

WEAR AND TEAR

Orvar Löfgren

Every summer I visit an old abandoned farm house in a deserted woodland, far away from the bustling holiday life out at the coast. For 30 years I have returned to a landscape of gradual decay and ageing. Each time I track the effects of a past winter season. The planks are rotting, the roof is caving in, nails work themselves out of the grip of wood and stand exposed until they rust and disappear. Plants and sprouts sneak into widening gaps and cracks. Moss and lichen create new color combinations and surface structures. The roof tiles become brittle and fall apart. Changes between warm and cold, wet and dry, speed up the decay process.

Indoors the curtains fade, the wallpaper loses its grip on the walls, old bottles turn opaque and the clothes in the wardrobe are attacked by mildew. Outdoors objects are ensnared by the grass, drawn into the ground by gravity, slowly disappearing. Only the handlebars are still visible on the old bike, waving above the high grass like the arms of a drowning person.

A swarm of activities are going on in the stillness of this abandoned landscape. Objects and materials are transformed into new forms and combinations. Most of these changes are so slow that they would hardly be noticeable if I was living next door. Only because I visit this farmstead once a year, can I observe and record them. New orders and disorders are created all the time. For the visitor, the boundaries between discarded and saved objects become more and more unclear. The disintegrating belongings inside the house look more and more like the trash accumulating behind the old barn.

The special atmosphere of this deserted farm is produced by the intertwining of the life of objects and its former inhabitants. Up in the attic you can find old tax returns, wedding photos and funeral invitations. They give off a melancholy mood of decay – scattered remains of both a family life and a home.

Ruins like this are culturally productive; they open themselves up to all kinds of daydreams. A fascination with decay runs through Western history, often filtered through the romantic mood of the bittersweet, mixed feelings of nostalgia and alienation. It is a mood often charged with moral or ideological values. The ways in which a ruin captures our attention vary with who we are and where we are looking from. Ruins can be invigorating as well as depressing. Children may be fascinated by what they see as the openness produced by decay and disorder. This setting can invite action and set their imaginations in motion. Elderly people may experience nostalgia or even bitterness, projecting their own situation onto the landscape, interpreting it in terms of loss or approaching death.

But a site like this old farm could also be used to explore the micro-processes of cultural wear and tear. One summer I brought a Mayan archeologist to the farm, and she enthusiastically started to list the transformative processes she saw in the building and among all the scattered objects: oxidation, glass crazing, percolation, osmosis, implosion, cryo-perturbation, erosion, and hydration. It struck me that her vocabulary from the natural sciences meant



that what some see as death and decay, others view as rebirth, new forms of life and information.

The rich terminology from biology, physics and chemistry made me envious; all of a sudden the cultural vocabulary for ageing seemed so poor. What if we turned some of these biological or physical processes into cultural metaphors? Can there be cultural *corrosion*, *erosion* or *dehydration*? Can a cultural phenomenon, an object, an idea, a routine or a symbol *fade* or *rot*? What kinds of cultural forces correspond to the work of weather, wind and water up at the old farm?

There may, for example, be cultural worlds or phenomena that could be characterized as *brittle*. They may look well-organized, intact and alive, but only a minor change or a slight touch may cause them to crumble or disappear. The Austrian author Stefan Zweig has described a classic case of brittleness. Writing in 1941 from exile he remembers the overwhelming feeling of stability, security and tradition people felt during his childhood Vienna, just before the collapse of the Hapsburg empire at the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. He calls it “The Golden Age of Security”. Members of the well-established bourgeoisie kept reassuring each other that they were living in a thousand-year-old monarchy that would remain forever. The economy was stable, everybody knew the interest rates ahead or in what year you would get the next rise in wages and what your pension would be. The year and family life had a ritualized rhythm. You could insure yourself against any eventuality. “Nothing could change in this well-organized order. Nobody thought about war, revolution or upheavals. Everything radical or violent was an impossibility in this era of rationality.” Then came the war and the old culture just fell apart. Nobody had seen the warning signals ahead (Zweig 1943: 2ff.).

Life Cycles

Cultural wear and tear varies in speed and scope. How is it that all of a sudden I see a theoretical concept, a shirt, or the family car with different eyes? One morning it just jumps out as unfashionable or tacky, and you are ready to throw it away or sell it.

Most cultural phenomena have a life cycle that make them fade, lose their attraction or usefulness, but the striking thing is that the rhythm or tempo of these cycles vary so much. Some phenomena age very rapidly, others hardly at all. As Michael Thompson has shown in his book *Rubbish Theory* (1979), physical and cultural wear and tear are rarely synchronized.

From the perspective of fashion and longing for the “brand new”, ageing is often seen as unappetizing, shabby or dismal. The unfashionable is always just round the corner, which gives the shining “new” a short life span. The first dent in car, the tear in the fabric or the fading of color will transform something into a *used* object, a worn idea, a second-hand commodity. It is obvious that our senses are taught to trace and evaluate cultural wear and tear. The hand defines the threadbare, our taste buds detect spoilage, our eyes note the paling, our ears the squeaking. Among thrift-shop managers it is well known that what really puts customers off second-hand objects is the smell of age.

Shining newness is thus a very vulnerable condition, as Rem Koolhaas points out in his discussion of “junkspace” (2003). He talks about the nightmare of the manager of a new mall. One day he might wake up and find out that his establishment has aged overnight, and all of a sudden there is moss growing on the walls, the pipes are dripping, the parking lot is cracked and empty.

Consuming the new makes last year’s model obsolete, or at least old-fashioned. This has long been an important theme for marketing specialists. The American car industry had already in the 1920s started to copy the idea of “this year’s fashion” from Parisian haute couture, and pioneered experiments with the idea of “planned obsolescence”. How can you speed up the cultural wear and tear of a product, make it age faster, get tired or tacky? Their methods were later tried out in other commodity fields (see the discussion in Arvastson 2004, Löfgren 2005 and Mattsson 2004). Interestingly enough some objects and phenomena turned out to be more difficult to “obsolesce”.

The idea of built-in-obsolescence can act as a kind of burn-out of the new. In the same moment as it

is presented on the catwalk, radiating light and energy, it is consumed from within. This double process reminds us that the Latin root of “consume” is destruction. What interests me here is the potential of looking at a cultural process that combines birth and death, making and unmaking. Intensification is linked to destruction: “Consumed by fire” (see the discussion in Wilk 2004).

Material and Mental Burn-out

The concept of burn-out also reminds us of the ways that we create metaphorical translations, as concepts are moved from one context to another. During the 1980s a new diagnosis swept over the Western World, called “burn-out”, and it was seen to have originated in the USA. In 1983 the term was first published in Sweden. A newspaper article defined the novel concept as “a long period of emotional overload resulting in emotional short circuit”. Two years later another daily paper stated: “Burn-out is the name for mental exhaustion and tedium, that is common among teachers, social workers and hospital staff, a condition that only recently has been given a Swedish name.”

But the history of the concept was more complicated. Burn-out turns out to have a long history in the Swedish language. For many centuries it was only used for material objects; a frying pan, a house or a town could be burned out. But in the artistic world of early 19th century Romanticism, the concept took on a new dimension, and it became a metaphor for the death of creativity. Artists and writers started to talk about burned-out hearts or minds. The concept spread rapidly among intellectuals towards the later part of the century. “He is burnt out without ever having burnt for anything but himself”, is a writer’s description of a colleague. August Strindberg talks about burned out brains, while another author describes himself as “an old burned-out gentleman, with his future behind him”. But the condition of burn-out was not applicable to anybody; it was both gendered and class-based. Burn-out was reserved for the male genius, and there was a heroic tone to the concept. You had given the world so much!

In the US the concept was also used for artists,

and in the late 20th century rock stars could be described as burned out, because they had been living too intensely, “burning their candle at both ends” with sex and drugs. Then the psychologists and the medical profession moved in, searching for a concept that could describe stressed professionals who suddenly collapsed from overwork and mental fatigue. It re-emerged as a postmodern disease, a new label for problems of exhaustion, disillusion and depression acquired through occupational stress. In the world of the 1980s and 1990s, this concept resonated strongly in some national and occupational settings, while it never caught on in other places.

In Sweden burn-out spread like an epidemic. A consultant who lectured on stress-prevention remembers:

Employees listened to the lecturer who said: ‘Have you ever felt a loss of memory? Or problems with sleep? Lack of appetite? Headaches?’ People sat with their checklists and thought: ‘Oh, My God, I’ve got burn-out.’ The talks had just the opposite effect than intended.

People found that this label fit their own condition to such a degree that doctors were ordered to stop using this magic word, which seemed to attract a wildly diverse set of problems. One of the problems with the metaphor was that it described a state of no return. After a case of burn-out, you were “finished”.

The concept, however, lived on both in the media and in people’s everyday world. Its immense attraction rested on its metaphorical power. First of all, it was a metaphor of the short circuit. “I have been exposed to mental and physical overload, my whole system has become overheated and now it has collapsed.” Secondly, it was a diagnosis that described an active subject: “I have been burning at my job, I have given everything and now I pay an unfairly high price for my strong commitment.”

The example of burn-out is interesting because it illustrates how a metaphor for mental wear and tear influences behavior and identity. In a study where we followed a group of middle-managers who had all been given this diagnosis, we could see that the

metaphor shaped not only their self-perception, but also reorganized their everyday life (Löfgren & Palm 2005). To be described by others or by yourself as burned-out signaled a special and dramatic transformation, in which you were drained of energy and life, so work seemed meaningless, your body was aching, your memory was gone, and you felt finished. Using this metaphor of fire, problems of both body and soul were seen in a different light, compared to older types of diagnosis like suffering from over-work, depression, or ennui.

Conclusion

The condition of burn-out traveled from the material world into the world of psychology and then to everyday culture. It is striking that so much of the discussion about cultural wear and tear has been borrowed from the material world, so it is always about objects and commodities (Kopytoff 1988; Thompson 1979). When we try talk about the ways in which less tangible cultural phenomena age or change, we still tend to be stuck with metaphors from the material world or with the ageing of organisms from biology. Cultural forms may become vessels, we talk of “empty rituals”, no longer meaningful to the participants, or institutions that are “drained of meaning”. People can describe themselves as mentally worn-out, an idea grows tired, a cultural symbol fades, an experience turns shallow, a lifestyle feels outdated, and a theoretical perspective carries marks of too much wear and tear. These are not unproblematic translations and on the whole our conceptual framework for understanding these types of cultural changes seems poorly developed. By using the concepts of biological ageing, for example, we give cultural phenomena an irreversible life-course, slowly moving ahead to a certain death. Through this process culture is naturalized, and its real working obscured.

We will always live in a world of metaphors when discussing cultural wear and tear, and we will always have problems trying to evade the moralizing dimensions hidden in such concepts. What kinds of cultural ageing seem threatening or unpleasant, nice, secure, or promising? What kinds of processes result in negative decay, while others just add a pleasant patina, or turn older things into prized antiques or wonderful classics?

References

- Arvastson, Gösta 2004: *Slutet på banan. Kulturmöten i bilar- nas århundrade*. Stockholm/Stehag: Symposion.
- Koolhaas, Rem 2003: Junkspace: The Debris of Modernization. In: Chuihua Judy Chung, Jeffrey Inaba, Rem Koolhaas & Sze Tsung Leon, *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*. New York: Taschen, pp. 408–421.
- Kopytoff, Igor 1988: The Cultural Biography of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective. In: Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, pp 64–94.
- Löfgren, Orvar 2005: Catwalking and Coolhunting: The Production of Newness. In: Orvar Löfgren & Robert Willim 2005 (eds.), *Magic, Culture and the New Economy*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 38–52.
- Löfgren, Orvar & Anne-Marie Palm 2005: Att kraschlanda i sjukskrivning. In: Bodil Jönsson & Orvar Löfgren (eds.), *Att utmana stressen*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Mattsson, Helena 2004: *Arkitektur och konsumtion. Reyner Banham och utbyttbarhetens estetik*. Stockholm/Stehag: Symposion.
- Thompson, Michael 1979: *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*. London: Oxford UP.
- Wilk, Richard 2004: Morals and Metaphors: The Meaning of Consumption. In: Karin Ekström & Helene Brembeck (eds.), *Elusive Consumption*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, pp. 11–26.
- Zweig, Stefan 1943: *The World of Yesterday*. New York: Viking Press.