



Essay

Navigating the Ruins of the Future

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Abstract

The Ruins of the Future are all around us. We usually experience these as oppressive and threatening. This paper argues that we can reframe this experience and that it is the role of the Futurist to act as a guide to these ruins. As a guide, the Futurist has one foot in the present and the other foot in the timeless. This makes her a shaman who deploys her Futures Senses in order to navigate the complex and uncertain realms of these ruins. The author draws on their experience in teaching history, futures and also in running workshops for decades to make this case and outline some of the tools they use. Chief amongst these are embodied practices that open students up to a creative, even exhilarating, engagements with their inner maps. Thus, the best outcome of any Futures activity is that each individual hones their own futures senses and develops their own map for navigating the ruins of the future.

Keywords

Ruins, Futures Senses, Shamanic Purpose, Hacker, Grace Hack, Wyrd.

Introduction

What comes to mind when thinking of ‘ruins’? Machu Picchu, Pompeii or Angkor Watt? Egypt’s Valley of the Kings? Chernobyl? A Gutted house after a firestorm? Or perhaps the cathedral of Coventry which was largely destroyed during the blitz of 1940 and rebuilt after the war as a testimony to human (British) fortitude in a remarkable modernist manner reminiscent of the phoenix rising from the ruins of its former self? Then again, if you have been in Paris recently for the WFSF 50th anniversary conference, you will be aware of the work on Notre-Dame de Paris¹ after the fire that ruined its central spire and much of the roof in 2019. Such tangible ruins rise first to the mind’s eye when we speak of ruins, but ruins also act as metaphors, attracting our imaginations. Acting as emotional attractors filling us with pathos, nostalgia, confusion and awe.

Here I am thinking of Percy Shelley’s famous poem Ozymandias², which reflects on the transitory nature of power. Or consider the evocative imagined ruins of Gondor, from Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings captured so well in the movie and accompanied by the majestic and deeply nostalgic music of Howard Shore. Ruins have powerful effects on those who encounter them. For me, they inform elements of the human psyche, and we ignore them at our peril. Our lives themselves contain ruins. We, as cultural beings, are palimpsests containing layer upon layer of ruin as memory, experience, culture, image and imaginings, hopes and fears all build up around us; layer upon layer. At one level ruins bear witness to what Dariusz Gafijczuk has called ‘traces of former vitality’ (2013, p. 150). This is where Ozymandias comes in. Yet ruins also evoke a sense of our own ephemerality. They remind us of the passage of time. What the old Anglo-Saxons beautifully term the ‘wyrd’.

In lines reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s famous description of the Angel of History, a 10th Century Anglo-

¹ See <https://www.friendsofnotredamedeparis.org/>

² <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46565/ozymandias>

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Saxon poet utters:

“The dark comes,
 night shadows deepen; from the north descends
 a fierce hailstorm hostile to men.
 All is full of hardship in this earthly realm,
 the course of *wyrd* changes the world under the heavens.
 Here wealth is fleeting, here friend is fleeting,
 here man is fleeting, here kinsman is fleeting,
 all the foundation of the world turns to waste” Translated by Eleanor Parker (2022, p. 59).

The north of this poem, entitled *The Wanderer*, is the place of desolation and cold that northern Europeans knew all too well. Parker’s beautiful book from which I drew this poem points to the grip of the north, of winter and the *wyrd*, on Anglo-Saxon imaginations. The modern ‘north’ I suggest is the future. The ruins of the future stand before us, and we are already walking through them. How *wyrd* is that! In fact, ruins flow from the past into the present and on into the future. They appear in all guises. Utopian dreams and dystopian nightmares. The tangible and the intangible. In addition, we inhabit ruins, but they also inhabit us as deep structures of mind, culture and dream. They are shrouded in what Frank Spencer has evocatively described as ‘fog’. For instance, think “*The Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog*” by Caspar David Friedrich (Image 1).



Fig 1: *The Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog* by Caspar David Friedrich

In Spencer’s article he describes the futurist as a ‘fog-seeker’, one who “doesn’t run from the fog, shield others

from the fog, or attempt to eliminate the fog. Rather, the fog is the friend of the Futurist, and in an era of complexity and emergence the fog is seen as the norm” (Spencer, 2023). For me the ruin, shrouded in fog, that we are walking into is what many are calling the Anthropocene. This is a place of loss, diminution and decline. Here entropy works with hubris and mixes us a future of ruins. The images of such futures are abundant. They sell books, and movies. They also numb us to alternatives. Now ruins are nice to visit but most of us do not want to live in them. Yet here we are in a civilization of ruins.

Terror of History/Terror of the Future

Ruins of course offer opportunity. The tour guide has a place to play as storyteller. Politicians and economists, reporters, social media influencers, educators and academics are all tour guides of one kind or another. So too are many Futurists. Here again I am thinking of Frank Spencer’s (2023) ‘Illustrated Futurist’ who can navigate the fog, but as Spencer points out, applying Wendy Schultz’s insightful five waves of futures practice, this is still an emergent fifth field of practice (Schultz, 2015). One requiring comfort with complexity and uncertainty. The qualities of fog and of course, of ruins. Most futurists are not there yet. We are still describing the ruins, measuring them, assessing and even eulogizing them.

Gafijczuk offers us something here. He notes that ruins hold promise. The layered nature of the ruin “allows several dimensions of reality to partially collapse, one falling into the other, disarticulating their previously sharply drawn lines of demarcation. The space that enables the emergence of this kind of phenomenon in its highest amplitude is precisely the inhabited ruin” (2013, p. 151). Add to this observation the understanding that the ruins we inhabit, past, present and future, are all the product of what Teofilo Ruiz (2011) calls the ‘Terror of History’. In his reading, humanity creates culture in response to a deep sense of ‘aloneness’ in the universe. Culture is like a coral (my analogy) that secretes manifestations of power, purpose and process which it deposits as ruins. Today we face a double terror. The terror of history and the terror of the future. This is a profoundly unsettling experience. Violence is a knee jerk reaction to this terror as the conflicts between Russia and Ukraine, Hamas and Israel demonstrate. So too are the profound conservatisms of nationalist, religious and tribal mindsets and the blind faith some place in technology as a panacea for our (and future) times. Yet something else is going on here, in the fog we can discern possible structures and new relationships. Perhaps ruins are not so bad. We just need to reframe our approach.

The Creativity of Ruins

For me ruins are creative, even transformative spaces to live in. They stretch into the past and into the future. I want to suggest that to live in them is both to sacralize them and to also tap into sources of energy, imagination and power that have the potential to regenerate our world. The ruins of the future need to be explored. We as futurists have tools but what is more important is perception and language. How do we make sense of these ruins shrouded in fog? Of the invisible lurking in plain sight? One language or conceptual shift is to think in terms of systems and emergence. As Sophie Strand argues:

“Emergent systems are characterized as systems that work as an assemblage of different entities. They represent the moment when chaos coalesces into synchronized, relational patterns of complexity that is utterly unpredictable” (2022, p. 39).

The ruins of the future press in on us. Comfortable with the sun and its clarity, the emergent ruins cause anxiety and as a result we experience a ruinous present not one of possibility. But as we futurists know, complexity is not ‘set in stone’ but a ‘moving feast’ in which the charm of it is to be found in our own reading of pattern and in responding creatively to what we discern. Roberto Calasso likens this reading and responding to the invisible lurking amongst the ruins as a ‘metal string’:

“The invisible is the place of the gods, the dead, ancestors, the whole of the past. It doesn’t necessarily require a cult [Futurists like cults LOL], but it seeps into every crevice of the mind. Like a metal string,

it need not vibrate, it can remain inert. If it vibrates, the intensity can be convulsive. The invisible is not to be sought far away. Indeed, it might even be too close to be found. The invisible ends up in each person's head" (2020, p. 15).

When I first encountered this passage, I saw the metal string as exogenous to the context of the futurist. Yet, over time I have come to see it as our own invitation to play 'convulsive' music amongst the ruins. To dance amongst the ruins just as Sophie Strand describes the presence of Dionysus as a trigger for emergence, and the swarming of possibilities and life affirming action:

"Dionysus and his celebrations were akin to emergent behaviour. When enough people sensed his presence, smelled mead fermenting in rainwater-flooded beehives, felt vines constricting and stoking the walls of civilized life, a type of chaotic wildness would coalesce into a new sort of group behavior. The Bacchanalian swarm" (2022, p. 39).

I use dance as a way to unleash the energy of individuals and groups. This is what I invited a group of embodied practice folk to explore in the book I co-edited with Camila Mozzini-Alister (M. Bussey, and Mozzini-Alister, Camila, 2020a). What Strand is describing here is the eruption of convulsive energy within a system that has been constrained by the 'civilized'. For me, to move our bodies as part of futures activities is to 'hack' the codes that bind us and hold us in ruins that are not of our own making. I see ruins as givens, but not simply as static elements of the world we live in.

We actually co-create ruins too. For instance, as we all engage in building a future defined by the Anthropocene we are building a ruined, diminished future. The 'North' is bearing down on us. We smell doom in the air. However, if we change the conversation – re-enchant it as Strand and Calasso (and others) have been arguing for decades – we enter new worlds of possibility. Here we find new work for our futures senses (M. Bussey, 2015, 2017). Senses that distil the fog and move us from fear and decline to some other space. Not utopian. Nor otherworldly. Nor, for that matter a continuation of the ruinous trajectory of modernity.

Something different, decidedly novel is emerging. And as Calasso said years ago, "What is new is the most ancient thing we have" (1993, p. 169). Futurist as shaman steps onto the stage. It was Ashis Nandy who first offered us this evocative term. The shaman is someone able to navigate the fog; someone with one foot in the present and the other foot in the timeless (2007, p. 176). It is the shaman who is able to navigate the ruins of the future without foreclosing on meaning and hope. The shaman is a shape changer. She is able to play their part in all five waves of futures work as described by Schultz (2015).

Futures Senses as a Guide to the Ruins of the Future

As beings who inhabit the ruins of the future it is easy to feel lost, disoriented and vulnerable. In my work I first seek to get people back into their bodies. Afterall, it is our bodies who do much of the heavy lifting in the world. It is our bodies that carry the wounds, emotional, spiritual, ethical that then manifest as illness and decline as we age. This is a mixture of temporal triage and destabilizing politics. When we reclaim the body we give ourselves permission to dissent from dominant conditioning and reconceive through new narratives, what Calasso calls myths, the world around us. This means reclaiming the ruins. Then I turn to the work of understanding how the ruins emerged in the first place. This involves the Future Senses of Memory, Foresight, Voice, Optimism and Yearning.

Memory work is historical and also phenomenological. We need to ask what ruins from the past are with us in the present and being projected into the future? Such ruins constitute the 'used future' described by Sohail Inayatullah (2008). We experience them as structures that constrain and wound just as they also constitute something we perceive as stable, secure and identity affirming. Ruins such as gender norms and political maps, economics and colonial regimes. Yet memory itself is a data set mobilized by our cultural conditioning. Thus, the work is to (re)member as Cynthia Dillard describes it (2012). As we engage in this work the ruins begin to shift and we also begin to navigate them with greater levels of confidence. Inayatullah, working at this deep level, describes this work as part of his 'stage theory' in which mantra "integrates and creates a new story for the participant" (2020, p. 51).

Foresight of course births this new story. It is what we as Futurists do right? We put on our tour guide hat and

lead others through the ruins. As we reconfigure the ruins of Memory, we generate new configurations of the future. Ruins are malleable. This is the zone of the anticipatory imagination (M. Bussey, Song, & Hsieh, 2017), it moves us from default positions of ruinous futures to ones that are more life affirming. Key for me is that we get to re-imagine our relationships with one another and with the world around us. This Neohumanist dimension is a powerful call to foresight work (M. Bussey, 2023b). Thus, we move towards kincentric versions of the future which are comfortable with complexity in relationship and also with the self-work on our own psyches. Foresight requires us to be comfortable in our own skin. Again, this involves embodied work as well as storytelling, myth making and also map making. Ruins involve maps. One of the key claims of futurists is that we help our clients make their own maps. Enable them to take charge of the mapping as opposed to navigating the maps given to us by our contexts. This futures sense understands that people understand themselves in relation to their maps, to the ruins that maps describe. Such maps of the future are internal descriptions of meaning and purpose. Robert Macfarlane reflects on this internal mapping activity thus:

“I have long been fascinated by how people understand themselves using landscape, by the topographies of self we carry within us and by the maps we make with which to navigate these interior terrains. We think in metaphors drawn from place and sometimes those metaphors do not only adorn our thought, but actively produce it” (2012, p. 26).

Finding and grounding our metaphors is what the futures sense of Voice is all about. Finding our voice, enabling others to articulate their voice, is a critical function of futures work. As Inayatullah observes when discussing mantra, this is “done exclusively with individuals, [in which] we move from the rational to the post-rational or the intuitive” (2020, p.50). Voice involves people as individuals taking charge of the story. Moving from control and that managerialist mindset to one of surrender and a joyful reconfiguration of their realities. Yes, we inhabit ruins of the future, but (hey!) they are not too bad. Voice is all about being a little less conditioned by our contexts. It brings with it the exhilaration of being freed from the cage we have been trapped in for years. It is a critical spiritual function of our humanity (M. Bussey, 2006). It can be bold, brave and even boisterous. I have found that grounding voice begins with the body, with moving and playing, and reclaiming the ‘inner child’. Individuals function within groups. Dancing and playing is something an individual does best in a group. Endorphins fly and dopamine flows when we are engaged in letting go. This is a form of ‘Grace’ as I describe it in my co-edited book with Camila Mozzini-Alister on the phenomenology of grace (M. Bussey, and Mozzini-Alister, Camila, 2020b). Cynthia Winton-Henry, the developer, along with Phil Porter, of InterPlay³, the modality I use, observes that:

“When we narrow ourselves to the security we feel in areas where we are gifted or comfortable, our wholeness is diminished. If we don’t develop a full palette of mental, emotional, and spiritual health, sometime entire areas of development get left off the menu” (2009, p. 53)

As we feel liberated from the constraints of the ruins of the future our psychological orientation shifts from risk aversion, fear, confusion and that managerialist compulsion to control. We become more optimistic. Optimism is a powerful futures sense. It builds on the sense of Voice. If we have no voice, no sense of our own capacity to act in the world (to dance in the ruins) then it is hard to be optimistic. This futures sense enables us to plan beyond possible and plausible futures and to reach for preferred futures. Optimism also challenges the terror of history and the terror of the future by reworking Memory and Foresight, shifting the focus from deficit to one that recognizes that indeed we as a species have much to celebrate without denying our own incredible capacity to damage one another and the world around us. Optimism enables us to read the ruins of the future differently. Where there was the tragic there is now emergence. The Greeks and Nietzsche gave us tragedy as a defining feature of the human condition. Optimism does not deny tragedy but recognizes that for all the mayhem that the Angel of History is challenged with, something else, something mysterious and life affirming is also going on. Optimism finds pattern and patterning in chaos. It finds solace in the ruins of the future.

This brings us to Yearning, the fifth futures sense. This is where it all comes together. This is the sense that calls

³ <https://interplay.org/index.cfm/go/about:interplay/>

us into the world. Fundamentally this involves a spiritual urge towards connection. I find it as a sensibility in many thinkers beyond decline, wearing many faces. In the work of Vanessa Machado de Oliveira it is described as ‘worlding’ (2021) whilst Timothy Morton describes it in terms of an ethical calling to embrace the more-than-human as part of our own humankind (2017). This sense gives form and direction to the human urge to weave together patterns of meaning and belonging that take us out of our own smallness into something greater. Sensing through Yearning makes the ruins of the future less daunting, less dark and foreboding. Instead, we begin to discern in them possible new stories, new belongings that invite us to reconnect with planet and one another. The terror faced in both history and future becomes less intense as we embrace our becoming other; that sense that finitude is not all there is. I explore this sense, and seek to give it voice through the Neohumanist recognition that we are transforming our consciousnesses through struggle in the world of form (M. Bussey, 2023a). This pushes critique and critical theory into new territory where the critical spiritual sensibility grounds in relational spaces that transform ruins as something given into emergent promises of reconnection (M. Bussey, 2000). In this space becoming becomes behoming.

Navigating the ruins of the future demands a new sensibility and we need to understand that our response to this moment is either to withdraw in fear or move forward via our Yearning for that which enlarges our hearts and minds. The doing of such work can happen at any scale from gardening to action within larger social institutions and movements that challenge the smallness and fear that the ruins of the future can elicit in us all. Again, I find that embodied expression is key to strengthening and affirming this yearning. Embodied processes release us from the grip of socialized dominance of the corporeal. It allows us, in some mysterious way, to forgive ourselves and the world for its violences. From there we then fall in love all over again with life and all the messiness of it, without in anyway letting go of the need to make this world, right now a better place.

Shamanic Purpose

So, this reflection has been ripening in me for some time. It was triggered by reading Frank Spencer’s lovely article on the Illustrated Futurist⁴. Yet before that, I was describing for another publication my embodied approach to a Summer School I taught in Lisbon in July 2023⁵. During this school we began each day with a set of embodied practices (Image 2). These practices evolved over the week as I laid in new actions, language and narrative. This was all about making the sacred palpable and in doing so releasing the imaginative and aspirational reservoirs held by the individual students as they turned their attention to the summer school theme of Urban Imaginaries. In a word, the week was structured around embodied rituals designed to manifest the best for each participant and weave a collective esprit de corps.

⁴ See <https://thefutureschool.medium.com/the-illustrated-futurist-the-walk-the-work-and-the-will-056091f3c5db>

⁵ See <https://artforadaptation.com/2023/10/24/urban-imaginary-a-transdisciplinary-summer-school-exploring-our-urban-futures/>



Fig 2: Morning Circle Lisbon 2023 (Photo Bram Goots)

Indeed, ritual has also been a theme in my work over the past few years. One expression is working with a group of colleagues, namely Kimberly Camrass, Liam Mayo, Elissa Farrow, Jeanne Hoffman, Claire Marshall and Emily Jaworski on developing a ritual on the Iron Ring that was show-cased by Claire Marshall at the Arizona 22 conference where the ritual was included in her Museum of Futures display.

My thinking was further stimulated by Teofilo Ruiz's (2011) eloquent description of human behaviour in the face of what he describes as the 'Terror of History'. Teaching history at my own University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia has always been heavily influenced by a futures lens. In this teaching I have my own secret weapon, which I call my 'hidden curriculum', a term chosen to deliberately invert the negative connotations of its use in mainstream critical pedagogy. This hidden curriculum is built on my conscious deployment of the futures senses. In this process I am acting as curator of what Frank Spencer calls an 'event horizon' for my students. Spencer uses the metaphor of the bridge. This bridge he says "is more than a crossing from one state of existence to another, or from the present into the future. Here, the bridge represents an event horizon or threshold event that causes previous potential states on the fringe to emerge into the world" (2023). As I read through his list of characteristics of the 'Futurist as Visionary and Imaginist' I found myself smiling, nodding and feeling very much affirmed. I could feel the ruins of the future all around me. I could discern in the fog novel possibilities and looming threats. I felt Ashis Nandy's (2007) presence too, as he describes the shamanic purpose of the futurist. I felt the dance within of becoming, that always arises as I contemplate a future beyond closure and the Terror of the Future. I also felt that ancient Anglo-Saxon poet, a nameless figure wandering amongst the ruins, pointing to the terrors that were clearly before his mind's eye as he wrote. I wanted to give him a hug and say: "It's okay. We have made it this far, despite all the terrors we have devised." In all this, I feel a shamanic purpose which is not the sole provenance of the Futurist but a quality of being human. But it is clear that if we pay attention, we as Futurists may hone and nurture this purpose into greater fullness.

Navigating the ruins of the future has become exciting. I continue to sharpen my futures senses and seek likeminded people to dance with.

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