From toxic to futuristic:
miners, their landscape
and the manipulation of (British) heritage

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Les photographies des mines, des charbonnages et de leurs paysages racontent une partie très importante du patrimoine britannique depuis le XIXᵉ siècle. Ce chapitre analyse deux moments de de ce processus d'esthétisation. Premièrement, une série d'images de Patrick Ward donne un aperçu de la vie des communautés minières dans les années 1960 afin d'historiser la relation complexe entre les mineurs et leur paysage à l'aide d'un récit photographique. Deuxièmement, les conséquences de l'industrie minière en tant que récit post-industriel seront observées dans les travaux de Richard Jones Energy+Notion (2016) décrivant de vastes régions du Pays de Galles où les mines de charbon sont remplacées par des éoliennes. Il s'agit d'une transmutation de l'énergie qui a profondément affecté l'identité des communautés locales. Dans ces deux exemples, l'acte toxique accompli par l'homme est surmonté par l'art: le regard photographique interroge la fonction de la mémoire et le concept de patrimoine en mettant en évidence la toxicité, comme réalisation du Sublime.

Toxic places

The title of this chapter refers to the process by which a toxic place becomes heritage[1]. Toxic landscapes are the product of deindustrialisation.

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1   The topic has been investigated by historians, architects and museologists, see for example: D. L. Hardesty, «Issues in Preserving Toxic Wastes as Heritage Sites», *The Public Historian, 23*(2), 2001, p.19-28.; J. Douet, *Industrial heritage re-tooled: The TICCIH guide to industrial heritage conservation*, London, Routledge, 2016; A. Fletcher, «Toxic Discourse: Waste Heritage as Ghetto Pastoral», *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* 39.2 (2014); G.A. Albrecht, «Public Heritage in the Symbiocene», *The Oxford Handbook of Public Heritage Theory*

They are remains of economic and scientific Progress that become heritage once they are artified. In practice, the process of artification is a form of manipulation, engagement and distortion of their prime function which uses the media and, in particular, photography as an instrument of meaning-making[2]. Futuristic, in turn, refers to the kind of imagery that is associated with toxic places. It denotes the geometric representation of landscape so typical of Italian Futurism which is used by many artist and photographers who address the issue of toxicity (*fig. 1 and 2*).

   To discuss these points, I will refer to a specific type of toxic place, i.e. mines and miners, as they well represent the transition between 20th-century industrialisation and postmodern deindustrialisation. I will then consider two British examples that embody the conversion of mines into art, and finally, I will identify a series of binary oppositions that characterise this kind of discourse.

   It is well known that heritage is intertwined with discourse and discursive practices. As Tunbridge and Ashworth state : « the present selects an inheritance from an imagined past for current use and decides what should be passed on to an imagined future[3] ». Every act of recognition alters what survives from the past, as the act of appreciation of a relic affects both its form and state as much as our impressions and perception of it. Just as selective recall hooks memory and subjectivity shapes historical insight, the recognition of objects symbolising the past refashions their appearance and meaning. Interaction with heritage continually modifies the nature of these objects and the context in which they appear, whether by choice or by chance[4].

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and Practice, Oxford University Press, 2018, see also Anais BELCHUN, *Écologie et photographie : une nouvelle vision du paysage. Colloque « Art, écologies et nouveaux médias »,* Raphaël Bergère, LARA-SEPPIA, Université de Toulouse - Jean-Jaurès, Oct. 2015, Toulouse, France. ffhal-01427434f, and for a broader view of the topic see Trivisani-Moreau Isabelle, *Paysage politique : le regard de l'artiste*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011.

2   Artification refers to situations and processes in which something that is not regarded as art in the traditional sense of the word is changed into something art-like or into something that influenced from artistic ways of thinking and acting. Making art is possible and even normal at the very early stages of human evolution, both for the species and for each individual. We turn something ordinary into something special. The 'making special' processes includes formalization, elaboration, repetition, exaggeration, and manipulation of expectation. See Elyane DISSANAYAKE, « The artification hypothesis and its relevance to cognitive science, evolutionary aesthetics, and neuroaesthetics », *Cognitive Semiotics* 5, 2009.

3   J. E. TUNBRIDGE, and G. J. ASHWORTH, *Dissonant Heritage : The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict*, London, Wiley, 1996, p. 6.

4   D. LOWENTHAL, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Fig. 1 David Maisel (b.1961), *The Mining Project (Inspiration, Arizona 4, 1989*, https://davidmaisel.com/works/the-mining-project/#15

Laurajane Smith, in her work *Uses of Heritage* (2006), maintains that heritage is a Western product and that it is through the discursive practices associated with it that we shape narratives of the past. What we forget, remember, memorialise or fake is the result of deliberate conceptualisation[5]. Moreover, heritage discourse generates both intangible and tangible consequences: it profiles the way cultural identity is constructed, interpreted, and valued, but it also determines how its concrete forms are conserved, managed and used (*fig. 3*).

Artification or, *patrimonialisation* in French, is thus a dynamic process of social change through which new objects and practices emerge from

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5   L. SMITH, *Uses of heritage*, London, Routledge, 2006, p.11-44; D. C. HARVEY, «Heritage pasts and heritage presents: temporality, meaning and the scope of heritage studies», *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 7 (4), 2011, p.319-38.

Fig. 2 Gerardo Dottori (1874-1977), *Aeropittura Futurista* (1934),
Galleria Russo, Roma in Massimo Duranti, *Gerardo Dottori, Futurist
Works Of The Master Of Aeropainting*, Roma, Palombi editore.

past ones and are placed within an aesthetic frame[6]. Artification conflates
with *artialisation*, a term created by the philosopher Alain Roger to define
a specialised world view that turns Nature into a landscape through the
perceptual framework of art[7]. In both cases, we have a discursive practice,
i.e. an action that by means of narration creates ideas that have political,
social and aesthetic consequences. More generally, artification is focused on
the collective, *artialisation* is perhaps more personal, but whether the focus
is on seeing a toxic place as valuable for a community or as meaningful to
an individual, toxic places dwell in post-modern imagination : they can be
institutionalised as museums or they can be frozen in a photographic shot,
replicated on the internet or patterned in a cityscape but they exist and
impact on us all.

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6   C. Bouisset, I. Degrémont, «La patrimonialisation de la nature : un processus en
      renouvellement», *L'Espace géographique*, 2013/3 (Tome 42), p. 193-199. DOI :
      10.3917/eg.423.0193.
      URL :   https://www.cairn.info/revue-espace-geographique-2013-3-page-193.htm ;
      accessed 23 December 2019.

7   A. Roger, *Court traité du paysage*, Collection Bibliothèque des Sciences humaines,
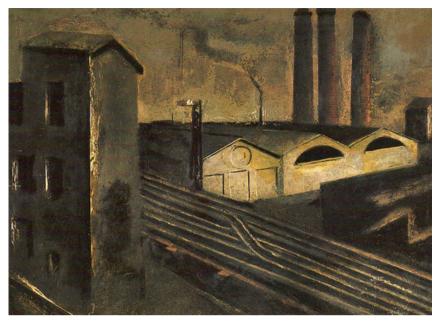   Gallimard, Paris, 1997.

Fig. 3 Mario Sironi (1885-1961), *Paesaggio urbano* (1940), Milano, Pinacoteca di Brera, https://pinacotecabrera.org/ collezione-online/opere/paesaggio-urbano-con-ciminiera/.

The procedure by which we define a toxic place as a piece of art involves an active role of the viewer; therefore, the relationship between the object, the artist and the public is essential to understand it. Their significance depends on the emotional effect they have on the public. For this reason, the notion of *sublime* has been used to conceptualise toxicity both as an objective condition of landscape (pollution) and at the same time to describe the fact that the meaning of toxic places is generated through human experience (*fig. 4*).

Jennifer Peeples coined the notion of toxic sublime to describe the sense of awe and marvel that is produced by the fear, ugliness, but also the inherent beauty and appeal of places that are contaminated by poisonous waste[8]. For the most part, toxic places are the result of the decommissioning of 20th-century industrial sites, i.e. places that have been dropped out when ceasing to be valuable in economic terms[9]. Indeed, a territorial resource may

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8   J. Peeples, «Toxic sublime: Imaging contaminated landscapes» *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, 5.4, 2011, p. 373-392.

9   P. Oakley, «Mining Sites. A permanent state of decay: contrived dereliction at heritage mining sites» in H. Orange (ed.), *Reanimating Industrial Spaces: Conducting Memory Work in Post-industrial Societies*, Vol. 66, Left Coast Press - Routledge, New York, 2016, p. 49-71.

Fig. 4, Alberto Pascual, *Battersea Power Station from the river*, London, England, Great Britain, UK, https://commons.wikimedia. org/wiki/File:Battersea_Power_Station_from_the_river.jpg; https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/legalcode.

be exploited when it belongs to a 'here and now' dimension, while heritage transcends time as it includes absolute values such as identity, nationhood etc. For this reason, to artify toxic places, we need to add an extra-value, i.e. the aesthetic one. Abandoned places balance themselves between the dimensions of being (territorial identity) and having (territorial resource). The equilibrium between being an economic resource and being heritage is reached if they can develop into an art object. From abandonment there is rebirth.

The fact that we recover toxic places does not imply that our impact as humans on the planet is less relevant, but it shows that how we act on the landscape and that how we perceive it may change. As mentioned above, the environment, Nature itself, is a social and intellectual construct subject to change: hence green storytelling represents man as guilty, science and industry evil and humanity doomed to extinction, as opposed to a positive view of exploiting natural resources to create social Progress which was the mainstream until the 1960s[10]. Therefore, toxic places testify for this sense of guilt but also necessary advancement of civilisation, wealth and economic growth for those who used the excavated resources. Quite obviously,

10   J. A. Du Pisani, «Sustainable development – historical roots of the concept», *Environmental Sciences*, 3:2, 2006, p. 83-96.

though, the picture is much more complicated, and deindustrialisation with its generation of toxicity has moved in the former 'developing' countries and is now globalised which means that the scale of social, economic and cultural impact has changed too.

There are toxic places that belong to the Western industrial past, and new toxic places in those countries that are mirroring Western industrialisation by paying the cost of our own decommissioning of the landscape[11]. One should distinguish between toxic places in Australia, Canada, the US and Europe because of the type of territorial division, difference in population density, or, for example, Russia with its different economic growth, political framework, types of industrialisation, the availability of natural resources. In fact, toxic places have different dimensions and appearances according to the geographical, economic and social context that generated them. As a consequence, toxic places act as *memento mori* allowing us to discuss social responsibility and ethics in relation to how we define social equity and welfare in a comprehensive anthropological perspective.

In other words, we may question how and if we should accept and support the exploitation of natural resources to secure welfare to people or we could discuss the opportunity to support pauperism and a view of scientific and industrial progress as evil *per se*. Depending on the point of view, toxicity can be seen as a necessary aspect of civilisation or the consequence of human folly. Whatever the approach, these landscapes are appealing, and even more so if they look solitary and void of humans. The exceptional beauty of abstract geometric shapes that characterises many pictures of toxic places reminds of a dystopic future, a dehumanised planet, the scenario that my generation built around the fear of nuclear bombs, day-after landscapes where nature overcomes man and restores its power: the aftermath of the Anthropocene[12].

However, as Peeples underlines discussing Burtynsky's photographs: «the purposeful omission of a victim leaves open the space for viewers to

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11   In this perspective, Western sensibility about heritage is often a matter of conflict: M. Hall *et. al.*, «Climate change and cultural heritage: conservation and heritage tourism in the Anthropocene», *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 11.1 (2016), p. 10-24; J. Caust, and M. Vecco, «Is UNESCO World Heritage recognition a blessing or burden? Evidence from developing Asian countries», *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 27, 2017, p. 1-9.

12   Examples related to the nuclear imaginary have been investigated by cultural historians and literary critics, for example see P. B. Hales, «The atomic sublime», *American Studies*, 32.1, 1991, p. 5-3; B. C. Taylor, «Nuclear pictures and metapictures», *American Literary History* 9.3, 1997, p. 567-597; D. Cordle, «Protect/protest: British nuclear fiction of the 1980s», *The British Journal for the History of Science* 45.4, 2012, p. 653-669.

question whether they might be casualties of the toxins since no other victims are present. Besides, excluding people from the image may allow for a more compelling sublime response[13] ».

Even if humans are excluded, these places acquire meaning if there is a viewer : the toxic sublime is a solo experience of the viewer ; it triggers the viewer's aesthetic response.

Truly enough, toxic places stimulate sight, but a toxic place often smells, we may taste the bitterness of toxic elements sprayed in the air, and places like these often used to be very noisy. To exist, they need to stir the five senses. Deprived of humans, they are meaningless and show in full their artificial essence.

Toxic places may be solitary deserts where nature brings back its original layout by erasing the deep and extensive manipulation that created toxicity itself. When recovered, the traces of industrialisation are preserved to look natural : the relics are objects of design and marvellous constructions that fit perfectly into the wilderness. These remains are transfigured and purified as post-industrial architectures to be inhabited again, cradles for new generations of humans, or left alone to be consumed by time : once erased they will be ready to welcome humans again.

Mines and toxic miners

Edward Burtynsky describes his interest in mines as the symbolisation of human power and toxicity : « What this civilisation leaves in the wake of its progress may be the opened and emptied earth, but in performing these incursions we also participate in the unwitting creation of gigantic monuments to our way of life[14] ».

In the passage above, a word like "performing" points to the constant action that is needed to maintain toxicity, while the adjective "unwitting" indicates that humans pretend to be innocent viewers, and "gigantic" evokes the scale of the scenery that we usually find in this kind of landscape photography[15]. Burtynsky's work focuses on vast segments of land carved by quarries, mines, refineries, railroad lines and

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13   J. Peeples, « *Toxic Sublime* » *op.cit.*, p. 388-389.

14   https://www.edwardburtynsky.com/projects/photographs/mines   accessed   23 December 2019.

15   Contemporary ruin lust–whether it is images of Detroit or Chicago by Vergara, Moore, and others ; post-apocalyptic films, or photographs by Burtynsky, Maisel and Fair–provides an aestheticised and distant view of waste which is hauntingly beautiful. The apocalypse is appealing, seductive, trendy. See https://www.camilojosevergara. com/;   https://www.andrewlmoore.com/detroit.php ;   https://davidmaisel.com/; https://www.ignant.com/2017/08/11/j-henry-fair-photographs-toxic-waste/ accessed 23 December 2019.

Fig. 5 Giacomo Balla (1871-1958), *Velocità di Motocicletta* (1913), Private collection in P. Daverio, *Il secolo spezzato delle avanguardie : Il Museo Immaginato*, Vol.3., Milano, Vintage - Rizzoli, 2014 p. 147.

Fig 6 Edward Burtynsky (b. 1955), *Anthropocene Uralkali Potash Mine #4*, Berezwiki Russia (2017), https://www.edwardburtynsky.com/projects/photographs/anthropocene

Fig. 7, Agricola, *De re Metallica*, Book VI,
p. 212, in H. Hoover, L. H.Hoover, *De
re metallica*, Courier Corporation, 1950,
Project Gutemberg, https://www.gutenberg.
org/files/38015/38015-h/38015-h.htm

demolitions. These are places of rejection outside our normal experience: they are exceptional even if what they produce is banal and distant from our daily lives (*fig. 5, fig. 6*).

In his perspective, photography trains the eye to consider the images as mirrors of the authentic personality of these places, and to recompose the patchwork of compromised land that can thus be portrayed into a unitary whole. The photographic image, interpreted by Burtynsky, does not limit itself to impressing and educating the eye of the observer to see the beauty in waste but implements a real process of rationalisation *de visu* of these degraded places. By filtering landscape through photography, Burtynsky provides a regenerated social function to mines and quarries, bridging ugliness into sublimity[16].

The sublimity of mines is also augmented by their complexity. Mines are an incision in the ground, an act of violence which can be recovered by time or art. In this case, the external architectures that emerge from these places are silenced, partially disguised and embellished by the progress of vegetation, hence everything becomes picturesque. Mines are valued as

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16   http://museum.wa.gov.au/about/latest-news/edward-burtynskys-minescapes-available-now; accessed 23 December 2019.
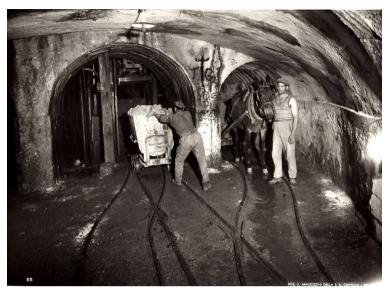
Fig. 8 *Miniera di Montevecchio, S.Antonio : momento del lavoro in miniera ; uomini e muli*, Archivio Storico del Comune di Iglesias
http://www.sardegnaminiere.it/il_cottimo_bedauxf1.html

empty spaces and polluted dumps. Photography stages them as deserts, hills with unusual colours, watercourses shining with bright and artificial nuances, massive quarry fronts whose large and vast dimensions stimulate our response to the point of idealising them. What makes them appealing are the oppositions that emerge in the photographs that portray mines as toxic places : internal vs external, empty vs plenty, light vs darkness, and sharp colour contrast that are so distinctive of this imaginary and discourse as to create the sublime experience.

Places like mines have a profound impact on people : they encapsulate community history, but they also represent one of the most controversial issues in international relations[17]. They are global and very local, and this is another crucial contrast that is featured by these places[18]. Mines are an excellent example of how humans act in and on the

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17 The importance of REEs Rare earth elements in microelectronics is one of the main reasons for a renewed exploitation of mines and a cause of international conflict. For a discussion see A. Saleem, « Social and environmental impact of the rare earth industries », *Resources*, 3.1, 2014, p. 123-134 ; Kiggins, D. Ryan, *The political economy of rare earth elements : rising powers and technological change*, CRC Press, Taylor and Francis, Boca Raton - London, 2015.

18 Actions aiming at preserving mining heritage testify for these characteristics. As a case in point we could consider the project *Les Mines de la Montagne Sauvegarder et Valoriser le Patrimoine Minier de la Montagne*, The project exemplifies the localism of these spaces, but the presence of shared features that could be found in many

landscape. Mine landscapes are vast, hollow, excavated architectures which men penetrate and walk. Mines are also underground sculptures meant to fulfil the technological needs of humans, and one of the very first forms of exploitation of the land along with agriculture[19].

However, there exist different types of mines, as mining techniques are classified according to two main excavation types: surface mining and underground mining. The two types of mining correspond to practices that impact very differently on the landscape.

In the United States, Canada, Brazil, Australia, Russia, vegetation and layers of rock are stripped to reach the ore, which means opening up the earth and making visible the invisible by using gigantic machinery and moving large quantities of land and materials, and here, the sublimity of the place is thus supported and nurtured by the gigantism of the whole process. On the contrary, sub-surface mining consists of digging tunnels or shafts into the earth to reach the ore. The ore is excavated, washed, separated, and grounded: layers of waste rock are abandoned for disposal which is then silently covered by vegetation or slowly erased by the weather. Darkness, in this case, links to the imaginary of death and rebirth, the *Hades*, the underworld.

In other words, the extraction method distinguishes the kind of work that is done on the earth: drift mining creates horizontal access tunnels, slope mining uses diagonally sloping access shafts, and shaft mining generates vertical access shafts. Rooms with pillars may also be built underground; holes created by explosives may then be refilled with

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other sites indicates the reproducibility and repetitiveness of the same toxic situation and its potential artification. The modalities by which these landscapes are recovered also indicate a sort of standardised approach to the issue. The presentation of the project reads: «Les activités du projet sont caractérisées par une forte composante immatérielle mais aussi par d'importantes interventions d'infrastructure, notamment de réhabilitation et de mise en sécurité des sites miniers, essentielles pour valoriser durablement ce patrimoine et en augmenter la fréquentation touristique»,
Culture is referred to in its immaterial nature which highlights how narratives and memories are crucial in defining space and the role of the people involved. The word "infrastructure" refers to the outside of the mine which is another significant facet of the aestheticisation process, while "rehabilitation" suggests that artification is a form of domestication. These places have to be restored to a dimension of security to allow their placement into the sphere of tourism. See: http://www.interreg-alcotra.eu/it/decouvrir-alcotra/les-projets-finances/mimo-miniere-di-montagna; accessed 23 December 2019.

19 We refer to the Bronze Age, and the Iron Age as periods of growth of human civilisation, as mining has accompanied humanity from the beginning. Extracting and digging metals has always been hard and challenging, proving the weakness and inferior position of humans in Nature but it would provide precious materials that substantiated civilisation, thus proving in the end human superior power.

waste to hold the structure[20]. These two approaches to mine cultivation are essential as we have two very different pictures of how man and the Earth interact: on the one hand man opening up the soil, on the other, it is the Earth that wins the game engulfing humans.

All this has a significant impact on mine photography, as the aesthetic effect is created either by editing the image to exalt colours, or to deepen the dark/light contrast as in black and white pictures. On the one hand, the photograph aims at capturing as much detail as possible at a high resolution to create a story, add depth to the image and provide a sense of tactility to a series of shots. On the contrary, in the imaginary related to collieries and underground excavation, the effect is entirely different and light becomes crucial. In general, we associate mines with the black and white faces of the miners. Colour, on the contrary, creates a dynamic effect of abstraction and design. Humans intrinsically associate the colour with particular emotions, while diverse hues and shades can add a particular atmosphere so that the sublime effect is reached.

In contrast, the lack of colour opens up a world where light, expressions, and people stories are intensified. Feelings are shown without distractions; the expressions and the movements are prioritised. Miners, in particular, stand out both as being an integral part of the landscape and as being objectified, foregrounded along with the machinery which they often substitute: miners are objects that inhabit the landscape.

These two contrasting poles are not new. There are several photographers who have dealt with this material since the early twentieth century to this day, either integrating humans as relevant in depicting this kind of landscape or rejecting them. Emil Otto Hoppé (1878-1972), for example, was the official photographer of the British royal house but was also a passionate traveller who immortalised industrial realities, the technological innovation conquered by modernity, together with those who made it possible, the workers. Bernd (1931-2007) and Hilla Becher (1934-2015) on the contrary, used photography to investigate the industrial territory as pure form. Their photography is detached from emotion, recovering the original value of the industrial instrument as an objective, impersonal witness to reality. The human figure is absent, while the subject is exclusively the industrial construction, the architecture repeated in serial

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20   P.-A. Rosental, «En guise de conclusion: vers une nouvelle histoire politique des mines», *Cahiers Jaures* 4, 2018, p. 151-155; M. Fontaine, «Les mines: un terrain d'expériences», *Cahiers Jaures* 4, 2018, p. 3-15; and also M. W. Flinn and D. Stoker, *The History of The British Coal Industry Volume 2, 1700-1830. The Industrial Revolution*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984; M. W. Kirby, *The British Coalmining Industry, 1870-1946: a political and economic history*, London: Macmillan, 1977.

shots and divided into types: water tanks, wells, tanks, blast furnaces, cooling towers, gasometers[21].

In sum, there is a line of continuity in the artification of these places. Contemporary photography has renewed both the documentary and critical intent of Oppé and at the same time developed utilising colour and aerial photography that the Bechers initiated. The result is better awareness of the existence of abandoned industrial areas and their potential recovery, beyond the local interests of communities[22]. However, this kind of photography highlights another vital aspect of toxic places, *i.e.* the opposition between "authentic" and "fake". Are these places authentic? Should they be left to decay and disappear or restored continuously as tourist attractions? In other words, should we leave these places to be erased by time or should they be restored to keep the memory alive? Turning mines into museums preserves memory and shapes community identity, but at the same time, it elicits the suffering inherent in the place; therefore, how should we position humans in mine landscape? As victims of toxicity or polluters?

The projects

In the British context, heritage discourse builds around the idea of land and landscape by valorising rural communities and symbolic places[23]. In this perspective, miners represent the prototype of the working classes, while mines are a powerful symbol of identity to be positioned between the rural and the urban dimension. The architecture and the machinery outside the pit create a micro-urban environment within the greenery of pastures and moorlands, which are also emblematic localities. In fact,

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21   S.-A. Baggott, B. Stokoe, «The Success of a Photographer: Culture, Commerce, and Ideology in the Work of E. O. Hoppé», *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2003, p. 25-46; W. Val, T. Pepper (eds.), *Cities and Industry: Camera Pictures by E.O. Hoppé*, York: Impressions Gallery, 1978; M. C. Vergara, «The Portrait of industrial Artefacts: The trigger of a new appreciation», *ZARCH: Journal of interdisciplinary studies in Architecture and Urbanism*, 5 (2016): 216-229; H. Liesbrock *et al.*, *Bernd and Hilla Becher: Coal Mines and Steel Mills*, Munchen, Schirmer/Mosel, 2010.

22   Urbex exploration represents a good case in point: P. Sergent, *Les secrets de la photo urbex: démarche - équipement - prise de vue – postproduction*, Paris, Eyrolles, 2018; A. Tesei, D. Calloni, *Italian urbex: viaggio tra i luoghi dimenticati*, Milano, Magenes, 2018; P. Traub, *Die Welt der verlassenen Orte: Urbex-Fotografie = World's lost places: urban exploration photography*, Halle (Saale), Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 2014.

23   Quite obviously the set of symbolic items is vast ranging from fashion to music, from the aristocracy to Shakespeare. In this context we refer to the idea of land and landscape. See: J. Bennett, «Imagining Englishness through Contested English Landscapes», *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 5-6 (October 2019): 835-48. doi:10.1177/1367549418786414; T. Gifford, *Pastoral*, London: Routledge, 2019.

mining holds a special place in the shaping of Britishness and mining sites stand metonymically for the nation, along with hedges, fences, gates, and dwellings ranging from castles to rectories, from manor houses to field workers' cottages. All these places conceptualise the landscape with a sense of nostalgia. All of them testify to a pastoral vision of the land and at the same time, bear the mark of industrial history[24].

The British landscape has always worked as a generator of cultural myths: until the 1960s the British Empire and its industries were the pillars of national identity and coal mines were represented as fundamental contributors to the building of an idealised national character – to some, even as a reinforcement of feudal authority[25]. Since the 19th century, British national identity and the class system had been constructed by placing the nation in the middle of the industrial revolution and scientific Progress. The ability to invent, manufacture and sell was portrayed as being something which distinguished Britain from the rest of the world[26]. British industrialists were seen as benefactors who initiated the industrial revolution and were the introducers of modernity to the Western world[27]. However, as Britain's mass-production industries declined in the face of global competition, British governments sought to reconstruct their image by representing nationhood as the embodiment of a modern advanced egalitarian nation. After the Second World War, the mining industry began to decline. The strikes of the 1980s put an end to the narrative of industrial power and were the last attempt to preserve mining heritage as a pillar of the nation.

Photography has always reinforced how Britishness was associated with these places: toxic in reality, nostalgic in form and appearance. Pastoral images of the countryside depict Britain as undisturbed, pacified, thus contributing to constructing a simplified and benign rural imaginary, picturing the country as safe. However, photographs of life in mining districts document the extreme poverty of these areas, the suffering, brutality and fatigue of these people. No place is left for the sublime of the

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24   D. Matless, *Landscape and Englishness: second expanded edition*, London, Reaktion Books, 2016.

25   D. Lowenthal, «British National Identity and the English Landscape», *Rural History*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1991, p. 205-230; K. Kumar, «Nation and Empire: English and British National Identity in Comparative Perspective», *Theory and Society*, vol. 29, no. 5, 2000, p. 575-608.

26   D. Sables, «Industry, heritage, the media, and the formation of a British national cultural memory», *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 21.4, 2017, p. 978-1010.

27   E. P. Thompson, «History from below», *Times Literary Supplement*, April 7, 1966, p. 279-80; N. R. Hothi, *Globalisation and Manufacturing Decline: Aspects of British Industry*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2005.

mining landscape. Toxicity does not exist as aesthetic dimension unless these places are abandoned and then the pastoral imaginary steps in.

Patrick Ward's images are a case in point as they attest to the outcomes of Britishness and post-industrial society in their artified form. In 2014 the National Coal Mining Museum for England exhibited a collection of photographs entitled *The Less-Favoured Land* which provided a glimpse into the lives of the mining communities of Horden, County Durham and Workington, Cumbria, during the 1960s[28] (*fig. 9*).

Photographs of miners mark the passing of time. What we see on the shiny surface of the photographic print no longer exists as we see it: as Barthes maintained, a shot is but the sign of mortality[29]. It may be a commonplace that miners are people who experience death and obscurity while alive[30], but the pictures that portray them either at work or posing, convey the idea of fixing a life that will disappear too soon. These kinds of pictures suggest that through the pose, the freezing of bodily motion, the death of the subject is enacted by the photographic shot which turns miners into a fetish. Yet, in Patrick Ward's project, the images capture miners against the harsh environment of their pits, and as a contrast, give us a glimpse of their spare time. From fetish, they are turned into people. British people (*fig. 10*).

The exhibition represented a community that was alive and happy. In these photographs, the smiling faces of the miners contrast with the sublimity of the spectral reality of their lives. The awe we feel thinking about their courage and the poisonous nature of their job (the silicosis of

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28   Some of the photograph is available at https://www.patrickwardphoto.com/portfolio/ G0000AaOR_XNHCEs; accessed 23 December 2019.

29   R. Barthes, *Camera lucida: Reflections on photography*, London, Macmillan, 1981, p. 14.

30   A. Kuhn, «Photography and cultural memory: A methodological exploration», *Visual Studies*, 22.3, 2007, p. 283-292; A. Kuhn, «Memory texts and memory work: Performances of memory in and with visual media» *Memory studies* 3.4, 2010, p. 298-313; D. Bate, «The memory of photography», *Photographies* 3.2, 2010, 243-257; M. Fried, «Barthes's punctum» *Critical Inquiry*, 31.3, 2005, p. 539-574; A. Sgard, «Questionner le paysage et la mémoire. Empreintes, traces, marques», *Mémoires en jeu* 7, 2018, p. 119-113; N. Mariotti, «Le paysage minier et sidérurgique dans les films de fiction français: Lieu de mémoire des représentations sociales», *Annales de geographie*. No. 3., A. C. Malakoff, 2016; M. Fontaine, «Visible/invisible», *Techniques & Culture* [En ligne], 65-66 | 2016, mis en ligne le 31 octobre 2018, consulté le 28 novembre 2019, URL: http://journals.openedition.org/tc/7810; accessed 23 December 2019, K. Hoffman, *Concepts of identity: Historical and contemporary images and portraits of self and family*, London, Routledge, 1996; S. Maresca, «Les apparences de la vérité», *Terrain* [En ligne], 30 | mars 1998, mis en ligne le 15 mai 2007. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/terrain/3409; accessed 23 December 2019.

Fig. 9, Patrick Ward, *Miners at the Horden Colliery, County Durham, 1960*, https://www.patrickwardphoto.com/portfolio/ G0000AaOR_XNHCEs/I0000VWdkNqEWkYo

their lungs that can be almost breathed by looking at the photographs) is a very different experience from the invisible and splendid toxicity of a pure excavated landscape. The photos fix a moment without being able to describe in full the alienation, and the irrational experience of a life where danger, accident and death, mutilation and disease were customary[31].

As Alain Sekula highlighted : « The culture of mining communities is frequently both militantly proletarian and luxurious in the sense of rural continuity and resistance to industrial discipline. Their culture has often collided with the logic of industrial rationalisation[32] ». Machines introduced new skills and of course, new dangers, leaving, in essence, the job as it was.

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31   Mines are a crucial element of cultural identity ; they have been the pivot of a community from father to son ; places cannot be separated from its inhabitants. It is not just the chemicals or the leftovers of machinery that characterize the essence of these brownlands, but the people who live there. For this reason the understanding of toxicity cannot be separated from the Human and should not be confused with pollution. Toxicity addresses the psychic dimension of perception, and it exists as a type of visual experience. It is through the vision, through landscape photography that mines become toxic places. On the contrary, visiting a mine is an experience of contrasts that pours into the senses, the internal and the external temperature, light and dark when entering a gallery, the absence of the original noise and the contrasting silence of an abandoned place. The variable colours according to the weather, the objects and pieces of machinery abandoned within and without the pit.

32   A. Sekula, *Photography against the grain : Essays and photo works 1973-1983*, London : Mack Books, 1984.

Fig. 10, Richard Jones, *Energy+Notion* (2016) https://
www.richardjonesphoto.com/energynotion-2/

Miners are usually pictured as wet, tired, and they look uncomfortable in their state, sometimes they gaze with pain. Yet, Ward's photographs of happy miners indicate a voyeuristic approach to their stories that contrast with Burtynsky's images : here it is the human face that creates the sublime. Viewers are thus equally horrified and seduced by these faces. Places of poverty resuscitate a scenario in which everything is quintessentially working class and British despite its misery[33].

Nevertheless, this idea of mining and the communities that lived around belongs to the past and is loaded with clichés. As mentioned before, Britain emerged from the twentieth century as the world's first post-industrial nation. This was an idea which involved consigning industries to the nation's past and revitalising abandoned urban sites by means of art, gentrification processes and green discourse.

Richard Jones is exemplary in this case because his project substitutes pastures to the blackness and bleakness of the Welsh collieries, pits have become windmills, and people have peacefully moved into the new ideological and aesthetic frame. In either case, we may question the authenticity of what we see, and even if heritage and Britishness now nest

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33   P. Bourdieu, « Le paysan et la photographie » *Revue française de sociologie* 6.2 (1965): 164-174 ; K. Bennett, R. Lee, « Amber and an/other rural : film, photography and the former coalfields », in R. Fish (ed.) *Cinematic countrysides*, Manchester University Press, 2018.

into green ideology, they seem fabricated. Alain Roger quite provocatively maintained that

> Je voudrais, à ce propos, dénoncer un préjugé : l'obsession du vert, entretenue par les écologistes et de nombreux défenseurs de l'environnement. Pourquoi cette "verdolâtrie"? Parce que le vert renvoie au végétal, donc à la chlorophylle, donc à la vie? Sans doute, mais est-ce une raison pour ériger cette valeur biologique en valeur esthétique, cette valeur écologique en valeur paysagère?[…] Faut-il qu'un paysage soit une vaste laitue, une soupe à l'oseille, un bouillon de nature[34]?

Does recovering a mine imply restoring the place to its natural primaeval state or cleaning it up so that the pain, noise, suffering that went with industrial work are erased and eradicated from sight? Is it an act of cleansing meant to be a new start for the place and the communities that live nearby? Jones fits into this new vision of domesticated toxicity by representing the recovery of the mining landscape in full, from ugliness into a sense of health and restored Progress: pictures reconstruct the movement from underground mining to open mining, and then to the restoration of pastures, ending up with windmill fields. Every image is commented upon by the voices of the subjects portrayed who worked in the mines so that it can be framed within storytelling practices. In this way, we hear and see those who live or have lived mining as the experience of their community and family[35].

Every time a social group elects a site as a symbolic place, it recognises its value as distinct, the place becomes recognisable, unique in the surroundings. The group accepts and shares a symbolism that points at experience and perception. Experience is directed or mediated by some form of communication that gives value to the constructed image of a symbolic place, continually modified by human activity or, we can say, by historical evolution. Perception reaffirms the need for the place to be universally shared, to become "memory of the community". The group creates images that generate new readings of the environment and society, as the landscape is not exclusively a biological or geographical fact. Patrick Ward shows this shift into a new connexion between the land, communities and their symbols.

In *Energy+Notion* (2016) coal mines are replaced by windmills: a transmutation of energy that profoundly affects the identity of local communities who have found an alternative source of income, and renewed

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34   A. Roger, *Court traité du paysage, op. cit.*, p. 192.
35   D. Meadows, «Digital storytelling: Research-based practice in new media» *Visual Communication* 2.2 (2003): 189-193; J. Lambert, *Digital storytelling: Capturing lives, creating community*, London, Routledge, 2013; C. H. Miller, *Digital Storytelling 4ᵉ*, Boca Raton, London, CRC Press – Routledge, 2019.

support by the government[36]. However, industrial scaled wind plants comprise a large number of volume-intensive, skyscraper-sized machines arranged in a phalanx along many kilometres of pasture. After the addition of the propeller blades and the other equipment, a turbine becomes a giant towering the land. Are windmills art objects despite their scale? Indeed they are all symbolic of the rehabilitation process that a toxic place undergoes to be artified or turned into a territorial resource. The whiteness, purity, positiveness of these installations evoke this process of rehabilitation and sanitation.

Conclusion

In the past, mines have been sustained as something indispensable to the prosperity of workers despite the harshness of their working conditions. At present, mines are often framed within some eco-critical discourse as epitomes of human failure and mediatised to enhance their symbolic and aesthetic value through art and photography[37]. Mines are moved from the domain of physical experience into an intellectual one. As mentioned above, landscapes are human constructs, which means that aesthetic principles, as well as social habits, engineer the land. The visual along with narratives create what we perceive as beauty and sublime. Photography plays a vital role in the process of artification of mines, along with institutions that work to support former miners, collect their experiences, their suffering and emotions, their sense of community and political engagement. Mining photography, whether focused on miners or their landscapes, is now an established genre.

Along with people, the machinery, the segmentation of the soil, and the fascination for contrasting colours or sharp black and white are leitmotivs in the transformation of toxicity into art. Toxic landscapes are landscapes in which human action has gone beyond the limit, bringing out the negative side of both. Like the *pharmacon* which cures but is poison, manipulated nature generates life and kills. The word "toxic" has a negative connotation (the Greek etymology indicates it from the start), but toxicity is inherent in Nature: it may be harmful to humans and other living creatures

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36   Part of the project is available at https://www.richardjonesphoto.com/energynotion-2/ accessed 23 December 2019.

37   W. Cragg *et al.*, «Ethics, surface mining and the environment», *Resources Policy,* 21.4 1995: 229-235; G. E. Damian *et al.*, «From environmental ethics to sustainable decision-making: Assessment of potential ecological risk in soils around abandoned mining areas-case study "Larga de Sus mine"(Romania)» *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 32.1, 2019, 27-49; P. Lucas, *La rumeur minière: Ou le travail retravaillé*, Lyon, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2019.

but it does not hurt itself[38]. Toxic elements have been there from the start – living creatures originated in the primordial soup that was toxic indeed : living creatures have been living within toxic places, waning and waxing in the history of the planet. These places may be toxic, and yet they can be recovered in their sublime significance of heritage.

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38 The word "toxic" has indeed become a trendy word in may fields. It was indicated as the word of the year 2018 according to the OED, used to refer *to the environment* and more frequently about harmful workplace environments with the toll toxicity takes on the workforce's mental health, such as a demanding workload, or outright sexual harassment. Another important use of the word is referred to as *toxic relationships* used in the media to define contemporary destructive interactions among partners, parents, or even politicians. Hence the focus on *toxic masculinity*. So appears the paradoxical nature of toxicity : perfectly natural and the starting point of life. Poisonous and deadly at the same time. Triggered, enhanced by human activity on the planet and at the same time, a very human intimate condition.

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