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moscow vertigo

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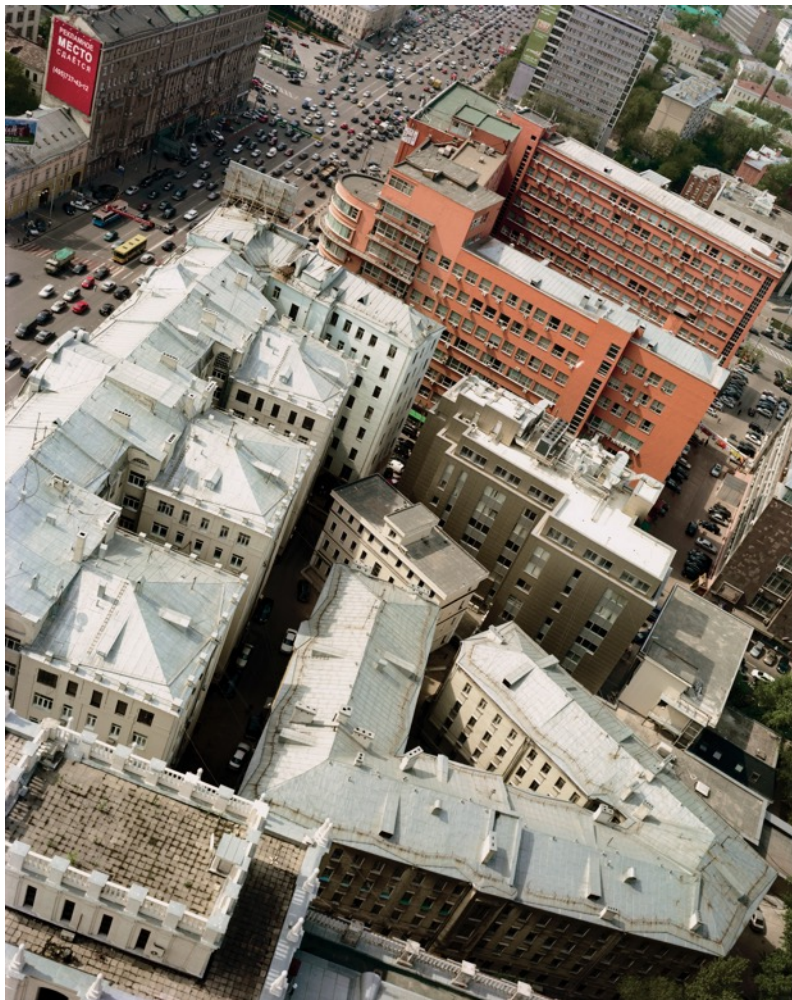
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Gabriele Basilico, Moscow, 2008.

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abstract

The paper explores the relationship between photography and architecture as a mutually constitutive one. Besides standing as subjects for the camera, buildings can also extend the photographer's capability to depict the surrounding landscape. In the interwar period, this interplay was exploited by avant-garde photographers associated with the "New Vision" who used architecture as a viewing platform. Among them was Aleksander Rodchenko, whose experiments with high-angle shots were part of the wider project to construct a revolutionary visual language for Soviet art. Moscow was the theatre of this visual revolution. Eight decades later, Italian photographer Gabriele Basilico visited the Russian capital and produced a photo-book, *Mosca Verticale*, that references Rodchenko's work in more than one way. Atypically, Basilico elevated the *vue en plongée* to his main framing device as he set out to depict the sprawling city from the Seven Sisters – the monumental high-rise towers built under Stalin between the late 1940s and the mid 1950s. Through considering Basilico's words as well as his pictures, the essay unpacks the multiple layers that constitute *Mosca Verticale*. It draws connections not only with the work of Rodchenko but also with that of Russian "rooftoppers" who, in recent years, have raised the vertiginous representation of the city to new heights. As a cluster of "supertall" buildings redesigns its skyline, Moscow is once again the European epicentre of a particular type of interaction between photography and architecture, whereby the latter serves as a platform to visualise the dizzying spaces of the metropolis.

Over the past decade there has been a surge of interest in photographs of cities taken from high vantage points. It seems that, in an age of drones and satellite imagery, the mechanised aerial view has become so ubiquitous as to warrant a return to embodied practices that emerged over a century ago. A case in point is *Mosca Verticale*, one of the last international projects carried out by Gabriele Basilico (1944–2013), the Italian photographer renowned for his analytical approach to the urban landscape. After studying architecture in his native Milan, Basilico took up photography in earnest in the mid-1970s and went on to develop a distinct method for “measuring up” space during a prolific career that spanned over three decades. Whereas Basilico is perhaps best known for his monochrome cityscapes shot from street level, he also used elevated vantage points to frame wider urban expanses: prior to Moscow, he had aimed his large-format camera downwards from tall buildings in other cities such as Barcelona, Monaco, and San Francisco. In 2007, a selection of his oblique shots was displayed at the Turin exhibition “Verticale”, a prelude to the Moscow project.¹ On that occasion Basilico explained that his photographic notion of *vertical* transcended the plumb view and referred, more broadly, to “a dynamic attitude of the gaze”²: an attitude that prompted him to explore the various layers of distance that become visible from on high. His fascination with the *vue en plongée*³ – a vivid term rendered in English, somewhat less suggestively, as high-angle shot – was also a tribute to the New Vision avant-garde of the interwar period. While describing himself as a “convinced horizontalist”, Basilico explored verticality as “way of observing the city, [its] architecture”:

“The attraction towards a vanishing point that makes one’s gaze fall downwards and, with a near sense of vertigo, brings closer the movement and flows that occur between the city’s full and empty [spaces]. A reference and also a homage to the memory of the *vue en plongée* that, from the Bauhaus experiments through to the 1930s, was an aesthetic and symbolic code of modernity as well as an original visual interpretation of space.”⁴

These insights paved the way for Basilico’s subsequent project (first published in book form in 2008), which was translated in English as *Vertiginous Moscow*.⁵ Unlike any of his previous works, this photo-book consists mainly of photographs taken from high points.⁶ Working in collaboration with the architect Umberto Zanetti, Basilico photographed the city from the “Seven Sisters”, the tall buildings erected at Stalin’s behest between the late-1940s and the mid-1950s to enhance the architectural profile of the Soviet capital. These monumental towers, also known to locals as “Stalin’s high-rises”, were focal points of the urban expansion that followed the 1935 General Plan for Moscow. Built in the stripped neoclassical style that became the trademark of socialist realism in the Soviet Union, they were originally designed to form a crown of towers radiating from the centrepiece of the planned scheme – the colossal Palace of the Soviets that was never completed.⁷ Today, the Seven Sisters house major public institutions such as Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Moscow State University, as well as various other offices, hotels, and apartments.

Basilico’s photographic essay comprises pictures *of* and *from* the towers (a point to which we shall return). Each of them is introduced by black-and-white photographs taken at ground level, which pave the way for colour views of the city from above. Both the composition of the shots and their sequence are defined by the particular properties of each building and by the vistas they open up on the cityscape. This site-specific attitude reflects Basilico’s consistent approach to the photography of cities, which was based on what he called “a sensitive, meditative gaze.” A patient mode of observation allowed the photographer to immerse himself in the places he visited so as to establish a unique relationship with his subjects. This intimate way of “inhabiting” cities was a means of domesticating the speed and chaos of urban life, while searching for a visual order in the most diverse and heterogeneous of built environments. Basilico sought, in his own words, “a calm, collective vision in which everything slows down.”⁸ Before his camera every city became a visual field charged with personal memories and associations as well as material and symbolic values:

“For me, to photograph a city means to make a series of choices that can be typological, historical, or affective; but, above all, it means to look for places and create stories and relations with them, including faraway places locked in our memory, or even imaginary ones. These places are streets, buildings, squares, horizons, sometimes panoramic views, that merge into a journey through the city. The photographer’s task is to work with distance, to take measures, to re-arrange space, to find an equilibrium between *here* and *there*, and, ultimately, to seek out the possible meanings of a place.”⁹

In *Mosca Verticale* the panoramic view plays a prominent role, twisted and adjusted to assist the photographer in his quest for meaningful clues. The visual journey through the city, signposted by the Seven Sisters, is defined by a systematic alternation between pictures of the towers (general views as well as close-ups) and pictures from the towers (high-angle shots as well as wide panoramic views). The latter enabled Basilico to depict various aspects of the city visible from above, such as the patterns of street traffic, the texture of the urban fabric, and the shape of individual buildings that stand out from the landscape – not least other Stalin’s towers that are visible in the distance. As Zanetti points out: “The sites of the towers were carefully chosen to impress upon the silhouette of the city vertical features that embody Socialism, and at the same time to provide views of one another.”¹⁰

The book teems with visual echoes that resonate across time as well as space. In his search for “stories and relations”, Basilico revisited some illustrious historical precedents. For instance, a high-angle shot from the Leningradskaya Hotel overlooking the adjacent Komsomolskaya Square (with the busy Kazanskaya railway station in the top-right corner) is reminiscent of “The Octopus”, Alvin Langdon Coburn’s famous 1912 photograph of Madison Square Park taken from the observation deck of the Metropolitan Life Tower – the tallest building in the world at the time. This picture, which a year later was shown in Coburn’s exhibition “New York from Its Pinnacles”, has been widely regarded as a key moment in the history of urban photography *from above*: not only for the abstraction of the detached view, couched in a pictorialist atmosphere, but also for its reflection of the dominant position embodied by Manhattan’s rising skyscrapers.¹¹ The shadow cast over the square by the imposing tower in “The Octopus” may be read as an index of the power structures that were shaping the metropolis in the early 20th century, when the view from above came to define a privileged social position as much as a popular visual spectacle. Furthermore, as I have argued elsewhere, Coburn’s towering gaze encapsulates the dual function taken up by high-rise architecture with regard to photography – that is, as both viewing platform and viewed object.¹² This twofold role is played out again and again in *Mosca Verticale*, where the modernist *vue en plongée* is redeemed and brought to new fruition. While Basilico had previously paid homage to New Vision photographers, with explicit nods to Berenice Abbott’s 1930s pictures of/from New York skyscrapers, his Moscow project alluded in particular to the work of Aleksander Rodchenko, whose slanted views of the Soviet capital were amongst the most radical experiments in urban photography of the interwar period.

Photography became a prominent medium of Soviet propaganda during the first five-year plan for the development of a centralised national economy that was undertaken by Stalin in 1928. Against this background, Rodchenko and his fellow artists of the *October* group set about exploring the dynamic aspects of urban life that could be registered through the new hand-held cameras with fast lenses. Rodchenko maintained that multiple snapshots should be taken from the viewpoints most appropriate to each subject, and these partial views should then be combined to attain a deeper understanding of reality. By those terms, the task of the avant-garde photographer was to dissect the visual world and reassemble it, dialectically, into a new and revolutionary image. In 1928, Rodchenko famously urged his fellow Soviet artists to abandon altogether the straight viewing angle: “Photograph from all viewpoints except ‘from the belly button,’ until they all become acceptable. The most interesting viewpoints today are ‘from above down’ and ‘from below up,’ and we should work at them.”¹³ By force of working *at them*,

oblique angles became the photographic signifiers of a modern way of seeing, as the act of tilting the camera was meant to shake off the burden of bourgeois pictorial representation. This framing technique led to a variety of effects. As Peter Galassi pointed out: “The oblique [perspective] can disengage the viewer from the scene, rendering it as a pattern of unfamiliar forms, unburdened of their worldly association. Or it can aggressively implicate the viewer in the scene, evoking a vertiginous plunge into an all too palpable space.”¹⁴ Although Rodchenko occasionally managed to combine these effects, he was – in contradistinction to Moholy-Nagy, for example – a master of the vertiginous plunge.

Rodchenko’s radical vision culminated in the early 1930s when he was tasked to document the “New Moscow”. The oblique perspective allowed him to transfigure ordinary street scenes into dynamic views – a photographic exercise in *ostranenie*, the art of defamiliarization theorised by Viktor Shklovsky.¹⁵ At a time when aviation and aeroplane photography were broadening the horizon of urban visibility, the *vue en plongée* became part of an expanded imagery of the modern city. By simulating an aerial perspective, the high-angle shot was meant to dislocate the viewer from an atrophied habit of perception. It represented the city, quite literally, as a revolutionary landscape: a visual field that appeared to be spinning before the viewer’s eyes. Rodchenko’s vertiginous views of Moscow marked at once the climax and the abrupt end of an artistic movement whose vision of revolution was predicated on a revolution of vision. With the decree on the arts, promulgated by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1932, the creative impetus of the Russian avant-garde was largely defused.

The formal influence of Rodchenko’s photography on Basilico’s Moscow project is so explicit that one would be tempted to take it at face value. Critics were quick to point out the differences. In a short essay published in *Mosca Verticale*, Christian Caujolle noted: “You can’t help being reminded that this was also the city of Rodchenko [...] Basilico, however, has not become a constructivist, and none of his images is meant to celebrate the buildings that he portrays.”¹⁶ As we have seen, the Seven Sisters provided him essentially with a series of observation points from which to apprehend the scale and shape of Moscow’s ongoing transformation. While Basilico might not have “become a constructivist”, he palpably engaged in a distant and productive dialogue with Rodchenko. The latter’s method reverberates through *Mosca Verticale*, which is organised as a sequence of visual fragments radiating from the towers. The constant change of perspective, coupled with the shifting distances and tonal alternations, manifests the “dynamic attitude of the gaze” that marks Basilico’s own approach to verticality. By framing each view from a particular angle and distance, he set out to measure up the city’s landscape from the buildings that, for more than half a century, were the main architectural landmarks of the capital and amongst the tallest buildings in Europe. In doing so, Basilico worked with – and, arguably, *worked out* – a distance that was historical no less than geographical. His systematic use of oblique perspectives was more than a formal homage to the Russian avant-garde: by photographing Moscow from Stalin’s towers, he might well have attempted to vindicate Rodchenko’s vision eighty years later, at another moment of significant change for the city. It is as though the Italian photographer (a highly cultured leftist who, in a documentary, can be heard whistling *L’Internationale* while walking to work), had elected his Russian predecessor as an inspirational guide on his journey through the city. We are here reminded of Geoff Dyer’s insight: “All the great photographers are capable of metamorphosing themselves, if only occasionally and accidentally, into other photographers.”¹⁷

Pushing this line of interpretation, it might be argued that Basilico’s camera managed not only to capture the vertical aspect of late-Noughties Moscow, but also to evoke the imminent growth that was about to explode. Two major skyscrapers had recently been completed by the time of *Mosca Verticale*, and the book’s title itself sounds almost prophetic in light of the wave of construction that has since swept over the city where, today, are situated seven out of the ten tallest buildings in Europe. The most dizzying shots of the entire volume are in the closing

section, dedicated to the massive complex of Moscow State University (MGU): at 240 meters of height, the tallest of the sisters and formerly the tallest building in Europe for nearly four decades. This building is typically introduced by a set of frontal views in black and white, ranging from wide-angle photographs of the architecture to close-ups of the façades; we are then lifted up, as it were, to the summit and shown the surrounding cityscape at varying angles as though from a banking plane that gradually steadies its line of flight – a vertiginous impression that is further heightened by the turrets on the foreground. The horizon line is straightened in the last two pictures, which restore a sense of balance to the series. Basilico's dizzying journey through Moscow, punctuated by historical references along with geographic landmarks, is ultimately defined by his typical penchant for equilibrium.

The chain of references is by no means closed yet. For *Mosca Verticale* anticipated, and perhaps even heralded, the popular vogue of "rooftopping photography" that burgeoned in the early 2010s. This phenomenon, which first emerged in North America, thrived on the popularity of self-portraits taken from extreme heights (often in precarious positions) and posted on photo-sharing websites before it broke into the mainstream media.¹⁸ It found a fertile ground in Moscow, where a group of young Russian "rooftoppers" (or "roofers") climbed Stalin's towers and other tall structures to take pictures from on high. The pinnacle of the Moscow State University building has been a favourite location for young roofers, such as Vitaly Raskalov and Kirill Oreshkin, whose sensational shots have been widely reproduced in the media. In some respects these photos stand poles apart from those taken by Basilico in the same place. If, in the latter case, the vertiginous cityscapes are highly controlled and craftily edited into an art book, the rooftoppers' pictures possess a raw immediacy that results not only from their rapid appearance and circulation on the Internet, but also from the frequent presence of the climber-cum-photographer within the frame.

These "trophy shots", as they are sometimes called, might easily be dismissed as mere thrill-seekers' selfies, but might also be viewed as architectural photographs of a kind. By arousing the giddy sensation of being *on the edge*, they signal the enduring power of the *vue an plongée* and its capacity to reconfigure the image of/from high-rises from ever new perspectives. What Galassi wrote about Rodchenko's oblique shots is all the more apposite here, for rooftopping photographs do contrive to "aggressively implicate the viewer in the scene, evoking a vertiginous plunge into an all too palpable space." Although their impetus is fundamentally different from that which animated a professional photographer like Basilico, these pictures have a distinct, un-mediated power of their own: without any claim to art status, they expose a space of visceral thrill and anxiety, thereby making an implicit commentary on the fragile relationship between body and space in the vertical city. The desire to reclaim the city's summits appears to merge with the dream of flying over it.

Russian roofers have been climbing skyscrapers the world over, yet have also held on to their home ground. A target of recent explorations has been Moscow's International Business Centre (MIBC), the high-rise district also known as Moskva-City which currently hosts the three tallest buildings in Europe. The sight of dizzying heights from these "supertall" buildings, which lie partly empty due to the latest economic downturn, manifests the monumental ambitions of today's powers that be – embodied by global financial institutions. Although the skyscraper cluster was still up-and-coming when Basilico photographed Moscow, his pictures evoke the vertical dimension of the city in a way that appears to be almost a premonition. The photographer searched the landscape for spatial relations between here and there, but also for temporal relations between past and present – in photographic as well as architectural terms. While *Mosca Verticale* registered the image of the city at a moment of change, it may also have prefigured a vertiginous growth that was simmering under the surface, and which other gazes would observe in years to come.

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notes

¹ Basilico's exhibition "Verticale" was held at the Photo & Contemporary gallery in Turin, between 1 January to 31 December 2007.

² Gabriele Basilico, quoted on the website of the "Verticale" exhibition (translated by the author); accessed August 7, 2016, <http://www.photoandcontemporary.com/event.aspx?ev=1137&ar=10>

³ The term is shorthand for *prise de vue en plongée*, an expression derived from the language of cinema.

⁴ Basilico, *ibid.*

⁵ Gabriele Basilico, *Vertiginous Moscow: Stalin's City Today* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009).

⁶ The project was first exhibited under the title "Gabriele Basilico. Moscou Verticale", at the Cité de l'Architecture / Palais de Chaillot, Paris, 23 October – 30 November 2008. It was later shown in Moscow at the State Museum of Architecture, 20 December 2011 – 5 February 2012.

⁷ Alessandro De Magistris, "Axis Mundi: A Vertical Moscow in Stalin's Shadow," in *Vertiginous Moscow* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 6.

⁸ Gabriele Basilico, interviewed in *Fotografia Italiana: Gabriele Basilico* (dir. Giampiero D'Angeli & Alice Maxia), DVD, Giart – Visioni d'Arte, 2008.

⁹ Gabriele Basilico, "Inhabiting the Metropolis," (translated by D. Deriu) in *Emerging Landscapes: Between Production and Representation*, edited by Davide Deriu, Krystallia Kamvasinou, and Eugénie Shinkle (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 21. Italics in the original.

¹⁰ Umberto Zanetti, "Moscow: Urban Transformations," in *Vertiginous Moscow* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 4.

¹¹ See for instance: Meir Wigoder, "The 'Solar Eye' of Vision: Emergence of the Skyscraper-Viewer in the Discourse on Heights in New York City, 1890-1920," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 61 (2002): 152–169. Thomas Stubblefield, "The City from Afar: Urbanization and the Aerial View in Alvin Coburn's The Octopus," *Journal of Urban History* 41 (2015): 340–353.

¹² Davide Deriu, "'Don't Look Down!' – A Short History of Rooftopping Photography," *The Journal of Architecture* 21/7 (2016): 1033-1061.

¹³ Alexander Rodchenko, "Downright Ignorance or a Mean Trick?" in *Photography in the Modern Era*, edited by Christopher Phillips (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), 246.

¹⁴ Peter Galassi, "Rodchenko and Photography's Revolution," in *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, edited by Magdalena Dabrowski, Leah Dickerman, and Peter Galassi (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 120.

¹⁵ The influence of Shklovsky's theories on Rodchenko's practice was all the more direct since the two worked together within the LEF group.

¹⁶ Christian Caujolle, "Gabriele Basilico. Unexpected Moscow," in *Vertiginous Moscow* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 10.

¹⁷ Geoff Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2012), 170.

¹⁸ Deriu, *op. cit.*