

On Eyesores, Remnants, and Ruins: Learning to See in New Ways

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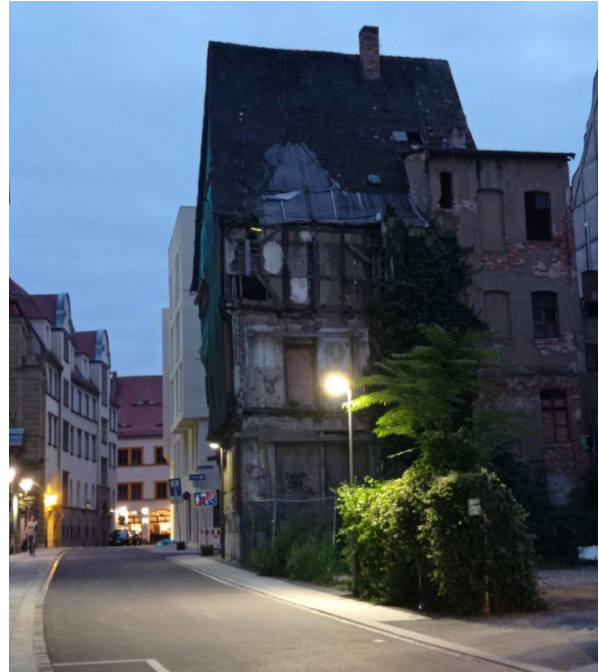
September 2021: 22 students and 10 lecturers have gathered at the University of Halle-Wittenberg for an enriching week of lectures, discussions, excursions, and film screenings revolving around the topics of (post)industrial entanglements, energy temporalities, and changing landscapes. As a first-year PhD student currently preparing my doctoral research on practices of future-making in the Welzow-Süd coal mining district in Lusatia, I was grateful to be able to join this group of junior and senior researchers from various disciplines, and hoped for inspiration and insights which would help me refine the ethnographic sensibilities, contextual understanding, and analytical toolkit for my fieldwork and research.

As I listened to the intriguing discussions at the summer school, my gaze now and then travelled a bit. Through the window to my left, I was often drawn into the stream of trams, cyclists, and pedestrians who passed by the lecture hall on their way to destinations unknown to me. As my gaze followed them, back and forth and back again, it eventually got stuck on something which did *not* move. Sturdily in the background of all this motion stood an abandoned house, its windows barricaded, trees and weeds growing beside and into it, its façade ornamented with graffiti. It sat uncomfortably in an awkward space on the side of a perfectly renovated city road, overlooking perhaps somewhat jealously the impeccable pavement with its neatly kept trees at its feet. On the other side of that road, it seemed to watch us, the participants of the summer school, as we debated industrial pasts, urban entanglements, and uncertain futures.



‘Eyesores are indispensable’, writes anthropologist Melanie Van der Hoorn in her book about the webs of power relations, layers of agency, and processes of meaning-making which produce the fate of buildings that come to be classified as ‘undesirable’ over time and turn into ruins.¹ Understanding buildings as material culture, Hoorn invites her readers on a journey through the ‘lifespan’ of buildings, beginning with their construction for a certain utilitarian purpose, becoming called into question for their value over time, and ending with their rejection by society and, eventually, their disposal by means of demolition, neglect, or decay. Often, however, the buildings persist, right in the midst of an urban space which moves on, in the midst of a flow of time from which they have somehow become uncoupled.

Throughout the week spent at the summer school, I could not help but feel observed by the abandoned house on the other side of the road. Entangled in conversations about futures and transformations, the presence of the abandoned house frequently made me pause and wonder: What about the things that do *not* transform (in the normatively imagined way), that somehow escape the sweeping stream of progress, that stay behind as ruins? What might these ‘eyesores’ want to teach us, at a time when the city, the surrounding region, and the whole of Eastern Germany are striving towards greener, cleaner, and shinier times?



Colour Schemes and Concrete: The Materialities of Time and Transformation

Disposal, as abandoned buildings can help us realise, often remains a rather unfinished business. On Day 2 of the summer school, we visited the heat and power station *Dieselstraße*, where the past sat surprisingly firmly among the restructured present reaching for the (post-carbon) future. After three rounds of modernisation, the grounds now comprise a curious collage of grey cubes which house the massive gas and steam turbines, two concrete storage tanks which used to hold oil but are now empty, a newly built thermal reservoir of 22 metres height in bright colours, a concrete chimney of 174 metres height which no longer emits smoke, and an intricate system of steel structures and pipelines which traverse the grounds and extend into the city to provide its inhabitants with energy and heat.



It was Felix Ringel's workshop on energy pasts, energy futures, and the temporalities of transformation which taught me to see that time, in fact, has a colour scheme in this park. Among the rather greyscale complexes, the new thermal storage tank stands out with its shrill colours of orange and green. It is tellingly called the 'energy and future tank' and advertised as a symbol for the power station's commitment to the post-carbon future. In contrast, the concrete infrastructure rendered obsolete by the decision to leave oil behind for natural gas sits inconspicuously on the concrete ground, almost blends in, is visually neglectable. Why is it still there? As our guide, an engineer employed at *Dieselstraße* tells us, it could not be dismantled because it would have been too expensive. Given the €100 million which had to be invested in the post-carbon future of the park, no money was to be wasted on processing the past and finishing the business of its disposal. It had turned out to be more economical to leave the no longer needed constructions of concrete and steel to their own devices. Stripped off their utilitarian value for heat and energy generation, they have become *remnants*: They no longer matter but persist nonetheless, if uncoupled from the rest of the compound. They have no place in the future, yet still linger in the space where it is made to unfold.

How is the post-carbon future materially made and inscribed into landscapes and livelihoods? The visit to *Dieselstraße* taught me how to look for the materialisation of time and progress, and how to inquire into the material assemblages through which ideas about pasts and futures are produced and made concrete. It made me realise that a state of post-ness does not mean a clear separation from the past, but rather the interwovenness of a place with its traces.

Carbon Othering: The Transformative Power of (De)valuation

How, then, through what kinds of processes, are certain things rendered as past, while others are entrained in the stream of progress towards the future? What are the processes by which a transformation takes on its particular form and direction? As Asta Vonderau pointed out during one of our discussions, the conceptualisation of the post-carbon future involves the construction of ‘carbon Others’, that is, people and industries against which visions of the future are posited as temporal-ideological antagonisms. In (Eastern) Germany, it is the coal industry which serves as this carbon Other: ‘Exit coal, enter future’ is a frequently invoked trope on stickers and posters of climate activist groups such as *Ende Gelände*.



Retrieved from Twitter: https://twitter.com/ende__gelaende/status/1287981709301026816?lang=en.

However, in a time of ecological crisis wherein the energy transition is widely embraced as a necessary, indeed imperative, move into a more 'sustainable' future, it is important to remember that, as one participant of the summer school remarked pointedly, 'one person's utopia might be another person's dystopia'. In a transformation as pervasive as the energy transition, it is not only infrastructures that are re-evaluated and rendered into remnants. Such processes of devaluation also concern the people who operate and once believed in them. As Eeva Kesküla pointed out during her lecture, this process leads to the reclassification of certain parts of the population, most notably coal miners. Those who, under socialism, enjoyed the pride and recognition as the drivers of socialist modernity, are now discursively reconstructed as the villains of carbon modernity, and turned into the antagonists of the post-carbon future.



Anthropological research tends to focus on either of the two groups. There are ethnographies of climate movements and 'green' transitional projects, and there are ethnographies on the disintegration of communities which grapple with the vanishing of their lifeblood industries. Neither of the two approaches, however, would be sufficient to grasp the complexities of a transformation. It is to the very processes of (de)valuation, the moments of wrestling and negotiation about what counts as 'future-proof' (*zukunftsfähig*), the moments of visionary domination and defeat, that social scientists should attend. Rather than taking the past-ness of coal or the futurity of renewable energy sources for granted, we should seek to understand *how* something, or someone, comes to embody either of the two temporal orientations.

As my postgraduate research project taught me to see, the coal industry is also to some extent the Other on whose shoulders the energy transition is advanced. With the decommissioning deadlines under their nose, which are now further compressed from 2038 to 2030, coal companies are nonetheless required to keep their power plants running reliably until renewable storage technologies are developed enough to ensure a stable supply for the entire grid. The requirement to keep operating, alongside the requirement to phase out operations and get ready for a corporate future without coal creates an extremely complex present in which the simultaneity of different temporal orientations has somehow to be juggled. Paradoxically, these carbon Others might very much be involved in the making of the post-carbon future, although *per definitionem*, they have no place in it.

So, while it is worthwhile to ask questions about who counts as the objects and who as the subjects of change, it is no less crucial to inquire into the very processes by which these subject positions are produced. Anthropologists should not uncritically subscribe to the temporality of progress and transformation, but rather resist uncritically joining in with vernacular categorisations of past, future, and teleology, seeking to unpack how *various* possible futures wrestle, unfold, and falter.

Admittedly, it is not surprising that I noticed the abandoned house on the other side of the road. I came to Halle with a certain ethnographic predisposition: ever since I joined the EMPTINESS project at the University of Oxford, my gaze has become increasingly attuned to scenes of abandonment and dereliction amidst a world that is only seemingly marked by ever more connectivity and concentration. My predisposition has been shaped by the analytical framework of our project which looks at the phenomenon of 'emptiness' as a contemporary social formation that consists of (1) an observable reality where places rapidly lose their constitutive elements such as people, schools, services, social networks, jobs, and the future; (2) a way of life, that is, practices and social relations that emerge as residents attempt to make life go on in these places; and (3) an emic interpretive frame which local residents use to describe and make sense of the new reality. ⁱⁱ

It is to the in-between places, the hinterlands beyond the nodes of capital concentration and bustling activity, that 'emptiness' draws our attention. Looking at the tears in the urban fabric of Halle through the eyes of the abandoned house on the other side of the road has made me wonder: How far can one scale down the notion of an empty(ing) place? So far, I had thought of 'emptiness' as pertaining to whole units of places, that is, depopulating villages and shrinking postindustrial towns, and therefore as a somewhat homogenous localised experience of disintegration. It was through the 'eyesores' of Halle that I first came to think about the phenomenon of *interspersed* emptiness: of emptiness as a phenomenon which can be scaled all the way down to the level of a single street; an emptiness which can exist in the very midst of sweeping processes of transformation, of hope, investment, and economic growth. And it is precisely by paying attention to this interspersed emptiness in the gaps off the developmental grid, I believe, that the most valuable lessons can be learned about the principles of spatial, social, and economic reorganisation which the post-carbon transformation advances. In this time of supermodernity which, according to Mette High, is as marked by an excess of construction as much as an excess of destruction, ruins would matter as much as new building projects. Places where things happen would matter as much as places where nothing seems to be happening anymore, and eyesores as much as the polished markers of development and investment. The easily

written-off gaps, then, can give us an indication of how, according to what principles, time is made to pass and materialise in space, how destruction and construction are arranged and disciplined under a given regime of transformation. Just as the movement of the cyclists and pedestrians comes more sharply into view when contrasted with the apparent stasis of the abandoned house and vice versa, that which transforms is best explored in relation to that which stays behind, persists, or goes other ways, to make sense.

Modernity is a temporal ideology that valorises newness, rupture, and linear plots.ⁱⁱⁱ What if social scientists attempted to study the energy transition without subscribing to these tropes? Perhaps anthropology can be released from the appealing grip of progressive time by acknowledging the simultaneity of multiple developmental trajectories, and by becoming attuned to the temporal uncoupling of interspersed emptiness from the sweeping logic of imperative transformation. Ruins are not *per se* dystopian. The closure of something opens a niche to be filled by something else, and processes of construction and destruction are powerful tools by which time and ideas are turned into material realities which shape, and are shaped by, the forms of life which emerge within them.





About the author

Friederike Pank is a DPhil student at the University of Oxford. In her doctoral project, she researches how civic, political, and corporate actors craft and negotiate local futures after coal in the Welzow-Süd mining district of Lusatia. In particular, she looks at how ambitious hopes for the region's revitalisation are reconciled with the local conditions of disintegrating services and infrastructures, persistent depopulation, and popular resentment which have been characterising the decades of postindustrial shrinkage since the collapse of socialism in 1989.

References

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