

D. Boric, editor

Excavating Memories: The Archaeology of Remembering and Forgetting

Memory, Melancholy and Materiality

Victor Buchli, University College London

Memory requires a certain degree of iterability both material and discursive in order to sustain it. It is this iterability that presences the absence of a loved one, the nation, home, or ones subjectivity or sexuality . From Foucault we know the importance of the iterative structures both materially and discursively that sustains subjectivities through various disciplines, such as the trained sinews of the soldiers body that remind him that he is no longer a peasant but a well trained disciplined soldier .However, when this iterability fails, both materially and discursively then there is a crisis of being.

The recent significance of the immaterial (see Rowlands 2005, Miler 2005) and its problems represent some serious challenges to the way we understand material culture and its material and discursive iterability. Pierre Nora has asserted that a society without memory frantically preserves everything . What Nora describes here is a shift in material and discursive intra-actions (see Barad) that sustain memory; a shift from milieux de memoire sustained by doxic assumptions and close knit communal oral traditions to Lieux de memoire (places of memory) which are essentially remains of where one might say milieux de memoire took place and are therefore preserved. This might also be seen as change of memory technologies from earlier predominantly discursive ones changing into something more material. The rapid changes of 19th, 20th and 21st century life means modern memory work as a result “relies on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image” - as Nora has stated (Nora 1989:13), which is really what the work of material culture studies has been since the 19th century to precisely facilitate such memory work in light of rapid industrialization and colonial expansion. It has been from its beginning the melancholic attempt (Shanks 1992) to grasp, materialize and bring into being that which has been already lost – and thereby deny that loss. It is an active form of resistance to the march of history – it is in Freudian terms, a refusal to mourn; a refusal to acknowledge the loss and move on and it is instead a pathological melancholic denial of this obvious loss, desperately attempting to hang on to something which is no longer there. There is probably no aspect of material culture studies or archaeology which is not subject to this melancholic yearning. Eng and Kazanian (2003) have suggested that this melancholic denial of the march of history which is the march of the Victor is fundamentally a radical denial of the dominance of historical power whatever form it takes on. Thus one can say material culture studies and archaeology have always been described by this radical dimension. However, this radical melancholic work has been characterized by a certain materiality to realise its work: the fragment, the souvenir, the artefact of material culture in all its variously constituted materiality. In this respect we should not forget the historically contingent nature of material culture itself and its object of study. Within a Foucauldian framework materiality can be seen as having been marshaled to create disciplines and subjectivities that empower as well as disempower. This is where material culture and archaeology as areas of cultural work have emerged.

However, the disciplining effects of materiality have been considerably attenuated –rendered increasingly ineffectual by changes in the materiality of late capitalist experience as evidence by recent Critical Legal work on actuarial practices (Simon 1988). These studies have suggested a shift away from the exertion of power from those based on the disciplining effects of the material

world. This is a shift from attempts to affect the materiality of the world – discipline it, shape it, incarcerate it, etc. but instead rather to manage it. This is what the sociologist Nicholas Rose refers to as the emergence of governance at a distance (Rose 1998) within late-capitalist neo-liberal societies. Power is not exerted materially but actuarially through the ephemeral aggregates of actuarial tables or the emergence of the ‘psy’ disciplines (such as psychology, etc.) described by Rose which create self-responsibilising, self-managing subjects that can be regulated from afar. Simon’s characterization of the social effects of actuarial practices suggests a form a social life that is attenuated, diffuse and incoherent. It only comes into a situated coherence in the form of aggregates based on diverse and contingent qualities – nothing that might inhere in something or someone we might describe as a subject based on a meaningful population or individual lived experience. As Simon states ‘Actuarial practices can mobilize segments of the population and form majorities that have no patterns of shared experience or structures of association and no basis for understanding themselves as motivated by a common cause’. (Simon 1988: 793). Simon is describing here an attenuation of moral density that shapes social life, from traditional status groups (Simon 1988: 793) to aggregates. In short fragmented subjects are forged according to formal criteria foreign to any lived experience (after all what does it really mean to be a member of the actuarial aggregate: male non-smoker with a drivers license in a 94131 area code, of which I am one?). Yet it is increasingly through such aggregates that juridical and actuarial power is being exercised, rather than any readily felt or identifiable lived subject position. This suggests that aggregates are formed according to the requirements of dominant powers: juridical, actuarial etc. However, they also erupt and coalesce in the form of class action suits to exert power collectively at the grass roots level amongst the disempowered. These are highly attenuated coherences, however. Increasingly these situated mercurial coherences emerge as quickly as they disappear in the negotiation of social life and power. Thus there is a loss of any meaningful coherent subjectivity, sacrificed with the exertion of power through highly attenuated and ontologically barren aggregates. A coherent fixed, palpable and essential subjectivity is lost within these circumstances. Simon argues that legal responses to this state of affairs have been mired in a refusal of the dissipation of the individual relying on rights oriented legal remedies focused on the Liberal notion of an abstract individual rather than on group strategies such as affirmative action (Simon 1988: 785) which might be more effective under these circumstances.

I would like to suggest that this melancholic preoccupation with the mercurial properties of social life is not just the preoccupation of archaeologists and other like minded people but characteristic of our state of affairs in general. Within such an unstable, constantly shifting setting everything is archived, desperately saved – every one is a historian (Nora 1989), constantly archiving their lives, as evidenced by the rise of popular genealogy and the unprecedented degree of documentation, through video, digital photography, and other technologies. Consider for instance the hidden video archive of any individual’s life that, when required by the powers that be, can be collected and presented in the instance of any missing person whose last hours can be summoned by police and security cctv footage. An otherwise anonymous life instantly becomes public spectacle.

However like Luria’s patient we must forget in order to be healthy (Forty 1999). This forgetfulness is of course provided for by the sheer superfluity of information that envelopes us obscuring so much, unless the powers that be force it to erupt to the surface as in the cctv footage of someone’s last known movements. But this also makes the task of constituting memory, materializing it problematic and consistently unstable. Necessary forgetfulness, however, comes at the ontological price of a tragic lightness of being described by Lipovetsky whereby ‘...it allows more individual freedom, but it generates greater malaise of living [...] which renders us increasingly problematic to ourselves and others’ (Lipovetsky 1994: 241). This ‘tragic lightness’ can be exploited as suggested in recent critiques of actuarial practices and social control. But if there is a lesson to be drawn from Foucault all power is at once enabling and disabling – it is probably up to us as students of material culture to understand this ephemerality and the ‘tragic lightness’ of our circumstances better - to at once understand its disabling effects but more

importantly its enabling ones. Thus the potential of these iterative failure raises some important issues if we are to consider the role of memory and the increasing prevalence of the immaterial in late capitalist life. The ephemerality of capital, financial transactions, the impact of new actuarial practices privileging management over the material effects of traditional Foucauldian disciplines all call our traditional approaches towards materiality and memory into question.

The increasing failure of material practices to sustain iterability makes this increasingly problematic (such as the uncertain fate of digitized information, photos, etc. and the ephemeral and changing media for information storage.) We are in a situation where we are no longer able to presence that which is absent yet are achingly and knowingly aware of that absence of something that is no longer and can no longer be. This suggests a material and mnemonic state of affairs that is characterized by a profound melancholy in the technical sense of Freud's original conceptualization. Our connection to the world socially and materially is increasingly melancholic. In a sense the process of mourning and the role that traditional materiality plays to facilitate it - by reincorporating that which is absenced into the present and part of our world is thwarted. This melancholic state of affairs inhibits this incorporation within our material and discursive iterative structures. For the simple reason that absences cannot be effectively re-iterated materially or discursively and thereby reincorporated, hence our constant failure to recover the past. Melancholy resists containment. It is always excessive and always resisting incorporation, whereas proper non-pathological mourning contains this excess, resolves it and moves on.

Take for example the disappeared of the Argentine military dictatorship (Buchli and Lucas 2001). It was the melancholic mourning over that which cannot be presented, the remains of lost sons and daughters by the Mothers of Argentina, that challenged the political order, calling the government and its past to accountability and facilitated by the presencing of the disappeared by forensic archaeologists. However, once the presencing has occurred, their remains found, the materiality of the disappeared, is able to be sustained and thus effectively materially and discursively re-iterated, through ritual mourning practices. This challenge, however, then subsides, mourning takes over, and the absences, now presences, are able to be materially and discursively integrated within prevailing social practices through public rituals of mourning and burial. Thus reconciliation and reincorporation can occur. Order has been challenged and affected, but now it has been restabilized. This is why museums and their artefacts are said to be the enemies of memory permanently ossifying it, forcing us to forget. Similarly, one can consider the melancholic images and artefacts associated with a miscarriage – a person that was to be, a potential presence, absent, but without the public means to mourn and incorporate within social rituals of mourning and burial associated with socially viable kin. If the child never was how can it be mourned yet it was there and the melancholic artefacts associated with such mourning constantly assert that absent presence that never was (Layne 2000).

However, increasingly the materialities in which we are engaged are not able to function in such a way. Thus I would argue we might be moving to a state of affairs that is increasingly melancholic as a consequence of its increasing immateriality, despite the fleeting nature of the ephemerality of social life and its political promise described by Lipovetsky. Presencing is extremely problematic under the conditions of immateriality – memory which presencing enables is highly unstable. As recent actuarial practices suggest, the strategic essentialisms upon which marginalised groups, ethnic and sexual are able to cohere as political subjects become increasingly problematic. The body and its subjectivities are not only difficult to sustain politically within these actuarial regimes but are difficult to cohere conceptually as our post-structuralist critiques suggest.

Hallam and Hockey have argued that the ephemerality of material life in late capitalist societies so cogently noted by Appadurai seems to produce desires for permanence to counteract these forces – this is the melancholic work of the various forms of material cultures studies which

constitute this materiality. They argue that it is no accident that memorial technologies and communal memory is such an important focus of the work of social scientists. However, rather than see this as a battle that we are constantly doomed to lose, because it is inevitably unstable and ephemeral we might see this as a terrain whereupon the critical empirical work of archaeologists and others can use this melancholic impulse and its excesses to challenge the status quo through its incessant re-imaginings and 'eruptive' materializations – being eruptive they function abjectively within the remains of the forgotten, rejected and wasted: this is after all the dirt of the dirt archaeologist - that challenges the boundaries and structures of social life. As Mary Douglas noted this has a 'composting' effect, reintegrating the abject and facilitating social regeneration. What seems to be happening now is that this process is accelerated, and widely dispersed – the tragic lightness of Lipovetsky and the technologies of materialization that material culture studies and archaeology serve are more attenuated, and immaterial. Thus how we work and what we do under such circumstances require a reappraisal or maybe just a slight shift in perspective as suggested by Colorado-Mansfield (2003). Maybe we should begin to 'liquefy' rather than 'objectify' – that is study the changing states of materiality in which we are implicated – which dominant powers seem to be transforming and consider how they disempower as well as empower (Colorado-Mansfield 2003).

It might be useful to consider the violations of boundaries that fluid immateriality entails, the violation of boundaries their dissipation, violating the outsides and insides that constitute materiality and durability through waste, decay, and seepage (see Edensor 2005 and DeSilvey 2006). These moments of seepage are not unlike Walter Benjamin's historical disruptions described by Eng and Kazanjian (2003). Like the ephemerality of fashion they keep open the possibility of continual renewal and challenge the settlements of the present such as the new hold actuarial and managerial practices have over us inhibiting coherence. This increasing inability to cohere that we are more and more susceptible to suggests that this fluidity too can be used against the exercise of power. In which case we might be witnessing a new terrain of micropowers, whose fluidities can enable as easily as they can disable. The problem of memory under these increasing immaterial conditions at this historical moment might offer some insight as to how to work these processes against their inhibiting effects. Rather than bemoaning the material and semiological effects of late-capitalism, as many critics do, it might be more useful to see how they both empower and disempower, that is both enable and disable under current circumstances. That conventional Western ontology is in crisis is no reason to try and understand these new forms that might be engendered and their enabling effects under the conditions of late capitalism.

The superfluity of information, means that as easily as it can evanesce so too can it easily congeal (to appropriate language from Alfred North Whitehead). As Rudi Colorado-Mansfield suggested "Some things we need to liquefy, not objectify" (Colorado-Mansfield 2003). It might be said that it doesn't take too much to refocus and cause the eruptions in times of emergency described by Benjamin that challenge power (Eng and Kazanjian 2003). Such an approach might help us move away from the seemingly fruitless debates of material culture as text at the expense of corporeal phenomenological understanding. There has been a tendency to analyze the textual and oral in distinction and at a remove from the material as though these aspects of materiality were in opposition. It might be more useful to move beyond debates of material culture as text and onto the more hybrid forms through which semiosis occurs and their particular material dimensions. We could see them as existing along a continuum of material and discursive interactions of social life – working in a more hybrid fashion to sustain social and material life (see Barad) - in short address the processes of liquefaction and objectification.

That we require material things to perform the memory work that they do is because of the conditions of social life within late-capitalism – material things were not called upon to do such work in the past. As Nora notes oral traditions facilitated his *milieux des memoires* rather than the materially sustained *lieux des memoires* of the present. Materiality was configured and worked differently in our recent past as in other ethnographic contexts and as surely as it was in the more remote past of traditional archaeology. Different technologies with different

materialities have been in effect in the past, and the recent past as well as they are emerging into effect in the present. In terms of their enabling qualities, we might consider the work of the archaeology of the recent past whereby the archaeological act facilitates those 'eruptions' in the present within the superfluity of information in which we are enveloped and thereby challenge the settlements of the present (Buchli and Lucas 2001).

In light of this one might consider how this melancholic preoccupation with the fluidity of material form and its 'eruptive' abilities might function. I would like to consider this painting from the Kunsthhaus in Zurich painted in 1765 by Bernardo Bellotto the nephew and student of Canaletto. In 1762 Bellotto returned to Dresden after the Prussians had occupied it during the Seven Years War. In the course of attempting to restore the damage caused by the Prussians to the Kreuzkirche (depicted here), its only remaining East Wall collapsed. This is the scene that Bellotto painted in all its empirically engorged, hyper real, ethnographic and forensic detail. This is not an Arcadian image of Classical ruins we normally encounter filled with picturesque peasants, but a precise account of daily life surrounding these ruins, with its workers, passersby, gawkers, and 'trümmerfrauen'/ rubble women (Kunsthhaus, Zurich: n.d.) employed to clear away the debris. However, we are instantly reminded here of other rubble women of another time following the Allied destruction of Dresden in 1945. In fact that destruction of 1945 is impossible not to think of when viewing this painting. Passersby observing it in the gallery of the Kunsthhaus in Zurich today read the picture's description and repeat the word Dresden several times knowingly re-iterating the more recent destruction of the city. Even though we know that this destruction that we are viewing was perpetrated by the Prussians we are more emphatically - through our knowing repetition of the word 'Dresden' - indicting the Allied forces of 1945. This is a consequence and indictment unimaginable by Bellotto at the time he painted this in 1765 but nonetheless a challenge and indictment that this painting in its excruciatingly detailed and I would add 'critically empirically' way was emphatically designed by Bellotto to illicit. 1945 and 1765 are closely concatenated and in fact conflated. This repetition, this conflation, that the viewing of Bellotto's image of 1765 and 1945 suggests also brings to mind other concatenations when we see this image and say 'Dresden' and then consider other forms of urbicide' in 2003 (Graham, 2003) in all their empirical detail, constantly erupting on our television and computer screens and in our mind's eye that challenge prevailing settlements of power and history.

It might be useful to note here the nature of empirical representation either in visual culture or language to reproduce as completely as possible the physical detail of that which is observed with minimal deviance in the interpretive eye of the observer. Its hyper-detail possess a certain promiscuous excess that enables its assimilation in radically different contexts (see Thomas 1997). It is a curious effect of this empirical tradition which collapses time. It always retains a haunting and challenging immediacy: such as the uncanny qualities of a Vermeer. This is not a reality effect, this is not a true documentation of things as they are, but it is a powerful sleight of hand that facilitates a merging of horizons that such an empiricism effects that with radical force produces an identification or an assimilation as Thomas notes. Such empiricism collapses time, challenges the boundaries of historically produced temporalities causing time and place to erupt and collapse into one another as the two Dresdens of 1945 and 1765 do here in the case of the Bellotto, indicting both the Allies of 1945 as well as the Prussians of 1765 not to mention Coalition Forces elsewhere in the more recent past. This is the melancholic effect of our empirical traditions that archaeology and ethnography have produced so well and which I would suggest have even greater work to do under the conditions of ephemeral superfluity in which we live now. But it is important to note that such empiricism can work in the opposite way. Bellotto's views of Warsaw where he was court painter after Dresden, were then used to reconstruct Warsaw after the Nazi occupation of World War Two. Interestingly in this case the critically empirical work of Bellotto was used in an equally radical and unexpected way to conflate 18th century Warsaw and an imagined vision of post-war 20th century Warsaw to radically undo the effect of war. It facilitated a reincorporation and denial of Nazi devastation, performing the opposite function of Bellotto's image of the Kreuzkirche - materially forgetting

the devastation of world war two as a form of counter-iconoclasm as Forty describes (Forty 1999:10) whereby “the filling of a void, whose emptiness had exercised diverse collective memories, ends by excluding all but a single dominant one’ (Forty 1999:10). It is precisely these eruptions that archaeology facilitates that momentarily challenge dominant settlements and whose melancholic refusal to let go provides a constant challenge to the way things appear to be. Our increasingly melancholic circumstances which mourn the loss of coherent subjectivities are also the circumstances whereby these melancholic impulses erupt to challenge the highly attenuated and ‘thin’ settlements about which power mercurially coheres in the present.

Reference cited:

- Appadurai, A. (1986), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barad, Karen (2003) ‘Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,’ *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 28, no. 3
- Buchli, V (2002) Introduction in *The Material Culture Reader*, V. Buchli ed., Oxford: Berg Publishers
- Buchli, V and Gavin Lucas (2001) *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past*, London: Routledge
- Colloredo-Mansfield, R (2003) Introduction: Matter Unbound, *Journal of Material Culture*, no. 11, vol 8, pp. 273 - 284.
- Douglas, M, (1993) *Purity and Danger*, London: Routledge
- DeSilvey, C. (2006) Observed Decay, *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 11, no. 3, 318-338
- Edensor, T (2005) *Industrial Ruins*, Oxford: Berg Publishers
- Eng, David L. and David Kazanjian, (2003) *Loss*, Berkeley: University of California Press
- Forty, A. and Susanne Küchler (1999) *The Art of Forgetting*, Oxford: Berg Publishers
- Foucault, M, (1977) *Discipline and Punish*, New York: Pantheon
- Graham, Stephen (2003) Urbicide by the Jordan, *New Left Review*, vol. 19 (Jan/Feb)
- Hallam, E and Jenny Hockey (2001) *Death, Memory and Material Culture*, Oxford: Berg Publishers
- Lipovetsky, Gilles (1994), *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Layne, Linda (2000), *He was a real baby with baby things*, *Journal of Material Culture* 5:321-345
- Miller, Daniel, ed. (2005), *Materiality*, Durham N.C.: Duke University Press
- Rowlands, M. (2005) ‘A Materialist Approach to Materiality’, in D. Miller, ed., *Materiality*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press

Rose, Nicholas (1998) *Inventing our selves: psychology, power and personhood*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Nora, Pierre (1989) Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire, Representations* 26, Spring pp. 7-25

Oliver, K. ed., (1997) *The Portable Kristeva*, New York: Columbia University Press

Shanks, Michael (1992), *Experiencing the Past: On the Character of Archaeology*, London: Routledge

Simon, J. (1988) The Ideological Effects of Actuarial Practices, *Law and Society Review*, vol. 22, number 4

Thomas, N. (1997) *In Oceania*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press

Whitehead, A. (1978), *Process and Reality: an Essay in Cosmology*, New York: The Free Press