The Industrial Image: Photography, Heritage, and Identity in the Ruhr Valley

Figure 1: Assemblage of Pipes (Bechers 1964)

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how photography has shaped the perception and preservation of industrial heritage in Germany's Ruhr Area, with a particular focus on the typological industrial photographs of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Employing a literature-based approach combined with a visual analysis, the study explores a chronological spectrum of industrial imagery, from 19th-century company archives and mid-20th-century documentary surveys to late-20th-century artistic interpretations. It investigates how these photographs not only recorded the material evolution of industrial objects but also influenced public and professional perception towards their historical value. The research finds that the Becher's systematic, typological approach recontextualized industrial structures as objects of aesthetic and cultural significance, contributing to a growing heritage consciousness during the period of deindustrialization. At the same time, other photographic approaches provided complementary layers, early industrial photographers created historical records, while later photographers introduced human and emotional dimensions to the portrayal of industrial decline. By analysing what each approach emphasizes or omits, the paper demonstrates that photography has served both as an archive and an argument, preserving visual evidence of the Ruhr's industrial past and actively shaping narratives of regional identity. The findings highlight that multiple photographic approaches together have reinforced an appreciation for industrial heritage and supported its preservation and adaptive reuse in the post-industrial era.

Outline

I.   INTRODUCTION

Photography has long served as a powerful tool to document, interpret, and ultimately preserve industrial heritage. From the 19th century onward, industrialists and historians alike turned to the camera to capture the magnitude and detail of factories, mines, and machinery. In these shifting decades, photography emerged as both a documentary medium and a means of interpretation, revealing a deep connection of the Ruhr's identity to industrial preservation.

By the mid-20th century, as industrialization transformed entire regions like the Ruhr Area in Germany, photography continued to evolve as an interpretive lens. Their images served multiple purposes: technical documentation, corporate publicity, artistic exploration, and archival memory. Crucially, as heavy industries in the Ruhr entered decline in the post-war years, photographs became visual testimonies of a vanishing era. This thesis examines how photography, in various forms, has played a pivotal role in preserving the industrial heritage of the Ruhr Area. It will focus on the typological work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, comparing them to other industrial and post-industrial photography approaches to understand how photographs construct meaning around industrial sites with nostalgia and regional identity.

Yet there is no chronological report, analysing the relation of different photographic approaches over time to the strong identity of the Ruhr Area. This paper is guided by a two research questions to contribute to this report:

> *How has photography, in particular the typological documentation of Bernd and Hilla Becher, shaped the perception, classification and conservation of the industrial heritage of the Ruhr Area?*

and

> *How do different photographic approaches, including historical archives, post-industrial imagery and contemporary interpretations, contribute to understanding the material transformation, spatial evolution and cultural significance of industrial structures?*

This research is conducted as a literature-based historical analysis, supplemented by comparative visual study of photographs. A wide range of scholarly sources on industrial heritage, regional identity, and photography are reviewed. Key works by historians and theorists provide a critical framework. These textual sources establish context on how industrial heritage has been interpreted and the significance of photographic documentation at various points in time. In parallel, an image-based comparative approach is used. Photographs from different eras are described and are embedded to illustrate points of comparison. By reviewing such images, the thesis tries to analyse what each approach highlights or leaves out.

Historical Background

The Ruhr Area in western Germany rose to prominence in the 19th and 20th centuries as one of Europe's industrial powerhouses (Berger, 2019). Rich in coal and later home to major steelworks, the area underwent a fast transformation from a rural landscape to a dense industrial metropolis. This industrial boom drove massive population growth, drawing in migrant workers from across Germany and Europe. A distinct regional culture emerged, centred on mining and steel factories, shaping strong working-class communities and a spirit of solidarity among miners (Rezende, 2025). Yet, by the late 1950s and 1960s, structural crisis set in, cheaper energy sources and global competition led to the coal crisis (1958) and subsequent decline of mining (Berger, 2019). Over the next few decades, the coal pits and steel mills of the Ruhr began to close. The last coal mine in the region shut down in 2018, marking the end of an era (Berger, 2025). This deindustrialization left behind not only economic challenges and unemployment, but also a profound existential question for the region (Rezende, 2025):

what is the Ruhr's identity after the mines and furnaces fall silent?

During the time of industrial decline, local communities and leaders initially had little interest in keeping the remnants of the heavy industry (Berger, 2019). In the 1960s, many politicians and companies expected to simply demolish defunct facilities. Yet, contrary to initial expectations, the Ruhr did not discard its industrial past so easily. A bottom-up movement emerged, began to demand the preservation of industrial sites (Berger, 2019). These activists saw value in everything from utilitarian structures like winding towers and blast furnaces to workers' housing colonies (Berger, 2019). Two early victories became emblematic, first the saving of the 19th-century *Eisenheim* workers' housing settlement in Oberhausen (Rezende, 2025) and secondly the protection of the ornate machine hall of *Zeche Zollern* in Dortmund, both slated for demolition in the 1960s–70s but preserved after public outcry (Berger, 2019).

By the late 1970s, Berger (2019) states, this bottom-up push had influenced policy at higher levels. The state government of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), led by Minister-President Johannes Rau, began to include industrial heritage into its cultural agenda. In the 1980s, even industrial stakeholders like the Ruhrkohle AG and mining labor unions shifted their stance from removing all traces of closed mines to the idea of preservation (Berger, 2019). The peak of these efforts came in the 1990s with the ambitious International Building Exhibition (IBA) Emscher Park. Under Karl Ganser's visionary leadership, the IBA (1989–1999) reinterpreted derelict sites and landscapes, demonstrating how abandoned industrial infrastructure could be repurposed as parks, cultural centres, and museums (Berger, 2019).

Today, the Ruhr Area proudly highlights its industrial past as an integral part of its identity. NRW is home to around 3,500 protected industrial monuments, the Route Industriekultur and many museums connected to industry (Berger, 2019). In 2010, the city of Essen showcased as European Capital of Culture with the motto *"Change through Culture – Culture through Change,"* explicitly invoking the region's post-industrial shift (Rezende, 2025). The result is a shared identity often called the "Ruhrpott".

Concepts of Identity

The overall identity of the Ruhr region is deeply intertwined with its industrial architecture. Without any other big background in history, industrial sites, such as blast furnaces, water towers, and mines, not only serve as functional remnants of the region's most important past but also function as symbolic representations of its industrial heritage. These buildings act as both a historical record and an ongoing influence on urban development (Rezende 2025). This new identity can be analysed through several concepts: *brandscapes, imagined communities and nostalgia*. Each of the ideas shows the impact of the industrial architectural history on the identity of the post-industrial Ruhr.

Brandscapes

The term *brandscape* refers to the strategic marketing of places by cultivating a specific image or brand (Swensen & Granberg, 2024). In the Ruhr, industrial heritage has become the core of its *brandscape*. Regional agencies and tourism brands have actively branded the Ruhr as a landscape of industrial culture (*Industriekultur*), highlighting iconic sites and the dramatic aesthetics of blast furnaces, winding towers, and cooling towers. The creation of the *Route Industriekultur* and related organizations (e.g. Projekt Ruhr GmbH, Ruhr Tourisms GmbH) in the 1990s and 2000s was crucial in this branding effort (Berger & Wicke 2014). The success of this campaign can be measured not only in visitor numbers but in the way locals and outsiders alike talk about the Ruhr. What was once seen as Germany's *dirty backyard* is now often celebrated an *industrial heritage mecca* where rusty factories are praised as monuments and represented like this in photography (Fig. 2). This shift also raises important questions about authenticity and historical integrity (Berger & Wicke 2014). Claus Leggewie warned that such marketing gloss may distract from ongoing challenges (like environmental cleanup), but even he acknowledged that underpinning this is a search for a new identity for a region that lost its identity (Berger & Wicke 2014).

Figure 2: Winding Tower Zeche Zollverein (Wasserbäch 2025)

Imagined Communities

Borrowing Benedict Anderson's concept (originally applied to nations), the Ruhr can be seen as an *imagined community* forged through shared industrial history. The Ruhr Area is not a single city but a region of 50+ towns and many cultures. Throughout the boom years, a strong regional identity developed often affectionately called *Ruhrpott*. This identity was reinforced by common experiences mostly related to its industry (e.g. long shifts, football). As the mines closed, regional workers feared the loss of their identity. However, industrial heritage initiatives like museums, heritage trails and photo exhibitions have helped re-imagine the community of the Ruhr in a new light. By curating and showcasing the region's history, they provide a sense of belonging to a community that transcends the present. There is also a component of what Anderson called *imagined*: the Ruhr identity today is partly a construct, selectively emphasizing certain positive themes while hiding over the negatives (labour conflicts, pollution, etc.) (Fig. 3). The Ruhr thus presents itself as a community with a grand, almost epic story, the rise and fall and rebirth which **photography** has been fundamental supported in visualizing this story. It is recognizable that the Ruhr's industrial memory has been institutionalized in 2019) and Brüggemeier (1994) observe that for its history, the industrial era is favourited, effectively overwriting pre-industrial memory and even much of the post-war records. This shows how the *imagined community* of the Ruhr today is tightly bound to its industrial legacy, as continuously re-imagined through heritage.

Figure 3:Durch Rauchschaden zerstörte Waldbestände im Industriegebiet (LVR-Industriemuseum 1920 – 1930)

Nostalgia

Nostalgia pervades the Ruhr's relationship with its industrial history. As heavy industry faded, a romantic longing for the vanishing era of coal and steel took root among many residents, even the people who once eagerly left the mines behind. Scholars have identified various facets of nostalgia in the Ruhr's discourse on industrial heritage. Stefan Berger (2019) provides seven prominent themes: *nostalgia* for regional identity, for national significance (when the Ruhr was the "industrial heart" of Germany), for the Ruhr's bygone modernity, for its cultures of solidarity, for its openness forged by immigrant labour, for the intense interweaving of industry and nature (both destructive and regenerative), and for the lived experience of industrial life (Berger, 2019). These layers illustrate that nostalgia is not monolithic. The uses of nostalgia, however, come with *silences*. For instance, the celebratory heritage narrative often excludes the darker layers of industrial history like the environmental devastation, the exploitative labour conditions, or the ties between Ruhr industry and militarism (e.g. arms production in wartime (Berger, 2019). *Nostalgia*, therefore, serves as both a motivating force for preservation and a filter that can push negative layers of the past aside. (Berger, 2019).

Photographs are deeply woven into this *nostalgic* need. Old images of miners covered in coal dust, or of long exposure iron pours lighting up the factories, evoke emotional responses for a time when *the Ruhr* meant something concrete (Fig. 4). At the same time, contemporary photos of industrial sites engender a *new* kind of *nostalgia*, a melancholy appreciation for decay and the passage of an era.

Figure 4: Schweißer (Hallensleben 1951)

III.   VISUALIZING INDUSTRY: THE EVOLUTION OF INDUSTRIAL PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE RUHR AREA

Historical Context

The visual documentation of industry has a rich history, especially in the Ruhr. Each era of industrial development spawned its own style of photography, reflecting contemporary needs and sensibilities. Understanding this evolution is necessary to understand the distinctive work of Bernd and Hilla Becher's typological approach and the value of photography for industrial heritage.

19th century

In the late 19th century, industrial photography was primarily utilitarian and promotional. *Hugo van Werden* (1836–1911) stands out as a pioneer in the Ruhr Area. A relative of the Krupp family, van Werden was trained in the new medium of photography and tasked with recording the Krupp factories in Essen. His work includes an 8-panel panoramic photograph of the Krupp factory (c.1864–1872) (Fig. 5) that is considered a milestone in industrial photography (Naß, 2022). Van Werden's panorama presented the entire industrial landscape in deep detail and scale, something paintings could not (Naß, 2022). Van Werden's photographs served multiple purposes. Advertising by documenting the plant for internal use, impressing investors and fair audiences, and indeed preserving a view of the works at a time of rapid growth (Naß, 2022).
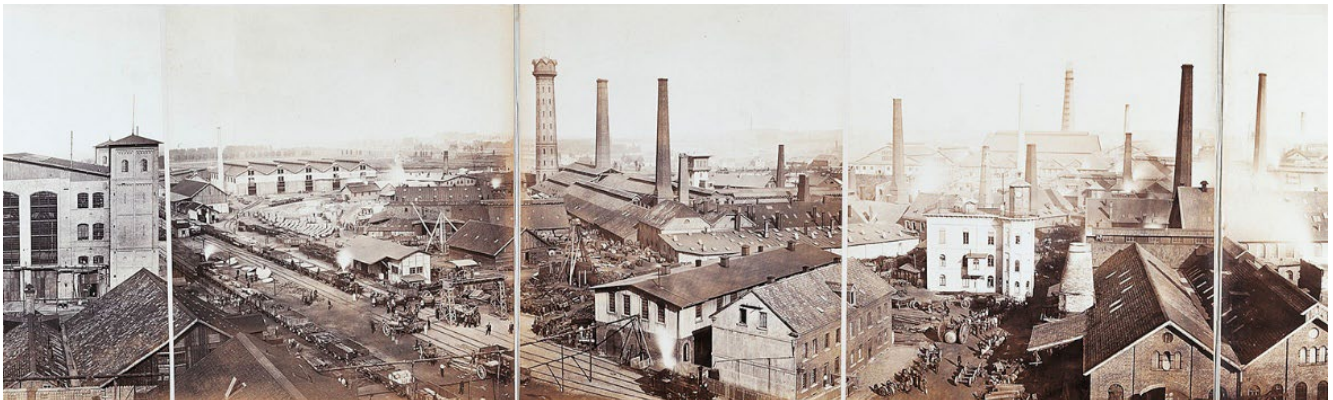
Figure 5: Kruppsche Gussstahl Fabrik October 1864, Innere Ansicht (van Werden 1864)

20th century

Moving into the early 20th century, we encounter photographers like *Albert Renger-Patzsch* who exemplified the New Objectivity. In the 1920s, Renger-Patzsch produced images of factory architecture, machinery, and industrial products with a cool, precise realism, e.g. treating a row of blast furnaces (Fig. 6) or a close-up of cogwheels with the same unemotional clarity as a botanical study (Sachsse, 2008). His style often highlighted the monumentality and geometry of industrial design and set a precedent by treating industrial objects as aesthetically significant in themselves. By the mid-20th century (1930s–1960s), industrial photography in the Ruhr was often official or commissioned photographs presenting an idealized vision of industry. *Ruth Hallensleben* (1898–1977) is a prime example of the commissioned approach. Hallensleben was one of Germany's best-known industrial photographers, producing images on assignment for companies and even for Nazi authorities during the Third Reich (Ruhr Museum ,2025). Working as a freelance but with steady clients, she mastered the art of "precise staging". Her photographs presented factories and power plants as idealized, and functioning worlds (Ruhr Museum ,2025) For instance see in Figure 7, Hallensleben carefully balanced composition including people in her photographs of factories to emphasize with the viewer (Ruhr Museum ,2025).

Figure 6: Cowper, blast furnace Herrenwyk (Renger-Patzsch 1927)

Figure 7: Zeche Bruchstraße (Hallensleben 1957)

In the 1950s, as the Ruhr was nearing its industrial zenith, a different photographic initiative took shape. *Josef Stoffels* (1893–1981) undertook an extensive survey of coal mines. He systematically documented nearly every of the roughly 150 coal-producing collieries in the Ruhr region. (Stoffels et al., 2018). This was an enormous task, resulting in an archive of images that captured the *face* of every mining site in this period Stoffels' motive was partly documentary, but he recognized that these structures defined the region's landscape and wanted to create a complete visual record (Farrenkopf et al., 2021). As seen in Figure 8,9 and 10, his style still bore traces of the traditional approach van Werden used. His images mostly focus is on the installations themselves, sometimes showing e.g. workers or cars. As Gisela Parak notes, Stoffels' post-WWII photographs *"convey a notion of boom"*, the mines look alive and intact, giving an impression of the booming industrial landscape (Farrenkopf et al., 2021, p. 221).

Alongside the grand surveys and commissioned images of industry, there were photographers who turned their lens to the social aspects of the Ruhr's industry. One example is *Anton Tripp* who documented events like the protest demonstrations against pit closures. His images, as noted by Parak, depicted *"social distress and political upheaval"* (Farrenkopf et al., 2021, p. 221). These works introduced a socio-political narrative invisible in the formal industrial photography of the time. While these human-centred photographers had less immediate influence on preservation, they still provided a important narrative connected to the Ruhr's identity. In terms of heritage, their images now serve to recall the social history of the Ruhr, a layer that heritage sites increasingly try to integrate (Berger, 2019).

By the late 1960s, then, the Ruhr had been recorded from many angles and layers. However, it was in this same period that Bernd and Hilla Becher began their work, bringing a new artistic vision that synthesized some of these motifs while radically separating from others.

Figure 4:Zeche Osterfeld (Stoffels 1959)

Figure 9: Zeche Königsborn (Stoffels 1959)

Figure 10: Schachtanlage Rheinpreußen 5/9 (Stoffels 1959)

Bernd and Hilla Becher

Bernd Becher (1931–2007) and Hilla Becher (1934–2015, born Hilla Wobeser) were a German husband-and-wife team whose collaborative photographic work has had an enormous influence on the value of industrial heritage appreciation. Bernd, originally from Siegen, a region with its own mining industry he had seen while growing up (Zweite, 2014). Hilla grew in relation with traditional photography. Marrying in 1961, they combined Bernd's conceptual vision and Hilla's technical expertise into a lifelong project (Zweite, 2014).

As Armin Zweite (2014) states, their work started around 1959, just as coal mines and ironworks in the Ruhr and neighbouring areas were starting to shut down (Zweite, 2014). They started photographing and documenting the disappearing German industrial architecture.

Methodology and Visual Strategy

The Becher's are best known for their creation of *typologies*, sets of photographs of structurally similar industrial buildings presented in a grid or series for direct comparison (Fig. 11). Their methodology was highly consistent, aiming for maximum objectivity in appearance. Technically, they favoured large-format film cameras on a sturdy tripod (Zweite, 2014). This allowed for fine detail and perspective correction. Typically, they photographed under overcast skies, eliminating shadows and contrasts that might distract from the form of the structure (Zweite, 2014). The images were uniformly black-and-white because the Becher's deliberately eschewed colour, believing that it could be a distraction and that black-and-white better conveyed volume and texture in a comparable way (Zweite, 2014).

The Becher's favoured a frontal, orthogonal viewpoint whenever excluding any details that would distract the viewer from the central theme, meaning they tried to avoid extraneous buildings or vegetation in the frame (Zweite, 2014). The goal was that each image would show the pure architecture of the industrial object, isolated as much as possible from its environment. Indeed, almost none of their images include people or operational context like smoke (Zweite, 2014).
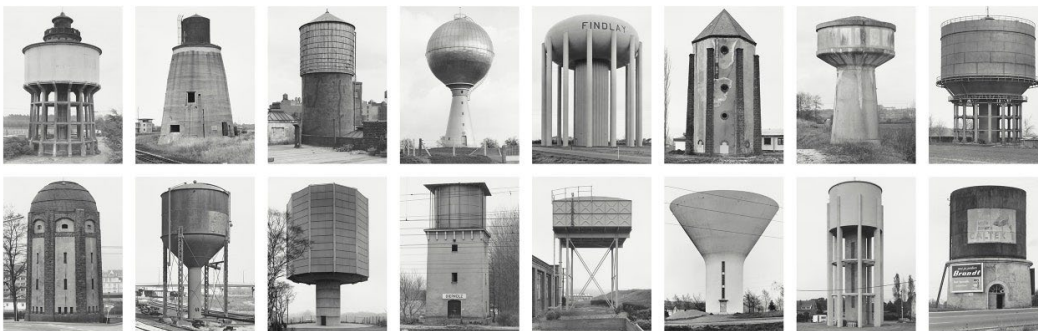

Figure 1: Water Towers (Bechers 1967-80)

Crucially, the Becher's photographed multiple angles, but in publications and exhibits they typically showed only one or a selection which best represented its geometry. (Zweite, 2014).

They began noticing patterns in the same function of a structure that could be categorized by their engineering type (Zweite, 2014). This led them to compose their work into *typologies* presented in grids where 6, 9, or 15 images of different examples of one type are displayed next to each other (Fig. 12). In such a grid, the similarities and small differences are revealed, inviting a comparative study as if one were examining biological specimens or architectural plans (Zweite, 2014). At each industrial site, the Becher's also often took one large scale landscape photograph of the entire complex to see the relationship of the objects in their context (Zweite, 2014). However, these visuals were typically not the focus of their published work (Zweite, 2014)

The grids themselves present different *temporal* context. By comparing structures from different times and places on one page, even though it was often not marked in their photos, the Becher's enabled viewers, including architectural historians, to study the evolution of these objects across decades (Zweite, 2014).

Some interpretations, like that of Maroš Krivý (2010), place the Bechers in exploring "negativity" in architecture, essentially what is forgotten or left out by mainstream architecture (Krivý ,2010). Parak notes, the Bechers were not activist preservationists per se, they were artists systematically documenting a disappearing world. But the effect of their work was to support the industrial heritage movement by providing a compelling visual inventory of what was at stake. (Farrenkopf et al., 2021).

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Figure 12: Kohlesilos (Bechers 1969-89)

Bernd and Hilla Becher's typological project stands at the intersection of art, industry, and heritage. Methodologically, they created a new visual language for industrial architecture, one that is detached yet deeply informative (Farrenkopf et al., 2021).

The Role of Photography in Representing Industrial Value

Photography has proven to be a foundational medium for capturing the value of industrial architecture, especially in a region like the Ruhr where change has been constant and often destructive. The Becher's are an ordinary example to explain the several dimensions to its role: *documentation, re-interpretation, advocacy, and memorialization.*

Documentation

First and foremost, photographs create a record of industrial sites at specific moments in time. A record that can outlast the site itself. In the Ruhr, many structures that were photographed by the likes of van Werden, Hallensleben or the Becher's no longer exist in physical form, they have been demolished or radically altered threw abundancy. The photographs thus become important artifacts, allowing later generations to study and visualize what is gone. In the words of Emile Zola,

"no one can claim to have truly seen something until he has photographed it" (Zweite, 2004, p. 9).

For instance, without Hugo van Werden's 1870s images, our picture of the early Krupp factories would rely only on drawings or written descriptions. Similarly, thanks to Josef Stoffels' systematic 1950s photos (Fig. 8;9;10), we have a near-complete visual map of what each coal mine looked like at the boom of the mining era (Stoffels et al., 2018). Moreover, the typological studies of the Becher's, which highlight even the detail of the structures (Zweite, 2004). This is crucial for historians and architects. When restoration projects appear, they often rely on old photographs for accuracy in finding the essence of a building. In this way, photography extends the *life* of industrial heritage beyond material decay, it stores information about dimensions, design, setting, and even techniques (Berger, 2014; Swensen & Granberg, 2024).

Re-Interpretation

However, photography does not only record passively, but it also *interprets*. The way a photographer frames a subject can implement certain values. Industrial facilities, especially in their working period, were utilitarian and not necessarily viewed as *heritage* by those who worked in or lived around them. It often took the photographer's eye to uncover an unexpected aesthetic or historical value. The Becher's work is a prime example, they tended to see a pithead or a gas tank (Fig. 13) not as a soot-stained piece of junk, but as a carefully composed object worthy of study (Zweite, 2004). This is essentially a *re-interpretation* of industrial architecture from a necessary infrastructure to something with a monumental value (Stimson ,2004). In comparison Hallensleben's photographs (Fig. 14), although done for marketing purposes, also re-interpreted industry by presenting it in the most favourable light, thus contributing to a public image as grand and modern (Ruhr Museum, 2025). In the heritage context, such interpretive photography can shape what we consider valuable.

If nobody had ever taken artistic photographs of a blast furnace, might it have been harder to convince officials to save one?

Figure 13: Gas tank near Wuppertal (Bechers 1966)

It's notable that some often-photographed sites became the ones chosen for preservation (e.g. Zollern in Dortmund, Zollverein in Essen). Photography helped *classify* these as the prime examples, as the Becher's did with *typologies*, identifying some structures as particularly representative and unique (Zweite, 2004). In heritage preservation, having a visual catalogue often supports the selection of protected monuments. The Becher's enabled *"architectural historians and future industrial archaeologists to recognize and study the evolution"* of structures like water towers and winding towers through comparison (Farrenkopf et al., 2021, p. 221). Thus, photography informs the classification aspect of heritage by determining types and often suggesting evaluation of significance.

Figure 14: Zeche Germania (Hallensleben 1956)

Advocacy

Photographs can also play a direct role in advocacy. We've seen how Grochowiak in 1969 invoked the Becher's images as a rationale to preserve sites (Farrenkopf et al., 2021), as well how the Work of Hugo van Werden promoted the Krupp company on an international stage (Naß, 2022). Photographs provide a visual "before" that helps stakeholders imagine what could be preserved or repurposed. They also evoke emotional reactions, *nostalgia*, that pure architectural data cannot (Berger, 2019). Photographic documentations produced by artists like the Becher's has served as visual evidence in preservation campaigns. The case of Zollverein's coking plant illustrates how evocative imagery was used to shift its perception from an industrial ruin to a heritage landmark worthy of international recognition (Rezende, 2025; Swensen & Granberg, 2024). Gisela Parak concludes that the Becher's photos *"helped to spark the institutionalization of industrial heritage"* (Farrenkopf et al., 2021). They did so by changing the way people see. Once a structure is photographed and exhibited as worthy, it starts to gain a social *nostalgia* (Berger, 2019). In short, photography was used as a tool to convince, making the invisible visible and the ugly interesting.

Memorialization

Lastly, as heavy industry faded, photographs took on a memorial role for communities or *imagined communities*. As Anderson concept shows, photography can shape a shared collective memory. A retired miner might keep a photo of his group as a keepsake (Fig. 15), or local museums might mount large prints of factory scenes to honour that legacy. In the Ruhr, various publications assemble historic industrial photographs to feed public *nostalgia* and memory (Rezende, 2025). The emotional weight of these images helps communities process the loss and others understand the human element connected to the structures. This use of imagery strengthens what Berger noted as the industrial period dominates the region's memorial (Berger, 2019).

Figure 15: Belegschaft der Schachtanlage carolus Magnus in Borbeck um 1895 (uknown arround 189676)

However, photography's representation of industrial value is not without challenges and reservation. Photographs show certain things and omit others, and their influence on heritage can sometimes influence understanding.

What Is Shown and What Is Omitted: Social, Political, Material, and Spatial Dimensions

Every photograph is a chosen representation. In the context of industrial objects, what photographers choose to include in the frame or can significantly affect how we understand the history of an industrial sites and its value. Moreover, preservation of industrial structures is linked to different challenges. Comparing the Becher's approach with other photographers reveals these choices and challenges along four dimensions: *social, political, material,* and *spatial.*

Social Dimension

Figure 16: Gutehoffnungshütte (Bechers 1963)

One of the most noticeable absences in many industrial photographs, especially by the Becher's, but also van Werden is the presence of people (Fig. 16). The workers and communities that animated these sites. The Becher's excluded human figures ton purpose to focus on architecture (Zweite, 2004). As a result, their images show industrial structures as isolated monuments, excluded from the labour and daily life that gave them identity. What is omitted is the human relation, important for rightful preservation. By contrast, photographers like Anton Tripp included people and not just as passive extras, but as protagonists showing the history surrounding the industrial figures. Tripp's photograph of the 1966 Graf Bismarck mine closure protest (Fig. 17), showing miners with banners, presents an entirely different story than the Becher's clean shot of the mine's winding tower.

The first highlights social conflict and the human cost of industrial decline, the second structural form and materiality.

What is the consequence?

Figure 17: Letzte Schicht auf der Zeche Graf Bismarck Schacht 1/4 (Tripp 1966)

When using these images for heritage interpretation, one must be aware. A Becher photo might lead a viewer to appreciate the engineering of a headframe in a sense of *false nostalgia*. It won't tell them anything about the workers' struggle and social dimension surrounding these objects. Conversely, a photo full of people might evoke empathy but no detail of the architecture. In an ideal heritage approach, multiple types of images should be combined to give a fuller picture. This shows the continuing allure of artistic shots showing industrial monuments. The omission of people can sometimes erase the past evoking false, not complete identity (Krivý, 2010; Berger, 2014).

Political Dimension

The political and economic layer of industrial sites is another aspect that can be either highlighted or hidden by photography. The fading of industrial heritage in the Ruhr area is deeply intertwined with political and economic decisions that often-prioritized short-term strategic interests over preservation. Legislation such as the *Bundesberggesetz* (1980) exemplifies this dynamic. By granting companies the decision to demolish disused industrial structures and closed mines without public consultation (see movie *"Demolition Entertainment"* by Jörg Keweloh), it effectively cleared the way for extensive erasure, losing possibilities for meaningful preservation frameworks. (Berger, 2014; Rezende, 2025). Certain structures were selected to remain, less for their outstanding historical quality than for symbolic function in the larger landscape of removal (Raines, 2011).

Is the demolished lost?

In this context, photography assumed a dual role as exemplified in the approach of the Becher's. On one hand, it functioned as a tool of resistance and documentation, producing visual records of sites threatened with disappearance and even supporting arguments for their preservation or adaptive reuse (Berger, 2014; Swensen & Granberg, 2024). On the other, photographs, particularly when aestheticized, risk participating in the same logic of strategic selection. Swensen and Granberg (2024) note that post-industrial imagery can contribute to the creation of commercial *brandscapes* spaces in which difficult or contested histories are omitted in favour of marketing narratives.
The result is a visual archive that, while necessary, can mirror the selective logics of the political systems that once endangered these sites.

Material Dimension

The materiality and textures of industrial structures and their physical condition is something photography can either reveal in detail or mask. The Becher's high resolution, black and white, large-format images are incredibly sharp providing information about rivets, rust patterns, bricks and more (Zweite, 2014). One can study how and object is constructed or how it has weathered (Fig. 18). In their prints, however, they often chose structures that were still intact. In fact, if a structure was too far demolished, it might not fit their typology or aesthetic of completeness (Zweite, 2014). So, in a sense they omitted the ongoing process of decay and even though they documented imminent obsolescence (Zweite, 2014). In comparison, extremely polished images, like Hallensleben's coloured advertising photos hide the condition of the sites. Hallensleben's precise staging, the colours and ideal lighting made everything look new and modern (Ruhr Museum ,2025). Some later artist, especially highlighting the demolishing process, emphasize material decay as an aesthetic. In the Ruhr for example Jörg Keweloh (*Demolition Entertainment*, 2003) did capture blown up industrial buildings in colour, highlighting the ongoing structural change.

What is with the invisible?

Figure 18: Fachwerkhäuser (Giebelseiten) (Bechers 1959-1973)

None of the images and movies show the material challenges of preservation related to industrial sites. Materially, many objects were too contaminated or damaged for feasible reuse, with substances like asbestos and heavy metals posing significant risks (Rezende, 2025). Municipalities or companies often lacked the resources for restoration as well seeing the cultural value worth preserving (Berger et al., 2017). Today, many heritage sites are kept intentionally a bit raw, preserving the patina you can see in the Becher's photos and promoting the *nostalgia* (Fig.19).

Figure 19: Landschaftspark Duisburg Nord

Spatial Dimension

Finally, spatial context is something photographers can decide to crop in or out. The Bechers' known images isolated objects, often removing wider spatial context (Fig. 13) (Zweite, 2014). This helped compare the individual in its typology, but it detaches the structure from its environment. For the preservation of an industrial site the relation to the surrounding is significant. Many of these sites were extremely difficult to repurpose, precisely because of their sheer scale and infrastructural entanglement (Berger, 2019). The disuse of these sites became a spatial issue as well a big potential. Their vacancy disrupted development patterns (Fig. 20;21;22), but also opened space for new planning logics, green corridors, transit routes, civic amenities (Berger, 2019). Some photographers show the shear large scale of the sites by stepping back. For example, the works of Josef Stoffels' in the book *Steinkohlenzechen: Fotografien aus dem Ruhrgebiet* (2018) show the entire complexity surrounding the industrial sites.

How can the detail still help?

The omission of spatial context in *typological* series sometimes led to criticism that the Becher's treat these objects like sculptures in a gallery, not as parts of identity connected to the sites. But one could argue that by doing so, they clarified the detail so that when one goes back to the actual site, one sees the structures' role in the clutter of context. This resonates with how many of these sites were later approached in preservation work, often without a set vision, through trial and error, as in the case of Zeche Zollverein, which evolved as a kind of *urban laboratory* where theory and practice simultaneously shaped over time (Dorstewitz, 2013).

Figure 20: Forgotten Structure 1
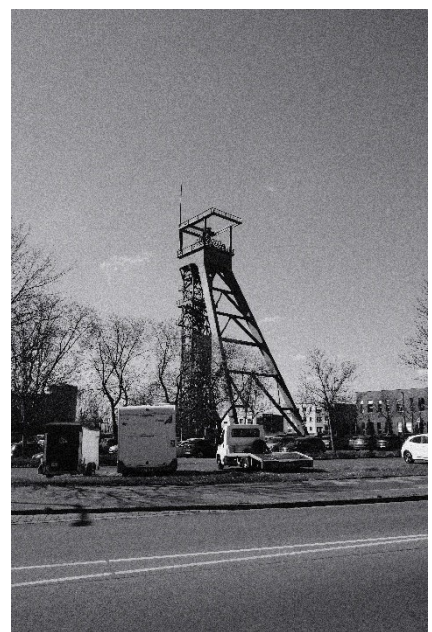
Figure 21: Forgotten Structure 2

Figure 22: Forgotten Structure 3

V.   CONCLUSION

Photography and industrial heritage in the Ruhr Area are entwined in a profound dialogue between memory and transformation. Over the course of this thesis, we have seen that photographs are far more than mere depictions of industrial sites, they are active agents in how we perceive, classify, and preserve those sites.

Focusing on the typological work of Bernd and Hilla Becher provided a lens through which to understand this dynamic. The Bechers approached the industrial Ruhr at a critical moment, visually salvaging its vanishing giants and, in the process, reframing them as objects worthy of admiration and protection. (Farrenkopf et al., 2021). As Gisela Parak noted, the 1960s/70s, when the Becher's did much of their Ruhr work, turned out to be a turning point in heritage consciousness, *"fed not least by the program of a photographic aesthetic"* (Farrenkopf et al., 2021).

But the Becher's were one voice among many. This paper also illuminated how earlier photographers like Hugo van Werden and Ruth Hallensleben laid foundations by documenting industry in service of its titans, creating images that today serve as historical records of the Ruhr's industrial might (Ruhr Museum ,2025 and Naß, 2022). Mid-century photographers like Josef Stoffels bridged into preservation, amassing archives that became vital once the structures started to vanish (Stoffels et al., 2018). And later/post-industrial photographers, like Anton Tripp have added layers of social context and artistic experiment, capturing the human stories and the ruin aesthetics that static shots of structures alone might miss (Farrenkopf et al., 2021). By comparing these approaches, we've learned that each had its own contribution: one gave us completeness of record, another gave us emotional depth, another gave us analytical clarity.

A key insight from this study is that photography can both celebrate and mourn industrial heritage simultaneously. Many Ruhr industrial photographs, carry an elegiac quality. They document loss even before it happens (the Becher's photographing a mine about to be razed), and they preserve memory after the loss (Stoffels' images standing in for demolished pits). Importantly, the paper also underscores that no single photographic approach can tell the whole story of industrial heritage. The Becher's omitted social context, requiring others to supply it (Farrenkopf et al., 2021). Conversely, human-focused photos omitted architectural typology, which the Becher's illuminated.

Thus, a comprehensive understanding and indeed a robust preservation strategy, benefits from assembling these puzzle pieces. In practical terms, this means heritage presentations in the Ruhr today wisely use a mix of imagery: art photos, archival documentation, personal snapshots, aerial views, etc., to convey the multifaceted significance of a site.

From a preservation perspective, the influence of photography in the Ruhr has been concrete. Sites like Zeche Zollern or Zollverein might not have survived without the shifting perceptions that photography (along with community activism) brought about (Berger, 2019).

In conclusion, the Ruhr Area's journey from Europe's industrial heartland to a post-industrial cultural landscape has been shadowed at every step by photographers with their cameras, from the earliest days of coal and steel to the present era of heritage tourism. Bernd and Hilla Becher stand out in this history for their singular vision that transformed cooling towers into art objects and by extension helped transform public attitudes from indifference to reverence. Yet, their work is one chapter in a broader narrative of visual culture that includes pragmatic documentarians and impassioned storytellers. Together, these photographers have turned the Ruhr's "industrial memory" into a visible, tangible presence, one that can be studied, admired, and passed on. The thesis demonstrated that by slightly adapting the frame, who is behind the camera and what they aim to show, the story of industrial heritage can look quite different. Ultimately, it is in the combination of these frames that the full significance of the Ruhr's industrial heritage comes to light: as architecture and as lived experience, as local story and global legacy, as fading memory and foundation for the future. The camera, in its unblinking witness, has ensured that the giants of the Ruhr, whether standing or fallen, will not be forgotten, but instead continually re-discovered by new eyes in new ages.

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