Visualising Deindustrial Ruins in an Oral History Project: Sesto San Giovanni (Milan)

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Introduction

In a special issue devoted to post-industrial oral history narratives, my contribution will focus on a photo gallery. Therefore, first of all, I have to explain why I am addressing the topic from this particular perspective. At the centre of interest is Sesto San Giovanni, a medium-sized city north of Milan that became the fifth largest industrial district in Italy after WWII, long recognised as "the factory city" or "the Italian Stalingrad". The photographs under consideration concentrate on the ruins of its big industries, built around the beginning of the 20th century and dismantled before that century drew to its close. The "part-time artist" Umberto Gillio,[1] who took the photos, is an amateur photographer who has devoted his time and skills to collaborate in an oral history project carried out between 2013 and 2015, a project in which I acted as a principal investigator together with two independent scholars, Sara Roncaglia and Sara Zanisi. It was born from the idea to enhance the cultural memory of industry in Sesto, and intended the photo reportage to act as an important visual segment of the entire research. Umberto Gillio's shots were meant to directly connect the photographic representation of former industrial spaces in Sesto the way they are preserved today with the oral testimonies collected in a campaign of interviews.

Our research has been funded by the Lombardy region[2], and one of the main requirements of the call for proposals we applied to was the ability to reach out to a wider audience rather than to a strictly academic one, and to ensure the dissemination of results in order to solicit the interest of the general public outside the university setting. That is why our investigation was intended as a public history endeavor, covering three main research products: an oral history archive – we collected almost 50 in-depth interviews about the aftermath of the industrial shutdown in Sesto[3]; a documentary based

1 http://www.umbertogillio.com/ (Accessed 16.04.2020).

2 We have worked in partnership with a local foundation, Fondazione ISEC - Istituto per la storia dell'età contemporanea (https://www.fondazioneisec.it/), which also preserves the large archives of the local industrial concerns, the independent association AVoce. Etnografia e storia del lavoro, dell'impresa e del territorio (http://www.avoce.eu/avoce/en/1229-2/), and my department at the University of Milan, the Department of Language Mediation and Intercultural Communication (http://eng.mediazione.unimi.it/ecm/home).

3 The interviews with former workers, union delegates, and managers from Falck Steelworks were realised using the life course model, and were audio and video recorded. The collection is now kept at the ISEC Foundation in Sesto.

 https://doi.org/10.3224/bios.v31i2.07

on our interviews[4]; and the photo coverage of the structural change in Sesto, entrusted to Umberto Gillio. In this article, I will try to unearth the cultural meanings and hints implied in these images.

1. Where: Sesto San Giovanni

From the perspective of post-industrial narratives, Sesto San Giovanni is a peculiarly intriguing space for a number of reasons. Undoubtedly, this has to do with the significance of its manufacturing past: for almost the whole 20th century, Sesto has been the location of several big firms with their factories and mills in the steel and heavy industries. To appreciate the magnitude of what has occurred in Sesto in the last decades of the century, we need to keep in mind some crucial events in its history, which can merely be sketched here.

Figure 1: Falck Concordia plant viewed from Viale Italia, Falck area's main longitudinal axis, in Sesto San Giovanni (Photo: U. Gillio 2015)

Industrialisation in Sesto starts in the early 20th century with the arrival of the major businesses of that time. Proximity to Milan, abundant water supply, good railway connections to Central Europe, and cheap property explain why several industrial concerns moved to Sesto in the wave of the Second Industrial Revolution: Breda in 1903 for railway engine manufacturing; Campari in 1904 for industrial beverages; Ercole Marelli in 1905 for power generating engines; Falck in 1906 for steelmaking; and Magneti Marelli in 1919 for magnetos and equipment for the automotive industry (Varini 2006; Tedeschi/Trezzi 2007).

4 The documentary, realised with the help of a professional filmmaker, Riccardo Apuzzo, is titled "Il polline e la ruggine" (Pollen and Rust), and is accessible on the ISEC Foundation YouTube channel, in Italian with English subtitles: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KcF1GY0DBlY&vl=en (Accessed 16.04.2020).

Thus, Sesto San Giovanni developed into a genuine industrial hub rather than into a mere company town that caters for a single industry. During the economic boom after WWII, it became the fifth biggest industrial centre in Italy, while Falck grew to be the major private steel company in the country and the major employer in Sesto. In the 1960s, out of 35,000 people who had a job in the city's heavy industries 9,000 worked in the four big Falck plants that shone with particularly evocative names: Vittoria (Victory – for cold rolled steel processing), Vulcano (Volcano – for cast iron processing), Unione (Union, also called T3 – for steel and hot bar rolling), and Concordia (Concord, also called T5 – for plates, welded pipes, and bolts) (James 2006; Trezzi 2007).[5]

As important as it is, the history of Sesto's big factories barely covers a century. The succession of factory closures was swift: only a 10-year gap separates the bankruptcy of Ercole Marelli in 1984 from the closure of the last Falck steelmaking mill.[6] The demographic shifts in the city reflect this parabolic development: the population numbered less than 7,000 in 1901 and peaked at almost 100,000 at the end of the 1970s; today, the number has shrunk to 80,000 inhabitants. Having gone through what is undeniably a process of deindustrialisation, but one that has not developed into a full post-industrial transformation, Sesto is a far cry from the cool and well-manicured places which western urban marketing has often popularised. Sesto's deindustrialising process is rather an instance of those "uncertain transitions" which ethnography and other social sciences have increasingly put under scrutiny (Burawoy/Verdery 1999).

Even though at the beginning of the research, our interest was generically directed towards the shutting down of the mills and factories in the city of Sesto San Giovanni during the 1980s and 1990s, our focus progressively narrowed to a single case as the project developed: the Falck steelmaking company. Along with Breda, Falck was the biggest industrial firm in Sesto until the 1980s and the one which usually provides the lion's share of images in the representations of the city due to its sheer size and the visible traces it has left in the urban landscape. The area formerly occupied by the Falck steel mills, which covers 1,450 square metres, represents 20% of the town's territory and is at the heart of the largest real estate urban redevelopment project in Italy, which is one of the largest in Europe (Moro 2016).

5 During the post-war economic growth, the Unione plant became the biggest privately owned steel mill in Italy; its claw-shaped roof, rebuilt in the 1950s, is a landmark in Sesto. Today, the only accessible site is Concordia, visible from the east side of Viale Italia, the main street cutting through the Falck area, together with the Magazzini Generali (MA.GE), the warehouse where the bolt section was located.

6 The Falck group changed its core business towards renewable energies after that (https://www.falckrenewables.eu/?sc_lang=en) (Accessed: 16.04.2020).

Figure 2: Falck Concordia plant viewed from the outside (Photo: U. Gillio 2015)

The regeneration path has not been smooth at all, and here I can only summarise the last stages. Sold by the Falck family at the beginning of the 2000s, after the plant dismantling, the area has indeed undergone several property transfers over the following two decades. In 2010, it was purchased by the Italian real estate firm Bizzi & Partners Development. Its fate has since been changed in compliance with a broader project called MilanoSesto – to stress that Milan is an unicum in Italy regarding its power to attract top international investors – as well as with regard to a masterplan designed by the Italian star architect Renzo Piano. MilanoSesto involves constructions on the Falck area with about 1.000.000 square metres intended for residential, business, and service use (gross buildable area). It includes the creation of a highly innovative hospital and a medical research centre; but it also envisages the protection and refunctionalisation of the imposing structures left from the Falck plants. These monumental industrial ruins – one of the main objects photographed by Umberto Gillio – are the only ones to have escaped the demolition, and the Town Council has long been seeking to have them recognised as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO (so far unsuccessfully). In 2016, the biggest Saudi real estate group, Fawaz Alhokair Group, was interested in building a large shopping centre (alongside a cinema and an entertainment area) in what remains of the former Concordia/T5 mill, bought a 50% stake in Bizzi & Partners, and put 20 million euros on the table to invest in the MilanoSesto project. Renzo Piano has since left the undertaking, but the firm has officially maintained that Renzo Piano's plan is not going to be changed. In 2019, while I am writing this article, the Falck area has been the object of a further agreement: 100% of the share capital of the MilanoSesto Development "newco", the business arm responsible for the MilanoSesto project, has been sold by Bizzi & Partners to Prelios Group (formerly Pirelli Real Estate), one of the leading European providers of alternative asset management and specialised real

estate services. In turn, Prelios Group is a key partner for Intesa Sanpaolo, the first Italian banking group for capitalisation, and Hines, one of the world's leading developers.

Figure 3: Concordia is currently the only former Falck plant accessible with prior authorisation (Photo: U. Gillio 2015)

One of the youngest among our interviewees, born in Sesto in 1985 as the son of a Falck worker, was 10 years old when the steel production ended. In his interview in 2015, he remembered in a sceptical mood:

> *Since elementary school, here in Sesto, teachers had asked us to dream up projects for the former Falck areas. They asked us to design our own projects, to imagine a future for the Falck areas. We were little kids, I mean, boys and girls, six or seven years old. […] Now I am 30 and the area is still empty (Alberto Rubino, employed at the Best Western Falck Village Hotel in Sesto San Giovanni, interviewed by Roberta Garruccio and Sara Roncaglia, Sesto San Giovanni, 20 June 2015).*

The person who took responsibility for the dismantling of the last Falck mills and for the utilisation of scrap metal expressed himself similarly during the interview:

> *The end came on 1 January 1995. It's now 2015: 20 years have passed and no decision has been made [about the Falck area]. Every year another excuse − first, there was a new mayor, then the property changed ownership, and they repeated over and over: "Let's launch a big competition, reach all the great architects in the world, and let's see what they come up with!" Finally, Renzo*

> *Piano came forward with the medical research project, the City of Health (Biagio Dragoni, former employee at Falck, interviewed by Roberta Garruccio and Sara Roncaglia, Sesto San Giovanni, 16 January 2015).*

Sesto has been waiting for the redevelopment of the Falck area for more than 20 years – and it still is.[7]

2. Who and How: Defining the Gaze

Though our first encounter with Umberto Gillio was accidental, its result was not accidental at all. As mentioned above, the photographs taken by Gillio are the outcome of a collaboration with the author in a broader research project. We conceptualised the photos to be an important visual component, not just a mere appendix, of the whole investigation, an integral part of our research project, based on our shared belief that combining oral testimonies and visual records can open up a way to document the complex responses to the economic change which has occurred since the end of the 20th century (Modell/Brodsky 1998; Freund/Thomson 2011).

One of the questions in our interviews on Sesto's recent history, for instance, concerned the spaces and transformations of the specific areas chosen by Umberto Gillio to be the subjects of his pictures: spaces of work, but also spaces bordering living quarters (because it is worth pointing out how deindustrialised spaces are still part of someone's everyday life), and places of a lingering affective bond, places to which meaning and the idea of home has been attached (Mah 2012). These industrial remains are waiting for a radical transformation with regard to their function and purpose; amidst this legacy, the imposing structures of the Unione and Concordia plants – along the Falck area's main axis, the Viale Italia – outshine the others.

The fact that Umberto Gillio is not a professional photographer offers a first key to read his images in an era which has been defined as "the golden age of industrial ruination" (Edensor 2005). Gillio's pictures have actually been taken in the context of brief urban explorations, and it is precisely in the context of urban exploration that the bulk of photographs of industrial ruins is produced today. His photos could easily fit into the category of "vernacular photography", an expression referring to images taken by ordinary people in everyday contexts; these "vernacular" pictures exist outside the networks of cultural legitimisation (Edensor et al. 2009) and do not necessarily need a qualitative approval. In other words, as researchers we were not primarily interested in the aesthetic value of Gillio's photos – which is not to say that his work does not deserve any praise; I personally like it for its rigour and the choice to avoid any embellishment. Rather, what we were interested in was the language which Gillio employs to "package the world", to use a phrase by Susan Sontag (Sontag 2004). Even more revealing was the fact that Gillio's photography – the specific stylistic choices he made in his own shots (composition, balance, camera angles, focal points, leading lines, light, contrasts,

7 Other areas in Sesto have already been subjected to urban regeneration: Breda Aviation has been absorbed into a public park (Parco Nord); the area where Ercole Marelli once stood has now become a business quarter; the Falck Vulcano plant has provided the site for a shopping mall; the Magazzini Generali Falck building on Viale Italia has been turned into a co-working space for small creative firms.

etc.) and the selection and the sequence he offered – ends up joining a large international network of similar vernacular images which contribute to construct, layer by layer, a strong visual trope of representing the deindustrialisation process.

Figure 4: Falck Concordia inside view (Photo: U. Gillio 2015)

3. Why: Contextualising the Images

There is a deliberate tension between Gillio's photographs and the interviews we have conducted about the deindustrialisation process in Sesto. The metaphor "tension" allows us to underline the differences in sense-making and in "temperature" and the unifying forces between two poles: the landscapes devoid of people which are represented in the photographs, on the one hand, and the fullness of the life histories we have collected, on the other. Furthermore, there is a grandiloquent narrative, on the one hand, of those who can profit from the structural change and the move to the new, which includes gentrified housing and attractive opportunities and services:

> *MilanoSesto is a fundamental starting point for a project that represents a new chapter in the transformation of the great city of Milan into one of Europe's most advanced and important metropolises (Prelios Group: agreement signed with Intesa Sanpaolo and Bizzi & Partners for the development of MilanoSesto, 7 May 2019).*[8]

And on the other hand, there is the bewildered gaze of those who can only stare at brownfields and environments of decay (Brown 2015):

8 http://prelios.com/en/news/prelios-group-agreement-signed-intesa-sanpaolo-and-bizzipartners-milanosesto-development (Accessed 16.04.2020).

> *Seeing Sesto in the '60s was scary because the city was one huge smokestack: Breda, Falck, Magneti Marelli were all there. Today, for me at least, Sesto is no more than a dormitory town 'cause there's nothing left. It's better only because you breathe a little better* (*Vittorio Tresoldi, former crane operator at Falck, interviewed by Sara Roncaglia and Sara Zanisi, Sesto San Giovanni, 9 June 2015).*

In this sense, we see Gillio's photographs as both a research tool and a way of generating historical writing, and we want them to be read in conjunction with the interviews and not as standalones (Dobraszczyk 2017). The following intense statement of a female Falck worker is an evocative example:

> *When I thought about it, I sometimes said to myself: "Good lord, how can you shut down such a big thing? Maybe one plant will close […] But metal sheets will always be needed after all." I could not imagine they would close the Concordia plant, the last one left. I mean, you can't imagine it will be gone next year, it's unthinkable. But it happened (Silvana Rovelli, former Falck employee, interviewed by Sara Roncaglia and Sara Zanisi, Sesto San Giovanni, 2 April 2015).*

It is precisely because the meanings and the cultural effects of deindustrialisation are slowly unfolding that they remain enclosed in similar words and images that have become so pervasive in verbal expressions of deindustrialisation. They form what the American scholar Dolores Hayden calls a "moral landscape" (Hayden 1997) in which "moral" is the major plank in the narrative: the loss of personal relationships, the bitterness and sometimes grudge connected with the choice and timing of layoffs, the awareness that something precious has been "wasted", the tropes of the lost importance of material production and of "making stuff". These words and images also describe a sort of "slow-motion war, […] the sensation of watching something die, not loss like a massive destruction, but a loss like something insidious, deep, pervasive" (Brown 2015: 148).

Figure 5: Falck Concordia inside view (Photo: U. Gillio 2015)

There is indeed a long history of collaboration between photographers, scholars, and intellectuals interested in social transformations, at least since Walker Evans and James Agee's pioneering book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* published in 1941. Evans as a photographer and Agee as a writer had travelled rural Alabama in the late 1930s to document the impoverishment of American sharecroppers in the midst of the economic and cultural landscape of the Great Depression. Their book's impact remains so strong that it has been compared to novels by Faulkner and Steinbeck. And their introductory words are still meaningful and inspiring for those following their example: "The photographs are not illustrative here. They, and the text, are co-equal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative" (Agee/Evans 1941, xi).[9]

While the field of deindustrialisation studies has experienced a cultural turn over the last two decades, a more particular "photographic turn" has emerged in the oral history of deindustrialisation, one that has produced new readings and understandings of structural change. The connection between photography and oral history has stimulated fresh collaborations that helped to re-evaluate the post-industrial legacy. Thus, rather than depicting industrial rubble as a decontextualised self-reference, as a major strand in professional photography does, the cooperation between photography and oral history turns the rubble and ruins into a memento of workers that over decades made these spaces into a social sphere and who have abruptly fallen "out of the picture" (Stoler 2013).

9 Another inspiring collaborative work, somewhat in the footsteps of Agee and Evans, is Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson's 1985 book *Journey to Nowhere*, which aims to keep track, through testimonies and images, of the 1980s as the most difficult decade for the American economy since the Great Depression.

There are several instances of this trend from the US (Frish/Rogovin 1993 on Buffalo, NY; Modell/Brodsky 1998 on Homestead, NY; Bamberger/Davidson 1998 on Mebane, NY). Historians and photographers who decide to work together are well aware of the fact that images need stories to create meanings, but also represent and construct the world they portray: "We tell stories about images, whether silently to ourselves as we view a picture and speculate on what happened before the depiction of a scene, or out loud to others. But the opposite is also true: we tell narratives through images" (Freund/ Thomson 2011: 5).

One of the most influential recent collaborations has been the work of Canadian historian Steven High and photographer David W. Lewis, whose journey across the North American Rust Belt exemplarily showcases the complex relationship between oral history, photography, and qualitative analysis, while also raising important questions: "These strategies force us to move beyond either nostalgia or populist criticism, and lead into the heart of a dilemma which is, in so many ways, an imaginative as much as an historical challenge: how to think about and respond to, and understand these profound changes […] The question on everyone's lips was 'why?' Why did the company pick and leave? Why did it depart the way it did? Why didn't the government or the union do more? […] What did the economic change mean to those most directly affected?" (High/Lewis 2007: 3, 13).

Figure 6: Falck Concordia ruination (Photo: U. Gillio 2015)

Umberto Gillio's photographs ask the same question – "why?" – raised in almost all the interviews with workers involved in plant closures around the world; but photographs are mute, they tend to tell very little of what has actually happened; it is words that invest photography with meaning. Oral history and photography then need to work together to make sense of and answer these questions: What does economic change

mean for those who are paying its price? How do people and places change after plant closures? What becomes of an industrial city after the plants have left? Photography and oral history in combination may mutually highlight the multiple narratives ascribed to the images and the in-between gaps which both images and narratives conceal (Freund/Thomson 2011).

One of the people we interviewed in 2015 commented on the redevelopment plans for Sesto's unused areas:

> *[Comes along] this Renzo [Piano], the star architect, who wants to build Lego skyscrapers, 30 floors, here in Sesto. Well, I ask myself: Who the heck is going to come here and decide to live here?!? Rich Arabs?!? Is there any attraction here?!? Beaches?!? Mountains?!? […] Let us be realistic: nobody is going to come here unless there's working industry (Silvana Rovelli, former Falck employee, interviewed by Sara Roncaglia and Sara Zanisi, Sesto San Giovanni, 2 April 2015).*

As mentioned, however, the "rich Arabs", evoked as characters of the most absurd scenario, had come eventually when the Fawaz Alhokair Group purchased the Falck area, before handing it over to the next international investors, Prelios and Hines, even though Sesto's proximity to Milan rather than the old industry played a role here. If Milan is still a relatively small city in terms of urban residents (1,300,000), the so-called "metropolitan city", which also includes Sesto, is not: Greater Milan has more than four million inhabitants and is the third largest metropolitan area in Europe (after London and Paris, and if we do not include the polycentric Ruhr region). It is an area where the per capita income is almost twice the Italian average and unemployment is half the national rate, and where one Italian super rich person out of two lives (54% of the 0,01% top earners and 42% of the 0,1% top earners), according to the XVIII National Social Security Institute Annual Report 2018 (INPS 2019). Thus, proximity to Milan is the single factor that most affects the way Sesto relates to its industrial heritage today. "If distance has died, location has not", as the *Economist* remarked in a special issue on "Space and the City" in 2011. From outside, Sesto San Giovanni's current central feature seems to be its closeness to Milan, but at the same time such a reframing makes the city far less "readable" for its very inhabitants whose orientation continues to be formed by the industrial past, because the forces that erased the industry changed the city almost beyond recognition. As elsewhere, the deindustrialised urban landscape is "somewhat unpredictable in this shifting age, a site of sensation and opacity, [but, and even more so] this unpredictability does not reduce the ruins' rhetorical and material force" (Irving 2015: 141).

Figure 7: Compressed air and methane gas system (Photo: U. Gillio 2015)

Just as abandonment and derelict spaces have become a powerful cultural motif in western societies, the photographic representation of deindustrial space has become a new photographic genre at an almost global level. As such it ends up saying less about the specific places depicted and more about the effects of globalisation (High/Lewis 2007; High 2013a; Strangleman 2013). The photographic practice in Sesto, which has produced impressive pictures in recent years, has to be seen in this context – from well-known photographers (Gianni Berengo Gardin 1996, see Gabriele Basilico's work in Corrias 2011) to talented amateurs (Aurelio Spinelli 2009) to ordinary people who practice photography as a hobby. Since the Falck area – invisible and inaccessible for more than twenty years after the shutdown – has become a destination for controlled urban explorations in the form of guided tours, photo safaris, and photo contests proposed by the municipality, this kind of practice has generated a huge production of images that are distributed on websites, social networks, and in self-produced digital books.

4. What: Nature, Art, and Industrial Remains

In the current iconography of former industrial areas, we hardly ever see people, and Gillio's pictures are not an exception. In accordance with this iconographic canon, there is not the slightest trace of human presence in Gillio's photographs. His pictures could be defined as "architectural still-lifes" (Sontag 2004: 27).

Although they are devoid of people, there is a wide range of things we see in these images: the imposing skeletons of relinquished plants, the few remains of electrification structures, water towers, empty tanks, hangars, parking lots, broken and boarded windows, closed gates, locked doors, and rusty signs that (to the amusement of some observers) have lost their authoritative power but continue to inform about rules and regulations and recall a former sense of hierarchy and work discipline (Edensor 2005).

Gillio's photos signify places and locales that have an arduous and buzzing history of men and women but which are now empty, silent, and desolate, a landscape in transition that is, itself, set to disappear (Apel 2015). The pictures' assumed emptiness, however, points to another product of change that literally grows from the industrial ruins and demands interpretation: a new kind of industrial nature, a new public art, unprecedented ruins of modernity.

Figure 8: Rusty production signs, still imparting instructions and orders (Photo: U. Gillio 2015)

4.1 Weeds?

The transformation of abandoned industrial sites often turns them into a playground of sorts, dangerous and attractive at the same time (High/Lewis 2007). There may be two potential readings of this tendency. On the one hand, it can be understood as a move attempting to hide the industrial past and therefore conceal the "authenticity" of a particular place of production. On the other hand, it may be seen as an element that actually emphasises this past, but at the same time nurtures the possibility of commodification by tourism and urban exploration before gentrification takes over.

Umberto Gillio's photographs portray the encounter between industrial remains and nature – "happenstance plants", shrubs and trees, grown in small wild woods, or just weeds, sprouting without human planning and being generally "out of place". This overgrowing nature seems to be on the boundary between representing a threat and suggesting an opportunity. We can hardly think of anything more banal, more negligible, more undeserving of scholarly study than these ubiquitous plants springing up at the edges of urban places. Recalling that "weeds thrive on radical changes, not stability", the environmental historian Zachary Falck has recently pointed out that the "dis-

turbance dynamics" connected with weeds "are important to study because these dynamics rework land across the globe". As "ruderal plants", weeds are "adapted to settle or survive in disturbed places and drastically transformed spaces", ultimately representing the most "recurring markers of and participants in times and places of change" (Falck 2010: 6 f.). They document both change and persistence on different chronological levels; they occupy landscapes associated with decay, multiply in times of transformation, but have coexisted with cities and urbanisation from times predating the onset of industry. Usually, this "fortuitous flora" is referred to in connection with its clash with economy and society as an indicator of decline, as though it appeared all of a sudden where it had never been before or where it had not grown for a long time. This perspective, however, conceals the persistence of weeds, their long coexistence with human landscapes, and ignores the fact that what has changed through time is mostly the way we deal with this kind of vegetation and the way city people experience the surrounding spaces undergoing transformation (Falck 2010). Mapping the way and chronology of the city's spontaneous vegetation – as Gillio's photographs do – reminds us how even such expressions of "industrial nature" (Storm 2014) are part and parcel of Sesto San Giovanni's history, which contribute to the understanding of its present landscape.

Figure 9: Water tower (Photo: U. Gillio 2015)

Weeds pinpoint the continuous dialectical relationship between nature and history, a theme central to Romanticism. However, neither the backward "return to nature", which the new deindustrialisation photography sometimes seems romantically to suggest, nor its dual idea of palingenesis, or more generally of a story with an open ending, are "outside time". The abandoning of places is followed by a particularly strong

growth of neophytes and "ruderal plants". Former industrial spaces are the very "disturbed environments" where they thrive – and the former Falck industrial estate is undoubtedly disturbed by many factors after a century of steel production, including the severe contamination with oils and heavy metals and with a high concentration of nitrogen. This environment stimulates a flora with particular characteristics: fast growth, a speedy life cycle, and a massive production of seeds and dispersion of pollen, sometimes particularly allergenic. The photography of former industrial spaces almost always presents to us the contrast between decayed buildings and thriving vegetation, the ruins of the old industrial civilisation and a "new wilderness", suspended between stillness and redemption (Kowarik/Körner 2005). In this encounter, a sort of restructuring of the order is at work, making itself less obvious, less predictable in the order of things, feebler and stranger (Edensor 2005).

Figure 10: Overgrowing woods and weeds in the Falck area (Photo: U. Gillio 2015)

4.2 Graffiti and Street Art

The pictures taken by Umberto Gillio feature another dominant motif: graffiti and street art in Sesto, which share their apparent spontaneous character with the weeds' unruliness. Uncontrolled, both integrate themselves into the urban, post-industrial realm, occupying, rearranging, and reusing space. An essay on graffiti and public order in Italy suggests that "contemporary mural writing is the expression of a different point of view in contrast with an urban environment that seems self-consistent and compelling in its forms, even though it is itself subject to contingency, the result of historical evolution that might have taken different directions" (Dal Lago/Giordano 2016: 42). Graffiti and street art belong to the diverse expressions of urban youth culture that have been shaped by industrial decay in many contexts of the developed world, often in a clash between urban decorum and free expression, or between defence of private property and visual

protest (De Innocentis 2017; Dal Lago/Giordano 2018; Mania et. al. 2018). As an art form they present a common denominator of deindustrialised landscapes; through their creative interpretation, they bring back a lost visibility to abandoned spaces, thus claiming a specific form of "alternative beauty" (Storm 2014). Graffiti functions both as a generator of creativity in the public post-industrial space and as a form of empowerment for the generation excluded from the social framework that an active industry used to offer. Graffiti and street art are also interpreted as a way to reclaim the street for self-expression, a form of rebellion against gentrification and culture-led redevelopment of former industrial areas (High/Lewis 2007). Media scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser, however, suggests that "the idea of 'activating people as a market' is a key to the branding of street art, an aesthetic practice that often plays upon a dichotomy between the authentic and the commercial, the real and the manipulative". She concludes that "street art emerges instead as a hybrid form that cannot be seen neither exclusively as a marker of urban decay, nor as a form of youth rebellion, or a mere form of cultural renewal" (Banet-Weiser 2012: 100 ff.).

Umberto Gillio's photographs remind us that Sesto San Giovanni is no exception even with respect to street art. Our larger research, however, warned that the practice of writing on walls needs to be contextualised. In Sesto and in the Falck area all this translated into the city council's decision to officially involve street artists (who, in some cases, are the children of former industrial workers and in other cases those of the new wave of migrants) in a number of redevelopment projects and consequently to authorise and legalise their contribution. After 2010, the walls lining many deindustrialised areas across the city, running the length of many kilometres of their main avenues, have become a large canvas for public art and an integral part of the new representation of the city. It is not coincidental that we find writers and graffiti from Sesto placed at the core of a short noir novel set in the Falck area. The protagonist, Mister Luini, is an engineer and "expert in mural art" who, with his sceptical partner Gino, wants to record all the graffiti tags of the city and describe each specimen in a dedicated form:

> *Non-iconic mural of great size; spray technique; polychrome lettering; grey and red dominant colours; well spread; edges neatly defined; doesn't damage private property; doesn't cover advertisements; overview … – he stepped backwards: – … good and elegant, no obscene or blasphemous content. I'd thumb it up. What do you think, Gino? […] Graffiti are becoming more and more important in our times, you must accept it, Gino. So, let's create a new code for [the author, named] Dash: "Number 646". Let's take a picture of the mural, and put it into our catalogue (Musati 2010: 84).*

Figure 11: Street art on Viale Italia. The Unione plant in the background, with its pincer-shaped roof, rebuilt in the 1950s and still visible, is a Falck landmark (Photo: U. Gillio 2015)

4.3 Ruins

> *When history piles up wreckage upon wreckage, ruins evoke not only the buildings from which they hail but also a transhistorical iconography of decay and catastrophe, a vast visual archive of ruination. In the era of global media coverage and round the clock exposure to visual data, ruins have become ubiquitous (Hell/Schönle 2010: 1).*

Thus opens a rich collected volume on the cultural history of the ruins of modernity, and ruins are one of the most central elements in Umberto Gillio's pictures.

The proliferation of images dedicated to industrial ruins has triggered a new debate; being actually not new in itself but new in the era of industrial retreat, this debate still relies on the great critics of photography as its conceptual object: Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, and Susan Sontag. Some have attacked what seems to be a trend towards aestheticism, exoticism, and fetishisation of the ruins of industrial decay as "ruin porn" (Stoler 2013; High 2013a; Strangleman 2013; Lyons 2018). Following Walter Benjamin, cultural historians know, however, that the aestheticisation of ruins ends up being unavoidable and irresistible, and that it does not necessarily subsume all cultural and historical connotations which they signify in their fundamental ambiguity. A ruin is a ruin precisely because it seems to have lost its function and meaning in the present. This ambiguity reflects the complex political-ethical balancing act inherent both to the heritagisation of industry as a process and to the ensuing heritage industry. Both are open to a wide range of uses, contradictory statements and sensibilities, alternative perspectives (progressive or reactionary nostalgia, pride or shame,

etc.), political sterilisation, instrumentalisation, and commodification. It is this "breakdown of meaning" that fosters competing memories and "an intensive compensatory discursive activity" (Hell/Schönle 2010). And it is for the semantic instability which characterises them that deindustrial ruins and ruination are open to so many different renditions (Steinmetz 2010; Huyssen 2010) which have become pervasive over the last 15 years, prompting the representation of urban decay in different media, formats, and genres in a global network of ruin imagery.

It is therefore difficult to deny the allure of industrial ruins, and it is even more difficult to counter the impression that those in Sesto San Giovanni also conjure up fascination mixed with bewilderment. Fascination is invoked, on the one hand, for the remains in their monumental grandiosity. A quote by Giovanni Falck from his inauguration speech at the electric steel plant, Concordia, in 1964 has become part of public memory and storytelling in Sesto: "It is with great emotion that today we open this new cathedral of labour, with a furnace 49 metres high, the same as in Milan Cathedral" (Musati 2010: 82). Bewilderment is provoked, on the other hand, at the sheer force deployed by financial capital, when it withdraws from industrial investment. The recognition of this ambivalence, of this sense of disproportion but also of solitude and silence that often surround industrial ruins, has started the conversation between ruin imagery and the aesthetic of the "sublime" or "deindustrial sublime" (High/Lewis 2007; Apel 2015). The expression loosens its ties here to high and elite culture, however, and has rather been adopted as the "working-class sublime" by the oral historian Alessandro Portelli in his work on the closure of the Terni steel plant by the German multinational ThyssenKrupp:

> *The factory seemed to lose its place as the primary subject of the town's conversation. So, while past generations had grown up hearing about the factory and knew what to expect when they started working there, the newer generations may have been more educated but knew much less of what awaited them beyond the factory gates. So the old sense of surprise, of wonder and amazement returned. [The factory appeared] as something awesome, a bit mysterious, frightful and beautiful: a city of fire, of epic size, in which huge machines move fantastic objects between iron and fire, and where fear, beauty and wonder weave into a modern form of what Romantic poets and philosophers, from Kant to Blake, called "the sublime" (Portelli 2014: 374).*

5. Conclusion

With this contribution I intended to elaborate on a few points: firstly, I wanted to briefly call attention to the reasons why Sesto San Giovanni is a relevant place to study with regard to structural change and post-industrial narratives. Secondly, I aimed at defining the nature of the visual documentation we gathered during our oral history project and its connection to the oral testimonies we recorded in Sesto. Thirdly, I intended to describe the context in which this evidence has been conceived and collected. Finally, I attempted some suggestions to understand the fascination these images exert, and what contemporary viewers can perceive from them as part of something "becoming a genre".

Figure 12: Graffiti on Viale Italia by a young female artist of Philippine origins, dedicated to a youth from Sesto who tragically died (Photo: U. Gillio 2015)

While the "corporate wasteland" described by High and Lewis is object to the increasingly frequent practise of organised urban exploration, whose photographic and narrative knowledge the web and visual social media are helping to spread (High/Lewis 2007), the reproduction and circulation of ruin imagery – abandoned factories, derelict hotels, libraries, schools, churches, business buildings, etc. – has recently trickled through to the most diverse media, from fiction to graphic novels, music videos and video games, film, TV series, documentaries, advertising, art exhibitions, and coffee-table books (Linkon 2018). Deindustrialised imagery, in particular, connects with a dystopian element which, not by chance, has been noticed and often exploited by photographers, admen, and video and film makers who have taken inspiration from the locales of deindustrialisation in their construction of post-apocalyptic landscapes – which leads us to the somewhat disturbing idea that we ourselves live in the future ruins of our present (Dillon 2011):

> *In ruins, history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay (Walter Benjamin: The Origin of the German Tragic Drama, quoted in Lyons 2018: 3).*

As a result, not only the photography of post-industrial areas arising from this kind of flow has become an iconographic genre in its own right, dictating a new aesthetic of

deindustrialisation, but, moreover, these media formats and converging cultural containers have made deindustrialisation rapidly visible to globalised culture (Hell/Schönle 2010: 4). That is why investigating these aesthetics falls in line with the exploration of the cultural and political meanings of economic change and with questioning the perceptions and representations of such a change (Irving 2015). As Dora Apel, a visual culture scholar, has written recently: "[Industrial ruin imagery] speaks to the overarching fears and anxieties of our era" (Apel 2015: 3). Before uttering a judgement, she adds, we must try to understand the reason behind the new powerful fascination that they conjure up in the different visual formats of the world around us, and how the beauty of these industrial ruins counterbalances the insecurity and anxiety that goes hand in hand with industrial decline. As Kate Brown, an academic historian, has further commented, "rust belt places are visible voyeuristically as porn, aesthetically as beauty, and economically as an opportunity, but the violence that created these ruins usually goes unacknowledged" (Brown 2015: 148). We must also try not to forget them.

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Abstract

My contribution focuses on a photo collection dedicated to Sesto San Giovanni, a medium-sized city north of Milan that became the fifth largest industrial district in Italy after WWII. Built around the beginning of the 20th century, its heavy industries were dismantled before that century drew to its close. Closely connected to a campaign of interviews conducted by historians and social anthropologists, the images under consideration aim to relate the photographic representation of former industrial spaces in Sesto as they are today to the oral testimonies and memories gathered between 2013 and 2015. The article elaborates on several points: it briefly sketches the reasons why Sesto San Giovanni is a relevant place to study structural change and deindustrialisation; defines the nature of the visual documentation we gathered during our oral history project; describes the context where this evidence has been conceived and collected; and attempts some suggestions to understand where the fascination that emanates from these images lies, and what contemporary viewers can perceive from them as part of a large deindustrial ruin imagery, something becoming a "global genre".