

## Visual translation of tragedy and the other: a genesis to the work of Sergio Larrain

Jean Paul Brandt

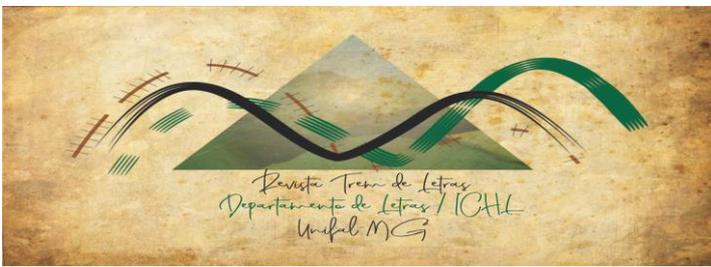
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### Abstract

This essay is an expository work that analyses the influence and impact of the Magnum Photos agency in the perception and development of Sergio Larrain's photo work. It explores the means and development of tragedy and the other as a consequence of worldwide politico-social concerns. The study considers Larrain's first documentary explorations on marginalized children in 1950's Santiago, Chile, to explain the importance of political imageries in portraying the otherness and the institutional appeal for the visual translation of exotic misery.

**Keywords:** Sergio Larrain. Photography. Aesthetics. Latin America.

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## Tradução visual da tragédia e do outro: uma gênese à obra de Sergio Larraín

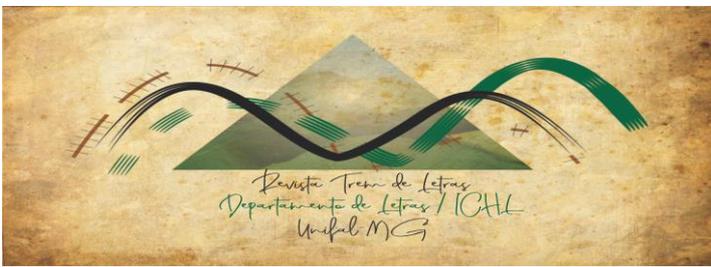
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### Resumo

O presente trabalho desenvolve uma análise expositiva sobre a influência e o impacto da agência Magnum Photos na percepção e no desenvolvimento da prática fotográfica de Sergio Larraín. Aborda-se a articulação entre as noções de tragédia e de alteridade como parte do desenvolvimento de preocupações político-sociais em nível mundial. O estudo considera as primeiras investidas documentais de Larraín sobre as crianças marginalizadas de Santiago do Chile, em 1950, como parte da constituição de imaginários políticos em que o retrato do 'outro' torna-se uma estratégia institucional voltada para a tradução visual da miséria em termos exóticos.

**Palavras-Chave:** Sergio Larraín. Fotografia. Estética. América Latina.



## VISUAL TRANSLATION OF TRAGEDY AND THE OTHER: A GENESIS TO THE WORK OF SERGIO LARRAÍN

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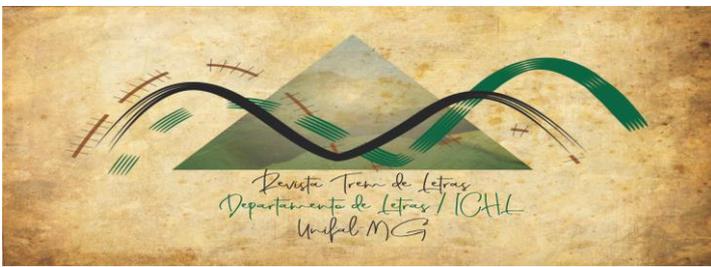
Sergio Larraín was a Chilean photographer and visual artist who was born in 1931 and died in 2012. He was known for his poetic and evocative images that captured the human condition and the natural world. Larraín was a master of black and white photography, and his work often featured elements of surrealism, abstraction, and symbolism. He was a pioneering figure in Chilean photography and had a major impact on the development of the art form in South America and Europe.

Tragedy and otherness visualization is one of the central themes in the work of Chilean photographer. Through his lens, Larraín captures the essence of tragedy and the marginalized, bringing to light the complexities and nuances of these experiences. His images challenge traditional representations of tragedy and the other, pushing beyond stereotypes and conventional narratives to reveal a deeper and more complex truth.

Unlike other photographers of raw instinct, Larraín's work is characterized by a strong sense of empathy and humanism, as well as a commitment to capturing the dignity and resilience of those he photographs. His images often serve as a visual testimony to the experiences of those who have been marginalized, oppressed, or forgotten by society. At the same time, his work is also a meditation on the nature of

*DOSSIER "RETOS ECOCRITICOS Y ECOSISTEMAS SOSTENIBLES EN LA FICCIÓN HISPÁNICA"*

Revista Trem de Letras	Alfenas, MG, Brasil	V. 10	n.2	1-18	e023008	2023
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tragedy itself, exploring the ways in which it shapes the human experience and the world around us.

His work however was not always intended to perform this way, yet it found a gigantic venue within political and historical complexities in which many institutions were structured into. For instance, in the 60s Magnum Photos catapulted the work of Larraín, among different variables, for finding in himself those “unique qualities” the Magnum’s founders themselves “had acquired during several years of contact with all the emotional excesses that go hand in hand with war (Manchester 118). That is to say, the capability to visually translate particular and traumatic experiences.

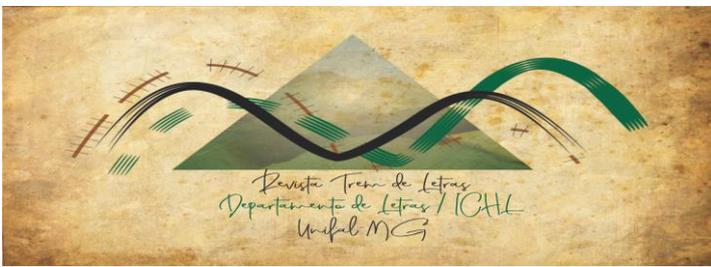
This essay, therefore, explores the implications through which Sergio Larraín earned a place among the most renowned photographers in the world of the twentieth century. In so doing, the study deconstructs Magnum's foundational principles on tragedy and the visualization of the other to grasp the importance of the work of the Chilean within this context.

## Visual translation, tragedy, and the other

The term of photographic translation is taken from Nathaniel Gardner's essay "Photography Translation: another way of looking". The author explains it as the technical and humanistic reproduction system that conveys unique knowledge when representing the omissions of other systems. Under this consideration, this study considers "visual translation of tragedy" as a visual representation taken from an

*DOSSIER “RETOS ECOCRITICOS Y ECOSISTEMAS SOSTENIBLES EN LA FICCIÓN HISPÁNICA”*

Revista Trem de Letras	Alfenas, MG, Brasil	V. 10	n.2	1-18	e023008	2023
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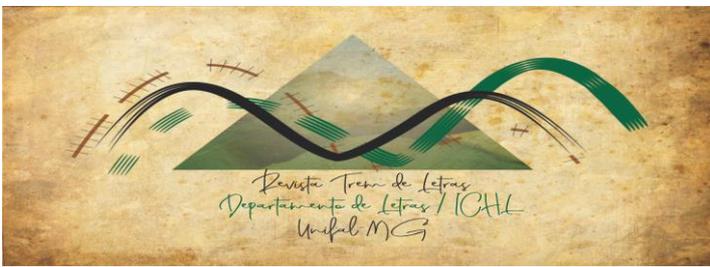
inimitable source related to tragic and unique historical moments. This type of photographic translation transforms the three-dimensional experience into a two-dimensional one by compressing cultural elements and generating new narratives (Gardner 2). Magnum Photos has been one of the twentieth century's most important institutions to be branded and modelled by this principle of tragedy translation. Even though they have never described their work in this particular sense, the evidence collected has most certainly proved this relationship, in which Sergio Larraín, later on, found his way as a world-class photographer. Therefore, this essay analyses the relationship between the visualization of tragedy in twentieth-century Europe, Magnum Photos, and Sergio Larraín as the catalyst of the photographer's work under newer aesthetic principles.

The visual translation of tragedy has its roots in the mid-nineteenth century, when photography got onto the battlefield for the first time, entirely changing the perception of the suffering of others. The tragedy was no longer something exclusively to read or hear about, but instead to observe, enriching the corporeality of war: guns, ammunition, uniforms, landscapes of death moved out of a fictional, unimaginable world into reality. The first warlike conflicts ever documented were the Crimean War in Russia (1853-1856) and the American Civil War in 1861 (Wells 81-2), becoming the starting points of visual assimilation and consumption of war tragedy "through the eyes of a score of photographers" (Carlebach 63).

Later on, in 1914, in the leadup to World War I, the American company Kodak attempted to encourage soldiers to take cameras into battle, feeding the modern desire of (a) consuming realistic, far-distant experiences and (b) recording wars, "even though this was strictly forbidden by the authorities" (Wells 160).

*DOSSIER "RETOS ECOCRITICOS Y ECOSISTEMAS SOSTENIBLES EN LA FICCIÓN HISPÁNICA"*

Revista Trem de Letras	Alfenas, MG, Brasil	V. 10	n.2	1-18	e023008	2023
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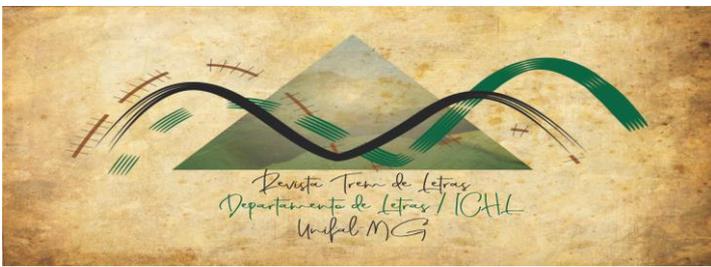


An accurate reflection in response to this relationship between commercial tragedy and photography comes in Susan Sontag's claim that "wars are now also living room sights and sounds. Information about what is happening elsewhere, called news, features conflict and violence — 'If it bleeds, it leads' runs the venerable guideline of tabloids (...) to which the response is compassion, or indignation (...) as each misery heaves into view" (Regarding the Pain of Others 16). The author understands that how humanity started to perceive others' pain had radically changed because of photography. Photographing and visualising suffering had created a social pulse, a sudden interest, in which photographers, institutions and viewers are all intrinsically bonded by a new experience of pain.

Magnum Photos's foundation is not an exception to this flow of war-related events. Almost a hundred years after the first explorations, the agency was conceived under a similar structure: a sense of tragedy and denunciation of the world's atrocities. Fred Ritchin, in his essay "What is Magnum", tells the story of Magnum's founder George Rodger, who decided to abandon war photography after being sent to cover the liberation of the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen in Germany. The photographer recognized as "obscene" the practice of recording the suffering. However, despite becoming Rodger's self-motif for abandoning war photography, this sense of obscenity is shown by Ritchin as an incentive to form the agency, along with other founders' experiences (Manchester 417-8).<sup>1</sup> The consciousness of tragedy became a fundamental value in Magnum's foundation, not only in the pursuit of their

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<sup>1</sup> In the same article, the author recognises that Magnum would have never existed if André Friedmann, also known as Robert Capa, had not been exiled from his hometown in Hungary for anti-government activities and forced to give up his career in agriculture to help his family as a journalist.



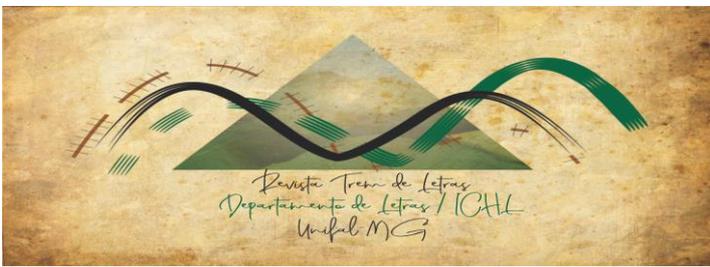
photographers but also as a newsworthy, institutional criterion. The writer Gerry Badger is even sharper when commenting on the foundation of Magnum and the "concerned photobook" of tragic events:

Magnum was founded in 1947, just after World War II, by war veterans and much of its business since has been closely connected with the reportage of conflict and strife. It has been noted by cynics that the agency needs a war somewhere in the world, or a famine, or inequality and suffering. This implies that it is always in business. In other words, the concerned photographer's concern is largely with human misery and the world's ills (Parr and Badger 236).

### Case study: Booklet *En el Siglo XX* (1965)

A similar criterion of human cruelty put the name of Sergio Larraín on the world photography map for the first time early in 1959, when Henri Cartier-Bresson called him to become a member of Magnum Photos. This sense of finding beauty in tragedy or the "pain of others", a phrase Susan Sontag coined in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), was initially applied to Larraín's work by the Swiss photographer René Burri when they first met in 1958. Burri evaluated and considered Larraín's series on the street children of Santiago de Chile not only for the artistry behind Larraín's work but also for his social commitment.

This particular photo work had been printed and used by charitable organizations in the 1950s. However, it was not until Burri's appearance that the photographs acquired artistic value. In this case, the artistry responded to candid moments found and



extracted from others' suffering and the social commitment to an emotional involvement with others' misfortune to visualise and denounce social injustice. On the one hand, this artistic-social criterion convinced Burri to introduce Larraín to Bresson as a promising photographer and,<sup>2</sup> on the other hand, structured itself as an institutional yardstick for several young photographers.

Similar to Larraín's case, the same inclination for exotic misery and otherness added the work of the Brazilian Sebastião Salgado in 1979 and the Swedish Kent Klich in 1998 to Magnum's collection.

In an article in the *British Journal of Photography*, Neil Burgess (founding director of Magnum Photos London and bureau chief of Magnum New York) could not have summarized these institutional criteria better. When remembering Salgado's work, *Gold*, he praises the value of his images "in the midst of violence and danger, and others at sensitive moments of quiet and reflection". He continues by saying, "it was a romantic, narrative work that engaged with its immediacy but had not a drop of sentimentality" ("Sebastião Salgado: Gold"). Here, Burgess refers to the visual translation of post-industrial communities.<sup>3</sup>

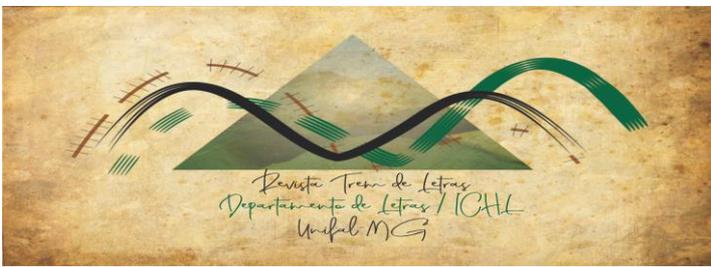
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<sup>2</sup> The story began, almost by chance, when in 1958 Larraín ran into the Swiss photographer René Burri on Copacabana beach, Rio de Janeiro, and told him that he was a photographer, that he had decided to meet Bresson at all costs, and that he was taking off for Paris the next day, just to do it. Burri, moved by Larraín's work, gave him his film rolls on Rio and an introductory letter addressed to Bresson. This event became the start of the relationship between Sergio Larraín and Magnum (Leiva 32).

<sup>3</sup> In the same article, Burgess recognises that they should have paid more attention to the socio-political uncertainties they "glibly" called post-industrial communities. This explained his relationship with and rejection of Salgado's early project *Workers* (42 different stories on manual labour around the world) because it would be "hard to sell". *The Workers* project was not newsworthy back then, or at least it was not until Burgess saw Salgado's photographs about the Serra Pelada mine gold in Brazil. What remains as significant, aside from Salgado's artistry, is what the Pulitzer Prize winner Matthew L. Wald, regarding Salgado's South America

DOSSIER "RETOS ECOCRITICOS Y ECOSISTEMAS SOSTENIBLES EN LA FICCIÓN HISPÁNICA"

Revista Trem de Letras	Alfenas, MG, Brasil	V. 10	n.2	1-18	e023008	2023
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This reality was well explored, too, by Klich, who recognized that his ten years of exploring Mexico City had finally paid off. He says, "I guess that the Mexican work was of great importance for my entrance [to Magnum]" (Klich), since not much time had passed after he returned from Mexico before the agency invited him to join. Only one year after his incorporation, Klich published his most famous documentary book with Elena Poniatowska in 1991, *El Niño: Children of the Streets, Mexico City*. This photographic project exploring the symbolic elements of abandoned children's marginality found only rejection in the Mexican capital but found a place outside the Latin region.<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding, Leiva recognises these events meant to Larraín "un reconocimiento a su persona, pero también la reafirmación de su aporte a la fotografía", since the Chilean photographer was "el primer latinoamericano en sumarse a esta agencia" (Leiva 32). This was an acknowledgement from Magnum to Larraín for his photo work that, under the modern European gaze, exposed the deepest side of poverty and abandonment in Latin America and that was simultaneously a protest, in Agnès Sire's words, "against the invisibility of these abandoned children and a homage of their freedom" (Larraín 182) in 1950s Chile.

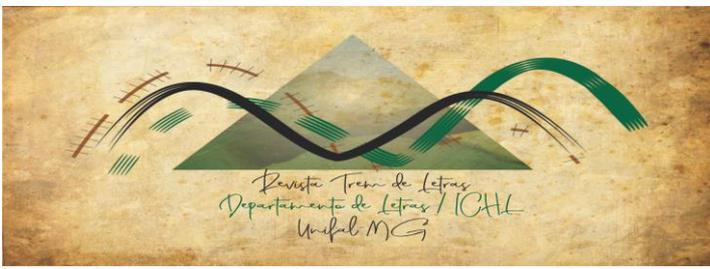
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photography, calls "a wondrous portrait of that continent's poor and common folk" **Invalid source specified.**, a photo-work later published in Selgado's *Other Americas and Gold*.

<sup>4</sup> In Gardner's essay, he explains how Klich, even though working intermittently in Mexico for over a decade (1984-1994) for the respectable charity Hogares Providencia, run by the well-known Priest Alejandro García Durán, becoming an active intellectual in the country, and planning an exhibition alongside the world-renowned French-Mexican journalist Elena Poniatowska on the visualisation of the marginal, never found the support he needed to publish their project in Mexico. Gardner mentions that upon the conclusion of this project, Klich's publisher decided to reject Klich's final work and cancelled the exhibition ("Photography Translation: another way of looking" 6-8).

*DOSSIER "RETOS ECOCRITICOS Y ECOSISTEMAS SOSTENIBLES EN LA FICCION HISPANICA"*

Revista Trem de Letras	Alfenas, MG, Brasil	V. 10	n.2	1-18	e023008	2023
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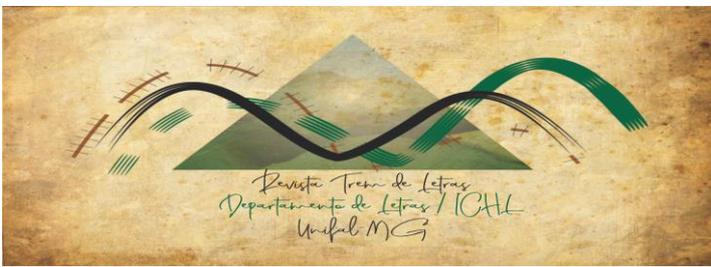
Larraín meant neither to explore poverty nor to expose injustice as other photographers did (Brandt 75-6); yet this quality in the photographer's work fits perfectly within the modern European institutional criterion concerning visual tragedy. As the photographer Luis Poirot recalls, Larraín had to assume his role as the photographer of the poor and misery for the sake of Magnum's agency (Poirot). Similar to his colleagues, the photographer found acceptance in a foreign institution that saw in his work the potential to explore an exotic tragedy.

To this end, throughout the following image selection, the study analyses social commitment and invisibility concepts through symbolic elements in Larraín's visual representation. It explains in parallel Magnum's interest in this specific work.

This photography series (Figure 1) was first part of a public charity campaign in Santiago de Chile in 1953, called Hogar de Cristo, a humanitarian foundation created in 1944 to help people in extreme poverty. This charity focused on the deplorable conditions of these abandoned children and used dramatic images to sensitize the parishioners to increasing daily donations: "ser generoso en la colecta de mañana" (Diario El Mercurio). In 1965, the same photo work was requested to support the charitable foundation Mi Casa to increase public and private donations.<sup>5</sup> The photo work appeared in a booklet called En el Siglo XX, published in the same year, in which Larraín offered more than just poor children: his sharp, extended material showed the intimate face of abandonment. In a close-up frame, Larraín shot the children in their natural condition, with dirt on their faces and hopeless expressions. This visual exploration

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<sup>5</sup> An organisation created in 1947, in Santiago, to protect and give shelter to dispossessed children.

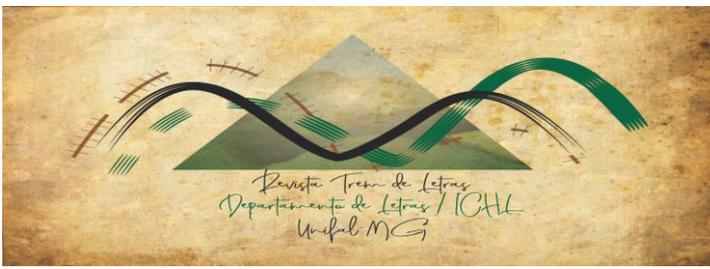


allows the viewer to understand poverty as it is commonly known today and humanise the precariousness of their social system.



Figure 1 – Booklet En el Siglo XX, Santiago, Chile (1965)

The photographs were displayed so that the text accompanying the images helped set up an emotional narrative. Gardner mentions a similar strategy regarding Poniatowska's essay concerning Klich's photographs on Mexico's street children: the written element imbues spaces with meaning that the visual cannot, providing a vital profundity in the narrative formation of this experience ("Photography Translation: another way of looking" 7). In Larraín's case, this "profundity" aims to trigger self-consciousness in the viewer, relating specifically to the pain of the other.

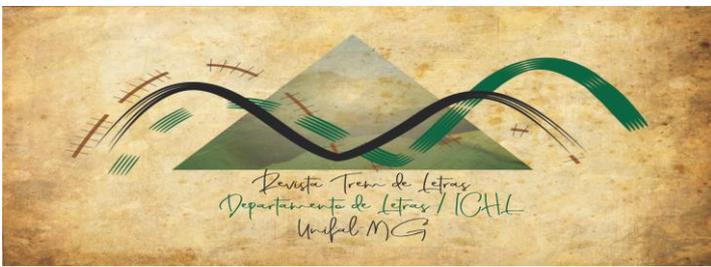


The writing "la calle para vivir" appears first. It is a section that shows four images of children in bad condition, carrying bin bags and wearing no shoes, running, and spending time under a bridge, with no hope. Then, on the upper-right side of the facing page, comes a portrait of two boys staring directly at the camera, or the viewer, as a spectator of their uncertain situation. At the bottom is the phrase "depende de usted". One of them is wearing noticeably older and dirtier clothes, with messy hair, whereas the other is in better shape and smiling. The visual composition points out that the meaning behind the phrase (it is up to you) is that the children's fate relies on other people, the audience, putting their misery in our hands in a passive-aggressive manner. In the lower-left frame comes the vindication, with the phrase "a ayudarlos", as if the tragic story of these children could be sorted by the foundation and the viewer's help. The characters now are no longer children, but young men helped by others: laying a hand on someone's shoulder in the first picture or helping another with his tie in the last one. For the first time in the composition of the images, the children are not by themselves but with helping hands. Finally, the phrase "a hacerse hombres" (to become a man) appears, accompanied by photographs of suited men getting married and having children. The images in the booklet show the rhetoric of life from which tragedy is an avoidable option which is up to "us", and Larraín's images doubtlessly help denounce it.<sup>6</sup>

The presence of Larraín at Magnum contributed to the social and cultural scene at the time. Likewise, this sense of social protest and denunciation had come a long

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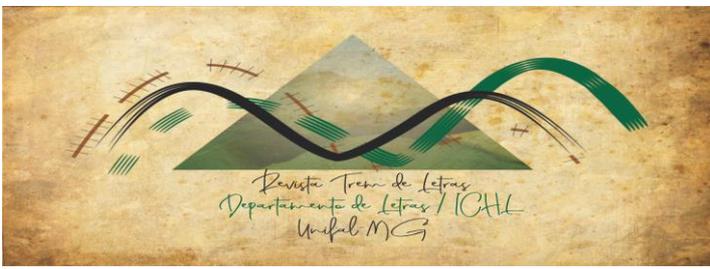
<sup>6</sup> These photographs in the booklet are only a small part of the original series that Magnum holds to this day, while many of them have been parts of larger exhibitions and publications, further studies of which should be considered.



way worldwide forged as a consequence of war implications along with the beginning of the disintegration of the Eurocentric system of imperialism. This system was partly based on an exploitative colonial strategy now under threat through countries taking back control over themselves: "Throughout Africa and Asia, oppressed people now aspired to regaining their independence. Devastated by the Second World War and embroiled in new conflicts brought about by decolonization, Europe surrendered much of its supremacy to two new superpowers: The United States and the USSR" (Chéroux 14). From this scenario of permanent political conflicts and threats arose a new form of humanism, centred in safeguarding and protecting human rights, making space for the creation of international institutions to foster cooperation. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1944, the United Nations (UN) in 1945 and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949 are only a few of these.

During the same period, the Chilean charities previously mentioned, among many other institutions in Latin America, were created. However, this consciousness of tragedy and the new face of humanism was politically sealed in the aftermath of the Second World War, in what Clément Chéroux in *Magnum Manifesto* recognizes as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. This declaration had a socio-political impact on the preservation and protection of human rights and the cultural sphere, promoting the visualization of tragedy through photography.

One of the most extraordinary paradigm/humanist shifts began in 1955 at one of the largest photography exhibitions ever held, *The Family of Man*, commissioned by the Luxembourgish-American photographer and former director of MoMA's Department of



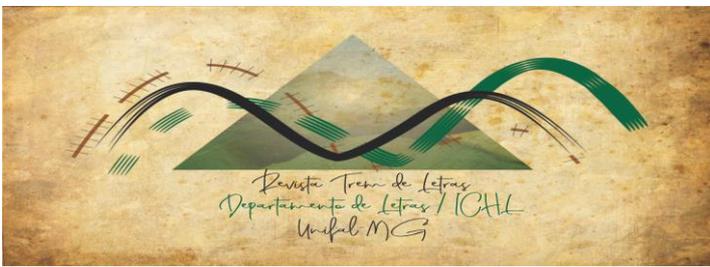
Photography Edward Steichen.<sup>7</sup> This exhibition acted as a role model for Magnum's most appreciated values: freedom, social commitment, and humanism. However, the critique was not particularly keen for either Steichen or the exhibition. Roland Barthes, for example, greatly influenced the scholarly reception of this event. In 1957, the French criticized the exhibition as an essentialist depiction of human experiences from birth through work to death, removing any historical specificity from the depiction (Tifentäle 4). The author, in his book *Mythologies* comments:

Everything here, the content and appeal of the pictures, the discourse which justifies them, aims to suppress the determining weight of History: we are held back at the surface of an identity, prevented precisely by sentimentality from penetrating into this ulterior zone of human behaviour where historical alienation introduces some 'differences' which we shall here quite simply call 'injustices' (101).

The English writer and curator of photography, Gerry Badger, draws upon Barthes' approaches to talk about the power of the editor-author. He claims that Steichen's exhibition "took many fine individual images by many fine radical photographers and neutered them politically, turning them into a giant, candy-coated pill" (*The Photobook: a History* 207). Nevertheless, despite the intellectual-political

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<sup>7</sup> Curiously, Larraín's career had one of its first international acknowledgments in 1954, when two prints of his personal collection of 1952 were purchased via the Edward Steichen Fund, and three others were included in MoMa's collection as gifts of the artist. Now, even though popular knowledge and the media have claimed Steichen's interest for Larraín's street children series, recognizing the humanist condition in both the curator and the images, the reality is somewhat distant in this regard. The archive collected by Sarah Meister (2019), MoMa's curator since 2009, shows that the acquired prints were not only not related to the Larraín's street children series but not to any humanist glimpse whatsoever. The five photographs show fragments of the streets of Valparaíso and perhaps Santiago, shadows and angled and vertical composition, which means that Steichen's criterion to consider Larraín's photographs in the first place was not humanist but purely aesthetic. This may explain to some degree why Sergio Larraín did not participate in *The Family of Man* exhibition in the first place and opens the possibility of further studies with regard to Larraín's aesthetic in the early 1950s and its relation to the American cultural scene.



turmoil Steichen generated, it is undeniable that this exhibition became a photographic event that "changed the way we view photographs today" (Dunmall), a statement made by Anke Reitz, conservator of The Family of Man in Luxembourg, paying exceptional attention to Magnum photographers. This exhibition crowned Steichen as "the epitome of the modernist photographer" (Parr and Badger 207).

This same exhibition set the basis for the Latin American version called *El Rostro de Chile* in 1960, led by the humanist photographer Antonio Quintana, the father of Chilean photography (Poirot). This exhibition included Sergio Larraín as one of its participants and he was recognized by his national peers for his humanist work (Leiva 70).

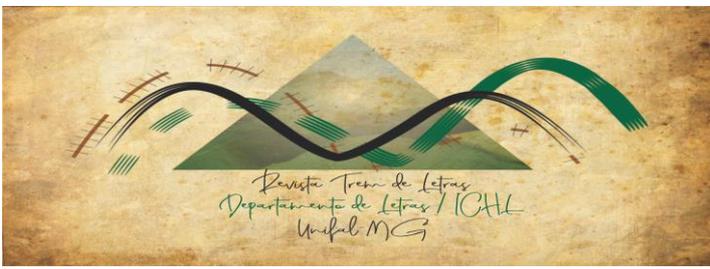
## Conclusions

Larraín's work responded directly to worldwide concerns at the time and an exploration of the visual translation of tragedy, shooting what Magnum saw as the portrayal of Latin American poverty, an institutional criterion strongly reinforced by the agency upon their photographers,<sup>8</sup> that bound them all in what Chéroux terms a "common denominator that transcends all frontiers" (Swartz), a sense of shared humanity.

The use of Larraín's photographs, either under this charitable gaze or Magnum's paternalism, automatically changes our status from naïve and passive viewers to

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<sup>8</sup> In 1959, Larraín was sent to cover the Algerian war as one of his first requests by Magnum, and a year later to infiltrate the Sicilian mafia.

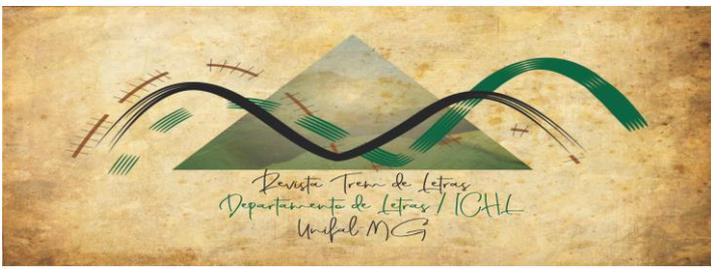


accomplices, partners in crime of the tragedy the photographers and viewers are witnessing. This institutional awareness of the political ways of seeing and the power of images have become one of the most common resources to manipulate viewers' reality in the twentieth century.

This way, Larraín's images have become a testament to the human experience, capturing the reality of poverty, oppression, and injustice. Through his photographs, Larraín creates a visual narrative that speaks to the larger issues of humanity and the human condition. He was particularly interested in the struggle of indigenous communities and the impact of modernization on their way of life, highlighting the need for social change.

The fact that Sergio Larraín was the photographer of the poor in the 1950s, picked by Steichen in 1954, considered by Burri and Bresson in 1959, and included by Quintana in 1960, eventually positioned the 29-year-old Larraín among the most renowned photographers of all times (Leiva 30).

In conclusion, Sergio Larraín's work remains a powerful example of the role photography can play in bringing attention to important social issues, particularly in this case study on how tragedy and the other get to be translated and read by a none-local audience. And even though the power of image institutionalization may push and convey in their tone or political reading, Larraín decodes the aspects of the human condition to dignify his subjects and bring them closer to a more human interpretation, turning the other somehow in one of us.



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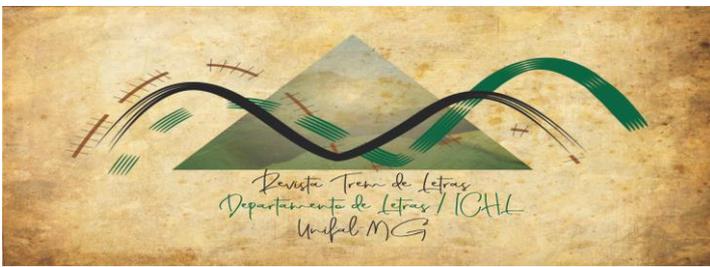
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Revista Trem de Letras	Alfenas, MG, Brasil	V. 10	n.2	1-18	e023008	2023
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