OLIVIER – LE SOMBRE ABÎME DU TEMPS



Laurent Olivier's wonderful book *Le sombre abîme du temps* has just appeared in translation (as *The dark abyss of time: memory and archaeology*) – [Link]

Laurent offers profound elaboration of the fundamental insight that the past is all around us, before us, in material traces,

that presence is filled with the past,

that the future is not constructed with innovation *per se*, but is an ongoing project of working on what is left of the past, and on what will become the past

(those iterative acts at the heart of design thinking).



Bamburgh Hall, Northumberland UK, a village that was once the capital heart of Celtic Christianity, setting for Walter Besant's historical novel of 1884 *Dorothy Forster*, set in the Jacobin uprising of 1715

This is something of an antithesis to historiography, that the writing of history establishes events, sequence, date, agency, causation. Instead Laurent celebrates Walter Benjamin's attack on such historicism with his messianic time of the now – *Jetztzeit*, and takes up Henri Bergson's metaphysics of duration.

There are four key components to this argument.

1) The temporality of archaeology, our most intimate human experience of the past, is not date and event, but what I term *actuality* – conjuncture, the articulation of past and present, rooted in the way the past can endure, albeit changed. Actulaity is the Greek *kairos* – a moment of re-connection, re-collection, when something prompts a link between past and present (hence Laurent sees this as memory

practice).

2) There is in this articulation a melancholic paradox – the past's material decay is the condition of its persistence. The past is gone, and, though we may wish to revisit, we can do so only on the basis of remains that *must have changed*. Forever now beyond experience, we can only know the past because it has changed, has become trace and vestige, and is thus with us now.

The present must decay. Immortality is not an option. Transiency is our condition of being, of the existence of the past in the present. Ruin and decay mean that the past can be a potential subject of experience and knowledge. Things can endure, through their material resistance to decay and ruin, and because we can care and protect, attend to old things.

3) This is a geneaological perspective, focused on chains of connection reaching back into time immemorial. Its main features are not plot and event (the drama of historicism), but everyday matters, the quotidian, material textures of life. Most of the past in the present is trivial and superficial.

I think of the fictions of Georges Perec and Alain Robbe-Grillet, indeed those too of Walter Scott, and how they foreground texture and indeterminacy. Consider how photography is a superb witness of precisely the superficial and everyday, mostly irrelevant noise against which we may wish to see event and drama in the gap between the moment of picture taking and viewing – the actuality of the photograph, the temporal gulf bridged by its materiality.

4) The past needs work, the present contains latent pasts ready to be re-activitaed, re-collected, re-articulated, re-presented in creative work – the craft of archaeology. In this geneaological perspective there are necessary breaks with the past, because memory depends upon forgetting. Memory does not hold onto the currency of the ongoing present, but is conjuncture – when something prompts a connection to be made with what had until then been forgotten, latent or dormant. The past returns in such creative acts, such hauntings that may appear quite uncanny, precisley because of the breaks in the flow of time.

See my book Experiencing the Past (1992) [Link]
The Archaeological Imagination (2012) [Link]
Archive 3.0 [Link]

Archaeography.com [Link]

Archaeographer.com [Link]

Ruin Memories [Link]



Daguerreotype, c 1850