

PRESENT IN ABSENCE

The Hidden Life of Infrastructures

Tim Edensor (Manchester)

Industrial Ruins, Urban Materiality and Maintenance:
The Lost Infrastructures of the City

Gastón Gordillo (Vancouver)

The Forests Destroyed by Bulldozers:
An Affective Geometry of the Argentine Soy Boom

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Gästehaus der Universität Hamburg
Rothenbaumchaussee 34, Vortragsraum

Öffentliche Vorträge im Rahmen des Graduiertenkollegs
„Lose Verbindungen. Kollektivität im digitalen und urbanen Raum“

Present in Absence: The Hidden Life of Infrastructures

Ever since Susan Leigh Star's famous hypothesis, the idea that infrastructures become visible upon breakdown has inspired a wide range of disciplines. As an analytical tool it has been used to examine all kinds of information infrastructure, telecommunication cables, rail networks, or ferry routes, asking for political, social and economic implications. More recently, scholars critically examine its potential to account for forces that operate beyond the visual. The connections infrastructures forge, it has been argued, assemble a heterogeneous set of actors, ranging from humans to things, and from objects to affects, imaginations and promises.

Following up with these debates, our workshop aims at revisiting the notions of in/visibility. We aim at discussing their potential, both conceptually and methodologically, to account for the emergence of spontaneous, fragile, but nevertheless powerful forms of connectivity throughout infrastructures. By doing so, we also confront the vocabulary of in/visibility with alternative notions such as absence/presence. How can invisibilities sensibly be "there"? And how does the absence of some parts of infrastructure overlap with the presence of other material reminders of the exact same function? It is exactly this simultaneity of presence and absence, the in-betweens and connections it generates, that motivate our workshop. Infrastructures present an interesting case in time, as it seems to lie in their nature to never completely disappear, but always be partially present.

Tim Edensor (Manchester Metropolitan University): Industrial Ruins, Urban Materiality and Maintenance: The Lost Infrastructures of the City

The lecture focuses on three things: First, it discusses previous work on industrial ruins and the ways in which they suddenly became detached from networks and infrastructures – also displaying material evidence of these detachments. Secondly, by exploring building stone in several buildings in central Manchester, it focusses on how the material composition of the city testifies to its relationships with other places, revealing how cities are always ceaselessly recomposed out of the materialities of many of these other places and speak of lost connections and infrastructures. Thirdly, it discusses maintenance and repair as infrastructural practices and as activities that sustain infrastructures. The hypothesis is that when these activities cease, infrastructures will fail.

Tim Edensor is a Reader in Human Geography at the Department of Environmental and Geography Sciences, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. He has written on a wide range of research topics including urban and rural cultures, industrial ruins, mobilities and tourism, rhythm analysis, affect, urban materiality, football and contested cultural memory. He is author of „Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality“ (Berg, 2005) and „Tourists at the Taj“ (Routledge, 1998), as well as editor of „Geographies of Rhythm“ (Ashgate, 2009). He is currently researching urban materialities and landscapes of illumination.

Gastón Gordillo (University of British Columbia): The Forests Destroyed by Bulldozers: An Affective Geometry of the Argentine Soy Boom

In Argentina, a vast infrastructure has emerged in the past two decades to make possible the production of soybeans to China and the rest of the world. If infrastructure is “matter that enables the movement of other matter,” as Brian Larkin argues, it is also matter that reorganizes geographies, redefines their daily rhythms, and immerses them in particular affective atmospheres. The infrastructure of the Argentinean Chaco region is haunted by the environmental and social destruction it is based upon. This lecture examines, first, how agribusiness evicts rural residents and destroys forests to create soy fields. Second, it will be argued that forests react to the advance of bulldozers as affective assemblages defined by the presence of trees in their entanglement with animal and insect life. It will be examined how the expansion of a corporatized infrastructure at the service of global supply chains has prompted the rise of grassroots movements united in their defense of the forests as places of subaltern autonomy and non-commodified life.

Gastón Gordillo is a professor at the Department of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. He has worked on questions of terrain and the materiality of space, violence, affect, ruins and ruination, protests and insurrections; as well as the “soy boom” and resistance to agribusiness in South America. He is author of “Landscapes of Devils: Tensions of Place and Memory in the Argentinean Chaco” (2004, Duke University Press) and “Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction” (2014, Duke University Press). He is currently researching the social and spatial impact of agribusiness on the Gran Chaco region in northern Argentina, focusing particularly on the political responses by local people to land grabs, evictions, and deforestation.