

BOOK REVIEW

NOTES ON THE UNDERGROUND: AN ESSAY ON TECHNOLOGY, SOCIETY, AND THE IMAGINATION

By Rosalind Williams,

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What are the consequences when human beings dwell in an environment that is predominantly built rather than given? That is the question MIT professor of the History of Science and Technology Rosalind Williams seeks an answer in her newly edited book *Notes on the Underground - an Essay on Technology, Society and the Imagination* (2008 [1990]). It is an essay based on lectures given at MIT around 1986. The chosen approach is multi-layered as it aims to explore the social, psychological and political implications of the lived experience in a technological world. This book is structured around academic and popular texts on technology. The time-frame of the texts chosen is focused on the nineteenth century.

The book is divided in seven chapters. The introductory chapter is titled "The underworld as a vision of the technological future". The underworld first appeared as an environmental metaphor by Lewis Mumford in *Technics and Civilization* (1934), a classic study of the machine age in a cultural context. The first chapter provokes a question of whether destruction of the natural environment might be culturally as well as physically harmful to human life. Williams writes that this question depends on the context: the same objects that are lamented as a violation of nature can, in another context, be celebrated as a victory over nature. For Williams, contemporary experience of the artificial environment is therefore contradictory: while we grieve for a lost way of life, we rejoice in a new one.

Chapter two runs with a title "Excavations I: digging down to the truth". This chapter looks at the interactivity of literal and metaphorical excavations. Until the scientific revolution, the central image of the earth was that of a nurturing mother, "a kindly, beneficent female who provided for the needs of mankind in an ordered, planned universe. This nurturing mother gave birth to plants and animals, and ultimately to human beings. Streams, forests, and minerals also were her children." (p 24) According to this worldview, mother earth was not a neutral resource to be exploited for human benefit; it was a sacred entity. Since the nineteenth century, excavation has served as a dominant metaphor for truth-seeking. For Karl Marx and his followers, the approach has been to analyse the level of monetary and commodity exchange as well as to demonstrate the previously hidden processes of production. For Sigmund Freud, the subterranean metaphor is central to his ideas about the human "sub-conscious".

Chapter three, "Excavations II: creating the substructure of modern life" examines excavation projects as social metaphors. Excavation projects have been considered as

metaphors for the undermining of an existing society, but – at the same time – they are metaphors for the "abstract progress of civilization." (p 54) Looking at things from the historical perspective, progress was seen as having its price and, furthermore, progress seemed to *demand* its price. One of the core images to represent the underground is the mine; the literal underworld. Railway accidents are mentioned as a demonstration of the relation between progress and destruction.

"Underground aesthetics: from sublimity to fantasy" is the topic of the fourth chapter. Williams writes that, before the eighteenth century, aesthetic inquiry was openly understood to be part of metaphysical and moral philosophy. The key aesthetic problem was to define objective properties that make an object beautiful. A central work that Williams mentions in the field of underground aesthetics is Edward George Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (published anonymously in 1871). In this book Bulwer-Lytton describes the inhabitants of the underground realm that belong to the "vril-ya"-race of tall, winged creatures. The vril-ya are as sublime as their landscape. They are at once handsome and frightening in their "calm, intellectual, mysterious beauty" and the source of their power is technology.

The fifth chapter, "Degeneration and deficiency in subterranean society" tackles with the common fear of the nineteenth century that mastery over nature brings divine retribution. The idea of progress, the dominating concept of the century, was mingled with visions of ruin. Among the writers of underground narratives, HG Wells has been chosen as an exemplary story-teller who used his stories, most consciously, to consider the relationship between technological progress and human degeneration.

Chapter six, "Journeys into the social underworld" discusses stories that are situated in the "low levels" of society. Popular classics are among the books under scrutiny, such as Charles Dicken's *Christmas Carol* (1843), where the unhappy, selfish man who lacks sympathy for others is forced to journey below the surface of society. Another well-known popular classic under Williams' analysis is Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* (1862). Williams aims to show the reader the subterranean life of society and the precarious and threatening underworld of misery.

"The underground and the quest for security" is the title of the concluding seventh chapter. According to Williams, there is nothing new about the "subterranean life" because "we have always lived below the surface, beneath the atmospheric ocean, in a closed, sealed, finite environment, where everything is recycled and everything is limited" (p 212). Williams argues that digging below the surface of the earth can be a quest for scientific truth, technological power, or aesthetic perfection. But a journey to the underground can also be a quest for security and, in these cases, subterranean technologies express regression and fear. "The wish to return to the dark, enclosed safety of the womb is so primitive as to be premythic" (p 190). Williams concludes by saying that the paradox is that the built environment can itself become a primary source of risk and the "manufactured environment" becomes an environment of fear: "the pervasive fear of the twentieth century is not what nature can do to us, but what we might do to it" (p 190).

Rosalind Williams has contributed with an insightful and pleasantly readable book. The author has constructed an appealing narrative that does justice to the extensive research and insightful analysis which flows through the book. The classical texts described in the book are explained clearly which makes it easy to follow William's argument even without having been able to read all of the quoted works. My only point of criticism is the almost exclusive focus on nineteenth century texts, even

though the twentieth century is also within the scope of the book. I would have expected some contemporary examples and texts about important artificial environments such as airplanes, oil rigs or virtual spaces since this is - after all - a newly edited version of the book. Williams does mention the “spaceship” as a contemporary type of artificial environments, but this has not been supported by examples from current literature. The new afterword section does not bring light for this matter either. In the final pages of the new afterword, Williams establishes a link between subterranean consciousness and environmental consciousness. The highest hope for Williams is that the new edition of *Notes* would speak for the humanistic dimensions of environmentalism in a "disturbed and dangerous world" (p 260). I think Williams has succeeded in the task of awareness-rising exceptionally well. Rosalind Williams' *Notes* is an important book and it adds a fresh dimension to the discussion about built environments as well as environmental sustainability. The world is indeed - as Williams notes - closed, sealed and finite where everything is limited and nature is not outside and separate from humanity.

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