

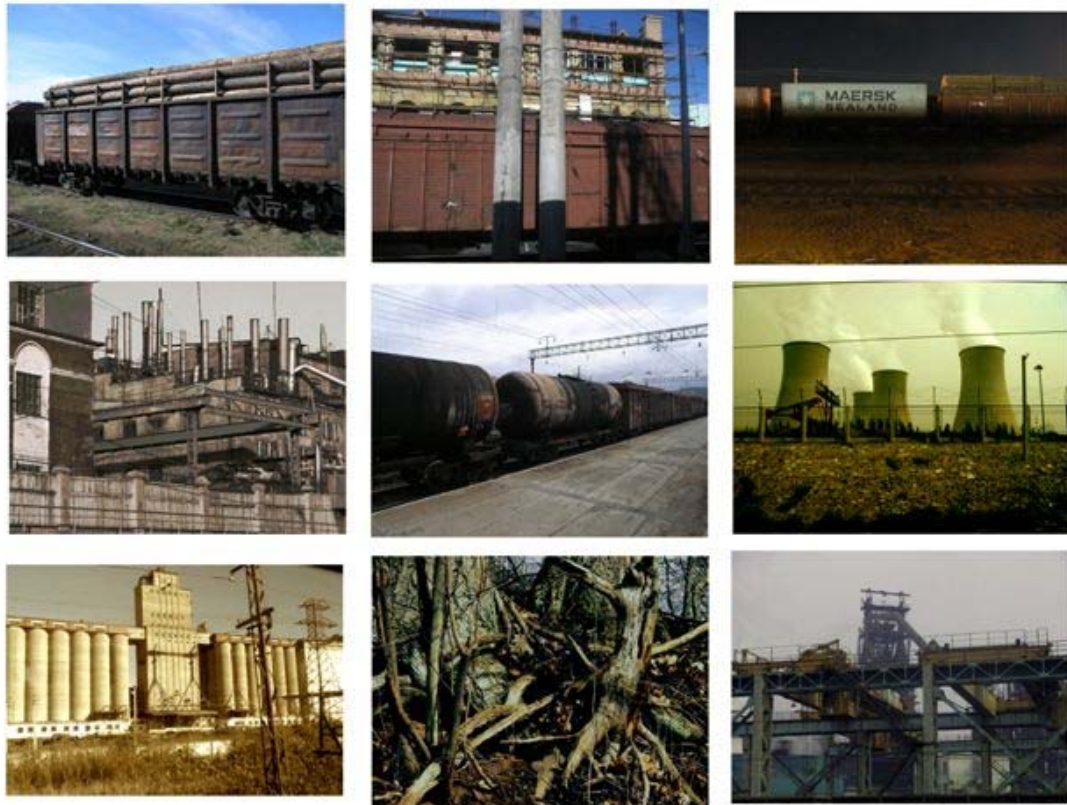
Irreversibility, or, the Global Factory

Imre Szeman

The ever-present danger of epochal analysis is that, as it runs ahead with emergent phenomena, the modes and forms of life that are still dominant are too quickly left behind in the theoretical rust. The proletariat emerged onto the stage of world history in the middle of the nineteenth century, at a time when most of the population was still engaged in subsistence farming. Agriculture remained dominant when the factories of Fordism made their appearance at the turn of the last century. And the forms of post-Fordist, postmodern, affective and creative labour said to characterize our present era are propped up by a global mass of factory workers, miners and oil rig workers, migrant farm labourers and others still engaged in work of the ‘body’ rather than ‘mind’.

Satellite technologies, the Internet and cell phones may have reshaped social experience, but it is at our theoretical and political peril that we forget that people using the technologies of mobility still have their basic experience of the world mediated by the alienation of the time-clock. Rustbelts and silicon economies in North America, seeming to embody the end of old processes and the ascendancy of new ones, obscure the fact that the global economy remains fuelled by older, more basic processes. Indeed, *the* most basic processes of all: the transformation of the wealth of the natural world through industrial systems that remain essential for the creation of those emblematic objects of globalization: post-modern office towers, computer screens, satellites and cell phones. The dynamics of global politics today are essentially nothing but an endgame struggle over the last ecological reserves of raw materials for economies that function only through the fantasy-dream of perpetual growth: oil, coal, natural gas, iron ore, water.

The passage across Siberia, Mongolia and China on the Trans-Siberian lays these processes bare. A journey that fits the genre of adventure travel (however mild it may now be) for all those who are not locals, the train traverses spaces of great natural beauty across two continents. Fields, lakes and forests, unimaginably large, seemingly able to resist by sheer virtue of their colossal size the intrusions of humanity, stretch away to the Polar Regions. The more instrumental origins of the railway are, however, apparent everywhere. Despite its immense length, this is a train journey through a zone of intense factory production – the Ruhr Valley stretched over six time zones, complete with huge cities rendered invisible to the global imaginary by virtue of the fact that they are situated in that great fantasy of emptiness called Siberia.



These are not the factories typically associated with globalization – the export-processing zones and tax havens of Guangzhou or the *maquiladoras*. Instead: coal-fired generating plants, tractor and railcar factories, coal mines, steel factories, aluminium-smelting plants, and a hundred other things besides, each mile another stretch of what only appears to be abandoned buildings, now put back to work in new economic circumstances for ever-greater modes of extraction and exploitation. Zones of intensified production offer clues to the often invisible forces reshaping the human and natural landscape on a global level: the rail line between Omsk and Novosibirsk has the greatest freight traffic density on earth. The view from the train window is of a blighted landscape, of human processes intruding and desecrating the hills and plains that spill away northward to the Arctic Circle. As different as they may have been politically, the economic forces of communism and capitalism share this in common. Still, in a world of six and a half billion people, production and extraction are a necessity, an inevitability, a source of wealth, a way of life. The wealth disappears into the markets; the cities, factories and human dreams that produce it remain fixed in place. Smokestacks and mazes of pipes, which seem to have been accreted almost accidentally onto the roof tops and surfaces of factory buildings (the legacy of multiple and conflicting logics plus time), strive to eliminate poisonous gases from the place of work, only to deposit them into the living spaces of the communities of workers.

These spaces of work and production form some of the basic spaces of human experience in the global epoch. They constitute a vernacular architecture. However much they are meant to be hidden away or expelled from the ‘civilized’ world, a catalogue of human spaces and experience would have to include these boxes sprouting a maze of steel appendages, where two basic activities occur: the life of humanity –



production – and that first extraction of value that begins the drama of what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the nightmare of every social formation: capital.

The German architect, Karl Friedrich Schinkel, visiting Manchester in 1825, wrote: “Here are buildings seven to eight storeys, as high and as big as the Royal Palace in Berlin.” The moment when factories grow taller than palaces is for Schinkel a melancholy one: the passing of history from the era of ornamentation and aesthetics into the plainer, more utilitarian world that would follow. But this moment marks another passage, too. When the factory exceeds the palace, we enter a space of social contestation: politics emerges from the world of powdered wigs and enters the streets. It is hardly surprising that the mirror-shade aesthetic of globalization seeks to banish smokestacks and factories to the hinterland, in the process trying vainly to drag politics back out of the streets to sequester it in the lifeless hermeticism of the glass-and-steel boardroom. Luckily as fate would have it, the politics of the street are as irreversible as the still glowing embers of the industrial age.

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the artist

Maria Whiteman is an artist and educator based in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. Her current work explores the zones at which industrial and natural environments come into contact. Images: Maria Whiteman, compilation of the series Irreversibility and Ephemera: Past and Future, 2005, digital photographs.
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