

CHAPTER 2

Aesthetics and Environmental Dereliction. The Ambiguous Sublimity of Destroyed Environments

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Abstract: Destroyed natural environments and derelict urban and industrial sites may all evoke an ambiguously disturbing sublimity. Landscapes that are devastated through heavy industrial activity or seriously altered due to climate change as well as decaying urban and industrial sites can all lead to challenging our notion of aesthetic experience. Both these types of decay, i.e. the ones concerning the natural environment and urban and industrial areas, are shown in artworks such as photographs, paintings, and (multimedia) installations. This is of course in line with the historical origins of the subject-matter. However, while explorers enjoy physically visiting areas of urban and industrial decay, only very few of them would go to a large-scale devastated area such as an oil field, an open-cast mine or a poisonously flooded area to experience it physically (Kover 2014). How can we account for these different attitudes?

Keywords: Sublime, Natural Environment, Built Environment, Environmental Dereliction, Aesthetics of Decay

1 Introduction

Hard-dry lands with animal skeletons, landslides washing off entire villages, floods bringing away buildings as if they were tree leaves, empty factories eaten up by rust and vegetation, abandoned neighbourhoods left in decay due to poisonous ground or radioactive air pollution, endless fields of waste, rivers drastically changing colours because of the chemicals poured into them and mountains of trash – these and similar, tragic images we are regularly shown nowadays; in fact, we are practically bombarded with them: images of environmental dereliction of all sorts and types. Right at the beginning, however, I want to emphasise that I do

not have any problems with this ‘being bombarded with’, given the crucial, essential and existential importance not only of environmental dereliction in itself, but also of those multiple and convoluted issues that result in environmental dereliction. It is highly pressing for the human species to resolve all these complex and interrelated global issues, and these images are strong reminders of this duty. Therefore, such images are strong reminders and their presentation serves as imperatives to act and react.

At the same time, however, I am interested in the various aesthetic questions and perspectives that both these sites and their representations contain, in the hope that these will offer further insights into environmental issues as well as into aesthetics itself. The aesthetic and ethical implications of the environmental crisis, including the ones regarding representation and experience, are truly complex. Changes in the modes of perception of these issues may modify not only the interpretation of the problems but also the possible range of solutions to choose from. As an illustration of this complexity, we can consider American philosopher Erich Hatala Matthes’ (2020) inspiring analysis of endangered coastal cities as a case study. The considerations formulated in Matthes’ essay (2020, pp. 179, 181), however, are applicable also to other instances of threatened areas:

We are now in a position to see that while climate change is presented (accurately) as the major environmental problem of our time, it is also part of our heritage. [...] Rising sea levels are not simply threatening our heritage, but they are also part of our environmental heritage – the inheritance of generations of industrial activity fueling anthropogenic climate change. We are endeavoring to save the coast from ourselves. [...] The ruins of coastal places operate as a devastating criticism of the capitalist-industrial forces that have driven anthropogenic climate change. But they also offer the promise of finding new meanings in these altered spaces – sites that might bring us together in opposition to the forces that engendered them, and inspire novel visions of a different future.

Highlighting the complexity of the particular environmental issue of coastal cities demonstrates that the same phenomenon can have multiple possible readings. A shift of perspective can thus become beneficial in finding a new basis for learning from the crisis and aiming at potential solutions.

In order to examine the variety of the issues connected to aesthetics and experience, let us have a look at some features typical of different

types of derelict environments. In my above listing the reader may have noticed that I have mixed ‘natural’ places and artificial or urban ones. Although I am aware of their different particularities, they have much in common that is important for our present study. Both are affected by the overarching phenomenon of the mass destruction of our planet caused by human activity, to which we all contribute to a lesser or greater deal. A further interesting aspect however is that certain elements of the decaying environment are or were originally the contributors or sometimes even the initiators of dereliction itself, even if today they appear just as decaying as the others. I am referring here to the factories and industrial sites that constituted the production places for items of mass production, in the service of the consumer society’s need of cheap, throwable and often-to-be-changed items, including for example the plasticware that now fills the lands and kills the animals in the oceans, or cars that pollute the air. It is curious to see that destruction can also reach those places where the objects that contribute to this very destruction were and are produced.

Even if there are significant differences both in the modes and in the reasons of the dereliction manifested in natural, urban and industrial sites, they can often evoke an ambiguously disturbing sublimity. Landscapes that are devastated through heavy industrial activities, or seriously altered due to climate change, as well as such parts of rustbelt cities or factory sites that fell into decay because of declining industry can all trigger challenging aesthetic experiences and lead to uncanny feelings.

Needless to say, these aforementioned challenging aesthetic experiences are not something that we could read through the lens of the classical category of the beautiful, and even the ‘ambiguously disturbing sublimity’ is not a manifestation of the sublime that has an overtly large proportion of appealing, attractive or fascinating elements (see more on the category of beautiful, also in connection with sublime, in Kvokačka 2018; on its status in contemporary aesthetic discourse, see Kvokačka 2020). The reason for which it can nevertheless be described with the help of the latter term is that it shares with classical sublime the immense power that overwhelms us and our capacities through perception. As renown, the classical interpretation of the category of sublime in the 18th century was traditionally related the power of sublime to the perception of immense oceans, endless deserts or threatening high mountains (see a detailed survey of the sublimity of some of these sceneries in Dufy 2013). The difference, in our

contemporary cases, is that unlike in the classical instances, these appearances of sublime do not contain much appealing, delightful or seductive components, despite the fact that some aspects, e.g. their sheer size or the overwhelming power they used to represent, can nevertheless seem fascinating for many. This peculiar version of the sublime and its consequences is what interests us here. They will offer us a chance to engage in some other aesthetic-related considerations and elements while at the same time presenting us with some instances that are nonetheless related to blatant existential threats. This is why it seems worth examining the issue a bit more.

2 Classical Instances

Coming back again to the various forms of environmental dereliction that I listed at the beginning, it may seem surprising that I have mixed natural surroundings, urban places and industrial spaces. As I have explained, the reason for this mixing is that these are all affected by some kind of destruction. There is, however, another reason why they can be all discussed together, even if at first glance natural and industrial sites seem to have so little in common, and this is connected again to the concept of sublime. Whatever distant these two types of derelictions seem to be from each other now, there are some commonalities in their perception. The forms of their visual representation are also mutually influencing each other.

Throughout the 18th century, sublime was regularly analysed with regard to, and its interpretation illustrated with, unclassical landscapes. Unclassical, or, as it is perhaps better to say ‘not-classically-beautiful’ landscape formations became representative examples of the sublime. We can see pictorial antecedents of this already in the works of some 17th century painters, which focused on certain landscape formations’ as “wild beauty” (*orrida bellezza*), to recall the Italian painter Salvator Rosa’s expression (quoted from his letter to G. B. Ricciardi in Schama (1996, p. 456). In this sense, the classical, beautiful, mainly Mediterranean, landscapes had their unclassical, sublime counterpart in the representation of Alpine scenes and Northern and Nordic regions. There, instead of the harmonious and mild shapes typically associated with Arcadian and Mediterranean regions, the challenging and frightening features – that, at the same time, were also considered spiritually elevating – is what dominated the representation of the scene. In certain interpretations, these features were not only spiritually

elevating, but also contributed to the noble intellectual introspection and evoked artistic creativity.¹

This representation of the sublime, however, only concerns the landscapes themselves. The more fascinating issue is that around the turn of the 19th century, the aesthetic category of sublime started to be used for interpreting phenomena in the industrial and urban context too (Whyte 1994). This is clearly connected to the speed characterising the growth of cities, industrial areas and factories – both in their size and in the number of inhabitants and people working in them – during the first Industrial Revolution. The quickly increasing cities started to appear frightening, disorienting, full of unfamiliar and threatening aspects. In this way, they took on aspects that, a few decades earlier, characterised the particularity of unclassical sublime landscapes. In a similar way, also industrial complexes obtained sublime qualities by being likened to instances of natural sublime, and vice versa. The mutuality of this analogy is demonstrated by the fact that impressive natural phenomena were described with references to industrial activities, like in the case of volcanologist Sir William Hamilton’s description of the 1766 – 1767 eruptions of the Vesuvius, compared in his 1772 book to foundries (Bätschmann 1989, p. 64, see also Duffy 2013, especially Chapter 2).

The parallelism between natural and industrial areas did not simply act at the level of poetic descriptions and textual metaphors, for it also played a role in the visual arts, as Oskar Bätschmann reminds us in his seminal book on landscape painting: “Bemerkenswert ist die Übertragung dieser Darstellung der Naturkräfte in eines der ersten Industriebilder” (Bätschmann 1989, p. 64). These considerations refer to a comparison between Philip Jacques de Loutherbourg’s painting *Coalbrookdale by Night* (1801) and Johan Christian Claussen Dahl’s *Eruption of the Vesuvius* (1826), where two completely diverse scenes are depicted with very similar pictorial tools and in a quite analogous style. In Dahl’s painting, the powerful natural phenomenon of the volcano is shown in its frightening yet fascinating power, as exemplified by the figures walking around the rim of the crater to observe the spectacle as closely as possible. In Loutherbourg’s work, conversely, the industrial activity is placed in the far background, with less ‘visitors’ close to the scene. Nevertheless, the sublime power of these diverse phenomena is rendered in a very similar way: the tonalities of red are equally powerful, the overwhelming amount of fire and smoke equally dominate

¹ See more on the history of this shift in Somhegyi (2016).

a significant proportion of the pictorial surface, and in both cases the painters have left some 'normal' landscape around the main motif as a strong contrast. In both cases, the particular emphasis given by the artists to the phenomenon depicted and its juxtaposition with the 'regular' and 'natural' world is what represents the focus of the picture. Despite the constitutive differences between the subject-matter of these paintings, a strong parallel is drawn in the description of the visual effects of these sights and sites. This similar visuality can be explained through reference to the sublimity of these natural and industrial-urban scenes, which also evokes a great deal of curiosity, respect and acceptance in us for the power of these phenomena.

As we approach our own time, it is exactly this curiosity, interest and respect that will turn into either an ungraspable anxiety or even into an elemental and existential fear of the (near) future, and this makes the examination of the issues surrounding both the visuality and the actual, personal experience of environmental dereliction worth pursuing.

3 Contemporary Cases

Now that we have seen that historically there can be a connection or even a mutual influence in both the perception and representation of sublime features in natural and urban-industrial environments, broadly understood, we can turn to the analysis of the disturbing sublimity of contemporary examples in particular.

Today we regularly see all sorts of terribly devastated sites as an illustration and proof of the close-to-suicidal activity of mankind, resulting in polluted lands, derelict neighbourhoods and destroyed landscapes. In this sense, the subject-matter of these images (some artistic, some coming from the news and the media) is in some way comparable to the representation of classical sublime phenomena also for the way in which it affects our contemporary environment, by highlighting for instance certain manifestations of such powerful elements in which power exceeds human strength, even when these very powerful elements are of human origin but have gone beyond our control. What is noteworthy, in the contemporary situation, is the difference between the curiosity aroused in us by the representation of these sites and our actual experiencing them, and this is what interests me the most here.

Let us go back once again to my initial list of different types of derelict environments. One of them, I suppose, may not seem 'so' terrible as the others, and this is the "empty factories eaten up by rust

and vegetation.” Indeed, although these decaying industrial sites, similarly to their natural counterparts, are also the result of environmental dereliction, and arouse in the observers uncanny and unsettling emotions, they usually have visitors, physical visitors. By ‘physical visitors’ I mean not merely people who appreciate them in and through artworks, e.g. photographs, paintings, (multimedia) installations, but people who come to see them directly, with the exact intention of experiencing their aesthetic and emotional effect in person. Hence the difference I have mentioned: while many explorers and melancholic visitors enjoy visiting areas of urban decay, only very few of them would travel to a large-scale devastated area, an oil field, an open-cast mine or a poisonously flooded area to experience it physically. I will now consider some further aspects of this difference.

The activity of visiting urban and industrial decay is often referred to as *urbex* – i.e., urban exploration –, *baikyo* (in Japanese) or *ruinporn*, depending on the location, the nature, the aesthetic departure point or the ethical implications of the activity.² There are many possible motives driving this activity, several of which are connected to the nature of the experience itself. As Tim Edensor scrutinises, in such places we have a truly multi-sensory experience, with stimuli and phenomena that we are normally saved of, including not only disturbing sights but also peculiar smells, creepy sounds, possibly harmful haptic encounters and so on, which may trigger novel experience and involuntary memories (Edensor 2007 and Edensor 2005a). On another note, Edensor also reminds us how, especially in the decaying industrial sites, we can realise the quick or even sudden fall of the formerly well-organised space by the disorganisation of spatial relationships, i.e. of the well-structuredness that was originally aimed at obtaining maximum efficiency – a basic criterion of industrial success (Edensor 2005b).

These sorts of visits, again, do not typically concern devastated natural landscapes, vast oil fields, open cast mines, and areas of waste deposition. In fact, the point is not only that we do not usually go to such places, but we do not even want to, or, to put it differently, we do not really have the courage to visit them. This is exactly one of the reasons why for example Tihamer Richard Kover (2014, p. 145) appreciates Edward Burtynsky’s challenging works: “he affords and confronts us with a sight that few of us have the courage to witness.”³

² See more on these in Somhegyi (2020a), especially Chapter 5.

³ See some further considerations on the aesthetic consequences of these questions in Somhegyi (2020b).

Emily Brady (2013, p. 173) also emphasizes the aesthetic and ethical clashes that one may encounter when observing such sites, both represented and/or in person:

As the disturbing, harmful origins of that terrible beauty become clear, aesthetic and moral values may come into conflict, making aesthetic appreciation more challenging. In actual experiences of these places, rather than photographic renderings of them, aesthetic appreciation may become blocked. When it is not, there will be uneasiness in the contemplation of something possessing life-denying qualities.

There are several possible explanations justifying why we are less afraid to confront derelict urban spaces compared to witnessing the natural environment being destroyed, even if both of these experiences could, in one way or another, provide us with an opportunity to encounter modern forms of sublime. Some of these explanations are more prosaic, others are more ‘theoretical.’

Among the more common and straightforward reasons, we can mention the issue of reachability: while in almost every larger town we may find abandoned and decaying factories and derelict neighbourhoods, natural environmental destruction – related for example to open-cast mines, oil fields, less regulated factories or poisonous fields – often happens in distant places, almost unreachable regions or even in other continents.

This issue also has to do with the scale of these phenomena, which is naturally a basic factor in any forms and manifestations of the sublime in general. Paradoxically, however, from a ‘visitor’ point of view, while a decaying urban environment, whatever grand it may be, still remain of human size, so that frightened and sublime-seeking visitors can get a glimpse of it when they want to feel the powerful elements destroying it and their effects, in many instances the extra-urban places where natural dereliction could be experienced surpasses us in its physical extension. Again, this is needed to get a sense of the sublime in cases of disturbing sublimity; nevertheless, if someone, despite the aforementioned difficulties, actually managed to reach these places of natural dereliction, she could only perceive a tiny fraction of the full strength of the experience. She would not feel overwhelmed by it – a typical feeling of the sublime – just simply physically lost.

These considerations, however, seem secondary when compared to the less prosaic and more emotional, aesthetic and existential reasons that justify our preference for derelict urban spaces. Indeed, we are

arguably much less afraid of facing disruption in man-made, artificial areas than devastation in the natural environment. When devastation is affecting ‘only’ man-made complexes, it looks less frightening and less harmful to observe and even, in certain sense, to enjoy aesthetically, as we could learn for example from the aforementioned works by Tim Edensor (2005a, 2007). This reluctance to appreciate the environmental dereliction of nature probably depends on the fact that we are at least unconsciously aware of nature crucial weight, of its irreplaceability, and of the fact that what we lose in this case is way more essential than in the case of slowly disappearing industrial zones.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed why indirect encounters via artistic representations or media images trigger serious concerns on the fate of our natural and artificial environment, not lastly through the sublime features of such depictions, and may even lead to a desire for experiencing urban and industrial decay in its real essence. However, we become significantly more hesitant of facing natural environmental dereliction directly, despite its aesthetic potential, and even despite the opportunity it gives us to experience contemporary manifestations of the sublime. When our real, elemental and essential existence is at stake, we do not have the courage to encounter dereliction directly.

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