FORENSIC ARCHITECTURE



“At a scene of crime anything might be relevant”

– a catch phrase from our work in theatre/archaeology, explored in *Experiencing the Past* (1992) and featuring now in my new book *“The Archaeological Imagination”*, out this coming week – [Link]

In this light, Ewa (Domanska) has referred me to a fascinating, an intriguing new project at Goldsmiths London:

Forensic Architecture.

Here is how it is described:

Existing at the intersection of architecture, history,

and the laws of war, Forensic Architecture refers to an analytical method for reconstructing scenes of violence as they are inscribed within spatial artefacts and in built environments.

It employs new modes of technical visualisation to generate complex knowledge about the spaces and histories of violence; transforming mute architectural products into active material witnesses that can be interrogated within public and legal forums.



As derived from its Latin source, forensics is the art of the forum; the practice and skill of presenting an argument before a professional, political, or legal gathering.

Forensics includes not only the speech acts of humans, but also the interpreted speech of things, mediated by an expert or a set of technologies. The art of forensics thus includes both field-work and forum-work. Although forensics is generally understood as the

application of science in service to the law, that is to say, as an investigative tool within the field, forensics is also a tool of persuasion that uses science rhetorically to speak within public and legal forums.

The project of Forensic Architecture brings different modes of technical modelling and analysis to bear upon violations of human rights and the laws of war as they are registered in and by space. We go on field studies to examine architectural, urban or infrastructure damage, but we also examine the remnants of violence as captured by different media – satellite imagery and other remote sensing technologies, GPS mapping, photography, activist and media footage, ground penetrating radar, mobile phone videos, CCTV footage, maps, and eyewitness reports.

There is little yet to show, but there are glimpses of what this research team may get up to – “Living Death Camps is a project that seeks to investigate the multiple relations between two concentration/death camps located in the former Yugoslavia and the problems associated with commemorating their histories …”

It’s actually too literal for me. Too superficial, to use the project’s own metaphor set. Another new book, due out over the coming summer and written with Bjørnar Olsen, Tim Webmoor, and Chris Witmore, *Archaeology: The Discipline of Things* (University of California Press) completely unpacks the innocence that the Forensic Architecture team seem to accord their visual *science*, their *technical*

modeling and analysis, the remnants of violence *captured* by different media – and in spite of their recognition of the rhetorical, persuasive function of forensics. (And our critique is far from a rejection of the potential of new hybrid digital media.)

The conceptual toolkit, the Lexicon of Forensic Architecture, is drawn from what typically gets called postmodern cultural theory. The familiar Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Serres are present, with forensic anthropologist Clyde Snow, media theorist Laura U Marks, members of the project. Really quite interesting. Definitely a project to watch.

So why am I not particularly enthusiastic?

Here is how the project proclaims the value of the concept of Fetish:

Fetish | Godofredo Nobre

The idea of the fetish refers to fabricated material objects of composite nature that negotiate heterogeneous cultural territories. I’m currently writing an extensive piece on it, but I’m not appropriating the term for myself (structurally following Pietz), as I prefer to construct the savage object to allow the fetish to travel into non-human ecologies. But depending on how you are constructing the lexicon, the previous definition can be enlarged to emphasize the main thing, that the fetish is not as relevant to speak of objects, as it is of cultural negotiations where objects take a primordial role.

The work of William Pietz on 16th and 17th century Portuguese colonial encounters is so provocative, especially given my predisposition towards Marxian notions of commodity fetishism and alienation. But this definition, this gloss, this gesture towards a notion (is it any of these?) says nothing to me, and particularly when I am thinking of material witnesses and international injustice. This is academic vacuity, with a touch of self indulgence thrown in. And alongside remote sensing and GIS? Theory is my passion. We need it. This is just too poor. It does damage to theory. They even cite Deleuze on an archaeology of the present; this is as superficial as its stratigraphic metaphor. The thinking behind the project is either opaque or just doesn't measure up to the challenge set to *represent injustice*. I hope this changes.



James Street Cardiff UK -site of the murder of Lynette White, St Valentine's Day 1988 – [Link]

Anyway, here is a taster from my new book (and at least I explore there the genealogy of this field of forensic architecture, its roots back in the eighteenth

century and earlier).

Let me return again to place/event, the engagement with a site focused upon the question: this happened here; or did it, could it have? The pursuit of such a question comes to involve a forensic attitude at the heart of the archaeological imagination. I have already mentioned the notion of the archaeologist as metaphysical detective. The associated forensic attitude is an attitude toward location. It can be summarized as follows: ***at a scene of crime anything could be relevant***. And anywhere could be a scene of crime. Faced with a scene of crime, the task for the detective is to identify, gather, and analyze evidence on the basis of which may be established a forensic case. But it is by no means obvious, often, what is evidence. Anything, potentially, could be evidence. … Anything could matter. It could be that the key to a case is an overlooked fragment or trace, a hair that could be analyzed for DNA, scratches by the door made by a unique pattern of nails upon the criminal's boots. Nothing is totally uninteresting to the detective. Then there is always doubt whether there is enough evidence to warrant the reconstructed sequence of events and attribution of motivation. Evidence won't speak for

itself; it needs mobilizing in a case, and this requires the detective to document the evidence.

Photography is the medium most perfectly suited to this forensic project. Let me introduce Walter Benjamin's comments on photography and the antiquarian imagination (in his ***Little History of Photography*** (1931), and see Carlo Salzani's very astute study, ***The City as Crime Scene: Walter Benjamin and the Traces of the Detective***, New German Critique, 2007). Eugène Atget photographed the streets and buildings of Paris in the late 19th and early 20th century. In his essentially documentary project he collected series of views based on themes such as the ornamental features of seventeenth and eighteenth-century buildings, signage of bars and cabarets, apartment interiors, street views. They take a documentary stance; Atget emphasizes content over his own presence to the act of photography. His photographs were intended for the use of painters, illustrators, decorators, set designers, and members of the building trades. Most of Atget's scenes are curiously empty of people, communicating an ironic stillness at the heart of urban life. You find yourself asking – why was this photo taken?

The Marxian critic and scholar of the Kabbala, Walter Benjamin, discovered Atget's photographs in the 1930s, along with the French surrealists. With others he thought that Atget photographed the streets of Paris as if they were scenes of crime. A scene of a crime, too, is deserted, as in Atget; a scene of crime is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence. With the likes of Atget, photographs become a paradigm of evidence for occurrences. They are a ***paradigm***, a method, or a standard, because, of course, nothing may have happened in the photographed scene to actually prompt the photograph. The potential of these spaces is enough to justify their photographic capture and documentation. They are a ***species of space*** where we ask – what happened here? As much as a focus on a past happening, this attitude towards place is about potentiality. We ask – what could have happened here? We imagine and look forward – what ***could*** happen here? In the future. Risk. Danger. Prospect. Far from being empty spaces, these are ***place/events***, with a history and a future.

Benjamin described this potentiality as a hidden ***political*** significance. This species of space demands a

specific kind of approach. Free-floating contemplation, an appreciation of the aesthetics, the balance of composition, as in a classic picturesque landscape, is not appropriate to such places. There is nothing to recommend them. But they do stir the viewer; we feel challenged by them, in a negative sense. Effort is needed to bridge the voids opened in this kind of space. The photographs beg for captions; Atget usually supplies them, and often they document the later demolition of a building.

Consider what happens when you don’t add captions to such photographs. ***Evidence*** (1977) presents a project pursued by Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan. They gathered a collection of photographs from archives that document scientific and industrial research and development. They refused the obligation to supply subject matter, to complement the images with identifying captions. The photographs in their book are completely mysterious and quite surreal, often threatening and disturbing, as you ask – “Just what exactly was going on in these experiments?”. They are like stills from the X Files.