

# Metaphorical Photography

George Tatge

I would like to thank Paolo Belardi for the invitation to speak today in such a specialized context. I was rather perplexed by the invitation, I don't deny it, but he insisted. I am a photographer and I will not talk about drawing, but about my photography. There is, however, a link: the first commercially published book illustrated with photographs, issued shortly after the invention [of the process] (a sales flop), was entitled *The Pencil of Nature*. It contained the first experiments with paper negatives by the British photographer Henry Fox Talbot. The "focus" of my section of the conference is entitled *Knowledge*, with three "topics" related to history, survey and technique. In the rare workshops I hold, these are all themes that I emphasize from the very first meeting. In fact, one of the questions I ask each of the participants to answer is "which book has most deeply impressed you?" The basis of every artist must be knowledge, also gained through reading.

I would say at once that my first love in life is literature. I would have liked to write, but fate took me in another direction, which perhaps has allowed me to live better among people. It's already a very lonely job, that of a photographer, at least the way I practice it. This also explains the word "metaphor" in my title, a literary device, from the Greek *phoreo*, that is, "to transport" an object or an idea onto another plane. Thus, an allusion. This image (Fig. 1), one of my favorites precisely because of its metaphorical power, is not just a field of corn after harvesting, with the stalks seen through the fog of a November dawn. The row of cypresses in the background alludes to what most people perceive. It is a photograph of a state of mind. In the introduction to his book of essays *Meditations on Quixote*, José Ortega y Gasset explains to his readers that the themes he touches on may be important or modest.

*Articolo a invito per inquadramento del tema del focus, non sottoposto a revisione anonima, pubblicato con responsabilità della direzione.*

Fig. 1. George Tatge, *Campo nebbioso (Field under Fog)*, 1998.



Fig. 2. George Tatge, *Caligola calzolaio* (*Caligola the Shoemaker*), 1976.

Fig. 3. George Tatge, *Francesca*, 1976.

Fig. 4. George Tatge, *Paris*, 1979.

He writes that his intention is "to place the objects of all kinds which life, in its perpetual surge throws at our feet like useless remains of a shipwreck, in such a position that the sun as it strikes them may give off innumerable reflections" [Ortega y Gasset 1986]. I find this to be the most perfect description of my photography, a search, often amidst modest places and objects. It's not by chance that I carry my camera around with me. When I take photographs, that's all I do. My mind has to be free of thoughts in order to give my mental reflexes the right concentration and hope for their agility and perspicacity.

How did I come to choose this way of photographing? It was my meeting, at university, with Michael Simon, a Hungarian professor who had fled his country due to the persecution of Jews. In his first lesson he made each of us cover the viewfinder of our camera and go out pointing it instinctively towards whatever meant something to us. From the first reading of these images of ours, it was clear that each of us had a different way of looking at and of interpreting the world. It was the most revealing lesson on the power of photography as a means of expression, as a means of self-analysis. I have an enormous respect for photojournalism (and I say this in a city that celebrates journalism every year and that, in 1949, witnessed the meeting of Paul Strand and Cesare Zavattini, who together produced one of the most beautiful books in history, *Un paese*) [Zavattini, Strand 1955], but I think there is also room for more introspective photography. In short, I think it is a duty to know the news of our world (preferably from newspapers), but I think it is also a right to be able to decide to take a novel or a book of poems in our hands. There is certainly room and a need for both.

About two years after my arrival in Italy in 1973, I decided to change photographic format, switching from a small format camera to a 5x7in. Deardorff view camera. I am still in love with it. I love its slowness, its sharpness, its ability to correct perspective lines, its irrational projection of the image on frosted glass (rotated and upside down). And this is where the discourse on technique necessarily comes into play. It is not a camera for those with an approximative approach. Unlike digital (which, however, is practical for obvious reasons of speed and cost) errors are not

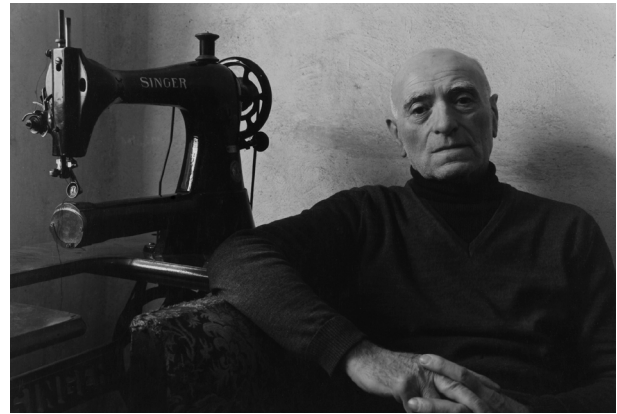




Fig. 5. George Tatge, *Il Po (Flooded Po River)*, 2001.



Fig. 6. George Tatge, *Cerchio d'acqua (Circle of Water)*, 1996.



Fig. 7. George Tatge, *Piscina e mare (Swimming Pool and Sea)*, 2010.

easily recoverable. The decision to set up the tripod is, in my opinion, the most fundamental: the relationship of the subject with the background can vary meter by meter: It becomes a sort of survey, like what topographers do with their measuring instruments.

Now I would like to show you images from a series of past exhibitions, but first some portraits from the volume *Al di là del tiglio* (Figs. 2-4) [Tatge 2002], a book about my adopted town, Todi, where I lived for twelve years and where my wife Lynn gave me our wonderful children, William and Alice. It is interesting to think about portraits using this camera. The subject doesn't look into the lens to connect with the photographer's gaze. It's not an exchange between the two. I'm not hidden behind the camera that is spying on him. I'm standing to the side, and I observe the subject, who is looking at the lens on his own, as though he were looking into a mirror without being able to see himself. For the subject it becomes a kind of meditation on himself. When I see that the mask has disappeared, then I snap a photograph. This book was an act of love towards the citizens of that town. By chance, while I was shooting for the book in 2002, inserting new images after 15 years of absence, I was reading *La luna e i falò* by Cesare Pavese, who talks about the "American" who returns to his village in Piemonte after years in the United States. And here is the magnificent passage that I found so pertinent to my state of mind: "you need a village, if only for the pleasure of leaving it. Your own village means that you're not alone, that you know there's something of you in the people and the plants and the soil, that even when you are not there it waits to welcome you." [Pavese 1950].

*Presences, Italian Landscapes* is an exhibition that I inaugurated in 2006, after my experience at Alinari which lasted sixteen years [Tatge 2008]. It is a sequence that follows the evolution of the landscape from an (almost) virginal land to a space worked by man and finally to a reality where the hand of man dominates the landscape creating a sort of land art (Figs. 5, 6). Returning to the theme of metaphor, I would like to read you a passage from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*: "You walk for days among trees and among stones. Rarely does the eye light on a thing, and then only when it has recognized that thing as the sign of another thing" [Calvino 1972].

Fig. 8. George Tatge, *Arco Etrusco (The Etruscan Gate)*, 1983.



Fig. 9. George Tatge, *Facciata (Façade)*.

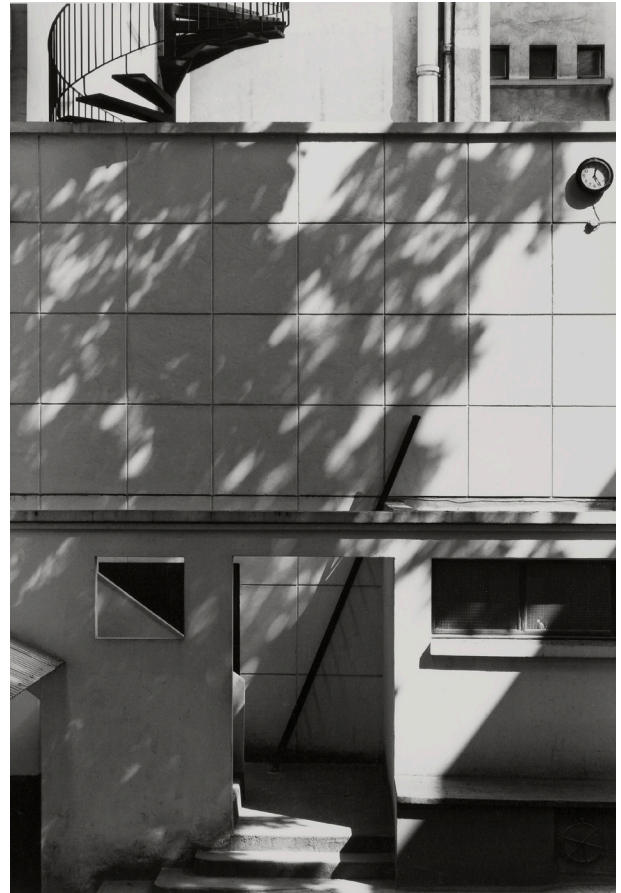




Fig. 10. George Tatzge, *Bomba Rosa (The Pink Bomb)*, Livorno, 2015.



Fig. 11. George Tatzge, *Passaggio murato (Walled Passageway)*, Florence, 2012.

*Italia metafisica* is the title of the exhibition I inaugurated in 2015. Like *Presences*, this exhibition was also hosted in Perugia the following year. I chose this title not because I am particularly attached to the art movement of this name, even though I was very happy with choice made by *Contrasto* for the cover. [Tatzge 2015]. It is certainly the image most inspired by De Chirico (Fig. 7). A clear backlight, the sea, the poles, an open space. There are also the perspective lines that the artist drew on the stages under his mannequins. The catalogue won an IPA award in New York and the Premio Ernest Hemingway in Italy: a real satisfaction! I chose this title, instead, to underline the metaphorical aspects of my work. The motive (not to say the meaning) of the shooting is often to be found beyond the physicality of the place represented. Here we find architecture rang-

ing from strong places (such as the Etruscan Gate, Fig. 8) to humble huts (Fig. 9). I still do not understand how it is possible that the history of architecture is not taught in schools! Painting and sculpture are taught, but to enjoy them you have to enter a church or a museum. While architecture surrounds us everywhere, day after day. We go in and out of buildings constantly without lending them a fragment of thought. Most people wouldn't know a 19th-century building from a Renaissance palace. So many contemporary works by enlightened architects are not even noticed in our hectic passage, while they would be there to delight us, if only we had the means to appreciate them. Although I have worked professionally with color for many years, I had never considered it for my personal research. I called myself a black and white photographer. Well, in 2011



Fig. 12. George Tatge, *Cenci rossi* (Red Rags), Prato, 2013.

something very particular happened. My mother, Italian, came back to Europe for her last trip and we went to Paris together, where my parents had lived for five years. There was an exhibition at the Grand Palais entitled *Odilon Redon, Prince of Dreams*. We saw, room after room, his "noirs," his charcoal drawings and his lithographs. We wondered where the famous paintings and pastels were. They were relegated to the last rooms. And the reason, then, was obvious. He had hardly touched color until he was almost 60! I was left speechless, and at that moment I wondered if it was not time to turn the page and try to use color film. I know that this story may sound presumptuous, that is, to say that I could think of emulating the experience of such an important figure. And yet, that's exactly what happened! It's thanks to my visit to this exhibition that I started taking pictures in color.

The exhibition that will open soon at Palazzo Fabroni in Pistoia, curated by the brilliant art historian Carlo Sisi, is called *Il Colore del Caso* [Sisi 2019]. It is a selection of the images that I have created over the last seven years, since I "converted." Those who have seen these images always recognize my hand. I am always attracted by precarious, allusive, sometimes surreal, ironic subjects, where reality is often in conflict with artifice. But, with chromatic possibilities, the eye-brain reflex works in a completely different way. If before, with black and white, it was the line, the shape and, above all, the light that caught my attention, now it is often the element of color. It's as if colors give off a distinct scent to attract me. It can be a delicate scent or a very strong one. If in black and white the object was the starting point for my work, now the subject has become color itself (Figs. 10, 11). As the great historian Carlo Bertelli recently wrote to me "yours are photographic images of colors and not color photos." The series of rags found in Prato is perhaps the most emblematic (Fig. 12). Each color has its own character, its own expression.

I feel that the joy of being able to use color has perhaps led me to produce images that are a little less melancholic. In any case, color is not enough. As Kandinsky wrote: "color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammer; the soul is the piano with many strings" [Kandinsky 1968]. Images must be inspired from within us.

The other important word in the title of the exhibition is the word "caso", that is, chance. I don't like programs. I prefer to wander. As I read at an exhibition by Gerhard Richter, one of my favorite painters, "I pursue no objectives, no systems, no tendency; I have no programme, no style, no direction. [...] I like the indefinite, the boundless; I like continual uncertainty."

I think that chance is one of the fundamental and fascinating aspects of photography. No other artistic medium can "take advantage" with such elegance. Life itself, with its combination of chromosomes, is determined by chance. It is often chance that brings me to a place at a certain hour with a certain quality of light. "Fortune rewards the bold." Therefore, we still have to work hard, but we mustn't denigrate chance. "He just got lucky with that shot!" A stupid comment. Instead, we should celebrate chance. As photographer Larry Fink said, "if you don't take a chance, you don't get a chance."

I thank you for your attention and I invite you to Pistoia to see the exhibition, which will run until mid-February.

## Author

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