Gesturality: An Ethico-Aesthetic of Anxiety in Late Photography

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Abstract
By examining the iconised photographs of the COVID-19 pandemic, published under the heading of *The Great Empty* by the *New York Times* in March 2020, this article explores the aesthetic operations and ethical implications of representing anxiety through photographing desolate landscapes. To do so, it situates these images within the genre of late photography, also known as aftermath photography, to discuss how emptiness can function as a surrogate for anxiety. First, by foregrounding the unique temporality of the landscape genre in photography, it examines the aesthetic dimension of seeing deserted places in photographs. By shifting its focus from the image to its caption, it then discusses how the caption of such photographs can interpolate an ethical dimension onto them. Finally, by drawing on Giorgio Agamben's philosophy of "gesture," the article puts forward that the combination of aestheticized photographs with ethicised captions in *The Great Empty* expresses anxiety as a mode of *gesturality*: a sui generis communicational mode that simultaneously galvanizes and paralyzes the viewer.

Keywords: Late Photography, Gesture, Aesthetic, Ethic, Landscape, COVID-19, Agamben.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, photographing emptiness has become a dominant form of representing anxiety across the globe. Ranging from empty streets and highways to abandoned restaurants and concert halls, photographs of vacant locations have entwined the menacing mood of the pandemic with the alluring charm of urban desolation. Such visual representations went viral through the overtly aestheticized photos published in the *New York Times* in March 2020, under the heading of *The Great Empty* (Figure 1; Figure 2; Figure 3). By situating these images within the genre of late photography, also known as aftermath photography, this article examines the aesthetic and ensuing ethics of representing emptiness as a surrogate for anxiety. In the late photography genre, photographers capture a vacant location in the world, where usually something tragic took place in the past; and, regardless of its physical features, they consider it a place instilled with meaning. In doing so, late photographers utilise emptiness as a vehicle for communicating disturbing memories. Consequently, capturing deserted places in late photography becomes a means of expressing that which has been absented from the photograph. In the same vein, when gazing across the hollowed terrains of *The Great Empty*, we are called to look tenaciously at something that inevitably evades the photograph, at something that remains merely as an absentee of that representation: the existential menace of the pandemic.

By taking the photographs of *The Great Empty* as its case study, this article explores the aesthetic operations and ethical implications of representing anxiety through photographing desolate landscapes. To do so, it first expounds on the genre of late photography vis-à-vis the

photographs of *The Great Empty*. Next, to examine the aesthetic dimension of seeing deserted places in photographs, it draws on the unique temporality of the landscape genre in photography. By shifting its focus from the image to its caption, it then discusses how the caption of such photographs can interpolate an ethical dimension onto them. Finally, by drawing on Giorgio Agamben's philosophy of "gesture", the article puts forward that the combination of aestheticized photographs with ethicised captions in late photography delivers anxiety as a mode of *gesturality*: a communication of communicability.

The Aftermath of COVID-19

Just a few months after the outbreak of COVID-19, when the word "pandemic" became an intrinsic part and parcel of everyday conversations, social media networks were already bursting with images of empty vistas across the globe. It is around this time that the usual effervescence of Time Square in New York City and the exuberance of the Place de la Concorde in Paris were suddenly replaced by an apprehensive, yet appealing, emptiness. Simultaneously haunting and alluring, such images became ubiquitous when the *New York Times* published an online photographic essay entitled *The Great Empty* (2020).[1] The assortment of photographs exhibited in this visual essay included, but were not limited to: an abandoned subway station in Munich (Germany); a vacant concert hall in Moscow (Russia); an emptied square in Caracas (Venezuela); a derelict beach in Los Angeles (US); a desolate bus stop in Tehran (Iran); an evacuated airport in Tokyo (Japan); and a deserted scene of the Red Fort (India). According to the columnist of the *New York Times*, what unites these haunting images and echoes throughout all of them is that "emptiness proliferates like the virus."[2]

Looking at these photographs, it is as though emptiness has become a means of conveying the insidious virus and its ensuing fatalities, which, at the time of writing, is nearing the heart-rending number of 6.8 million lost lives across the globe.[3] But instead of representing the virus or its calamitous consequences, the viewer of these photos is merely confronted with placid streets, peaceful highways, serene landscapes, and still cityscapes. All one sees is, in short, a salubrious emptiness. In other words, when looking at the emptied terrains of *The Great Empty,* we are invited to look resolutely at something that has been left out of the frame: the anxious and precarious living state imposed by the pandemic. The only source of understanding the grim context of such photographs is hence not so much their beautified vistas, but their captions. While, for instance, Figure 1 displays a graceful sunset where the sky, the sea, and the coastline are merged under the glimmer of a seraphic amber colour, its caption reads: "an unchanging ocean, a barely recognizable beach in Santa Monica." Likewise, Figure 2 shows an idyllic scenery of California suburbia, where hazy skyscrapers in the background and

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[1] 'The Great Empty', *New York Times*, 23 March (2020). At: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/23/world/coronavirus-great-empty.html. Accessed 15/03/2023.

[2] 'The Great Empty,' *New York Times.*

[3] 'Corona Virus Death tool', https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/coronavirus-death-toll/ (Accessed March 15, 2023).

colourful semi-detached houses in the foreground are overlayed with the lush grass patches that extend onto the edge of the frame. Once again, the caption of the photo reads: “California residents have been ordered to stay home”, reminding the viewer that the pleasing landscape is altered by the perilous virus which has enforced all the residents to remain indoors. Consequently, while these images invite us to amiably gaze across the photographic frame, their captions unsettle our gaze by voicing the distressing content that lies dormant in this communication. However, such an uncanny admixture, which conflates an encouraging photograph with a discouraging caption, was not created during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such a visual strategy has been historically utilized in the photographic genre of late photography, whose way of handling ethics and aesthetics bears striking resemblances to the *New York Times* photographs.

Late photography, also known as aftermath photography, is a contemporary and rapidly expanding photographic genre that has an incontrovertible affinity with empty places, especially the ones that bear tragic, and at times traumatic, memories of the past. It was not however until the 1990s that this genre emerged as a cohesive paradigm, popularized by Joel Meyerowitz’s images of the Ground Zero, and Paul Seawright’s, Charles Green’s, Lyndell Brown’s, and Luc Delahaye’s photos of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This genre finds its precedents in Roger Fenton’s images of *Valley of the Shadow of Death* (1855), which demonstrated the aftermath of the Crimean War, and in Alain Resnais’s film *Night and Fog* (1955), which reflected on the images of abandoned Nazi concentration camps of Auschwitz and Majdanek.[4] In the aftermath genre, the photographer visits an empty terrain in the world, where something went adrift in the past, and, regardless of its physical features, considers it a place replete with significance. For this representational system, a narrow alley is as much of a place as a colossal landscape, since for late photography “what defines a place is not its physical features, but the historicity that is anchored to it.”[5] As art historian Donna West Brett has put it, late photographs are “both constructing notions *of* place, and in turn, as being constructed *by* place.”[6]

Nonetheless, instead of seeing the photographed event in the frame, as a slice of time or a frozen movement in space, the spectators of late photography encounter a hollowed-out trace of the event represented through sheer void and emptiness.[7] As photography theorist David Company has succinctly put it, the spectator of late photography is confronted with “the trace of the trace of the event.”[8] This means, if usually capturing an event in the world would leave an indexical mark in the photograph, as it has been for decades alleged amongst photo historians, the belatedness of the photographer to witness the event in late photography results

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[4] Veronica Tello, ‘The Aesthetics and Politics of Aftermath Photography: Rosemary Laing’s welcome to Australia’, *Third Text*, vol. 28, no. 6 (2004), p. 555.

[5] Ali Shobeiri, *Place: Towards a Geophilosophy of Photography* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2021), p. 112.

[6] Donna West Brett, *Photography and Place: Seeing and Not Seeing, Germany after 1945* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 2. (Emphasis in original).

[7] The act of taking a photograph has been usually associated with “slicing” a moment in time or “cutting out” a piece of space. Such readings have been propounded by thinkers such as Susan Sontag and Christian Metz. For further elaboration on spatiality and temporality of the photograph, see Christian Metz, ‘Photography and Fetish’, *October*, vol. 34 (1985), pp. 81-90 and Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1977).

[8] David Campany, ‘Safety in Numbness: Some Remarks on Problems of “Late Photography”’, in *Where is the Photograph,* ed. David Green (Maidstone: Photoworks, 2003), p. 124.

in nothing but a trace/index that is twice removed from its source.[9] That is how late photographs create an uncanny feeling in the viewer: while they pretend to be containers of visual information, they offer nothing to the viewer but sheer emptiness. In doing so, they lure us into seeing what ineluctably escapes the photographic frame: the absent event and its resultant calamities. Similarly, when looking at the viral photos of *The Great Empty* we are asked to look at something that remains imperceptible in the photographs: the invisible virus and its ensuing anxieties. Whether the subject matter is a belated event or an untraceable virus, in both cases, we are left with a beautified landscape impregnated with solemn content.

Despite the poignant story that lingers behind the picture surface, the viewer of *The Great Empty* is simply confronted with an uneventful landscape imbued with a lush atmosphere, whether such a landscape is located at the beach (Figure 1), in the suburb (Figure 2), or amidst the city inhabitants (Figure 3).

Figure 1. "An unchanging ocean, a barely recognizable beach in Santa Monica" by Philip Cheung in *The Great Empty*. ANP / New York Times ©.

[9] In the history of photography there has been an ongoing debate about whether the photographic image can be seen as a sign for the reality it represents, particularly whether it is an iconic or indexical sign. If the indexical sign implies that the photograph has a causal relationship to its referent (e.g., smoke being an index of fire), the iconic sign suggests that the photograph conveys what it represents only by means of imitation, (e.g., a painting of fire being an icon of real fire). However, as Tom Gunning argues, indexicality and iconicity of photographs have always been intertwined, since our evaluation of the photograph as an accurate embodiment of reality depends not only on its indexical basis but also "on our recognition of it as looking like its subject." Therefore, he contends that the "the photograph exceeds the function of a sign" precisely because its "truth value" always depends on its "visual accuracy" (indexicality) to the same extent as it does on its "recognisability" (iconicity). Tom Gunning, 'What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs', *Nordicom Review vol.* 25, nos. 1-2 (2004), pp. 41-48.

Figure 2. "California residents have been ordered to stay home" by Rozette Rago in *The Great Empty*. ANP / New York Times ©.

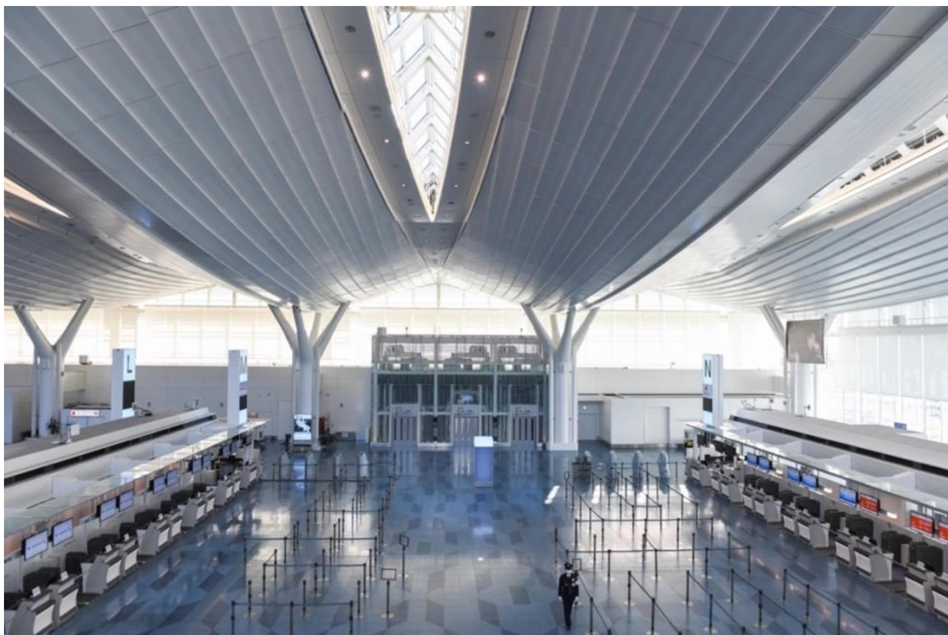

Figure 3. "When the world stops traveling" by Noriko Hayashi in *The Great Empty*. ANP / New York Times ©.

Each of these photographs could have been a depiction of an idyllic spot for a Sunday-afternoon stroll, wherein one could energize for the following week by simply looking at the placid scenery. To put it differently, instead of giving access to the distressing content of these photographs (i.e., the psychological and existential toll that COVID-19 has taken on the entire world), such landscape depictions mislead the viewer: they instigate a leisurely seeing at the expense of ignoring the non-represented. As I will discuss in the following, such a paradoxical

visual strategy has to do with the inherent affinity of the landscape genre with the temporal dimension of seeing.

The Aestheticized Photograph

> The encounter with the photograph is the encounter between two presents, one of which, already past, one of which can be animated in the act of looking.[10]

Regardless of their different interpretations of the physical sites, the photographers of *The Great Empty* have approached the emptied locations as landscapes. Yet, instead of being instilled with an idyllic atmosphere, these landscapes are perfused with an invisible, yet menacing, presence of the pandemic. Whether such landscapes are natural or cultural, indoor or outdoor, urban or rural, what visually weds these photographs is the representational schema and composition of the landscape genre. This genre, however, has a variety of manifestations. As the geographer D.W. Meining once noted, the same landscape can be seen as a system, artifact, history, ideology, wealth, problem, nature, habitat, and place, depending on what qualities we elicit from and assign to it.[11] Considering landscapes as places, Meining suggests, is to regard them as "particular localities" wherein "our individual lives are necessarily affected in myriad ways."[12] In this light, *The Great Empty* reveals how disparate landscapes across the globe can be seen as particular localities wherein the psychological and physical well-being of residents are being ravaged by the virus. It is this specificity that unifies these photographs: they are all landscapes seen through the overarching conduit of place.

Although in painting the landscape is customarily interpreted via the categories of the pastoral, the sublime, and the picturesque,[13] the medium of photography has its own modalities when it comes to the landscape genre. As photography scholar Liza Wells suggests, there are mainly two key lines in landscape photography: first, "pictorial" landscapes, which are constructed according to the "preconceived idea" of what a landscape can look like; second, "topographical" landscapes, which are meant to function as neutral records of a given location.[14] Landscape photos in late photography, including the ones shown in *The Great Empty*, fall into the latter category since in this genre the photographer's primary intention is to make an exact geographical documentation of a place in the world. Still, such a classification does not seem to aid the interpretation of *The Great Empty*; in that, despite all of them being topographical landscapes, each photo seems to deliver a distinct mood to the viewer. For example, while Figure 1 conveys a sense of tranquillity and immensity by adjoining the amber sky with the stygian sea, Figure 2 exudes an eerie combination of stillness and liveliness by

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[10] Marianne Hirsch, 'Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2002), p. 21.
[11] D.W. Meining, 'The Beholding Eye: Ten Versions of the Same Scene', in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, edited by D.W. Meining (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 33.
[12] Meining, 'The Beholding Eye', p. 46.
[13] The classic appreciation of landscape pertains to three categories: first, the pastoral, which reflects a landscape that is meant to please the viewer through "regularity, smoothness, tranquillity and unity"; second, the sublime, which relies on an emotional response to the grandeur of features"; and, third, the picturesque, which reconciles the two by blending "the craggy irregularity of the sublime into the smaller more intimate compass of the pastoral." Isis Brook, 'Aesthetic Appreciation of Landscape', in *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies*, ed. Peter Howard, Ian Thompson and Emma Waterton (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 108.
[14] Liz Wells, *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 33.

overlaying the imposing buildings in the background with the rustic apartments in the foreground. Even though they are all topographic landscapes, aspiring to give accurate records of the physical locations, every photo in *The Great Empty* communicates a distinct ambiance to the viewer. This is exactly why the traditional categories of landscape depictions have been frequently criticized,[15] since they are all premised upon the interpretation of the landscape as a visible scene: as something merely visual. Landscape photography, however, is not only about the scenic interpretation of places, but it also has a close kinship with the temporal dimension of seeing.

When we look at a landscape, philosopher Giorgio Agamben notes, "We perceive a stop in time, as though we are suddenly thrown into a more original time. There is a stop, an interruption in the incessant flow of instants that, coming from the future, sink into the past."[16] Looking at landscape images, Agamben suggests, the linear sequence of time seems to come to a halt, which causes an experience of temporal suspension in the viewer. Commenting on the possibility of temporal deferral in photography, theorist Thierry de Duve argues that it is mainly in "time exposure" photos that the viewer experiences a break of time. In time exposure shots, such as landscapes and still life photos, the viewer experiences a "now" that is "without any spatial attachment", since "it is not a present but a virtual availability of time in general."[17] For de Duve, while snapshot photos can create a tension between arriving too early to witness an event in the photo and always being too late to experience the event in real life, time exposure photos can generate a temporal cessation that is triggered in the act of looking. In other words, he suggests that the "now" of landscape photography is not embodied in a way that one can see happening immediately within the frame; it rather remains as a potential that viewers can experience through prolonged looking at the photograph. As he puts it:

> The word *now*, used to describe the kind of temporality involved in time exposure, does not refer to actual time … It is to be understood as a pause *in time*, charged with a potential actualization, which will be carried in the time-consuming act of looking.[18]

Accordingly, in confronting landscape photos one not only registers a visual scene but also experiences a pause or stop in time: a temporal hiatus that comes about through the extension of the act of looking. Similarly, while looking at *The Great Empty* photographs, one not only registers the depicted scene but also experiences a temporal arrest that constitutes the now of the landscape: a temporal dimension that awaits actualization via the elongation of looking at the photograph.

Moreover, as photography theorist Victor Burgin reminds us, in a long confrontation with a photographic image it "no longer receives our look, reassuring us of our founding centrality, it rather, as it were, avoids our gaze."[19] Here Burgin foregrounds two essential

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[15] Isis Brook, 'Aesthetic Appreciation of Landscape', p. 111.
[16] Giorgio Agamben, 'The Original Structure of the Work of Art', in *The Man Without Content*, translated by Giorgia Albert (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 99.
[17] Thierry de Duve, 'Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox', *October*, vol. 5 (1978), p. 121.
[18] Thierry de Duve, 'Time Exposure', p. 121. (Emphasis in original).
[19] Victor Burgin, 'Looking at Photographs', in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1982), p. 152.

elements embedded in prolonged looking at photographs. First, by remaining long with photographic images, one no longer simply sees the image, which implies a *passive* registration of the scene, but rather looks at it, which entails an *active* engagement in the scene. Second, when looking at the photograph for a long time, the image seems to elude our gaze, thus interrogating the authority of the viewer in the act. As geographer Denis Cosgrove explains, most European languages differentiate between the passive and active usage of the sense of sight in relation to "seeing" and "looking".

As he elucidates:

> The former suggests the passive and physical act of registering the external world by eye; the latter implies an intentional directing of the eyes towards an object of interest. In English, *viewing* implies a more sustained and disinterested use of the sense of sight; while *witnessing* suggests that the experience of seeing is being recorded with the intention of its verification or subsequent communication. *Gazing* entails a sustained act of seeing in which emotions is stirred in some way, while *staring* holds a similar meaning but conveys a sense of query or judgment on the part of the starer.[20]

On the one hand, looking at landscape photographs encourages the viewers to maintain their look, thereby bringing the now of the photograph to a standstill and causing an experience of temporal suspension. On the other hand, long looking at photographs impels the viewers to relinquish their position and become witnesses whose act of looking requires further inquiry. In doing so, elongated looking at landscape photographs invites the beholder to stop uninvolved gazing and, instead, make a judgment about what is looked at: to stare at it. It is now that the close rapport between late photography and the landscape photos in *The Great Empty* becomes tangible. If the photographers of *The Great Empty* have chosen the landscape genre to convey the inquietude of the pandemic, it is because looking at landscapes can cause an interruption in the incessant flow of instants, thus creating a temporal arrest within which anxiety is contained but not manifested. In other words, if these photographers have used landscape imagery to relay a sense of trepidation, it is to invite us to *look* intentionally at the ramifications of the pandemic, to *witness* carefully its psychological and existential toll, and to *stare* interrogatively at the apprehensive reality that lingers behind these stilly landscapes. In short, instead of voicing anxiety, as is common in news photographs, these overtly aestheticized landscapes deliver it in sheer silence: we feel it but do not see it.

Nevertheless, without their captions, these photographs would have been nothing but beatified landscapes, devoid of the actual unsettling content they are meant to convey. Therefore, by shifting my focus from the photographs of *The Great Empty* to their captions, I will next discuss how these explanatory texts can project an ethical dimension onto these landscapes.

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[20] Denis Cosgrove, 'Landscape and the European Sense of Sight – Eyeing Nature', in *Handbook of Cultural Geography*, ed. Kay Anderson, Mona Domosh, Steve Pile, and Nigel Thrift (London: Sage Publications, 2003), p. 253. (Emphasis added).

The Ethicised Caption

The image is mute, and the text crackles with white noise.[21]

Commenting on the empty cityscapes taken by French photographer Eugène Atget around 1900, Walter Benjamin said that "free-floating contemplation" was not an apt way of describing his photos; for, not having any caption, they could have addressed the viewer to an infinite number of readings. Thanks to Atget's uncaptioned photographs of deserted places in Paris, Benjamin declared that for the first time "caption have become obligatory" in the history of photography.[22] Up until today, Atget's photographs of vacant places in Paris stand as irrefutable cases of how language use can affect photographic interpretation. Without their captions, for example, while one can construe *The Great Empty* photos as the outcomes of leisurely urban explorations, another can interpret them as careful geographical documentations of the given locations. One of the most ubiquitous ways to curtail such a misinformed reading is to label photographs with a caption: an accompanying text that limits possible reflections about the intended meaning of the photo. Still, as Burgin has contended, not every photograph needs to be captioned to indicate a link with language or carry a linguistic component: "even a photograph which has no actual writing on or around it is traversed by language when it is 'read' by a viewer."[23] When we look at a photograph that is dark in tones, according to Burgin, we tend to project "all the weight of signification that darkness has been given in social use" onto the photograph. Following this line of argument, he argues that even an uncaptioned photograph carries a linguistic component within it, because as soon as it is looked at "in memory, in association, snatches of words and images continually intermingle and exchange one for the other."[24]

Although Burgin is right in saying that each photograph is invaded by language immediately after it is looked at, regarding *The Great Empty* (and late photography at large), the latent linguistic codes of the photograph lead the viewer astray. For instance, by ignoring their captions and simply long looking at *The Great Empty* photographs, one may interpret them as: the paradisiacal coast (Figure 1); the peaceful countryside (Figure 2), and the immaculate airport interior (Figure 3). Not having access to their captions, we are thus embroiled in what literary theorist Roland Barthes once referred to as "the polysemy of images"[25]: the fact that in each photo coexists infinite possible signs depending on the viewer's interpretation of them. To be clear, without their captions, long looking at the late photos of *The Great Empty* misled the viewers rather than guiding them. This is because in late photography the photographer visits the aftermath of an event wherein something has gone askew before the photographer's arrival; hence, to make up for the absence of visual

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[21] Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Distinct Oscillation', in *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 75.
[22] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), p. 233.
[23] Burgin, 'Looking at Photographs', p. 144.
[24] Victor Burgin, 'Seeing Sense', in *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Post-Modernity* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 51.
[25] Roland Barthes, 'The Rhetoric of the Image', in *Image Music Text*, ed. Stephan Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 30.

information about the event, late photographs, more than many other photographic genres, necessitate the inclusion of caption.

Without a caption or a title, linguist Clive Scott asserts that photographs are essentially insufficient and incoherent, in that they "refer too pointedly and yet do not know how to name what they refer to".[26] For Scott, a photograph's caption is to be understood essentially as an "intervention" on the side of the photographer, which forestalls the response of the viewer. In other words, he suggests that a photographer captions the photograph to reduce impertinent interpretations on the part of the viewer, thus inhibiting the polysemy of the image to govern acts of looking. In addition, he argues that a caption never coincides with the image: it either precedes it or succeeds it, thereby causing the meaning to be displaced from the image.[27] To illustrate this point, he distinguishes between three ways with which captions inform the act of looking: first, "as a destination", as a description of what is represented in the photograph; second, "as a point of departure", as something non-interfering that directs the viewer and then leaves the image to do its work; third, "as a parallel but displaced commentary, set at a distance from the picture, so that the meaning is neither in the picture nor in the title, but in their point of convergence".[28] In the case of *The Great Empty* photographs, the caption does not make explicit the real toll of the pandemic (i.e., the lost lives and the unsettling milieu in which the local communities reside), nor does it function as a non-interfering element that allows the image to continue its work; for, once the caption is read and the real context of these images is revealed to the viewer, the text and the image are severed from each other, each voicing a different narrative. To explicate, if looking at these landscapes would constitute a state of ataraxy in the viewer, reading the captions and thus learning about their real context unsettles the elongated gaze of the viewer. As a result, the caption merely functions as parallel but displaced commentary about the photo, which, by distancing itself from the image and disconcerting the photograph, signifies that the meaning is neither in the image nor in the text, but in their very point of convergence. Nonetheless, the question remains: why did the late photographers choose such an uncanny juxtaposition of the text and the image?

Observing the relationship between the text and the image, art historian W. J. T. Mitchell argues that the "overlapping between photography and language is best understood, not as a structural matter" but as a mode of "resistance".[29] To illustrate this point about photography Mitchell discusses a collaborative photo essay by James Agee and Walker Evans, called *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In this collaborative photo essay, which was published in 1941 in the USA, the American writer, Agee, and photographer, Evans, documented the lives of impoverished sharecroppers during the Great Depression. The photo essay is divided into two sections: one of which includes the uncaptioned photographs taken by Evans and the other half includes Agee's text, which provides descriptive information about the photographs, foregrounding the devastating context in which they were taken. In the words of Agee, who wrote the descriptive text: "The photographs are not illustrative. They and the text are *coequal*,

[26] Clive Scott, *The Spoken Image: Photography and Language* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 1999), p. 60.
[27] Scott, *The Spoken Image,* p. 51.
[28] Scott, *The Spoken Image.* p. 47.
[29] W. J. T. Mitchell, 'The Photographic Essays: Four Case Studies', in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Communication* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 281.

mutually independent, and fully collaborative."[30] As Mitchell proposes, the main reason for the separation of the image and the text is that the authors intended that, as beholders, "we find ourselves drawn, as it were, into a vortex of *collaboration* and *resistance*" with the photographs.[31] In other words, they have separated the text and the photographs to impel the viewer to collaborate in the image through the act of looking and, at the same time, given the disturbing contextual background offered by the text, to remain distant from and foreign to the images. Reminiscent of late photography that employs the image and the text as coequal, Agee and Evans utilized the text and the image as mutually dependent so as to create a space of collaboration and resistance in the spectator. In both cases, while the beholder is invited to participate and engage in the image through the act of looking, the distressing contextual knowledge given by the text nullifies the possibility of any collaboration, thus leaving the viewer in an ethical deadlock that hinders any effortless access to these photographs. According to Mitchell, for Evans and Agee the separation of the text and the image in communicating the devastating content of the photographs "is not, then, simply a formal characteristic but an *ethical strategy,* a way of preventing easy access to the world they represent".[32]

Even though *The Great Empty* photographs and the photographs of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* have different narratives, the ways in which they utilize the text and the image to convey the photograph's content bear a striking resemblance to each other: they both use the image as a means of invitation, collaboration, and participation and the text as a means of resistance, exclusion, and nullification, thereby constituting a space within which the viewer is caught in between the coequal power of the text and the image. Regarding *The Great Empty* photographs: while the landscape images encourage the viewer to look, react, and respond to them, by divulging the poignant narrative that lingers behind the picture's surface, the captions nullify the invitation of the landscape and thus exclude the viewer from the image. In doing so, the coequal yet counteracting forces of the image and the text impede easy access to the unsettling content of the photograph, ensnaring the beholder in an ethical predicament in which meaning ceases to be in the image or the text. As a result, a sense of foreboding is conveyed to the viewer through the photograph and the caption without being reduced to either of them; it simply comes into being inbetween the two, wherein the caption projects the grim context of the pandemic onto the photograph. In this situation, to use Jean-Luc Nancy's words, the solemn content of these photographs "oscillates distinctly between the two in a paper-thin space: recto the text, verso the image."[33] That is how the uncanny juxtaposition of an aestheticized photograph with an ethicized caption allows the photographers of *The Great Empty* to communicate a sense of anxiety without exposing it to the viewer.

However, communication not as something that can necessarily make visible the content of the photograph through the space between the text and the image, where the viewer also faces the ethical dilemma of collaboration and resistance; but, as in Giorgio Agamben's words, communication as a way of making a "gesture".

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[30] Quoted in Mitchell, 'The Photographic Essays', p. 290.
[31] Quoted in Mitchell, 'The Photographic Essays', p. 300.
[32] Quoted in Mitchell, 'The Photographic Essays', p. 295. (Emphasis added).
[33] Nancy, 'Distinct Oscillation', p. 75.

Gesturality: An Ethico-Aesthetic

> A good photographer knows how to grasp the eschatological nature of the gesture.[34]

For Agamben, the term "gesture" refers to how a communicative act can convey something without articulating it; that is, without making the content of the communication visible. Instead of making evident the content of an expressive act, Agamben writes, a gesture "makes expression possible, precisely by establishing a central emptiness within" the communication.[35] That is to say, he puts forward that in every expressive act (e.g., presenting a photograph that aims to convey specific content to the viewer) there is a part that is delivered as the internal void within the communication, which remains unarticulated and impalpable to the partakers. As he puts it, the term "gesture" refers to "what remains *unexpressed* in each expressive act."[36] Although the Agambenian gesture resides in an expressive act that aims to convey something, it remains inherently as the unexpressed part of the expression, since it does not produce, nor make visible, that which it contains. Instead, "what characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported", states Agamben.[37] That which can be endured and supported in a communication refers to the unexpressed aspect that can exist only as the central emptiness within it, as something that intrinsically resists articulation. To be clear, Agamben proposes that, although the gesture can become the vehicle of transmission for the unexpressed within an expression, it cannot produce or make visible the content of this transmission; instead, it merely functions as the carrier of the unexpressed part of the communication. That is why he argues that the term "gesture" concerning a communicative act differs from production and praxis, because,

> if producing is a means in view of an end and praxis is an end without means, the gesture then breaks with the false alternative between ends and means that paralyzes morality and presents instead means that, as such, evade the orbit of mediality without becoming, for this reason, ends.[38]

The gesture does not approach an end in order to produce something, as then it could manifest and make visible the content of the communication; nor does it refer to an end that does not ensue from any methods; instead, it becomes a means, or a way of reaching something, that never approaches an end. For Agamben, therefore, the gesture refers to pure means, whereby the unexpressed aspect of a communication can be conveyed, albeit that nothing can be produced. That is, the gesture is the possibility of presenting a means, a method, with which the unarticulated part of an expression is passed on, but not expressed. As Agamben succinctly puts it, the gesture is the "communication of a communicability."[39] In other words, the gesture

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[34] Giorgio Agamben, 'Judgment Day', in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), p. 25.
[35] Giorgio Agamben, 'The Author as Gesture', in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), p. 66.
[36] Agamben, 'The Author as Gesture', p. 66.
[37] Giorgio Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture', in *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 56.
[38] Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture', p. 26.
[39] Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture', p. 58.

is the very possibility of a communication in which the content can be transferred without being acted out. It is, in short: "*the process of making a means visible as such*", states Agamben.[40]

Returning to the photographs of *The Great Empty* at this point, if the photographers have situated the viewer in an ethical impasse between the image and the text, it is neither to embody nor to induce anxiety, but to communicate it precisely as what remains unexpressed in this communication. This means that, by entangling us in between aestheticized landscapes and ethicised captions, these photographs have created a spatial vortex through which the anxiety of the pandemic has been made palpable, but not necessarily visible, to the viewer. By entrapping us in between the invitation of the landscape and the exclusion of the caption, each of these photographs "makes a means visible as such": a method through which the global menace of the pandemic is communicated to us precisely as the internal absence within this communication. It is how *The Great Empty* photographs constitute an ethico-aesthetic that simultaneously empowers and disempowers us, exhilarates and devitalises us, thereby communicating the existential anxiety of the pandemic as an ontological modality of gesturality, that is: as a communication of communicability. In this condition, the feeling of anxiety becomes a means without an end, perpetuating ceaselessly between the photograph and its caption, wherein the beholder is concurrently beckoned by the aestheticized image and benumbed by the ethicised text.

Conclusion

By situating the photographs of *The Great Empty* within the genre of late photography, this paper has examined the aesthetical and ethical implications of using desolate landscape photos as surrogates for the anxiety caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. To discuss the aesthetic dimension of these photos, I have drawn on the intrinsic temporality of the landscape genre, showing how such images can create an elongated looking in which the viewer is invited to look, witness, and stare at that which is not visible in the photo. To discuss the ethical dimension of these photos, I have expounded on the specificity of captions in late photography, arguing how the incongruity between the caption and the image constitutes an ethical impasse for the viewer. Lastly, by drawing on Giorgio Agamben's philosophy of "gesture", I have proposed that the conflation of aestheticized photographs with ethicised captions in *The Great Empty* is a method of articulating the pandemic anxiety as a mode of gesturality: a sui generis communicational mode that simultaneously galvanises and paralyses the viewer.

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[40] Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture', p. 57. (Emphasis in original).