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et métaphores

Introduction: Notes from a Bunker

Mathew Staunton

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Introduction: Notes from a Bunker

The past is absent.

We think about it incessantly, write about it as if our life depended on it, get very excited about it, even obsess about it, but no matter how much we (as academics) would like it (or sometimes need it) to be otherwise, the past is not a foreign country where they do things differently, a place we could potentially visit and explore if only we could hit upon the right methodological approach. It is more like a long-lost city, existing only in stories. We sometimes manipulate bits and pieces of it in our hands, study them for clues, transform them into “traces” and “evidence”, write up articles about them and send our conclusions out into the world but, as Alun Munslow has playfully pointed out¹, the past is what it was and that’s all there is to it. We have no choice but to accept that it can only be accessed in those narratives (texts, films, songs, films, dances) we choose to create about it.

We sometimes dream it otherwise. In *Life is Elsewhere*, Milan Kundera describes an imaginary *modus operandi* that would surely appeal to Irish studies researchers of every stripe: an observatory that can be placed anywhere along a character’s timeline.

[...] we’re looking at Jaromil from an observatory I’ve erected at the point of his death. For us his childhood is in the distances where months merge into years; he has come with his mama from these misty distances right up to the observatory, where everything is as visible as the foreground of an old painting in which the eye can distinguish every leaf on a tree and every leaf’s delicate tracing of veins².

This corresponds, more or less, to how many of us imagine our practice. And why shouldn’t we? We close our eyes and aestheticise the part of the past we are interested in into existence, making people move about and act according to our interpretation of a body of archival material (the bits and pieces of the past), a corpus of testimony or a collection of memories, and our ability to craft this interpretation into a coherent story. Some of us might even describe this process as “reconstructing” the past, but this is a very risky business. If we are not careful (or humble) enough we might accidentally emulate master “restorers” Michael J. O’Kelly or Eugène Viollet-le-Duc³ and present fantastical architecture extrapolated

1. See Alun Munslow, *The Aesthetics of History*, London, Routledge, 2019.

2. Milan Kundera, *Life is Elsewhere*, Aaron Asher (trans.), New York, HarperCollins, 2000, p. 260.

3. Professor O’Kelly’s unconvincing “restoration” of the tumulus at Newgrange using steel-reinforced concrete is highly controversial. Similarly, much of Viollet-le-Duc’s “restoration” work is now considered to be the result of pure fantasy.

with great energy from piles of silent stones as the past reborn as if that past were a jigsaw and we had all the pieces and the box at our disposal.

Aesthetics is the name of our game (hats off to O'Kelly and Viollet-le-Duc on that score) but we are not reconstructing or accessing the past directly. We have no time machine or Kunderan observatory. The past is absent. We are sitting in a bunker with whatever bits and pieces we have managed to accumulate and we are staring at a concrete wall. As we curate our backgrounds and interact with the rectangles on our screens, we arrange our ideas, papers, maps and photographs on the wall and try to provoke epiphanies. Some of us imagine that we are looking *through* our documents as if they were windows into the past but there is no *through*. Only paper and wall. The absent past stays where it is in the absent past and we remain where we are in the present, aestheticising our favourite parts of the past into (hopefully) compelling narratives.

Narrative is crucial, then. Without it the bits and pieces of the past cannot become evidence. Without a narrative what would they be evidence for? Without evidence, though, narratives about the past are often experienced (or denigrated) as fiction. Not necessarily fake, or false or untrue (although some colleagues use the word "fiction" to mean just that), but not the stuff of proper academic research either. This need not worry us overly. We are not in the business of truth-telling (whatever that might mean in 2021) or religion. Our theatre of war is reality. We aestheticise our personal vision of the past in complex narratives not to convince our peers that we have discovered some new truth in some old archive or that our interpretation of the machinations behind some past event are undoubtedly true. We do what we do to maintain or modify reality. As French philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist Bruno Latour has helpfully pointed out, reality is that which resists modification after attacks by dissenters:

[...] reality as the latin word *res* indicates, is what *resists*. What does it resist? *Trials of strength*. If, in a given situation, no dissenter is able to modify the shape of a new object, then that's it, it is reality [...]⁴.

What remains standing after the dust has settled is what we call reality. Collectively, we add and subtract, chip away at and nail pieces to reality, transforming it minute by minute and article by article. Remember, though, that Latour's context is scientific. He is thinking about laboratories and the evidence they produce and aestheticise into theories. From our perspective in the third decade of the 21st century, however, it is clear that if packaged attractively enough and released into the world at the right moment by the right influencer, even the most nonsensical narrative is capable of modifying reality, no matter how much scientific evidence is built into the barricades. Sometimes, a narrative can create evidence out of nothing.

4. Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 93.

Fortunately, this is not the abominable notion that it seems and is altogether in keeping with classical notions of evidence. French historian François Hartog elegantly reminds us in his *Évidence de l'histoire*⁵ that the word “evidence” came to us via the Latin *evidentia*, coined by Cicero to translate the Greek word *enargeia*. *Enargeia* was the vividness of description that made a powerful impression on the perception of readers, transforming them into spectators of past events. The adjective *enargès* was used to describe those moments of epiphany when gods appeared before mortals, making the invisible spectacularly visible and replacing faith with proof. *Enargeia* is the visual image created by a text that imbues it with the power to “show”. It is the power of narrative to modify reality.

As we explained in our call for contributions in the time before the pandemic, the *raison d'être* of this thematic issue is to showcase innovative, experimental and disruptive approaches to transforming the absent Irish past into narratives and evidence in our present.

In an effort to hibernicise the German word *vergangenheitsbewältigung* we embraced the Irish expression *mionchíoradh an am atá caite* (“fine-combing the past”) to help us engage with and process the past and organise the articles in this volume. This expression implies the evolution, renovation or creation of methodologies to disentangle and sift the traces of the past and work towards healthier narratives. Simultaneously, *cíoradh* also implies disturbing, shaking things up, harassing, aggravating, and challenging established reality with a view to modifying it.

In the difficult year that has inserted itself between the now and then, we have re-prioritised our needs and desires. More conscious than ever of our bunkered practice, we have set a watch for moments of joy and playfulness and thankfully found much to smile about in the response to our call for contributions. The lengthy correspondence with contributors has been of particular comfort. We have also enjoyed the passionate, innovative and, frankly, exciting methodologies and strategies deployed by our colleagues, especially those we were encountering for the first time.

Sean Campbell’s ground-breaking article on the coverage of the Northern Ireland conflict in the *New Musical Express* opens this thematic issue. “Ground-breaking” is an overused term and has come to mean almost nothing (or almost anything) but it is justified and meaningful in this case. Simultaneously opening paths into publishing history and the history of the Troubles, Campbell’s scholarship is fresh and invigorating.

Joana Etchart is also looking at the conflict in Northern Ireland but through the prism of a revisited interview with the late Maurice Hayes. Beyond the obvious value of the insightful words of a well-placed and keenly observant public figure,

5. François Hartog, *Évidence de l'histoire: ce que voient les historiens*, Paris, Gallimard, 2007, p. 12.

this article highlights the methodological benefits of re-exploring oral history interviews conducted in the past (is this a source for a study of Hayes' past or a historical trace of the interview itself?) while pointing out the many dangers inherent in approaching such material without a thorough understanding of the context in which the initial interview was carried out.

Remaining in the geographical context of Northern Ireland but engaging with a very different subject from an unorthodox (and, for that reason, significant) angle, Fabrice Mourlon takes a part ethnological, part historical look at the Northern Ireland jazz scene. Asserting that a satisfactory study of the scene cannot be accomplished by an outsider positioned behind a desk, Mourlon ventures out into the jazz community, using his priceless insider status as a jazz singer and his network of relationships with jazz practitioners to craft a convincing narrative.

Moving into the domain of visual culture, Valérie Morisson's article guides us skilfully through the unfamiliar world of urban exploration (urbex), the exploration of abandoned, artificial structures, industrial ruins and all that is hidden (mostly right under our noses) in the built environment, shedding light on the meticulous (historiographical) work of dedicated practitioners. Despite engaging in a clandestine and often illegal activity, Morisson shows us that urbexers are profoundly concerned with conserving and documenting a past that has generally been excluded from official histories, collectively producing photographic records on websites and social media that engage with absence and death in fresh and dynamic ways.

Moonyoung Hong's article on Tom Murphy's play *The Wake* stands out as our only literary contribution, but it is a worthy ambassador. In a careful analysis of the symbolic 2016 staging (as part of the Abbey Theatre's 1916 celebration), she argues that Irish theatre remains a force to be reckoned with when it comes to revealing what popular and official discourses often shy away from. Hong eloquently navigates the disturbing moral and cultural landscape of a past that clearly extends through our allegedly progressive present into a future still under construction and up for grabs.

Sociologist Audrey Rousseau takes an extremely fine comb to a similarly disturbing past as she applies an experimental methodology combining computer-assisted discourse analysis and Ricoeur's hermeneutics to the collected testimony of the survivors of the *Magdalene Laundries* and press articles on their lives to reveal what political and academic discourses generally overlook.

We end this issue with a very personal contribution from Patrick Gormally, who studies the methodological potential of his own family's narratives of "The Emergency" (a.k.a World War II) to shed light on what is very much an under-explored part of the Irish past.

Mathew STAUNTON

École nationale supérieure des arts décoratifs – ENSAD