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Returning to where we have never been: excavating the ruins of modernity

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1. Introduction

It has often been pointed out that the origin of archaeology lies in collecting: the search for, classification, study and curation of relics and ancient artefacts (Schnapp 1996). The other element that is at the origin of the discipline is the study of ancient buildings and landscapes through chorographic and architectural studies (Shanks 2012). These buildings and monuments—from ancient mounds to medieval churches—were often in ruins. These were valued for the historical information that they encoded, but also, especially during Romanticism and in northern Europe, for their aesthetic qualities. With the transformation of antiquarianism into the science of archaeology during the first half of the nineteenth century, the aesthetic experience gradually lost ground, and with it ruins in themselves, whereas historical information became all important. From that moment on, the ultimate goal of archaeology would be not to work with ruins per se, but to overcome ruination and restore buildings to their original shape: this could be literal (the anastylosis of Greek temples and Roman theatres, the “medievalization” of old French towns by Viollet-le-Duc) or on paper. Ruins, and entropy more generally, were perceived as a problem to be solved by both archaeologists and what the equivalent to today’s heritage managers. While archaeologists were disavowing ruins *qua* ruins, others scholars, such as Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin and Sigmund Freud, developed an interest in them as allegories or metaphors for the human condition, modernity and history.

Ruination, in fact, has not stopped being a source of inspiration for philosophers and social scientists for the last hundred years. However, the last decade has witnessed a striking upsurge of work on ruins and more specifically on the ruins of the most recent past. These are now being explored from a variety of viewpoints and disciplines, including anthropology, cultural and literary studies, geography, art and art history (see a thorough review in De Silvey and Edensor 2012). In some cases, ruins seem to be just

a pretext or a metaphor to explore issues of decay, decadence, ephemerality, dystopia or failure (Stoler 2008, Hell and Schönle 2010; Dillon 2010), but there is a growing fascination as well with the materiality of abandoned spaces which is in tune with a wider material turn in the humanities and social sciences. Thus, ruins are no longer the preserve of archaeologists but a field open to multiple engagements within and beyond academia. In this context, archaeologists might run the risk of adopting, once again, the theoretical robes of other disciplines and forgetting to generate ideas from their own encounter with the remnants of the past. This would be regrettable, since ruins, like things, are essentially an archaeological phenomenon and deserves a particular archaeological approach (which is, of course, not incompatible with the development of other perspectives). The risk of mimicry, though, seems less acute today in the discipline, as we are living a time of growing epistemological confidence (Olsen et al. 2012; González-Ruibal 2013). This is manifested in the study of the contemporary past by an increasing number of works that propose archaeological ways of thinking about modern ruination (González-Ruibal 2008; Olivier 2008; Dawdy 2010; Olsen 2010: 166-172; Harrison 2011; Pálsson 2012; Pétursdottir 2012). In this line, my intention is to offer here some theoretical elements of reflection for the study of the ruins of modernity and present a case study where an archaeological methodology, theory and rhetoric have been used.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part deals with two theoretical concerns. My first concern has to do with how we know things as archaeologists working with the recent past. In particular, I am interested in the role of recognition and witnessing in the production of archaeological knowledge. My second concern has to do with time: I will explore, among other things, the particular politics of supermodern temporality, the temporal conundrum of the recent past, and the kind of time that emerges through an archaeological engagement with modern ruins. The second part puts to work the ideas developed in the previous sections through a case study—vestiges of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)—that was my contribution to the Ruin Memories Project.

2. Recognition and witnessing

Anagnorisis

Spanish poet Julio Martínez Mesanza (2007: 53) writes:

“I only want to return to the trenches,
to the trenches where I have never been...
I only want to return to the sadness
of the Western front, which is my sadness”

As an excavator of Spanish Civil War battlefields, I can relate to the feeling to which Mesanza refers: every trench I excavate is the trench I have heard of and read stories about, a trench I know intimately before I start digging. I would like to defend here that the idea of recognition is fundamental in the archaeology of the recent past. Its concepts of familiarity, alienation and the uncanny (Graves-Brown 2011) are, in the last instance related to the way we relate to the things we study, which is very different to the relations that we establish with the materiality of other periods or other cultures. Recognition is ever present in contemporary archaeology.

The complex relationship between cognition and recognition was central in classical theories of knowledge, through the concept of *anamnesis* in Plato and *anagnorisis* in Aristotle. Anamnesis—like psychoanalysis—is making unconscious knowledge come to light: knowledge, according to Plato, is already in us, but we need an active effort to disclose it (*Meno* 81d, e). The concept of *anagnorisis* in turn, was developed by Aristotle, who argued that it “is the change from ignorance to knowledge” (*ex agnoías eis gnōsin metabolē*) (*Poetics* 1452a). For the aims of this chapter, there are three interesting issues in Aristotle’s discussion of anamnesis: first, the idea of change (*metabolē*). As in Plato’s *anamnesis*, recognition is not passive: it implies a transformation both in knowledge and in the knowing subject. The second element is the idea of terror: recognition causes compassion or terror, as when Oedipus recognizes his mother (*Poetics* 1452b, 1454a). Finally, although Aristotle places most emphasis on the recognition of people, he points out that anagnorisis can happen with inanimate things (*apsicha*), as well, and he adds: “of the most trivial kind” (1452a).

Philosopher Ernst Bloch opposes anagnorisis to anamnesis. For him, anamnesis has a conservative function, because it means remembering only what is already known. Instead, anagnorisis implies a reactivation of the traces of the past in the present: “Recognition [as anagnorisis] is a creative shock, where an element from the past jolts consciousness out of joint and thereby helps in the creation of novelty” (Geoghegan 1996: 37). It is the shock of seeing alive someone who was thought to be dead, a

common trope in literature from the biblical story of Joseph onwards. In the case of the archaeology of the contemporary past, it is also the shock of actuality that comes from the recognition/confirmation, with material proofs, that the past existed, that it was so (Shanks 2012).

Does the shock of anagnorisis/anamnesis come only from mere recognition? Is it only a question of surprise? I would argue that there is at least two other reasons for the shock. As archaeologists we do not only recognize, we do so in a particular way. On the one hand, in our anagnorisis there is as much recognition as misrecognition: as the people that have gone through the experience of the Gulag (Etkind 2009), we deal with transformed, scarred, traumatized beings (human and nonhuman). On the other hand, we see more than we should. There is a moment of embarrassment in disclosing the traces of the recent past. While working with modern ruins always implies a peculiar intimacy with other lives, in the case of archaeology this is even more so, because we work with often unconscious traces of people's behaviour and because we deal with intimate artefacts, not just empty, awe-inspiring ruins. Our ruins are full of involuntary mementos, presences and stories.

The problem of the archaeological form of anagnorisis is its conscious character: recognition in the case of the Greek tragedies comes unexpectedly. There is no inquiry. In the case of the archaeology of the contemporary past we know that we know and yet we ask. This brings to mind Bodenheimer's research on the obscenity of questioning (cited in Žižek 1989: 179): "The question lays open, exposes, denudes its addressee, it invades its sphere of intimacy". Nowhere is this clearer than in examining the debris of the contemporary past. The shock of anagnorisis comes from recognition (we see and identify those things that could be our things or those of our parents or grandparents), but also from the realization of our totalitarian gaze. As any totalitarian power we do not have all the answers, but we do pose all the questions (Žižek 1989: 179) and our aim is to reach the innermost, intimate kernel of the other (Žižek 1989: 180).

Our questions as contemporary archaeologists are frequently obscene, not only because they evince a voyeuristic desire and reveal the intimacy of the other, but because they force the addressee to answer—the Spanish Civil War soldiers whose traces I excavate simply cannot say "no". Like the inquisitor or the colonial ethnographer (Rosaldo 1986), the archaeologist goes deep into the other's life. We know the answers, yet we keep asking and facing the shock of anagnorisis. We know

things that not even they know or knew. We know things that they would prefer that we did not know.

Witnessing

This faulty omniscience—faulty because we can see everything, but not everything that we would like to see—is not without a trade-off. There is a responsibility in seeing (Blocker 2009), which makes up for the obscenity of questioning. The archaeology of the contemporary past, more than any other archaeology, links knowledge and ethics. From the moment one starts working with recent ruins, one accepts the responsibility that will emerge with that knowledge, with having the privilege and burden of seeing.

Yet, what kind of witnessing is that where coevalness is denied? It has been proposed that memory cannot be restricted to first-hand experience and recollection of events. Marianne Hirsch (2008) has coined the term “postmemory” to refer to the relationship of the second generation with a traumatic past. In the same vein, we could speak of post-witnessing. As archaeologists, we do not document the events as they happen, but we become witness of a kind when we dig them up. Paradoxically (or not), we are at the same time postwitnesses and hyperwitnesses. We see too late, but we see more. Seeing too much is not less problematic than seeing too late. Postwitnessing implies ethical and epistemological problems. From an ethical point of view, it implies an added distance to that which is already inherent to witnessing (Blocker 2009: 37); from an epistemological point of view, there is the often insolvable issue of equifinality: we witness a disaster whose causes we cannot always ascertain with certitude. The problem of hyperwitnessing has to do with the abovementioned obscenity of questioning, but also with power. Blocker (2009: xv), referring to the visual rhetoric deployed by Colin Powell to denounce Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction, has pointed out “the strategic potency of that invisible position relative to the seeming vulnerability of the visible witness”. There is a difference, though, that is crucial: unlike Colin Powell, archaeologists do go to the field and, not less importantly, our work is done in public. To neutralize the potential negative outcomes of hyperwitnessing, it is essential that the “I” of the witness is both present but empty: we have to certify that we are there, that there is a human being (not god) that collects evidence, and a place from which and about which testimony is given. This “I”, like the Derridean *khōra*, has to remain empty to make justice to the things and the events that

are being witnessed: only they have a place (Derrida 2011: 49-55). It is not the “I” of the postmodern, which fills all the space of the witness with his or her ego.

The question of witnessing, then, is also a rhetorical issue: how best to express the ethical compromise. I would argue that anaphora, which is intrinsic to archaeology, is an apt way of manifesting an ethical stance towards the recent past. Anaphora, a rhetorical trope based in repetition, has proved extremely popular in contemporary culture, from poetry to photography. The typological orderings of industrial ruins by Bernd and Hilla Becher, for instance, can be considered a form of anaphora. Yet the form of the trope that interests me here is the one that is deployed to express an ethical compromise. This is best reflected in the work of poets Adrienne Rich and Aimée Césaire and in the art of Carrie Mae Weems (1998). The latter openly resorts to the language of witnessing to denounce historical injustices. In *From here I saw what happened and I cried*, the artist displays a series of old black-and-white photographs, dyed red, depicting stereotyped black persons—as seen and appropriated by whites: slaves, servants, indigenous peoples. This is a traumatic, though belated, witnessing of injustice: she certifies that slavery has existed, not far from us (Barthes 1981: 79). A similar rhetoric device is used, although not in an explicit way, by photographer Camilo José Vergara (1999), when he photographs the same derelict buildings in ghettos through the years, often decades, documenting changes (large and small). Repetition is both an aesthetic procedure and an ethical stance. This is seen in war or disaster memorials: the enumeration of personal names creates a metonymic impression of presence and at the same time shows an obsessive concern with exact documentation and with each and every victim.

The work of archaeology bears strong resemblances with the art of witnessing, anaphoric aesthetics and memorialization. We keep returning to the same places, we classify and inventory the evidence with almost neurotic detail and display our findings in typological plates. It is our way of producing knowledge, but also of saying “We remember”. Interestingly, in our work in the remains of the concentration camp and mass graves of Castuera, some relatives said that the fact that we were excavating was already a homage to the victims—a demonstration of care. Archaeology is not only a way of witnessing and remembering. It is also a way of making others remember and share the responsibility for witnessing.

3. Time

Time out of joint

That the time of ruined modernity is a particular kind of time has been already suggested (Augé 2003). However, what has been less often discussed is the temporality produced by the archaeological engagement with modern ruins. Although some authors have complained of the special treatment that modernity receives among theorists and social scientists (e.g. Dawdy 2010), it is difficult not to think that modernity, and more particularly high modernity or supermodernity, is characterized by a unique kind of temporality (Harvey 1990; Bauman 2000; Virilio 2007; Olivier 2008; Connerton 2009). The two central ideas in which most thinkers insist are speed and rupture. The first, understood as a destructive excess in which politics, economy and technology mingle, has been dissected by Virilio (2007). The skyscrapers that were torn down in New York at the turn of the twentieth century inaugurated the era of destructive acceleration: “buildings no longer followed a traditional life cycle—ripening gradually from gestation through maturity to old age—but rather the artificial, accelerated, and unpredictable cycles of speculative real estate” (Yablon 2009: 255). The speed of destruction and construction processes is also been addressed now by archaeologists working on the recent past: Pálsson (2012: 561-564) does not only document the rapid transformation of modern buildings into ruins, but also points to the need of changing heritage criteria in accordance to this accelerated temporality. The idea of rupture, in turn, has been eloquently transmitted by Derrida (2006), when he insists, through Hamlet’s words, that “The time is out of joint”. In Derrida’s discourse, time becomes a moral element: “Time is disarticulated, dislocated, dislodged, time is run down, on the run and run down, deranged, both out of order and mad. Time is off its hinges, time is off course, beside itself, disadjusted” (Derrida 2006: 20). The same feeling had a great protagonist, and victim, of the twentieth century, Stefan Zweig (2002: 11), when he wrote in exile: “all the bridges have been destroyed between our Today, our Yesterday and our Day before Yesterday”. This idea of broken, unjust and confused time is not simply visible in modern ruins: it is perhaps there where the disarticulated and unjust temporality of supermodernity is better grasped. Time is ruins.

The time of agony

There is something characteristic in the ruins of the contemporary past that is not related to the political economy of capitalism or to the rationality of high modernism. It has to do with the recent nature of these ruins. If an archaeological site from a thousand years ago is—usually—a dead site, in that most processes have been stopped or brought to a standby (as if in a comma), a modern ruin lies somewhere in-between death and life. It is precisely in this twilight zone where most things happen in an archaeological site, as people who have studied abandonment processes now. Pawel Gorecki (1985), in an ethnoarchaeological study in Papua New Guinea, discovered that more changes take place in the first few years after a site is abandoned than in the following tens of millennia. When studying recent ruins, then, we study the most dynamic period of an abandoned site. This requires a particular way of telling things, including a sensibility for the nonhuman.

The time of agony is also a time after history. History, at least in its dominant historicist version, is usually presented as a series of phenomena that follow one another. If one reads a history of the twentieth century, no matter whether it is oriented towards the *événementielle* or to *mentalités*, some phenomena invariably fade from view while others achieve prominence. There is little room for failures, ruins and the debris of history, for the things that get stranded in the way: what happened to the colonial outposts after decolonization, to the nuclear silos after the Cold War, to the peasant farmhouses when peasants migrated to the cities? What goes on during this time of agony in which things vanish physically and from our memories? In the prison of Carabanchel in Madrid, between its abandonment in 1998 and its demolition in 2008, many things happened, unrelated or thinly related to mainstream history: the premises were occupied by Romanian immigrants without documents, looted by scrap dealers, painted over by graffiti artists, used as a training area by the police, as a playing ground by teenagers, as a place of memory and as a utopian space by former political prisoners. The space underwent all kind of material transformations, many things were subtracted, but many others were added; a new, transient ecosystem emerged, in which people, animals, natural elements and pollution had a part. For the historian, the history of Carabanchel ends in 1998. For an archaeologist, it starts there.

The time of agony is often a reversible time. It is not only that during the early period of abandonment things happen. It is also that they *can* happen. There is room for

hope (and fear). To do an archaeology of the recent past is to give oxygen to the last breath of the dead or the dying. It is a resurrection of a kind, as Barthes (1981: 82) sees in photographs, but an ephemeral one: like the short-lived resurrection provided by the shock of a defibrillator. It is trying to come to terms with what we love and hate before we can let it go. It is doing what we cannot do with people. When they die, they die. Many things are left untold, unsolved. Many things that we would have wanted to ask, to clarify. We can ask ruins, abandoned things, the personal objects of the deceased. And then we can bury them properly. It is not only through exhuming bodies that we can exorcize the specters of the past.

Pure time, historicity and the instant

Marc Augé (2003: 45) has suggested that ruins offer a vision of no time in particular, but of pure time: “To watch ruins is not to make a journey to history, but to live the experience of time, of pure time”. The idea is not very different to that expressed a hundred years before by Alois Riegl (1982), when he argued that the “age-value” of monuments lied in its evocation of the passage of time, not of any time in particular. This feeling is especially strong in the ruins of the recent past, which often have the patina and the aspect of a prehistoric ruin. Furthermore, when one excavates modern ruins, one usually finds a conflation of different times: in the sites of the Spanish Civil War where I have worked, trenches cut through medieval settlements, concentration camps were established over Late Antique necropolises, and Iron Age fibulae appear side by side with shell casings, all of which produces a strange impression of coevalness or percolating time (Witmore 2006), but also of the temporal upheaval and disjointedness to which Derrida refers.

Nevertheless, the indiscernibility of time is only part of the gist of modern ruins: in fact, they materialize a time that is extremely vague (the passage of time, pure time, patina) and extremely precise. It is in this productive tension where both the fascination for modern ruins and a new form of knowledge actually arise. Thus, the potency of a trench that my colleagues and I excavated in the last Republican line of the Battle of the Ebro, in Catalonia, does not lie only in the entropy to which it is subjected. It is rather the realization that this site that is fading towards pure time, and meddling into an ancient Mediterranean landscape of olive trees and terraces, is also from a very precise time: the cartridges and grenades that we recover among the ruins of the trench are dated very precisely to the morning of the 15th of November of 1938. We are seeing

pure time, but also an instant and, not less importantly, history in its most historicist and *événementielle*. The historicity of modern ruins has been often disregarded by those who are attracted by more ethereal and aesthetic aspects, but it is fundamental in our understanding of contemporary ruination and in the way we relate to it. It is not by chance that remnants of the Soviet era, Nazism or specific wars are more disturbing than those that cannot be so definitely bounded and labelled. This is because the time of the ruin exceeds and at the same time is constrained by historicity: archaeological interventions instead of dissolving the historicity of ruins, brings it into relief.

Beyond historicity, the ability to capture a single moment, frozen in time (an ephemeral event made material), is perhaps one of the greatest assets of the archaeology of the contemporary past. The difficulty (or outright impossibility) to capture real moments in the archaeological record has been a matter of debate for a long time (cf. Lucas 2012: 103). However, in the case of the recent past, moments—understood not as small-scale structures (ibid.: 181), but as unique, ephemeral events—are key for producing a sense of presence (Gumbrecht 2004). These moments characterize an epoch in all its intensity: for example, a series of bullet holes on an execution wall that was used only once for this purpose (a not uncommon phenomenon in Spain). In that, archaeology reminds us of painting or sculpture, as described by Lessing (1853: 16), which are confined to manifest a single moment due to its material limitations. Although Lessing has been criticized for the rigid dualism and the dynamism of art underlined, the relevance of stasis should not be downplayed. To be limited to an instant is a constraint, but also an advantage. It increases the intensity of witnessing and its uncanny qualities: we have to add with our imaginations the before and the afterwards, like in a crime scene. What we have is, often, the most tragic moment (the moment of death or violence or despair). Sometimes a snapshot can capture the drama of an era better than a narrative. Besides, in a moment when movement and change are privileged in every sphere of life, ruins make us respect stillness and permanence (Olsen 2010: 159-160). In the concentration camp of Castuera (Badajoz, Spain), we excavate the guards' barracks. They were reused by the last prisoners of the camp: a group of 29 inmates in charge of dismantling the entire premises, which they did in less than a week. They were sheltered in the cramped, decaying barracks, like homeless people. They ate sardines around fires made on the earthen floor. We document the can openers, in the exact place where they left them. Frozen in time, the last meal of the last prisoners

during their last day in the camp: the 2nd of May of 1940. There, we lose their trace. These can openers, this gesture, is there last material testimony.

Historicity, as revealed by archaeology and historical documents, is also important because it puts a definite end date and, thus, creates an era. In the mere passage of time, in pure time, there is no drama. Drama lies in beginnings and endings, especially sudden, traumatic ones. To know the end transforms the very existence of the thing. This is eloquently expressed in Moritz Heinmann's sentence quoted by Walter Benjamin (1968: 100): "A man who dies at the age of thirty-five is at every point of his life a man who dies at the age of thirty-five". The Republican trenches of the Spanish Civil War and the testimonies of the Republic (an insignia, a coin) have deeply inscribed death and defeat in them, even if they are from 1936, well before the end could be envisaged. "The statement that makes no sense in real life", writes Benjamin in relation to Heinmann's sentence, "becomes indisputable in remembered life". And what are excavated ruins but remembered life?

Archaeological time

Archaeology is about presence: the presence of the past in the present (Gumbrecht 2004). In summoning the past, we work as shamans: we bring the dead to life; we make them present and they come to speak to us. We see them, even when others do not. What we perform as archaeologists, however, is an operation that has not been properly appraised in all its consequences. Archaeology abolishes a tenet of modern rationality: for the modern, the past is located in another time (the time of ancient Rome, or the Mayas, or Prehistory). But archaeology does not fully comply with a nonmodern (traditional) rationality either: for this, the past is located in another space—like the Christian heaven and hell (Hernando 2002: 10, 206). The shaman's art consists in making the space of the ancestors and the space of the living converge. For archaeology, instead, the past is located neither in another time nor in another space, but *here and now*, in this space and in this time (Olivier 2008: 86). We do not have to bring the past and the present together, because they are already together. We only have to reveal their coevalness. Archaeological time, then, is neither a modern nor a traditional time. While this is always the case, when working with remains that are modern from a perspective that bypasses all Cartesian divides we undertake a particularly subversive task: we de-modernize modernity.

There is a second element that makes archaeological time unique. Archaeology transforms sites through excavation, an essentially archaeological method, and by excavating ruins we arrive at the moment *before* everything happened. When we dig, at the beginning we find the end, and at the end the beginning. At the bottom of the sondage there is the primeval emptiness, which can be terrifying. In the cemetery of Castuera, we dug two mass graves of people that were executed by fascists during the Spanish Civil War. One had 11 bodies, the other 22. When we finished the excavation of the first mass grave and the corpses of the killed had been removed, we saw a sad, dreadful void: the mass grave before becoming a mass grave. Sometimes the most terrible place is the place where there is nothing, where nothing has yet happened.

This is related to Barthes' *punctum*. He refers to the photograph of Alexander Gardner, taken in 1865, immediately before his execution: "The punctum is: *he is going to die*. I read at the same time: This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake" (Barthes 1981: 96). Ruins, like photographs, carry with them the beginning and the end. The trenches of the Spanish Civil War that surround the University City of Madrid are the materialization of the anti-fascist cry: *No pasarán!* "They will not pass!" They did pass, but it is as if the trenches were disobeying History in their stubbornness, in their refusal to disappear: with moving loyalty, they keep guarding Madrid against the armies of Franco. The war is over and not yet over. The bloody revenge of the Nationalists has not started and has already finished. Archaeological work, in this case, consists in reawakening the trenches, bringing them back to life by reactivating its traces: as leafing through a book of photographs of dead people, the gaze of the past stares at us when we survey a field of ruins. In unveiling the trenches, we experience anagnorisis in two ways: there is the shock of recognition, to which Aristotle referred, but there is also the realization of counterfactuality, which is related to the utopian element that Bloch saw in anagnorisis: we discover traces of the future in the past. We discover hope: the hope that things could have been different; that they could have been better; that there is still room to make History. This is the same utopianism, with a sense of emergency, that is present in Walter Benjamin's writings: an utopianism that mixes the traces of the past, with the dangers of the present and the hope of the future.

A note on ekphrasis

A proper discussion of the archaeological poetics of manifesting modern ruins requires a space which I do not have here. Some elements of rhetoric have been presented in previous sections. There are two issues, however, which are important to situate the following case study and which are related to the notion of *ekphrasis*. First, ekphrasis is the description of a work of art using another form of art: for example, a poem that describes a painting. It does not intend to cannibalize the referent, but to disclose its truth through another medium. I understand the archaeology of the recent past as a form of ekphrasis: a creative work that respects the truth inherent to the thing with which it works—in this case, ruins. Secondly, the best ekphrasis does not try to explain anything. It has to proceed as Benjamin's (1968: 89) storyteller: "it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it".

4. From here I saw what happened. Two sieges of the Spanish Civil War

In Spanish the word *sitio* means both site and siege. Every *sitio* is a *sitio*, every site is a siege. Besieged by people or ghosts, by things or ruins.

First siege. Abánades, Guadalajara 31st March – 2nd April 1938

I saw walls in dry stone, delimiting enclosures—*cerradas*—where the lambs grow fat eating green wheat (FIGURE 1).

Walls of dry stone, a work of generations, a skilled craft. An effort at building the land so that the land bears fruit: meat and wheat.

I saw things and I learnt words that were forgotten or maybe concealed under flows of discourses on nothing, words that come and go and leave no trace. The words I learnt here, they melt with the land.

I have learnt *paridera*, *cerrada*, *corralón* and *corraliza*. I have to say that these are more than words. These are words that are faithful to the materials, to the stone and wood and straw, to the things themselves. Words that have a taste in your mouth, that you can almost touch with your fingers, as you can touch the dry stone walls that dwell in a dry land.

I saw layers of time. I saw them and touched them and smelled them. Layers of peasant history, of charcoal and ashes, of the hardest clay you can imagine—a land to break the plough and the back of the peasant—of white stone, broken into blocks and more blocks and more blocks to make centuries of walls, a thick mantle of limestone in the dry land.

I saw a forest regularly turned to ashes only to revive again, every spring.

I saw a *paridera*—a sheep pen—where the sheep are kept when they are about to deliver their lambs. A large *paridera*, well made in a time of revolution and war (another war and another revolution). A *paridera* that gave a new meaning to the land—and a new weight.

I saw Philip VII, the monarch who killed Spanish liberalism, the king who started the Spanish Civil War 120 years in advance. A minuscule monarch on a minuscule button inside the *paridera*. A tiny button that some call “patriotic”. A *paridera* instead can never be patriotic. It just stands there, stone on top of stone, impervious to history.

Even the saddest history of all.

I saw an army of people away from their land. An army of Catalonians ready to repeat a tragedy, for they fought for their country already, in this same land, two hundred years before. And they lost.

I saw the proud signs of their nation, soon to be abolished, lying on the ground. Catalunya, the coat of gules and or. A symbol, a name, and a language that would be banned or marginalized for forty years. But not yet.

I saw fear. Fear can be smelled 73 years afterwards, but you can touch it. Fear as a shelter where soldiers took refuge during artillery and aerial bombings, with one-meter-thick walls of stone, the same stone of the *paridera* and the *cerrada* and the *corralón*, the same stone, all stones, trembling as if about to collapse. But they did not collapse under the 105, 75 and 81 mm bombs and mortars that the Nationalist dropped on this site. Not even the 155 mm shells that weigh over 40 kilos.

I saw the stubbornness of the walls and the stones at the unwitting service of the Second Spanish Republic. Unflinching, unyielding, still today, when there are no soldiers left. Or Republic. Faithful objects.

You come to know every stone when you dig them, when you draw them and live with them for weeks. Faithful companions.

I have not seen—but I can imagine—Republican soldiers knowing the stones one by one as I came to know them in Alto del Molino. Windmill Hill. A mill that seems to have vanished without a trace. Unlike the Republican Army.

Traces they left. And more than traces.

Again, traces of the soldiers' fear. Fear in the bottles of brandy, used to combat fear. Brandy that allows a man to jump a parapet and march towards a machine gun.

Traces of food, tons of food, to feed the soldiers, to fatten them up, like turkeys or lambs, so that they are strong enough to launch yet another hopeless offensive and another one after that one.

And I saw boredom in the trenches. A white piece for playing checkers. Killing time before time kills you.

I saw the keys of two peasant houses. Heavy, coarse keys made by a blacksmith.

And I saw love in the trenches. The love of somebody who writes back home. Imagine walking among ruins in the forest. Under your feet, only ink bottles and cartridges.

That's the archaeological record of the Spanish Civil War. The Republicans wrote, they wrote and they wrote more than they shot, because culture liberates you, education is progressive. If the pen was mightier than the sword, the Republicans would have won the war. So many ink bottles to write back home letters in Catalan or Spanish, full of mistakes and full of love (FIGURE 2). So many poets and so few generals in the Republican trenches.

The love of somebody who sends a delicacy to his friend or son or comrade in the frontline: a tiny can of anchovies. The salty taste of home. A taste that remains in the lips when one is bleeding to death lying on the dry, cold land.

I saw cold as well. Cold that penetrates your bones and becomes one with you. Minus 20, often. The coldest place in Spain. Cold that no even the strongest brandy can shake off. Or not for long. Cold that you can see in the bottles of cough syrup (cough syrup to win a war). Cold, also, that you can touch in the shell buttons of the soldier's underwear, spread all over the *paridera*.

I did not see, but I can imagine, the soldiers making themselves comfortable in their new home, the former home of sheep and goats, the present home of fleas and lice. And I can see, or half-see, the place abandoned after they surrendered, a mess of ragged clothes, empty tin cans, lost cartridges, broken ammunition boxes and underpants. Broken things and broken hopes. Our work makes them visible (FIGURE 3).

The soldiers will miss the food and warm cloth in the concentration camps, when they surrender. But not yet.

I saw things, humble things to which I can relate. I cannot relate to a 7.62 mm Mosin Nagant cartridge made in Tulski Patronnyi Zavod in 1934, but I can relate to a piece of aluminium foil used to wrap a chocolate bar and I can relate to the brand Milán on an ink bottle, a brand which brings back memories of childhood—the brand of the erasers that I used at school was Milán. I would not associate Milán with trenches and bullets. But perhaps with other sadness and defeats.

I saw a bunker that would not make it into Paul Virilio's book¹. An anti-modern bunker, a cave or a cellar. The word bunker seems alien to it. It does not name it as *cerrada* names the *cerrada* in truth. Thing and name are out of joint.

I saw tracing bullets, by the dozen, blown up and scattered all over the bunker. Somebody decided to set ablaze a box of ammunition, probably after the war, either for fun or to be sure that these things would not be around to harm anybody. Tracing bullets cross the skies of Baghdad, Tripoli or Hanoi. There is a geography for things. A particular place and a particular time. Tracing bullets do not belong in Guadalajara. In Alto del Molino. Not now. Hardly then.

I expect a clay pot or a sickle or a cask inside the bunker-cave-cellar. But it does not turn up.

I saw the Scorched Juniper Grove. Enebrada Socarrada. The name in local Castilian is shortened: Enebrá Socarrá. It sounds bolder and tougher. It is no longer a grove, just a place name and a memory of violence. Enebrá Socarrá. Scorched indeed were these fields in the spring of 1938.

I saw the last place in earth where I would have liked to be the 31 of March 1938.

Another *paridera*, another sheep pen, more modest this time, but more tragic as well (FIGURE 4).

A *paridera* where Nationalist soldiers were besieged and resisted to the last man. One man falling after the other. Nationalist soldiers, barely twenty years old, fighting shoulder to shoulder.

In the Enebrá, I understood what siege means. Being completely surrounded with no escape and no hope. To see the face of the enemy that is going to kill you. They were *that* close.

I saw the member number 7570 of the Fascist Party of Valladolid. Or rather what was left of him. Not even bones, just a number in a piece of metal. Or maybe he threw the

identification tag before being killed or captured. Things can betray you. Speak too much.

I saw, we saw, despair and confusion. And a teeth brush. And a red star.

We saw things and we draw them and we picked up with utmost care every piece of evidence from the ground. Evidence of a massacre that everybody knew and nobody recorded in detail. Just the number of the fallen and the lost units. Banal deaths, over 200 people killed in a war that exterminated half a million. No CSI for them. No worth (FIGURE 5).

What is here to be learnt?

So many pieces of shrapnel, so many tank shells, so many bullets.

40 stripper clips, 5 bullets for each clip, 200 shots. How many hit the target, how much death did they sow?

Belief. A medal with the Christ of Agony. So adequate.

I saw the frenzy of soldiers, shooting and shooting, spending every single cartridge they had. Officers firing their pistols at close range. At least two different pistols. Soldiers firing their German rifles.

You cannot see, but you can imagine as I do, dozens of soldiers crouching behind the sturdy walls of the *paridera*, a *paridera* that did not yield either. Apolitical things, these *parideras*, ready to defend dictatorship, revolution or democracy.

And it stood up, when nobody was left. Nobody reconstructed the *paridera* after the war. Too much blood or too much fallen stones. Or simply too much.

In the Enebrá Socarrá I see, we see, too much and too little. We see everything in detail and as in slow motion. We are everywhere in the siege of the Enebrá. We are in one corner of the *paridera* and in the *corralón* at the same time. We jump from the macro to

the micro, from the satellite image to the texture of the layer that we are excavating. We see every single magazine that they shot, their prayers in their religious medals. We see the remains of their last supper. The spoon and the fork that fell in the fray. What did those soldiers see, crouching behind the *paridera*? What did the others see of what was happening inside the *paridera*?

I saw so little. So little and so much at the same time: this paradox is what constitutes the archaeology of the recent past. Excess and lack. No blood, no guts, no cries, no anguish. Only a hint of them, in things. The same intense feeling of a historian in an archive touching the material documents of an irretrievable timeⁱⁱ.

I saw the bones of a foot (FIGURE 6).

I had never found a foot before. A foot with a boot. And then we found another one. And another. And I thought about the *punctum* in this mass burial. Not the skeleton or the mishmash of bones, but the trivial detail: the boot clinging to the foot. The loyalty of things.

I am seeing a gesture here, I thought. I am seeing an ordinary gesture that I myself perform every day: putting on and tying my shoes. A gesture that in this case turned out to be one of the last for the owner of the boot. To put on your boots. To feel comfortable and ready for the day. A thing that is thing because it works, because we do not think about it, or about the gesture. Heidegger, of course, comes to mindⁱⁱⁱ. But maybe the soldier thought about the boot when he was putting it on the last day of his life. Maybe it stopped being a thing for a while and became something else, something of moral consequence. For a while, until it turned into a thing again.

A foot with a boot is something ironic and tragic at the same time. Like finding a red star and a religious medal together.

I saw pain in a piece of shrapnel. If things can be perverse and evil, shrapnel is. I remember Erich Maria Remarque^{iv}, when he writes that soldiers would rather walk on his bleeding stumps rather than wait inside a crater to be torn to pieces by artillery fire. I

remember Apollinaire as well: “artillery is the art of measuring angles”. The hundred thorns of a piece of shrapnel. A hundred open wounds.

I understood and did not understand what shrapnel means. Shrapnel, *metralla* (FIGURE 7).

I saw piles of corpses, bones mixed with cartridges mixed with tin cans mixed with broken glass mixed with shrapnel. We are cyborgs even when we die (or even more when we die): an assemblage of human and non-human debris. Abject cyborgs.

Bajo las matas

En los pajonales

Sobre los puentes

En los canales

Hay Cadáveres^v.

This is what I learnt: there are corpses under the junipers, in the parideras, near the cerradas, in the creeks and quarries, along the paths in the fields. There are corpses.

From here I saw what happened.

But I could not cry.

Second siege. La Fatarella, Catalonia, 15th – 16th November 1938

I saw a village razed to the ground and suspended in time: Corbera.

In Corbera, there is a small palace confiscated by anarchists: crude red letters still mark the main door, like a cut in the wood. There is a bombed church that is cultural heritage, because it is a church, not because it is bombed. There are walls pockmarked with shrapnel and bullets, now crumbling. There are closed doors. There are open windows. There are empty streets (FIGURE 8).

I saw art that should not be here. Ruins manifest themselves. Whenever great art happens, writes Heidegger, a push (*Stoss*) enters history, and history either starts up or starts again^{vi}. Modern ruins, like great art, often have a push, a jolt that changes history or the way we see history. The ruins of Corbera have this push. They do not need an artist that imposes her speech on ruins. Archaeologists, and good artists, listen to ruins. We listen to them because they are mute and it only speaks truly that which is mute. That says Jacques Rancière^{vii}. And in Corbera, you see that he is right.

In La Fatarella, we dug a bunker, a true, modernist bunker this time. Thick walls of reinforced concrete: neat angles and clean surfaces: a sturdy pillbox for a machine-gun. A manifestation of will. A will to stand, never to abandon the place. Never alive.

You do not need an effort of imagination to picture yourself the end of this pillbox.

I saw two impacts of artillery shells and the interior walls of the bunker spattered with shell fragments. Spattered perhaps with something else 73 years ago. The shrapnel broke the perfect geometry of the pillbox (FIGURE 9).

And this brings to mind Giorgio de Chirico's words:

Ma noi che conosciamo i segni dell'alfabeto metafisico sappiamo quali gioie e quali dolori si racchiudono entro un portico, l'angolo d'una strada o ancora in una stanza, sulla superficie d'un tavolo, tra i fianchi di una scatola.^{viii}

But we who know the signs of the metaphysical alphabet, we know the joy and the pain that are enclosed in a portico, the angle of a street or even in a room, over the surface of a table, between the sides of a box.

We archaeologists, perhaps even better than Italian metaphysical artists, know the pain enclosed inside a room or a box. The pain in the horizontal slit of a loophole, from where you see the enemy advance, a hundred times stronger than you.

I saw a bunker turned into a dump: the galleries full of cartridges and grenades and empty tin cans. A large medicine bottle, some animal bones. The victors lived in the

captured trench for a few days, before they moved on, leaving another massacre behind. I wonder: how can one live amidst half-rotten corpses and keep eating and chatting and sleeping? Surrounded by the things of the people you have killed.

I saw the bottom of the trenches, full of materials. Unused cartridges, still wrapped in paper. An empty magazine from a machine-gun. Toothpaste and vitamins to keep clean and healthy.

A modern battlefield is an archaeologist's dream: so many things, all in situ. Laurent Olivier says that archaeologists are like rag-pickers, rummaging about in the garbage^{ix}. He uses the word *chiffonnier*, who means junk dealer. But it could be also translated as scavenger. This is more akin to what we do in many sites of the recent past. We do not select, like a junk dealer. We are more like vultures, leaving carcasses clean.

It is a great effort to leave this carcass clean. There is so much waste. Every inch of the Terra Alta (High Land) covered in industrial war debris. Every single inch of the terrain made dangerous for generations.

I saw three unexploded grenades, used to storm the trench: one Polish, two Spanish. The Spanish ones are crude artefacts, full of screws and plates and wires. I know that they are highly volatile, but they are fascinating things. The Polish one as well: an icon of the twentieth century. I need to hold it in my hands. While I clean it, I feel afraid. I am afraid of an archaeological artefact (FIGURE 10).

I saw olive trees with green olives planted in the soft white earth, light like dust.

I saw a monument commemorating a Nazi officer, killed by a Republican sniper from the trench that we are excavating. This is the history, these are the people, that we commemorate in Spain. The Nazis.

I saw the last soldier in the last battle. Nobody built a monument for him. Nobody knew that he was here, in the soft white earth, near the olive trees. Until we came. Then they remembered.

He and 500 with him decided to die so that others could live. They chose their fate: to be the last to retreat to allow 25,000 Republican soldiers to cross the river Ebro. Their defeat was their victory. They made a barrier of flesh, bone, steel and concrete. They were overrun, but they resisted enough. The flesh and bone, steel and concrete became once again re-mixed in a monstrous hybrid.

I saw a fellow human being (FIGURE 11).

I saw pain.

I saw broken bones: three fragments of shrapnel very deep inside a femur, broken into two, nine fragments of shrapnel where the lungs once were, one fragment of shrapnel between two vertebrae which severed the spinal cord. If he had survived, he would have been a quadriplegic. Tied to bed for life.

I saw a void where a hand once was. A hand—and a life—sacrificed to return a grenade in the last attack to the last position of the last Republican army.

And I saw a hand clutching shadows.

I remembered the verses by Salvatore Quasimodo^x:

*Non mi preparo alla morte
so il principio delle cose,
la fine è una superficie dove viaggia
l'invasore della mia ombra.
Io non conosco le ombre.*

I do not prepare myself for death,
I know the beginning of things,
the end is a surface that is travelled
by the invader of my shadows.
I do not know the shadows.

He did not know the shadows either. But he was prepared for death. He came to meet the invader of his shadow, *l'invassore della sua ombra*, with a bag full of grenades and his pockets full of cartridges. He brought few things with him. Nothing personal, or not too much.

- A good pair of boots, with thick wool socks. Size 43.
- A military jacket.
- A belt.
- Trousers.
- Underpants, with a shell button.
- A mess tin, army issue.
- A small basin for shaving, perhaps for drinking.
- Toothpaste.
- A knife or razor.
- A dark-green medicine bottle.
- Three complete magazines for the Mosin Nagant rifle, still wrapped in their Russian paper.
- Two Polish wz-31 fragmentation grenades with B-3 fuses.
- A side bag to carry it all.
- A military leaflet.
- A folded piece of paper for a letter he never wrote.

I saw his things and his bones and thought, with Paul Celan, that he is dead, but he can breath^{xi}.

There was a code in a piece of plastic, near the ribs. 43330RI. I remember the other peoples/numbers we have found so far: 7570, a Fascist volunteer; PF BM138 B549, a Republican soldier in Alto del Molino. 43330 RI, the last hero of the Ebro.

I saw the man several times in the store where we deposited his bones, in La Fatarella. The ruins of a man. I saw every detail of his death. Traces of his life. His broken bones, his bad teeth. I think he was not handsome. But he was tall. Maybe a foreigner. Maybe not.

He became a friend. His things. His ruins.

This is what I saw.

And I cried.

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ⁱVirilio (2008).

ⁱⁱRobinson (2010).

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v Perlongher (1997).
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vii Rancière (1992).
viii Cited in González García (2000: 68, note 54).
ix Olivier (2008: 159-192).
x Quasimodo (1997: 197)
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