

Urban Explorers: Quests for Myth, Mystery and Meaning

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Abstract

This article is about urban exploration, a cultural practice of exploring derelict, closed and normally inaccessible built environments. The article is, in a sense, an experiment in research, learning and representation and is as much about the way the information is presented as it is about the topic itself. It consists of two parts. The first component is a video article that can be viewed online at <http://vimeo.com/5366045> [Correction added on 13 October 2010 after first publication on 3 October 2010: The URL has been corrected]. The second is this document, an annotated script and short article meant to support the videographic document. This piece, as a whole, is a review of the work of five scholars (Alastair Bonnett, Tim Edensor, Caitlin DeSilvey, Hayden Lorimer and David Pinder) who have studied the theories and practices behind contemporary urban exploration from a number of different perspectives. I include video footage of my own ethnographic research on the topic, though I allow discussion of previous work to contextualize those images to establish what might be considered a videographic literature review.

Introduction 1 – The Video Article

My passion for urban exploration began in the abandoned mines and ghost towns of the Mojave Desert in California. My enthusiasm for derelict places eventually led me to London where I found a vibrant community of explorers with similar interests with whom I began a long-term ethnographic project.

Early in the project I realized that I needed to better understand the history, boundaries and significance of previous work on the topic, so I embarked on a journey across England to interview a diverse group of academics who had spent time thinking about urban exploration. While travelling to film these interviews, I was concurrently conducting visual ethnography (Pink 2007) work with the urban explorers on my project in London. By intertwining my practice with the voices and thoughts of these scholars and then melding them in the editing process, I believe I have come closer to finding an effective form for the video article. I would therefore like to suggest that the video article, which contains references, chapters and even keywords, stands well on its own as a piece of academic scholarship.

The first video article to attempt to do this was also in *Geography Compass*. In 2008, Phil Jones and James Evans created a video which utilized visual media to elucidate a rather theoretical discussion of Lefebvrian social nature (Evans and Jones 2008). The video made clever use of animated graphics, but felt more like a presentation done in front of the camera than an edited work.

Evans and Jones article was an important milestone for geography; it revealed new potential for videographic methodologies in geography (Rose 2001). I see this video as well as theirs as serving both as a way to learn about urban exploration and a way to think about how scholarship can work with new digital technologies to engage with wider audiences to communicate information in a different, though equally potent, way.

Though the video has clearly been crafted for an academic audience, its visual and aural appeal has (perhaps) the potential to attract more, or different, interested individuals than text. In a way, this article is a response to theirs, a different take on how this sort of work can be done, though of course, neither way is right or wrong – perhaps they just serve to entice different audiences.

Finally, his video is meant to be a review, not a piece of new research, so you will find that the video proposes more questions than answers. This, hopefully, will prove fruitful in terms of the discussions that could lead down any of the open threads exposed during viewing.

Introduction 2 – The Topic

The term urban exploration conjures up a multifaceted set of interlaced images and ideas. I expect that each person reading this will have a slightly different idea of what exactly those words mean. Perhaps they even make you cringe – much of the language used here, like the term exploration itself, has heavy colonial baggage. But to individuals and groups who call themselves urban explorers, UrbExers or simply UEs, the phrase is unabashedly precise and most certainly not about cultural ‘othering’. In some cases, the term is even seen as a process of reasserting local control over historic landscapes and the overdetermined spaces of the city, an idea that David Pinder mentions in the film.

Urban exploration is an ‘interior tourism that allows the curious-minded to discover a world of behind-the-scenes sights’ (Ninjalicious 2005, 3). In my own words, I might describe the urban exploration ‘scene’ as a transnational enthusiasm focused on exploring and recording liminal zones and derelict places, rooted in an interest for the past and a passion for the photography of the ‘forgotten’.

Urban exploration has a long history in places such as Paris, where the explorers in the catacombs underneath the city actually have a distinct designation, *Cataphiles*, assigned to those who dare to venture into and care for these underground labyrinths. In cities such as Rome, London, New York and Detroit, you will find urban explorers, many times all posting on the same internet forums, stretching networks of experience and meaning across the globe.

I believe that there are deep cultural roots in urban exploration, roots that tendril into themes about life in the city, roots that play on desires for emotional freedom, the need for unmediated expression, associations with childhood play and historic materiality (Desilvey 2006, 2007), artistic expression (Foster and Lorimer 2007; Pinder 2008), memories of experiences embedded in landscape and desires for physical human connection and bonds through shared experiences of peaked emotions (Cahill and McGaugh 1998) and body/landscape relations (Macpherson 2010). These are issues explored in/by phenomenology (Tilley 1994), psychogeography (Bonnett 2009), geographic ontology and cognitive archaeology. I believe that tracing the roots of urban exploration will reveal a philosophical rabbit hole that does not end at the smooth pavement of everyday life (Edensor 2005a,b).

The topic also conjures up associations with other practices, such as parkour (Saville 2008), street art (Dickens 2008) and skateboarding (Borden 2001), practices which also seek to redefine roles, stigmas, associations and normative values in city space. These connections are fascinating and leave room for additional research.

Urban exploration is a topic that has been little discussed in academic contexts, perhaps because of its rather ethereal nature. I have found two films on the topic (Faninatto 2005; Gilbert 2007), a few television shows (Duncan 2004; Wildman 2007; Zuiker et al.

2006), a handful of popular books (Toth 1993; Vanderbilt 2002; Deyo and Leibowitz 2003; Ninjalicious 2005; Talling 2008), a single academic text (Edensor 2005a,b), two M.A. dissertations (Lipman 2004; McRae 2008), a few journal articles (Genosko 2009; Pinder 2005) and a very large stack of zines (locally printed fanzines). The most intensive coverage I have located regarding urban exploration is actually in popular magazines and newspapers, where the press is almost assuredly negative and work to reinforce state-controlled social templates that urban explorers are working so hard to reconstitute and reinterpret. Wherever you find urban exploration, it is obvious that it fills a need that other activities and practices seem unable to satiate.

The next section consists of the full transcript for the film. The primary purpose of this section is to serve as a data mine where quotes from the film can be referenced accurately in written documents elsewhere and to assist those who are not able to watch the video. Following the transcript, I have included a conclusion, references for further research and a list of questions that the film breaches.

FILM TRANSCRIPT

SCENE 1 – Introduction

[sound of running water and walking though a dark hall]

[fade to title card]

Title card text: Urban Explorers: Quests for Myth, Mystery and Meaning

[fade to scrolling text]

Intro text

[fade to title card with quote]

[Tim Edensor in an office with books behind him]

TE: What I think walking around a ruin brings to the fore is the flow of experience. So, we might, of course, you have to confront the brute materiality of a ruin. First of all in getting into the place, very often you have to do a bit of climbing, but once in there, you're forced to move and bob and weave and avoid obstacles, so you're confronted by a materiality in any case, but then you're also drawn to a materiality: to the textures, to the decaying fabric that confronts you, to the unfamiliar feel of many things whether, even if it's dirty or spongy or mossy, or decaying, these sensations, these tactilities if you like, the materiality of a ruin, impose themselves upon you, but also draw you towards them. I think they have that power.

[Caitlin Desilvey sitting on a couch in an office]

CD: If you really go deep into these places, there's an element of revulsion always, with materials that are starting to decay, and this sense of sort of smells that you encounter and substances that you can't identify and feeling very much like you are being threatened by these things and in a sense you have to get through that and I think it definitely keeps many people from going deep into sites.

[David Pinder standing on Princelet Street in London's East End]

DP: I think there is certainly a troubling history, obviously, to the term exploration and standing in the East End that's readily apparent when you think back to the 19th century when the area was a site for many social reformers depicting it often in terms of very imperialist language about this sort of dark East End and the social reformer would come and shed light on these darkened spaces. But I think also there's a strong case for trying to reclaim that language. I mean, some of the cases I found very compelling in seeking to do that go back to a geographer like Bill Bunge (1969) and the radical expeditions that he conducted at the end of the 1960s

and early 1970s in Detroit which was playing with that language very self-consciously but trying to subvert it. So the idea would be, rather than exploring the local people, it would actually be through collaboration you would use geographic tools to enable people to explore their own environments.

[Tim Edensor in an office with books behind him]

TE: The urban explorers are a strange bunch. I don't think they want to necessarily want to preserve places, I think they want to experience them. I think there's a kind of a strong anti-authoritarian streak amongst urban explorers, so they see themselves as people going out on a limb against the kind of prevailing authority, particularly prevailing ideas about how we should use space and they do indeed seek out not only derelict spaces but ventilation shafts, old mines, military installations and so forth to explore them and they often record them.

[fade to section title card]

SCENE 2: The Desire to Explore

[Hayden Lorimer standing on a West London street]

HL: The purpose underlying it, as far as I can ascertain, seems to me a fascination with landscape, and a fascination with place.

[Alastair Bonnett sitting in an office with books behind him]

AB: And it comes down to exploration itself. I mean it is about going into places that other people haven't ventured.

AB: Part of the emotional impetus within urban exploration and psychogeography is about discovering a sense of place. Kind of like, essences or feelings of a particular intensity and connecting to them. And they may be from your own past or they may be from somebody else's past. But in the context of like this placelessness or placeless urban realm in which people find it very difficult to know where they are and where they are going and things like that, that sense of connecting to real places or real feelings or real memories has got this nostalgic content.

[David Pinder sitting in an East London business district]

DP: So in many ways the, kind of, the past of cities gets erased and, or repackaged and sanitized to be kind of like a commodity to be sold and I think its partly in that context that I would see some of the interest in psychogeography, some of the interest in exploration, this kind of attempt to find gaps and cracks within this spectacularized urban space. It seems increasingly hard to have a sense of historical consciousness in a space where everything is spectacularized and in that sense trying to rediscover the pasts of places can have a radical edge as opposed to being simply a romanticization of the past.

[Alastair Bonnett sitting in an office with books behind him]

You place last in the context of the kind of deracination of modern society in which people aren't sure who their neighbors are even and they're not sure they're in a community, and this sort of plays out that fantasy of having the community or of creating your own community and of not just being you know like the whole virtual thing – I think this is quite important. Community isn't, or, cannot just be, based on a sense of a shared identity across thousands of miles. I mean the whole process of doing stuff together and actually walking together... you know, it's like Hannah's (Macpherson 2009) stuff about the whole kind of bodily process of walking and how important that is the discourse and narrative of the of the Rambler.

[David Pinder standing in a derelict space]

One of the things that's really interesting about that idea of exploring I think also is opening up the vertical dimension of the city. There's a wonderful line from Robert Sullivan in a book, it's a preface to a book on underground New York (Granick 1991) and he says, he invites you to think of grabbing hold of the empire state building and lifting up Manhattan so that all the roots, as it were, of the city are exposed underneath, all the thousands of miles of cables and tunnels and... that idea of a kind of geographical imagination which thinks downwards and thinks upwards, call it a kind of verticality of the city, really opens up a different feel for what constitutes the space of the city.

[Tim Edensor in an office with books behind him]

TE: I think it's very difficult to say 'are these places or are these landscapes', there are, certainly, there are certain kinds of representations on the internet, on internet websites that utilize landscape quiet a lot. And I think what's interesting actually, if you look at these sites in totality, is the way in which they zoom right out and look at whole ruined landscapes, let's say like Detroit, but then home in very, very specifically to just tiny patches of texture or small inscriptions or tiny little details, and I kind of like that difference in scale. The idea that we have this very strong sense of place or the atmosphere of a room even is conjured up in some of these photographs but then also we have this sense of a wider context, of the wider ruined landscape.

[fade to section title card]

SCENE 3: Rediscovering Childhood/Landscapes of Play

[Alastair Bonnett sitting in an office with books behind him]

AB: It may be about reclaiming a childhood. I think there is a real interesting thing in this whole debate about childhood and people getting older and feeling conscious that they've lost something or they never had something in their childhood. Because, you know, the way children are treated these days, it's a very caged experience.

[David Pinder standing in an East London business district]

DP: One of the characteristics now of living in the city, and particularly somewhere like London and British cities, is that you're constantly being watched. I mean the estimates kind of vary but people talk about 4½ million cameras or something. So there's this constant sense of, almost like a drive for transparent space – that we're continually being watched and it's very difficult to imagine getting outside that other than in private spaces. So I can certainly see that desire for into zones which are, in a sense, off the map.

[Alastair Bonnett sitting in an office with books behind him]

AB: I certainly was able, as a child, to just go off with my brother for the day. And part of that process is exploring the landscape. And so we used to go to this building called Copt Hall around Epping, which was a ruin, and it's this old mansion. The thing was we weren't alone obviously because it's the kind of thing that other kids did and it's the kind of thing that children did do.

[close up of Caitlin Desilvey]

CD: I grew up next to a cemetery and there was this one little sort of hut that I remember that was set back at the back of the cemetery and the way that I remember it, it had in it rudiments of home making so sort of pots and pans and things like that and I remember being really frightened of this space but also really fascinated by it and as I got older I remember going in it and sort of using it as an imaginative space. It is partly about wanting to recreate some of that feeling of being a child and going into these slightly transgressive spaces where you can, your

imagination can, kind of assemble a world that is other than the world that is other than the world you live in.

[close up of Tim Edensor in an office]

TE: That's the value of these places, they aren't overdetermined places in which certain practices are privileged and others aren't. You can do what you like when you go into a ruin, you can smash things up if you want, and many people do because I believe they like that physical encounter with materiality which is usually forbidden in the rest of the world.

I used to visit a huge stately home that had never been completed close to where me grandmother lived in Scotland and I used to go in this building, by myself, from the age of being maybe 7, 8... and it was sort of second nature for me to do this, I think my pleasure in exploring ruins dates from a very early age and something really that I've always done and then later on, of course, I've always carried on exploring places, exploring derelict and ruined sites, but I suddenly realized that it intersected with some of my academic interests.

[David Pinder standing on Princelet Street in London's East End in the snow]

DP: Well part of the appeal often of abandoned sites or spaces which aren't smoothed over in a spectacular way, is precisely that they afford room for imagination. If you think of where kids like to play its often not in the prescribed playgrounds but its in the sites outside of that where there are objects that can be transformed in the imagination into a whole variety of things and I think often empty spaces or spaces that are beginning to decay often allow the imagination to roam in terms of what was there, what might have been and also what could be in the future.

[Tim Edensor in an office with books behind him]

TE: Urban space is increasingly regulated and controlled to produce certain kinds of smooth space and in some ways, ruins talk back to that kind of space. They talk back to the way in which we ordinarily think of what 'proper' urban aesthetics might be. They also talk back to the way in which we sensually experience space or urban space and often that sensual experience of urban space is, I think, very deprived, Whereas in ruins there is a much greater panoply of sensual experience to be gained. The third thing I'd say is that it also talks back to the kind of way in which memory is produced in the city... certain memorial sites, museums, heritage district and so forth but when we go into a ruin, we confront a different kind of memory, one that's much more, one that's much vaguer, one that's much more intangible, but nevertheless can be very rich.

[fade to title card]

SCENE 4: Questing for Historic 'Authenticity'

[Caitlin Desilvey sitting on a couch in an office]

CD: I think it was the better part of ten years, in the end, that I was involved in this homestead in Montana which is, it's just north of Missoula, Montana. I went up on this mission 1997 and had this immediate sense that somehow this place, needed, I needed to be there actually – it wasn't anything more than this gut sense that I absolutely had to figure out what this place is about and it was just this, the aesthetics of it that drew me in initially, this sense that the buildings were all overgrown, it was this sort of weeds choking the passageways between them so you sort of had to force your way through and there were many little building, about 12 at least in various states of decay and sort of dusty windows that I was peering through.

So I had all these master locks that were on the doors and so I went up with the bolt cutters and I cut the bolts off, cut the locks of all the doors and then I had entered the homestead. And even that moment where my presence there became legitimate, in a sense, because I had

gained permission and access... immediately changed the way I was relating to the space actually because suddenly I had some kind of a responsibility or some kind of expectation around my presence there that in the initial moment when I was peering through windows and trying to understand what was there is still the most powerful and the most resonant.

I felt like I wanted to explore how I felt in that place. It was an incredibly personal compulsion. It wasn't about like necessarily trying to, in the initial stages, trying to preserve the place or trying to share it with anyone else, it was actually kind of a greedy sense that I wanted to be there and that I wanted to poke around and take photographs. I've struggled actually and struggled with the work in Montana with that sense of wanting to give people the sense of that somehow they were having that sort of immediate visceral exploring moment. Without that feeling I think you can't really call it exploration.

[Hayden Lorimer standing in a West London street]

HL: Very often there seems to be this presencing or presenting of the past in those explorations and for that I think it's terrific actually. Really interesting to see that what we have are small groups of people or networks or communities of people whose interest actually is in a geographical past. Having said that, I'd also think it really important actually to point out that in many respects what I see these people as are slightly glorified and slightly funkier by their own design, versions of the classic landscape historian or local historian in that, that their interests are in dredging up very often small forgotten, marginalized, obscured hidden histories of local communities. And so in many respects I see them as the current generation or a continuation of that much longer tradition.

[Alastair Bonnett sitting in an office]

AB: The eccentricity, the idiosyncratic, the particular, the unknown and the mysterious nature of the past in the small alleys and the little gunnels and hideaways of the old city become this real sort of source of avant-garde or left wing nostalgia. So, there's a bunch of issues there to do with the past and time and going into the landscape and being an urban explorer.

[a California ghost town in a state of preservation]

CD: Once you talking about start preserving these places or interpreting them in any sense you have just crossed a line. It's not that it's a failure, it's just that it's on the other side of that line.

[Tim Edensor in an office with books behind him]

TE: The thing is of course, about a ruin is, you can't fix it. Then you start to conserve it or preserve it. Then it's brought under a whole different realm and you freeze it at a particular time of decay. One of the interesting things about a ruin is that it does continually mutate. So you can go to a ruin when it's first abandoned let's say and maybe someone's smashed a few windows and you can see moisture gathering on the floor, pools of water. You start to see a little bit of peeling in the wallpaper, but then you can go back two months later and the transformation can be quite dramatic. It can be very very rapidly colonized by non-humans, by moss, by fungi, by mold, bacteria, by birds and animals, grasses and trees.

[close up of Tim Edensor in an office]

TE: While vestiges of a ruined quality can be achieved by preservation and conservation and the transformation of space into a leisure heritage site, it still has to be acknowledged that a lot of the qualities that I find in ruins, the kind of sensuality, the mystery, the tactility, the hauntedness of these places, the disorderly aesthetics of such places will be to an extent lost. The trick is, I guess, how can these ruined spaces be best preserved to reflect those qualities that I've just talked about.

[fade to title card]

SCENE 5: Spectral Geographies

[Alastair Bonnett sitting in an office]

AB: I suppose that there is a kind of interesting and very obvious link, you know, towards sort of like that hippie element who have a particular fascination for the mysterious and the vaguely occult and I was quite surprised by this link when I first started coming across it you see, but the more I found out about it the easier it was to make these sort of, you know, connections. It's something to do with the notion of disappearance, and the not visible, and this connection it's sort of the whole point of excavation and archaeology it's like a sense of uncovering which is not just literal.

[Caitlin Desilvey sitting on a couch in an office]

CD: These places have ghosts in them don't they? I mean they're places that have hauntings no matter how you define that. There's a quality about them where the people who inhabited them and the people who moved through them have left these traces and I think there is a sort of reluctance to try to intervene or to rearrange these spaces partly because you feel like you might wake something up.

[Close up of Tim Edensor in an office]

TE: Notions of the immaterial arise. So for instance, we often confront specters. Again, kind of vague entities, spectral things that are triggered by strange signs, unfathomable objects, peculiar posters on the wall, things that we've forgotten from our past. Things that are fairly indefinable but nevertheless carry a bodily presence that once was there, a kind of an absent presence, and often those things can particularly resonate in clothing or chairs which have held bodies or lockers, or machines or in the tools that lie there which you can then pick up and feel. So there's this continual interweaving between the kind of fantastical, the imaginary, the ghostly and the kind of brute material reality of the ruin and I wouldn't want to privilege either of those two things.

[close up of Caitlin Desilvey]

CD: It's relational, how we construct meaning around these places so yes we are making those ghosts as well, but I do think there's something about that sort of uncanny balance that you feel in these places where the objects have this sort of autonomous presence. It's very fragile and once it starts to get eroded it can very quickly move those places into a state where you can't access those feelings anymore, you can't find the ghosts in them anymore.

[Hayden Lorimer standing in a West London street]

HL: Sometimes there's a greater emphasis placed on the magical or the psychic within these urban landscapes and so there's a greater imperative placed on finding things that are somehow immaterial as well as material in the landscape. Picking up on sources of energy, on auras or on time loops that create or recreate versions of things happening in the same place at the same time in slightly different iteration. But then again, if we stop and think, there's actually a long landscape tradition of looking at secret, mythical, magical landscapes. There is a landscape history tradition within Britain which deals once again with those alternative or unorthodox or non-conformist versions of landscape.

[Tim Edensor in an office with books behind him]

TE: In terms of the spectral I think it's, the whole point about a ruin is there are innumerable signs and entities that attract you to them, and you can contemplate, you can conjecture, you

can surmise about what it is that you're looking at. And often that surmising goes nowhere, there's nothing concrete about it. I think, you know, in the wilderness you can do that, of course there are signs, but they aren't as dense, as coagulated as in certain kinds of ruined industrial spaces.

SCENE 6: Insights

[a hole broken though a wall]

CD: I looked in trying to see what was inside the building and I saw my own eye looking back at me! And I sort of flipped out and I realized that there was actually a fragment of mirror that was stuck, that somehow had gotten stuck or maybe even it was just a piece of glass that had gotten stuck in the siding so just in the right place, eye level to me at age 10 or whatever I was, it was looking back at me, and I've since sort of thought about that sort of experience as this sort of weird metaphor for what you do in these kinds of places, what you go looking for because you always sort of find yourself looking back at you.

[close up of Tim Edensor in an office]

TE: It's significant that there are a lot of people doing urban exploration now and what I now realize is, it's incredibly important because it testifies to a desire to find places of mystery, to find places that are not wholly smoothed over or that don't appear to be entirely regulated, that aren't highly predictable. Now nowhere is highly predictable. There's no doubt about it, if we can start reading the city otherwise we can see it in all sorts of different ways, but nevertheless we're limited by the kinds of codes, by the aesthetic and ideological codes that restrict and limit an urban space and so the desire to find ruins, as the desire to find wild places is something that's very much part of our culture. And I think you just, very often it's a kind of a subconscious longing to find places that aren't overdetermined, where surprises can happen, where the mysterious can unfold, where the inexplicable can be found. Where you can play and mess about and invent things off your own bat. You can go there and you can look at a ruin and you could think, 'this is useless, this has absolutely no function whatsoever', but if you study it, if you study a place over a long period of time, or you even go into a place and look for evidence of activity, you can see that these places are used for a whole plethora of different activities.

[Urban explorers burning candles on a piece of industrial machinery]

DP: I think that is kind of, is partly why it's so poignant, seeing some of those sites. That it's not only all the activities and desires and the lives that were lived in those spaces but also all the hopes that were originally embedded in them.

[a decaying restaurant menu on the floor]

AB: Urban exploration and the notion of exploration I think is going to be useful for us to move forward, partly because it's got to do with individual sense of freedom and this sense of like, being able to engage with the world rather than just be told, you know, what is, what is freedom and what is human happiness and what identity you have and all that.

[Fade to scrolling credits]

LINKS

There are countless websites, forums, virtual social groups and databases devoted to urban exploration. The list below consists those that I have found most accessible, useful and/or interesting.

Meetup Groups:

<http://urbanexplor.meetup.com/>

This collection of websites is a database for local groups to meet up. This link specifically will take you to urban exploration meetup groups all over the world so you can locate one near you.

Facebook groups:

<http://www.facebook.com/home.php#/group.php?gid=2215129336&ref=ts> (international)

<http://www.facebook.com/home.php#/group.php?gid=6718540759&ref=ts> (specific to the London area)

The worldwide social networking site Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>) is, I have found, the easiest way to network with other urban explorers. There are also discussion boards and photographs on the site, though they are not as extensive as dedicated urban exploration website boards.

Forums and databases:

<http://www.uer.ca/> (International)

<http://www.28dayslater.co.uk/forums/> (United Kingdom)

<http://urbexforums.co.uk/> (United Kingdom)

Although there are dozens of urban exploration websites, many are very local or are by invitation only. These three are wide ranging, open and full of interesting photography, forum board postings, stories and, in the case of UER, a full database of sites all over the world.

Artistic exploration sites:

<http://sleepycity.net/> (International)

<http://www.ltv squad.com/> (New York City)

<http://www.placehacking.co.uk/> (United Kingdom)

<http://infrared.fr/> (France)

These sites highlight graffiti, photography and artistic practice in derelict urban spaces.

FURTHER READING

The literature on urban exploration is roughly divided between academic work and literature written by urban explorers themselves, though as my research indicates, many urban explorers are also exceptional scholars. Although there is a lot of the latter available, I have chosen two that I have found to be most cited in academic work.

Academic work

Bonnett, A. (2009). The dilemmas of radical nostalgia in British psychogeography. *Theory Culture Society* 26 (1), pp. 45–70.

This article highlights important ideas about the role of nostalgia in modern society, using psychogeographic practice to situate urban political activism. It is a great read and makes important connections between psychogeography and urban exploration.

Delyser, D. (1999). Authenticity on the ground: engaging the past in a California ghost town. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89 (4), pp. 602–632.

Delyser has been at the forefront of arguments about the management of heritage sites and the ‘authenticity’ that these places do or so not convey. Issues of ‘authentic’ historic experiences in urban landscapes are key to urban exploration and this paper makes it abundantly clear that cultural tourists (in this case visiting Bodie Ghost Town in

California) to historic sites constantly seek out the forbidden to heighten tourist experiences. The paper also brings up interesting ideas about whether urban exploration can ever to rural exploration.

Desilvey, C. (2006). 'Observed decay: telling stories with mutable things.' *Journal of Material Culture* 11 (3), pp. 318–338.

In this article, Desilvey uses her work at a Montana homestead to discuss alternative management practices at decaying sites, challenging notions that visitors to these sites are there to see ruins in a state of 'arrested decay'. Desilvey's findings here parallel the thought of many urban explorers and other scholars who would like to observe the mutations of these places through time. The article is also extremely well-written and enjoyable to read.

Edensor, T. (2005). *Industrial ruins: spaces, aesthetics, and materiality*. Oxford, UK: Berg Publishing.

In this work, Edensor describes his personal experiences in ruins in beautiful language, complimented by a plethora of wonderful photographs taken by the author. The book is, to date, the best academic work done on urban exploration and should be the first thing you read if you are interested in the topic. The book, as states in the title, only focuses on industrial ruins and has little discussion of the urban exploration community.

Genosko, G. (2009). 'Illness as Metonym: Writing Urban Exploration in Infiltration.' *Space and Culture* 12 (1), pp. 63–75.

This article highlights the accomplishments of the urban explorer Ninjalicious, using his zone Infiltration as a primary source throughout. The essay considers key sites of Ninjalicious' exploration. The article is very narrow in focus but has some interesting quotes from an obscure zine.

McRae, J. D. (2008). *Play city life: Henri Lefebvre, urban exploration and re-imagined possibilities for urban life*. Unpublished Master's thesis held at the Department of Geography, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

This masters thesis uses Henri Lefebvre's theories about the ongoing production of social space, explicated in his spatial triad, to define and explain urban exploration. The thesis is well written, well researched and is full of a wealth of geographically specific information on urban exploration communities.

This thesis can be found online: <http://qspace.library.queensu.ca/handle/1974/1046>

Pile, S. (2005). *Real cities: modernity, space, and the phantasmagorias of city life*. Thousand Oaks, California, Sage Publishing.

Pile's account of modern city life highlights the fact that we constantly neglect emotional aspects of cities and therefore seek to find them through psychogeographical practice. These practices, he argues, manifest themselves in the forms of ghosts, dreaming, magic and vampirism, and coincide with the explorations by urban explorers to find the 'unknown' and 'forgotten' realities of cities. This book was seminal in triggering academic interest in spectral geographies as well as wider academic interest in urban exploration.

Pinder, D. (2005). Arts of urban exploration. *Cultural Geographies* 12 (4): 383–411.

Pinder's article on an art collective in New York who use abandoned and 'empty' spaces for artistic practice is an important account of the intersections between artists, academics and urban explorers. The paper raises the interesting issue of who has rights to the city and in what forms.

Toth, J. (1993). *The mole people: life in the tunnels beneath New York City*. Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press.

This book, written in a journalistic literary style, is a collection of stories about the author's experience of living with homeless people underneath the streets of New York. Although the book has been challenged regarding its accuracy, the portrayals in the book bring to mind the fact that these spaces in the city are used by more groups than just urban explorers.

(2008) *Cultural Geographies* 15(3).

This issue of *Cultural Geographies* contains 6 very interesting articles on the 'spectral turn' in geography and is an essential read for an understanding of ghostly manifestation in ruins.

Urban exploration literature

Ninjalicious. (2005). *Access all areas: a user's guide to the art of urban exploration*. Canada: Infilpress.

Ninjalicious, due to his prolific nature and grace with words, is, by far, the most cited urban explorer to date. In this book, published posthumously in 2005, Nijalicious details the reasons behind and methods involved in urban exploration, discussing legalities, equipment, and how to access different types of places such as sewers, drains, utility tunnels and construction sites. It should be noted that Ninjalicious purposefully chose to use the term infiltration as an aspect of urban exploration, revealing his desires to explore the unknown parts of the city, not necessarily abandoned.

Deyo, L. B. and David 'lefty' Leibowitz (2003) *Invisible frontier: exploring the tunnels, ruins and rooftops of hidden New York*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

In this book, the work of Deyo and Leibowitz, the founders of Jinx magazine, take their daring and 'stylish' New York urban adventurer club into new landscapes. Although the book feels a bit like an ad for the magazine, its is a database of information similar to what you would find on urban exploration online discussion boards in print form.

Conclusion

Urban exploration is a practice that hides in the shadows, inviting us to shift our gaze in new directions, to challenge convention and to think more critically about the practices of everyday life (De Certeau 1984) and the rhythms and flows of urban environments that have myriad potential for reconfiguration (Lefebvre 2004). The spectacle of exploration works to rupture the tamed spaces of modern urban life, feeding on the joy of not just subversion, but personal connections to people and places. Urban explorers find beauty, adventure and joy in places that have been written off the map by others.

It was not easy for me to produce this article. Urban exploration has become very personal to me, something I want to horde and hide from the world. There is a fear that by revealing my personal sanctuaries, my urban wildernesses, that they will be lost. Like the ghosts we chase in these spaces, as soon as you look directly at them, they dissipate. But taking up the challenge, as you have seen in this article, is what urban exploration is all about. There is a world just beyond what you know that holds secrets, should you dare to experience it.

POSTSCRIPT

As a final note, the explorations undertaken as part of this research were taken with knowledgeable local guides utilizing extreme precaution to prevent harm to myself and

others. Ruins, derelict places, tunnels and bunkers are full of hazards: chemicals, insects and animals, sharp rusty bits of metal and corridors that morph into mazes after walking for many hours. Explorations in these places must be taken with this in mind, gearing appropriately for each explore.

Following the urban explorer code of ethics, no sites were broken into during the course of production. In some cases, we found people living in the places and carefully made our way out so as not to disturb them in their homes. I would encourage everyone to explore their local liminal environments, but be sure you do so in a safe and respectful way, preferably with a guide who has experience in safely and successfully exploring these places.

Short Biography

Bradley L. Garrett studied at the University of California Riverside where he received a B.S. in anthropology and a B.A. in history before moving to Australia to complete an M.A. in maritime archaeology in 2005. Bradley accrued about 5 years of experience doing archaeology in California, Hawai'i, Oregon, Australia, Iceland and Mexico before taking a more permanent position with the United States Bureau of Land Management as an archaeologist for the past 3 years. During this time, Bradley also began using digital video to make short documentaries about places. This practice led to the beginning of his PhD at Royal Holloway, University of London and his use of digital video in mapping conceptions of landscape and place and his current work on urban exploration.

Note

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