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This short essay attempts a phenomenological reflection upon my brief encounter in Spring 2022 with the remnants of the Lisbon and Setúbal coast defence artillery batteries known collectively as *Plan Barron*. It reflexively examines my strategies for making sense of these Portuguese emplacements by reference to more widely known concrete bunker systems and the scholars and enthusiasts who have given these their attention.

Encountering bunker hunters

In 1958, whilst holidaying at the French coast at Saint-Guénolé, a young Paul Virilio began his quest to make sense of the Nazi 'Atlantic Wall', a chain of over 15,000 thousand concrete bunkers constructed between 1941 and 1945 and which stretched along 5,000km of coastline, from the Bay of Biscay to the Norwegian arctic with the aim of preventing an Anglo-American invasion of Nazi -occupied Europe.

Seeking to put to work the embodied phenomenology of perception advocated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012), Virilio declared how his project had been triggered by a bodily sensation: "I was vacant in the middle of my vacation … scanning the horizon…, with nothing interrupting my gaze, brought me full round to my own vantage point, to the heat and to this massive lean-to buttressing my body…" (Virilio, 1994: 10-11). Thereafter he committed himself to come to know these bunkers, and he would achieve this through a combination of attentiveness to the physical – embodied – circumstances of that encounter, the material qualities of the bunkers, and also to the symbolic (and semantic) resonances of these strange places, including how the blank concrete structures that he encountered pointed to other deeply embedded cultural archetypes: "the Egyptian mastabas, the Etruscan tombs, the Aztec structures" (1994: 11) and "the crypt, the ark, the nave" (14).

Virilio's *Bunker Archeology* project strove to 'know' these bunkers through a combination of embodied experience and taxonomic information gathering, he photographed these structures and researched their design, construction and purpose in archives (see Bennett (2017) for a more detailed discussion of the motives and methods of Virilio's bunker hunting).

By coincidence, at the same time that Virilio was implementing his obsessive project, United Kingdom was embarking upon its own bunker-building spree. Between 1956 and 1965, 1,500 small underground concrete shelters were constructed to form a network distributed across the entirety of the United Kingdom, from which volunteers of the Royal Observer Corps would, in the event of nuclear war, monitor and report blasts and fallout (see Bennett, 2018). Abandoned in 1992 following the sudden end of the Cold War, this network of 'ROC Posts' quickly fell into ruin. But by 2000 it was receiving systematic attention from amateur bunker-hunters, who were seeking to visit and document (and sometime to restore) as many of these sites as they could find and access, and who were detailing their exploits on the internet. In 2009, I commenced a decade-long study of how these Cold War remnants have been valorised by these enthusiasts, looking at their motives and methods for their engagement with, and their enchantment of, these otherwise blank and dank spaces (see Bennett, 2011a & 2013).

Meanwhile, there are bunker hunters who specifically seek to experience and research coast defence artillery batteries, because these structures were also suddenly abandoned, leaving a strange legacy of ruins for them to explore and make sense of. The United Kingdom Government decided to abandoned its coast defence artillery batteries in 1956, having concluded that developments in missile and jet technology marked the end of viable coast defence through static gun emplacements. In his 1974 book (coincidentally written around the same time as Virilio's *Bunker Archeology* project was first presented for public consumption) Ian Hogg writes of lure of needing to research and know these once secretive – but by then abandoned – military places, detailing his fascination with:

> "the size of the fort; the immense effort which must have gone into building it, arming it and manning it; the architectural intricacy of it; the fact that from the top of the casemates I could see more works which appeared to be equally derelict; all these things made me wonder just how many of these forts existed, who built them, when, why, how had they been armed , and a thousand other questions. From then on my spare time was devoted to delving into old records, questioning old gunners, and travelling about to find and examine more forts." (Hogg, 1974:10)

In Portugal, the coast artillery batteries of Plan Barron remained in operational mode (and very secret) until the disbanding of the Coast Artillery Regiment in 1998. Thereafter these sites were mostly abandoned, thereafter quickly falling into ruin like the Atlantic Wall and the ROC Posts, and presenting strange apparitions within otherwise mundane rural, urban and coastal environments which recall Virilio's sense of revelation that: "as I concentrated on these forms in the middle of apartment buildings, in courtyards, and in public squares, I felt as though a subterranean civilisation had sprung up from the ground." (Virilio, 1994: 12).

What connects all bunker hunters is a persistent urge to uncover and to 'know' these places and the vast, existential, systems that they formed part of.

The declassification of the Plan Barron defence system in 2004, laid the ground for bunker hunting logics to be applied to these sites, and since 2015 they have become the object of investigation and potential re-animation by Maria Rita Pais and her colleagues at Lusofona University of Humanities and Technology, Lisbon (Pais et al, 2021).

And this is how I found myself in May 2022 touring five of the Plan Barron coast defence batteries.

The Plan Barron tour

Our conference's day-long tour brought us successively to suburban *terrain vague*, to overgrown woodland ruins, to cliff top prominences, to nature reserves and veteran associations. At each site we came upon the remains of Plan Barron's long silent coast artillery batteries, their turrets, their subterranean munitions stores, their fortified command posts.

Plan Barron was a scheme devised in the 1930s by General Frederick Wilmot Barron, who between 1934 and 1938 was the Inspector of Fixed Defences for the UK War Office. Long standing collaborative defence arrangements between Portugal and the United Kingdom (Stone, 1994), had led to provision of British military expertise and materiel, to establish a system of eight coast defence batteries to defend the approaches to the vital harbours of Lisbon and Setúbal.

So, as another Englishman in Portugal, I was taking my turn to pass through and inspect the fortifications, perhaps like General Barron once did. As I gazed out from these unfamiliar coastal heights upon the glistening sea, and the boats drifting in and out of range of these emplacements' guns, I wondered what my predecessors made of these sites and their views. Presumably their gaze would have been evaluative and instrumentalist: how well would the batteries target the ships below? How vulnerable would they be to return fire from the ships below? How well had UK design and operating practices mapped across into Portuguese hands?

But today the batteries are no longer operational – they are now matters of the past and are (in many, but not all cases) abandoned. Taken together (as a ruined system) these sites are a meshwork of preserved pasts, ambiguous presents and potential futures. These sites are each somewhat freed from their original meanings and purposes. Less so, where still subject military or veteran stewardship, more so where in a state of more fulsome abandonment. In the latter sites, there is evident scope for free-play, both in terms of physical interaction with the remnant structures, and in terms of the meanings that can be projected onto them by visitors.

So, what is the appropriate gaze to bring to these places? For our tour's Portuguese hosts these sites are now-revealed places of defence, a materialised explanation of Portugal's avoidance of being embroiled in to the Second World War. They are testimony to a successful national defence. Yet, for most Portuguese these places and their purpose are still unknown. And in the United Kingdom, Plan Barron (and military aid to Portugal) means nothing, it has no resonance in cultural memory.

My studies of how the UK public think about their own physical defences has found a heady mix of nostalgic patriotism surrounding Second World War fortifications (typified by the hastily built land defences constructed in 1940 'when Britain stood alone' in fear of an imminent Nazi invasion) (see Bennett, 2013). But engagements with the UK's Cold War bunkers are more ambivalent. Knowledge of these structures is vaguely held in UK popular culture – and much about nuclear bunkers rests on myth and symbol than on actuality (Bennett, 2011b). But for the UK's ROC Posts these were places without guns: as monitoring stations they formed part of networks of "passive defence" (McCamley,

2007). As such, the awkwardness of engaging with valorisation of places of willed violence do not directly occur.

Meanwhile, in contrast the Atlantic Wall and its coast defence emplacements, are categorised as places of wartime occupation, of trauma and slave labour (Tzalmona, 2013). Furthermore, the bunkers of the Nazi elite in Berlin and elsewhere are seen as repositories of evil: entombed cultural contamination which should not be released (see Bennett, 2019).

So, how to frame non-Nazi coast defence batteries? Are they redeemed by the success of their deterrent effects? Maurice-Jones (1957: 3) notes that histories of coast artillery "must largely be one of lonely garrisons vegetating for years in distant ports and batteries, of changes in organisation, methods, armament and fortification, and very rarely of the roar and smoke of battle and sudden death", and certainly a holistic and embodied account of such places whilst in operational use would need to be accounts of the tedium of waiting for something (an attack) that may never happen. But it is the silent *capability* (and lethality) of these cannon that is their main effect – as a deterrent. The

same could be said of nuclear launch facilities (see for example, the account of the monotonous origins of a nuclear accident at a Titan II missile complex in Schlosser, 2013), and that doesn't stop them being deadly and offensive.

So, where should I place Portugal's Plan Barron bunkers on that interpretive continuum? I decide that the guns are what needs to be accounted for, they are what differs here from what I am normally examining. Are these cannon playful, and open to resignification? Are they truly silent?

Engaging painted cannons

Our tour's lunch destination takes us to a neat military encampment (which doubles as a nature reserve). Here we find a battery of coast artillery pristine in thick coats of fresh-looking olive-green paint. These cannons look like they could still fire. A ladder allows me to climb onto the top of the emplacement. The big gun barrel now extends from between my legs, pointing out to sea. I am shamed by the masculinist pose that I have subconsciously constructed. What, I ask myself, is getting me excited about this ability to clamber upon what feels like still alive materiel? Yes, a heritage of war-play is activating in me, but the accelerant is the materiality of the scene, it is the solidity of the metal and the lustrous paint. So, in realisation of this stirring within me, I decide that paint and the gun barrels will be the themes which I will foreground in my open reading of these sites.

We can start this meditation on paint and coast artillery with a painted picture of a cannon: John Minton's (1953) *Portuguese Cannon, Mazagan, Morocco,* painted in 1953. Looking closely at the barrel of the cannon we see the patina, and this is an effect created with paint. But we see it (and the broken gun carriage) and we think of rust, decay, disempowerment. In the Tate (n.d.) commentator's view we see Minton signalling (and materialising) the stretched-across-time (and now aged) effects of colonisation (the fortress dates from shortly after the Portuguese invaded the area in 1502).

Here then we have two intertwined meaning-making processes: the symbolic potency of cannon (what they may stand for) and the physical fact and form of cannon and their not-quite-as stable-as-we-think presence over time materiality.

In launching its 'Save our Cannon' campaign in 2018 English Heritage drew together these two aspects, asserting the heritage-value of coastal cannon as "precious objects, vital alongside our castles and fortifications in telling the story of England as an island nation" (English Heritage, 2018) and then raising the spectre of the material vulnerability of these sturdy-seeming structures, for "coastal guns are regularly battered by strong winds blowing corrosive moisture and salt spray over then which means that, untreated, they can corrode 20 times faster than those just a mile or so inland." (English Heritage, 2018).

Big guns (and cannon in particular) are a quiet but ubiquitous feature of heritage sites. Sometimes the guns are survivors from the site's former defensive purpose, at other times they are interposed. Think for example of cannon encountered at stately homes which speak to former owners' colonial campaigns 'abroad' rather than the original defence of the cannon's new-found home.

And in other modes cannon become appropriated as a surface to be written upon, a scribble pad to articulate new (and sometimes fleeting) meanings. Take for example the 1797 naval cannon donated to Tufts University in 1956 and which since the era of the Vietnam war has been a beacon of "multilayered meaning" (Ferguson, 2018). As a focal point for anti-war protest the cannon was removed from display in the mid 1960s. It was reinstated in 1977 following a campaign by alumni, but then painted by a protestor opposing the conferral of an honorary degree upon Imelda Marcos. Almost immediately it was repainted by counter-protestors. Thereafter it became a canvass for successive paintings, accruing over 1,000 coats of paint. A recent stripping of the accumulated paint players took contractors six weeks to accomplish, as they closely worked through the layers, hacking off chunks of multicolour paint, some of which ended up in the hands of the University's art collections registrar, Laura C. McDonald: "we're object people – we love objects – and we were amazed that, through the simple act of repeatedly painting an object over and over, the paint had become an object, with a top and bottom, cross-sections and colors. It was something you just wanted to look at and hold" (Ferguson, 2018).

Ferguson's account of the refurbishment work suggests broad support not just for the stripping away of the paint layers – but also for the iterative work that the successive paintings represented. However, she also points to the guarding necessary to hold against change one iteration of the paint scheme (for example, on the eve of a sporting event). As one defender put it: "we organized guarding shifts in an Excel spreadsheet, and divvied up blankets, sleeping bags, snacks, hot cocoa…several groups tried to either bribe or non-maliciously attack us, but we fended them off. You might think painting the cannon is easy, but nothing about the cannon is that simple" (Ferguson, 2018).

And in another recent instance of US cannon-contestation a homeless man was seemingly paid by a protester to deface a Civil War era cannon in Mobile, Alabama that had been painted in rainbow hues in celebration of Pride month, with the blessing of the city officials. The protestor's colour of choice was black paint: perhaps seeking to restore the cannon to its original military colour scheme (Mobile Real Time News, 2022).

Cannons then can become a canvass onto which both symbolic notions of identity are projected *and* enacted with paint. They are also chunky metal objects which have strange sculpture-like, phenomenological qualities.

The Plan Barron tour continued onward to other abandoned batteries, in greater states of ruination and material and semantic openness. Here, the cannon had become blank canvasses for colourful graffiti. But at every site paint was at work, either holding these guns in their original mode, or distorting their form and purpose far away from military uses.

It would be easy to ascribe an anti-military purpose to the graffiti-covered state of cannon at other, unguarded, sites – but very little of the paint added to these structures was a commentary upon what the guns had been (or arguably still were). Graffiti of unattended flat surfaces in the Lisbon area seems to be a fairly ubiquitous thing – this graffiti was no more a protest against militarism than an equivalent image painted at the rear of a supermarket should be taken as a critique of consumer capitalism. And there was nothing final (and everything provisional) about these continually overlain and overpainted graffiti at these unguarded sites.

If this painting was an instance of what Giorgio Agamben (2006) has called “profanation” then it is an example of how the *effect* of profanation (moving something out of a cherished and foregrounded

state into something more prosaic and unremarkable) is not dependent upon a particular motive to bring that about. Instead, the profanation can simply be the side-effect of a new use having been found for the thing, its place and/or its surfaces (see Bennett & Kokoszka, 2020 for further examination of this). Indeed, only one graffiti image (as shown here) seemed to directly engage with form of the gun (by giving it a sinister smile in order to transform its front elevation into a face), all other graffiti ignored the three-dimensional form of the gun emplacement, treating the surfaces instead opportunistically, and simplistically, as flat 'canvasses'.

Meanwhile, at the 'pristine' emplacements, the fresh-looking, super-thick and uniform grey-green paint communicated order and a timelessness: provided this paint continues to be applied this scrupulously, this gun will remain 'as-is' (with the clarity of its military identity unfettered) forever.

But in either case the clue to these gun emplacements' survival is the paint. Without regular painting and overpainting by either crew (the military or the graffiti brigade) these structures would succumb to entropy, especially in salty, coastal air.

I hear talk in the UK of unease in the heritage sector about the fetishization of bladed weapons within similar presentations of 'our' island story. But English Heritage's press release (and its connected campaign to save cannon against assault by corrosive air) suggests no squeamishness about coast artillery. In part perhaps this reflects the 'defensive' nature of that type of coast defence fortification, but the outbreak of a new artillery-based war in eastern Ukraine makes it harder to unquestioningly 'love your local cannon'.

And yet, once again, I find the phenomenological taking over. I'm tumbled back to visceral recollections of childhood: of super-thick paint on myriad tanks, planes and warships presented to me as places of curious encounter and clambering during 'Open Days'; of the chipped paint of the sea

mine sitting innocently as a tourist 'attraction' on the seafront promenade; and of the feverish dreams of the anticipatory child the night before a visit to Salisbury Plain to clamber into the wrecked hulks of exploded tanks. It is the overwhelming impression of being inside a machine, of metal wrought into shapes and sizes larger than any everyday form and encounter: these were the strongest impressions stirred by my trips around the Portuguese gun emplacements.

In short, the mere presence of a gun signals something. But what that thing is seems to be somewhat elusive (or at least multitudinous). A cannon can summon an impression of the past. Or it can be a less certain phenomenological object – something large, unusual, and distorting expectations of local sound and temperature (think the sounds of struck cannon, and of the colder (or hotter) surfaces of the cannon than of its surroundings).

Cannons sit in a family of objects that register in multiple ways, and this is why I can't make up my mind about my encounters with these Portuguese gun emplacements. Should I approach them as strange, alien objects that leave the mind and body to ponder metaphorically? Or should I situate them squarely in in a context – read them as materialisations of militarism and celebrate their decline (or survival) accordingly?

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