Critical Review

Phantasy of Rio

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Informing Contexts

PHO720

Introduction

Cinema is about motion—stories unfurling in real time, flickering reels spinning at 24 frames per second, and a crowd bound together in collective breath. Yet the buildings that embody this vitality can grow profoundly still once deserted. In undertaking my WIPP Portfolio for the “Informing Context” module of my MA in Photography (January–April 2025), I was drawn to Rio Cinema, a once-thriving local theatre now caught in a hush of abandonment. This setting became the locus for my project, Phantasy of Rio, an undertaking that merges my personal rec-ollections with psychoanalytic theory, through a monochromatic photographic journey.

While Cinema, at its core, is an illusion of movement, for many of us, the word alone evokes memories of bustling lines at the ticket counter, neon marquees announcing showtimes, and the warm hush that envelops an audience as lights dim. Yet once such a cinema is abandoned, that carefully orchestrated dance of reels, stories, and communal spectatorship dissolves, leaving behind a stark contrast: a stillness that almost belies the dynamic energy once contained within.

“A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know.”
-Diane Arbus

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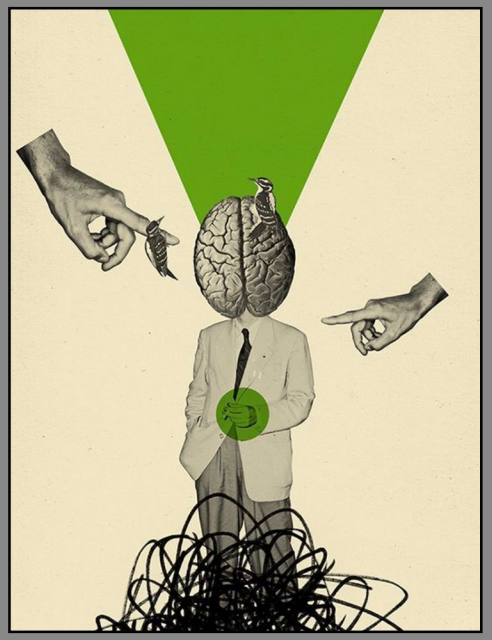

Fig 1- Phantasy by Mariam Loretsyan

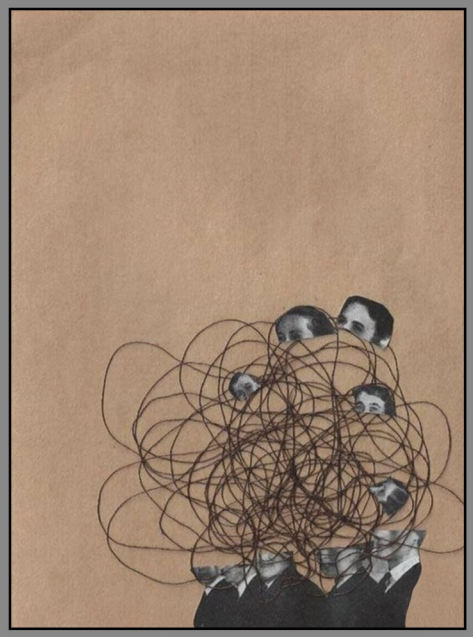

Fig 2- Phantasy by Rose Cefalu

Exploration

From the outset, I decided not to number or caption each photograph. Instead, I invite the viewer to enter these images as one might roam an old film set—unanchored, guided only by curiosity and the occasional glimmer of insight. In truth, I vacillate between nostalgia, longing, and what Sigmund Freud calls “phantasy”—a realm where daydream, memory, and unconscious impulses swirl together. More than an academic exercise, this project serves as an emotional reckoning with a place that was once so present in my life but now stands on the brink of erasure.

In “Photography and Cinema”, David Campany underscores the odd coupling of photography’s static essence with cinema’s perpetual flux. He contends that while film tries to replicate “reality in motion,” photography seizes an instant, inviting deeper contemplation on what’s visible or implied at that single moment. Rio, in its dormant state, amplifies that tension. Where hundreds of fleeting moments once strung together to create lively experiences, what remains is only freeze-frames of disuse, like frames of film extracted from a spool and pinned in place.

Photographing the now abandoned Rio evokes what Campany calls “paper cinema,” where a series of still images forms a spectral narrative of a once-bustling environment. In my black-and-white images, I piece together glimpses of tattered seats, broken fixtures, and leftover reel canisters—vignettes that collectively recount Rio’s arc from cherished local venue to silent shell. Each photograph stands alone, yet viewed in sequence, they convey a ghostly film of emptiness. It’s as if the building itself is caught between the memory of motion and the reality of stillness, a tension that echoes cinema’s illusions of movement.

In Rio, while humble and unassuming compared to grander palaces, there is nonetheless a palpable sense of sadness. Silent rows of seats, once lively, lie still beneath a fine layer of dust, hinting at all that was left behind. Photographers like Seph Lawless, documenting deserted malls and amusement parks, illustrate how swiftly once-bustling spaces can collapse into oblivion when crowds and commerce recede. Meanwhile, the emotional power of black-and-white photography, seen vividly in Don McCullin's stark war time images or Daido Moriyama's moody urban frames, feels especially apt for Rio's suspended darkness. Stripped of color, the building's surfaces and shadows speak most directly to memory and loss.

Fig3: Seph Lawless. Autopsy of America. 2014

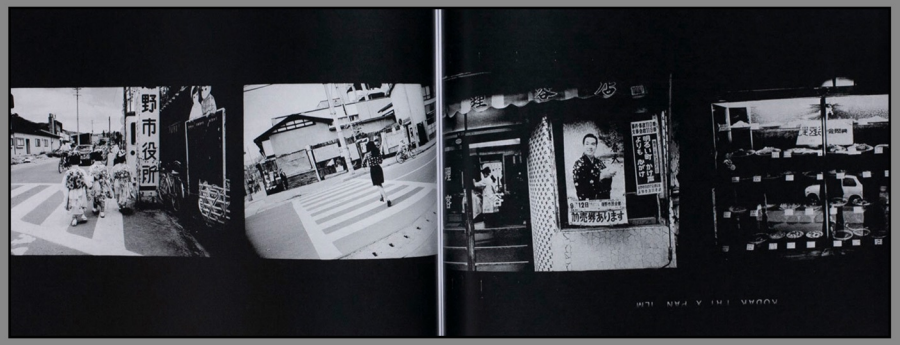

Fig4: Daido Moriyama. "Daido Moriyama: Tales of Tona". 2012

Fig5: Don McCullin."In England". 2007

Within this deserted cinema, it's not just the building's aura that compels me, but the personal recollections and unconscious triggers that awaken when I walk around. Patricia Townsend, referencing Donald Winnicott, uses the concept of "transitional space" to describe that creative intersection where an artist's interior world meets external stimuli. In my case, each dusty corridor or half-peeled poster stirs a memory of how it felt to queue for tickets as a child, or the hush that preluded a movie's opening. Townsend calls this intuitive pull a "hunch", the intangible spark that draws me to photograph a specific angle or composition.

"The motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single fantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality."—Sigmund Freud

Creative Process

For me, following these hunches means letting the environment speak first—a posture reminiscent of Adrian Stokes's idea of "carving," where you respond to what's already present. If I see an unexpected shaft of light highlighting a row of seats, I might snap the photo exactly as is, preserving that ephemeral slice of time. Other times, I'll engage in "modelling," adjusting vantage points or slightly repositioning an object to accentuate the building's inherent melancholia. This dual approach resonates with Jeff Wall's distinction between "hunters" and "farmers" in photography: I become the "hunter" when I spontaneously capture a discovered moment, and the "farmer" when I methodically shape or cultivate a scene to coax out the emotional undertones I sense beneath the dust and neglect.

These metaphors—"carving" vs. "modelling," "hunting" vs. "farming"—aren't just academic constructs; I feel them personally every time I bring my camera to my eye inside Rio. Sometimes, as a "hunter," I roam around with the adrenaline of searching, waiting for the natural light in the hall or a corridor to fall just right, as though pouncing on a decisive moment akin to street photography. On other occasions, I'm more like a "farmer," returning multiple times, adjusting the angle or controlling the elements as if cultivating a visual orchard of the mind. In either case, the synergy of environment and personal vision shapes the final image.

This bridging of environmental cues with personal recall is where the transitional space concept truly shines. Rio is not merely a "subject" for me to photograph and document; it's an active participant in the creative process. The theatre's peeling walls might "tell" me a story of missed potentials or unfulfilled showings, reminding me of a time I arrived late for a movie, heart pounding from excitement. I respond with an image that tries to fold in that memory, letting the building's actual condition converge with my mental vantage point. The photograph that emerges is both an external document and an interior reflection—a subtle dialogue between what is physically present and what is emotionally resonant.

“Nostalgia is a seductive liar—it persuades us that the past was simpler and happier than it really was.” —G. W. Ball

Framework

If I were to take a conventional approach, I might label the heart break I feel at seeing Rio in ruin as nostalgia—a lament for simpler times, crowded nights, the flickering glow of a screen capturing everyone's attention in unison. Sigmund Freud, however, pushes deeper. He posits that "phantasy" involves unsatisfied wishes and hidden elements of longing, surpassing mere sentimentality about the past. The battered seats might be triggers for my own unaddressed sense of loss: the younger me who was once enthralled by a comedic double feature, or the communal warmth of sitting among strangers, collectively surrendering to the magic of moving images.

Freud would suggest that the emotional weight we perceive in these images arises not just from external changes but from the internal transformations we undergo. Rio's demise might reflect the passing of certain illusions in my own life—the illusions of youth, or of unwavering communal bonds. This could be why the torn seat, or the curled-up film reel resonates so powerfully: it's an external symbol for an internal shift. I am not simply yearning for the theatre's operational days; I may be grieving versions of myself that no longer exist.

Freud's concept of mourning can also illuminate how one sometimes lament not just the building's end but the ephemeral experiences it hosted. A cinema like Rio might have witnessed countless first dates, giddy teenage outings, and families huddled with popcorn or gram, creating a tapestry of personal and communal rites of passage. Perhaps witnessing the few remaining seats in the empty hall collecting dust feels like an irretrievable piece of a collective narrative that has vanished. A photograph of a seat leaning at an odd angle conjures the time I accidentally spilled my drink during a comedic scene, or the hush of tension when a plot twist shocked the entire auditorium. By capturing that seat now, I confront my inability to revisit the exact thrill I felt then—an acknowledgment of life's unstoppable progression. Under Freud's lens, that awareness can carry an undercurrent of mourning, not just for the place but also for the self I was.

Crucially, Freud recognized that phantasies could be generative, spurring artistic invention. Photographing the cracked wall on a once grand and cozy hall, I may unconsciously project my own illusions of revival—imagining the place reawakened with new films or envisioning an alternative timeline where the theatre never closed. In a subtle way, each shot becomes an expression of that longing. The creative impulse merges my dream of recaptured glories with the building's stark present. With each photograph of Rio, the emotional impetus is the spark of "what if?"—a quiet testament to how fantasies shape the images I produce.

"Spaces carry the weight of what happened there—what was said, felt, or silenced. Photography can unravel those silences, revealing the emotional architecture of a place." —C. M. Weems

In “Finding and Knowing—Thinking about Ideas,” Shirley Read stresses the importance of recurring themes that unify a photographer’s work. My obsession with Rio isn’t a standalone curiosity; it connects to a broader fascination I have with spaces that have been left behind—old houses and buildings, unused fairgrounds, derelict train stations, even defunct hotels and cafes. Each was once a small social epicenter. Now, absent the bustle, these places hum with a different kind of energy: the echo of lost gatherings and ephemeral joys. Recognizing this pattern clarifies that what I’m doing at Rio is part of a more extensive inquiry into how people congregate, celebrate, and ultimately relinquish the corners of their lives that once felt indispensable.

Fig 6: Walker Evans - "American Photographs".1938

Fig 7: C.J. Vergara - American Ruins. 1999

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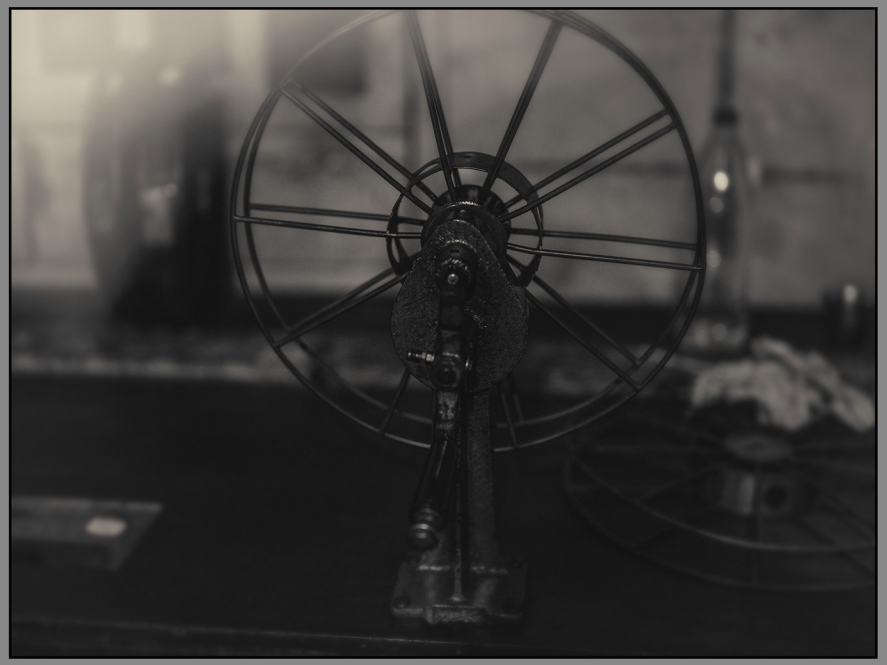
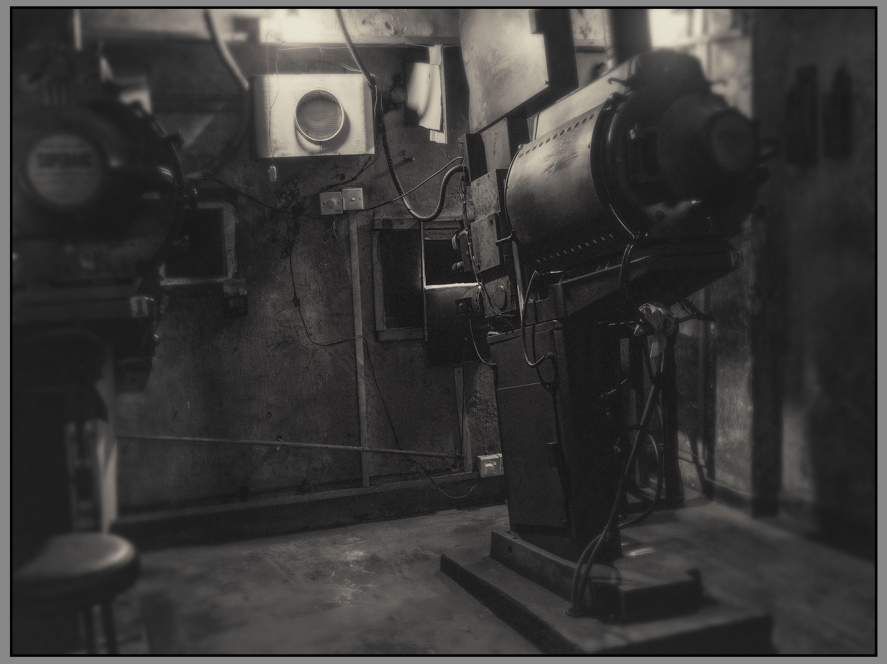
Fig 9: Walker Evans - "American Photographs".1938

I’m far from alone in my fascination with deserted buildings and communal spaces. Seph Lawless highlights how so-called consumer palaces devolve into haunting malls or fairgrounds once the crowds and spending disappear, revealing the fragile illusions at their core. Camilo José Vergara, on the other hand, revisits the same neighborhoods over many years, showing how social or economic pressures transform—or fail to transform—these once-flourishing locales. Echoes of this impulse surface even in early American photography; Walker Evans in the 1930s also sought to freeze shifting local scenes in time as a subtle critique of human pursuits. By aligning my black-and-white images of Rio with this tradition, I’m reminded of a collective draw to the silent traces left behind when life moves on.



"I create pictures that exist in a space between reality and daydream. My intention is for the viewer to enter that world, as if stepping into a collective unconscious."
—Gregory Crewdson

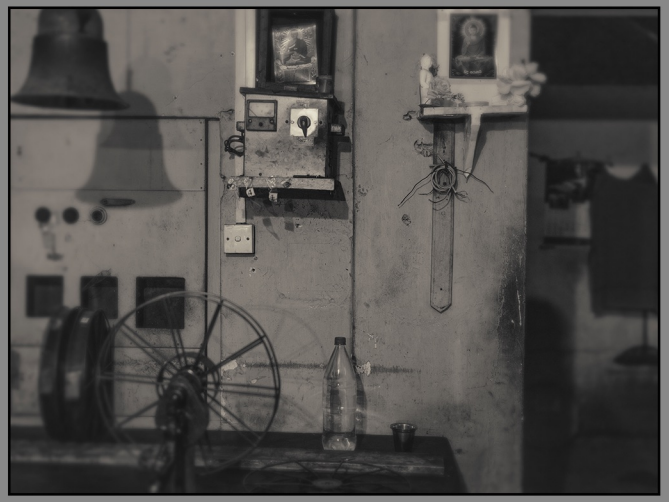


Janina Struk warns that photographs, devoid of context, can be ambiguous or easily misread. A black-and-white image of a battered theatre seat or a darkened unfrequented dusty corridor at Rio might appear as artful gloom or “ruin porn” if the viewer doesn’t realize the seat was once the focal point of a local community’s weekly entertainment. She reminds us that embedding textual details, archival data, or anecdotal narratives can transform the impact of a photograph. When we know that Rio once hosted everything from blockbuster action marathons to obscure foreign-language screenings, or that a devoted projectionist manned the reels for nearly a lifetime, these pictures gain greater depth. They’re no longer just snapshots of emptiness, but portals into a richer tapestry of cinematic history and the lives woven into it.

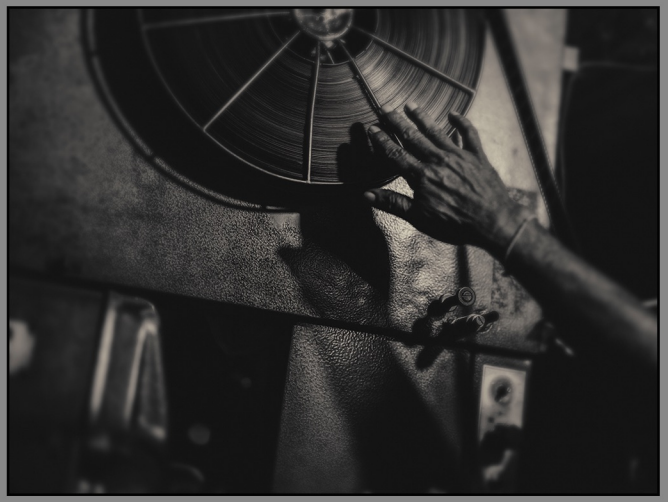
Additionally, Struk’s emphasis on context connects seamlessly with the psychoanalytic angles explored by Freud and Townsend. If their insights help us see the unconscious or “inner swirl of longing” behind our relationship to a place, contextual details reveal how those drives are forged by actual social and historical shifts. For example, the decline of single-screen cinemas in favor of multiplexes or on-demand streaming isn’t just about technology advancing; it also reframes our emotional engagement with film. Gone is that collective hush before the lights dim—a moment when an entire audience united in silent anticipation—now traded for individualized headphone viewing in the isolation of our living rooms. By understanding this broader change, we see the building’s transition not simply as structural decay, but as evidence of a cultural transformation that alters how we gather, share stories, and slip into the realm of cinematic daydreams.

Fig 10: Warsaw Ghetto Boy. Unkown Author. 1943

Fig 11: Starving Jewish boy in the Warsaw Ghetto. Unknown Author. 1943



“Photography is, essentially, an act of nostalgia.”- Sontag, S.



Reflection

Sequencing and editing these images further shape the emotional trajectory of Phantasy of Rio. I opted for a structure that interweaves liminal shots—soft, dreamlike frames of half-lit corridors or drifting dust motes—with more straightforward documentary images showcasing the theatre's actual state: peeling signs, battered seats, rusted film cans, time worn projectors. I also omitted any images featuring people from the Portfolio, reinforcing that sense of emptiness—even the old operator, who stood so faithfully by his projector when I was photographing, is conspicuously absent in my WIPP.

This alternating rhythm of liminal and documentary reflects how I move between emotive recollection and raw observation. The liminal images evoke the intangible swirl—Freud's "phantasy" dimension—while the more documentary images anchor the viewer in the building's factual decline. Piecing them together in a fluid sequence invites an almost cinematic flow, shifting from shadowy illusions to concrete details, then back again, as if we're simultaneously exploring memory's haze and historical reality. I felt that this editorial approach helped unify the narrative: it mirrors my internal process of drifting between reverie and stark acceptance of Rio's present hush.

Conclusion

At its core, Phantasy of Rio is a meditation on what it means for a place designed to cultivate illusions to be abandoned. The hush that reigns here is more than physical silence; it's the resonance of a hundred, maybe a thousand communal moments that once beat in unison.

By colliding with each of these elements, I realize that Rio's emptiness is not truly empty. Memory lingers in the dust swirling where projector light once illuminated an audience's wide eyes. A battered poster's half-legible text can summon a half-century's worth of comedic or tragic screenings. The chipped paint or cracks on the walls may mirror the gradual chipping away of communal traditions, replaced by more isolated entertainment habits. Even the battered "Manager" sign, half off its hinge, might lead me to wonder about the people who once meticulously scheduled each showtime, the families that came year after year, or the shy teen lovers who found solace in a dark corner seat. Every photograph becomes, in some sense, an invocation of these fleeting illusions—a quiet incantation to a communal dream that once united strangers in shared wonder.

Moreover, in refining my approach, I discovered how personal this reflection is. The sense of hush resonates in my own mind: a hush for the self who was once wide-eyed in the glow of cinematic wonder, a hush that acknowledges we can't truly resurrect the exact fervor of old joys. But photography, especially black-and-white, can approximate the intangible—freezing that hush into an image that invites the viewer into the same emotional space. In capturing Rio, I'm also capturing my own sense of phantom longing. Where is that feeling now? I can't fully articulate it, but with each photograph, I conjure a remnant: the swirl of a half-faded daydream or the subtle ache of a cherished memory.

Author's Note

All photographs in this document were taken by me in February and March 2025 for the "Informing Context" module. I have deliberately chosen not to caption or number them, hoping the reader will slip into my narrative as if peering through the lens of my own memory.

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