
Photography, Stereotypes and Reluctant Gentrification in an Old French Industrial Town

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It is difficult to know the image of a city. Whether it is found in popular representations, the media or urban marketing, it is most often stereotypical. This is not surprising because images capture reality as much as they express our imagination of the city. Drawing on the work of amateur and professional photographers, this article aims to show how the work of photographers contributes to the production of the images of the city of Saint-Etienne. For more than a century this city was one of the main industrial centres of France but over the past forty years it has experienced a sharp decline. It also hosted many photographers who worked for local companies. Today it is encouraging gentrification, which has been slow to emerge.

Keywords: Imagination, photographers, images, stereotypes, urban heritage, industrial heritage.

Introduction: Saint-Etienne, Stereotypes and Cultural Intimacy

‘The sky is low but the impression of greyness, almost sticky, does not come from there. In this neighbourhood of Saint-Etienne, it comes from the dilapidated buildings [...]. The facades are as if covered with soot. There, some cabins overlook the top floor of a building. Elsewhere, it is a pile of decrepit buildings at the corner of a staircase. Here, just a few steps from the courthouse, in what is called Tarentaize, one of the poor neighbourhoods of the town, there are buildings that fall into ruin in the backyards. Saint-Etienne] seems to have remained the “poor city”, the capital of slums.’ (Zappi, *Le Monde*, 2014)

Journalist Sylvia Zappi did not imagine the uproar that her article entitled ‘In Saint-Etienne, the city centre undermined by poverty’, and the pictures that accompanied it, would produce. For several weeks, the text circulated in social networks, was commented upon, vilified and mocked. In the cafes and at the newsagents it became the main concern. Many of the regular readers, who usually considered *Le Monde* the newspaper of reference, were shocked by an article they considered insulting and anachronistic, so they stopped purchasing it. Saint-Etienne, called the ‘capital of slums’ in the national press, did not deserve this bad publicity. The mayor asked his fellow citizens to send photographs promoting the city to the newspaper’s editorial office via Twitter with the hashtag #stephanoisfiers.¹ On Sunday of the following week, at the stadium, nicknamed the ‘Cauldron’, the ‘Magic Fans’, one of the two groups of ultra-supporters of the ASSE² (the local but very famous football club) held up a long banner during the match. On it was written, ‘Go down to the slum, we’ll teach you how to read *Le Monde*’. Their ‘city patriotism’, as Bérangère Ginhoux (2017) calls it, had been wounded.³

This caricature of the city, accompanied by two photographs of dilapidated buildings, overshadowed a more balanced text that described a problem recurrent for several decades

¹ This can be translated as: Stephanos are proud.

² This acronym stands for ‘Association Sportive de Saint-Etienne’.

³ For further information and analysis on this subject see Béal et al. (2017) and Rautenberg (2018).

(Tomas 1989). It revived stereotypes written centuries ago by novelists and travellers who described the sadness, poverty and darkness of the town at the beginning of the industrial revolution (Thermeau 2013). People countered them more or less successfully by emphasizing the image of a popular and warm city, a truly 'local ideology' (Gay et al. 2014). The reactions against the newspaper demonstrated an attachment to the city that is truly widely shared, beyond political and social divisions, when Saint-Etienne seems to be attacked from the outside. They evoke a form of 'bottom-up essentialism' (Petit and Rubbers 2013:17) that helps to build local community, perhaps more effectively than cultural institutions or municipal marketing. They also emphasize the union of natives against the outside, here it was a Parisian newspaper, though more often expressed in Saint-Etienne is antipathy toward neighbours from Lyon.⁴ These attitudes express a local *cultural intimacy* (Herzfeld 1997) made of 'tiny practices' that build the common as much as, or better, than public policies. Cultural intimacy is a shared mental space in which one feels protected from external aggression. It is accompanied by actions of self-reification, such as the use of stereotypes or self-stereotypes which are enshrined within the group, or sometimes through ostentatious practices. It takes place within social poetics often imbued with nostalgia for the old times (Herzfeld 1997: 78) and relies on a certain iconicity made of folkloric emblems, stabilized iconic or mental images that are used to signify the permanence of the group, and feed a 'narcissism of small differences' (ibid: 68) designed to strengthen the collective identity in a world in perpetual motion. It has been shown that institutional and non-institutional images, are able to transform symbols in cities, but more often those images and symbols are transformed by local people (Nas ed. 2011).

In this article, I defend the view that images, especially photographs, contribute to shaping this local cultural intimacy. It is not surprising that *Le Monde's* pictures hurt a lot of people. Those two pictures affected residents' imaginary more powerfully than any article about poverty. I will begin by exposing local stereotypes through the looking glass of the colours of the town. I will, then, discuss how today photographers, both amateur and professional, take part in this popular imaginary and contribute to shaping a long-term image of the town. I conclude with a discussion of their ambiguous input on gentrification.

Since the 1990s, when Saint-Etienne engaged in urban competition under the mayor Michel Thiollière, their pictures have rarely been consistent with the creative and design city promoted by the local authorities. However, they did contribute to a popular nostalgic representation favoured by the new urban classes who are expected to move to Saint-Etienne. The ethnographic data on which I base my discussion is from the collective research that I led a few years ago (Rautenberg and Vedrine eds 2017) and the new investigation I have conducted in and around Saint-Etienne for two years. This research involves professional and amateur photographers, focusing on how their relationships with the town affect the way in which they take their photographs.

⁴ Saint-Etienne and Lyon, 55 km apart, are traditional enemies, today for football derbies, but in fact from much longer time, at least from the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.

The Colours of Saint-Etienne: Stereotypes at Work

Saint-Etienne held a major place during the French industrial revolution at the beginning of the 19th century, thanks to a ‘magic triad’: coal deposits that were exploited since the end of the Middle Ages; hydropower from two little mountain rivers that has been used to work steel for weapons since the 15th century; and weaving industries active since the 18th century. Coal mining stopped in 1973, at the Puits Couriot,⁵ but the production of weapons and weaving (particularly of ribbons) continues. The Museum of art and industry, one of the first created in France in 1889 with the support of industrialists,⁶ proudly claims that Saint-Etienne is the capital of the ribbon industry and the bicycle.

During the 19th century and until World War I, the population of the city grew from 16,000 to 150,000. Several writers and travellers compared Saint-Etienne to Manchester in England and to some American industrial boomtowns such as Detroit in Michigan. The peak of the population was reached in the 1960s with more than 220,000 inhabitants. Then, it decreased inexorably to around 170,000. According to some authors (Béal et al. 2010), Saint-Etienne became a ‘shrinking city’. In 2012, 20 percent of residents were out of work, and the poverty rate was 22 percent. Saint-Etienne has a migrant population of 16 percent, and a substantial minority of people with parents or grandparents who were born in Algeria or Morocco lives here (Gauthier 2014, Benbouzid 2004). When talking with people, reading newspapers and official communications or listening to football fans, artists or photographers, one realizes that a few more or less mythical narratives are largely shared. The most popular is a description of the town as a coal miner’s one. In fact, only 7 percent of residents were miners in 1948, while 27 percent were steelworkers. Saint-Etienne has always been a city of industrial workers, not miners; and yet, the coal miner is the archetype of *Stéphanois* with his qualities and faults. Local museums, social activists and associations, private economic actors, heirs of the punk-rock movement, artists (Trigano 2017) and amateur photographers (Rojon 2015) also try to preserve traces of the industrial past.

There are several possible paths to enter the world of images of Saint-Etienne. One seemed to me particularly relevant; that of the colours that we lend to the city. It is striking to read and hear so often of Saint-Etienne associated with three colours: black, the oldest; red which evokes at the same time the revolt and the fire of the forge; and green, the colour of the ASSE⁷ but also of the surrounding countryside, of which the *Stéphanois* often speak. I also could mention grey, the colour of the coal sandstone of older buildings.

⁵ It continued until 1983 in the area under study.

⁶ Several local entrepreneurs, are still active members today of the *Association des amis du musée*. They help finance exhibitions and give subsidies to buy new pieces for the collection. Among the various entrepreneurs, Casino deserves a special mention; it is a well-known supermarket company created in Saint-Etienne in 1896 which opened many stores in the area; it has a long historical association with the football club and the mining history of St Etienne.

⁷ The Association Sportive de Saint-Etienne is usually called ‘The Greens’. The ASSE was created in 1919 by Casino. The firms gave its colour — green — to the club.

The earlier quote from *Le Monde*, surprisingly, reminds us of testimonials by novelists and travellers over the past two centuries. As the French female activist, and socialist, Flora Tristan wrote on 21 June 1844,

‘It is the sister of Lyon, but blacker and dirtier still, we take all the public monuments for prisons [...]. All the workers I saw seemed cold, shy and unintelligent’. The next day, returning from church, she notes: ‘all these poor people are stunted, idiots [...] all speak a kind of abominable patois [...] the city is horribly dirty, badly paved [...] a dirty little stream that is called the river [...] flows under the city [...]; the climate is awful, the wind continually raises a cloud of black dust (coal), very cold in winter, very hot in summer.’ (cited in Thermeau 2013: 56-59).

Albert Camus also drove his point home:

‘Saint-Etienne in the morning in the mist with the sirens calling for work in the middle of a jumble of towers, buildings and big chimneys carrying their deposit of slag like a monstrous sacrificial cake to their summits to a darkened sky.’ (quoted by Mandon 1976: 128).

In a rather one-sided way, says the sociologist Daniel Mandon (1976), the portraits underline the ‘disgrace’, the darkness, the ‘disembowelled’ lands of the Saint-Etienne landscape, including in the Blue Guide, 1965.⁸ Saint-Etienne is often described as ‘the black city, the noisiest and busiest in the world’ (Vant 1981: 168). However, according to the geographer André Vant, black was not necessarily negative. For some commentators, black was also the colour of industry and progress. However, people denounced the dust that fell on their clothes, the smoke of the factories, the rain that turned black because of the slag and the soot on the facades of the local buildings. This imagery is not limited to literature; it is also found in newspapers and photo novels, whose influence in the construction of the imaginary was important. Today, ‘the black city’ is also widely found in the works of the local artists studied by Sandra Trigano, such as Julien Morel, who produced a series of paintings depicting the industrial wasteland or the photographer Pierre Grasset, whose photographs portray life in the wastelands (Trigano 2017).

Mandon points out how ‘black’ has often been associated with ‘red’ in Saint-Etienne’s descriptions (Mandon 1976). The French journalist and writer Jules Vallès, who lived in Saint-Etienne between 1840 and 1845, wrote that when he settled in Nantes he missed ‘the sound of wagons, the neighbourhood of blacksmiths, the fire of the blaze, and [...] the chronicle of the misfortunes of the mine and anger of the miners’ (quoted by Thermeau 2013: 65). The red of the forge is associated with the red of revolt. This cliché of the red city even found its way onto the benches of the national assembly where the local member of parliament, Pétrus Faure, denounced ‘a legend spread throughout France (tending) to represent the workers of the Saint-

⁸ The Blue Guide was a famous French travel guide that highlighted cultural and historical insight of places to visit.

Etienne region as eternally dissatisfied and as permanent revolutionaries' (Faure 1956: 34). In the industrial valleys close to Saint-Etienne, the strength of the workers' movement has been solidly documented since the end of the 19th century. This area was a cradle of the French anarcho-syndicalism movement before World War I (Colson 1986); then, it became a bastion of the French communist party, and remained so until the end of the 20th century.⁹ Some dramatic events, such as the shooting of the Brulé in La Ricamarie on 16 June 1869, when 14 people were killed, are still alive in the minds of retired miners and steel workers. They continue to feed artistic expressions and militant publications (Peyrache 2011: 78). Red was the colour of the miners' union that accompanied the funeral procession of the famous union activist Michel Rondet. Peyrache writes, 'red the political colour of these elected representatives, the bloodshed and fire, a flag that alone conveys images, the blood of these martyr workers' (2011: 78).

In recent years, symbols of blue-collar workers and miners are abundantly mentioned in the publications, stickers and posters of contemporary anarcho-syndicalism movements. They are generally black, red and white, and feature shovels, pickaxes and sometimes a hammer. Similarly, while usually forgotten by most historians (Bedoin et al. 2011: 22), the memory of the big strike of the miners in 1948 remains alive among many militants. This memory of revolt and of workers' struggles is conspicuously absent in the permanent exhibition of the Museum of the mine that opened in 2014. During the long decline of local industrial fabric, from the 1970s until a few years ago, red and black were the symbols of the past. It was a glorious industrial past of which people were proud, but which they felt they needed to discard.

In the past, those who visited Saint-Etienne discovered a city surrounded by a bleak, charmless natural landscape; a city planted among arid mountains. However, the town was intimately linked to its surrounding countryside. Numerous city dwellers maintained a strong attachment to their family villages, which they visited regularly. Today, Saint-Etienne is a town with many community allotments that play an important role in bringing together workers from various ethnic communities. Many migrant workers from Italy, Portugal or from North-Africa come from farming backgrounds and share their knowledge and seeds about gardening in the allotments. These rural sensibilities remain strong:

'[...] What struck me when I worked in Lyon, I was in an office, [...] people had never seen a cow. They did not know what it was whereas in Saint-Etienne, people are from the countryside. Their parents, or ... they know what a chicken is, a cow is whereas in Lyon, people did not know. [...]' (reported by Vedrine in Rautenberg et al. eds 2011: 247).

Above all, Saint-Etienne is green because of football. 'The Greens' is the very popular nickname of the football team, l'ASSE. An aspect of the city's social imaginary has a special

⁹ Saint-Etienne had a communist mayor between 1977 and 1983. Most of the surrounding industrial towns had socialist or communist municipalities after World War II (Firminy, La Ricamarie, Unieux, and so on).

flavour. During the 1970s, the black and red heroes of industry, the miners, and the green heroes of the stadium shared the same battleground as they engaged in saving the honour of the wounded city. As a consequence, green that was synonymous with the club¹⁰ became a proud local banner during the 1970s, when Saint Etienne experienced economic and social trauma. Today, the colours green and black continue to express the homology of the football player and the miner, which is sometimes expressed in the songs of the supporters. As reported by Bérangère Ginhoux (Rautenberg and Vedrine 2017: 98)

‘In every city we have represented, for this green jersey that we have always loved,
The sons of miners defend with pride, The colours and the honour of our *Sainté*
[that is, Saint-Etienne].’

The collective outrage that followed the article in *Le Monde* and the supporters’ pride are not merely emotional. They are expressions of a strong attachment to the city that is built upon their exploration of the recesses of its streets. They are based on a sensitively concrete experience of the city. They draw on an intimacy with the urban landscape that links the present to the past of local everyday life. Personal experiences are incorporated in the wider history of a city that had a national destiny and an envied place in world history. For example, many people who travel abroad say that they have found the Manufrance catalogue¹¹ or ribbons from Saint-Etienne in Asia, in America or in Eastern Europe. In Saint-Etienne, workers and miners happily continue to imagine the past that gives meaning to the material city. By experimenting with the traces of the city’s past, today’s inhabitants develop a much greater interest in history than what could be achieved by merely going on school outings to a museum. Sandra Trigano reported an interview with the photographer and projectionist Raphael Labouré (Trigano 2015: 155)

‘ST: Did you ever take pictures of this industrial aspect? What is your link to that?
RL: My link to that [...] My generation came after [...] the great epic of the Greens, the textile industry and all that. These are things that have stayed in the city and that we feel, but which have actually died. We have vestiges of the past that are very pretty to take photos of. In fact, my generation, we arrived, there was no longer a lot of activity. People tended to go away or stay unemployed. ST: Did your grandfather tell you about the mine? RL: Yeah that happens but not [a lot]. ST: That did not interest you? RL: Yeah maybe. ST: So, it’s not through your grandfather’s story that you’re interested [in the mine]? RL: No, it was through daily life; you pass all the time in front of the shaft, you’re interested. In addition to my work, I tended to make projections there [at the museum]. A fairly strong relationship with the Museum [...].’

¹⁰ Green was first and foremost the colour of the Casino Group and its sports association which is at the origin of the football club.

¹¹ Manufrance was one of the biggest firms in Saint-Etienne. It was a mail order company specialised in hunting guns, bicycles and hardware.

As we see, the imagination of the city ought to be embodied in public events and places. In addition, activities which ritualize public and private events that impact upon our past, present and future life, should be included in stories to be told and shared. Stories can transform individual memories and imaginings into collective memories and imagination. This is the proper role of museums and artists, whether they are professionals or amateurs. Ultra-supporters do the same when they hold up *tifos*¹² and sing of the glory of the ASSE. Between the black of the soot and of the coal, the red of the revolt, the accidents and the fire of the forges, and the green of the countryside of the neighbouring Velay or the Geoffroy Guichard stadium, the miner icon imposes itself and erases those of other workers. This stereotypical miner that represents the incarnation of the Stéphanois, as a hard-working, easy-going, undisciplined, worker has its rural origins in Italy, Poland or North Africa.

Photographers in Saint Etienne

Many people work to preserve, or glorify, the past and the memory of Saint-Etienne. There are managers of restaurants and cafes and other economic agents who invest in restoring old buildings, as well as artists who are attached to the atmosphere of the industrial town and activists of the punk-rock movement,¹³ who defend the working-class culture. Supporters of the football team who are sometimes considered a legacy of the working-class traditions, or simply inhabitants engaged in local associations also are involved in this process. Here, I will focus on photographers who have a particular attachment to the town. From 1876 until today, there have been 400 artisan photographers in Saint-Etienne. Their peak years were in the 1960s and 1970s when 43 professionals were active and photography became very popular because of the availability of inexpensive cameras.¹⁴ It was a time when photography became a popular artistic practice *par excellence* as people learned to shoot and develop pictures in photo-clubs and shared an aesthetics that was not a mere copy of the academic aesthetics (Bourdieu 1964).

For various reasons, there is a special relationship between Saint-Etienne and the photographers. This history has not yet been recorded but we can easily find some elements that are good indicators of photographers' special affinity with the town. For example, some well-known artists were born here, from the painter and photographer Felix Thiollier (1842-1914), some of whose works are kept at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, to Valérie Jouve (1964-), who had an exhibition at the famous Centre Pompidou in 2010.¹⁵ A large number of books are illustrated with photographs dealing with the local history. Also, the genuine 'books-territory' (Antoine et al. eds 2017) demonstrates a closeness between images in the book and the urban space as perceived by pedestrians. Until the 1970s, many photographers worked in industry,

¹² Tifos are large banners that supporters display during football matches.

¹³ See <https://lafrancepue.org/wordpress/>

¹⁴ Georges Pitiot: conference of the 2 March 2017 at the Musée du Vieux in Saint-Etienne.

¹⁵ See <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/cpv/resource/cAbM8Mq/rXKEak>. Her first exhibition at the Musée d'art contemporain de Saint-Etienne Métropole was in Spring and Summer 2018.

producing pictures for catalogues and various commercial displays.¹⁶ Particularly after World War II, some studied in Saint-Etienne's famous School of Art. Today, Saint-Etienne is considered by several photographers whom I met as a wonderful stomping ground because of its topography (the town is built on seven hills and surrounded by mountains on three sides). Also attractive to them is its dense and disorderly urbanism that mixes large buildings and little villas with gardens. Local houses of the 19th or early 20th centuries contrast with tower blocks of the 1960s and 1970s. This 'authenticity' of residential spaces reveals important aspects of local life.¹⁷ However, despite the national fame of some photographers who show the vitality of ordinary life such as factory work or the city's mundane urbanity, the local élites reject the artists who put the less attractive reality of the city on display. Contemporary images of the town would be overwhelmed by two post-industrial mythologies that emerged from the interviews: on the one hand, there are designs that deal with the transition between traditional and modern economical activities; on the other hand, there is football as a social medicine perpetuating traditional local values originating in the former industrial culture. In the last fifteen years, two of the major projects pursued by various local municipalities have been a creative district that has replaced the previous Manufacture d'armes de Saint-Etienne¹⁸ and the renovation of the stadium.

The omnipresence of the industrial landscape in the local economy and in the local culture can explain the relationship between the two that began almost 150 years ago. Felix Thiollier is certainly the most famous of those early photographers. He had an early passion for Roman churches, romantic ruins and rural landscapes, and was well-known by the end of the 19th century (Paradis 2017). He also shot mining landscapes, factories and industrial chimneys. He belonged to the local bourgeoisie as his father owned a ribbon factory. His collection of more than 27,000 pictures is owned by his descendants and by some other local families. Some of his work is displayed in the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Etienne Métropole. But he had no students, and it is difficult to prove his photographs had a direct influence upon the representation of industry in the city, although more than 700 images are of the 'black country', which was the nickname of Saint-Etienne. However, we do know that he held an important place in the iconography of the industrial world as shown in a recent exhibition at the Puits Couriot/Musée de la mine, in 2016.¹⁹

There are many images and allegories of industrial work displayed in public spaces, as shown in the 2017 exhibition at the Puits Couriot/Parc-Musée de la mine, with contributions of

¹⁶ The most famous was certainly the Manufrance catalogue we mentioned before.

¹⁷ See <http://imu.universite-lyon.fr/projet/optimum-observatoire-photographique-du-territoire-images-des-mondes-urbains-en-mutation-2017/>

¹⁸ The Manufacture d'armes de Saint-Étienne (MAS, Saint-Étienne Armaments Manufacturer) was a French state-owned manufacturing company; the heir of the Royal Arms Manufacture created in 1764. Production ceased in 2001.

¹⁹ Catalogues of the two exhibitions are forthcoming.

the GREMMOS.²⁰ We found hundreds of representations of miners' and steel workers' work on graves, in churches, in city halls, on statues in public parks and in contemporary frescos, tags and graffiti. The exhibition clearly demonstrated the important place of industrial work in everyday life and in collective representations. It showed the old, important and continuing presence of images of industrial work in the public sphere, at least from the 1920s. These images had different functions, such as celebrating the modernity through work and industry, remembering the workers' contribution to progress, recalling the dangers and the harshness of industrial work and bringing the working class to religion, as well as paying tribute to eminent industrialists, politicians or trade unionists. In Saint-Etienne, the culture of workers and the industrial past do not only exist only in memory or history; they are visible and touchable on street corners and house facades. They help to consolidate the public imagination in a strong relationship between past and present by reviving stories of ordinary pedestrians and resident photographers.

Alongside three museums,²¹ many individuals and other public institutions contribute to preserving the traces of the industrial past. Saint-Etienne also has several associations that are interested in its industrial past, whether it is industrial buildings or workers' memory and history. The GREMMOS, which gathers together academics, students and amateurs engaged in working class history, is certainly among the most active local agents. In 2011, they published a big, thick and very well documented book, titled *1948: Les mineurs stéphanois en grève. Des photographies de Léon Leponce à l'histoire* (Bedoin et al. 2011), about the main miners' strike that occurred at that time in Saint-Etienne. Miners stopped working in that year for 7 weeks; that strike involved 350,000 miners in France and 22,000 in the Saint-Etienne coalfield. It is much less present in the miners' collective memory than the previous strike, which took place one year before and was closely controlled by the Communists. Fortunately, the 1948 strike was covered by the photographer and journalist Léon Leponce (1893-1969), who stands as a good example of photographers who were engaged in capturing the reality of social life. He studied at the School of Art of Saint-Etienne and opened a photo studio in 1916. As many other photographers, Leponce shot weddings and portraits of the local bourgeoisie. He also worked for businesses such as Casino. He is known especially for being a photo-reporter for several local newspapers. GREMMOS's book, which is dedicated 'aux mineurs de la Loire', is based on the analysis of photos of the strike and related protests by Leponce and of a short film made by the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), trade unionists who were close to the French Communist party. The pictures are analysed as ethnographers do: comparing images, browsing newspapers to find the dates of publication, looking for details and cross-referencing them with

²⁰ This acronym stands for Groupe de Recherches et d'Etudes sur les Mémoires du Monde Ouvrier Stéphanois. See <http://www.gremmos.lautre.net/>. I am a member of this association.

²¹ These are, the Museum of Art and Industry which we have already mentioned, the Museum of the Mine at the Puits Couriot and the Museum of Modern Art. The latter owns one of the main collections of contemporary art in France.

other sources such as interviews and biographies. Thanks to Leponce's photographs, a dramatic moment in working-class history can be shared with the general public.

Leponce holds a place in the long list of photographers in Saint-Etienne who were fascinated by the industrial landscapes, by the working class and, more recently, by the brownfields. They have distanced themselves from Thiollier's romantic and scenic images. Philippe Hervouet, a professional photographer who has worked with local cultural institutions, thinks that there was a real proximity between the Fine arts school of Saint-Etienne and the local industry and business. For example, photography courses were already organized before World War II to teach industrial photography for economic enterprises. Several photography studios specialized in working for industrialists, such as the studio Caterin that worked for Manufrance. According to several of our interviewees, this is a major reason why there are more photographers in Saint-Etienne than elsewhere. Their strong involvement in industrial photography marks their legacy. For many of them today, shooting derelict old factory buildings has become a political commitment signifying their attachment to Saint-Etienne's history and to the popular culture of workers. As Philippe Hervouet said during an interview on 7 December 2016, 'for artists, industry is becoming something to preserve; even an inspiration'.

According to our sources, there are now between 30 and 50 such individuals in the city. It is not possible to have a precise number. Few are artisans and own a shop. Some declare that they are artists and some have photographed Saint-Etienne a lot but do not live in the town. In any case, the great majority are not professionals. Several photographers whom I interviewed are what Sandra Trigano called 'resident artists' (Trigano 2017). Whether professionals or amateurs, artists or activists, they are very close to the city where they live. They feel attached to its history, to its vernacular landscapes where they look for traces of the popular culture and its 'aesthetics of everyday life' (Light and Smith, 2005), which impact one's senses and representations of the urban landscape. This aesthetics not only plays a role in the experience of our environment, but also in our attachments to the places where we live. Other photographers may not be 'residents' of Saint-Etienne, but they have been interested in its industrial landscape at one time or another in their visual work. Some describe themselves as 'artists', others as 'activists' or 'amateurs'. Thirty-seven are members of the Saint-Etienne photo-club and 27 others of the Beaulieu photo-club located in a social-centre created fifty years ago. Some big changes appeared a few years ago in the social composition of photographers. There are many more women among them today. Most photographers, like many young people, are not — and do not want to be — identified as artisans or shopkeepers. Actually, the boundary between artists, amateurs and professional is very difficult to define. When I asked him to define a photographer, Maxim, a young artist who arrived from Nantes three years ago, said, 'you are a photographer', as I showed a picture I took in an old factory. He introduces himself as an 'activist' and refuses to 'prostitute himself' by shooting marriages and portraits. Presently he receives economic support from public assistance and some public institutions. Maxim frequently photographs urban landscapes, street views and old empty factories. 'Pictures can be seen by everybody', he says, therefore photographers can be good propagandists for the

memory of a place. He expresses great solidarity inside his group stating, ‘photographers in St Etienne are like a family. Everybody knows about each other's activity’. Later he told me, ‘It is very cool. When I arrived from Nantes, I went to the photo club where I met one or two members, they introduced me to other members; then I participated in an exhibition; they proposed for me to join the Boite Noire;²² and there are also a lot of social networks.’ A point to be highlighted is that most of these photographers claim that they are inspired by the previous generations of Saint-Etienne’s photographers. Practically all of them post their work on their personal websites or on social networks, which are their principal way of communicating with the public and their community (Rojon 2015). It is difficult to distinguish between amateurs and professionals as both often collaborate in their photo clubs. They share advice and sometimes participate in the same exhibitions.

Two major categories of attachment to the city emerged from their comments. One emphasizes the particular ‘aesthetics’ of the city that includes a peculiar arrangement of horizontal and vertical lines and an urbanism that is more of a patchwork than a neoclassical Haussmann style arrangement, but always contains a glimpse of the green hills and mountains that surround the town. The other, highlights the many ‘traces’ of the city’s labour and industrial history, embodying a vernacular urban landscape that is becoming very rare in France. Some of my informants associate with football what remains of the local popular culture.

Conclusion: The Ambiguous Place of Photographers in a Popular Town that Aims to be Gentrified

Several academics of the University of Saint-Etienne reacted to the article with which I introduced the present discussion. Ten days after publication, three academics sent their response to the *Le Monde* under the title, ‘A Saint-Etienne, pauvreté n’est pas une fatalité’ (Gay et al. 2014). They described municipal policies that alternated between economic recovery and urban regeneration designed to halt the demographic decline that began in the 1970s. Unlike what Sylvia Zappi’s article suggested, they claimed that Saint-Etienne’s poverty rate in the city-centre was not higher than other towns, such as Lille or Strasbourg, that are supposed to be wealthier.

In their response, Gay and his co-authors addressed the substance of the text. However, many people and most of the photographers were shocked not by the written article but by the two pictures that were used to illustrate the city-centre. They were pictures of an uninhabited house located in a district that was undergoing renovation and was demolished a few weeks later. Regardless of what the article said, both pictures impacted local society much more than what the journalist intended. Local residents, academics, football fans, artists and politicians denounce the article as an insult to the town. The trauma lasted a long time. Three years later, the British photographer Ed Alcock obtained subsidies to exhibit 50 portraits of inhabitants under the title #Stéphanoisfiers in the streets of Saint-Etienne.

²² *La Boite Noire* is a collective of young photographers.

Some valuable lessons can be learned from this journalistic episode about the place of photography in the shaping of urban imaginary. Zappi's article revealed the bias that is largely shared among journalists and media people, but it also arose opposition to the contempt shown for local values. Images can be much more effective than scientific arguments, and sociologists and ethnographers ought to take this into account.

This event contributed to reinforcing the cultural intimacy of local people. The strong reaction of the mayor, academics and institutions can be partly explained by the politics of gentrification taking place in Saint-Etienne, led by the local authorities with national support. Saint-Etienne is not a big city where capitalists look for good investment in real estate to protect their capital, as described in New York by Alessandro Busà (Busà 2017). However, in Saint-Etienne as in New York, the city markets itself to the 'new urban classes', who are seduced by the commodities offered by the 'city producers'. Saint-Etienne, as every city, is trying to brand itself (Busà 2017: 174-179). In 2007, the mayor commissioned a study about Saint-Etienne's 'creative classes' in reference to Florida's theory (Florida 2002). This is a difficult issue as Saint-Etienne is too close to the more attractive city of Lyon. It is a 'shrinking city'²³ that has been losing residents since the 1970s. But it is also well-connected to an attractive countryside which provides opportunities for young creative people to reside outside the city centre. Unfortunately, Saint-Etienne has also maintained its negative 'black town' image (Rousseau 2008: 114). Our study suggested that the town was far from meeting Florida's criteria, despite the amount of public investment in the upscale renovations of the former factories of the *Manufacture d'armes de Saint-Etienne* and other municipal policies — such as obtaining the label 'city of design' by UNESCO in 2010²⁴ — that are intended to attract the 'creative classes'. Finally, Saint-Etienne's original 'creative class' is mostly made up of young people born in the town, or close to it, and sentimentally attached to it. Unlike the mobile young entrepreneurs described by Florida, they are a captive group.

Everywhere, photography has had an influence on our appropriation and understanding of cities, as expressed in photographic images of urban landscapes, activities and local characters. For example, through seeing and photographing, Jerome Kruse (2012) described how ethnic communities settled in Brooklyn and other big cities around the world. Photography offers a gigantic database that enables the public to see and understand the transformations of the urban landscape. Thanks to digitalisation and digital platforms — professional and amateur — photographs are easily accessible and the practice of photography has experienced a real revival. Photography highlights not only major or minor events of our private life, but also puts social movements on display by consolidating and embedding them in the collective memory. Thanks to their ability to reveal the past and the present palimpsest of cities, pictures continue to shape our imagination about cities.

²³ The political scientist Max Rousseau prefers the formula 'losing cities' when speaking of Saint-Etienne.

²⁴ See <https://www.citedudesign.com/fr/international/010812-saint-etienne-ville-unesco-de-design>

The photographers whom we interviewed caught the hidden dimensions of urban life and told insignificant or important stories of Saint-Etienne, but they did not promote a ‘creative city’ that did not correspond to their experience. Their feelings about, and representations of, the ‘good city’ are not far from the average values of people who might move into the old popular neighbourhoods that are targets of current gentrification policies, like the Crêt de Roc, where an eco-neighbourhood has been created by locals and by people from other parts of the town.²⁵

Among the youngest photographers, several remind us of the individuals described by Max Rousseau. They could easily fit the profile of the ‘new urban classes’, but they are merely stuck in a town that they have been unable to leave. They take pictures of the town and post them on their personal blogs, on Flickr, on Instagram and other social networks, where they create evolving representations of Saint-Etienne. There, their aesthetic inclinations are blended with nostalgia and honest concerns about faithfully documenting disappearing traces of working-class life and popular culture. These images can be seen by anyone from anywhere, they feed the inhabitants’ cultural intimacy but they also produce a representation that does not fit in the attempt to project a clean and smooth image of the creative city for more distant consumers.

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²⁵ See <https://www.saint-etienne.fr/entreprendre-projets/projet-urbain/cr%C3%AAt-roc-transformation-urbaine-%C3%A9co-durable/cr%C3%AAt-roc-transformati>

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