

Reviews

Envisioning media power: on capital and geographies of television by B Christophers; Lexington, MD, 2009, 467 pages, US\$80.00 (£49.95) ISBN 9780739123447

To be honest, were I not asked to review it, I would almost certainly never have come across Brett Christophers's *Envisioning Media Power*, and if I had, I would almost certainly not have picked it up. Aside from the word 'capital', the title of the book would have led me to lump it in with a broad 'media' or 'popular culture' literature quite distant from my own interests. It turns out that would have been very unfortunate, because—and this may be the most serious criticism I have of a very good book—the title does not do the book justice; it is not exactly misleading, but it does little to suggest the breadth of issues and literatures with which Christophers engages. I think it is fair to assume that anyone would be surprised to find that a book entitled *Envisioning Media Power* contains novel and sustained considerations of the nature and status of commodities and commodity chains, urban policy and the 'creative cities' debate, Marxist social theory, the politics of international markets and prices, Edward Said's ideas about 'travelling theory', and more. All this is threaded deftly through a detailed discussion of power in the television industry, of course, but there is much of interest here to those of us who never spend time on television.

Because of this breadth and detail, and because the book is quite long (430 pages), it is difficult to straightforwardly describe its purview. It is a study of the political economy of the Hollywood-studio-dominated television industry and of the complexities that attach to the production, distribution, and consumption of arguably very unusual commodities—television programs—across various scales. Under this umbrella, however, Christophers fits a lot of fascinating material.

For example, television shows have unusual 'public good' features. They are nonrival (one person's consumption does not reduce the amount to be consumed by others) and, at least in some ways, nonexcludable (it is difficult and sometimes impossible to prevent or limit people from consuming the commodity). Usually, and precisely because of these features, public goods are supplied by the state, if at all. If you cannot make goods scarce or prevent free riders, then profit is impossible and markets do not respond. But Christophers, riffing on David Harvey's famous 'spatial fix', shows how the "underlying spatial architecture" (page 130) of television is a product of the constant effort—via legal, institutional, representational, and economic means—to produce excludability. He calls these efforts "windowing": "the means employed by distributors to stagger the release and transmission of television programs and films, both by territory *and* by media platform" (page 138).

To anyone interested in commodities and commodity chains of any sort this analysis is very compelling, not least because it is one of the many points in the book where Christophers focuses on the function of the state (another one of those principal objects of the book which is hard to imagine upon reading the title). For any legal means—and copyrighting etc are the main tools the media industry uses to create scarcity—involve a state that is complicit in the windowing effort. And this is not the only interesting way the state plays a role in the book. Since Christophers's special focus is on television in the English-speaking world, the role of state-owned media conglomerates like the BBC is central to his account—but not how one might expect. Instead of merely pointing out that the state can play the media game too, Christophers offers a fascinating discussion of the complexities that emerge from the fact that these 'public' corporations have different mandates from private firms, one of which is some sort of 'fair' representation, and distribution of employment and revenues, across the national polity.

For instance, in one of the later chapters he discusses the BBC's plan to move much of its operations out of London (to Greater Manchester) in 2011. Christophers uses this move, and the local and national states' roles in it, to engage a damning critique of the creative cities fad in entrepreneurial urban governance. This critique has, of course, been rehearsed elsewhere, but Christophers's contribution is to find and articulate the meaning of the national state in

the process. This has been missing in the debate until now, and, since it is an enormously important debate from a policy perspective, this is no small contribution.

One could, of course, follow other threads here and there as they are elaborated in the book, but if there is perhaps one central pattern, it is Christophers's effort to understand television media not merely as consumer content, but as located at several points along the circulatory path of capital: as a material commodity that must be produced, as a commodity that is exchanged, both locally and across larger scales, and as a means of cultural, economic, and material distribution. The insights and connections this makes possible are far more exciting than I, at least, ever would have guessed. Don't judge this book by its cover.

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Insectopedia by H Raffles; Pantheon Books, New York, NY, 2010, 480 pages, US \$29.95 (UK £19.34) hardcover, ISBN 9780375423864

The dreams started sixty pages or so into *Insectopedia*: clouds of locusts streaming in through my apartment windows; spiders tickling my face and arms; battles against armies of giant ants, *Honey I Shrank the Kids* (1989) style. Hugh Raffles's bugs colonized my dreamscapes. In the best dream I actually was a bug (a beetle, maybe?) gliding along the trade winds that transport millions of creatures large and small. This dream was undoubtedly inspired by the first chapter of the book, "A" for "Air", in which Raffles documents airborne-insect-collecting expeditions during the 1920s and 1930s, when scientists and agriculturalists learned that the air above one square mile of countryside can carry as many as 36 million insects. Ballooning spiders, emblematic of this mode of air travel, "climb up to an exposed site (a twig or a flower, for instance), stand on tiptoe, raise their abdomen, test the atmosphere, throw out silk filaments, and launch themselves into the blue, all free legs spread-eagled" (page 7). Sounds fun, does it not? Raffles inhabits and renders all of the insect worlds of *Insectopedia* with the same vividness and infectiousness as the ballooning spider's. My dreams came as no surprise.

Each chapter of the A–Z of *Insectopedia* is an exposition of insect intimacy: insects that are intimate with each other, humans who are intimate with insects, and Raffles's own intimacy with insects and their friends. Bugs bring together characters ranging from a renegade Swiss scientist-artist documenting the effects of nuclear radiation on insects, Shanghai cricket fighters, a "minority sexuality" of crush fetishists (who fantasize about being crushed underfoot and play out this fantasy by watching women squish bugs with their feet), scientists studying insect soundscapes in the mountain-pine-beetle-ravaged forests of North America, and so on. By drawing upon the deft ethnographic sensibility he has demonstrated in previous work (2002), Raffles pries open the mundane details of these intertwined human and insect lives to explore profound questions about the relationships between art and science, humans and animals, passion and instinct, and language and communication.

But Raffles does more than just use insects to think about critical philosophical questions, or to connect seemingly disparate tales. Like Donna Haraway's dogs (2003, page 5), the animals in *Insectopedia* are "not just here to think with" [a pointed reference to Levi-Strauss's (1970) comment that "animals are good to think with" (page 204)]. Raffles is a bit in love with insects. He respects them—"they are so busy, so indifferent, and so powerful. They'll almost never do what we tell them to do. They'll rarely be what we want them to be. They won't keep still. In every respect, they are really very complicated creatures" (page 4). He occasionally reveals a reverence for them, too: "along with their beauty, these animals find their way to some deep part of us and, in response, something taboo-like draws us in... What other animal has this power over us?" (page 44). As Raffles reminds readers throughout his book, all of the imbrications of nature and culture he narrates are made possible because of the insects themselves, insects that are "not merely the opportunity to culture but its co-authors" (page 100).

When it comes to insects, much of this co-authoring is coerced, and Raffles is sensitive to the violence and cruelty that abound in human–insect relationships. Reflecting on fruit flies' role as scientific test subjects, he notes that the flies "not only bear the burden of our dreams of health

and longevity, but they also assume the task of living out our nightmares" (page 120). When he is not attentive to the violence, he wonders about his inattentiveness. In Shanghai, Raffles is swept under the spell of a cricket fight, drawn into the intense energy concentrated on the "tiny drama" of two crickets facing off, what Raffles calls "a singularity" (page 99). Afterward, he reflects on the brutality of the spectacle, "the sovereignty that forces other beings to perform such unwonted acts", and on his own failure to register this cruelty in the moment. Throughout *Insectopedia*, Raffles is motivated by his curiosity and incredulity towards not only insects, but also his own, often unpredictable and uncontrollable, responses to them. In one of my favourite essays, under "N" for "My Nightmares", Raffles records the insect obsessions that mounted as he researched, how first bees then winged ants "took over", then locusts, then beetles, all of which lead Raffles to remember "what we already know: that insects are without number and without end, that in comparison we are no more than dust, and that this is not the worst of it" (page 201).

While tracking down *Insectopedia's* statistics on Amazon.com, I spied a 1-star review of the book and was curious (okay, more like puzzled). The reviewer had keenly anticipated an "alphabetical listing of insects, with scientific facts and detailed photographs" and was disappointed to find instead "a fat volume of random musings on insect-related topics ranging from Doubt to Languages to Sex" (Green, 2010). Indeed!, I thought. One person's trash.... But it is worth a word of warning to those who might come to *Insectopedia* seeking a comprehensive A–Z of insect life: systematic and decisive this book is not. As Raffles himself confides to an interviewer on the same Amazon page: "as much as I like encyclopedias, I also wanted to make fun of them—the vanity of the idea that it's possible to know everything, and then possible to collect all that knowledge in one place" (Raffles, 2010). Accordingly, *Insectopedia* is not encyclopedic: it is eclectic, eccentric, ambivalent, and decidedly nonauthoritative. But therein lies its warmth and candor, its humor and melancholy, and its humility and beauty.

Perhaps it is what Friedrich Nietzsche (1974) calls a "hopeless curiosity" (page 372) that leads us to imagine these other insect worlds. Maybe we can conceive of this otherworldness only in our dreams. But Raffles is content with—indeed, he seems to delight in—mysteries, and he wants us to try to imagine, anyway. He asks us to

"stop. If you're inside, go to a window. Throw it open and turn your face to the sky. All that empty space, the deep vastness of the air, the heavens wide above you. Every day, above and around us, the collective voyage of billions of beings.... There are other worlds around us. Too often, we pass through them unknowing, seeing but blind, hearing but deaf, touching but not feeling, contained by the limits of our senses, the banality of our imaginations, our Ptolemaic certitudes" (page 12).

The exercise of imagining, however hopeless, makes us remember what we know but seem to forget: that our world is not the only world, and our ontologies not the only ontologies, that "we're all in this together" (page 386), coexistence "is a condition not a choice" (Bingham, 2006, page 495), and being is always being-with (Nancy, 2000). Insects—vastly different from but everywhere entangled with us—demand respect and humility, argues Raffles.

"What foolishness to judge insects—so ancient, so diverse, so accomplished, so successful, so beautiful, so astonishing, so mysterious, so unknown—by criteria they can never meet and about which they could not care!... What pitiful poverty of the imagination to see them as resources merely for our self-knowledge. What sad, sad, sad sadness when language fails us" (page 200).

In urging the recognition of multiple worlds, of multiple ways of being, *Insectopedia* makes us see the world differently—perhaps the most one can hope for from a book.

It has been warm in the city, and the fruit flies are flourishing. There seems to be no escaping them. But there is also something appropriate about how, each time I sit down to read *Insectopedia*, an homage to bugs and their besotted friends, or to write this review, a tiny dark speck flits across the screen, the book, the corner of my eye, and I am distracted. The insects keep interfering with my reading. I am quite sure Raffles would not mind.

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Ruins of modernity edited by J Hell, A Schönle; Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2010, 511 pages, US\$25.95 paper (£16.50) ISBN 978 0822344742

Like many topics, discussions about ruins seem to reoccur in curious yet familiar iterations every decade or so. The publication of Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle's 500-page collection *Ruins of Modernity*, with over twenty contributions from a range of perspectives, seems to indicate a new layer has been etched into a seemingly endless intellectual fascination with dereliction. Indeed, the editors acknowledge in the introduction that "to be seduced by the beauty of ruins is an experience as inescapable as it is old" (page 2).

Much of the contemporary work in this new volume, like studies that have come before, builds on John Ruskin's (Landow, 1971) musings in the 1850s on the "irregular variety" and picturesque ruggedness of abandoned places and the work of Georg Simmel who, in the early 20th century, wrote of ruination as testament to the enduring power of nature. There are also the expected references to Rose Macaulay's (1953) text *Pleasure of Ruins* and Sigmund Freud's (1989) musings about the urban palimpsest in *Civilization and its Discontents*.

But it is Walter Benjamin's writings about ruins as allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1998) and *The Arcades Project* (1999) that many of the authors in this collection see as the catalyst for thinking about the important relationship between form and meaning in the ruin. Benjamin wrote about "irresistible decay" (page 214) just years before Adolf Hitler's architect Albert Speer was developing his "theory of ruin value" assisted by the political geographer Karl Haushofer, suggesting that the German imperial legacy would be bolstered by the construction of monuments built to decay well (see chapter 10). As Hell reminds us, Germany was not alone here; Joseph Gandy's 1798 depiction of The Bank of England in ruins was commissioned by John Soane to similar ends. These hubristic motivations for "ruin gazing" coupled with Benjamin's attempt to render them transparent make it clear that we have arrived at a present moment where we are suspicious of the ruin, suspicious not only of its capacity to invoke a dangerous sense of nostalgia but also of its failure to produce capital. Ruins have retained much of their imperial taint since the fall of the Third Reich despite the attempts of writers and scholars such as JB Jackson and David Lowenthal (strangely absent from this discussion) to renew interest in the 1980s (Jackson, 1980; Lowenthal, 1985).

However, with the publication of Tim Edensor's (2005) *Industrial Ruins*, which I reviewed in this journal two years ago (Garrett, 2008), and the notable work of Caitlin DeSilvey (2006) and Dydia DeLyser (1999), the topic was once again brought into the spotlight. This time, from the ground up, grand narratives were subverted, especially those suggested by bureaucrats and heritage managers, in favour of small stories, local histories, and personal sensory engagement. Hell and Schönle's collection, despite endnoted nods to that body of work, largely sidesteps this shift, pushing the ruin back behind the glass of Benjamin's theoretical symbolism similar to the recent work of Dylan Trigg (2006) and Christopher Woodward (2002), creating a rather distanced, yet not uninteresting, new look at an old idea.

What the collection lacks in depth it makes up for in breadth. The notion of the ruin is usefully expanded here to include the ruins of the Soviet Bloc (chapters 4, 7, and 24), the indigenous past of the Americas (chapters 12 and 19), never-realised Soviet architectural projects (chapter 4), Germany's industrial heritage parks (chapter 16), the earthquake of Lisbon (chapter 20), America's auto industry (chapter 17), the World Trade Center towers (chapter 3), and even Saddam Hussein's Bagdad palace (Introduction). These contributions entice us to expand our optics regarding what constitute the ruin, spinning diverse stories of "ruin as promise" and "ruin as warning". Both of these concepts are brilliantly captured in a single place by Jonathan Veitch (chapter 18) in his visit to the strangely romantic horror of the Nevada Atomic Test Site, echoed recently in Paul Dobraszczyk's (2010) exploration of the area near the exploded Soviet nuclear reactor at Chernobyl in the journal *City*.

The contributors to *Ruins of Modernity* also, importantly, acknowledge the increasing presence of the ruin in popular culture, in particular looking at the writing of WG Sebald (chapters 2 and 11), in cinema (chapters 9, 22, and 23), and in photography (chapters 17 and 24). The importance of these contributions should not be underestimated. Hell and Schönle structure the book into five sections, roughly divided into architecture, politics, imperial visions, (post) ruinscapes, and ruin gazing. Yet the book, perhaps inevitably, is a Frankensteinian collection, making radical erratic swings with each chapter. The result, ironically, feels like digging through rubble to find buried artefacts. Some finds, like Veitch's article (chapter 18), Hell's piece on imperial ruin gazers (chapter 10), George Steinmetz's piece (chapter 17) on ruinscapes (which makes rather astounding geographic moves), and Anthony Vidler's contribution (chapter 2) on air war and architecture, I devoured with reckless abandon. Other pieces in the collection were entirely confusing, and a few were utterly unreadable in their obfuscations.

Although this collection could have been trimmed by a third without much loss, it was still missing something. Whilst I could not quite put my finger on it while digging through the chapters, I realised what it was when I received a new book in the post by Steven High and David Lewis. Their book, *Corporate Wasteland* (2007), is built around a series of interviews with former workers of shuttered industrial sites in the United States. Reading the first interview with a worker, I had an immediate visceral reaction which sent me running back to *Ruins of Modernity* where I realised that what I kept longing to read were the stories of people in these places, both before and after their ruination.

The book seems entrenched in the gaze of a passive theoretical spectator, observers lacking bodies, dissecting ruins metaphorically from the safe distance of a film viewing, an archive, or, at best, through a camera lens. When I reread Andreas Huyssen's words "we live in an age of preservation, restoration, and authentic remakes, all of which cancel out the idea of the authentic ruin" (page 27) and Jon Beasley-Murray's comments that ruins are "mute remainders" (page 215), my pencilled exclamation points in the margins suddenly had new meaning. These assertions encapsulate the point where the book falls short, the place where Edensor, DeLyser and DeSilvey, High and Lewis, Dobraszczyk, and even myself (Garrett, 2010) have been working to write stories of ruins from the inside out, stories not about capital, empires, name dropping, wars, and the production of history but about bodies in places and about places on the margins brought to centre. These are stories about the ruination as a place for different experiences and alternative representations; ruins as places of play, promise, activism, unregulated participation, unexpected memory, and encounters with the uncanny and the sensual. This sort of work, which undermines the notion of the "ruin gaze", makes only a cameo here. The inclusion of discussions around how this "close" research has begun to erode our static notions of ruins as "wasted space", or, better yet, of this sort of embodied, personal, and emotional engagement with ruins, would have added much to the collection.

What the volume does, it does well. On this list would be the work from the underrepresented Eastern Europe and Global South, a new interest in apocalyptic visions of ruination, and the willingness to look beyond the materiality of dereliction. *Ruins of Modernity* is full of important, fresh, theoretical contributions of the ruin as allegory and metaphor and, although the book isn't shockingly innovative in terms of novelty, it is a clear signpost in our relationship to ruins.

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