Introduction: The Bunker's After-Life: Cultural Production in the Ruins of the Cold War

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Introduction: The bunker's after-life: cultural production in the ruins of the Cold War

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Abstract

This special issue explores how demilitarization and repurposing are still playing out within abandoned military bunkers of the Cold War era, 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Noting that the physical erasure of these bulky defensive fortifications is practically impossible, the Introduction shows how the contributors' common concern is to explore the ways in which new uses and new meanings are applied to these stubborn structures. By adopting a notably broad definition of 'cultural production' (one which can accommodate mould, acoustics and irony as cultural phenomena) the Introduction demonstrates how the contributors find these places — through their embodied exploration and archival enquiry — to be anything but dead or trapped by their past militaristic purposes. Instead, the bunker's after-life is found to be a matter of ongoing cultural production, acting out through a variety of contemporary appropriations: some of them contested and some of them playfully indeterminate.

Keywords: Cold War, bunkers, nuclear war, demilitarisation, ruins, cultural production

Introduction: the aims of this special issue

The contributors to this special issue of the *Journal of War and Culture Studies* all seek to explore the question 'what happens to bunkers after a conflict has ended?' Traditionally wars end with a wave of demilitarisation, a purgative, destructive process that seeks to either remove or repurpose military structures, to the extent that they are no longer required for defence (Towle 1997; Webster 1997; Rakoczy 2008). In the pithy commandment of Isaiah 2:4 (The Bible, 1998), swords are to be struck into ploughshares. But some structures are simply too big and/or too numerous to either recast or to destroy. In the case of twentieth century indomitable reinforced concrete military structures, these fortifications were designed to resist sustained assault by high explosives and since 1945, by nuclear weapons. Such structures are nearly impossible to demolish, particularly where they lie underground (Bennett 2019) – stubborn endurance is their *raison d'etre*. Thus demilitarisation for these structures is unlikely to be achieved through physical destruction, instead it must be achieved via repurposing or other semantic stratagems aimed at disrupting their military connotations. Unless, of course, these places come to be seen as having cultural symbolic value via those military connotations, and whether as proud patriotic heritage of a time (for example, in the case of the pillbox) when Britain 'stood alone' (Wills 1985) or a dark heritage with an admonishment value: warning monuments to the effects and/or anxieties of the last century's conflicts (Macdonald 2009).

Often, it appears, the first step in moving bunkers towards their post-military after-lives is a communal act of shunning, as observed by Paul Virilio (1994) in 1958 when inspecting a cluster of coastal bunkers forming part of the Nazi's Atlantic Wall, a chain of fortifications built between 1939 and 1941 by slave labour and stretching out along the coast of north western Europe: 12,000 bunkers from the Bay of Biscay to the Norwegian Fjords. Virilio pondered why the Wall's mammoth constructions (local instantiations of one of the world's largest ever construction projects) were seemingly all but invisible to locals. He concluded that they were being actively denied meaning by passers-by in order to denature and depower these once deadly symbols of an occupying military power. But he felt that with the sufficient passage of time these structures' raw mnemonic power to

summon wartime memories would fade, and new post-military after-uses and attendant – more positive – meanings would emerge too.

Virilio's concern to account for his bunkers' current and potential future uses and meanings has proved to be very influential in contemporary bunker studies, a multidisciplinary endeavour which over the last decade has seen geographers, historians, architects, archaeologists, artists and others exploring the fates of bunkers abandoned in the aftermath of the twentieth century's conflicts (see for example Beck 2011; Strömberg 2013; Bennett 2017). Whilst Virilio's own investigations focussed upon Nazi bunkers, the contributors to this special issue enquire into the post-war fates of Cold War-era bunker sites (and in particular those structures built to withstand nuclear attack). As the second half of the twentieth century has started to recede into 'the past' of a previous era, we have seen the Cold War rise as a fertile, new area of historiographical and cultural analysis (Griffith 2001). Much of this analysis has focussed upon the international relations of the superpower standoff, but an emergent attentiveness to the Cold War's symbolic and material culture (of which nuclear bunkers are its most durable artefacts), has started to redress the imbalance. But the framing of these symbols and artefacts as heritage is harder than for those left behind by the Second World War, and for a combination of many reasons: because secrecy as to the design and location of relevant facilities remains an obstacle to interpretation; because the moral coding is less clear on whether any particular side (or their facilities) embody 'good' or 'bad' moral narratives; and because the Cold War didn't follow the spatial logics of previous wars – there were no distinct battlegrounds, the Cold War was everywhere and nowhere, for this was (in North Western Europe at least) a war-in-waiting, a tense existential standoff materialised in bunker-building spread out across the whole of territories rather at borders or other anticipated points of contact with an invading army; and (perhaps most anomalously) because these bunkers were built for a conflagration which, in the end, never transpired.

The bunker studies presented in this special issue broadly echo Virilio's method: combining accounts of embodied exploration with attentive archival work, and their concern is to achieve both a phenomenological account of the nature of these now-abandoned places, and a taxonomic assessment of the trends that shape the original, present and future lives of life of these structures. Bradley L.

Garrett and Ian Klinke (2019) have recently laid down a challenge to the hegemony of Virilio's methods and concerns in bunker studies. They point out that the dominant scholarly approach tends to depict the bunker as both a symbol of, and an artefact of the past – rather than of the present and future. They point out that the bunker (as an emplacement of military power) is still very much alive. They also persuasively argue that Virilio's framing tends to figure bunkers as places of shelter (with its inhabitants as victims) rather than as places of relative safety from which perpetrators plan the extermination of whole cities.

Garrett and Klinke's critique is well made, and points to new areas of scholarship which need to be explored within bunker studies. However, it is not the case that the Virilio-type approach is exhausted. There is still plenty of work still to be done to understand the end-of-life stage of bunkers and of the cultural effects of their affective and symbolic resonance in abandonment. Accordingly, this collection seeks to build upon the broadly Virilio-type studies presented in my 2017 edited collection *In the ruins of the Cold War bunker: materiality, affect and meaning making*. That collection presented a multidisciplinary investigation of contemporary bunker re-engagements from around the world by 13 contributors, touching in particular on artistic and heritage based-appropriations of these now-abandoned Cold War spaces. As befitting the *Journal of War and Culture Studies'* concern with the points at which war and culture meet (and the forms of cultural production related to that intersection), the new articles assembled in this special issue develop an even wider and more provocative set of lenses with which to detect the multiple forms and intensities within which post-military forms of use and meaning making come to be projected onto the blank walls of bunker spaces. Through this they reveal the processes by which (and rate at which) originating war-related uses and meanings fade from these places, thereby enabling the bunker's after-life.

In the following sections I will briefly introduce the five articles, noting as I do so that bunker studies is inherently a multidisciplinary endeavour. I will then draw out the similarities and differences of the articles by considering first how each contributor identifies and examines ongoing cultural production within the bunker, secondly how each contributor approaches the bunker's resistance to entropy, and

finally how each contributor characterises the bunker's ongoing cultural reverberations: its resonance, both literally and metaphorically.

Bunker studies is multidisciplinary

Over the last decade the after-life of bunkers has become a subject of study across a number of disciplines: from archaeology to real estate, from cultural geography to fine art (see, for example, the array of disciplines represented in Bennett 2017). Accordingly, the contributors to this special issue represent a broad spread of disciplinary perspectives, and survey a wide range of bunker interactions.

Matthew Flintham is an artist and an academic whose work focusses on representations of military landscapes. In 'Vile Incubator: a pathology of the Cold War bunker', he investigates the after-life of the Torås bunker complex in Norway, reflecting on both the embodied act of bunker exploration and the ongoing cultural production that he finds in this supposedly dead, lifeless abandoned place.

Louise K. Wilson is also an artist and an academic, and her work has investigated iconic Cold War military sites like the former testing range at Orford ness in Suffolk, through site-based installations and audio art. In 'Sounds from the bunker: aural culture and the remainder of the Cold War', Wilson considers the appropriation of Cold War bunkers' distinctive acoustic atmospheres and of 1980s bunker-themed pop songs in contemporary music production.

In their collaborative article "'Mine are the dead spaces": a discussion of bunker work's atmospheres, limits and routines', Becky Alexis-Martin, a cultural geographer whose work specialises in nuclear geographies, leads a discussion with artists Kathrine Sandys and Michael Mulvihill, using the surroundings of the Churchill War Rooms, a Second World War bunker deep beneath Whitehall in London, as a prompt for considering the valence of the bunker to artists and its other denizens. Sandys is an artist and academic who, like Wilson, has worked with the distinctive audio-visual properties of empty bunkers. Mulvihill is an artist who has recently completed a practice-based PhD based around a residency at RAF Fylingdales.

As an architect, Sean Kinnear's 'Reopening the bunker: an architectural investigation of the post-war fate of four Scottish nuclear bunkers', presents an assessment of the underappreciated architectural

significance of Scottish Cold War bunkers, outlining their distinctive architectonic qualities and profiling in his four case study sites, four different approaches to preservation and after-use of these structures. Kinnear calls for greater heritage protection to be accorded to these sites in Scotland.

Finally, in 'Profaning GAMA: exploring the entanglement of demilitarisation, heritage and real estate in the ruins of Greenham Common's cruise missile complex', I consider with my former student Philip Kokoszka (who contributed fieldwork as part of his 2018 MSc dissertation) the strangely mundane, indeterminate fate of GAMA, the once-iconic cruise missile bunker complex built at RAF Greenham Common in the early 1980s. We do so from the perspective of real estate and land-use planning, and seek to show how an appreciation of the entanglement of a number of contemporary cultural drivers (demilitarisation, ruination, heritage preservation and re-utilisation) can help to account for the site's unexpected 'failure' to become a formal monument to its Cold War past. In conclusion, reflecting upon this outturn, we attempt to suggest – using the work of Giorgio Agamben on 'profanation' – that this failure of the site to achieve a singular new meaning may in itself be fitting.

Still alive: ongoing cultural production in the abandoned bunker

This journal's aims include promoting exploration of the relationship between war and culture during conflict and in its aftermath, and examining the cultural production and circulation of both symbols and artefacts of conflict. Bunkers are very potent and enduring symbols and artefacts of conflict, which are deeply embedded in contemporary culture (Bennett 2011). To draw out this embeddedness, this special issue takes a very broad view of the bunker's cultural production. As Raymond Williams (1983, 87-93) notes 'culture' is not a settled term. The contributors to this issue tend towards using the term in its anthropological sense – with cultural production thus here being regarded as the processes by which social groups produce shared meaning about abandoned bunkers, and whether that arises within small groups of enthusiastic bunker preservationists or across wider society via popular culture. Therefore, the narrow, elitist, sense of 'culture' promoted by Matthew Arnold (1960) as the production only of the fine arts is elided.

Additionally, the expression ‘cultural production’ is used here in a way intended to emphasise that that the generation, modification and circulation of cultural symbols and artefacts is always ongoing. Meanings evolve – therefore the cultural production of the bunker is not a one off, originating event. The meanings and uses of these places evolve over time, and in response to a variety of broadly societal trends (e.g. how bunkers are portrayed in popular fiction) and in how individual actors actively engage in a process of appropriation within the bunker, each projecting and inferring upon the bunker in accordance with the needs of their own purposes and practices. Thus Kinnear portrays the variety of actors, motives, and resulting re-use schemes, brought about recently in four Scottish bunker sites. Meanwhile Kokoszka and I investigate the medley of stakeholders and their entangled cultural logics at play in the stilted after-life of the former cruise missile bunkers at Greenham Common. Furthermore, the articles by Wilson, and Alexis-Martin, Mulvihill and Sandys, show how the phenomenological qualities of the abandoned bunkers appeal to them as artists, as largely ‘blank canvas’ sites which they can appropriate (albeit often only temporarily) and are used in their production of site-specific installation and performance works. Notably, Wilson – as an artist working mainly in the medium of sound – shows how the bunker can be valorised for its acoustic, as well as its visual, atmospherics. Flintham (also an artist) appropriates an even more unusual cultural feature of the abandoned bunker: its mould. In doing so he productively pushes the notion of cultural production to its extreme – for mould is a culture which replicates itself, taking hold within the bunker’s stale air. As Williams (1983, 87) notes, one of the earliest meanings of ‘culture’ is “the tending of natural growth”. Flintham’s then is a view of the more-than-human enculturing of the bunker – if the mould culture can be said to be self-tending of its own growth. Alternatively, a human cultivator or sorts can be identified in Flintham’s own semantic cultivation, his human valorisation of the mould’s bunker colonising expansion drives by subjecting it to meaning making, by rendering it aesthetic.

Survival cell: the bunker’s battle against entropy

Flintham seeks to show, through his attentiveness to these cultures of mould, that bunkers are ultimately ironic spaces. For within the heart of their hermetic isolation, decay and degeneration (as instances of the entropy – the drive towards loss or energy – that afflicts the eventual dissolution of all

things), derelict bunkers are found to be generative, living places. Thus they are ironic because they are both hostile *and* habitable. Engineered originally as survival cells for humans, these places are now abandoned and inhospitable to their intended denizens. They have been rendered toxic to humans through the proliferation of these moulds and other entropic processes of decay. And yet, the mould, and those wider processes of change, are themselves a form of dynamic change – and if viewed in a wide frame of reference – signs of survival and endurance. In short, the bunker endures and has an existence (and cultures of sorts) even when fully abandoned. Flintham links his ruminations on the resilience of mould to the Cold War-era theorising of cybernetics, the science of distributed systems and self-organisation. Cold War theorising (and the art and fiction that Flintham identifies as influenced by this anxious milieu) was influenced by existential questions of how – and where – to best face-down the accelerated entropy to be witnessed in the face of a nuclear blast. And the best answer to that question was usually 'the bunker'. Conceived as a sealed survival space intended to facilitate the autonomous survival of Cold War human bodies and other culture-preserving vessels of information, Flintham's Cold War bunker is largely bereft of human life and apocalyptic scheming. But conflict and survival are both still enacted there, for the bunker is now host to daily battles of territorial expansion and defence waged between extremophiles deep inside this now hostile-to-human terrain.

Meanwhile, approaching decay and degeneration from a more avowedly human (and heritage preservation) standpoint Kinnear makes an impassioned plea for greater attentiveness to Scotland's Cold War-era bunkers, presenting that call within the context of a narrative of loss (through sites falling victim to both material decay and unsympathetic redevelopment). He argues that increased attentiveness to the architectural significance of these places could spur their greater protection. However, Kokoszka and I show that setting out to save an iconic site may require more than protective heritage and land-use planning designations. We show how the interplay of drives for demilitarisation, heritage preservation and sustainable economic re-use have led to the Greenham Common cruise missile site being stuck in limbo (neither fully alive nor fully dead) since the site was

sold off by the Ministry of Defence in 2003. Thus regulatory intervention may have slowed GAMA's entropy but by no means has it been halted or reversed.

Still transmitting: the bunker's ongoing resonance

Virilio collaborator Sylvère Lotringer, writing in support of Virilio's claim that the Atlantic Wall bunkers had a strong mnemonic resonance for him, has recalled drawing up close to an abandoned Nazi bunker as a child, placing his ear upon its concrete flank and listening to hear the "roar of war still trapped inside" (Virilio & Lotringer 2003, 10). This depiction both acknowledges the distinctive acoustics of cavernous bunker-spaces, as the sound of waves echoes within them, and also their affective, mnemonic quality, whereby they trigger his memories of the war. It seems unlikely that Lotringer means us to take his statement literally (i.e. that the bunker itself somehow holds memories of the war independent of its human interlocutors), and Nadia Bartolini (2015) has recently argued persuasively against suggestions that bunkers themselves have a historical and/or militaristic essence which they store and transmit independent of the projections and inferences of particular visitors.

But certainly, the acoustic properties of bunker-spaces are affective, and can be utilised by artists and musicians in their work. Wilson shows how the distinctive acoustic signatures of sites like the domed Teufelsberg listening station in Berlin have been preserved digitally, such that the very distinctive reverb of that structure can be used as an ambient sound-shaping technique in the production of wholly unrelated sound recordings. Thus, an acoustic mapping of a bunker and its echo characteristics may outlast the site itself, its virtual form preserving and transmitting an aspect (but only an aspect) of the bunker's being. Commenting upon the possibility of virtual preservation and/or recreation of long-lost bunkers Kinnear suggests that virtual recreations inevitably lose a quality that only the bunker itself can deliver – the affective charge of being there as a fully embodied visitor, picking up the musty smells and sense of confinement that Flintham also depicts in his explorations into the Torås mountain-bunker complex.

But to acknowledge these affective charges is not the same as believing that these places are haunted by their histories. Alexis-Martin, Mulvihill and Sandys note the affective charge of abandoned

bunkers but conclude that the contemporary cultural interest in abandoned bunkers more rooted in their 'blank space' affordances – their semantic openness – than it is in any firmly determining past essence. They argue that abandoned bunker sites do not throw an obstinate military essence at any visitor. Indeed, Mulvihill finds that even when operational military sites may not seem very distinctive at all. Furthermore, Alexis-Martin reports that despite working daily within a former local government Cold War bunker, it was many months before she came to realise that the basement offices in which she was working had started life as a facility designed for nuclear war.

Alexis-Martin, Mulvihill and Sandys show how such places are increasingly sites of free-form play and projection rather than clear communion with an immovably encoded past. Kinnear would take issue with the desirability of such free-play and in his article argues for the importance of preserving (or sympathetically adapting) these structures as a way of retaining both their mnemonic connection to the Cold War past and to their distinctive atmospheres and taxonomic forms. For Kinnear taking the bunker former into the future requires a delicate balance to be struck between preserving the embodied mnemonic traces of the past and finding ways to bring about an enduring preservation via new-found uses. Kinnear believes that there is a resonance from these places – but it could be easily missed if not carefully sought out and protected. Meanwhile, Kokoszka and I find an ambivalence at the heart of attempts to find an enduring heritage status for the GAMA site at Greenham Common. On paper the site has a very strong claim to internationally significant heritage status, but we find heritage significance to be but one shaping influence in the battle for its after-life. The past, *per se*, is seemingly not an ultimate dead-hand controlling influence over even this iconic bunker site.

Meanwhile, Wilson shows us a second type of resonance – a cultural reverberation. She describes how anxiety about the heightened risk of nuclear war in the early 1980s insinuated itself into popular culture (and popular music in particular), often using bunkers as a motif. This conflation of nuclear anxiety, bunker-talk and new wave synth-pop has in the last decade seen a wry, nostalgic revival; a cultural production that merges a new-found attentiveness to the once-unattainable shelters with the lo-fi musical stylings of the early 1980s, by pop-ironicists such as Luke Haines. These ironic pop-cultural appropriations of the Cold War bunker are perhaps the most playful appropriations of all.

Conclusion

The autumn of 2019 saw much attention focussed upon the iconography of the 'Berlin Wall', on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of its fall. Considerable efforts were expended to destroy the wall in the early 1990s - achieving its near-total erasure in a matter of months. This was a campaign of physical demilitarisation that ensured that the ending of German partition would be irreversible. In contrast this Introduction and the articles in the special issue consider the endurance of a more diffuse, harder to destroy, and less prominent set of Cold War material culture: the bunker. As with the Wall, these structures are iconic, mnemonic even. The articles presented here contribute to the ongoing development of bunker studies by showing that these obstinate structures are not just materially durable (for they manage to retain some of their original war-related purpose embodied within their strange, brutal forms) but also fluid, in that they are caught up in an ongoing cultural production which over time enables a loosening of war-related meanings, a loosening that can bring both new utility, and also episodes of playful irony. This loosening contributes to the attrition of the bunker's original form as both war-related materiel and as a potent symbol of war. Ultimately, this loosening is found to be the product of a quiet, long-term semantic decay, a subtle, slow-burn form of cultural demilitarisation which strikes quite a contrast to the speedy, systematic physical erasure of the Cold War's more evident and destroyable military structures, like the Wall.

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