

Not Just Remembrance: Different States of Cultural Fragility

A few decades ago being a local personality was something. The idea of local itself was remarkably different from now and every town had its own celebrity: a politician, a tycoon, a journalist perhaps... At the same time, the chance to overcome geographical barriers and extend one's own popularity to other communities, this was pretty hard. Tom Leonard, however, was probably more than happy first with his articles for the Cleveland Standard and later with his job as a district reporter for the Evening Gazette. I don't know if covering football events and being a member of the Lifeboat Committee suggested to him the cosmic transmutation of sport into a metaphor for society and fair play as a collective ethical code. That is to say that, far more than athletes, what he really wanted to celebrate and preserve was the memory of local miners, their infinitely repeated anonymous gestures, their poor tools, their obscure role in that trajectory of social and industrial history that turned Teesside into one of the most important ironstone mining areas in Victorian and Edwardian Britain, until its slow but complete decline after the Second World War. Leonard's collection of memorabilia from the mining industry that was closing down was therefore the first step in making his dream of a Mining Museum come true in 1983, even though that came shortly after his own death. And now we can experience the claustrophobic sensorial deprivation of the underground tunnels, and listen to the passionate account of anecdotal family reminiscences of museum guides whose grandfathers and forefathers lived in the area, worked in the mines. Men who, when they came back home wore trousers so soaked with humidity and powder that they "could stand with no body inside".

Sometimes you need proper ruins, crumbling buildings devoured by vegetation or pure decay, as an incentive for conservation. In other cases, the passage from use to heritage is much faster, almost instantaneous, because something else has been neglected for a long time; dignity, recognition, well-being... In fact, it is very often left to citizens and local communities to fight for the protection of what they consider their own past: the traces of *industrial archaeology*. This has been true since the time of the campaign to save the Euston Arch, when the discipline was a new-born field of research known by a narrow circle of academics. Even before the contemporary commentary on ancient relics became such a post-modern practice, it was revealing the fragility of civilisation as well as personal histories. The transition between a state of industrial Romanticism, with its dark mines, and the windy open fields where excavations are bringing to light remnants of the Neolithic Age, following the discovery of an Anglo-Saxon burial site, is therefore a passage through different states of cultural fragility.

The possibility to disappear and be forgotten generates potential freedom: the territory is finally able to escape a given function, a strategy, to elude the logic of productivity and economic planning and to become an object of contemplation and rediscovery. However, a new regime takes over under the flag of the laws of representation. In the re-staging of the ironstone mining, fuelled by narratives, documents and collectibles, as well as in the pits outlined in the ground by the archaeologists, whose findings are now treasured and museified too, there is space for something missing, but not for indecisiveness. There is an inescapable degree of fictionality in both places that Sven Lutticken would probably explain with his theory of *park life*: the contemporary proliferation of fenced-in spaces, gated communities, themed and protected enclosures of territory endowed with a special history, morphology, wilderness,

landscape or leisure destination. *Park life* builds on the concept of the *human park*, introduced by Peter Sloterdijk in a famous lecture in 1999: in the end, we all are animals under the influence of culture¹, in a big zoo where guardians reject the entropy of abandoned places whose identity is nourished only by the residual and time has no label.

We don't know how relevant is the role that memory plays in civilisation and progress, suggesting for example how not to deviate or not to repeat a certain pattern. Similarly, we don't know to what extent artists are hostages of cultural memory². Aby Warburg envisaged an unconscious migration of visual symbols from antiquity into the future as the vehicles of collective memory, whose transmission cannot be explained in biological terms, but rather through socialisation, habits and cultural formations. There are other ways too for cultural memory to nurture and inspire an artistic process, more individual, subjective, immediate, that can set up a museum of the everyday life of a closer or distant past. However, memory is not about preserving the past, but rather about reconstruction. Its destination is a museum where authenticity of signs and traces is not even an issue. What is left to artists is not a salvage operation that would reanimate the lost object, but it is a regeneration process that will relate the object to the present by re-enactment, interpretation, criticism, transformation, appropriation... From a culture of production to a culture of (cultural) consumption.

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Notes

1. Sloterdijk, Peter. "Regeln für den Menschenpark", Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1999.
2. Green, Charles & Gardner, Anthony. "The Second Self: a Hostage of Cultural Memory", in *A Prior Magazine*, University College Ghent, 2008.