

## Comparative Study:

This comparative study investigates the cultural context and function of the following pieces, and how this has influenced their formal qualities:

- “*Prostitute*” – Eugene Atget (1920’s)
- “*Gold Corner*” – Joel Meyerowitz (1974)
- “*Untitled (Aftermath Series)*” – Joel Meyerowitz (2002)

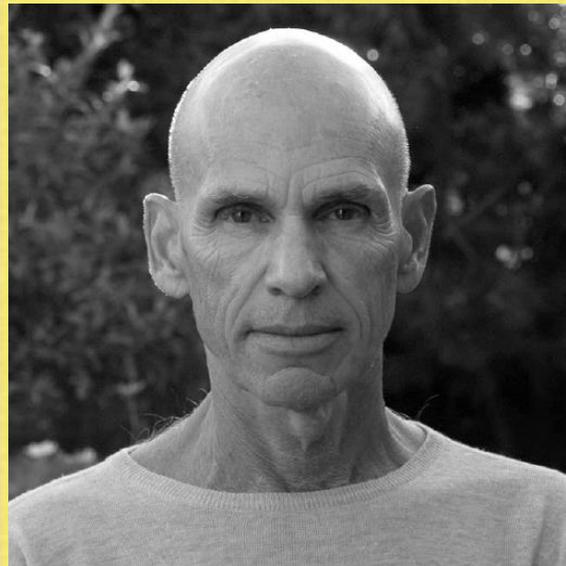
By Inga Filipiak

# Introduction

To tailor the comparative study to my interests, the movement I decided to focus on is Street Photography. Being such an infantile form of art (developed during the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century) (Hacking), photography has always caught my interest because of the way it is so different to other art forms; rather than physically creating something, street photography involves a raw approach of creating art, since it focuses on capturing what is in front of a lens.

The piece “Gold Corner” (1974) by Joel Meyerowitz is particularly interesting: it is a reportage of what Meyerowitz was able to find in New York on that particular day. Through using multiple compositional photography techniques, such as the Rule of Thirds, he builds a confusing and disorientating atmosphere that is perhaps synonymous with the commotion found on a New York street scene.

On the other hand, *Untitled – Aftermath Series* (2002) is not documentary photography,



but a photojournalistic archive of 9/11 (Hacking). In my opinion, an exploration of two different approaches to Street photography (documentary photography and photojournalism) would offer an interesting comparison (Lenman).

Eugene Atget was one of the first people to pursue photography. *Prostitute* is one of the only pieces from Atget’s “Old Paris” archive that includes a person, as his images are mostly of architecture (Lenman). Therefore, I found a comparison of early versus contemporary photography valuable; it shows how not only the methods, but also photographic composition and content has changed over time.

## KEY REASONS FOR SELECTION OF PIECES:

- ❖ Different time periods of the pieces.
- ❖ Cultural contexts – Paris and new York
- ❖ Different photography techniques used to create the pieces.
- ❖ Each piece is a form of Street Photography

# Street Photography

When the camera was first invented, people condemned the idea that photography was an art form. Despite being a revolutionary invention, photography was seen as a threat to the traditional art forms, such as painting and drawing. However, as people became aware of photography's technical aspects (eg. lighting and exposure), they noticed that the camera was far more complex than it seemed and also demanded skill in order to be handled with. By the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, photography had been accepted into the artistic world.

Defined as “a style of documentary photography that features subjects in public places”, street photography only became popular once hand-held cameras were introduced in the 1890s. Prior to this invention, photography was largely studio-based and focused on the portraiture of the wealthy, reinforcing the social-class hierarchy present at the time. However, the introduction of hand-held cameras sparked an interest in artists to experiment with the medium; they were able to use photography outside a studio environment. Thus, many artists began working on streets, capturing working-class communities. While the long exposure time of the camera’s lens forced the subjects to re-enact their movements, amateurs, such as French photographer Charles Nègre, were the first to practice the concept of “external photography”. However, it was only in the 1930s that the term *street photography* was coined.

Street photography is frequently associated with both of *photojournalism* and *documentary photography*. While photojournalism includes the reportage of events in a journalistic and photographic way, documentary photography is a “depiction of the real world...[recording] the human condition within a wider context”. These sub-genres show that street photography has a very important social aspect, as it is based on documenting humans.



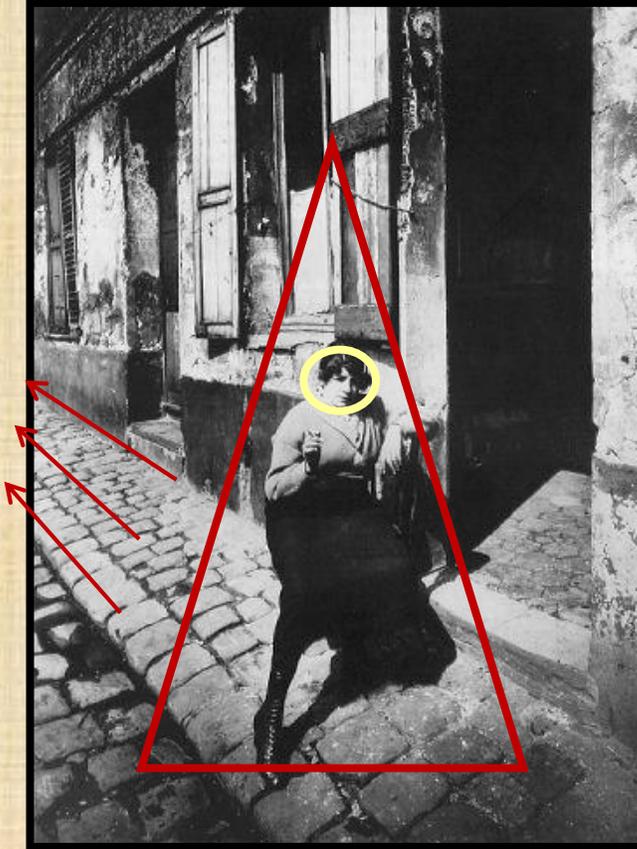
Charles Nègre:  
*Pifférari Assis*, 1853  
20.5 x 15.7 cm

# Formal Qualities

*Prostitute* has an odd number of people (one), creating a natural and common atmosphere; an even number of people creates tension and discomfort (eg. twins are often used in horror films) as our eyes are not accustomed to seeing something identical. This is otherwise known as the **Rule of Odds** (“Photography Composition – Rule of Odds”). The natural feel not only reinforces the “daily life in Old Paris” concept (Lenman), but allows our eyes to thoroughly investigate the piece and its details, as we feel comfortable in looking at the image.

With the **subject’s gaze** directed to the lens, an intimate relationship between us and them is formed—it seems as if we are conversing. In turn, *Prostitute* makes the audience feel as if they were standing in the alley themselves, living the scene and interacting with the woman. The idea of being “in the scene” is further reinforced by the angular depth (perspective) of the image: Atget’s vantage point explores diagonal lines in the background (Adams). Consequently, a pull to move down the street along the implied lines’ directions is created. Incorporating movement helps engage the audience with the image (“Basic Photography Techniques”).

A unique quality of the image are the **geometric structures** formed by the prostitute’s body position. In photography, triangles symbolize stability, fullness and solidarity (Bradley). These attributes however contrast to the characteristics frequently attributed to prostitutes, as



they are often viewed as weak, delicate and inferior to men. Perhaps this contrast has been used to emulate the unique nature of Paris and its people: although the woman is a prostitute, someone who is often seen as delicate, her Parisian heritage makes her strong and independent.

The piece includes **contrast**, in which there is a clash of straight and curved lines: while the architecture and pavement create straight lines, the prostitute is softer with her arch creating curves as she leans. Consequently, she protrudes from the background and dominates our focus. In other words, emphasis is placed on the prostitute, encouraging an analysis of her characteristics.

Also, there is a range of **dark and light tones** due to the exposure value of the image, causing powerful shadowing. Shadows establish a dramatic effect by placing emphasis on areas of light. In this case, they are on the face of the prostitute. With dark regions surrounding her face, our gaze is directed at the prostitute. Furthermore, shadows are essential for texture formation: in “Prostitute”, shadows help reveal the patterns of the cobble-stone, walls and clothes of the prostitute. Without them, the piece would appear two-dimensional (Bigelow).

Texture makes an image three-dimensional. Essentially, most street photography wishes to recreate what can be seen on a street on a daily life basis (Lenman). In this instance, *Prostitute* is an entrance into the old Parisian world that is now extinct. With the help of texture, we feel engaged in the image because of our need to “touch” it. (“Basic Photography Techniques”)

# Eugene Atget – “Prostitute”



***Prostitute (1920's)***

**18 x 24cm**

**Dry Plate Negative**

Born in 1852, Eugene Atget is one of the preliminary fathers of Street Photography, largely (Lenman) due to him living parallel to the evolvment of the camera: Atget used 'glass plates', meaning "he did not have to develop his negatives immediately and could spend all day photographing". Not only did these enable the immediate capture of street scenes, but also stimulated the stop of the use of tripods, since the new cameras did not require stands and could be hand-held. (Hacking)

At the time, "Old Paris" (pre-industrial Paris) was experiencing mass development and modernization due to the industrial revolution of the Western world. This development included destruction of heritage and monumental sites, which were frequently replaced with more pragmatic buildings such as factories and innovation-schemes, such as the *Metro*. Residents of "Old Paris" considered a movement away from tradition as negative, and thought it was imperative to preserve an archive of the city. Serving as a documentation of the pre-industrial period, the archive would permit future generations to understand the beauty and charm of *Old Paris*. (Hacking)

Being a member of the French community, Atget agreed with the Parisians' opinions and, in 1888, decided to pursue a project that would last him the next 30 years: a large record of "Old Paris" made with the help of the instantaneous cameras available (National Gallery of Art, Washington). "Atget was photographing the rapidly disappearing architecture of Old Paris along with street scenes" (Hacking). Henceforth, the economic (the industrialization) and social (the camera) elements at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had a great influence on Atget's work.

# *Prostitute*

The potential function and purpose of *Prostitute* is to show the more run-down areas of the city. In other words, Atget is showing how, despite its imperfections, Paris is still beautiful. Thus, he aimed to not only document the most beautiful and famous parts of Paris, but also the narrow streets and alleys which are less-known by others (Hacking).

What's more, the image is narrative of the working-class (Hacking), portraying the common Parisian person. In this case, the working-class individual shown is a prostitute: someone who earns very little money and has a profession usually associated with a poorer background. Perhaps the message Atget wishes to convey is that Paris is a city in which any person can live in, regardless of their social status.



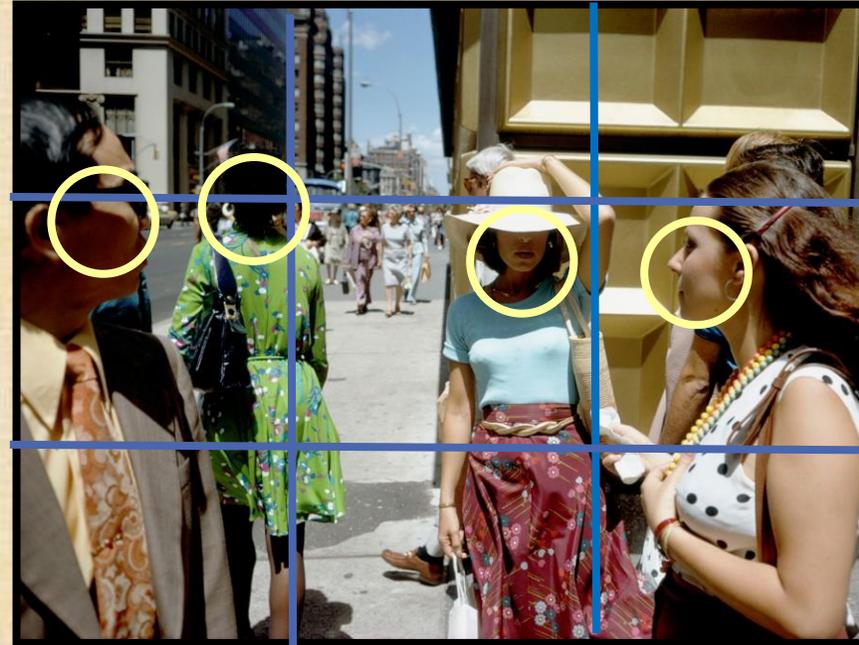
*“They perceived in his ‘artless’ images a hidden world of the unconscious beneath the surface of the city”  
(Lenman)*

Looking at the archive as a whole, however, Atget’s intention is to establish a recording of “Old Paris” so that, even after the city has been completely transformed, Parisians and others have the ability to reminisce about the pre-industrial period. (National Gallery of Art, Washington).

# Formal Qualities

An important feature of *Gold Corner* is the **gaze of the four subjects**; none are directly facing the camera. Furthermore, their gazes overlap in the mid-ground. This reinforces the idea of a "street scene"; the implied lines made by the subjects' gaze are diagonal, creating guide-lines that the audience follows. Since these overlap, the audience is confused as their eyes do not have only one directional line that guides them across the image, but multiple ("Photography Composition – Line"). This sense of disorientation perhaps reflects the everyday commotion of a New York street scene - people are constantly on the move.

Secondly, the golden wall is used as **negative space**. The left-half allows us to look beyond the negative space and follow the lines that form the depth of a street – in my opinion, this area represents the positive space. The negative space places emphasis on the subjects ( the people) that stand in the foreground of the image. Additionally, it appears as if the two figures positioned in front of the negative space protrude more than those located on the positive ground ("Photography Composition –Simplification"). Perhaps an emphasis on the humans shows that they are the key feature of the image.



There is also the **vanishing point**, where the diagonal lines of the road appear to converge. Meyerowitz takes advantage of naturally-occurring lines of the street scene to create guidance for the audience. Our eyes are drawn to follow the lines and see where they lead us: in this case, they culminate at the end of the street, creating depth. ("Street Photography – Creating Depth") Depth is further explored by the distance until which the image remains sharp, otherwise known as the **depth of field** (Lenman): as our eyes move further down the street, we notice that the characteristics of the image become more blurry.

Unlike Atget's work, Meyerowitz chooses to use the **Rule of Thirds** in this piece. Every Points of Focus (points where the vertical and horizontal lines meet) in *Gold Corner* is located on a person. Since the purpose of these points is to reinforce a feature of the image, we can conclude that Meyerowitz wants the audience to focus on the people, as opposed to other elements ("Photography Composition – Rule of Thirds"). In my opinion, Meyerowitz wanted to show the different types of people that can be found in New York and how multicultural the city has become (Tignor).

An interesting characteristic of *Gold Corner* are the **geometric patterns** found on buildings. Geometric patterns are often overlooked in daily life, which is why they have such an impact in photography. They create visual harmony within the piece, drawing the audience's attention towards the image; our eyes are attracted to something we can make sense of – something that continuously repeats ("basic Photography Techniques"). Meyerowitz used the golden pattern of the building in his image and simultaneously decided to "break it" by putting figures over its surface. Overlapping features creates multiple planes within an image, giving it more depth and a three-dimensional quality. ("Photography Composition – Simplification").

# Joel Meyerowitz – “Gold Corner”

*“Ordinary, everyday life has in it magical moments where only the camera...can hold onto [them]” – Joel Meyerowitz (Golden)*

Joel Meyerowitz began capturing images in 1962. He often links his interest in photography to Robert Frank, claiming that Frank was his “primary influence” (Golden). Working parallel to the development of the colour film, Meyerowitz is seen to have made colour film popular and, with his work, shown the versatility of street photography (Lenman). Working in a period of mass resistance against the use of colour film, Meyerowitz is frequently considered as one of the first photographers who pursued colour: “Colour was thought, back then, to be too commercial, or too much an amateur’s material.” (Meyerowitz).

After the world experienced WWII, the cold war and tensions due to ethnic discrimination, the 70s and globalization gave Americans a new way of life, completely transforming the landscape of the USA. “[America] stood as the most influential society in the world”, with globalization occurring all over the country. More so, globalization enabled the spread of communication, people and cultures across many nations. In other words, the world began exchanging its different cultures, in the form of people, food, media and religion (Tignor). In turn, Meyerowitz perhaps wished to capture these changes in the interaction of cultures, which were also influencing the New York street-scene.



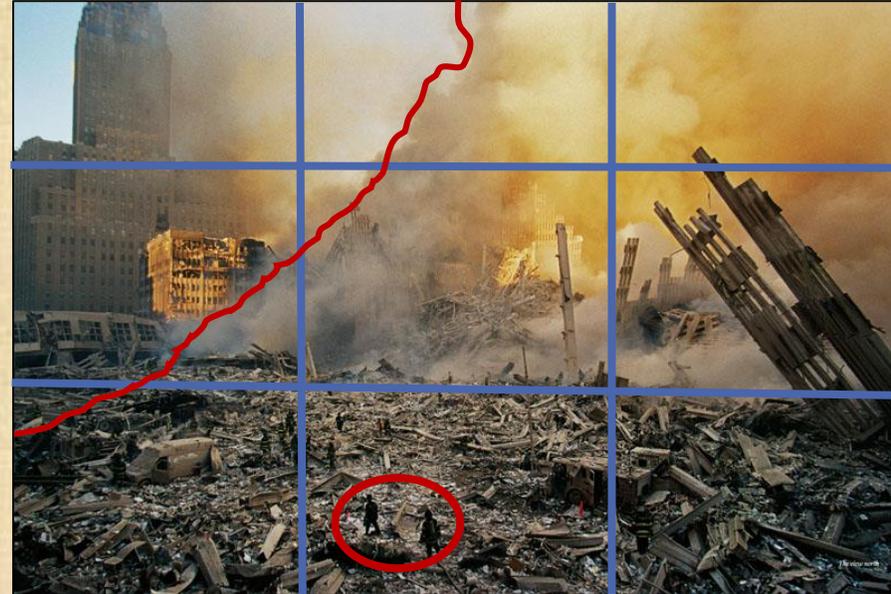
***Gold Corner*** (Part of  
**Retrospective Series: 1960-1970)**  
40 x 50cm  
**Colour Analogue Photography**

# The Function of *Gold Corner*

During the 1970's, Meyerowitz was in search for "revelation" and "epiphany" in his photography. Having used colour photography for the past decade, he began moving away from the idea of simply capturing an incident, and instead focused on the whole composition, where all elements of a scene played equal parts: "I meant [my photography] to be about the 'experience' of being on the street, in that specific city...so that viewers might experience for themselves what it felt like in that moment" (Houlette). His knowledge of photography helped Meyerowitz acknowledge the importance of considering a composition as a whole, rather than only capturing interesting street scenarios. Additionally, Meyerowitz's photography at the time can be described as *documentary photography*: "a depiction of the real world by a photographer whose intent is to communicate something of importance" (Lenman). Following this definition, we could perhaps deduce that Meyerowitz was commenting on the cultural movements of the 70s and the presence of globalization across the globe. More specifically, how these trends were affecting New York. Evidently, the cultural context of Meyerowitz's 70s photography played a key role in his concepts.

In the case of *Gold Corner*, we immediately feel the disorderly nature of the city; the implied lines, multiple planes and little symmetry of the image gives the viewer little means of focus; symmetry is usually associated with order, because our eyes adjust better when we can make sense of what we see. Without it, the audience feels lost (Holzmueller). In addition, the image emits the feeling of movement through the subjects' gazes that indicate a sense of direction. These aspects may represent the overwhelming nature of a typical street scene in New York that Meyerowitz wished to portray through *Gold Corner*.

# Formal Qualities



grey hue, there is a yellow light that illuminates the smoke. This contrast in brightness is almost unnatural. Perhaps this represents how 9/11 seemed almost too devastating to be true. According to Meyerowitz, “you looked at that pile and just to witness it, to stand up against it, this looming five-, six-story tangled mass was something that no one has ever seen.” (9). This statement shows how an event like 9/11 had never happened before.

Lastly, there is a **implied line** that separates the image into two (indicated in red) (“Photography Composition – Line”). On the right side of the line, we see a chaotic environment of metal scraps. This area is detailed and dominant. On the left, however, there is a still-standing building that stands robust and is perhaps representational of strength. Consequently, the audience cannot help but jump from side-to-side and investigate the contrast between strength of the building and the chaos of the debris. Perhaps Meyerowitz is showing the mass destruction of 9/11, and does so by constructing a dystopic versus utopic universe. He illustrates how whilst the rest of New York is still-standing, the World Trade Centre has been completely demolished and resembles a completely other world – a dystopia.

The image’s scale is also important. The humans in the image (marked by the red circle) are very small and disproportionate to their surroundings. This reinforces the atrocity of 9/11 and the mass impact it had on a society. The proportional difference between humans and the metal debris perhaps shows the extent to which the event is ‘out of our control’. Once again, Meyerowitz used the scene’s characteristics to convey a message concerning 9/11.

Similar to *Gold Corner*, *Untitled* also uses the **Rule of Thirds**: the image is split into three horizontal parts, representing foreground, mid-section and background. What’s more, the vertical sections include key features, such as the slanted structure (right) and the building in the distance (left). This method creates a dynamic flow across the image’s grounds. Motion is also created by the rising smoke, as it stretches across the solid structures, making a uniform image (“Photography Composition – Rule of Thirds”) This a form of guidance across the image, so that the audience gets a sense of what is begin shown.

**Texture** is also captured in this image. The foreground consists of rugged and strident metal debris, which is unpleasant to look at. On the other hand, the soft, cloudy-like texture of the rising smoke is delicate and gentle. This contrast in texture helps create an illusion of tactility. Although photography is a documentation of what is in front of a lens, it should enable the viewer to jump into the scene and essentially apply their senses to what they see (“Basic Photography Techniques”). Clearly, Meyerowitz wants us to feel, smell, hear and see the scene, in order to understand the impact and magnitude of 9/11.

Meyerowitz has also used an interesting palette of **colours**. While most of the image consists of a

# Joel Meyerowitz – “Untitled: Aftermath Series”

The *Aftermath* series is based on the events of 9/11. Shortly after the incident, officials and the NYPD classified the area as a “crime scene”, essentially prohibiting any access of press and locals to the area. However, through connections and a continuous drive, Meyerowitz eventually gained unlimited entrance to ground zero and the clean-up process that lasted almost nine months. His interest in documenting 9/11 was shaped by his desire to help: being a “native New Yorker” – as Meyerowitz calls it - he felt the need to be a member of the restoration process (Melia).

After being denied the permission of entering the enclosed premises, a strong attachment formed between him and his New-Yorker roots and immediately, Meyerowitz felt the urge to create an historical archive of Ground Zero. In other words, the conceptual intention was to create a record of post-9/11 and the area’s recovery (Conrad).



*Untitled (Part of Aftermath Series: 2002)*

Size Unknown

Digital Camera

In a broader context, 9/11 shocked the entire globe. Seeing as 9/11 occurred at the opening of the century, it is often considered to be the incident that defined the 21<sup>st</sup>-century world; the event was so influential that terms such as “pre-9/11 world” and “post-9/11” were introduced. Ultimately, the incident pre-empted the concept of a global community and helped recognize the need for collaboration between nations, in order to fight against terrorism (Tignor). Considering the mass impact of 9/11 on the world, many people, including Meyerowitz, were influenced and considered it important to document the event.

Finally, the access to cameras enabled Meyerowitz to capture as many frames of the event as possible and helped facilitate the documentation process; he did not have to paint the sceneries.

# Function of *Untitled – Aftermath Series*

The function of *Aftermath* is to construct an archive of the impact of 9/11. This record is an opportunity for New York residents to gain visual access to the prohibited “crime scene” and see the extent of the event. With very few people having right of entry, Ground Zero was completely enclosed from the public. As *Aftermath* is the only existing photographic record of 9/11, Meyerowitz “was taking pictures for everyone who didn't have access to the site...[he]wanted to communicate what it felt like to be in there as well as what it looked like: to show the pile's incredible intricacy and visceral power...[ he]could provide a window for everyone else who wanted to be there, too--to help, or to grieve, or simply to try to understand what had happened to our city. “ (“Aftermath”). Likewise, the archive was also for future generations to look back on the event: “[my aim was that]people in the future who looked at this work -- not as a work of art, but as history, as what happened here -- could literally look at the photographs and feel what it was like to stand in front of the pile.” (“Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero”).

The series' title *Aftermath* plays a significant role in the understanding of the pieces. Defined as “The consequences or after-effects of a significant unpleasant event” (Oxford Dictionaries), the word *aftermath* shows the disastrous effects of 9/11. It shows the need to record the results of humans' mistakes, in order for us to learn the importance of avoiding such an event in the future. However, it could also be a tribute to those who lost their lives during 9/11 by recording the *aftermath*.

In my opinion, *Untitled* is one of the most interesting pieces of *Aftermath*, because it depicts a clash of two worlds: the background consists of a still-standing building, whilst the foreground is of metal debris. Perhaps these components illustrate a collision of utopia and dystopia, whereby the dystopic world has become reality. Furthermore, it suggests how amidst the whole of New York, there is now a mountain of debris in the streets (Conrad).

***“[My aim was that] people in the future who looked at this work -- not as a work of art, but as history, as what happened here -- could literally look at the photographs and feel what it was like to stand in front of the pile.”- Joel Meyerowitz (“Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero”)***

# Comparison of Meyerowitz's Pieces

## Meyerowitz: "Gold Corner"

- (Cultural Context) Post WWII era saw mass movement of people and globalization, particularly in America (Tignor). Meanwhile, the art of photographic documentation was only evolving (Lenman). In consequence, photographers felt compelled to capture the changing street-scenes of their cities.
- (Function and Purpose) Portrays the changing street scenes of New York in consequence of globalization and the integration of cultures. (Lenman)
- (Media) Captured on 35mm lens format. This allowed Meyerowitz to be discrete about his photography and quickly capture scenes (fast procedure with camera)
- (Formal Qualities) The negative space creates two grounds, giving the image depth. More so, the negative space puts emphasis on the subjects located in front of it, which in this case are people.
- The peoples' gazes play a key role in creating the street scene atmosphere: each person looks into a completely different direction and the gazes overlap, suggesting that they will collide with one another. Similarly, in a city people are always "on the move".

## Similarities

- The world was experiencing change: in *Gold Corner*, globalization was drastically changing cultural interaction. In *Untitled*, 9/11 catalysed a movement of global unity.
- As New York is famous, people are perhaps interested to see what happens in the city. Meyerowitz's photography enables others to gain an insight into New York.
- Street Photography serves as a documentation of time, whether it be an documentary photography or photojournalism, such as *Untitled* (Lenman). Street photography perhaps helps artists and audiences see the small details of life we tend to neglect in our day-to-day life.
- Rectilinear Perspective creates the illusion of being within the scene – the camera's lens takes the position of a natural eye viewpoint ("Basic Photography Techniques").
- Rule of Thirds: By using this method, Meyerowitz creates balanced composition, whereby the heaviest elements are located on the edges of the image ("Photography Composition – Rule of Thirds"). Through this, the image becomes aesthetically pleasing; our eyes are accustomed to balance.

## Meyerowitz: "Untitled: Aftermath"

- 9/11 event was a key event that marked the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Tignor). Due to its impact, there was a need to create an archive of the event..
- Create an archive of 9/11, in order to represent the event's mass impact.
- Give the citizens of New York the ability to see the aftermath of 9/11.
- Texture plays key role in setting the atmosphere of the image; the bottom-ground consists of the debris of the World Trade centre, creating an dominant and rugged texture. This has connotations of something unpleasant. Contrastingly, the background has smoke rising which is much more delicate. The clash of these textures is synonymous with the way 9/11 was an event that had never before happened.

# Comparison of Meyerowitz and Atget

## Meyerowitz

- The world was experiencing change: in *Gold Corner*, globalization was drastically changing cultural interaction. In *Untitled*, 9.11 catalysed a movement of global unity.
- As New York is famous, people are perhaps interested to see what happens in the city. Meyerowitz's photography enables others to gain an insight into New York.
- Street Photography serves as a documentation of time, whether it be an documentary photography or photojournalism, such as *Untitled* (Lenman). Street photography perhaps helps artists and audiences see the small details of life we tend to neglect in our day-to-day life.
- Rectilinear Perspective creates the illusion of being within the scene – the camera's lens takes the position of a natural eye viewpoint ("Basic Photography Techniques")
- Rule of Thirds: By using this method, Meyerowitz creates balanced composition, whereby the heaviest elements are located on the edges of the image ("Photography Composition – Rule of Thirds"). Through this, the image becomes aesthetically pleasing; our eyes are accustomed to balance.

## Similarities

- Atget's Parisian world was quickly changing due to the industrial revolution that promoted the destruction of Old Paris. Similarly, Meyerowitz experienced globalization in the 70s as well as the post-9/11 world. Therefore, the photographers were compelled to document these changes first-hand and capture them in the process.
- Despite the two different eras, both artists use typical purposes of Street Photography : they are visually documenting history as well as everyday life. (Lenman)
- Rectilinear perspective. Similar to Meyerowitz's pieces, Atget's *Prostitute* also uses rectilinear perspective. The latter constructs the illusion of being directly in the scene, which obviously builds a relationship between the viewer and the image's content. Perhaps the photographers want to build this intimate relationship so that the emotive and hidden message of their piece is conveyed.

## Atget

- The industrial revolution stimulated the destruction of Old Paris, whereby development schemes were essentially wiping-out the authentic Parisian landscape.
- An archive of "Old Paris" prior to the city's destruction in consequence of the Industrial revolution and modernization schemes. For Atget and Paris' citizens, it was important to establish a way of preserving "Old Paris" (Hacking).
- *Prostitute* is one of the few images of a person in Atget's archive. Perhaps the objective is to represent the common and working-class people that could be found in the city at the time. (Hacking).
- Dry plates and hand-held cameras allowed Atget and other photographers to take pictures of street-scenes rather than having to paint them. This also made Street Photography a much more popular art form (Hacking).