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## **Shared Histories: Form and Conflict**

A re-reading of Paul Virilio's Bunker Archeology from  
Rosalyn Deutsche's post-colonial feminist aesthetics



Support station on the coast of the English Channel.  
From Paul Virilio's *Bunker Archeology*. Page 79



Bunker for light artillery.  
From Paul Virilio's *Bunker Archeology*. Page 80



Lookout station on a beach in Normandy  
From Paul Virilio's *Bunker Archeology*. Page 86

In the last chapter of *Bunker Archeology*, Paul Virilio writes: “*Space was at last homogenized, absolute war had become a reality, and the monolith was its monument*”. Referring to the series of bunkers known as the Atlantic Wall, which were built in the north-west coast of Germany by the Nazis during the Second World War, Virilio’s text establishes a relation between the history of forms and the history of conflict. Virilio’s analysis suggest that the bunkers represent a tension between history and form: bunkers have a direct relation with the history of conflict that allowed their emergence, yet their “abstract forms” allow them to perform today as monuments, aesthetic symbols of some kind. Reading Virilio’s text, in November 2019, to be precise, was the first time I found out about these enigmatic monoliths, and the first time I saw one of them was through one of the beautiful photographs that accompany the book. These images produced on me an immediate “aesthetic pleasure”, an aesthetic experience. I recognized through these images, the bunkers as a beautiful form of architecture. But what does this mean? What is the social relevance of this contemporary “aesthetic” experience provided by the bunkers? and how could the history of these abstract forms allow spaces to think differently about the history of conflict and of struggle itself?

The beauty of the bunkers informs us about ourselves as much as about the past. As Virilio writes: “these littoral boundary stones were to teach me much about the era, and much about myself.” The contemporary aesthetic appreciation of the bunkers performs as an affective aesthetic experience through the symbolic dimension of architecture, which allow for an abstract level of associations to emerge. Precisely because our aesthetic experience is filled with added meanings by us as subjects and not only with the visual information we receive, it is established a certain dialogue with the structures, in which new meanings are created just in that experience. The aesthetic experiences of the bunkers, by being about perception, feeling, subjectivities that are constantly formed in that very moment of experiencing, these subjectivities in-the-making establish a certain counter-process of subjection that execute its forces against the fixed story of the past that has told us: that these structures are only a residue of a past war, and that its permanence in the world only remain us of such past conflict. These counter-aesthetic subjectivities open up the possibility to create a different account of history from the past. Not a history that attempts to be neutral, but on the contrary, that is so subjective and filled with affective notions of desire and fantasy that, in turn, open up spaces for new meanings to emerge.

## Fragmentation and Difference: Establishing aesthetic preoccupations

These emergent subjectivities can only avoid the trap of falling into a narcissistic appropriation of history based on a hyper-individual account dimension of the aesthetic pleasure, if such subjectivities take into account the notion of the "other". In her text *Boystown*, feminist theorist Rosalyn Doucette argues that although aesthetic appreciation is often a construct that has been commonly neglected from history as a having an actual "affect" in society, in fact aesthetics expose notions of difference and fragmentation in several socio-political and cultural realms. Although the bunkers emerged as a product of conflict, but their built form represents a reality on its own. A reality or an entity that allow us as viewers to construct our own associations with our own specific histories of conflict. This focus on representation or the aesthetic dimension of built forms does not mean a desertion of politics, rather, it reinvents the political through an aesthetic appreciation of architecture. As Deutsche writes: "Feminist discourse addresses the implication of voyeuristic and narcissistic visual operations in the construction of subjectivity considered not as a process of imprinting social norms on individuals but as an ambivalent process of psychical identifications, internalizations and projections with political effects". Notions of fragmentation and differentiation give voice to a multiplicity of subjectivities, identities and realities to also play a role in the re-construction of history, including the role that aesthetic fantasy and aesthetic desire had played in the construction of the past. This feminist account of history through fantasy and desire challenge the postmodern views on history as being homogenous, continuous and accessible for everyone.

Understanding the agency of the aesthetic fragmented subjectivities, emerged through notions of fantasy and desire, in its role in fostering the formation of certain counter-politics of space, adds a deeper dimension to the urban struggle and its reclamation of history. The complexity of aesthetic perception allows the various spatial and visual disciplines at stake to collide in a moment in time and reflect in its own spatial conditions. This aesthetic re-appropriation of history, should not attempt to become a neutral construction, nor to de-contextualize forms from history, but on the contrary, it should attempt to find alternative socio-historic-aesthetic contexts and in doing so radically recontextualise in history abstract spatial forms and in doing so allow the subjects to construct and de-construct their own subjectivity by the multiplicity of associations activated in aesthetic experiences of spatial forms of conflict.

## Conflict, Form and Democracy

My argument on aesthetics as a subjective counter-reclamation of the history of forms and conflict, is also an argument for democracy. Feminist theories critique Marxism for arguing that only economic production constitutes the foundation of the social totality and therefore, it also prioritizes the role of class conflict in the project of human emancipation, leaving out other possible starting points that could add to the social emancipation. Including a feminist aesthetic perspective to the socio-political discourse is crucial to the strengthening of social struggles, and counter-hegemonic struggles. In this context the aesthetic realm plays the role of the “other”, challenge universalizing discourses and fighting for its inclusion in the field of history and political theory, and arguing for a multidisciplinary intake of those notions. Feminist theories argue that in order to dismantle the totalitarian knowledge promoted by hegemonic structures, it is necessary to construct more democratic forms of knowledge and subjectivities that acknowledge their uncertainty and plural foundations. Similarly, to Virilio, Deutsche also sets a joint framework for relations between aesthetics and politics, or visibility and democracy, and the possibilities that the feminist notions of fragmentation and difference bring to the table when it comes to understand the conflicted and political nature of built forms and interdisciplinarity of its representation and association. Because built form is not non-social, as commonly understood by postmodernism, and it is part of the larger system of social relations and political affects that constitute the fabric of the world. It is because the associations they afford us and the way they shape alternative kinds of subjectivities that aesthetic pleasure, by unfolding our desires emerged through the act of looking, that we can understand other histories and other pasts. Finally, my argument for the political relevance of aesthetic pleasure is also a reaction of what is happening in the contemporary context of the world. We cannot longer afford to non-politize aesthetics. The rise of the far-right and its growing appropriation of affects and desires, will very likely lead to the creation of other kind of bunkers and other kind of walls. The left needs to start reclaiming an aesthetic account of history too.