

## **Clay Pipes and Motherboards:**

### **a Clumsy Guide to Beach-Combing on the River Thames**

#### **Abstract.**

As ruined objects lose their exchange-value and become waste, they might still hold, the paper argues, a present agency as newly invented games and hobbies, as well as a memory which projects the uncanny feeling of their past repressed usage. In particular, drawing on Benjamin's suggestions that children can 'discover the new anew' out of objects discarded as waste, the paper briefly hints at the different temporalities at the intersection between collective and personal histories.

The impressive collection of clay pipes fragments, which accompanies the session, demands a thought on the past productive and social organization of the everyday life along the River Thames, as well as on the potentials for reproduction of future spaces. At the end, in fact, through the practice of beach-combing on the Greenwich Peninsula, a reflection on public access and uses of the Riverside is proposed, as well as on particular modes of addressing childhood(s) as everyday practice.

#### **Introduction.**

"Allegory is in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things" W. Benjamin.

*Often, after school pick-up, we wonder around the riverside in Greenwich, from the World Heritage to the least known remains of the local docks stretching to the O2 (ex Dome, of course), on the Peninsula. We consider this trail a very peculiar treat, part of our extended turf, reachable on foot, bike or scooter. We name places, we know short cuts and entrance points. Our favourite is the 'dirty place', an old dock of metal scraps and naval repairs, in which the most fascinating discoveries take place. We usually have very good time, manage to get our wellies dirty enough, and carry home some bits, from electric circuits, to huge bolts, and wood sticks for the fireplace.*

*Recently, our focus has been on clay pipes. They can go back to Seventeenth century and vary in shape and size, according to the current popularity and the prize of the tobacco. They were particularly common around Greenwich - as I learnt from the Annals of the Greenwich Historical society in the public 'Heritage Centre' in Woolwich - where were locally produced and delivered often for free with a pint along the numerous workmen's hangouts. Clay pipes were disposable,*

*and incredibly cheap. There must have been loads around accumulated for nearly three centuries. Some of them ended up in our fish tank, back in the water. Curiously, the historical house of the first pipe smoker was knocked down to make room for the infamous Blackwall Tunnell in one of the Victorian clear-outs.*

This is the plot with a final twist, and alongside this seemingly autobiographic piece of writing I shall develop theoretical arguments, drawing on both sociology of the childhood, urban theory, and most recent developments in human geography.

I want to make clear straight away, though, that the author's position is not neutral, there is no claim to objectivity here, and I make no apologies for that. I understand that 'social space' is not an abstraction, a diagram, a geometrical space, a bird's eye view, from which ordinary agents, including sociologists and their audience see the social landscape. 'The most crucial thing to note is that the question of this space is raised within the space itself - that the agents have points of view on this objective space which depend on their position within it' (Bourdieu 1984:169). In studying the regeneration of this part of London for the last four years, in fact, I have matured a sense of place that does not stand in any neutral ground. Moreover, I am increasingly aware that, by practising photography, I have developed an attention for details, patterns, objects, distances, distributions, and scale unknown before: it is not a case in fact that photography and architecture, or design, have long been entangled together to produce and manipulate our sense of space (Mack, 1992: 3).

The paper suggests two movements that briefly address two questions: what is it that attracts children (and not only) to play with discarded objects and in unruly places, usually called 'ruins'? If children have a privileged access to mimetic processes, through a 'make-believe' imagination, what challenges are they invested with in a rapidly changing material and social landscape?

## **A fascination for Ruins.**

The starting point is the idea that the organization of the social world depends upon the regular and predictable distribution of objects in space, artefacts which support habitual social performances and ways of living. It's their role within networks which is fixed in their interrelation with humans, spaces, technologies and forms of knowledge. Prompting this further, we might speculate about objects as establishers of foregone practices, in which the former are already linked by habituation to the latter: as practices change, in this case the practice of smoking pipes along the riverside, they leave obsolete objects behind as wreckage, only awaiting to find an afterlife in new networks or hybrids. 'Or they might linger on as denaturalized reminders of past events or practices, purposely memorialized in various ways or simply present as ruins, as melancholy reminders' (Thrift, 2008: 8-9). Or we might want to turn this 'inside-out', so that what now is classified as waste may once have signified progress:

'the debris of industrial culture teaches us not the necessity of submitting to historical catastrophe, but the fragility of the social order that tells us that this catastrophe was necessary' (Buck-Morss, 1989: 170).

In other words, objects are usually apprehended unreflexively, with no concern to their variety of uses, placements and circulation, across time, space and culture. 'Enmeshed in regimes of signification and common-sense ideas about usage and proper location, things are situated within a web of normative epistemological and practical associations, tethered to cultural uses and meanings' (Edensor, 2005: 97). But waste lacks, by definition, any obvious meaning, and it is unclear about its function. By being also "out of place", discarded objects fit into neither symbolic nor practical orders: 'these things have escaped the assignments which previously delineated their meaning and purpose and so we are able to relate to them in imaginative, sensual, conjectural and playful fashion. We may incorporate them into speculative narratives which free them from epistemological moorings' (Edensor, cit: 123).

We can offer them (or they can offer us) new spaces.

## **From space to place.**

The framework I sketched around waste-objects can be extended to waste-lands with similar surprising outcomes:

'These marginal, disorderly spaces have been connected by other researches to the needs of children to enact autonomous activity free from the authorities that bind them in other spheres, such as the home and school. These spaces thus may be seen as central to the successful transition into autonomous and socially responsible adulthood. Yet, they are increasingly eliminated from the urban landscape (Cloke and Jones 2005; 321-323)'.

In Western society, 'urban areas are formed by functional differentiation, places geared towards children's needs, often of a particular age, are scattered like islands (such as houses, day-care, recreation centres, sport fields, and playgrounds) on the map of the city' (Zeicher, in Christensen et al, 2003). These places are highly regulated, usually strictly patrolled and have to respond to the never-ending list of H&S checks. Many scholars have noticed how children's movements are structured both spatially and temporally by time-scheduled activity programs and, on the converse, they suggest that the ability or faculty of young people of 'hanging about' and 'doing nothing' could be seen as a resource or a positive attitude, a moment of suspension from the necessity and demands of everyday life; or a possibility of taking the mask off, of stripping the statuses, and of renunciation of their set roles (Matthews, in Christensen, 2003). Moreover, the way that children use to give their favorite places names, which reflects their imaginative play or other affective uses they make of them, is seen as a form of

appropriation of the public space, a way to make themselves at home in public space (Valentine 2004: 76).

It is important to highlight, though, that these restrictions on children's movements are not uniform, responding to class and cultural based stimuli. Family status emerges as one of the most important mediators of experience, especially because the recent years have been characterized by an increasing diversity of family forms (Valentine, 2004: 81). An array of studies have identified how 'middle class' children have generally more structured and privatized play activities, building up mostly in cultural capital, while children from lone parents households, for instance, both for lack of material means and emotional support, have the richest environmental experience of their local environment (e. g. Zeiher 2003, Valentine 2004). Childhood(s) and childrearing are then class acts.

## **Back to space.**

"A Hell rages in the soul of the commodity; a guilty and abandoned nature that can no longer find its meaning fulfilled in itself, falls from emblem to emblem into the bottomless depths" (W. Benjamin, in Buck-Morss, cit: 186).

What I am trying to suggest, I guess, it is that ruins open up to a critical reflection on the nature of place commonly represented as fixed ensemble of coordinates by the geographer, bi-dimensional drawing by the architect, and a-priori network of relationships by the planner. Rather, places are increasingly seen as temporal processes where all manner of trajectories, humans and non-, are to meet, not fixed in time and space, but 'variable events; twists and fluxes of interrelation' (Amin and Thrift, 2002, in Cloke and Jones, 2008:87), 'conjunctions of trajectories which have their own temporalities' (Massey, 2005, in ibidem). Ruins, in other words, do not merely evoke the past, nor ruined objects just tell us a story of an obsolete practice. They contain rather a still and seemingly inactive present, and they also suggest a premonition that something will happen: in fact, they irremediably point to future erasure and subsequently, to the reproduction of space, thus conveying a sense of the transience of all spaces.

'In ruins, the linearity of narrating the past is upstaged by a host of intersecting temporalities which collide and merge in a landscape of juxtaposed asynchronous moments, a spatialization of memory which involves crossing, folding, piercing, rather than sequential organization" (Edensor, cit: 125).

In the final part of the paper, I want to turn my attention to the production of future space in the ephemeral and transient city. I mentioned at the beginning that this plot had a final twist, which I am going to reveal now.

*Just a few days after handing in the abstract of this paper, I was stopped by two police officers on foot, busy at patrolling the neighbourhood at the time that 'dangerous' kids come out of*

*schools. Apparently alerted by two concerned passers-by, they stopped us and issued me, as being the responsible adult, with the following Stop Code,*

*"G: Check on Welfare".*

*"Stopped as small son - age 6 - on wrong (Thames Side) of barrier on small area of sharp stone near to Thames Water, request by two worried members of public (09/05/2009 @ 15:19)".*

*According to the Police Officer, who made a quick moral assessment, the child was well fed and dressed and there was no other concern<sup>1</sup>....*

Drawing on Piaget's studies on intelligence, western ideas of childhood is fully embedded on the model of linear development, linked to age as main variable. The child, in this model, acquires ability of doing things and moving around progressively and under adults' supervision: she is described as a 'proto-adult', or an adult in-being, and negatively defined as for what she cannot do rather for what she is able to do. If children are unable to perform, or incompetent, then their everyday praxis is overlooked or even ignored, and 'childhood' itself is something imposed upon children and something they are bound to resist. Against this common framework, or better common-sense notions<sup>2</sup>, the concept of competence is a key factor: 'competence is not a stable attribute of a particular age but rather is a fluid context-dependent performance that can be staged by children and adults alike' (Valentine, cit: 54-65): the *rhetoric of children's agency* needs then to take on board the particularities of children's lives. As Prout suggests (in O'Brien et al, cit: 274): 'What we require is detailed examination of the network connections, the materials and the means of their translation, through which children's agency is (*or is not*) produced' (italics in the article). And if we maintain that childhood is a constructed category, or relational to the world of adults, then we might want to think how and to what extent children are allowed, both in real life or academic productions, to opt out from their pre-defined social roles.

Not just their agency then but, importantly, the other aspect of this discourse is to recognize the dynamics in which such competence is encouraged or suppress, that is, competencies are 'situated within concrete social context in which competencies are structured' (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 1997: 8), that is to say that the subject is also a node in power discourses matrix. Valentine's study (2004: 62) demonstrates, for instance, how children's understanding of their own safety is more articulate and complex than 'their parents blanket bans or warnings' and 'often have a well developed local knowledge of both incidents and rumours of danger' and good understanding of their locality 'because of the amount of time they spend in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Kieran Bonner (1998) shows how an unequal power relationship between parent and child is exploited further by the state, which, in more or less explicit ways, determines power and control over the parents in order to ensure, for instance, 'they exercise "proper" control over the development of their children's competence and intellect' (in Skelton et al., 1999). Also it has been noticed how risk plays an important part in both constructing children as 'vulnerable' in public space, and in marking as 'neglectful or irresponsible parents' whoever does not comply with this generic level of threat (O'Brien et al. 2000)

<sup>2</sup> Hutchby and Moran-Ellis talks about a 'double hermeneutic' of the developmental theories of childhood, so that they 'have become part of ordinary thinking about the role of the family in children's social development' (1997:9).

neighbourhood with local friends’.

The finding of another ruin of our time, a fragment in the braid of powers, that is, the stop note from the police (attached to the show-and-tell session), just added up to the story and made me rethink and rewrite the paper with a slightly different angle. It made me aware above all that assemblages of objects and their connections in increasingly complex networks, are also localized, contextualized, determined by the place and the play within it: that is, a finding of the same clay pipes in a village of Yorkshire would have had, I guess, a completely different depth and might have entailed a very different story. The Surrealist had an interest in the found objects as revelatory force: 'to collect is to launch individual desire across the intertext of environment and history. Every acquisition, whether crucial or trivial, marks *an unrepeatable conjuncture* of subject, found objects, place and moment' (Cardinal, 1994:69, my italics). In this I maintain with Thrift that:

'The world is made up of all kind of things brought in to relation with one another by *many and various spaces* through a continuous and largely involuntary process of encounter, and the violent training that such encounter forces' (Thrift, 2008: 8, my emphasis).

## Some final thoughts.

'The child can do something of which the adult is totally incapable: discover the new anew' (W. Benjamin).

As Buck-Morss (cited: 273-274) recalls: "The 'trick' in Benjamin's fairy tails [the cunning of the awakening] is to interpret out of the discarded dream images of mass culture a politically empowering knowledge of the collective own's unconscious past. He believes he can do that because it is through such objects that the collective unconscious communicates across generations. This discovery reinvests the objects with symbolic meaning and thus rescues for the collective memory their utopian signification". If we follow this line of thought, then, our story of discarded clay pipes might release some signifiers linked to the peculiarity of the place: that is, the practice of smoking along the Riverside might have belonged predominantly to a world of adults workforce, distinctly white and male, who occupied the public spaces of the docks. On the other hand, by establishing a practice of beach-combing, we were able to lay claim on the territory, despite the conflict with the current practices of policing and controlling the access to such spaces. Right to the matter of *liminalities*, then, and of the negotiation and the conflict for urban space: a complex and difficult negotiation, 'from struggles over where to kick a football or discussion between parents and children about going out to play to wider debates concerning land use or planning for the future forms of cities' (Christensen & O'Brien, 2003:1). Thinking of the regeneration of the Peninsula, in the ruins and waste there is also a critique of power as the determinant of the production of such object or building in the first place, questioning the situation in which it is produced. Power therefore makes waste, decides what is no longer of use and disseminates common-sense ideas about what ought to be over

and done with.

The lesson I learnt is that we need to use more than one lens and be able to swiftly move *foci* so to see *at the same time* children's shaping of their everyday lives *and* major societal processes, which they are embedded into. The habitus is, in fact, a generative rather than static system, and the decision-making process takes place in an environment produced by a flow of events that extends throughout the course of the individual's life. On the other hand, by negotiating between his or her own intentions and the prevailing environmental factors, each person develops his or her own habitual means of deciding what to do next: the famous 'the feel of the game' (Bourdieu, cited).

## **Postscript.**

We could have easily gone down the 'historical' aspect of the ruined objects, linked to their 'second nature', the aesthetics, and the imaginative work gone into them. We could have rescued the 'fetishes and reifications' that were embedded within them, even trying to give them some aura back *via* 'exhibition value'. In this case, we would have missed the chance of illuminating 'the unrealised and forgotten potentials that existed in the present for forging through these objects freer, less alienating relationships with the world' (Latham 1999: 456).

*We soon found ourselves bored of looking for pipes, reading about pipes, even dreaming of pipes, so we moved on: while more and more of those ended up in our fish tank, our new obsession had become the computer motherboard, but this is another story happy to tell you next year.*

## References

Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984.

Buck-Morss, Susan.: *The dialectics of seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. London: MIT Press, 1989.

Roger Cardinal and John Elsner (edited by ), *The cultures of collecting*. London: Reaktion Books, 1994

P Cloke, O Jones, "Unclaimed territory: Childhood and disordered spaces (s)", *Social and Cultural Geography*, 2005

P Cloke, O Jones, 'Trees in Place and Time', in Knappett, Carl; Malafouris, Lambros (Eds.), *Material Agency Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach*, 2008

Pia Monrad Christensen, Margaret O'Brien, *Children in the City: Home, Neighborhood, and Community*, Taylor and Francis 2003

Edensor, Tim: *Industrial ruins: spaces, aesthetics and materiality*. Oxford, UK; N.Y., NY: Berg, 2005.

*Children and social competence: arenas of action* / edited by Ian Hutchby and Jo Moran-Ellis. London: Falmer, 1997

A Latham, 'The power of distraction: distraction, tactility, and habit in the work of Walter Benjamin' - *Environment and Planning D*, 1999

*Reconstructing space: architecture in recent German photography* / edited by Michael Mack. London: AA Publications, 1999

Margaret O'Brien, Jones, Deborah, Sloan, David, and Rustin, Michael. 2000. "Children's Independent

Spatial Mobility in the Urban Public Realm" *Childhood* 7(3):257-277.

Alan Skelton, Book Reviews, *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 1747-5066, Volume 9, Issue 3, 1999, Pages 301 - 313

Thrift, N. J.: *Non-representational theory: space, politics, affect*. London; New York: Routledge, 2008.

Gill Valentine, *Public space and the culture of childhood*, Ashgate, 2004