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Time to destroy. An archaeology of supermodernity.

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Abstract.

The archaeology of the contemporary past is becoming an important subfield within the discipline and attractive not only for archaeologists: different social scientists and artists are engaging with the remains of the recent past in manifold ways. In this article the term supermodernity is chosen to describe the period that started with the First World War. This period is characterized by increasing means of devastation, both of humans and things, and as a result of this, by a proliferation of archaeological sites (battlefields, industrial ruins, concentration camps). Taking destruction as a leitmotiv and adopting a symmetrical approach (*sensu* Latour), four issues that concern the archaeology of supermodernity are considered: mediation, materiality, place and memory, and politics. It is argued here that we have to make the most of the particular rhetoric of archaeology in order to delineate a specifically archaeological approach to the recent past, and that we must produce a more critical account of supermodernity's destructiveness using archaeological evidence.

Introduction.

The archaeology of the contemporary past is a young but important field within the discipline (see Gould and Schiffer 1981; Schiffer 1991; Rathje and Murphy 1992), which has grown exponentially during the last decade (Schnapp 1997; Buchli 1999; Olivier 2000; Buchli and Lucas 2001; Saunders 2002; Schofield et al. 2002; Schofield 2004, etc.). The disciplinary limits of this kind of archaeology and those of anthropology, sociology, contemporary history, art history, history of architecture, material culture studies and technology studies are unclear, and the projects that can be

labelled as archaeology of the recent past are likewise varied in object, scope and theoretical grounding. Thus, some studies that use the term “archaeology” seem to have only a slight connection with archaeological practice, but a lot in common with material culture studies (e.g. Buchli 1999). However, some questions seem to recur in many of these works: why doing an archaeology of the present? How does it differ from other practices and modes of knowledge? Which is the nature of our evidence? The need for filling the “black hole” (Rathje et al. 2001) between the archaeological past and the present is already acknowledged by many archaeologists (see also Hicks 2003, 316-317), but many issues surrounding the field and the definition of its objectives await further debate. Eventually, the question about the archaeology of the contemporary past raises many themes that have to do with archaeology in general: memory, history, time, evidence, ruins, decay, materiality, narrative, politics.

This article is a reflection on the archaeology of the recent past, with a special emphasis on the archaeological record produced by the destructive impetus of what I will call supermodernity. Two questions have to be addressed in the first place: why (and what is) supermodernity and why destruction.

Supermodernity (*surmodernité*) is a term coined by the French anthropologist Marc Augé (2002 [1992]). He refers mainly to the late 20th century, as characterized by the revolution of speed, new modes of communication and transportation, and different spatial relations, including the emergence of a new category of place: the *non-lieu*, actually the negation of place itself, whose main characteristic is being transitive and largely asocial: airports, freeways, undergrounds, malls. The supermodern is equivalent to the post-modern, post-industrial or late capitalist of other authors and although Augé is mainly thinking in Western cultures, the effects of supermodernity, through globalization, are obvious in the world at large. I have chosen the term supermodernity and enlarged its implications in relation to archaeology for several reasons.

First, unlike “post-”, “super-” does not imply overcoming, but exacerbation, exaggeration (Augé 2002, 36). “The short twentieth century” (Hobsbawm 1994), which starts in 1914, and what comes afterwards, is a period of extreme, baroque modernities. It is modernity qualified or upgraded, not modernity overcome. As such, it is a quite coherent, self-contained period. The second industrial revolution, the world wars, the environmental crisis, and the apogee of globalization are among the defining features of this historical episode. An archaeology of supermodernity explores the material nature

of these excesses and especially the devastating consequences of supermodern exaggeration.

Secondly, it is necessary to expand supermodernity to fill the gap left by historical archaeologists, who tend to concentrate on the period comprised between the 16th and 19th centuries (e.g. Deetz 1977; Johnson 1996; Tarlow and West 1999; Leone 2005), usually leaving the 20th and 21st centuries to material culture students – although, especially in the US, there is a growing number of practitioners turning their attention to more recent periods (e.g. Mullins 2006). Conventionally, historical archaeology studies the last 500 years of human history, a period that coincides with the birth, evolution and expansion of Western capitalism and modernity (Hall and Lucas 2006, 51), but the most recent part of this past is too often forgotten.

Thirdly, this forgetting of the recent is not only caused by the peculiar nature of supermodernity or the absence of time depth. Paradoxically, it is the fact that we have a living memory of the recent past and that we are personally involved in it that have condemned supermodernity to oblivion by archaeologists. It seems that we cannot study what we – or our relatives – have directly or indirectly experienced. The events of supermodernity are often lived as personal and collective trauma in the present – partly because of their destructive nature. It is not easy therefore to talk about them, whereas more remote historical episodes – such as the 1848 revolution or the Franco-Prussian War – have usually lost the power to affect us so poignantly. Nevertheless, the fifty or so years usually conceded to the archaeology of the recent past looks like a too short time span – and ever changing. As I have said, it is not only our memories, but the social net of memories in which we have been educated and socialized that counts, and that includes tales and experiences transmitted by our parents and grandparents. At the beginning of the 21st century, then, it seems appropriate to trace back the archaeology of supermodernity to the inter-war period. The archaeology of supermodernity is the archaeology of us who are alive, for sure (no other archaeology can claim that), but is also, more than any other, the archaeology of trauma, emotion and intimate involvement (see Campbell and Ulin 2004).

Why destruction? I will deal with this question more lengthily later. Let us say, by now, that supermodernity is characterized, as modernity in general (González-Ruibal 2006), by destruction as much as by production or consumption, with the difference that the first phenomenon is usually overlooked. Thus, Buchli and Lucas (2001a, 21) state that “production and consumption arguably form the central poles of contemporary

material life, indeed the material basis of social existence in capitalist and socialist industrialised societies”. If modernity in general brings destruction, supermodernity produces it on an extraordinary scale. The most radical example that comes to mind is nuclear war. However, as Serres (2000, 32) has pointed out, supermodern daily life brings more damage to the world than several world wars together. If sociologists and anthropologists study production and consumption, archaeology, the science of ruins and the abandoned, of fragments and death (Pearson and Shanks 2001, 91-93), seems especially suited to work with destruction: the realm of abjection (Buchli and Lucas 2001, 10-11). After all, one of the peculiarities of archaeology is that it usually works with abandoned, ruined places – what we call archaeological sites. I do not mean that the archaeology of the recent past should be restricted to this kind of sites only, that an archaeological methodology can only be deployed in these contexts, or that all modern archaeological sites are derelict, ghostly places. Nevertheless, I will focus purposefully on traces of supermodern destruction because I consider that they manifest something crucial about our era, they provide relevant political lessons, and they are a counterpoint to the kind of research developed by other disciplines, such as anthropology and material culture studies. Also, by destruction I do not mean sudden and absolute devastation only (like Chernobyl). Many destructive processes brought about by supermodernity are relatively slow and gradual: consider the formation of post-industrial landscapes (like Detroit) or the abandonment of rural areas due to the urban exodus.

In this article, four main topics on the archaeology of supermodernity will be tackled: mediation, materiality, place and memory, and politics. I have selected these topics, among many others, because of their strong connections, their pertinence in relation to destruction, their theoretical possibilities, their impact in other fields (from sociology to performance), and their relevance for archaeology as a whole. Through those points, I will try to address the following questions: Why doing an archaeology of supermodernity? In which ways archaeology can meaningfully engage with the recent past? How can we avoid falling into banality and mere aestheticization? And, how should we carry out a politically engaged and critical practice?

1-Mediation.

In this section, I will ask the question how should we translate the contemporary past as archaeologists? I will describe two ways of doing that: 1) storytelling, which is

currently the most usual procedure for the mediation of the past in archaeology, and 2) manifestation, a mode of translation which, unlike storytelling, is not based on a literary rhetoric.

Much historical archaeology is justified in the belief that we need alternative stories, that oral and written data do not tell everything about the past, that there are other things to be told from artefacts and that there are other experiences that have to be accounted for. During the last decade, the idea of narrative has been growing steadily in the discipline (Praetzellis 1998; Joyce 2002). Archaeologists, especially historical archaeologists, think that they have to write stories by epistemic as well as ethical imperative (Given 2004). “In small things forgotten” (Deetz 1977), we find the voice of the subaltern, the Other, those who have no voice in the official records (slaves, women, blacks, the colonized). Archaeology, then, can also provide alternative accounts of supermodernity, by focusing on destruction and the abject, the less gentle face of the world we live in. I will outline three scenarios in which archaeology must produce an alternative narratives: 1) genocides and political killings; 2) wars that leave no documentary record or in which the memories are highly contentious; 3) the subconscious – or unconscious – in culture.

It is not strange that extrajudicial killings and genocides – a characteristic of supermodernity’s destructiveness – has produced a heftier literature than other themes (e.g. Crossland 2000; Schofield et al. 2002; Koff 2004). Archaeologists are currently requested to work by international organisations in a variety of contexts: from the location of bodies of American soldiers in Southeast Asia, to the excavation of mass graves in Argentina, Guatemala or Yugoslavia. In most cases, the facts that led to assassinations have been concealed or distorted by dictatorial regimes or war circumstances have prevented the recovering and proper burial of deceased individuals. Here, the stories that archaeologists produce have to do with the circumstances of death. Nonetheless, we should bear in mind that the excavation of people assassinated for political reasons is not always encouraged by the necessity to know the real story, or a story that is different from the official account. In many cases, mass graves are excavated because of a need for restitution, which is a need for presence, not for meaning. I will deal with this later.

The second scenario in need of alternative archaeological narratives is that of wars that leave few documentary traces – like most conflicts in the Third World today. Here, written documents are scant or absent, narratives are usually distorted and

imposed by dictators, and sometimes the events are played down or concealed by implicated Western governments (Rathje and González-Ruibal 2006). In places like the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the most horrible recent war raged between 1998 and 2002, archaeologists and ethnographers will have to join forces to tell the story of the disaster. We tend to think narrowly of forensic archaeology as the excavation of human remains, when we consider both genocides and wars. Yet forensic practice is much more than identifying corpses. It is about documenting the scene of a crime and reconstructing a story from the remains: all traces left in a destroyed village, a battlefield, an abandoned house, in a factory after an industrial disaster. The difference between forensic science and archaeology, though, is that the latter is not just interested in the micro-event per se, but in contextualizing it in the wider political and social picture as well as in the long term. Take the remains of an ambush from the late 1980s on the road that leads from Ethiopia to Sudan through the region of Metekel. We have no bodies there. But we do have four trucks and an anti-aircraft gun, all perforated by shrapnel (FIGURE 1). We can reconstruct the event, in a forensic way, and tell the story of a government convoy that was destroyed by guerrilla fighters during the Ethiopian Civil War (1974-1991). We have gruesome, specific details – such as an RPG hole that perforated the back of the drivers seat in one of the trucks; the fuel deposit blown up by a piece of shrapnel; dozens of shell casings dispersed by the explosion; the seat of the anti-aircraft gunner pierced by countless fragments. We have all the evidence that will never appear in the usual historical narrative, but that help to create a strong sense of presence. At the same time, however, we can relate this micro-event to the global politics of the time, involving the Cold War, development policies, nationalism, peasant societies, the history of ethnic and political conflict in the Horn of Africa, and modern technology. It is not yet another tiny story, but a micro-event made globally significant. It depends on how we tell it. Archaeology, then, cannot only produce alternative stories: it can also tell stories in an alternative way.

The third aforementioned case where other narratives or explanations are pertinent is the unconscious in culture: things that we take for granted or care little for. This is not necessarily related to supermodernity's destructiveness, although it can indirectly be: consider garbage, for instance. William Rathje's study of modern garbage has proven how archaeology can tell a completely different story, a story that can make a big difference in ecological and economic terms and alleviate the collateral damages produced by supermodern consumerism (Rathje 2001; Rathje and Murphy 1992) –

however, we can doubt whether Rathje's production of alternative truths is really framed as a story, as understood by most archaeologists (Praetzelis 1998). Many of Michael Schiffer's investigations can also be considered alternative tales about American society through material culture, be it the electric car or the portable radio (e.g. Schiffer 1991).

The emphasis on narration, however, has led to overlook other possible modes of engagement with the materiality of the recent past. We need alternative ways of translating the remains from the past (Shanks 2004; Witmore 2004) and this need is especially urgent in the context of the contemporary past at least for two reasons: because, given the overabundance of historical information for the recent past, there is a risk of saturating memory by a proliferation of narratives and details, which may eventually neutralize and trivialize the past (I will return to this later), and because the evidence that makes the archaeology of supermodernity is often very particular in its abject detail and its traumatic political implications.

These questions appeared clear to me when dealing with the remains of a Second World War battlefield on a hill near the town of Mankush (western Ethiopia). Here, an Italian military camp existed whose function was to defend the frontier with the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, when Ethiopia was occupied by Fascist Italy (1935-1941). The place was bombed in 1940 prior to the invasion of Ethiopia by the allies, an invasion that culminated in the defeat of Mussolini's army in Eastern Africa by the end of 1941. Today, the Italian trenches are remarkably well preserved and full of food cans, metal sheet, and other materials, including bayonet scabbards, some shell casings and even an automobile (FIGURE 2). This base did not play any significant role in the Eastern African theatre and it is not even recorded in some official maps (Ufficio Storico 1971). However, there is a fair amount of published textual information about the site and its occupants – and some archival research would turn up some more. It is obvious that as archaeologists we can tell something else from the ruins, construct other tales. But, do we really need more narratives about the Second World War, probably the best researched period in history? Do we need more fine-grained information about each and every event of the conflict? These are questions that are not pertinent only for that historical episode, but for the contemporary past as a whole. Do we always need more stories and more voices? Furthermore, is the proliferation of stories and perspectives always progressive and positive, as the post-processual advocates of multivocality claim

(e.g. Bender 1998; Hodder 2000, 2004)? Is the struggle for liberation simply reducible to a “right to narrate” (Žižek 2004, 190)?

I think that archaeology’s mission in the most recent past is not necessarily or uniquely to provide new and different accounts, more data and more interpretations. Manifestation (*sensu* Shanks 2004) can be at least as important as the construction of narratives, in the usual sense of the term, and it has the added advantage of being less dangerous for the saturation of memory. Manifesting implies re-membering things (Olsen 2003) and being less an historian, who writes stories, and more an archaeologist, who works with material remains that are not reducible to text. In the case described above, what we need is perhaps a rough material image of the banality of war, as expressed in those trivial archaeological vestiges in the middle of nowhere, to be contrasted with the fierce fascist rhetoric of the time. It is not a tale: rather, an archaeological disclosure of the nature of Fascism. In a sense, we do need a kind of narrative, but not the one modeled on literature that seems to be so popular in our discipline nowadays (Joyce 2002), a narrative that translates things into words, losing thingliness (the Heideggerian *Dinglichkeit*) on the way. Manifesting is especially important in supermodernity: facing the devastation and pain brought by failed modernities, it is a kind of revelation that we need more than an explanation. It is another way of seeing Auschwitz or Belzec (Kola 2000), not another tale about what happened there. As narrators, archaeologists can hardly write a story that matches Primo Levi’s. But we can produce something else.

As Buchli and Lucas (2001, 25) remind us, the archaeology of the contemporary past works with the “unsayable”, the “unconstituted”, what lies outside discourse. It works with trauma, destruction and pain: war, emigration, totalitarian regimes, social engineering, inhuman development, industrial disasters, (post)colonial failures. Archaeology must deploy its own rhetoric, one that keeps the thingliness of the thing, without being trapped into verbal discourse, and that does justice to the troubling nature of the archaeological record we work with. Sontag (2003, 89) said that “Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us”. The archaeology of supermodernity, like photography, should be able to haunt us (Shanks 1997a). At least, it has to summon up the presence of the past in a vivid way. This also means a rhetoric that is less based on completeness – what many narratives aspire to – and more on the acceptance of the inherently partial, fragmentary, and therefore uncanny, nature of the archaeological record (Lucas 2005, 127-129). This has been put aptly by Eelco

Runia (2006a: 309). He says that “Presence is not the result of metaphorically stuffing up absences with everything you can lay your hands on. It can at best be kindled by metonymically presenting absences”. There are many points in contact here with archaeology: metonymy, absence, things on the margin.

Martin Heidegger’s theory of art may provide good arguments for an archaeology of the contemporary world that takes into account the essential incompleteness of its material record. For Heidegger (2002), the essence of the work of art consists in the unconcealment of the being, in truth as revelation (*aletheia*), and, therefore, in allowing something to come forth. Nonetheless, the work of art is not a simple act of disclosure, an act of absolute openness. The work opens a new world and at the same time sets forth the earth – which stands for what cannot be known. World and earth – revelation and concealment – are in constant opposition, in a battle (Heidegger 2002, 26, 37), but they also depend on each other. This denial of absolute openness belongs to the essence of truth as unconcealment. One of the effects that results of the appearance of the work of art is the disturbance of everything around the work: the work of art shows us that “the ordinary is not ordinary, it is extraordinary, uncanny” (Heidegger 2002, 31).

As the Heideggerian work of art, the archaeology of the contemporary past brings both disclosure – something terrible happened – and concealment: the unknowable and unsayable – but what happened exactly? In a period so well documented as the 20th century, archaeology shows that there are areas of darkness; events that cannot be completely unveiled; things, in sum, that we cannot get to know or comprehend despite all the research, all the data, all the archives that we may have. By converting archaeology into a discipline that aspires to totality and completeness, it loses its power and its essential nature, which lies in working with “the radical undecidability of the past” (Edensor 2005: 330). Archaeology respects the earth and works with it, both literally and from a Heideggerian point of view.

A Heideggerian approach implies a particular way of manifesting things – a different way of engaging with the materiality around us (and in us). This implies making the most of our archaeological sensibility (Shanks 1992). Yet resorting to Heidegger’s theory of art, to artistic creativity (Shanks 1997, 1997a; Pearson and Shanks 2001) and reflecting upon the coincidences between the work of artists and archaeologists (Renfrew 2003) do not have to imply transforming what we study into an art object and ourselves into artists. There is a risk in aestheticizing and romanticizing

modern ruins, which convert them into playgrounds. In my opinion, this is the impression produced by Tim Edensor's otherwise excellent work, due to his emphasis on the sensual and aesthetic (even enjoyable) aspects of ruins (Edensor 2005), which neutralizes the author's own critical discourse. A playful, picturesque and largely acritical view of ruins has been developed by some artists, mainly in the United States (e.g. Gottlieb 2002; Ridgway 2003; Plowden 2006). Some unfortunate synthesis of art and science have also arisen suspicion among critical intellectuals, such as Žižek (2004, 150), who bemoans the "New Age monster of aestheticized knowledge".

I think that it is more appropriate, given the political and traumatic nature of many supermodern ruins, to explore them from the point of view of alienation (see Buchli and Lucas 2001). This, however, does not preclude the cross-fertilization between art and archaeology, quite on the contrary: There are many artists that, rather than drawing upon mere nostalgia and romanticism, have explored the political side of destruction and abandonment: Camilo José Vergara, Manfred Hamm, Jason Francisco, Joan Myers, Edward Burtynsky, Jeff Wall, Mikael Levin, and Joel Sternfeld, among others. It is easy to find many striking connections and a similar poetics (Shanks 1997a) between the work of these artists and a critical archaeological project of supermodernity: we are both interested in trauma, memory, absence, death, decay, evidence. Mikael Levin for example, works with the absent memories of Jewish life in central Europe. He has photographed the almost indistinguishable archaeological remains of some concentration camps (Baer 2002), a task also carried out by Jason Francisco (2006) (FIGURE 3). Francisco addresses questions of home, place, history and memory by extending his gaze from people to things and engaging with the fragmentary and fragile evidence of Ashkenazic historical experience in the 20th century. With their exploration of absence and blurred evidence, the art of documentary photographers recalls at the same time the nature of contemporary archaeology, which works with fragments and oblivion, and the Heideggerian fight between world and earth.

But what is the task of the archaeologist? With Žižek's caveat in mind, I am not proposing here to turn archaeology into art, thus replicating the gesture of those archaeologists turned writers. As archaeologists, we have our own rhetoric, a Heideggerian way of manifesting the Being, between the world and the earth. We work between revelation – how this truck exploded when driven over a landmine (González-Ruibal 2006, 186) – and concealment – why was this house abandoned? (Buchli and

Lucas 2001b). We are trained to read material traces and engage in meaningful and original ways with the qualities and textures of things, because we do know about material culture and history and we have developed a methodology to document and manifest the past. This methodology is so powerful that some artists are basing their work on it, most famously Mark Dion (see Renfrew 2003), and authors such as Foucault or Freud constantly used archaeological tropes in their research. Both artists and archaeologists are concerned with documentationⁱ, but we, archaeologists, are specialists in documentation. Our mode of disclosing truth includes a variety of sources (more than any other discipline), which is broadening with audiovisual and digital media (Olivier 2001, 399; Witmore 2004a and b; Webmoor 2005, Van Dyke 2006). Many archaeologists are now using traditional and new modes of representation in a more creative fashion (e.g. Hodder 2000; Pearson and Shanks 2001), but traditional means of archaeological documentation (drawings of artifacts, plans of structures, distribution maps, graphs) may have an extraordinary power when applied to the contemporary past (FIGURE 4): they can help to manifest that past in new, unfamiliar ways. The combination of old and new media is expanding the possibilities that archaeologists have to translate the qualities of things (Witmore 2004a). Given the abundance of data and the peculiar nature of the archaeological record of supermodernity, the archaeology of the contemporary past should benefit even more from these new modes of engagement with the material. Modernity has created a sharp, asymmetric divide between rhetoric and truth that has to be overcome (Ginzburg 2003): they are not conflicting. In fact, rhetoric helps to mediate the past in richer ways: conflict is within truth, where disclosure and concealment struggle, not in the essential entanglement of truth and rhetoric.

To sum up, the archaeology of the contemporary past can provide alternative stories about recent events, but it can also – and it must – mediate the recent past in ways that manifest presence and keep memory alive. This implies exploring other ways of engaging with the materiality of the contemporary world and working in the gray zone that lies between revelation and concealment.

2-Materiality.

The archaeology of the contemporary past has to do justice to the enormous relevance of things in our recent history. This means, in the first place, paying more attention, in a symmetrical way, to the collectives of human and things that are involved in the

historical processes that we study (Latour 1993, 1996; Law 2002; Netz 2004; Olsen 2003, 2006; Witmore 2007), and, secondly, taking into account the thingliness of the world we live in – an issue that is achieving more and more importance in the social sciences (Demarrais et al. 2004; Meskell 2005; Miller 2005; Tilley et al. 2006). Many people outside archaeology are becoming aware of the relevance of materiality in our supermodern existences: there exists a widespread new material sensibility now (Shanks et al. 2004), that is reflected in a growing interest for the most mundane things.

With regard to the first point, the increasing relevance of material culture in supermodernity, Bjørnar Olsen (2003) has already made the point that humans and things are inextricably bound and that the anthropocentrism of the social sciences prevents us from seeing the collectives of humans and things that really exist (also Latour 1993). The fact that humans and objects are enmeshed in hybrid collectives is more obvious than ever in the supermodern world. Among other things, because people are well aware that they no longer master the artefacts that they produce: sometimes we feel that we are controlled by our own things, to the point that they can kill us, exterminate us all – consider the sci-fi dystopias typical of supermodernity. As Virilio has noted “Knowing how to do it doesn’t mean we know what we are doing” (Virilio and Lotringer 1997, 66). The First World War is a good case in point: a 19th-century society with 19th-century ways of conducting war awoke with horror to supermodern conflict by means of supermodern *matériel* culture (Schofield et al. 2002). The horrendous casualties of this war can only be explained by an imbalance between people and things, things going way ahead of people. This kind of situations, and the proliferation of “intelligent” artefacts, can explain the recent interest that archaeologists show in the agency of material culture (e.g. Gosden 2004). According to Olsen (2006), the human trajectory since the origins is one of increasing materiality, in which more and more tasks are delegated to non-human actors. On the other hand, supermodernity has given rise to a novel sort of objects that have to be taken into account, what Serres (1995, 15) has called “world-objects”: “artifacts that have at least one global-scale dimension (such as time, space, speed or energy)”. Many of these world-objects, such as missiles or military satellites, are very coherent with the supermodern global capacity for destruction.

The presence of material actors is obvious in politics. Supermodern politics are more than ever entangled in things: monuments, military camps, model villages, capital cities, roads, ballot boxes. Foucault (2000, 210) foresaw the parliament of things before

Latour: “Government is the right disposition of things ... but what does this mean? I think that it is not a matter of opposing things to men but, rather, of showing that what government has to do with is not territory but, rather, a sort of complex composed of men and things”. Political changes usually involve a new ecology of things and people. What is usually forgotten is the role of abandoned or destroyed things in the new ecologies – the production of destruction (Virilio and Lotringer 1997). The “right disposition of things” for the Serbian Chetniks in the Balkan war included the killing of Islamic monuments (not only people) (Hall 2000, 188). For the bloodless modernist utopia of the Galician peasants in Spain, change necessarily entails the destruction of the vernacular past (González-Ruibal 2005). The same goes for the futuristic Italian Fascism (Ghirardo 1989) and many other modernist dreams. These new ecologies usually mobilize fragments from the past and make them present, only to be razed to the ground: The 16th century bridge in Mostar became a very contemporary artefact in the recent conflict in the Balkans, and the same can be said of the mosque of Ayodhya or the Buddhas of Bamiyan (Meskell 2002, 564-565; Golden 2004, 184-186).

The production of destruction, with its effects on the collectives of humans and things, is especially obvious in time of war and political revolutions. During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) a new series of actors appeared on the political scene. Not just supermodern weapons (bombers, machine guns, tanks), but also asphalted roads, telephones, the radio (Thomas 1976, 1004) and portable photographic cameras that recorded the conflict (Sontag 2003, 21). Hugh Thomas (*ibid.*) has pointed out that the history of the conflict was the history of the abuse of technology, but who abused whom? The most advanced military technology razed a countryside of peasants, ploughs and ox-carts, as Robert Capa’s photographs captured so well (Capa 1999) (FIGURE 5). An archaeology of the Spanish War (González-Ruibal 2007) has to take symmetrically into account the thingliness of the trench, the road curb where people were executed, the sickles with which anarchists killed landlords and priests in Andalusia, the Fascist mass graves and the German bombers that razed Barcelona, as actors in the conflict (*cf.* Olsen 2003). The destructive clash of industrial technology and non-industrial communities is characteristic of the relationship between people and things in supermodernity. We find this time and again in the Vietnam War (Hickey 1993), in the civil war in Ethiopia (González-Ruibal 2006) or in the most recent slaughters in Darfur. The archaeology of supermodernity studies these unequal

collectives (the peasant and the Kalashnikov, the hunter-gatherer and the chainsaw) that are present in our globalized world.

An archaeology of the supermodern, however, has to go beyond merely taking things into account. It has to go a step beyond technology and material culture studies. For an archaeology of the supermodern the “background noise” (Witmore 2007) is everything: garbage, ruins, the asphalt on a road, a pile of bricks, an empty shell casing, a rusty tin can (FIGURE 6). This is not only a rhetorical call for revaluing the margins and reading between the lines, in the postmodern way. As a matter of fact, it can turn out to be a strong critical claim. Anthropologists, although more concerned than ever with space (Gupta and Ferguson 2002, 65; Delaney 2004, 35-75), are also more than ever separated from the thingliness of space itself. The deterritorialization and multi-situatedness of contemporary ethnography (Clifford 1997) has also worked for the disappearance of matter: houses, streets or towns only figure as thin nodes anchoring ethereal networks in the media world of transnational diasporic communities. The spaces of globalization (finanscapes, mediascapes, ideoscapes, etc.) defined by Appadurai (2002) or the “placeless, timeless, symbolic systems” that inform the network society delineated by Castells (1998, 350) are virtual worlds, devoid of matter, in which ideas and capitals seem to flow. “Utopian digital futures... ignore the escalating divisions in wealth across the world and almost all the economic and social consequences of globalization”, reminds Martin Hall (2000, 152). Likewise, digital wars as broadcasted in media seem to have dematerialized conflict and made it obscenely spectacular (Sontag 2003, 110), therefore neutralizing pain and violence. Paul Virilio commented as soon as 1984 that “a war of pictures and sounds is replacing a war of objects (projectiles and missiles)” (quoted in Virilio 2002, x). But, as Hall (2000, 183) points out “there [is] no virtual escape from an AK-47”. And an anthropologist well aware of the critical relevance of the material, Michael Taussig (2002, 25) notes that “the materiality of the material world and of the workaday world is far too easily taken for granted, especially in societies with advanced technology. What is required now as the world lurches toward ecological and political self-destruction is continuous surprise as to the material facts of Being”. It is necessary to go down to the ground and describe stinking rubbish, blown up mosques and hastily buried corpses to destroy the virtual myth, because the world is still about material things. Archaeology reminds us that there is a chaotic material reality behind the clean and invisible networks of

globalization and digital media, a materiality that is not reducible to social constructions and symbolic meanings.

3-Place and memory.

The matter of the archaeology of supermodernity fluctuates through very diverse kinds of locales. Three sorts of places, which are chosen here for their different relation to memory, will be taken into account. These are places of abjection, *mnemotopoi* and *lieux de mémoire*.

Most of the things the archaeology of the contemporary past has to deal with belong to the realm of the abject (Buchli and Lucas 2001). A quick inventory would include trenches, mass graves, landfills, bomb craters, derelict factories, abandoned railways, ruined houses, bunkers, nuclear testing grounds, concentration camps, refugee camps, places devastated by industrial disasters or racial riots. These different kinds of archaeological sites can be found in Kabul, Fresh Kills-New York, Srebrenica, Chernobyl, Bhopal, Detroit, Baghdad or Los Angeles. The archaeological scars of supermodernity are, in a sense, akin to Marc Augé's non-places: "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (Augé 2000, 83). Heritage that is not positive has been defined as negative (Meskell 2002), ambivalent (Chadha 2006) or hurtful (Dolff-Bonekaemper 2002). Sites that can be defined as such are not all necessarily places of abjection: only those sites whose existence has been crossed out from collective memory, about which nobody is allowed to speak or nobody wants to speak, or whose existence is denied. Places of abjection are those sites where no memorial is built and no commemorative plaque is ever to be found. If anthropology deals with non-places, archaeology has to deal with landscapes of death and oblivion (FIGURE 7): a no-man's land, too recent, conflicting, purulent and repulsive to be shaped as collective memory. This is the natural space for an archaeology of supermodernity's destructiveness. Nevertheless, some places of abjection may become important places for collective recollection. In this way, they become *mnemotopoi*, places of memory.

Mnemotopos is a word coined by Jan Assman (1992) inspired by Halbwachs' work (1971) on the places of pilgrimage in the Holy Land. Thus, if a place of abjection is a locale beyond social remembrance, where memory is erased, condemned to oblivion or put in quarantine, the *mnemotopoi* are the material foundations of collective memory.

They are not necessarily different, typologically speaking, from places of abjection. It is the way particular locales have been constituted in relation to a group's identity that grants them a particular status. However, the *mnemotopoi* include new categories too: monuments, memorials, historical buildings and places where something socially significant happened, something that left a collective memory trace: an Olympic stadium, a boulevard, a concert hall. Among the contemporary *mnemotopoi* we have the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC, Auschwitz's concentration camp and New York's Ground Zero (FIGURE 8).

Both *mnemotopos* and place of abjection are locales where a non-absent past resides (Domanska 2005, 405). That is not necessarily the case of the third space that will be described here: the *lieu de mémoire*, a kind of place which is often mixed up with the real "place of memory", the *mnemotopos*. A *lieu de mémoire* is like a well-worn metaphor, a cliché that claims to encapsulate memory but that has been too internalized, historicized and trivialized by society and the State to be able to display any true, living memory anymore – the national flag, the hymn, Victor Hugo, the Tour de France. In a sense, it bears a dysfunctional fossilized memory in a world where the past is reworked by the social sciences and spontaneous memory has been eradicated (Nora 1984, xxiv). Many *mnemotopoi* are eventually condemned to become dead *lieux de mémoire*: the matter of history and historians, already detached from socially significant recollection. And even worse, *lieux dominants*, places at the service of power (Nora 1984, xl). Olivier (2001, 186) has already pointed out how the State tends to absorb these sites into a monument-apparatus designed to sustain an ideological discourse.

Most places are in constant ontological change. These metamorphoses depend on the materiality of the locale as much as on the social context, the historical circumstances and the multifarious interests embedded in them. Places of abjection and *mnemotopoi* are those more prone to sudden change, as materializations of a non-absent past that cannot be controlled or subject to a finite interpretation (Domanska 2005, 405), but the *lieux de mémoire* are also characterized by their constant metaphors (Nora 1984, xxxv). As it can be easily supposed, the role of archaeologists can be fundamental to change the status of particular sites. The Cold War sites in the United Kingdom (Cocroft and Thomas 2003) are a good example of places of abjection that are being inventoried, classified, studied, and, therefore, ontologically transformed into places of memory, soon to become *lieux de mémoire*. As Runia (2006, 18) points out, the more a

monument is interacted, the more it loses its presence and the more it becomes a platitude.

Battlefields are a good case to exemplify the nature of the archaeological sites of supermodernity. Consider two different battlefields of the Second World War: Kiev (1941) and Omaha beach (1944). The latter is clearly a mnemotopos, a key place to remember fundamental events in recent Western history, events that are still part of the living collective memory of most people in Europe and North America. Even if our memory is already affected by a historical mode of reasoning and academic scholarship, there is still some room for spontaneous recollections in places like that. Going to Omaha is still like going to Auschwitz – a sacral, deeply moving pilgrimage. However, the site is in danger of becoming a historical cliché, a *lieu de mémoire*. It has been monumentalized and aestheticized to enhance and re-direct remembrance (FIGURE 9). In a few decades it will have probably a similar effect in our consciences as the Roman Colosseum or the battlefield of Waterloo. Once their terrible connotations are lost or diminished, these sites become places of leisure, with scarcely any sinister aura. The war remains around Kiev, on the contrary, are still closer to a place of abjection than to a *lieu de mémoire*. The battlefield and the subsequent places of the Jewish genocide are sunk into oblivion, and tons of war debris, human remains, mass graves, and structures remain more or less undisturbed except for the occasional looters. The trenches and fortifications have not been constituted as a place of collective remembrance, probably because of the difficult politics of memory in a country that has suffered a lasting totalitarian regime (Khubova et al. 1992; Sherbakova 1992). A similar case in point is that of Spain, where most archaeological sites from the civil war have been condemned to oblivion, due to the silence imposed by a lasting dictatorial regime and an imperfect democratic transition (González-Ruibal 2007).

However, many places cannot be easily classified in a single category. As it has been repeated ad nauseam, different groups usually perceive the same place in very different ways and these multiple perceptions are sometimes contentious: it is not only multivocality, but multilocality as well (Rodman 1992; Bender et al. 2001). This is all the more obvious in the supermodern past, in which personal memories are still very alive. A couple of examples could be the conflicting readings of a Cold War military base in Britain (Schofield and Anderton 2000) or the multiple subaltern interpretations of Cape Town's District Six in South Africa (McEachern 1998; Hall 2000). Nevertheless, it is not always how to remember a place that is at stake, but whether a

locale has to be remembered at all: consider the remnants of the Berlin Wall (Klausmeier and Schmidt 2004). Settlements with ruined vernacular architecture in Galicia are for many former peasants a pure dystopia, about which they prefer not to talk. They are often isolated from new urban-style sprawls (FIGURE 10) and the ruins are shamefully concealed under façades of modernity – rows of modern, brick-and-concrete houses along the roads (González-Ruibal 2005). They convey a powerful message of poverty and underdevelopment for those who, until a few decades ago, depended on the plough for their survival. Nonetheless vernacular villages are also *lieux de mémoire* for many educated urban Galicians: the sturdy vernacular house is a symbol of national identity as much as the hymn and the flag (*lieux de mémoire* in Nora’s sense), and it has been constructed as an everlasting ethnographic element, a metaphor of “Galicianness”, by local anthropologists (González-Ruibal 2005a, 140-142). These conflicting visions on the archaeology of the recent past produce heterogeneous built environments, as heterogeneous as the narratives about that same past: thus, there are villages with some houses refurbished in pseudo-vintage style by urbanites, and some others in ruins, whose former inhabitants have decided to build a modern residence elsewhere. Dystopia and utopia can coalesce in the same spot.

What is the role of the archaeologist facing the spaces of supermodernity? Archaeology, as Laurent Olivier (2000, 2004) has pointed out, is closer to memory than to history. But if it wants to aid memory, it must help to preserve something of the uncanny in the places that it studies, especially when it deals with the ruins of supermodernity’s destructiveness. Many authors coincide that those sites that are not subjected to conservation policies are usually the most evocative at all (Schofield 2005, 171). Rescuing particular locales from oblivion – a battlefield, a mass-grave or a prison – is not enough. Archaeology has to run against trivialization and preserve the aura. It must keep memory in place, but at the same time it should work against the saturation of memory. This issue, what Nora (1984, xxvii) calls “le gonflement hypertrofique de la fonction de mémoire”, is particularly worrying in the recent past. Memory has two enemies: oblivion and the overabundance of recollections (Terdiman 1993; Matsuda 1996; Connerton 2006). By producing too much remembrance, archaeologists – and historians – run the risk of blunting memory and making it banal – this is perhaps the risk of Omaha or Auschwitz. Thus, Nora (1984, xxvi) says that the annihilation of memory is linked to a general will for documentation, whereas according to Augé

(1998, 23) oblivion is necessary: some things have to be forgotten if we want others to be remembered.

When dealing with a period so well-researched and documented as the last hundred years, the danger of saturating memory, evening out the past, and choking the relevant with the trivial is even more threatening, but not many archaeologists seem to worry about this. It is not obvious, for example, the reason for documenting the over 500 remains of war planes from 1912 to 1945 that are known to exist in Britain (Holyoak 2002) or the 14,000 anti-invasion defenses of Britain from World War 2 (Schofield 2005, 57). Do we need 500 micro-histories about as many micro-events? What are the repercussions for collective memory if we preserve, restore, musealize and display thousands of pillboxes? Although new ways of documentation and management are being developed (Schofield et al. 2006) the risk of saturating and trivializing memory is still there. Sites that are over-documented and manicured lose their aura and their political potential. Against the de-ritualization of our world, that allows *lieux de mémoire* to deaden the past (Nora 1984, xxiv), archaeologists should bring ritual again to the landscape (e.g. Pearson and Shanks 2001, 142-146).

The other danger for memory is its absence or denial. Saturation leads at best to hollow clichés: *lieux de mémoire*. Oblivion favors places of abjection. If against the overabundance of remembrance archaeologists should learn to develop new strategies of management and documentation that help to preserve the aura of a place, against silence and trauma they have to bring forgotten places back to public attention, denounce absences, point out contradictions, encourage recollections and foster discussion (Ludlow Collective 2001). In sum, archaeologists have to help to produce landscapes of counter-memory (Hall 2006, 204-207) and to make things public (González-Ruibal 2007). This leads us to the last point: politics.

4-Politics.

The archaeology of the contemporary past has to be political – every archaeology is, but forgetting politics is inexcusable in the time we live (Fernández 2006). Actually, most archaeology of the contemporary past *is* political, independently of the archaeologist's intentions. How can we survey a concentration camp, excavate a trench or a mass grave or study a derelict ghetto without getting involved in politics? By focusing on the destructive operations of supermodernity (war, failed development projects, mass

emigration and displacement, industrialization and de-industrialization) archaeology can be an original critical voice in the field of the social sciences.

It has been pointed out above that archaeology is about memory and presence. Summoning presence is, perhaps, the strongest political act that an archaeology of supermodernity can perform. According to Runia (2006, 5), “Presence... is ‘being in touch’ – either literally or figuratively – with people, things, events, and feelings that made you into the person you are”. As opposed to this need for presence, Paul Virilio thinks that the situation in the late 20th century is characterized by the “politics of disappearance” (Virilio and Lotringer 1997, 89). These politics include, among other things, the wars concealed from the media, invisible bombers and the missing bodies of political opponents. Archaeologists have to make things visible and public (cf. Ludlow Collective 2001; Leone 2005).

However, how we make things public is not a matter free from contention. Usually, archaeologists think that challenging official narratives implies showing all data available and, as we have seen in the first section, producing alternative, more complete narratives. Slavoj Žižek (Žižek and Daly 2004, 141-143) has criticized the right to narrate that suspends the notion of truth and, particularly, what he calls the “universal truth of a situation” (that the Jews, for example, were in a position to articulate all the truth about Nazism). The philosopher also outlines two different critical attitudes: Noam Chomsky’s commitment to show all the facts versus Gilles Deleuze’s pessimism. Referring to Nazism, Deleuze said: “All the documents could be known, all the testimonies could be heard, but in vain” (quoted in Žižek 2004, 190). The disclosure of the unspeakable performed by archaeology can be politically more powerful than many traditional ways of narrating facts. We show evidence: we bring presence to the fore and put the corpses on the table. This critical process can be considered desublimation, using Žižek’s (2001, 39-40, 89-90) concept. It can be argued that desublimation is incompatible with the theory of art delineated by Heidegger – which sublimates some beings. However, I think that we can retain the idea of disclosure of the Heideggerian approach to art and combine it with the political potential of desublimation. It is not the whole “fantasy of the real” – as Žižek puts it – that archaeology can desublimize, but, more specifically, the political fantasy of the real. This is done by transforming the sublime Thing of politics into the abject, tangible thing in itself. Žižek (2004, 149) resorts to the famous Duchamp’s urinal to show the work of sublimation: an ordinary artefact of abjection has its materiality

transubstantiated into the mode of appearance of the Thing. Archaeology's political task is just the opposite: to show that the Urinal is a urinal: a revolting thing. Thus, the sublime Thing of Order and Progress can be shown to be in archaeological terms a quite abject thing: the ruins of a devastated Indian village in Brazil; the sublime Thing that was the idea of Revolution can be shown to be a frozen Gulag in Siberia, and the Thing/Development equates an abandoned steel container rusting in a forest in Ethiopia (FIGURE 11). Crude materiality, as unveiled by archaeology, desublimizes the ethereal, sublime Thing. Both art and archaeology work in a similar way: making us looking at objects in a different, disturbing way.

I fully understand some archaeologists' concern with showcasing the bright – or less dramatic – side of 20th century archaeological sites, especially those who are responsible for heritage management. Admittedly, archaeologists affiliated to English Heritage are among the first to have called attention toward the most recent archaeological sites (cf. Schofield 2005, 115ff) and there is not lack of critical statements either (Schofield and Anderton 2000; Schofield et al. 2002). Schofield (2004) says that “we should no longer view the twentieth century merely as a pollutant, something that has devalued or destroyed what went before”. However, such a positive view runs the risk of sanctioning what we have done to the world and to ourselves during the last century. A nuclear silo is not a late medieval cottage and although violence and power are encapsulated in almost any human product of the last five thousand millennia, never before have things been capable of destroying the world itself and never has human agency, allied to that of things, been so thoroughly destructive (Serres 1995). I feel the need for using archaeology as a tool of radical critique, opposed to State mechanisms for sanitizing the past. Those mechanisms may lead us to forget politics (the implications of the past in the present), and, in the worst scenario, to obscene theme parks. Actually, sanitizing our object of study is an operation inherent to archaeology as a discipline (Buchli and Lucas 2001, 9-10). When dealing with the recent past, however, we have to be alert, if we do not want to transform the cleanliness and distance created by the discipline into ethical passivity and detachment. The book by Cocroft and Thomas (2003) about Cold War sites in Britain raises, in my opinion, a whole series of ethical and political problems: structures designed to produce mass destruction and horrific physical damage to innocent human beings are described with scientific aloofness and enthusiastic technical detail. Lack of politics is always conservative politics: The worrying impression is that we can get to know more, in a

profound sense, about the dramatic twentieth century with a photograph by Mikael Levin or Camilo José Vergara than with some archaeological research on the recent past.

The emphasis on the *construction* of landscape (see Bradley et al. 2004) as something positive or at least creative keeps in line with a romanticizing acritical perspective that is strongly rooted in some British archaeology – and not only archaeology (Woodward 2001). The emphasis on destruction that is defended here, although probably less fashionable (and certainly less useful in heritage management), tries to keep critique alive. It is not anti-modernism, though, that is postulated here, since anti-modernism tends to be extremely reactionary – but amodernism (Latour 1993), as beautifully deployed by Michel Serres (1995) in his “natural contract” – a pact with nature, that subverts modernist relations of domination and expands the social contract to non-human beings.

The array of possible criticism is as wide as supermodernity’s misdeeds: from the modernist kitsch that razes vernacular spaces to the ravages of war that wipe out entire nations. Archaeological critique can be a counterpoise to a certain tendency in material culture studies toward levity and banality, a tendency inherited from cultural studies and some post-modern thinking. Not that archaeology is free from trivialization: even strongly controversial matters, such as the excavation of mass graves, are sometimes verging on sheer voyeurism and sensationalism. However, the tendency toward trivialization is clearer in material culture studies. In line with the Baudrillardian claim asserting the death of production, material culture studies performed a smart move from production to consumption (Miller 1987). Another critical turn has been proposed in this article: from consumption to destruction. Destruction is very often caused by consumption itself: the vegetarians eating soy in a European metropolis unwittingly foster the destruction of the Amazonian rainforest, while the consumption of diamonds in North America favors the dreadful mutilations of several thousand Liberians (Campbell 2002). Should we just investigate how Americans use their innate human creativity to reshape the meaning and social uses of diamonds – despite what De Beers tries to impose – or also explore the bloody genealogies of precious stones? As an archaeologist, I feel more inclined to carry out the second task. Although most work on transnational commodities and globalized commodities chains are largely celebratory and optimistic (cf. Inda and Rosaldo 2002, Foster 2006), some anthropologists are leading the way in denouncing sinister trade networks (Shepher-Hughes 2000) and

some critical anthropologists and archaeologists have already voiced criticisms to the depoliticizing effects of the “creative consumption” paradigm (Wurst and McGuire 1999; Graeber 2004, 99-101), but mainstream social sciences are ensconced in this paradigm and not very willing to change (cf. Tilley et al. 2006). Without having to return to production as the only focus of attention, I think that archaeology should focus on the other side of the enchanting “shiny peanut” that Daniel Miller (1997, 1-3) finds in Trinidad accompanying beverages: a less shiny image of indentured labor, depopulated rural landscapes, abandoned factories, urban slums, ever-growing landfills, depleted natural resources, and even lunar warscapes. In this way, archaeology may offer a counterpoint to the excessive optimism of globalization studies (e.g. Foster 2006; Miller 2006). Following a sort of Foucauldian procedure, archaeologists must trace back the genealogies of things, rather than the biographies (Kopytoff 1986)ⁱⁱ, going from consumption to production, but also from consumption to destruction, exposing concrete structures and relations of power on the way – what Taussig (2004) does with gold and cocaine in Colombia. These genealogies, however, are not only Foucauldian – in their interest for relations of power – but also sociotechnical (Latour 1996; Law 2002; Witmore 2007), in that they deal with collectives of humans and things (diamonds, mercenaries, machetes, Kalashnikovs).

This critique does not mean that I consider some material culture studies worthless or that the heritage managers’ concern with the recent past is futile. Their contribution to archaeology is beyond doubt. Yet it is because I see a troubling lack of political commitment in many works – unlike in much historical archaeology (Delle et al. 2000; Hall 2000; Ludlow Collective 2001; McGuire and Wurst 2002; Leone 2005) and anthropology – that I demand a closer look at supermodernity’s politics of destruction: archaeology, with its focus on ruins and abandonment, can be the most suited discipline to deal with the (politically) abject of our recent history and our very present.

Conclusion: beyond archaeological therapeutics.

The archaeology of supermodernity, that is, of modernity gone excessive, is different from any other archaeology. This should not be mistaken for an attempt to asymmetrically separate past and present: the past percolates (Witmore 2004b). There is not an archaeology of the 20th or 21st century, but an archaeology of the 21th century, plus all the previous pasts, mixed and entangled (Olivier 2000, 393, 400; Witmore

2004b, 2007). The particular character of the archaeology of supermodernity can be, nonetheless, reasonably argued: the traumatic nature of the recent past; our intimate implication in the events; the disturbing nature of the archaeological record of supermodernity – whose historical proximity makes it so raw and traumatic. In this article, it has been argued that it is precisely this particular and at the same time all-embracing character of the archaeology of supermodernity that makes it a privileged space to reflect on certain concepts that concern archaeology as a whole: translation, materiality, place, memory and critique.

From the First World War to the Chinese Three Gorges Dam the archaeology of supermodernity is the archaeology of superdestruction – of life and matter. From this perspective, my stance is admittedly pessimistic. It is not, however, a paralyzing pessimism but one that triggers action. This action that can be translated simultaneously as archaeological therapeutics and archaeological critique: a way of dealing with a traumatic past, bringing forward presence and managing conflicting memories. It has been proposed here that the mission of the archaeology of supermodernity is not only telling other stories – although these are extremely important in many cases. What is usually most necessary is manifestation: a disclosure that allows for the return of the repressed – the unsayable (Buchli and Lucas 2001). It is from this point of view above all that archaeology can perform a therapeutic – as well as political – function. Manifesting means performing the political act of unconcealing what the supermodern power machine does not want to be shown: the corpses in a Bosnian mass grave or the fantasmatic ruins of Bhopal's factory in India. Actually, that is what the descendants of the killed in the Spanish Civil War: not as much historical explanations or alternative stories, as their relatives' corpses (Elkin 2006; Ferrándiz 2006). Not meaning, but presence. Only these acts of disclosure can bring healing to those who have suffered supermodernity's violence. Primo Levi committed suicide because he could not *say* Auschwitz. The question is, then: could we, archaeologists, help to perform a therapeutic task by manifesting what cannot be said?

Nevertheless, archaeology is not only about healing, but also about critique: exposing the dark genealogies and destructive operations of the contemporary world. For many Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina (Crossland 2000) not all is about recovering their relatives' corpses. They understand that therapeutic closure might imply political closure (amnesty and amnesia), too. They want to keep political struggle alive and for that reason, some controversially oppose the recovery of the disappeared

bodies. In my opinion, therapeutics and critique are not incompatible. Archaeology should provide peace and reparation to the victims and give no truce to the perpetrators of crimes against humanity.

The problem with some archaeology of the recent past as it is carried out, however, is that it is either too archaeological, in that it only wants to document, catalogue and sort out the things of the past, or too little, using the recent past as an excuse for innocuous creative engagements with material culture and landscape. My point is that both approaches, although necessary and innovative, may run against a politically-conscious archaeology and diminish the true radical potential of the discipline. For making the most of archaeology, we have to overcome the Anglo-Saxon dualism between scholarship and commitment that Pierre Bourdieu denounced many times – and before him, the Critical Theory school (Horkheimer 1999). This is another asymmetry that has to be overcome in order to do an archaeology that bypasses the Cartesian divides. Bourdieu (2002, 475) claimed for the restoration of the French tradition of engaged intellectual, but this is actually a tradition that can be found elsewhere in Mediterranean and Latin American archaeology, anthropology and history – for archaeology cf. McGuire and Navarrete (1999), Fernández (2006), Funari and Zarankin (2006), among many others. In this tradition, scholarship and political commitment are one and the same thing (Bourdieu 2001, 37ff; Fernández 2006). Like Bourdieu (2004, 44-45), I want to be “someone who helps a little bit to provide tools for liberation”. An ambitious task, maybe, but worth trying.

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Figures.

- Figure 1. A Soviet anti-aircraft gun (ZSU-23) destroyed in an ambush during the Ethiopian Civil War.
- Figure 2. A Ford abandoned in the Italian military camp at Mankush (Ethiopia) by Mussolini’s troops.
- Figure 3. An abandoned Jewish cemetery in Central Europe (Francisco 2006).
- Figure 4. Archaeological plan of an abandoned traditional farm in Galicia (1960s) with distribution of artifacts.
- Figure 5. A Spanish peasant, in traditional attire, using a machine-gun in 1936. Photo by R. Capa (1999).
- Figure 6. The interior of a house abandoned in Galicia (Spain) by emigrated peasants.
- Figure 7. Overgrown trenches from the battle of Brunete (1937) near Madrid (Spain).
- Figure 8. New York’s Ground Zero.
- Figure 9. The American memorial at Omaha beach (Normandy).

Figure 10. Ruined houses and granaries, concealed by overgrown vegetation, in Galicia (Spain).

Figure 11. Containers from an abandoned development project (Benishangul-Gumuz, Ethiopia).

ⁱ See the Presence Project, an initiative involving artists, performers and media students, coordinated by Michael Shanks (<http://www.presence.stanford.edu>).

ⁱⁱ The difference is pertinent: the concept of genealogy transcends the life of an object and relates the thing to artefacts, peoples, ideas and institutions in the deeper past, and also expands the links to other collectives synchronically.