

„TO BRING PHILOSOPHY OUT OF CLOSETS
AND LIBRARIES, SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES”

ÜNNEPI KÖTET SZÉCSÉNYI ENDRE
60. SZÜLETÉSNAPIJÁRA
LIBER AMICORUM FOR ENDRE SZÉCSÉNYI



**„To bring philosophy out of closets and libraries,
schools and colleges”**

Ünnepi kötet Szécsényi Endre 60. születésnapjára
Liber amicorum for Endre Szécsényi

Szerkesztette
Radnóti Sándor – Wessely Anna – Reményi Édua

Sapientia
Budapest, 2025

A borítón Sir Joshua Reynolds *Members of the Society of Dilettanti*,
„Vases” című képe látható a Courtauld szíves hozzájárulásával.

© Szerzők, 2025
Minden jog fenntartva.

Tördelte: Harsányi Tamás
Nyomdai munkák: Premier Nyomda Kft.

ISBN 978-615-02-3918-7

Tartalomjegyzék

Ludassy Mária: A történelem-nélküliség csapdája, azaz az önkéntes szolgátság a <i>Leviatán</i> tól a többség zsarnokságáig	9
Radnóti Sándor: A pasztorál és az idill: szemben a történelemmel	21
Kiss Ilona: Don Quijote domesztikálása, kiűzetése és államosítása Epizódok egy Bulgakov-dráma előtörténetéből	49
Babarczy Eszter: Az értelmiségi születése Friedrich Schiller Pierre Bourdieu szemüvegével	77
Popovics Zoltán: Művészet és redukció Esztétika és fenomenológia	99
Pintér Tibor: Egy angol libertinus Rómában	109
Cairns Craig: Scotland and Environmental Aesthetics	121
Cynthia M. Pyle: Beauty in Small Things: Renaissance Natural History across Three Centuries	169
Ullmann Tamás: A kívülállás egzisztenciája és esztétikája	191
Olay Csaba: Arendt és a demokrácia	211
Bartha-Kovács Katalin: Du Bos érzésesztétikája és az affektivitás nyelve	235
Veres Bálint: Hogyan emelkedett a zene filozófiai rangra? (És hogyan esett ki onnan?)	255
Somhegyi Zoltán: Concrete Symbols: Reflections on the Aesthetic Challenges of Bunkers	271
Kékedi Bálint: Skócia, Skye-sziget	279
Csuka Botond: A festői esztétikája és a sétálás művészete. Szécsényi-marginália	281
Elisabetta Di Stefano: Narrating the Landscape, Creating Atmospheres: Sicily Through the Screen	295
Reményi Édua: A hab a tortán – és más nyalánkságok Ízlés kérdése-e a desszert?	311

Zoltán Somhegyi

Concrete symbols

Reflections on the Aesthetic Challenges of Bunkers*

Ever since I first saw Jane and Louise Wilson's series of photographs of WWII bunkers along the French coastline, I have been intrigued by them.¹ My fascination however, was always, and still is, twofold. On the one hand, I am interested in the bunkers themselves, given their strange ambiguity: simple structures that can strongly repel, not only physically, due to their thick walls, massive constructions and the weapons placed inside them, but also visually, through their brutal, unpleasant monolithic forms. On the other hand, however, my fascination is also directed to Jane and Louise Wilson representation itself, that is, on the way how the bunkers are shown in the artists' photographs. Therefore, the following text reflects upon these two partly parallel paths: how are and what are these ruinous structures for us now, and what can art and aesthetics 'do' with them? This latter question, however, also entails two further directions: 'doing' something with (or through) art and aesthetics is not merely on a theoretical level, investigating these past objects with regard to our present and future, but it can also point towards practical directions too, that is, to the complex issues of whether art can save these bunkers, or, to put it in another way: whether we can be saved from them by art?

What immediately surprises or even troubles me – and I guess many of my fellow observers – of these photographs by the Wilson sister is the very *concreteness* of bunkers. Pun is partly intended, here I am referring to both the impenetrable material of the bunkers and their definite presence that is made present *on* and *through* the images. This latter aspect is emphasised especially through the composition of the pictures. In particular the one titled 'Azeville' (2006) is representative from this

* The first version of this essay was presented in the 2024 *World Congress of Philosophy* in Rome, Italy, in August 2024. I am grateful for the colleagues at the Congress for their valuable questions and comments that helped me further developing these considerations. The paper was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

¹ See some works from the series on the website of the Tate Museum, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/jane-and-louise-wilson-31300>.

point of view.² The side walls of the bunker are not only touching the frame but go even beyond it. In this way the whole monstrous construction – in fact, literally monstrous as it is threatening like a monster – is put in the foreground, inevitably forcing us to face it, to encounter it, to observe all its details. For example, the fact that despite its lack of function since eighty years now (or, about sixty years ‘only’ if we count from the date of the creation of the picture itself) it is not deteriorating too much, given the massive construction material. This is how it will look, in the aforementioned double sense, so *concrete* on and through the pictures.

Besides the troubling fascination that the great series of art by the Wilson sisters provide us with, the images point to something that is well beyond the actual objects represented here. They offer us the opportunity to contemplate on bunkers in general, hence not only on these ones in the French coast but on others too. Bunkers, casemates and other reinforced concrete military constructions, just like battlefields, former warzones and fighting areas can be part of ‘difficult heritage’, to quote Sharon Macdonald’s useful and precise expression, on all levels and in many aspects: historically, politically, socially, economically, ecologically and, of course, also aesthetically.³ They are part of a problematic past and difficult heritage due to the fact of being, among others, reminders of the aggressive armed conflicts, the loss of innumerable lives, the opposing political systems, or the huge efforts and costs of construction for such a terrible reason. We shall also add to these the destruction they are responsible for, then the environmental impact of the military material, and, of course, we cannot forget their visually disturbing nature of being proper ‘wounds’ in the otherwise often very beautiful natural settings. Apart from these, however, their being problematic is also manifested by the issue (implicitly also referred to through the Wilsons’ work) that actually whose heritage is it? They were built by the occupying German troops on French territory. Of course, it is probably useless to properly scrutinise this aspect, that is, whether it is a heritage of German military technology or the history of the occupied France, or obstacles that the Allied powers had to overcome. It is much more fruitful to consider them as remnants *from* and thus common

² <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wilson-azeville-p80083>.

³ Sharon Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond*. London, Routledge, 2009.

remembrance *to* those terrible times. And, in fact, these bunkers are quite efficient as being reminders, *aide-mémoires*, physical signs, given the fact that they are almost impossible to disassemble.

These are just some of the reasons why such bunkers can be considered as being difficult or problematic heritage. All this, however, clearly explains why we cannot or should not ignore them. Just the contrary: they share with any other – and perhaps more pleasant – types of architectural heritage the feature of posing questions for us as future generations (future generations from these architectural remnants' point of temporal perspective). And these questions are not only about what to do with them, physically, but also what are they (still) here for? What do they *mean* for us? And how can art 'manage' them, broadly construed, hence not only in representation but also through possible actual interventions?

In order to at least attempt to answer some of the above questions, and survey some aspects of the aesthetic challenges, let us again remember their *concreteness*. This is actually something that impedes their aestheticisation. Even if, at first, they looked like having a chance for that. At the end, if we think about the many – and aesthetically much more pleasing – classical ruins we have, we realise that a great amount of them are from our 'military' heritage: just think of the antique fortresses and mediaeval castles that can deteriorate so beautifully, and that have often been represented in visual arts and featured in literature. Or, in fact, the two can even converge, if we recall, for example, the author Victor Hugo's sketches of ruins, of which Michel Makarius insightfully observed: 'That splotches of ink generate forms proves that the figure proceeds from a primitive Chaos: this is the Romantic vision of Creation that the presence of ruins completes. Each of Victor Hugo's drawings tells of a form that stutters into being, that equivocates between a return to the nocturnal and the temptation of becoming an identifiable image.'⁴

But with bunkers, the case is different. They do not decline in a similarly pleasing manner as Gothic castles. And not, or not only, because they are more recent than their mediaeval predecessors. As I analysed in some earlier texts, recent ruination or the so-called 'contemporary ruins' (that I find a contradiction in terms) register on other aesthetic

⁴ Michel Makarius, *Ruins*. Paris, Flammarion, 2004. 149.

scales than classical ones.⁵ As they are still too close to our own age and life, they do not emanate the calm and tranquilising effect of classical ruins but are rather sinister and disquieting. However, bunkers are resistant to aestheticisation also because of another aspect: because they are directly connected to the ‘reasons’ of ruination. What is more, not even to the ‘natural’ ruination but to the aggressive, intentional and sudden ruination, that is, war destruction, that never leaves beautiful ruins, just rubble and debris. Therefore, being aware of this when observing these architectural remnants of the bunkers, this knowledge will further impede aestheticisation.

This is thus why we can claim the impossibility of beautification, as well as the hindrance to aestheticisation, in the sense that bunkers cannot really become aesthetically pleasing, neither in their physicality, nor as a subject-matter. This problematic may remind us of the dilemma formulated in a recent text by the Catalan visual artist Francesc Torres: ‘how should I photograph what was in front of me in order not to aestheticize the horror? Does it make sense to pick up a camera without the manifest intention of getting good images? What constitutes a good image when you are photographing a corpse? Can you make art with those images? How do you visually deal with the ruin of a country?’⁶

While earlier I mentioned the ‘concreteness’ of bunkers as an important feature to understand their aesthetic challenges, now I should rather complement the expression, and claim that the bunker itself is like a *concrete symbol of its own aesthetic chances*. It is impenetrable, unchangeable, unbeautifiable. Bunkers do not give up. They resist, not only physically but also aesthetically.

As architectural objects, they cannot be made aesthetically interesting that easily. This is what the Wilsons understood very well when they were not looking for a particular viewpoint or special perspective to represent them. They did not start experimenting with the view, for example, along the otherwise very captivating tradition of architectural photography, starting from, for example, Lucien Hervé, or the photographers of Constructivism or of the Bauhaus. No, the Wilson sisters

⁵ Zoltán Somhegyi, *Reviewing the Past: The Presence of Ruins*. London, Rowman & Littlefield International, 2020. Especially Chapter 5.

⁶ Francesc Torres, ‘Rubble, History and Time’ in Joan Ramon Resina and Laura Menéndez Gorina (eds), *What to Do with Ruins? Contemporary Uses of Ruination*. Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, forthcoming in 2025), Chapter 6.

showed the bunkers directly in their massive concreteness, and mainly in a frontal view. They also did not experiment by converting them into ‘anonymous sculptures’, as did Bernd and Hilla Becher during their decades-long documentation and categorisation pursued with a scientific rigour of the soon-to-be-gone industrial heritage.

But, of course, just because bunkers cannot be made aesthetically pleasant, it does not automatically mean that they cannot be inspiring, and even aesthetically important, or important for aesthetics and aesthetic research. This is thus where artistic research, elaboration of the subject-matter, or even actual intervention has its aesthetic chances, challenges and even responsibilities. Such artistic investigation can offer further perspectives and open up new ways, beyond the obvious attempt of mere aestheticisation that is, as we have seen above, destined to fail.

So what could be the actual paths to take? I think artists are on the right track when they do not simply take into consideration, implicitly, but even emphasise explicitly the real issue: that these bunkers really *are*, they exist and that there are no real signs that they could cease to exist. Creators need to stress what these bunkers are: concrete symbols of their own aesthetic challenges. They should present them and represent them for what they are. Not to ‘tame’ them but let them stay undomesticated and even frightening. As Jane Wilson stated in an interview about the works: ‘They are quite a potent symbol of what that whole building and what that whole ethos was meant to represent in terms of their design, you know the supposed menace is still lingering in those buildings.’⁷ Precisely this is why I prefer when these bunkers are represented as something in front of which we are still hopeless and desperate, even after eighty years of their extremely slow ruination. This time, however, fortunately, we are not hopeless and desperate because they are still active in their original function, but because we are nevertheless unable to escape them, and we thus need to ruminate on what they were (for). This is how these sites can still stimulate critical reflection, and have the possibility to become something similar to what Robert Bevan defines as ‘thinking sites’.⁸ They can also trigger us to think about the

⁷ <https://web.archive.org/web/20160501164629/http://www.tate.org.uk/tate-modern-mobile/conflict-time-photography/wilson>.

⁸ Robert Bevan, ‘Learning from Bolzano: From Sites of Honour to Sites of Shame’, *Kritische Berichte. Zeitschrift für Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften* Vol. 51, No. 4 (2023) 64–73. 66.

vicissitudes of history and its connection with natural forces, like in the photos of the cold-war-era radar station in Straumnesfjall in Iceland by Marino Thorlacius.⁹

These are, of course, the visual renderings. But what about their physicality? I think also here we should take their basic feature of being contested and problematic heritage as the departure point. Architects, designers, site developers or owners should not seek ways of ‘embellishing’ them, or should not turn to difficult design practices to try to hide their past, and to try to make them look like, for example, fancy pieces of modernist architecture. Instead of these, I think again the starting point should be the defining physical features of bunkers.

I consider this approach to be particularly justifiable and authentic for the two options that are the most typical ones for managing these elements of problematic heritage: musealising and adaptive reuse. Of course, these are viable only if there is the wish, and ideally also financial means, to do something around bunkers. Often they are just let where and how they are. But if it is decided to do something with them, then, since they neither can be dismantled nor will decay beautifully, they can either become some sort of a museum of their own history, or get another function.

The first case is quite straightforward, since the object needs to present itself, and report on the era in which – and the function for which – it was built. There can be minimal design intervention, cleaning, installation of information panels, etc., but I think it is equally interesting if the ‘post-history’ of the construction is also shown, hence, for example, not all of the graffiti is taken away. In this way, it will not only be a deep-frozen time capsule of the years of its operation but could include, or at least refer to, the years and decades later, hence how it was perceived after its active service, because obviously that is also part of the history of heritage.

The second case, adaptive re-use is more complicated. Since in this case there is a new function, the place needs to be, at least minimally, adapted to serve this new purpose. However, ideally it should again not deny and obscure its former history. Naturally, besides this historical reference, it can use and – in a positive sense of the word – also *exploit* the

⁹ See some works from the series on the website of the artist at <https://www.marinothorlacius.com/straumnes>.

special spatial qualities of the place.¹⁰ This can happen on two levels: the new function can use the peculiar physical conditions of the space, like in one of the former military Tunnel 88 on Matsu Island that is now used as a deposit of a distillery and wine cellar, having the perfect micro-climate for that.¹¹ On another level, however, when finding a new function, the mere physical aspects that are considered can again have historical references, thus playing with the features and characteristic history of space on a meta-level. For example, when in former bunkers and military constructions art exhibitions are organised, like in the first edition of the Helsinki Biennial in 2021 that showed the work by Hayoun Kwon about the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea in a former military barrack.¹² Certainly the special location contributed to the effect of the already very strong piece.

Based on all the above, we can say that bunkers are a problematic and difficult form of heritage, but one that in its impenetrable and undecayable concreteness also serves as concrete symbols of their aesthetic potential. Nevertheless, we should not shy away from encountering them. As Paul Virilio, one of the most influential researchers of these sites wrote in the preface of his book *Bunker Archaeology*: ‘these littoral boundary stones were to teach me much about the era, and much about myself’.¹³

¹⁰ See some further considerations on these questions in an earlier paper of mine, Zoltán Somhegyi, ‘Space-Making and Aesthetics: Adaptive Restoration, New Functions and Their Experience in Architecture’, *Enrahonar. An International Journal of Theoretical and Practical Reason* Vol. 69 (2022) 85–103.

¹¹ See <https://www.matsu-nsa.gov.tw/Attraction-Content.aspx?a=2721&l=2>.

¹² <https://helsinkibiennaali.fi/en/artist/hayoun-kwon>.

¹³ Paul Virilio, *Bunker Archaeology*. New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1994. II.