

# Manchester Left Writers respond to Big Ruins 14/05/2014

*Big Ruins: The Aesthetics and Politics of Supersized Decay* was the title of a day conference held at Manchester University, hosted by CIDRAL, the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Arts and Languages. MLW members attended, and it struck us that this event was symptomatic of the problems of supposed 'radical' academia, which we have already explored, but also of the problems of the conference format. There was a lot of good will, hard work, enthusiasm and humour here, and a lot of friendly people. Some speakers did go outwards, both theoretically and historically, to the wider implications of what they discussed, and many were engaging, wry and erudite. A few attendees asked some probing questions.

But it struck us forcefully that conferences just aren't what they used to be. People used to get het up. Everyone seems to just drift listlessly in and out of focus now, in and between sessions. At this point in history, that is astonishing. There must be a new and productive way to meet and share work. The conference format has long been beset with pitfalls. Too many streamed themes, for example, leading to audiences of no more than six people, presenting repetitive material, generative work.

The specific problem at this event was that the aesthetics mentioned in the title of the conference were present, but the politics were being unconsciously repressed by those aesthetics - in fact, smothered by them - all day. Most of the speakers declared a horror of romanticism, before heading into extended, highly romantic monologues: descriptions of surfaces of decay, mournful wails which actually seemed to be about their own mortality. But how does one remove oneself entirely from the regime of romanticism? It is like trying to step outside Christianity, for instance. So much western culture is saturated with its values. The shadow of romanticism, like that of Christianity, is very long. Fair enough, perhaps, but this was also very far from politicised, precisely at the moment when that is urgently required.

We were assured that a case was not being made for more ruination in cities, yet we also heard that too much maintenance made for sterile urban environments. But it struck us that the city should be much more maintained, managed and used, in the face of a crisis of human resources and housing. We should be making our urban environments useful, as well as ourselves. And this, to be clear, is not to say that we need more securitisation and private investment, but more autonomy, and the handing over of the city's abandoned resources to the poor. The Lefebvrian 'right to the city', and Lefebvre, were conspicuous by their absence here.

The suffocating romantic presentation of ruins meant that the fashion for so-called 'new materialism' was pervasive too. Just as a woolly approach to the emotions is currently a reactionary bounce-back from dessicated abstraction, so 'the new materialism' is a way of pretending to have gone beyond the philosophical idealism of much broadly postmodern cultural theory.

In reality, it is an alibi for carrying on as before, only with a new box of toys. And now there's a kind of fetishistic magical vitalism going on too, madly attributing agency to every pebble and molecule of air in these abandoned sites. In the right hands this is great material for poetry, but not much else.

Alongside these themes, there was a semi-conscious attempt to deal with the politics of pleasure that usually ended with a simple abdication of responsibility. There was a constant self-consciousness on display about the political stakes of being a detached observer, getting a private frisson out of something that might also signify exploitation, oppression, or polluting rapacity. It rarely did more than acknowledge the problem, though. Sometimes the worry was headed off by implications of the 'narrowness' or joylessness of a more austere critique, and you could almost hear the echo of neoliberals gleefully stereotyping the left as miserable puritans.

We were given taxonomies of ruin-gazing, 'ruin-phobia', next to ruin fetish. We are scared of ruins, apparently. But actually, most of the speakers seemed to be frightened of declaring the political dimensions of the subject - and scared of actual living human beings - arriving very late at capitalism, and therefore the political, the process of flows or their lack, which actually produce the living physical and human ruins of a place such as Bradford, for instance. Most of the papers only briefly and abstractly included economics, if at all. Instead, a particular aesthetic language was in use. 'The sublime' cropped up a lot, including a tellingly uncritical reference to Edmund Burke, intellectual founder of modern conservatism. What we didn't hear were terms like 'capital', 'free market', 'dispossession', 'neo-liberalism', 'surplus-value', 'labour', 'working class', 'power', 'exploitation', 'slum', 'ghetto' and 'favela'.

Ruins were sites of beauty for all the speakers. Why are these sites not ugly? These smashed collages with no intentional formalism. They are ugly, and dangerous, toxic, full of asbestos and broken glass, often the sites of exploitative labour. They are not all poetic, by any means, yet we were being urged to undertake academic and aesthetic leisure in these spaces, rather than to revive and clean them up in response to the deep crises that often created them.

When people explain what characterises their 'kind of ruin', they may as well be writing about wine or gardening equipment in the weekend supplement of a broadsheet newspaper. There was a sense of 'alt-tourism' bound firmly to a fairly easily identifiable fraction of today's middle classes.

What nobody ever described were the ruins many of us awkwardly and grumpily inhabit. The ones Patrick Keiller is obsessed with: cramped, decaying Victorian terraces with faulty sash windows, or tiny, mean new apartments rented out for inhuman sums, which are already falling to pieces because they were built cynically, across the real class divide in Britain, the owners versus the renters. These are the ruins and their politics we want to hear about. Ruins need to be connected up to politics and people if their aesthetics are to make any sense.

Instead, speakers fell back on earlier, convenient scripts, ruins 'as museums' for instance, a notion hanging around for the last fifteen years, via the work of Iain Sinclair, Patrick Wright and others. Is the ruin an inventory? A collection? No. It's a mess. The thing that could not be rediscovered was a practical left humanism; 'really useful knowledge'. That was the real phobia. Scrap yards were smashed apart archives, rather than signs of grotesque materialist excess in the face of our own extinction, and therefore it was the danger of human extinction that could not be directly articulated.

The references that underpinned the looking were usually tasteful and middle class: Le Corbusier, Bergson. We want to hear about Rochdale town centre, and why it can no longer support a McDonalds, and we don't need a reference to Debussy to make it sensible. It was very interesting to look at what is happening in Detroit via Walter Benjamin, but Detroitification is going on down the street.

The 'ambivalence' of ruins was repeatedly stated. Hovering in the background was the familiar and still appallingly hegemonic postmodern stance that if you can spin something as multiple, mobile, in-between, in flux, then this is always good in some ill-defined way. But surely one thing that characterises all ruins is that they are always historical, and therefore they are always loaded, multiple signs. This stated 'ambivalence' actually began to look like a political abdication.

Overall what we witnessed was the re-emergence of a much older problem: the confusion of transgressive romanticism, and other forms of middle class dissidence, with leftist cultural, social and political analysis per se. There has been an incorporative move made on the left in the academic humanities and social sciences. As with all such processes, it has been long and complicated, and it needs much deeper prodding to work out how it has been achieved, and how we shift the balance from where we are now. But it is a process that definitely has something to do with the aforementioned problem.

At one point, we looked up briefly from our frustrated note-taking to watch an attendee play Sudoku on a mobile phone in front of us as this material was didactically delivered. This observation returns us to the concerns we laid out at the start of this response concerning the conference format. We can critique the content of the conference in the vein of our first Broadside, but we also need to analyse the form, as our second Broadside does concerning the academy in general. Why and how is this content perpetuated, and what new organisational formats might produce new and better content?

Regarding the academy, MLW have been looking at more positive forms of response to the kinds of crises it has so far only critiqued. For instance, the Social Science Centre in Lincoln are offering accredited degree programmes on a co-operative basis which return to the idea of the co-production of knowledge. It strikes us now, looking back on this event, that the co-production of the conference is an utterly essential adjunct to positive interventions like the Social Science Centre.

What we need to do is create new spaces that can actually collapse the divide between the *deliverer-academic* and the *student-attendee*. Spaces in which people might feature who are vocally and unselfconsciously aghast at the presentations of space given at Big Ruins, because they are unfamiliar with the kinds of scripts used to do so. In response, they might offer their own experience in a language unfamiliar to academics. In this sense, we might create new awareness on both sides, and new forms of class consciousness might be allowed to emerge. We cannot keep doing this, to ourselves, to each other, but especially to those we presume to speak for outside the institution.

- *Manchester Left Writers, 2014*