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Looking at Bunker(photos) - Thoughts of a historian

(Markus Oberndorfer: Foucauld - La Disparition, Fotohof edition, p 8-9)

We see the wide horizon of the Atlantic Ocean, the boundaries between the sky and the sea and the sea and beach are difficult to define. Something stands out from the sea, a rock, maybe the spine of a stranded deep sea creature that turned into stone. A surfer elegantly navigates around the perimeter of this creature: Markus Oberndorfer takes pictures of disappearance and change, of the appropriation of the remnants of World War II. To some extent Oberndorfer (and many others with him) is following the lead of French philosopher Paul Virilio, who discovered the bunkers of the Atlantic Wall along the Northern coasts of France as early as in the 50's, who took photos of them and saw the annihilation of "total war" inscribed in these colossi.¹

In the photographs of Markus Oberndorfer — taken half a century later — these inscriptions of war seem to have vanished. The bunkers of Cap Ferret have been colourfully covered by graffiti artists, their tags hardly ever make a reference to the history of the bunkers. Visitors are sunbathing nearby, the sea washes around the bunkers, which are sinking in the dunes, a few houses have been attached to them — everybody seems to ignore these vestiges of German occupation and the downfall of the Nazi regime. Tourists integrate the bunkers into their "holiday" routine, others use them as canvases for their art. Apparently there has so far been no "musealization" of these remnants on Cap Ferret. Nature reclaims these concrete remnants and thus lends to them an aesthetic quite different from the one of "functional architecture". Through the eye of the photographer they appear to be fossilizations of an entirely different world. However, through the succession of photographs they are restored into everyday life; the trash bin and the refuse are remnants as well — merely the decomposing leftovers of the present.

The task of the historian is to engage with the past; like the photographer, she does that from the point of view of the present. The engagement with remnants and with places challenges the historian in a very special way: how do I uncover the history of the bunkers, how do I manage to fathom different perspectives in the historic strata? A short text by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, which fills only about eight pages, provides a useful approach to the "other places" and their "heterotopias"². Places, Foucault claims, are marked by relations of placing. Such placings, tying themselves to the real places, also reconnect the utopias — the non-places, with the places. These "heterotopias" are "places outside of all places, even though it might be possible to indicate their location in reality." They reflect power relations as well as phantasms, desire just as the people who are placed in these places and thus somehow construct them. The "heterotopias", which are marked by deviance, by illusion and compensation, always refer to the order of society — they demand to be historicised. By that Foucault's ideas provide interfaces to reflections on history and memory.

Let us return to the disappearance: forgetting is part of memory. Scholars theorising the phenomenon of memory, like Jan and Aleida Assman, Peter Burke etc. distinguish between the "storage memory" (cultural) and the "functional memory" (social/communicative). This indicates that we always draw on the accumulated, nearly infinite storage space of cultural knowledge; however, as soon as we cease to relate this knowledge to our primary needs and experiences, it can disappear again into this storage space.

If we relate the history of the creation of the bunkers as military edifices of a hostile and criminal historical regime to them as "heterotopias" in a Foucaultian sense, then this history seems to vanish.

¹ Paul Virilio: Bunker-Archäologie, München/Wien, 1992 (Paris 1975).

² Michel Foucault: „Andere Räume“, in: Karlheinz Barck, Peter Gente, Heidi Paris (Ed.) Aisthesis. Wahrnehmung heute oder Perspektiven einer anderen Ästhetik, Leipzig, 1990, p.34-46.

However, the knowledge that these bunkers of the Atlantic Wall had the sole purpose of protecting the soldiers of the Wehrmacht and of preventing liberation from precisely this regime remains inscribed in these bunkers. The same holds true for experiences of exclusion and menace: the civilian population did not find protection in the bunkers, it rather got caught up in the battle between the attacking troops of the Allies and the defending troops of the Wehrmacht. For quite a while no one talked about the grief

and sorrow over the dead; still, the dead are always present at the cemeteries, in narratives and books. And this hidden presence can be made visible any time, can be ejected from the storage space.

After the end of the war the Bunkers told the story of the defeat of the German troops, but also hidden stories of collaboration, of economic as well as private relations between the troops of the Wehrmacht and French civilian population. During the time of the Cold War the bunkers were a sign of the hope to find shelter in the event of an atomic strike. Simultaneously, however — and this can be clearly seen in the graffiti — fear and horror also elicit desire: the bunkers — and this holds true not only for the bunkers at the Atlantic — are removed from the context of the war. It is predominantly young, urban males who as kind of "last adventurers" explore the bunkers: modern spelunkers, submerging into the deep, into the dark. It suggests itself, to interpret this desire as a hope for salvation, or as a compensation in Foucaultian terms. The musealisation, too, be it driven by private or public initiative, seems to cater for this desire. The war enters the museum and is denuded from its menace.

The graffiti artists who cover the bunkers with their artistic phantasies must surely know that these will ultimately also be consumed by the wind, the sea and the sand. Just as the surfer, who looks for challenges close to the bunkers, and just as the photographer they are illusionists — they seem to transform the bunker, to remove it from the context of its creation. The photographer, however, does not stop at that — and we have to thank Markus Oberndorfer for this. He also captures the intrusion, an intrusion that leads us into reflection. Or, with Foucault, "*heterotopies*" refer to the bases of society. In their documentation of vanishing and in their appropriation the bunker photographs of Markus Oberndorfer contain the message that wars are '*man-made-disasters*' from which man-made bunkers provide no shelter.

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