

# Night of the Living Dead: modern ruins and archaeology

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## Archaeologies of the present

*A spectre is haunting contemporary archaeologies – the spectre of the present.* That is to say, one has recently been witnessing a shift in archaeological approaches: a new, ‘neo-materialistic paradigm’ (so-called *return to things*) is slowly emerging on the scene. It indicates weak aspects of post-processual perspective with its emphasis on the social, meaning, signs and analyses of discourse, among others. On the contrary to post-processual approaches, here attention is mostly paid to materiality of things. What has also been clearly pointed out is the fact that, more than ever before, the present slowly becomes more important and interesting for archaeologists than the distant past (e.g. the Neolithic) (fig. 1). It is rather the materiality of things than constitutes archaeology than the focus on the distant past (e.g. Lucas 2004).



**Fig. 1. Materiality in and of the present: a ‘ghost town’ Kłomino, Poland (author Dawid Kobiałka).**

It is said that previous approaches have overlooked, or even more accurately, blurred what seems to mostly characterize archaeology: things as things. From this point of view, one cannot but agree with Laurent Oliver (2013, 127):

*History will always have infinitely more to say about past events, just as anthropology will have more to say about the way in which human communities function. The theoretical strength of archaeology resides in its exclusive relation to material remains, which is what distinguishes it from all other disciplines in the social sciences. It draws its immense theoretical potential from its study of the materiality of the present. As scholars from other disciplines have sensed, there lies therein the source of a radically new approach to the world, for archaeology’s relation to matter leads to a veritable phenomenology of the present.*

No wonder then the French archaeologist goes to the end of this reasoning. If archaeology is about things, their materiality, what can be said about the world through material culture, then

the conclusion is easy to predict. It is only in the present that archaeology can show its all theoretical and practical strength. In contrast to e.g. the Neolithic from which have survived few pieces of pottery, some flint tools, some pits and so on, the present is full of material culture. And the materiality of the present is the task to be undertaken by contemporary archaeologies. That is why, as the title of Oliver's paper clearly points out: *the business of archaeology is in the present* (Oliver 2013).

Nonetheless, what still is missing within archaeologies of the present is something – what at first sight is – very non-archaeological, so to speak: popular culture. In other words, sometimes references to popular culture give chances to grasp what is so specific of archaeologies of the present. We want to discuss this issue a bit more in this short post.

First thing to notice here is that archaeological approaches into the recent/present times have become very popular (e.g. Buchli & Lucas 2001; Oliver 2003, 2013; Schofield 2005; González-Ruibal 2008, 2012; Shanks 2007; Webmoor 2007; Webmoor & Witmore 2008; Holtorf & Piccini 2009; Harrison & Schofield 2010; Olsen 2003, 2010; Harrison 2011; Olsen *et al.* 2012; Olsen & Pétursdóttir 2014).

Although these works are very diverse, there are some subjects that unite them all like: ruins, decay, material culture, heritage-in-the making, a conviction that archaeological methodology can be applied to contemporary world, going beyond the limits of modernistic reasoning and so on (fig. 2).



**Fig. 2. Nature upon culture?: a room in one of the blocks in Kłomino (author Dawid Kobiałka).**

One of the consequences of doing archaeology of the present is that there is no real difference between e.g. Neolithic potsherds and ruins from e.g. the Cold War. Both are very present and

very 'alive'. By the same token, there is no place for typically modernistic dichotomies like: past-present, dead-alive and so on. And this stands in contrast to previous archaeologies which often were based on such dichotomies.

Without any doubt, archaeologies of the present shed new light on many subjects. Nonetheless, popular culture offers tools to give new twist to archaeological approaches into the recent times.

### **Archaeologies of the present and popular culture**

What both popular culture, especially Hollywood films, and archaeologies of the recent past have been fascinated with is, as we claim, the problem of the undead, how things go on beyond their own life and death. Recall only many films about zombies that have recently been released (e.g. *Survival of the Dead* (2009) directed by George A. Romero, *The Revenant* (2009) directed by D. Kerry Prior, *Zombieland* (2009) directed by Ruben Fleischer, *ZMD: Zombies of Mass Destruction* (2009) directed by Kevin Hamedani, *The Dead* (2010) directed by Jonathan Ford, Howard J. Ford, *Warm Bodies* (2013) directed by Jonathan Levine, *World War Z* (2013) directed by Marc Forster; to mention but a few).

These films and, what is a new phenomenon, TV series like *The Walking Dead* or *Revolution*, touch upon the very problem of humanity and things made by people: how things persist after their own supposed death. One cannot here forget about post-apocalyptic films as well like: *The Road* (2009) directed by John Hillcoat, *2012* (2009) directed by Roland Emmerich, *The Book of Eli* (2010) directed by Albert and Allen Hughes, *After Earth* (2013) directed by M. Night Shyamalan, or *Oblivion* (2013) directed Joseph Kosinski.

It can be said that a zombie embodies a world in ruins. Zombies are never naked. On the one hand, they seem to be driven by some primordial drive and have no interest in material culture. On the other hand, they always have some dirty pieces of material culture (usually clothes) on themselves. It is as if zombies encapsulate two opposite attitudes. In the same vein, zombies are neither simply alive nor dead. They are *undead*. This observation is especially valid when one takes into account a point once made by Slavoj Žižek (2004), that the undeadness is what characterizes human beings. We want to add here only that this may apply also to heritage (material culture) from the recent times.

On May 2013, we were surveying Kłomino in Poland, a 'ghost town' that was between 1945 and 1992 a secret Soviet base (fig. 3). We noticed many motifs that are interesting from an archaeological point of view: ruins, decay, material culture and so on. One of the blocks ('Leningrad type'; see also Buchli 1999) is even still occupied by people nowadays. We found many traces of not only Soviets' living in this place. Artefacts like: beer cans, vodka bottles, instant barbeques, remains of bone fires indicate that the place has been often visited since the Soviet departure (fig. 4).



**Fig. 3. A fragment of a wooden chest left by the Soviets (author Dawid Kobińska).**



**Fig. 4. Remains of a bone fire inside one of the blocks in Kłomino (author Dawid Kobińska).**

There are two archaeological points of views on these ruins. On the one hand, one can see the town as ruins of the past, as something what belongs to history. This would be rather a typical

archaeological posture that uses clear modernistic divisions like: dead-alive, past-present. On the other hand, the ruins can be seen through the lens of archaeologies of the present. Here it would be rather outlined that the past is never simply past, that it is very part of the present. In the same vein, the town is as much alive as it was during the Soviets.

However, there is another possibility to look at ruins from the recent past. They can be seen as *undead*. They go on beyond their own life and death. When a zombie is shot straight into the head, it gets up and goes on. This is very terrifying experience. We experienced something very similar in Kłomino. Many of the blocks have recently been bulldozed. Nonetheless, the one that is most interesting is that which is now renovated and transformed into a hotel (fig. 5). This building caused very ambivalent emotions among us. It was like precisely observing a dead person who gets up after its own death. One sees that the ground and first floor are renovated. New plastic windows are in place. People live there now. We talked to a person that works on a renovation of the block. We were even invited for sightseeing of one of the flats.



**Fig. 5. The undead block in Kłomino (author Dawid Kobiałka).**

The place becomes ambiguous when one compares it to the flats on the second or third floor. One sees damaged windows, balconies look like they could drop down in any second. On one of the balconies a towel, most probably left by the member of some Soviet soldier's family. Curtains could be seen through the windows. That is why it can be claimed that this building embodies what we mean by a horrifying experience of living on after its own death. It cannot

be said that the place is dead or alive. The place does not belong simply to the past or only to the present. It is rather *undead*.

### **Conclusion**

This post was intended to highlight one aspect that closely bounds archaeologies of the present and popular culture. At first sight, archaeologies of the present want to develop specifically archaeological approaches into the resent past/present. The base of such approaches is material culture and its materiality that *leads to a veritable phenomenology of the present*. That is why, modern ruins, world in decay and so on are very often chosen to exemplify the usefulness of these archaeologies.

Similarly, contemporary popular culture has recently been fascinated with the same subjects that are of interest to archaeologies of the present. Films, TV series etc. about modern ruins, world in decay are very popular. One of the elements of such post-apocalyptic films is zombies, those who live after their own death.

If one thinks of zombies as a metaphor of that what is undead, that is to say, what is beyond life and death, then this might offer a good matrix to approach modern ruins and heritage-in-the-making. Most of them are neither simply alive nor dead. In other words, they do not simply belong to the past or the present. This aspect of material culture was noticed by us thanks to popular culture. Sometimes specifically archaeological approach of material culture still needs references to very non-material domain that is popular culture.

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