating results with historical value, without being sublimated. Despite the mimetic reality or the figurative and socio-cultural codes of the Bechers’ Dusseldorf School imprints, paraphrasing Barthes (1980, 155), their topologies gave an account of the historical, ethnological, and ideological extent of those abandoned places.

In 1975, the Bechers were also part of one of the most far-reaching exhibitions in the history of the genre, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (1975), whose most representative photographers denaturalized the sublime and eternal imagery of the American pictorialists. By contrast, the Bechers’ visual claims advanced banal motifs of the growth of American suburbs (Szarkowski

\(^1\) Franklin D. Roosevelt established an agency called the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1935, which was in charge of coordinating photographic documentation efforts in the country’s impoverished rural areas.
1966). Moreover, after this success, and with the rise of television, documentary photography came to be a subset of the contemporary institutional art gallery system. It is worth mentioning that the efforts of photo-journalism and mass media to replicate endless images in both print and audiovisual broadcast programming expanded its intellectual scope through Manovich’s literary theory of the image in real-time (2001). Indeed, Manovich’s arguments about the evolution of screen technologies partially explain the new complexities of documentary photography and how it is able to survive with respect to the mass production of the news-media industry. As an attempt at survival, the apparent neutral aesthetics of the new topographic vernacular photography took a similar stance to the Russian formalists, whose aesthetic devices departed from the idea that art is something extraordinary, whilst non-art records can be designated as ordinary. Hence, it is the ambiguity of these topographic works that both beautify and strip industrialization of any pictorial frills and which position those artists as the most politicized and activist documentary photographers (Kane 2018). The neutrality of the documentary in the new topographers can also be put into question in their appropriation and re-appropriation of an everlasting continuum of striking iconic symbols and vernacular vocabularies from previous documentary photographers, including pictorialists and modernist movements of all kinds. There is a continuity between the past and present artistic concerns that progressively stretches those earlier aesthetic experiences. This “that-has-been” past subjective becomes a form of “theatricality” over time, in Barthes’ (1980) words, and can be interpreted as the reconciliation of different artistic formulas, where language materializes and transpires, breaking away any agreement with verisimilitude.

By the end of the 1970s, the modernist trajectory entered a crisis of representation in a moment when the mainstream of creative documentary’s scientific discourses, which set forth the undercurrents of realism and positivism, was also put into question. To this end, the cultural and institutional conditions that supported the scientific and quasi-photo-journalist conditions of documentary photography began to change (Clarke, 1997). Furthermore, in the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping’s open-door policy promoted a renewed realism in documentary photography, which departed from the earliest expression of socialist realism, whilst the country experienced a “cultural fever”, and experimental art spread throughout the nation, culminating in avant-garde photographers documenting and intervening in cities (Wang 2015; Ortells-Nicolau 2017). Art academies and photographic salons reopened their doors in an atmosphere of relative political relaxation, which smoothed the way for the reintroduction of formalistic compositions intermingled with humanism. These changing cultural and institutional conditions were indigenizing documentary photography in post-socialist China, which crossed the space between...
legitimization and social commentary on the one hand, and the sacrifices and huge progressive efforts being made in the regeneration of a service-based economy and its post-industrial logic on the other (Wu Weiping 2004; Lu, 2007; Hacking 2015; Shi 2018). As Zhou (2018) discusses, there was a compendium of power relations from intellectuals, journalistic practices influenced by both socialist realism and Western documentary media, as well as curatorial persuasive methods that carved out the documentary genre as an art, forging a non-critical Chinese post-socialist realism. It was in the context of these broader developments within the “domestic turn” that home-grown documentary photography was developed. In this respect, Lopez-Mugica and Whyke (2022) contextualize a kind of more experimental photography that was critically capturing the incessant gentrification of Chinese cities, which crumbled the Maoist-style architectural arrangements of downtown areas into ruins. The authors further claim that amateur documentary photography and other independent experimental visual forms “served as evidence of exploitative and brutalizing political factors. Over the past last decades, artists’ perceptions have made visible the limits of growth beneath the surface of utopic political imagination” (Lopez-Mugica and Whyke 2022, 5).

Social commentary concerning urban modernity was also noted by Wang Bing, a key member of the documentary movement, who shares his preoccupation in his *West of the Tracks* (2002) with regard to the industrial change of Shenyang in Jilin province, singled out as the once-prosperous central-planning capital of the northeast rustbelt. Wang Bing’s nine-hour documentary pays homage to Sebastião Salgado, the extraordinary social documentary photographer who recorded the impoverished conditions of factory workers during the manufacturing decline caused by the shift to a service-based post-industrial reality in Brazil (Lü 2005). What also makes Bing’s documentary special is that the factories and their surroundings are brought closer to the audience as leading protagonists of the documentary, whose distressing unresponsiveness reminds the spectators of the state-run machinery and its embryonic rationality. It showcases how the ruination of the soviet-design urban model that functioned as a social engine of “utopia” has finally upset the stability of factory workers and land use, whilst rendering visible desires for the rustbelt’s rejuvenation and new developments driven in the uninterrupted intersections of state-capital and the development of urban villages (chengzhongcun 城中村) in post-socialist China (Chu et al. 2022).

From a different perspective of the ruins amidst the old state-sponsored heavy industry factories, some Western landscape photographers, such as Edward Burtynsky and Andreas Gursky, to name a few, have sublimated the degradation or factory zones which makes them suitable for use as timeless locations of non-progression in the new, profit-led market economy. Their photographic efforts “reduce
the thread of time to a point” which can re-contextualize the ambiguous meaning of the documentary genre (Dubois 1986, 163). As happened with the first avant-gardes, there is a break with the sensorimotor relationship of the real in their images, and their representations what Augé claims as “the presence of the past in a present that supersedes it but still lays claim to it…” (2009, 75). In a similar vein, Deleuze (1989) addresses the evolution of the perception of time from the modification of the movement-image in classical cinema to the time-image in modern cinema via experimental films, including those which draw on Dada and Surrealism, or nouvelle vague works such as Resnais’s Last Year in Marienbad (1961). The shift from the movement-image into the time-image is equal to the repetition of the real-time in the present, which gives rise to the breaking of the chronological logic of time (Deleuze 1989, 360). Considering Deleuze’s accounts of temporal experience, we could also rethink how documentary photography was repeating the present time, situated between linear time and atemporality. On the one hand, these temporal sequences, as they stretch out in the subliminal landscapes of Burtynsky and Gursky, privilege the parts over the whole, reassembling them in stereotyped visualizations of post-colonized societies, rather than taking control away from expected visions of the industrial other. Documentary photography has transferred colonial and imperial ways of seeing the world to celebrate the benefits of the industrial landscape and to classify the industrialized other with a simplified picture of reality (Kolenda 2019). On the other hand, Burtynsky and Gursky’s sublime ethnocentrism blends overpowering colours, which are profoundly altered by non-human forms of industrialization and essentially pose formal and conceptual questions of contemporary art photography: “Although remnants of materiality, of ‘thing-ness’, still adhere to it [the photo], its value is not in its being a thing, but in the information, it carries on its surface. This is precisely what characterizes the post-industrial in general: it is the information, not the thing, which is valuable” (Flusser 1984, 36).

However, between Deleuze and Flusser comes a third way through the idea of movement as a mediator, which moulds the geographical shape of space and the subjective experience of time. It is crucial to account for what Ashmore (2019) suggests concerning the mobility between dispersed geographies that can be moulded as prolonged events. Ashmore draws on the context of northeast England’s industrial landscape and its linkage to the past, to claim that there is a kind of mobile contract between those who inhabit those spaces with their representational pictures, proving that local viewers’ imaginary visions have always been on the move. Such mobilization of socially eventful interactions, historical objects, and internal structures exists beyond the image itself. This harvests neutral factualness, which can adjust to the subjective experiences of the people who linger
around such locations. Likewise, we argue that Western photography’s diverse spaces and timelines can be mobilized by people and things found in Asia in an ongoing transnational process between the West and China.

Having to reflect on how the qualities and properties of Western documentary photography deconstruct modernism, its representations seem susceptible to the crisis of the universal values of modern progress (Foster 1983). There is not just a rupture with the uniformity of modernist aesthetics, but also with heterogeneity in the epistemic interpretations of how the development of post-colonial landscapes and the unequal effects of globalization affect the ways of perception and knowledge. Such a reflection does not attempt to be exhaustive, but it imagines the beginning of the description of some expressions and categories that allow us to clarify the conceptions of time associated with Western documentary photography and its own history in its intersection with the Chinese industrial and post-industrial scenes. Our interpretations in the ongoing process of post-industrial landscapes in Shanghai lie in the shared imaginary universe of Gauvrit’s documentary chronotope. As Holquist (1990) explains, Bakhtin cultivates the idea of a chronotope in novels, which can develop nuances from spatial locations to move events along, and thereby represent historical time. Gauvrit’s chronotopes and sub-chronotopes are examined to realize how both parameters not only re-erect boundaries that can challenge the viewers to visualize those abstract images, but can also convey threads to understand the frictions and ruptures before, during, and after this post-industrial transition and the post-socialist belief system that continued.


Chronotopes and Sub-chronotopes as a Socio-cultural Semiotic Method

Based on a socio-cultural semiotics analysis, semi-structured interviews, and archival work, this article explores post-industrial cartography from a constructivist and relational perspective, rejecting it as a given ontological category. Gauvrit’s cultural vistas of an industrial past allow the artist to reflect reality and acquaint the audience with a set of knowledge and visual cues with the objective of reproducing an economic and socio-cultural identity: the industrial myth. In doing so, the article assesses how these industrial landscapes have changed over time, and how these visual places also conceal spatial arrangements that inscribe and reinscribe the smallest socio-cultural stories. In particular, in order to explore the capacity of time and space to engage in such a cultural construction, we draw from...
Greimas and Courtés (1982) to adapt Bakhtin’s “chronotopes” in Gauvrit’s documentary photography. By inferring Greimas and Courtés’s alethic modalities, as linguistic principles of both truth and possibility, we propose a cultural matrix so as to understand Gauvrit’s photo-essay as follows: (1) the chronotope of necessity (premodern), which corresponds with the chronotope of the idyllic and the chronotope of the castle, as chronotopes of cyclical time; (2) the chronotope of the possibility (modern) related with the chronotope of the “road” as an avenue for possibilities; (3) the chronotope of impossibility (postmodern) in close proximity to the idea that any rearrangement of time and space cannot transpire like a modern utopia. This schema corresponds to the essential characteristics of the chronotope of “genre”—an intertextuality of belated photographers and styles—which are endowed as sub-chronotopes of possibility in our analysis. We consider documentary photography as a visual tool that moves between art and realism to eventually grow into a channel of representation of the myth of industrialization, an essential symbol that represents the cultural and social transformation of Suzhou Creek’s post-industrial landscape.

The Cyclical Photographic Necessity of Suzhou Creek

Documentary photographers have often attempted to depict the images of industrial power plants and assembly factories as part of a shared imagination to perpetuate an idealized nostalgia. Bakhtin’s (1981) reading of the past sketches out knowledge and understanding about how the past persists in the present, a temporal quality that resonates with one of the most significant defining characteristics of the chronotope of the castle. These theoretical interpretations of the Bakhtinian chronotope of the castle could thus be supplementary to Gauvrit’s specificities of time. Bakhtin metaphorically describes the chronotope of the castle as “architecture […], as furnishings, as weapons, the ancestral portrait gallery, the family archives” (Bakhtin 1981, 240). In that view, this chronotope can correspond with the permanency caught in the historical temporalities of the factories haunting Suzhou Creek, adding an archival value to their cultural heritage. Gauvrit is familiar with the changes concerning the temporal modes of production, unveiling the darkest side of this urban renewal: “Thus, there will be no museum of an end of a century Shanghai. Gone are the chains of buildings with faded colours and laundry hanging in the open, the blackened lanes with badly ensured concrete houses with tilting roots, the barges on opaque canals and the muddy Suzhou Creek, formerly the belly of Shanghai and today a new Rivera for a privileged elite and a Nouveaux Riche” (Interview, January 21st, 2015) (Figure 1). In light of this quotation, it is considered that the historical
time or the chronotope of the castle replaces the socialist image repository of a utopian industrial world, intensifying these eventful changes into historical details. In the task of envisaging the newly embryonic post-industrial landscapes, Gauvrit does not want to enter into the “danger of excessive antiquarianism” with regard to a nostalgic past of Suzhou Creek’s deindustrialization process (Bakhtin 1981, 246).

Thus, in Figure 1, the corrosion and rust of the industrial structures become projections of Maoist forces, which are interrupted by the overhanging buildings of a new post-industrial Shanghai or by the farming spaces of a pre-industrial era (Figure 2). These signs of deindustrialization convey what is described by Dubois (1986) as being a territorial need/cyclical time couplet. In this respect, Gauvrit is also concerned with the Barthesian “the thing has been there” (1980, 76), which can only be rediscovered by the Chinese other’s comprehension of non-linear time. On the basis of the above, the “chronotope of the castle” can alter the most obvious historical narratives, what Bakhtin claims as “historical inversion” (Bakhtin 1981, 397). Most of all, the natural, the industrial and the post-industrial come together as a continuous “historical inversion” to produce a post-pastoral
co-existence. Gauvrit reinforces this point when he asserts “I am sometimes like a French post-impressionist ([laughs]). I like their underlying composition” (Interview, January 21st, 2015) (Figure 2). Undoubtedly, there is a certain tone of impressionism in his spatial aesthetics that has been gathered by the picturesque quality with the aim that: “the picturesque [...] permitted the illusion of hope. It not only brought the contraction of future time bringing distant objects closer, but also the magnification of the minute, the God-like survey of the great, the picturesque assembled by time and space, presenting society as a community of objects” (Carter 1997, 244) (Figure 2). Accordingly, it is plausible through the picturesque to penetrate into the topography and the imagination of Suzhou Creek, even when Gauvrit’s pictorial outlook might destroy the idyllic non-dualist Chinese chronotope. Therefore, the dialectics of an idyllic unitary time and space alignment is exposed by Gauvrit’s chronotope photography, which has free license to continue or discontinue with the indigenous temporal unity of place (Figures 1 and 2). This impact is particularly obvious in Bakhtin’s (1981, 221) notions of both the “idyllic chronotope” and its antinomy, the “destruction of the idyllic chronotope”. Bakhtin proposes that the idyllic chronotope is: “[...] An organic fastening-down, a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory [...] unity of place [...] unity of rhythm, the common language used to describe phenomena of nature and the events of human life” (Bakhtin 1981, 225‒26). This homogeneity is modified by Gauvrit’s multifaceted idyllic sense of place and time, which is similar to Bakhtin’s “destruction of the idyllic” (Figure 1):

We see the breakdown, the hero’s provincial romanticism, which is in no way idealized: the capitalist [(post-)socialist] world is also not idealized, its inhumanity is laid bare, the destruction within it of all ethical systems, which had been formed at earlier stages of development, the disintegration of all previous human relationships (under the influence of money), love, the family, friendship, the deforming of the scholar’s and the artist’s creative work and so forth, all these are emphasized. (Bakhtin 1981, 224)

The two farmers that can be seen in Figure 2 and their individual ways of cultivating the land represent a symbolic-mythical character of a romantic pastoral West, rather than the cyclic symbolic recurrence of an idealized Chinese landscape. They thus symbolize the destruction of the idyllic chronotope, and the defeated way of farming by urban civilization, conquered by the overhanging skyscrapers behind the imposition of globalized Western capitalism. The irrefutable suffocating urban feature of these rural landscapes (Figure 2) exemplifies how the uniform aesthetics of the new gated communities and their slogans of a harmonious civilization prevent their inhabitants from continuing with a collective kinship. Wu
(2010) claims that the presence of gated communities, as result of post-socialist city sprawl, has also eroded the continuity of old ways of developing social relations and everyday interactions.

Figure 2. View of Zhabei district. (Source: JP Gauvrit, The reproduction of the images is strictly forbidden without the author’s written approval)

There is also a clear intention in Gauvrit to evade the clichés of abandoned industrial plants (Figure 1), like those other emblematic artistic photographs that were circulating in the city at the time, either in official or non-official photographic circles, including Burtynsky’s (b.1955)² wall-sized photographs of industrial landscapes, Liang Weizhou’s (b.1962)³ large format “pictorialist” series of the outskirts of Shanghai,⁴ and Su Jin’s (b.1981) massive black and white collages of industrial plants:

I was fully aware that around 2005, it was a very common practice to shoot photographs of abandoned industrial buildings, and I was not interested in converting these places into museums. I started fooling around in

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² See China (2005).
⁴ See Memory City (2009).

Gauvrit’s remarks situate us closer to the concept of the chronotope, and how the language of photography can also pick up space to build knowledge. In this light, the multidimensionality of the function of the idyllic chronotope is transformed through the destruction of the idyllic chronotope; these being two contrasting modes of production: the industrial and post-industrial. On the one hand, the idyllic chronotope does not allow the disruption of national myths and local identities as “accepted” prerequisites of “unity”. On the other hand, the destruction of the idyllic may not necessarily be in search for the scars of Chinese history in the ruins of these industrial zones. Both chronotopes threaten the real value of these re-used buildings, turning them into a kind of museumification of this selected industrial heritage in an age of over-commodification and large-scale industrial regeneration. Gauvrit’s chronotopes pose questions about whether or not “the duty of remembrance is not, to a certain extent, a strategy of forgetfulness” (Debary 2004, 122). Only in this way does Gauvrit find the everlasting indexicality of the here and now that traces back to repeated and identical images found in Western artistic representations of landscapes, which can extend cultures and materialities (Dubois 1986).

The Modern Photographic Possibility of Suzhou Creek

When contemplating Gauvrit’s stylistic modernism, it is important to introduce Bakhtin’s chronotope as an insightful tool to explore the metaphor of the road to explain the photographer’s adventurous intersections between the West and China. Rode (2006, 13) defines the road as the threshold between two different spatial fringes: “centripetal forces orient culture toward the uniformity of a central authority and order; centrifugal forces orient culture away from a uniform centre toward the diversity of the margins”. Rode claims that these combinations of centrifugal and centripetal events are a typical phenomenon of the chronotope of the road, in which the road could be a heterotopia for being equally close to the centre as to the margins. There is no doubt that Gauvrit’s amateur chronotope responds to Bourdieu’s (1965/1996) middle-ground position, in his analysis of the middle-aged and middle-income Frenchmen’s use of photography. Photography is a middle-class art that infuses a comprehension of class habits through experience. Gauvrit’s class customs can also be perceived through his mid-brow aesthetic practices, which can be placed somewhere between the conflicting margins and the conformism of the centre. The centrifugal-centripetal spatial organization can be deduced from Professor Lin Lu, who wrote the
following in the preface to Gauvrit’s photographic book: “His angle and the position in pointing to objects is different, it is also the value in it. One can find this value in the discomfort or pain of confronting these pictures that seem to be unfamiliar to the Shanghainese, like those specific sinks in the backyard, cheap and colourful plastic tables, cloths hanging, high-voltage electric poles struggling with vegetables” (cited in Gauvrit 2008) (Figure 3). This coexistence consists of both heterogeneous familiar-marginal social geographies and unfamiliar-centres of Western abstractionism, in which these different expressions can be understood as heteroglossia of socio-ideological languages under Gauvrit’s photographic codes. The term heteroglossia here comes from Bakhtin’s analysis of the intersection of texts and subaltern voices, which can pervade a wide range of perspectives between the generic and the specific chronotopes, within a variety of social and artistic utterances and styles (Clot and Faita 2000). Prof. Lin Lu makes some interesting remarks on the socio-cultural constellations that emanate from the objects themselves while producing a reality that seems to contribute to a discursive “heteroglossia”. Gauvrit’s artistic and social voices thus finally meet at the chronotope of the road. The spatial uncertainty caused by the photographer’s unfamiliar “modern” documentary style reformulates the familiar-marginal industrial idiosyncratic local life. As in Figure 3, Gauvrit’s modernist composition of vivid abstractions configured abstract shapes and lines made by letters and the empty billboard grids, contrast with the brownish deteriorated concrete of the house, showcasing people’s most intimate household belongings as well their humble and precarious conditions. It expresses a generational ability to survive when pushed away from the post-socialist centre, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has shied away from Chinese Maoist thinking to save the factory workers’ job security in these former new villages, to embrace policies that emanate from the speculative real-estate market (Pan 2005) (Figure 3). But it also grants some remarkable dignity to the subject matter within the strictest terms of Walker Evans’ tradition of social realism, which developed in his work for the FSA. Gauvrit recognizes the admiration for Evans’ photographs and their moral beauty in which, as Sontag (1977) proposes, there is a blurry line between the insignificant and essential. Yet upon closer examination, Evans was elevating the ethical scale of the subjects or objects photographed. The torn billboard in Figure 3 recalls Evan’s vernacular language of signs-advertisements during the Great Depression that ironically reappear in Shanghai, and so establishes a parallel reflection of the living conditions of Western capitalist and post-socialist consumer societies, where pleasure and dreams cannot be realized as such.

Moreover, this socio-artistic peripheral arrangement situates the heterogeneous chronotope in a frame of tension, because of the smallest of material possessions.
What makes the chronotope of the road become a border is that it bridges “several sites that are in themselves incompatible”, not only in the relationship to the “chronotope of the real” found in Suzhou Creek, but also within the photographic representation of space (Foucault 1984, 10). As Gauvrit suggests, such virtual and fluid space “does not only come directly from the proper materials given by the language of photography, but also from a space that is not entirely derivative from the tangible or topological references of Suzhou Creek. It also comes from a space that contains instances as abstract relations” (Interview, January 21st, 2013).

The materiality of these places is not a tongue-in-cheek reference to Flusser’s (1984, 36) “thing-ness”, as a toolkit metaphor used here to mobilize information and knowledge. Gauvrit is conscious of the potential of his heterogeneous photographic spaces, and “thingness” as a prominent feature of post-industrial photographs:

My visual language intends to re-arrange the communal pivotal unit of all the possible spatial categories, in a basic dialogue between variety and harmony. Spaces can be seen as dispersed through the diverse parts of my photographic structures depicted, and can also be perceived as a coherent unity. (Interview, January 21st, 2015)
From here, the author’s idiosyncrasies are also buttressed by his visual prompts, colours, shapes, and textures that make up his counter-intuitive utterances within his chronotope of the road. These “signs” or “parts” work as Bakhtinian’s “sub-chronotope” utterances that enrich the chronotope of the road and can all come fortuitously together despite their spatial or social remoteness (Bakhtin 1981). This threshold unfolds the border dynamics among social and material outer spaces (as independent and multiple voices including the light-sensitive objects) and can be valuable for an exploration of place as enunciated in the socially constructed space of a photographic story-telling account (Figures 3 and 4). Somehow Gauvrit simultaneously rejects any comparison of his photographic prints with a “postcard-exotic sort of illusion”, and he goes on to state that “the abstract aesthetics do not veil the “banal”, since the Chinese people that I have talked to, they have asked me why I am interested in the ugly pictures of such underprivileged areas of Shanghai” (Interview, January 21st, 2013). Far from an act of postmodern pastiche, which can be observed in his amateurish colourful prints, these images are constant reminders of the carnivalesque. Gauvrit harvests a set of lofty expressions of abstractionism that serve to dignify the “authentic” poor “other”. This modernist attitude is likely neither ordinary nor synthetic to the gaze of the Chinese, who might not share those modernist dualist perspectives of subject-mind and object-nature (Figure 4) (Greenberg 1988). As for Chinese aesthetics, and the disappearing relation between subject and object in art that situates the self in unison with the universe, Tu Wei-ming (1983, 56) discusses that such a “privatized ego” can also engage in a fecund relationship with the natural world and the experiences of artists and their receptive audiences in different time periods. For this reason, in particular, Gauvrit appears to articulate the common folkloric histories of Suzhou Creek according to the rules of his own documentary syntax to address many “centres” (post-socialist policies of demolition/geometrical abstractionism) and “peripheries” (social encounters). This semiotics of culture means to encourage as many “border” dialogues as possible in a post-industrial society (Herr 2013). In Figure 5, there is not a highly rigorous Western perspective, and it is only slightly defined with three separated planes, which do not allow the viewer to step into a single area (even the main character the dog, it is not in the centre), but instead enables them to wander around the image, as happens with the multiple perspective technique used in traditional Chinese painting.

To an extent, the selection of these enunciated positions is part of Gauvrit’s artistic and polyphonic modus operandi that sweeps along towards the interior of his photographs, together with the thematized referents of the real, to “enforce a movement through space” (Bakhtin 1981, 105). As in Figure 4, the hermetic framing of the old housing structures underlines the sense of asphyxia and how Shanghai’s new service economy is speeding up the rhythm of life and excluding
unskilled labour from the new knowledge economy. Gauvrit’s modernist photography creates a modern chronological form of linear sequences that expands from the rural and industrial to the coming information society. These semiotic utterances are an abstract representation of space, which displays the social relations of an era. It makes it possible to reflect Chinese modernity through the photographic image that resounds with Barthes’ (1980) premises, that photographs were real at one moment in time.

_A Post-modern Photographic Impossibility of Suzhou Creek_

To illustrate the crisis in the representation of Shanghai’s industrial history, there is a chronotope in this photo-text that is a uchronic representation, referring to what would have occurred in Gauvrit’s documentary photography if the conversion to a creative cultural hub would have not happened in Suzhou Creek (Portelli 1988). In other words, it secures a temporal punctum, defeating the historical to validate, simultaneously, that something has both existed and ceased to exist. Gauvrit’s documents insinuate an additional emotional value, the prescribed punctum (Barthes 1980). The latter relates his work to the modernist mythological stories that idealize
science and technology, as authentic narratives of the documentary genre. It is important to be mindful that Gauvrit also actively contests his subjective intention, even when he acknowledges that “I attempt to be as neutral as possible. There are also images loaded with abstractionism” (Interview, January 21st, 2015) (Figure 5).

As shown in Figure 5, Gauvrit gives a glimpse into an archetypal contemporary manufactured environment with a focus on factories that are still working (Figures 1 and 5) suggesting that the “post-smokestack” industrial era is not metaphorically visible or is still not happening in the presence of Gauvrit’s camera lenses. There is also another reading that points to the possibility of a psycho-scientific complex state of subrogation in his desire to portray the factory as a fetishistic object that is no longer functional in the wake of deindustrialization. It begins with Freud’s idea of working-through, whose double form of ritualization lies between remembering the dead as the regressive melancholia, and then accepting that the object is dead (never possessed, as a principle of masochism) (Freud 1985) (Figure 5). In Figure 5, the factory reveals nearly nothing about its organization, and our comprehension of it is still based – as Sontag (1977, 42) would put it – “on functioning”. Nostalgia is probably the only way to comprehend it, since the operational lifespan of the factory is temporal. This mediated melancholic representation with ideological interests could be regarded as an ontological reality dependent on a ritualized transcendent entity that is no longer contingent on the everyday activities identified in his depictions. Rather than a mere autonomous aesthetic, this transcendental ritual form attempts to retrieve the “lost object of pleasure” to alleviate its disappearance (Adorno 1997). Mitchell (2002) warns us of the iconicity’s excessive simplification of cultural and social connotations, in the selection of industrial frames that takes on several deliberately beautifying guises that can impede visions of other less attractive realities.

Moreover, as the densest semantic trope, the chronotope performs as a uchronic representation that permeates the most profound structural changes and the impossibility of representing a form of organizing work around the factory’s utopian, Soviet model. This political system with Chinese characteristics, the so-called “Datong Socialism”, epitomizes “the vision of a morally defined order, based on the principles of freedom and equality and on the absence of any kind of borders and other sources of conflicts” (Spakowski 2019, 92). The impossibility of a socialist utopia is replaced in this photo-essay album by a heroine (Figure 6), a girl doing intellectual homework, personifying the Chinese ideals of the “made in China” and “created in China’ logos, which demonstrates, as Keane puts it, that the “creative process needs to be deeply embedded in the education system” (2006, 294). Mao’s archetypal “iron worker” genderless model of Daotong Socialism appeared as young and strong females, looking both determined and gracious to convey ideal behaviours and thus ensure economic prosperity and national unity. This functional
and anti-cerebral direction has been prolonged beyond the Maoist’s proletariat thought in the superstructure of the regime, as part of a broader discourse in the “culture and education, literature and arts” (National People’s Congress 1975, 16). Against this restriction of self-determination, Gauvrit’s ideal heroine is literally turning her back to the camera, and metaphorically this gesture also could evoke the hope of a new generation of critical thinkers who could change the repetitive ways of doing things in China. Thus, this photo-essay is creating the possibility to imagine a China that could have been but—at the time the photo fieldwork occurred—had never been. Probably, although under the radar of the CCP and only in a few post-socialist and more contemporary New Village projects, artists and villagers were able to engage in some sort of community-building to create:

novel space of social commentary and critique, not simply in the reception of the films by audiences but much more in the actual process of producing the documentaries. Most notably, this production process includes long-term relationships developed between filmmakers and subjects, in which the [documentarist] filmmaker might spend several years living with those being filmed, more in the manner of an anthropologist than of an investigative journalist. (Berry, Xinyu and Rofel 2010, 10)
Therefore, due to this limitation of creative provision and the impossibility of spending time with the others in the community, the poor Other is not necessarily portrayed as living within the confines of an undesirable circumstance. There is a possible alternative world, in which the subject matter of poverty is not necessarily represented with the ingrained passivity and distance seen in the Western tradition.

Figure 6. View of Zhabei district. (Source: JP Gauvrit, The reproduction of the images is strictly forbidden without the author’s written approval)

Gauvrit also uses the word “toolkits” to describe the voices or styles of the genre of photography that are continuously used in his narratives and visual representations (Interview, January 21st, 2015). These voices give way to an alternative form of expression, turning Gauvrit’s toolkits into a network of heterogeneous stylistic (multiple) voices, which in Bakhtinian terms could be translated as a sense of unity “in a polyphonic work” (Morson and Emerson 1990, 235). Gauvrit thus tends to cite or quote previous modernist genre styles, as he himself recognizes, “one can see Evans almost everywhere” (Interview, January 21st, 2015). In some photographs in the book, we can see a photographer full of resources, who, like Walker Evans in the 1930s, is able to use his straight photography while making use of all types of signs, billboards, posters, and other elements. Evans’s photographic life started in Paris, where he was influenced by modernism and the avant-garde.
When he began to photograph the most difficult years of the American economy after the financial crash of 1929, it was possible to find a third meaning in his apparently meaningless oeuvre and impersonal neutrality (Tagg 2003). For this reason, there was always a clear intention by Evans to blend the photographic and linguistic signs to refer to, on many occasions, a nation that has been drawn into misery, or even to show it with a sense of nostalgia. Evans was able to find the extraordinary in the ordinary details of a gloomy America. While revisiting Evans’ depictions of the poorest parts of the American South, Gauvrit’s style of photography might not depict the underprivileged and their wealthy surroundings as well as Evans’ work, in which “Hollywood glamour and consumer pleasures, image to create desire—were omnipresent” (Grundberg 2010, 14). There are no clear marks in Gauvrit’s images of the discoloured luxury and glowing advertising “consumer economy” that abound on Shanghai’s high streets. This prevents the locals from collectively imagining and fulfilling the banal desires of the Chinese consumer society that was emerging in their own territories.

Moreover, Gauvrit’s concise style and middle-class adventurism are not actually interested in de-mystifying much of the Western “magic” documentary photography of the last century. In one of the images, we can see a dog that recalls Daido Moriyama’s (b. 1938) most famous picture of a suburban “stray dog”, a photograph he took during one of his many road trips in America (Figure 4). For this subject, the figure of the dog in both pictures seems to be an outcast, a punctum that rearticulates social class relations and becomes a poignant Barthesian punctum (Figure 4). On the one hand, the presence of the dog re-establishes a channel of communication between those who live in these traditional local industrial areas, and those who are no longer living in this type of rural atmosphere and might feel that uncanny punctum. On the other hand, with the subject matter of the dog, Gauvrit also permeates the sensual abstract poetics of his pleasurable dealings around these areas in a liminal way as “time-out-of-mundane-time”, which can also inspire a sense of pastoral nostalgia (Howell 2013, 60). Therefore, Gauvrit’s artistic fate is also tied to entire generations of Western photographers, who have been trapped by their private pleasurable and painful obsessions with the poor Other as middle-class tourists. Michelangelo Antonioni’s Chung Kuo (1972) subverted the seed of socialist realism with his ultra-realist devices, which were related to the excessively stereotyped images connected with negative values outside China. However, Antonioni’s (1912–2007) experiences of socialist modernity have been questioned by Sontag, who argued that the Chinese gaze cannot be blamed and that it is wrong to “find the Chinese naïve for not perceiving the beauty of the cracked peeling door, the picturesqueness of disorder?…[B]eauty is not inherent… it is to be found by another way of seeing” (Sontag 1977, 90).
These non-spontaneous and non-interventionist origins may justify Antonioni’s aesthetic-related purposes since, as Sontag recognizes, “nobody ever discovered ugliness through photographs. But many...have discovered beauty” (Sontag 1977, 85). The Chinese expert gaze would recognize that there is an unshakeable connection between the river-side images of Gauvrit and some of the cinematic spaces created by Lou Ye’s (b. 1965) Suzhou River (2000), which catches the imaginary eyes of the Western flaneur (Figure 7) (Lu 2010). In Figure 7, the riverfront is composed of industrial factory frontages, ships, metal pipes, water towers, smoke stacks, and abandoned buildings bringing about a temporal and timeless intimacy with the surroundings, so much related to slow documentary filmmaking. These screening spaces take us away from the crowds and carry on the legacy of the aforementioned Antonioni and Lou Ye to explore solitude in cities. Art and cinema remind us that we have lost our intimacy and that even if we have stronger visual contact with those who surround us in cities, we have lost our emotional connection with them. This transcultural visual dissemination of abandoned post-industrial places produces cityscapes, whose transmedia environments share similar deep and intense deindustrialized emotional landscapes. The possibility to represent Suzhou Creek without bearing in mind its future cultural cluster in this photo-essay implies that Gauvrit’s representation also includes grim images of the deserted city in ruins and
the mistiness of the river, as ghostly fleeting glances, so predominant in transnational cinematic and artistic representations of Shanghai (Lopez-Mugica and Whyke 2022). There is thus also room to think differently about the creative city to come, through the derelict factories and the heroine-girl, as a creative place that has never happened yet, but both can exist in an ephemeral moment. Such a sub-chronotopic array of elements repurposes the decline of factory work from the old Maoist-age architecture and the rise of “creative” spaces, which have finally discarded the liberation of the working-class struggle and the eternal Maoist hope of security in work and life. Gauvrit’s revelation can also come from the crystal-image category of Deleuze (1987), as one of his three chrono-sign strands that match orderly time. The crystal-image chrono-sign problematizes this post-modern impossibility by accepting historical and non-historical moments taken from the real and imaginary both being blurred in a kind of representational photomontage. Gauvrit’s photo-album embraces uchronia as the impossibility of representing a “now-when event” (Portelli 1988). This alternative photographic present embraces the other re-visualizations of this deindustrialization event to modify and mediate with the sanctioned narratives of Suzhou Creek, projecting itself as a parallel cosmos.

Conclusion

Based on archival research, socio-cultural semiotic analysis, and in-depth interviews, this article revisits the local identity, cultural memory, and ultimately the myths of Suzhou Creek’s post-industrial landscapes. The analysis outlined above can be complemented by arguments that the genre of documentary photography has its own spatial and temporal chronotopes. The production of borderless spaces between formalist and social enunciations imbues a history of visual language combined with less abstract features in producing dynamic chronotopes in transition. Through Bakhtin’s chronotope of the castle, Gauvrit’s time becomes artistically and culturally visible, as an uninterrupted cyclical expression of time-necessity. In other words, there is still a goal-directed historical narrative that is resilient with regard to the idyllic chronotope as a pre-modern consensus about Chinese history. However, the destruction of the idyllic local chronotope by means of the fast-track modernization introduced in China in the 1980s and 1990s disrupts the sense of consensus around the unity between the pre-modern and modern industrial myth. Furthermore, Gauvrit’s road chronotope ties and unties a mythic time of the castle chronotope over the geography of these places. His modernist devices also point to the stories, origins, or signs as “modern” alternatives to a goal-oriented history. As such, the chronotope of the genre of photography together with other sub-chronotopes of time and space pinpoint visual forms of
“subgenres” and “belated photographers”, which are brought about by his intertextual manoeuvres. This is perpetuated by a technological fetishism that can reveal the significance of transnational myth that revolves around a “magic” form in photography, which is superimposed over any uchronic dreams and memories of the underprivileged working class of Suzhou Creek. Gauvrit’s documentary photography lodges the consciousness of the displaced local self and the unconsciousness of those in more privileged positions and re-creates them in an authentic and creative chronotope of temporal and spatial representation.

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