

Haunting in the ruins: matter and immateriality

Tim Edensor

Cities seem to be becoming increasingly regulated. In the transformation towards a service economy during the 1980s, Thatcher's broom swept away many of the remnants of 19th century British industry. Old industrial sites are turned into shopping centres, retail parks and leisure sites. Or old factories and warehouses are scrubbed and painted and transformed into flats. Or they are demolished, leaving a large expanse of space awaiting the attention of property developers. Ironically, in an attempt to bestow an identity on these new spaces, attempts at theming rely on connotations which conjure up previous manufacturing activities. There is then, in the drive to market places, to create new post-industrial images and identities, an aesthetic imperative to smooth over the cracks of the industrial city, and to fix the past, so that it does not intrude into an imagined linear future.

Yet the process is not seamless. In less wealthy urban areas, old industrial buildings linger and decay. Gradually falling apart they are the rotten teeth in the new city smile. Fenced off and policed, feared as dangerous locations for illicit behaviour, they become a familiar *locus horribilis*. City managers and planners want to move on, cast aside the city's past. In cahoots with architects, heritage workers and marketeers, they suggest that the past is a distant, romantic echo that resounds faintly in museums and in potted accounts. Yet the ruins shout back at the refurbished urban text. Populated by ghosts, they haunt the city, for the unofficial past cannot be exorcised whilst their traces remain.

Hauntings rupture linear temporality, inconveniently bringing forth energies, which have supposedly been extinguished and forgotten. Intruding into the present, ghosts repeat events and effects, reinstating a cyclical temporality. As Benjamin reveals, the idea of linear progress under capitalism is of an especially evanescent character, is characterised by 'extreme temporal attenuation' where industrial techniques and commodities attain venerable status, and fashion produces instant obsolescence, so that the recent past becomes ancient history. Like the arcades which Benjamin was attracted to, in industrial ruins we find the 'leftover' commodities, 'ancient, wild flora which, blocked off from the "sap" of consumer traffic entwine with each other in the most irregular fashion', sum-

Photos © T Edensor



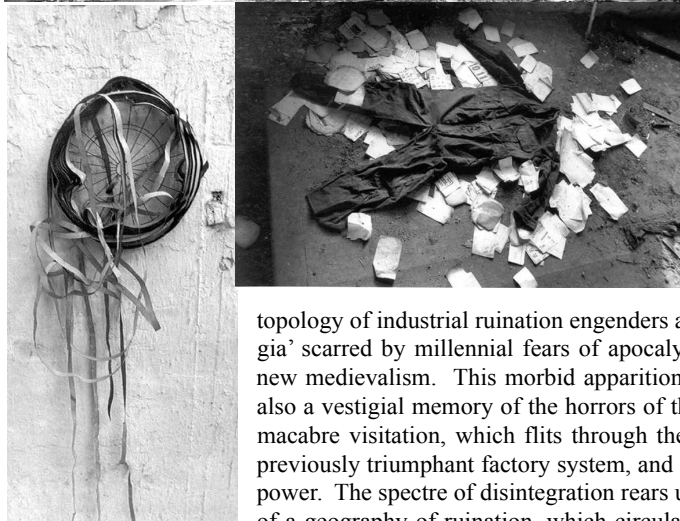
moning up the far-distant, recent past (Buck-Morss, 1989: 65-66). In the ruins, remnants of machinery and fashions such as office styles, calendars, wallpaper, adverts and posters that have long been out of circulation, acquire venerable status. Unexpected shocks haunt our own pasts: discarded fashions and crazes

leap out, spooking us by rekindling forgotten sensations of handling and wearing things that have passed into disuse and been forgotten, consigned to dumps or attics.

In the ruins, 'master narratives of history as progress decompose into the tense confabulations of a continuously re-membered past that hits the present like a nervous shock' (Stewart, 1996: 6). The past is where things fall apart, because they are transient. The ghosts of this past rear up in the ruin, they are the debris of unprecedented material destruction, the 'small, discarded objects, the outdated buildings and fashions', the '“trash” of history' (Buck-Morss, 1989: 93). Forgetting this carnage provides the only way that the myth

Tim Edensor

Photos © T. Edensor



of seamless capitalist progress can be imagined. But the ruins remember the processes of 'repetition, novelty and death' (Buck-Morss, 1989: 97). For 'the crumbling of the monuments that were built to signify the immortality of civilisation becomes proof, rather, of its transiency' (Buck-Morss, 1989: 170), revealing the fragility of the social order.

Ruins have long symbolised the fear that civilisations eventually crumble, that empires ultimately fall. The

topology of industrial ruination engenders a 'post-industrial nostalgia' scarred by millennial fears of apocalypse and the terror of a new medievalism. This morbid apparition of a return to chaos is also a vestigial memory of the horrors of the unimaginable past, a macabre visitation, which flits through the myth of progress, the previously triumphant factory system, and a degenerating imperial power. The spectre of disintegration rears up in the representations of a geography of ruination, which circulate through popular culture, in films and television programmes. Ruins are a spatial backdrop populated by Dr Whos, replicants, robocops, outlaws, cyber-punks, techno-visionaries and decadent gangs, a spectral cast who combine atavistic elements of medieval chaos and cruelty, and both dystopic and utopian future capabilities. As less regulated spaces, the ruins offer a home for the urban uncanny.

Spatial Hauntings

Romantic conventions of what rural tumbledowns, classical ruins or old castles represent typically invoke a Gothic picturesque which marks the cycle of birth and rebirth, and is interwoven with intimations of a morbid desire for the mystery of death (see Roth, Lyons and Merewether, 1998). Likewise, in industrial ruins, the Gothic intrudes, mingling the living (plants, fungi, birds) and all that points to death. The Gothic 'marks a peculiarly modern preoccupation with boundaries and their collapse' (Halberstam, 1995: 23) conjuring up a landscape of moral, spiritual and bodily decay, within which 'boundaries between the 'normal' and the pathologized 'other' collapse' (Toth, 1997: 89-8). Likewise, ghosts defy binary oppositions such as 'presence and absence, body and spirit, past and present, life and death' (Buse and Stott, 1999: 10). And like the Gothic, ghosts bring 'into shadow that which had been brightly lit, and brings into the light that which had been repressed' (McGrath, 1997: 156).

Industrial architecture articulates the necessity of ordering, of scheduling and disciplining. Ghostly traces of the banal workings of order line the walls and floors of ruined factories: the spatially organised hierarchy embodied in the foreman's hut, the office suites, the instructions to workers, clocking on apparatus. But the process of decay mocks the previous compulsion for order.

In industrial ruins, a radical re-ordering, or dis-ordering, carries on, now immune to the imperatives of production and progress, to the will of managers and time-keepers. A Gothic decay effaces the ordering of space and objects, erases the borders between discrete spaces and blurs the boundaries, which confirm things as separate aggregations of matter. Things take on an indistinct form, become apparitions of the things that they once were. In these derelict interstices of the city, walls collapse, and 'nature' displaces the 'urban'. Fragments of ordered space fall out of their previous contexts to recombine like elements in dreams, tumbling down from their assigned places to mingle in a random, ongoing re-ordering, shaped by where things happen to land, in dis-array. Masonry crumbles, ceilings fall down and wild arrangements of heterogeneous materials coalesce. Grease, plaster, dust and by-products merge. Reams of archaic paperwork, effusions of electrical wiring and plumbing, girders and old machine parts create accidental sculptural forms and unimaginable juxtapositions. Things fall from their assigned position, become detached from their useful and ornamental contexts, losing the mark of their class and category. Standing in isolation or in odd assemblage, the meanings of things becomes lost or inflected with new associations. Things get wrapped around and inside each other, forming accidental mixtures and hybrids. They communicate with each other, stand in curious relationship with each other, but we cannot be sure how they communicate, how they are related, what events and processes have led to their relocation.

Tim Edensor

Matter is a composite of molecules, masquerades as intrinsically discrete, but physical decay deconstructs the bounded-ness of objects. In the object-world, things generally withstand the ambiguity which inheres in their composition by being situated in distinct locations: in place. But in ruins, things gradually lose resemblance to that which they once were, and the barrier between one thing and another evaporates. Things gradually become something else: fungus replaces wood, wallpaper and upholstery; fabric delicately crumbles, gaps appear, get gnawed upon by beasts and worked at by bacteria; bird-shit coats machines; moss grows on brick. Elaborate designs emerge: patterns of warping, peeling, mouldering and rotting take shape, encrustations, blotches and spots grow on surfaces, things become see-through. Disassembling material separates into parts, which stretch away from each other as joins weaken. In the slow processes of corrosion, things give up their solidity, their weight, become spectral forms bearing traces of their past.

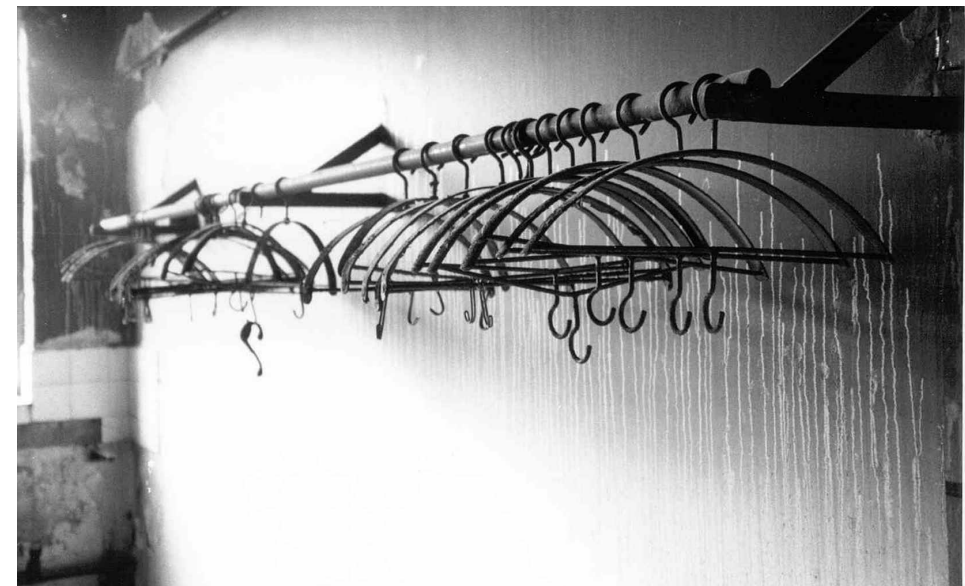


Moreover, the things that the factory produced are no longer commodities. Lying on palettes, they are the vestiges of an archaic commodity-world, in-between objects that are trapped between a past and a present, between that which was valuable and that which now has no use. Unfinished in many cases, they never reached the maturity of finished article, are the husks of things that were to be, things in the process of being made into identifiable items. They are the indeterminate, ghostly artefacts of a long-forgotten industrial process.

The factory was a constellation for a series of flows, a node in a network of distribution of money, matter, people, information and knowledge. Raw material was transported in, goods shipped out; investments were made, workers paid and profits accumulated; ideas circulated around the complex established by the company; and people joined the factory, came and went to work, travelled on behalf of the company. All organised, routinised and instituted in an ongoing effort to synchronise and schedule activities. Ruins are like a phantom limb, factories and warehouses which have been dropped from the

Spatial Hauntings

body of the network. And the traces of this amputation litter the factory: boxes are piled up for export but were never sent, chits and receipts never filed, parts never joined together, plugs have been pulled and electricity has been disconnected. The day the factory stopped. In the ghostly choreographies of the past, bodies swarm into gates, clock on, take breaks and exit. These routines might now be faint echoes in the elsewhere of the other lives of the ex-workers: the times they are accustomed to taking a tea-break, the embodied habits that shape ways of walking, the ingrained customs which stimulate memories of working life. And such rituals might be distilled in their bodies, which, shaped by their work, are marked by the contours of calf muscles, the shape of hands or the distortions of large biceps. Bypassed by the reorganisation or the dissipation of the network, ruins stand alone, de-linked from a social and economic life, remnants which trace wider connections and energies.



Ruins are an intersection of the visible and the invisible, the present and the past. The energies and the activities of the people who made them, designed them, inhabited them, passed through them and decided to abandon them are now merely a residue. But there are half-known ideas, fuzzy memories and dreams and fantasies in the shreds and silent things that remain. And the swarming presence of the people that dwelt within these spaces, who made them pulsate with life, is re-animated by these traces. There are

Space and Culture 11 & 12

Tim Edensor

scraps of material and clothing: overalls, hob-nail boots, gloves and hardhats which conjure up the affordances experienced by the clothed, working body. The discarded tools, the fragmenting machines and the dormant production lines suggest the kinds of bodily endeavours required, and the skilled eyes and hands that were trained and practised. Comprising some of the objects which passed between workers, they suggest the material exchanges, which their relationships. Technical words on scraps of paper oiled notices, and calculations worked out on walls signify the now arcane forms of knowledge, the mundane factory vernacular, which constituted an everyday, practical know-how. The rotting collections of stickers and cigarette cards, posters and pin-ups, and the

prevalence of graffiti scrawled onto walls - nicknames, support for football teams and pop groups, and the vilification of bosses - reveals the claiming of, and the domestication of impersonal space. Chits, bills, adverts, posters, notices, warnings, labels and species of paperwork, notice-boards, signs, letters and stencils silently talk the language of the factory. In a pregnant soundscape, full of creaks, wind, flurries of birds and echoes, these ghostly words reassert themselves, simultaneously remembering the whistling, orders and shouts, talk and laughter, machinery, singing and the radio.

Ghosts flit across space; they cannot be captured or classified. Bearing traces of the past, they cannot explain it, but they allude to forgotten sensations and thoughts. By virtue of their partiality – they are not whole bodies or coherent, solid entities – ghosts are echoes which refuse reconstruction, traces which only lend themselves to speculation and imagination, fragments which kindle half-remembered understandings, elusive feelings. They are apparitions which suggest avenues via which we might

remember the past but provide no map. These ghosts inhabit the defamiliarised, spaces previously attached to the city. The presence of the uncanny in the ruins destabilises the boundary between the known and the unknown: ‘the familiar and the secure is always haunted by the strange and unfamiliar, while the unfamiliar often has a troubling familiarity about it’ (Buse and Stott, 1999: 9). In ruins, ghosts present themselves as signs which can be read for significance: ‘through them, a setting speaks to people, haunts the imagination, whispers and audible lamentation, trembles in expectation’ (Stewart, 1996: 93).



Photos © T. Edensor

Spatial Hauntings

In my opening paragraph, I argued that the trend to aesthetically regulate the city includes the reorganisation of its relationship to the past. This effacement of the past in the rush towards the new engenders anxiety amongst inhabitants that spatial and temporal co-ordinates are being lost. Ministering to this need for a re-anchoring of urban identity has come the heritage industry, specifically in the guise of commodified nostalgia, and in the efflorescence of a museumisation of the past.

The heritage and museum industries collect particular fragments, spatialising and ordering memory in the display of historical bits. The mystery of the past is magically eclipsed, the illusion of fixity performed through a radical decontextualisation whereby historical artefacts are isolated, positioned against uncluttered backgrounds so that they cannot come to mingle with other fragments. Memory ‘becomes a species of collection’ (Britzolakis, 1999: 75). Brought out of the realms of the unknowable and the ambiguous, this trick disguises the excess of matter and meaning that reside in sites that are haunted. The artful montages of the museum cabinet, like those found in shop-front display and in interior design, disguise the incommensurability of things ‘by fusing the elements so artfully that all evidence of incompatibility and contradiction, indeed, all evidence of artifice, is eliminated’ (Buck-Morss, 1989: 67). This coding of things into normative patterns and arrangements is intrinsic to the ordering principles of spectacular, ornamental culture. This weird display of selective vestiges masquerades as an insight into the past but by design and interpretation tends to fix it. As de Certeau and Giard claim, ‘the ghost is exorcised under the name of “national heritage”’. Its strangeness is converted into legitimacy’ (1998: 134).

In the ruin, however, a different relationship to the past is available, one that is not part of any kind of packaged nostalgia:

In the ruin that remembers, history and place, culture and nature converge in a tactile image that conveys not a picture-perfect re-enactment of ‘living pasts’ but the allegorical re-presentation of remembered loss itself (Stewart, 1996: 90).

Ruins are sites where we can construct alternative stories to decentre commodified, official and sociological descriptions, and conjure up spooky allegories that keep the past open-ended, that acknowledge that it is radically unknowable whilst continuously telling stories that capture partialities. Counter-memories can be articulated in ruins, narratives that talk back to the smoothing over of difference. Away from the commercial and bureaucratic spaces of the city, ghosts proliferate where order diminishes. Ruins are spaces where the unseen and forgotten lurk, but they are especially important, because as Avery Gordon says, it is ‘essential to see the things and the people who are primarily unseen and banished to the periphery of our social graciousness’ (1997: 196).

Space and Culture 11 & 12

Tim Edensor

In ruins we feel ‘that which appeared to be not there’, but is on the contrary, a ‘seething presence’ (Gordon, 1997: 8). There are a host of spectral signs that wail and haunt us, letting us know that the past is never merely a set of irrefutable facts or a potted narrative, and they also disconcert assumptions about the ‘natural’ inevitability of forms of economic reconstruction. For this haunting is an affective possession, not ‘cold knowledge’, but ‘transformative recognition’ (1997: 8). Things suddenly become animated, the ‘over and done with comes alive’ in the barely intelligible, in the just-out-of-reach, when ‘the blind field comes into view, when your own and another’s shadow shines brightly’(1997: 197). Some effort of will however, is required, for ‘following the ghosts is about... putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look’(1997: 22).



Photos © T Edensor

Like ghosts, ruins are inarticulate, indeterminate and hybrid, they contain traces of emotion, activity, knowledge and event. The telling of their tale is impossible. Fragments suggest the beginnings of sentences but the combination of traces in the ruin composes a halting and stuttering kind of speech. Words are missing, elided and erased, meaning is always open-ended, but it is precisely because of this inarticulacy that hauntings offer the clearest riposte to fantasies of power and urban smoothness.

Cultural Studies, Staffordshire University,
Stoke-on-Trent, United Kingdom

Spatial Hauntings

References

Buck-Morss, S. 1989. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Cambridge: MIT Press

Buse, P. and Stott, A. Eds. 1999. *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, Basingstoke: MacMillan

_____. 1999. ‘Introduction: a future for haunting in Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History,’ Buse and Stott Eds.: 1-20

Britzolakis, C. 1999. ‘Phantasmagoria: Walter Benjamin and the poetics of urban modernism,’ Buse and Tott Eds.: 72-91

De Certeau, M. and Giard, L. eds. 1998. *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Living and Cooking*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press

_____. 1998 ‘Ghosts in the city,’ de Certeau, Giard and Mayol Eds. : 133-143

Gordon, A. 1997. *Ghostly Matters*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Grunenberg, C. Ed. 1997. *Gothic*, Boston: MIT Press

Halberstam, J. 1995. *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, London: Duke University Press

McGrath, P. 1997. ‘Transgression and decay,’ Grunenberg Ed.: 153-158

Roth, M., Lyons, C. and Merewether, C. 1997. *Irresistable Decay: Ruins Reclaimed*, Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute

Stewart, K. 1996. *A Space by the Side of the Road*, Princeton: Princeton University Press

Toth, C. 1997. ‘Like cancer in the system: Industrial Gothic, Nine-Inch Nails and video tape,’ Grunenberg Ed.: 79-90