

Heritage messages of a post-nuclear nature

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My research is focused on post-industrial sites in general, or post-industrial landscapes, for example, related to mining (like in Malmberget in northern Sweden), iron- and steel industry (like in Duisburg in the Ruhr district in Germany), and nuclear power (like at the Ignalina nuclear power plant (NPP) in Lithuania).

I have analysed the history, heritage and contemporary situation of these post-industrial landscapes. However, heritage is such a messy and difficult concept to work with, and my areas of interest are often not considered as heritage in the first place. Lately, I have begun using the metaphor of a “scar” – and tried to articulate a category which I term “post-industrial landscape scars” (Storm, 2014).

I propose that the metaphor of a scar might be useful to better understand and manage these post-industrial sites, including NPP and radioactive waste. Briefly, I suggest three subcategories: reused, ruined, and undefined post-industrial landscape scars. I will not go into details, but I guess they are intuitively rather easy to understand. The NPPs I have been working on mainly belong to the undefined category.

What is a scar then, and how can it be used metaphorically? A bodily scar is a reminder, pain of the past, the trace of a wound, ugly, spontaneously understood as something negative. But it can also carry positive or more ambiguous connotations (Caesarean section operation, Mensur scars, for the veteran and the fiction hero, body ornamentation through so-called scarification) – these scars tell a story about courage and even resilience. Therefore, the scar is ambiguous and significant, but always telling that something important has taken place, reminding about important pasts. Furthermore, this metaphor implies a process, from wound over a scab to form a scar. However, this process of healing is not linear or automatic, that is, not deterministic, but instead it could be cyclic, and demand active work and wounds can reopen.

In this conference the notions of memory and heritage are crucial, and the scar metaphor is closely related to heritage. Heritage is usually understood as something positive, but I believe that heritage is not only positive, and a scar is not only something negative, instead both of them are basically areas of intensified cultural negotiation (Giblin, 2013).

The scar metaphor challenges contemporary understandings of heritage in two ways especially. Firstly, in the heritage debate there has been a movement from the physical to the mental and by using the scar metaphor I want to bring the material world back into the centre of heritage understandings. The scar denotes something that is both physical and mental, that is, the material world is not only equivalent to a “tool” or “facilitator” for memory (Smith, 2006) but integrated experience.

Secondly, the scar contests the notion of layered stories (palimpsest, the recycling practice of Antiquities), since I think this idea misses the interconnectedness between

the different stories and meanings. Instead, the scar metaphor suggests heritage to be organic and interconnected, skin layers merged together into a new dense scar tissue.

On this basis, the idea I want to bring into our discussions concerns industrial nature, or rather post-industrial nature, and its expressions as specifically post-nuclear natures and its relation to the scar metaphor. But to begin with, what is post-industrial nature? I have found two main characteristics.

The first characteristic is that industrial nature is a strategy of controlled overgrowing – providing recreational areas as well as making possible biodiversity-rich habitats (for example, ruderal species). The concept of urban-industrial nature emerged among botanists in Berlin in the 1970s. Today, ecologists even talk about nature of a fourth kind (from an ecological point of view) – after the pristine, the agricultural, and the horticultural nature (Kowarik, 2005). This nature of a fourth kind emphasises a capacity for process, and can even be understood as the most natural kind of nature, even represent a new wilderness.

The second characteristic is that industrial nature is a photographic genre of “nature taking back”, expressed in activities like urban exploration, concepts like industrial cool, and the fact that these sites are used as contemporary stages, in countless films among other examples. This genre has, however, also been criticised as “ruin porn”, without any people in the pictures, hiding social justice and so on.

The post-industrial nature relates to the scar metaphor in that there is a thin line between, on the one hand, the positive effects of the strategies of creating forests and parks in former industrial sites, and the visual appreciation of these places, and, on the other hand, the negative effects, mainly in terms of hiding real problems of a bad economy, contamination, social problems, etc. Therefore, post-industrial nature can be understood both as contributing to the healing of a wound into a scar, and as concealing hurting pasts behind a fancy surface.

If we now move to the specific post-nuclear natures, that is new and experimental to me. I tentatively see two main types so far, based on NPPs and not on waste storage facilities.

The first is marked by the ideal of returning the site to the original state – that is, prior to the NPP, examples are found in Yankee Rowe NPP in the United States and Barsebäck NPP in Sweden. The Yankee Rowe has been dismantled and the site has been turned into a green lawn, while in Barsebäck, the plant is still there and there are competing future visions about what will happen at the site. The local politicians’ vision for Barsebäck is to turn it into a seaside resort. “To clean and make green”. Take away every trace, seen as responsible behaviour – but what about memory and heritage in this process?

The second type of post-nuclear nature I have identified so far is marked by the idea of setting areas aside and letting wildlife return, pictures from the exclusion zone around Chernobyl, where there is also a dedicated nature reserve in the Belarusian part, highlight the unique pristine nature. To what extent the animals and plants are affected by radiation is certainly debatable. It emphasises a flourishing wildlife – but what about memory and heritage? Both in terms of biological and chemical heritage and in terms of the human experiences connected to this place.

So, what to do with the idea of post-nuclear natures? What are the heritage possibilities? Firstly, it has to acknowledge that the post-nuclear nature can mirror human nature interactions. Secondly, to consider ways of letting the post-nuclear nature bring a message to future generations: telling “Here” as its basic message (Bandolin and Sörlin, 2007). Translated into my understanding of the landscape scars, the message would be: “Here is a scar in the landscape, telling that something important has happened”.

I believe that nature will most probably overtake any remains (whether they are deliberately given shape or unintended leftovers) and this is something we must count on.

So, if the strategy of communicating with the future is to leave messages then we must try to let nature be a force that contributes to making visible, not primarily hiding or concealing what has happened. And this can be considered for different time frames; decades, centuries or millennia – while more short-lived constructions (like recreational areas, or exhibition centres) connected to the profoundly changed landscape (like piling of rock) can articulate experiences and knowledge to new generations.

I conclude that heritage, here understood in terms of landscape scars, includes both material and mental legacies that are ambiguous and do not heal automatically. So, I suggest that we should firstly, articulate the *scar*, with all its ambiguities, saying: something important happened “here”. And secondly, in this work of articulation, make use of *post-nuclear natures* – perhaps through landscape formations as a basis. And finally, always bear in mind, the thin line between *healing* and *concealing* in this process.

References

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