Leviathan’s larval subjects – thoughts on conveyor belts, metal worms and tunnelling

This is a short companion piece to yesterday’s blog-post, ‘Behemoth’. It’s inspired by Matt Barnes’ (@Liminalcity) suggestion that the tunnel boring plant currently eating an underground path for London’s Crossrail project might comprise the larval stage of the mobile plant monsters that yesterday’s post was concerned with. Matt’s comment got me thinking about tunnel boring machines, mines and snaggle toothed worms. Here’s the result.

Larval cousins

I’m tempted not to write any words to accompany this juxtaposition of images. The pairing probably makes its point powerfully without need for explanation. What hits me though is how close this uncanny resemblance is.

Larval excretions
As the tunnel bore and the worm each push their way through the ground they disturb and ingest the soil and rock in their path. There is no spare space between them and the ground in which they are encased. The only ways that matter can be displaced is squeezing it onto/into the surrounding ground, or by taking it inside, and passing it along their linear bodies. And in each case eventually it spews out at surface level, leaving telltale mounds: spoil heap, worm cast or mole hill. These mounds then stand as lasting physical proxy for the chew and squeeze undulations invisibly played out by these subterranean creatures as they pulse themselves onward through the silent darkness.

In the case of Crossrail’s exertions there’s a fascinating account of the journey and fate of 4.5 million tonnes of that project’s 6.5 million tonnes of spoil by Bull (2012). He charts the lorry-railway-conveyor-jetty-estuary journey that carries this stuff eastward, to Northfleet and the swelling mudflats of Wallasea.

Larval journey

I went down Wales’ last working deep coal mine in the 1990s. For a few hours I had a taste of that worm-world. Everything underground was tubular, the immortalised pathway of some previous steel tunnel worm. The thing that struck me most was the emptiness of this then still-active place. Hundreds of striplights illuminating almost nothing. Imagine the London Underground stripped of posters, people, tiles, trains or free newspapers. These were wide tunnels of nothingness, pathways along which the conveyor belts ran. To get to the coal face we had to ride these conveyors, lying prone, face down as the belt hurtled along these deserted tunnels. As we each lay in our position on the belts we seemed very isolated, very distant from our companions. We were left to our thoughts, and we got a fleeting chance to sample what it must be like to be commodity riding these purposeful, automated, rubber highways.

Eventually we were decanted, and completed our journey to the coal face on foot. Here the roof became lower, and I remember the walls as darker, of evident rock (the earlier tunnels in my mind’s eye were smooth, and white lined – although this is probably a mistake, a conflation with subsequent journeys on the Tube). Thereafter we faced a final hunched stagger into a metal machine forest of hydraulic jacks, each standing in line holding up thousands of tonnes of the world above our frail bones. These jacks could walk, shunting forwards as the cutting face advanced. This was a hollow worm.

And then the cutter came buy, a massive rotary head slicing the coal seam from side to side, throwing up clouds of dust into the headtorch beams and sending fractured coal-rock onto the conveyor to begin its long surface-bound journey. The effect was like sitting inside an unusually dusty and noisy printer assembly, watching the print head purposively and powerfully march to and fro along its guide rail, and with an overwhelming feeling that ‘I really shouldn’t be here, this isn’t a human place’. Then a small stray piece of coal flew towards me, it was something at a scale that I could make sense of – like the fuel chunks the coal man used to bring to our home – I pocketed it, feeling suddenly grounded, and began the slow journey back to the surface.

At the surface we were directed to the shower block where we climbed out of our orange overalls and scrubbed at the underground dust that we now carried in every skin-fold. Emerging back into daylight, back dressed in our lawyers-on-a-day-out-to-indulge-a-client garb, we walked towards a line of laughing miners. The laughter only increased as we stepped closer. Then pointing, and a mirror. We’d proved the bet right. We were incapable of washing as proficiently as a miner. The mirror showed think black kohl-like residue around our eyelashes and other deeply engrained coal dust tattoos. We were neophytes, new to this game. We had a lot to learn. We were the larvae.

The urge to dig

The ‘larval subjects’ part of this title comes (via Deleuze) from Levi Bryant’s blog-site of the same name. As Bryant puts it: “Larvae are creatures in a process of becoming” he then likens that to the putative aims of his writing on his blog. Perhaps something similar can be said about burrowing. What strikes me looking back over the tunnelling machines, office workers venturing tentatively into a coal mine and meditations on a worm’s rhythmic motion is how each entity drives forward because it is in its nature to do so. Implicit is a journey towards something, but that target is vague and probably unattainable in any final sense for the entity itself. This is a driven drivenness, a propulsion that the entity may have no account for. Give me a spade on a beach and I start to dig. Ask me why and all I can say is, “it’s for the pleasure of the digging”. I really feel: ‘Because you’ve just given me a spade’. That’s as deep as it gets.

Let’s leave the last word here to the Hackney Mole Man, William Lyttle who spent 40 years burrowing beneath and beyond his East London home, excavating 100 cubic metres of earth before finally being stopped by a Council enforcement notice. In his defence Lyttle explained:

“I first tried to dig a wine cellar, and then the cellar doubled, and so on….tunnelling is something that should be talked about without panicking….I don’t mind the title of inventor. Inventing things that don’t work is a brilliant thing, you know. People are asking what the big secret is. And you know what? There isn’t one.” (in Lewis 2006)

References


Lewis, P. (2006) ‘After 40 years’ burrowing, Mole Man of Hackney is ordered to stop’ The Guardian, 8 August
Behemoth: on the beguiling monstrosity of the wandering factory

FEBRUARY 16, 2013  3 COMMENTS

“Then the earth shook and trembled; the foundations also of the hills moved and were shaken, because he was wroth. There went up a smoke out of his nostrils, and fire out of his mouth devoured: coals were kindled by it. He bowed the heavens also, and came down: and darkness was under his feet….He made darkness his secret place; his pavilion round about him were dark waters and thick clouds of the skies. At the brightness that was before him his thick clouds passed, hail stones and coals of fire.”

Psalms 18: 7-12

Many of the practices that I’m interested in involve walking factories – in the sense of walking around and within them for a variety of reasons. But what about factories that walk? That’s worth a ponder.

There’s something monstrously captivating about the idea of a moving factory – a truly mobile plant unmoored and roaming abroad, rapaciously consuming all in its path. It’s the point at which a vehicle become more complex, more totalising in its operations, than it feels a vehicle should. A point where the factory function starts to foreground and the vehicular elements retreat into the background. Think roadsweeper, combine harvester, dragline, tarmac layer. Factories on wheels, churning, belching – slow, but relentless. And beyond human, for any driver seems dwarfed, superfluous, stuck somewhere spare that hasn’t already been consumed by an asymmetric (and unstreamlined) productive purpose. And then there’s the nomadic dimension: this machine is untethered. It is free to move next wherever it may, there are no rails or foundations to constrain it. This thing has chaotic potency.
This week started with an expedition, a search for an invisible hole. The task was to trace to source the origin point of a house brick that I found when my garage was demolished a few summers ago. The brick helpfully had an inscription in its frog, ‘Chas. Wirkworth – Wadsley Bridge’. A bit of map work found the site of the former brickworks and we trekked to it. But this piece is not about that trip. Instead it is about a trip that we did not take. My research found many ‘vanished’ brick work sites across the historic maps that I’d spread out on the kitchen table. Flicking through as a time sequence, holding location stable but skimming through successive editions of the ‘same’ map, my attention was drawn to a former brickworks and clay pit on Carnaby Road in the Walkley district of Sheffield. Here’s the time slice:

Two things grab me here. First that the brickworks doesn’t – does – doesn’t exist. It is a blip in time. In its day it dominates its site, then its gone, the clay cavity in-filled with refuse. The second is the thoughts triggered by thinking about the scale and extractive / generative ferocity of the plant whilst it existed. Through time the brickworks appears mobile. Maybe I’ve been watching too many end-of-the-world-alien-invasion films with the kids recently, but the strange two kiln beast appears to travel (an effect of the doesn’t – does – doesn’t flicking through maps and the eras that they represent). Thus an alien brick-ship descends upon an empty field, chomps into the land consuming earth in its fiery furnaces and spewing out millions of identikit bricks. But then something weird happens. The bricks start to form houses. The brick-ship becomes surrounded and flies off, leaving its empty field. The house army laying siege to the field pause (perhaps awaiting reinforcements from elsewhere) before finally crashing in, tide like, filling the field with their next generation host.

And then it’s all over, at least until a wave of urban clearance or a road scheme pulverises the houses in turn, rendering them back to fractured brick and block-dust and the ground level swells with a new layer of ground. Made ground.

Credits

Photo: http://www.agg-net.com/resources/media-gallery/image/mobile-feeder-0
Maps: Digimap

> Blogroll
1864 Sheffield Flood Claims Archive
28dayslater
Abandoned Communities
Abandoned Tube Stations
AditNow
Affective Landscapes
Airfield Research Group
Amy Cutler
ARCH (Alliance against heritage crime)
Archaeology & Material Culture
Atlantikwall
Berliner Unterwelten
Biospheric Harm Aesthetics
BLDGBLOG
Britain from above
British Toilet Association
Bunker blog
Bunkerbehoud
Bunkerpictures
Bunkersite
Circular Site
Closed Pubs
Concrete Mushrooms
Conserving the 20th Century
Constructing the local
Crepuscular rambling

Tracing as trivial pursuit: Inverness, Collection Point B, 1.44pm, 7 August 1997

February 3, 2013 1 COMMENT
"Always look at the whole: what that thing is that gives you such an impression, and undo it, distinguishing it into its cause, its matter, its point, the time within which it must come to a stop."

Marcus Aurelius
Roman Emperor and Stoic Philosopher
Meditations (c180AD) xii.18

A postcard from somewhere I’ve never been

I’ve never been to Inverness and have no particular reason to think that I will ever go there. No doubt it has its charms – as all coastal towns do – but it means nothing to me, and I have next to no knowledge of it. It’s somewhere in Scotland, on the east coast, and quite northerly. People live there. They are much like me. And they have an Argos, or at least they did one lunchtime in 1997.

Thursday, 7th August 1997 was a long day. In Inverness the sun rose at 5.25am that morning and would not set until 9.19pm. During the 15 hours, 53 minutes and 19 seconds of daylight, the then oldest man in Britain died, Princess Diana started her holiday with Dodi Fayed and a sudden movement of an insufficiently tethered consignment of 16 pallets of denim en route to the Dominican Republic caused a DC-8-61F cargo plane to crash land during its lunchtime takeoff at Miami airport. In its frantic descent the out of control plane narrowly missed a Budweiser Distribution Facility and finally came to rest in the car park of a local shopping mall, destroying 26 cars in the ensuing fireball.

Meanwhile, back in Inverness, amongst a plethora of other non-newsworthy events that day, someone, for some reason, purchased a copy of the Trivial Pursuit game at 1.44pm in the city’s own local mall.

I know this because I have the receipt. I found it Sellotaped to the inside face of the game’s upper lid when I pulled open the box to play that same copy last weekend. This essay is about the ways in which I have tried to understand the odd feelings that struck me as I unexpectedly came across this small document, lying dormant inside ‘my’ game’s box.

In writing this essay I’m fully aware that this artefact is but one of millions of its kind generated each year. It has no special qualities other than that circumstances have combined to provoke me to subject this iteration of this everyday thing to greater scrutiny that it usually warrants.

Ian Bogost, writing of his take on object oriented ontology, calls for the practice of ‘ontography’, an endeavour in which the action and constitution of objects (and their relationship with other objects) is charted, or more specifically conjectured. As Bogost (2012) puts it, the aim should be to write:

“the speculative fictions of [objects’] processes, of their unit operations. Our job is to get our hands dirty with grease, juice, gunpowder and gypsum. Our job is to go where everyone has gone before, but where few have bothered to linger”

So, in what follows I offer up some speculative fictions for this humble Argos receipt. Trying to linger longer than convention dictates that I should, giving more attention than it ‘deserves’ and seeing what I come up with. This involves applying different perspectives, scales and genres – none any more important or determinative than any other.

‘There are Eight million stories in the Naked City’

She perhaps stood at the brink of the Eastgate Shopping Centre and waited for many minutes before stepping forth across the threshold. The sun was bright in the street and her eyes adjusted slowly as she went inside. She had been
to the bank and withdrawn her savings, carrying the money in a folded up newspaper that she had hurriedly purchased for that purpose. Entering Argos a few moments later she found a quiet corner of the shop floor, extracted two crisp £20 notes from the bundle and joined the queue to place her order. She’d found out a few days before just how much this game would cost (£37.99) and she still found it hard to accept that that really could be true, but it was, and she wanted the best for her son. And the best was this set of 4800 answers.

At 1.44pm precisely she paid up and then shuffled into position, at Collection Point B standing at a position midway between the bulbous display monitor hanging from the ceiling, and the collection counter. After a few moments her number flashed, on the fat dull green and black CRT screen. She then collected her purchase and quietly left the shop. The fresh faced assistant at the counter had put the receipt in the bag. The number 72 bus then took her home, and once there she took the receipt and the box out from the bag and laid them on the dining table. With the edge of a pen lid she then scored a line across the cellophane, cautiously unwrapped and opened the box before carefully fixing the receipt into the underside of the lid. Then she reassembled the package, covering it in Simpsons themed wrap and attached a modest gift tag, written with the words ‘To Kevin, with love forever, your Mum (I’m sorry)’ on top, slightly off-centre so as not to occlude any of Bart’s faces. She then placed the gift on the table and walked out of the family home for the last time.

‘To a hammer everything looks like a nail’ (Bogost 2012)

The rubber soles paused at the transition from warm paving slab to the cooler ceramic floor tiles within the shopping centre. Then, with a cautious step to adjust for differential traction, those soles shuffled onward and into the hardy microfibre carress of the store. Here enfolded paper was unfurled, leaves loosening their grip on each other, yielding individual slips of exquisitely ink printed watermarked and silver-slitther stitched parchment. These were then presented through an invisible downdraft column of mechanically chilled air by a cantilever of sweaty palm-flesh, and quickly ushered onward into the still air darkness of a smooth plastic cash drawer, held taught there by its stainless steel retention spring. Then chug-whir, a spool spun deep within the till in obedience to the command of an electro-mechanical jolt. Ink was sprayed in regimented dance, an array of dots building up line by line as the paper spewed up into the cavernous room. Then, rip. Cellulose fibres cleanly severed by internal blade. A receipt was born. An arm movement then scooped the paper slip upward, transferring it to another, more clammy hand which then – moving in an approximate arc – transited to the statically charged air hanging stale beneath the cathode ray tube, and its phosphorous glow. Here a moment of local stillness, amidst a sea of sound and movement. Presently a box rode down a rubber incline, slid across a smooth white surface, was briefly raised up by another fleshy crane and then tumbled into the spangle shaded caressing walls of a plastic bag where it nestled snugly, pinned between the inner wall of the bag and the cellophane wrapper of the box. The surfaces embraced in mutual congress as the rubber soles move back out into the street, to the grey metal pole with the characters ‘bus stop’ affixed at its skyward end, and thereafter via the added frisson of a bumpy bus ride, to a flat wooden plain upon which cellophane was then flayed from gossomed cardboard. The box was opened. Air was exchanged and the receipt was adhered to the cardboard, where it then sat in ageless darkness, shielded against ultraviolet light and oxidation for 16 years before suddenly encountering daylight again.

The invisible


‘Beam me up Scotty’

What struck me most as I opened the box last weekend was how that receipt gave me precise co-ordinates in both time and space. All that was missing was a time machine. If I had one the receipt would give me a fix on an event that I had no part in. Travelling there (and then) in my blue box I could materialise into the spangle shaded caressing walls of a plastic bag where it nestled snugly, pinned between the inner wall of the bag and the cellophane wrapper of the box. The surfaces embraced in mutual congress as the rubber soles move back out into the street, to the grey metal pole with the characters ‘bus stop’ affixed at its skyward end, and thereafter via the added frisson of a bumpy bus ride, to a flat wooden plain upon which cellophane was then flayed from gossomed cardboard. The box was opened. Air was exchanged and the receipt was adhered to the cardboard, where it then sat in ageless darkness, shielded against ultraviolet light and oxidation for 16 years before suddenly encountering daylight again.

What will be the final destination of this thing? Could we ever account for all of its stations, or for all of the layers at years, until remembered by happenstance last weekend.

1.44pm


‘Beam me up Scotty’

What struck me most as I opened the box last weekend was how that receipt gave me precise co-ordinates in both time and space. All that was missing was a time machine. If I had one the receipt would give me a fix on an event that I had no part in. Travelling there (and then) in my blue box I could materialise Doctor Who-like at the moment of ‘my’ Trivial Pursuits purchase, and follow its purchaser home and witness it’s ‘box-fresh’ unveiling. That idea then got me thinking about all the unknowns about ‘my’ game’s provenance, all the events, material processes and elements in circulation, before, during and after 1:44pm on 7 August 1997. It made the world seem both big and small. Particularly as I conjured the circumstances in which ‘my’ iteration of this product had somehow thereafter found its way South, and presented itself for purchase in a Sheffield charity shop. It had then lain unopened in my attic for a few more years, until remembered by happenstance last weekend.

What will be the final destination of this thing? Could we ever account for all of its stations, or for all of the layers at which its story and context could be read? The answer is a simple ‘no’. And speculation is probably as close as we can get to making any selection from the multitudinous layers meaningful in human terms. The best I can do is invent narratives and/or material or symbolic contexts each within which to somehow ground and know this slip of paper.

The difficulty of the exercise is that this mundane occurrence, lacks identity as an event. Effort has to be applied to make it noteworthy, and in the doing so something necessarily gets superimposed; colour and/or order are added.
"But when there is no remark to be made, no event to be marked out, then where would you possibly start, and where could you possibly end, in giving an account of the ordinary?"

At an earlier point in his book he helpfully invokes Michel de Certeau’s notion of a “science of singularity” – case study method by another name – and points to fiction as creating a space in which attention can linger on features of the everyday which would otherwise fall “through the cracks between disciplines”. Again he invokes de Certeau who saw fiction, and its scope for creating “indexes of particulars”, as a haven of representational space for the:

“everyday virtualities that science doesn’t know what to do with and which become the signatures, easily recognised by readers, of everyone’s micro-stories.” (de Certeau 1984: 70).

The vignettes above tried to sketch some of the micro-stories (or unit-operations – take your pick of the term you prefer) of the unknown shopper, the surfaces and the abstract systems brought together in the everyday event of buying a board game. In spirit I had Georges Perec in mind, and also the children’s fiction of Alan Arhlberg’s Gaskitt Family stories, like The Man Who Wore All His Clothes. Perec and Arhlberg both present an overabundance of incidental detail, and in doing so cause the density of the everyday world to tumble into view. Objects step forward centre stage, silent processes are heard, lives, bodies and surfaces interact and the chaos and approximation of perception and communication are laid bare.

But does the attempt to narrate or otherwise spotlight these sub-events actually bring them into view? The irony is that, as I look back, pulling this piece together has rather worked to erase the odd feeling of poignancy that struck me when I first encountered the receipt last week. Opening the box let daylight in. Given enough time that daylight would erase the ink and also work to destroy the cellulose bonds within the paper itself. Left long enough the receipt would pass onward from illegibility to deterioration to dust. And, so too as I subject this slip of paper to excessive attention its hinted specialness fades in the neon light of familiarity. It recedes back into the background, where it and most things probably belong and/or are condemned to sit.

References:


Photograph: Eastgate Shopping Centre’s Noah’s Ark clock – hourly the automaton monkey climbs the Giraffe’s neck and strikes the bell: http://farm9.staticflickr.com/8452/8057396826_355d361c41_z.jpg

Botanising on asphalt — weeds, memory and an empty patch on the street corner

Photograph: Botanising on asphalt — weeds, memory and an empty patch on the street corner.
I wandered desolate
in front of a tank factory
and sat on a bench
near the switchman’s shack.

A flower lay on the hay on
the asphalt highway
–the dread hay flower
I thought–it had a
brittle black stem and
corolla of yellowish dirty
spikes like Jesus’ inchlong
crown, and a soiled
dry center cotton tuff
like a used shaving brush
that’s been lying under
the garage for a year.

Yellow, yellow flower, and
flower of industry,
tough spiky ugly flower,
flower nonetheless,
with the form of the great yellow
Rose in your brain!

This is the flower of the World.”

Allen Ginsberg (1954) In Back of the Real

I came across this poem whilst idly flicking through a slim collection of beat poets at my father’s new house a few weeks ago. I know little about poetry, and much less about botany. It was the reference to ‘tank’, ‘factory’ and ‘asphalt’ that got my attention. I know more about those things.

But Ginsberg’s point about the resilience of the weed he encountered at that run-down site has reverberated as I’ve sat this week reading Richard Mabey’s 1973 classic, The Unofficial Countryside. Mabey urged us to see what would now be called ‘brownfield’ sites. But he was urging us to see them. Not to necessarily see them as anything in particular, whether as heritage or as regeneration opportunity. Instead the call was to notice them for their own sake, and to marvel at the resilience of nature at such places.

Writing in the 2010 foreword to the reissue of his classic, Mabey explains that his book was written at a time when bombsites and inner-urban dereliction were still a common sight. That these brown fields have largely been erased from their locations and local memory, is the theme of this essay.

The postwar era carried a reconstruction and modernisation ethos with it, but the cities and towns could not be remade overnight, that process took many decades. And during the interim such sites remained as unused derelict land, co-opted as playgrounds, informal storage, advertising hordings and the empire of weeds.

In the 40 years since Mabey’s book was first written we have seen the rise of in-filling and regeneration. The drumming of derelict sites into new commercial or civic purpose, a hallmark of a general return to the once-abandoned urban centres. Gentrification, and successive boom and bust property cycles erased most of the sites that Mabey wandered for his book. As he pithily puts it:

“…the last scruffy bombsites have been buried under National Car Parks…spontaneous greenspace has become demonised as worthless brownfield, and an anaemic tidiness creeps across all the last fragments of free land.” (2010:15)

As Mabey strode these now lost lands, he read them as rich in flora and fauna. His was both a scientific reading and a poetic one. He would spot, name and draw rich emotional sustenance from what he found there.

I admire that evident stimulation, but I’ve never really felt it myself. It’s the tanks, the factories and the asphalt that does it for me. And it’s not that I was never given the opportunity to partake of this rich reading. No circumstances prevented me from jumping aboard, it just never quite worked out. I recall my father buying me a pile of nature-in-towns books in the late 1970s, the boom years of the urban ecology movement largely set in train by Mabey’s book. I remember one in particular – it had a picture of a storks nest on top of a continental looking domestic roof. It just didn’t stir anything in me. I liked the idea of the gear that went along with this hobby – the camouflage, the binoculars, the hides. But the ‘spotting’ bit left me cold.

When I started pulling my thoughts together for this piece, I thought it was going to be an agnostic acknowledgment of the rich way that naturalists read derelict sites. Thus far it has been. But in thinking back to the era in which I was given those books, I’ve been reminded that I used to sit at my father’s old house in Exeter and look across at a tangled mass of creeper like foliage, with massive white flowers wrapped around a fenced off empty portion of the street corner opposite no 18.
I never knew what those white flowers were called, and never felt the urge to find out. All I knew was that they made a nice popping sound when you squeezed their buds and that the entire site was coated in this Triffid-like mass. In some sense I knew that this space was aberrant to the order of the streets and buildings around it, but that was as far as I got. But today I have pushed the boat out, I now know the name of that weed-mass, Bindweed (sometimes called – even more evocatively – hedgebell or bearbind) and I now have confirmed to me, my gut feeling that this was probably one of the ‘last scrubby bombsites’ that Mabey had opportunity to chronicle just before they were swept back into ‘productive’ use.

As my thoughts drifted back towards bombs and airraids, and despite half hearted efforts to resist this drift (I’m supposed to be having a break from such musings) my search led me through old maps of Dinham Road. The terrace was complete up to the 1930s map edition. But by the 1950s house numbers 1, 2 and 3 were missing, a white-space void now were formerly there were houses (this road didn’t follow the odd/even convention for numbering for some reason). This remained the case until the 1990s when new, low rise brick dwellings appeared to reclaim the numbers 1, 2 and 3. Here’s what the street corner looks like now. The Victorian terrace ended abruptly at number 4, shown as the black (tar?) painted gable wall.

Through the marvel of internet wandering my enquiry soon found that nos. 1, 2 and 3 Dinham Road disappeared in flames on the night of 4th May 1942. A large firebomb targeted at a nearby timber store triggered a conflagration recalled by one local resident, James Bell who had passed by that street corner that night in his effort to escape Exeter’s Blitz (a revenge attack for the RAF targeting the historic German town of Lubeck):

“My brother and I, with much protests from mother, went with Dad – it was 4 am – to the end of Haldon Road, down under the Ironbridge at Lower North Street. There was a fire, on the corner of Dinham Road with rubble in the road, The fire was from Dinham Road corner to as far as the bridge started. It was caused some said by an oil bomb” (Bell 2005).

As counterpoint, Bell also treats us to the staccato of the Chief Fire Officers Report 4th May 1942 and its depiction of the raid as an abstract assemblage of fire, pipes, water and timber:

“0410 Timber Stores, Dinham Road, serious fire, tank No. 162 (cap. 15,000 gallons) adjacent to fire ground. Supplies supplemented from ‘Header’ on pipe-line No. 1. Relay of two lines 21/2″ via Engine Bridge, North Street junction of
Bartholomew Street. Shortage of pumps was severely taxing pipe-lines.

And all of this was new to me. I’d sat and stared at those weeds for many long hours. There were swifts that used to gather in massed ranks above this greenery, swooping and chirping in their very distinctive manner. As I think about it I tumble back to circa 1979, I’m sitting by the window and the weeds and the swifts are still there darting through the warm summer air.

That clump of vegetation had seemed eternal. It was there when I first visited this road, and was there when I stopped going there. And yet, it was a passing phase. There was a before and an after, neither of which has a place or role for these weeds.

But for me, looking back, the irony is that I remember this site and its column of empty sky only because of its weeds and the spiralling swifts. Seemingly, despite my best efforts to deny this at a cerebral level, these natural features left a powerful effect on my remembrance of this place. The Calystegia sepium lived up to its name: Bindweed.

References:
Poem source: http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/Allen-Ginsberg/3690
Photo sources: Bell (2005); Digimap; http://bloomingmarvellousrushmoor.blogspot.co.uk/; http://www.flickr.com/photos/zenmama/2632198350/

FILED UNDER ABANDONED BUILDINGS, AIR RAIDS, BUILT ENVIRONMENTS, DARK REAL ESTATE, DWELLING, HOUSE & HOME, GHOSTS OF PLACE, MATERIALITY & MEMORY, MEANING MAKING, MELANCHOLIA & NOSTALGIA, TRACEWORK, URBICIDE, WANDERING

Craterology & Legal Geography – searching for law and other meaning in quarries and elsewhere

I’ve spent a lot of time writing about bunkers and bunker-hunters in recent years, so it is with a tongue pressed firmly in my cheek that I declare 2013 as my year of writing about quarries. It’s not that I don’t mean it (I do) – but I’m fully aware of the need to be seen not to be taking this all too seriously. And yet, I’m not just looking at those who playfully enchant these places, I’m also studying those who own them, and do their best to manage them. So, some of the time I need to be very serious. I’m writing for two different communities, about one place type with me in the middle trying to make sense of both sides, and shuttle alien perspectives back and forth across the mid-line.

So, hello craterology

But, having caused some friction (and hopefully some insight) with ‘bunkerology’, this is probably the one and only time that you will see me talk of my projects under the label ‘craterology’. But, essentially that’s what I’m up to: investigating how people go about making sense and order within areas of hollowed out stone.

Alongside some more user-aesthetics based investigations of these spaces, this year will be about writing up my study of the British Mountaineering Council’s quarry managing (and climbing encouraging) practices, and seeking out further angles from which to think through my research question ‘how do people interact with these places?’, and in doing so also address the sub-question ‘and how do these people make sense of both the rock and each other?’

To kick off, I will soon be posting up another blog post that will link to a short article by me forpopanth.com on
climbers’ reactions to a graffiti incident in a former North Wales slate quarry. And more will follow in due course on
culture clashes and normative orders in abandoned quarries.

But it’s actually the ‘other’ side of my work that I want to flag today. The BMC invited me to spend time with them
learning about how they manage their quarry/climb sites, so that I could see owners who are not averse to climbing
from a liability point of view, and how they achieve that equilibrium. My study will consider how they do that, and also
examine why most other owners of these places are less relaxed and instead see the idea of recreational access to
these places as a major risk issue. All sorts of issues, and ways of reading place and risk, tumble out of this.

Legal geography

And the origin for all this focus on meaning making? Well, I’m an environmental lawyer by training, but in recent years
I’ve been publishing mostly in cultural geography journals. So, any opportunity to square the circle and write about all
the angles that interest (or distract) me in one unified place is the holy grail. That’s essentially what this blog site is
about: me sitting up on the fence, looking at both sides and trying to squeeze views, information, juxtapositions in both
directions through the mesh.

So, today was especially satisfying, for with Antonia Layard (University of Birmingham) we’ve issued a call for papers
on law and geography for the 2013 Royal Geographical Society conference. Our aim is to get the ball rolling towards
establishing the legal geography hybrid as a worthy branch of both law and of geography scholarship, by building a
conversation with all interested parties on how law and spatiality/matter co-act to construct place and space. And this is
not a domain incursion – law trying to colonise a corner of a rival discipline. No, it’s more humble than that. It’s based
on a realisation that spatiality and physical matter need more attention in legal scholarship, and that geographical
sensibilities probably help to point us in the right direction.

As Antonia (who is Professor of Law & Geography, the first such appellation that I’m aware of in the UK) puts it, what
seems to connect those projects that qualify for a putative legal geography is a concern to investigate law’s spatiality
‘from the ground up’: the studies we are thinking of start with the experience of visiting and/or being at a site. The
analysis that then follows is grounded in the physical reality of that site, as it refractions through the discursive layers of
site practice, local understanding, and thereafter appreciation of the wider context, and imposition of more formal legal
frameworks onto places of that type, and people of the type who manage or visit them.

And that neatly brings me back to quarries – start at site level, understand the local normative order and the actors
through whom it manifests, think about the interplay with the physical and the wider discursive context and formalities.
Then pull it all together.

So, here’s the CFP if anyone’s interested in joining in the conversation:
Call for Papers and Contributions – Legal Geography

Submission Deadline for papers – Friday 8th February 2013 (other contributions can come later, please see below).

Organisers – Antonia Layard (Birmingham) and Luke Bennett (Sheffield Hallam)

Legal geography is an emerging discipline, located both within geography and law and society studies. At its core, it draws on legal and geographical techniques and concepts to understand ‘the role and impact that space and place have on the differential and discursive construction of law and how legal norms and practices construct space and places’ (Blomley 1993, 63).

While legal geography has been an emerging discipline for some time particularly in North America, it is not yet a clearly defined site of research in the UK or (with some notable exceptions) internationally. With the 2013 RGS Conference theme of ‘new geographical frontiers’ this seems as good a time as any to try to develop, collaboratively, how legal geography (or geographical law) might be understood and undertaken in the UK and beyond.

We make two proposals for sessions. The first is for a Roundtable on Legal Geography and we would be very interested in hearing from anyone with a paper that engages explicitly with legal geography as a discipline, mapping the subject in some sense, investigating the subjects, techniques and approaches that legal geography uses.

We also hope to organise a world café session, which would be entirely participatory aiming (perhaps) at creating some initial networks, contacts, collaborations (for grant or scholarly purposes), bibliographies or ideas for further research.

Please do get in touch if legal geography holds any interest at all! (a.layard@bham.ac.uk).

Antonia Layard
Professor of Law & Geography
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**The heap-monster and the anthill – some thoughts on the indeterminacy of buildings**

**JANUARY 12, 2013 1 COMMENT**

One of my favourite CGI animation films is Monster House, a rather underrated 2006 offering from Robert Zemeckis and Steven Spielberg. It riffs on Poe’s The Fall of the House of Usher in aligning the atmosphere (and activities) of a dilapidated house with the bitter decrepitude of its lone human occupant, the splendidly named Horace Nebberecracker. The film loses something in its final third where the haunted mystery of this place gives way to the house stepping forth, out of the shadows and in monstrous form, tottering on two improvised legs, in pursuit of the
What’s it like to be a building?

Recently I’ve been burrowing into theorists who argue – in one way or another – for a return to matter in social theory, a material turn in which things should be given their due along people and discourse. Due to this, earlier this week I took a colleague to task for a research proposal in which she claimed allegiance to actor network theory. For whilst she noted ANT’s commitment to a principle of symmetry (i.e. that the non-human, physical realm should get equal billing in any analytical account), she considered that to give such matter equal billing in her study of the fate of a particular type of ruined building could appear ‘forced’. I questioned what that meant, and why an attentiveness to the existence of the bricks, the wood, the steel and the other elements and their shaping contribution to the life and fate of buildings would be forced, if forced meant ‘artificial’. Buildings are made of matter. Matter interacts with other matter. Buildings decay through human neglect because these material processes are free to take over. The fate of a building is precisely a rich interplay of human and other actors.

But to the extent that ‘forced’, means that we – as humans – struggle to give ‘authentic’ depiction of the world as viewed from the perspective of a stone, a brick or a slate roof tile then I accept the point, but only up to a point.

I recently read Ian Bogost’s Alien Phenomenology, or What it’s Like to Be a Thing (2012). It’s a great book, but its title is rather naughty, for Bogost readily admits inside that we humans can never know what it’s like to be a thing, and that instead all we can do is attempt to write:

“the speculative fictions of their processes, of their unit operations. Our job is to get our hands dirty with grease, juice, gunpowder and gypsum. Our job is to go where everyone has gone before, but where few have bothered to linger”

Certainly any attempt to write about those processes within the humanities / social sciences is awkward due to its novelty – but to regard such endeavours as necessarily ‘forced’ is to reject a key tenet of ANT as I understand it, namely that the presence and role of non-human objects needs to be admitted back into analysis of the networks of interactions through which reality is made.

I also questioned my colleague’s framing of ‘the buildings’ as the only physical element to be accorded a place in the story. Yes, the building as-a-whole is an important physical part of the story, but so are the sub-elements and their interactions. In classic ANT terms, a building is an assemblage, a temporary stable network of elements. It holds together whilst the human stakeholders, the material elements and the surrounding environment permit it.

So, in this essay I want to consider what happens when we ascribe agency to buildings, or instead try to see them as the sum of their parts.

The heap-monster – the rampant whole

In Monster House we are presented with the anomaly of a rampaging house, a fixity rendered strangely mobile and chaotically shedding clapperboards and other domestic elements as it stumbles to life, rising on its newly found haunches and launching into the chase. This heap-monster is portrayed as purposeful, as alive in a way that is alien to our experience of the built environment.

In the real world – rather than that of Hollywood – a brick doesn’t know that it’s part of a house, and has no sentience.

Yet to us humans we look at an intentional construction of brick, wood, slate and steel and we see a house (or a home if we happen to have a reason to associate emotionally with it). We perceive it at a particular default scale (unless we are a roofer, public health inspector or double glazing salesman in which case we focus on a particular sub-part). We see it as a whole, as a building, rather than as a set of component parts.

But what of the summation of broken buildings, to what extent do we still see ‘house’ in the demolition pile or the tornado’s wake? To what extent do we give identity to heaps? Can the amorphous still have identity?

Ordinarily, we struggle to see form or stable identity in such chaotic piles of matter, particularly if the rubble pile is not our own home. But, in extremis we can. Take for instance the following description of the remains of the World Trade Centre and the way in which the twisted mound of debris came to be framed as a thing, as an ominous foe:

“And then of course, there was the pile, always the pile. It had been the focus of ferocious energy during the collapse, and now again was the focus during the unbuilding. The pile was an extreme in itself. It was not just the ruins of seven big buildings but a terrain of tangled steel on an unimaginable scale, with mountainous slopes breathing smoke and flame, roamed by diesel dinosaurs and filled with the human dead. The pile heaved and groaned and constantly changed, and was capable at any moment of killing again. People did not merely work to clear it out but went there day and night to fling themselves against it. The pile was the enemy, the objective, the obsession, the hard-won ground.”

(Laingewiesche, 2003: 72)

For me, whether the pile self-identifies as a pile is not the point. Objects have properties that shape how they interact with other things (think of smooth vs rough surfaces and the different that makes when two objects pass each other). Objects do cause effects on other objects. But we shouldn’t confuse this ability to cause effects, with intentionality.
in how we as humans orientate to these physical things and their ‘natural’ processes and properties. How we give them house room (or not), why we do this and how those framings affect the outcome of our relationships with these places and things.

The anthill – the sum of all parts

The narrator, gazing upon The House of Usher before him attempts not only to read the mood of the ancestral seat, but also to find a stable correspondence between the totality and the component parts of the building, for:

“No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be no wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones. In this there was much that reminded me of the specious totality of old wood-work which has rotted for some years in a long neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air. Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability. [Yet] perhaps the eye of a scrutinising observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure...” (Poe, 2003: 93)

In this passage Poe not only gives us a rare incursion of building surveying into gothic fiction, but he also asks us to consider a building as an assemblage of parts, hinting at the impermanence of the relationships between those parts, and also of the relationships with the surrounding world and its forces (gravity, erosion, corrosion and subsidence). Poe reminds us that the integrity of any building is finite – and by the end of the narrator’s fateful visit the once ‘barely perceptible fissure’ has finally brought the house of Usher to its fall.

In this image, a building is an unnatural assemblage, waiting to fall apart. It is the sum of its parts, and dependent for its existence and identity upon the integrity of those parts. And those parts interact with each other, act upon each other. Sometimes this aids the overall structure (think of the strength-through-compression features of a stone arch assembly), yet in other circumstances (like Poe’s crack) the interaction is the seed of eventual catastrophic failure.

And here we can jump domains. Leaving literature behind we can follow the point into the prosaic world of construction law, and how the courts grapple with the ontology of buildings and the prospective damage of Poe’s ‘imperceptible fissure’. For, perhaps surprisingly, the courts in their very down to earth adjudication of disputes about building defects are having to decide the appropriate scale with which to frame the built environment and its elements, for (for convoluted reasons I won’t delved into here) compensation may only be payable, outside the realm of contractual relationships, in situations where a latent defect has caused damage to property other than itself. And here the question becomes both very practical and very esoteric – if I have a defect in the construction of a door lintel that threatens the future stability of the upper floors of the house, should the law regard the whole building as the ‘thing itself’ or just the door lintel?

Thus, the courts have to decide what they are looking at – is this a meta-assembly of component systems (door systems, wall systems, window systems) or is it indivisible a single thing, a building? English speaking courts around the world have grappled with this conundrum for the last 25 years. In North America they have started to view buildings as an amalgam of multiple zones and systems, thus accepting the notion that systems/zones of a building can cause damage to other zones/systems. But to date in the English courts this ‘complex structure theory’ has not taken hold.

To English judges at least, a house is a building, not an assemblage of bricks, wood and metal.

References


Luke Bennett (Sheffield Hallam University) and Amanda Crawley Jackson (University of Sheffield) are currently preparing an academic paper on the Furnace Park project. We hope to give it its first outing at the Royal Geographical Society annual conference in August 2013. Here’s the abstract as a taster of some of what’s to come…

**On curating strange encounters in multidisciplinary space: a case study on opening up a plot to multiple reading**

In the long retreat from essentialism, prevailing orthodoxy has it that the experience of place is multivalent, partial, subjective and/or pragmatic (e.g. Creswell 2004; Harman 2009, Delaney 2010). In this paper we will explore what this means in concrete terms by examining our involvement in the valorisation and art-led repurposing of a small plot of derelict land in the heart of Sheffield’s industrial quarter. At the core of our project has been a conscious desire to reveal and then linger over the multiple ways in which stakeholders associated with this project have each brought their own ‘ways of seeing’ (Berger 1972) – their aesthetics in the widest sense of that term – to bear in making sense of the site for their purposes. Through this the project has seen a small abandoned scrubland site suddenly heavily traipsed by police, surveyors, writers, engineers, artists, scavengers, architects, police, film makers, ecologists, poets, lawyers, children, groundworks contractors and ambivalent bystanders. We will show how these visitors are strangers to each other, and this place, and yet through their proximity in time spent on site, their involvement in the project and the similarities and divergences of their sense making strategies, their paths, thoughts and actions start to interweave to create a rich, vibrant set of place-forming narratives for a supposedly ‘non-place’ (Augé 1995). In bringing these ways of reading out of their disciplinary silos, by creating a context in which their discursive grip of the situation was rendered slightly askew – we summoned intriguing patterns, commonalities and charming juxtapositional effects (Highmore 2002), a loose project specific community-assemblage of the type theorised by Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Rancière, that energised this forgotten site with new life, colour and purpose.

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**FILeD UNDER ABANDOnED BUILDINGS, ANT, OOO AND THINGOLOGY, BUILT ENVIRONMENTS, DARK REAL ESTATE, FURNACE PARK, MATERIALITY & MEMORY, MEANING MAKING, RUINS, TRACEWORK, URBAN EXPLORATION, WANDERING**

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