RUINS – THOUGHTS ON THE AESTHETIC

An exhibition currently at the Tate in London is exploring British images of ruin

since the 18th century.

Ruin Lust, an exhibition at Tate Britain from 4 March 2014, offers a guide to the mournful, thrilling, comic and perverse uses of ruins in art from the seventeenth century to the present day. The exhibition is the widest-ranging on the subject to date and includes over 100 works by artists such as J.M.W. Turner, John Constable, John Martin, Eduardo Paolozzi, Rachel Whiteread and Tacita Dean.

[Link]

Turner’s Tintern Abbey, 1794

This is meant to be a topical exhibition. Contemporary art abounds in work dealing with material decay, persistent memory, fragmentary remains, archival traces. Pictures of ruins, photographs mainly, are to be found in quantity on all the photo

sharing websites. This archaeological genre has never been more popular (Paul Mullins offers an excellent and nuanced commentary on his blog – [Link])

But do such images sometimes turn the manifestation of urban, economic and political failure into images of beauty for easy contemplation, effacing social injustice and suffering? Are processes of decay neutralized by being made into the subject of aesthetic pleasure?

Here's Brian Dillon, curator of the show at the Tate, in the Guardian in February 2012 –

> An obsession with ruins can risk a fall into mere sentiment or nostalgia: ruin lust was already a cliché in the 18th century, and its periodic revivals may put one in mind of Gilbert and Sullivan: "There's a fascination frantic / In a ruin that's romantic." The great interest in the remarkable images of decayed Detroit – in the photographs, for example, of Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, on show at the Wilmotte Gallery in London from this week – is easily understandable but seems oddly detached from analyses of the political forces that brought the city of Detroit to its present sorry pass. It may be that as a cultural touchstone the idea of ruin needs to slump into the undergrowth again. But the history of ruin aesthetics tells us that it would likely resurface in time, charged again with artistic and political energy, and we'd find ourselves looking once more at blasted or

burned cities with a visionary or melancholy eye, just as Rose Macaulay did in 1941, ambiguously lamenting a bombed-out house where “the stairway climbs up and up, undaunted, to the roofless summit where it meets the sky”.

[Link]

Recent similar commentary comes in the New York Times –[Link] and the Huffington Post – [Link]

The Wikipedia entry for “Ruins photography” expresses it as follows –

“Ruins photography aestheticizes poverty without inquiring of its origins, dramatizes spaces but never seeks out the people that inhabit and transform them, and romanticizes isolated acts of resistance without acknowledging the massive political and social forces aligned against the real transformation, and not just stubborn survival, of the city.”

[Link]

This is a critique of “aesthetics”, in the sense of treating and representing something, a ruin, *aesthetically*. Assumed is a distinction between superficial and popularly appealing beauty (of the photographs), and a deeper truth that is being occluded (typically conceived to involve the people who are the subject of ruin). Aesthetics here means to do with the ways things seem and are represented, and not least by artists.

The exhibition offers enough diversity to compromise this easy opposition of

illusion and reality, the utility of scientific knowledge and the indulgences of pleasure. This is an old and recurring line of critique, and not just of photographs. Many since Plato have wished to banish the artist and what are conceived as their superficial aesthetic efforts, merely illustrative secondary representations, at best a popular entertainment, from the state of the philosopher King who alone can guarantee access to the truth of reality.

And these are images of places that are often culturally and historically charged. Turner's ruins are paradigms of the picturesque. Other ruins are historical sites where things have happened, for better or worse. Ruins may be valued more as tourist attractions and as heritage icons than as the sources of history. Tintern Abbey becomes picturesque ruin, the realities of the dissolution of the church in the sixteenth century forgotten. So a related line of criticism pits heritage, the reception of the past rooted in contemporary interest, against history itself, the truth of what actually happened (Lowenthal 1996 and many after).

Let me share here an edited version of a comment I made recently to a paper in the *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* ("Imaging modern decay: the aesthetics of ruin photography" by Þóra Pétursdóttir and Bjørnar Olsen), arguing that photography can witness the materiality of things in ruin, avoiding this ideology of the aesthetic (a powerful argument given the likes of Olsen 2010 and fieldwork in the abandoned Soviet mining town of Pyramiden – also the Ruin Memories Project). (References are at the end.)

Let me raise some questions about this notion of the aesthetic that underlies this debate.

The key is first to detach aesthetics from a sole association with the arts. Let's revert to an older definition of the aesthetic – as concerned with sensation and perception, where sensation is about emotional engagement and subjective evaluation, and perception is cognitive, involving objective ascertainment (Welsch 1996). Think, sense, feel, evaluate: these are the key aspects of human experience (Shanks 1992; Svabo and Shanks 2014).

Kant convincingly showed in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1999), under the concept of the transcendental aesthetic, that aesthetic elements are foundational for knowledge: only in space and time, that is through experience and intuition,

can objects first be given to us. Nietzsche went further in holding that reality is wholly aesthetic in character – a construct which we produce, like artists with fictional means, through forms of imagination, intuition, projections, phantasms, pictures, and so on. Cognition is metaphorical in that there is no direct engagement with reality: the aesthetic is here associated with our fundamental separation from a reality which always must in part withhold itself, remaining ineffable (Harman 2013, Witmore 2014). Even Hume recognized the essential role that the conjectural imagination plays in making up for a reality that must always remain somehow distant. We create forms of orientation (the aesthetic) that, at best, need to be as movable and elastically constituted as a reality that itself is fluid and changeable. This constructed, impermanent, flexible character of knowledge is now a commonplace in the philosophy and history of science.

things themselves

Aesthetics is well conceived as a branch of epistemology (how we come to know the past), and ontology (concerning the character of the past we wish to come to know), both relating to human experience. The debate about just what things are and how we apprehend them is an iterative return to what has concerned so many for so long (consider the recent works from Ian Bogost, Graham Harman and Tim Morton; as well as archaeological efforts in Olsen et al 2012). Herakleitos, in the very earliest days of occidental philosophy, saw that he could never plunge his hand into the same river twice, and realized that there is no fundament whose truth can be revealed or concealed, that we must only work with the oblique signs transmitted to us not directly through our senses but through an independent medium – and for Herkleitos this was god's inspired representative.

And aestheticization, in this broad sense of the scope of human experience, is something we have grown to know well everyday in modernity. It is captured in the notion of the experience economy, where we purchase not so much goods anymore as packages of designed experiences. The growth of the digital makes the real sometimes seem barely real, as experiences and relationships slip so easily across face-to-face and mediated encounters. And the power of industrial design, working on new materials and technologies, makes reality seem all the more mutable and malleable, subject to the aesthetic.

So there are five key components to this extended concept of the aesthetic:

- experience – by which I mean cognition, perception, evaluation
- poetics and "cosmetics" – pertaining to construction and arrangement (from the Greek *kosmos*) – experience works with and upon reality in making it what it is to us through the forms of the imagination, in design and making
- specificity in time and space – our experiences, engagements with things, are always located temporally and spatially
- iteration – temporal and spatial specificity means that an experience may be revisited, but never exactly reproduced
- reality always withholds something – because cognition and perception, the situatedness of human experience, can never encompass all its qualities.

As an archaeologist I too have realized the allure of ruin. From the beginning of my career as site photographer, finds photographer, finds artist and site surveyor, I have dealt in the representation of archaeological ruin, working on what remains. I enjoy my persona as archaeographer – experimenting in photo work with archaeological sites and things. So let me return now to the question of how we pursue imagery and photography (of ruins) under this expanded notion of the aesthetic.

The aesthetic and its association with media and representation. First, and as a premise, I suggest that the very notion of medium is undermined. No longer is medium to be solely conceived as material form and associated discursive and institutional agencies (such as TV, Movies, or Photography – comprising light sensitive chemicals, a certain instrumentality, the photographic image produced and distributed by the press, amateur and professional photography and their discourses, all serviced by corporate interests, and so on). Rather than medium we should think of *mode of engagement* (Shanks 2007), where photography is an architecture of arrangement of viewer, viewed, instrument, audience, the camera (a windowed room), and agencies of "inscription" ("pencils of nature" (or just graphite), chemicals and/or sensors) (Shanks and Svabo 2013).

Free ourselves from the simple notion that photography is primarily about photographs and things get very interesting indeed. Photography is about how we work with what remains. This is precisely how I have suggested we should conceive of archaeology itself (1992, 2012).

Setting up the camera and tripod, or easel, before the ruin, in order to capture

the image. As well as architectures of arrangement (the cosmetic component, if you like), this notion of the aesthetic also draws attention to poetics – construction, making an image, delivery and consumption (Shanks 1992, Part 4; Shanks 1997a). I have suggested that a paradigm of performance is required to understand this media work that is the photography of ruin.

Performance? We may conceive performance as a doing and a thing done, involving dramaturgy (organizing the protagonists and the action), scenography (the architectures of arrangement, mise-en-scène, location, including theatre), and mediation/documentation/reception (scripting (or not), record and aftermath). It is in site specific performance, a genre of contemporary art (Kaye 2000, Pearson 2010) that I have found considerable enlightenment of this aesthetic. Mike Pearson and I, working with members of arts company Brith Gof, have offered a series of works and reflections under the designation "theatre/archaeology" – rearticulations of fragments of the past as real-time event (Pearson and Shanks 1996, 2001, 2013; Pearson 2007, 2010; McLucas 2000). Much use has been made of photo work, though the photographs themselves, a fortiori, have been very much part of this blurred genre. Rather than standing alone as documents or illustrations, we have used, repurposed photo work as a means of exploring an aesthetic of located, time-bound engagement with (im)material traces in nomadic (after Serres) and paratactical (after Adorno) experience (Svabo and Shanks 2014, Pearson and Shanks 2014; Shanks 2012).

What does this mobilization of photography (of ruin) in theatre/archaeology look like? Sometimes in Artaud mode, sometimes Grotowski or Brecht (Shanks 2012), offering only temporary hold, interrupting and intervening as things slip away, theatre/archaeology offers a constellation of performance practices (things and things done) dealing with encounter, gathering and transformation – a guided tour of a ruin, a forensic portfolio, a temporary on-site installation, a deep chorographical map, the museological experience of an animated archive in the online world Second Life … (for examples and discussion see Pearson and Shanks 2001, 2013, PearsonShanks.org, archaeographer.com).

Perhaps ironically, given the separation of this expanded concept of aesthetics from a lonely association with the arts, it is in romantic, modern and contemporary art, rather than academic philosophy, that I have found the most stimulating explorations of this located and material engagement with the world of things. Tim Morton (2011 for example) is correct, I believe, in identifying the importance of

what can certainly be called a non-anthropocentric ontology in the works of European Romanticism (Shanks 1995; the Romantic sublime of “all that is solid melts into air”, for example, or Wordsworth’s “life of things” Shanks 2012: 21-25). Modernist painting broke with naturalist conventions in favor of an increasing focus upon the materiality, the “reality” of the painterly surface, and since the 1960s mixed media and time-based art work has deeply questioned the ontology of the art object and its relationship to human experience. I believe this is why there has been a growing interest in the convergence between contemporary fine arts and an archaeological sensibility (for example, Russell and Cochrane 2013).

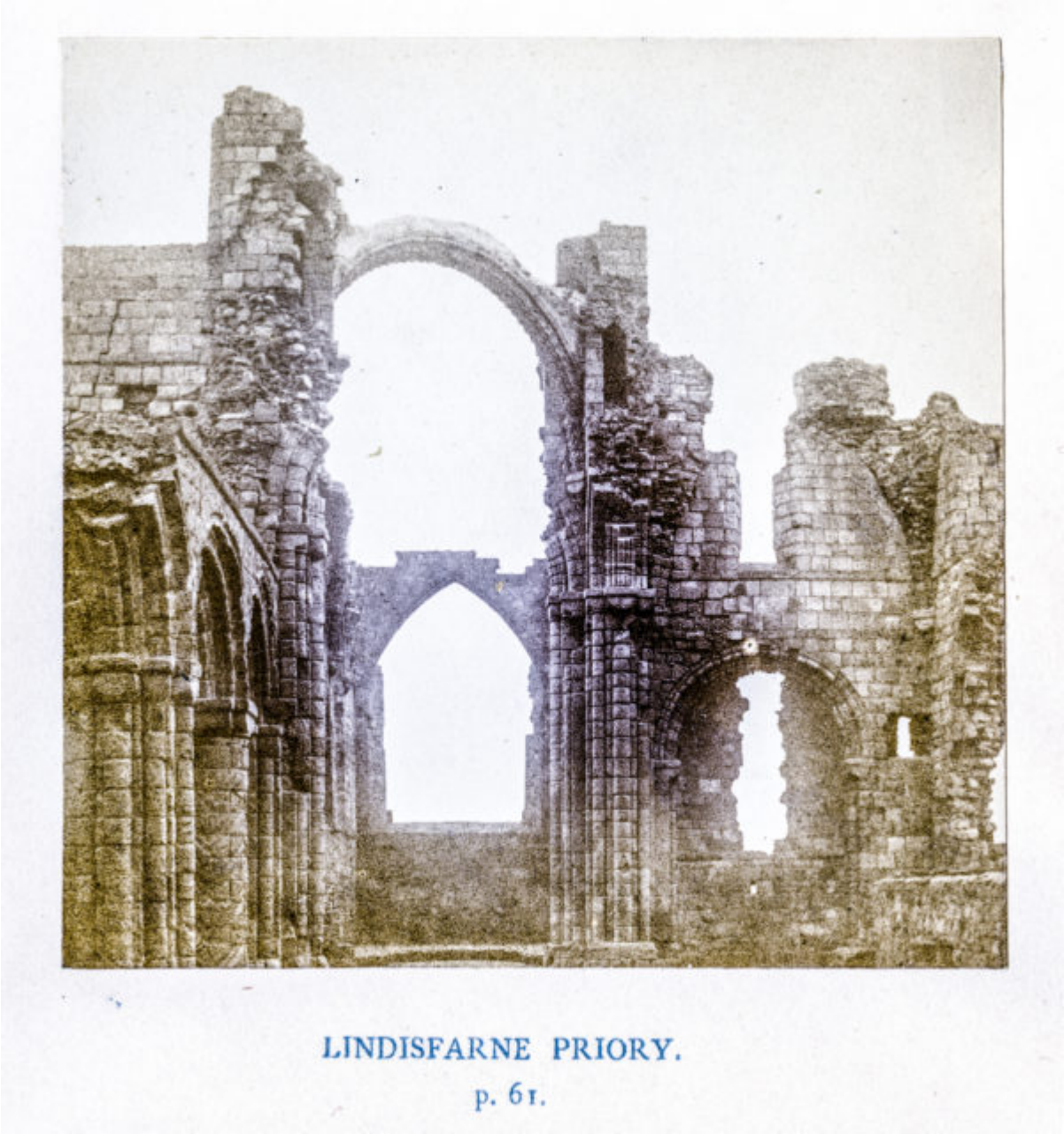
Hal Foster marked out the expanded aesthetic of fine art in his *Return of the Real* (1996), but for the most sophisticated and consistent address to the aesthetic in relation to arts practice we should look to critical theorist Theodor Adorno. Steeped in post-Kantian aesthetics, a musician and witness to the horrors of the aetheticization of politics in the twentieth century, Adorno articulated a negative dialectics, a fluid aesthetics of non-identity (1973, 1984) – “the realisation that there is no essence to things; it is the secret that their identity is fabricated piecemeal from alien forms. At the root of an artifact is the dissension of other things, disparity (Foucault 1986: 78-9). This is its life, its being in the world” (Shanks 1998: 42).

Adorno understood arts practice and its dilemmas – Offer ideology critique? Witness the ineffable? Offer an avant-garde vision that must remain fundamentally incomprehensible? With Walter Benjamin, he struggled with this political challenge of when and how to intervene. This question, for me, is one of (political) representation. So I end with the vital difference between illustration and representation (Shanks 2012). Both are aspects of rhetoric, quite a component of the aesthetic. We might retain the word illustration for a secondary support of an argument, through exemplification in image or description. Representation, however, is best reserved for advocacy, the construction of argument for a case, a person, a community, the arrangement of evidences and witness statements, the delivery, the re-presentation to an audience, the people in assembly, and all rooted in the delicate shifting relationship between reality, experience, documentation and what we make of them. Representation is, in this sense, precisely an engagement and interactive performance. And I read in both Benjamin and Adorno the conviction that technical progress (in photo work, in illustration, in representation) is the key to political progress. This is, for me, the heart of the aesthetic.

The implications?

- This expanded and old notion of the aesthetic is a key to understanding (parsing) human experience, and so has considerable application to human centered design (consider how it takes us far beyond cognitive science, behavioral psychology and ethnography, mainstays of HCD).
- Be mindful of medium as making – engaging with things and places so as to represent, to witness, to make manifest.
- Attend to the particular qualities of engagement with site and thing – haecceity (sense of hereness) and quiddity (the whatness of things) – accepting that, in the performance of encounter, in being represented, there will always be more to say, depict, to do.

So we can recognize the allure of ruin, while witnessing the presence of the material past that should not be forgotten.



LINDISFARNE PRIORY.

p. 61.

Lindisfarne, photograph by Thomas Annan (1860s), illustrating Scott’s poem Marmion

Linfisfarne, photo by MS, Leica Noctilux (1976)

Turner’s frontispiece of Dryburgh Abbey and Bemersyde House, title page to Volume 5 of Scott’s collected poetry (Cadell 1831)

The graves of Scott and Haig in the ruins of Dryburgh Abbey

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My works are available in PDF at academia.edu

The theatre/archaeology of Pearson|Shanks is under archiving effort at PearsonShanks.org

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