
Autobiography of a living ruin

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Abstract

Cities are the most complex human construction. In their organic weaving, the different layers make up an invisible density, a fabric sewed by an infinity of hands. Of its overlapping lines, perhaps the most important is memory, as a collective construction, and affection, personal or general, always starting from a private place, shared or not. From this intimacy, with spaces and time, affectivity results as a bond. The experience of ruin is close to one of erosion, in that drawn-out slowness, and implies subjectivity in crisis by oblivion, disaffection, and phantasmagoria. That is, if there are ghost-towns there are also the ghosts of cities. Sometimes nightmares well exposed. This presentation deals with this nightmare of loss as a remembrance exercise of my own childhood in Vizela, Portugal.

Here it will be shown, in first person, the experience of a living ruin that completely changed the city: the Vizela River. It is thus an affective ruin or an autobiography of a public space. The decay established by the pollution of the Vizela River, once considered one of the most polluted rivers in Europe, had absolute consequences in the perception of the city, both in the surrounding Vizela river, and in the game of the old to the new centrality, between the decompensation and the unbalance. If, from the philosophical point of view, the questions of good were translated by Ethics and Politics into the notion of the common good, in the daily life of the cities this has been realized into an uncountable succession of collateral damage: from the ties of memory to the bonds of affection, urban edification and community habits, revealing the problem, well focused by Hans Jonas, on the breakdown and continuity of gestures and generational responsibility. An analysis and understanding of Vizela ruination process means to understand the silent impact of the life of the river in the city. The founding water of Vizela became her loved one that nobody visits in the cemetery. If the flux of life and water are parallel, as old Heraclitus reminds us, the notion of constant loss is a witness to a radical paradox: a ruin, moving, exposed, alive. The possible charm of decadence, and the melancholy of the remains, do not hide a crime, public and private, which is based on oblivion. A forgotten, still remaining, non-place.

Is it a ruin the visible result of lack of memory? How to understand a living ruin? These questions will be answered in the context of the Vizela River case-study. This exposition takes the form of a personal testimony, from childhood till the present, in confronting the passage of time.

Keywords: Memory, Living ruin, City impact, Autobiography

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