



Monumental Crisis

Three Sculptural Images of Planological Response to Long-Term Urban Decline

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Abstract

In this short contribution reflections are offered on a number of monumental works of art which were all emplaced sometime during the last 25 years in post-industrial locations in the UK that are marked by decades of urban decline, i.e. Stoke-on-Trent or North Staffordshire (the location of the 24th Roundtables), Gateshead-Newcastle and the North East of England, and Merseyside in the North West. The works of art, it will be argued, can be seen as slightly hysterical reactions to the trauma of relentless and unrelenting decline, and as expressions of a process of loss and mourning.

Keywords Totemic law · Urban decline · Urban regeneration · Monumental sculpture · Hysteria

1 The Hysterics of Totemic Law

All human behaviour is communicative. That is, any behaviour by human beings performed (and that word is chosen advisedly here) under conditions whereby there is even the slightest chance of it being detected by other human beings, is always going to be deeply and ineradicably communicative in nature. This insight in human being has been with us for a very, very long time (the name Shakespeare may come to mind here) but it took social psychologist Paul Watzlawick and his colleagues [6] to spell it out in a few words, back in 1967: ‘one cannot not communicate’. This ineradicable feature of human being also applies to behaviours deemed ‘pathological’, or ‘psychiatric’, and if there is one psychiatric syndrome that exemplifies this to the extreme, it must be *hysteria*. The hysteric draws the attention of other human beings in highly spectacular ways. He or she shouts, using word and/or gesture, ‘Look here! Look at me! Here I am, suffering tremendously. Can’t you see? I’m suffering. I’m burdened by an unspeakable trauma. These are my wounds. I am sheer suffering. That is what I am’. There is something theatrical about hysteria.

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But that said, hysteria manifests itself in a variety of ways. Already in 1923, the German psychiatrist Ernst Kretschmer [2] delved into those manifestations. He distinguished two extremes of manifest hysteric behaviour. Both, he claimed, find their origins in the pure biology of living organisms. On the one hand, he writes, we have behaviours that remind us of the ‘Totstell reflex’ in some animals. Some animals will indeed ‘play dead’ when they sense danger, or when they find themselves in a ‘crisis’ of some sort. Most spiders, for example, are known to stay absolutely still, or to curl themselves up, whenever the merest shadow hovers above them. Hedgehogs roll themselves into a ball. Donkeys freeze in their tracks. And so on. Some human beings, whenever they end up in a crisis, or when they experience some form of trauma, display similar behaviours. In some cases only a few organs shut down (i.e. hysterical paralysis, which psychiatrists were already aware of long before Kretschmer’s time, or psychoanalysis’s for that matter), but sometimes the whole organism goes into gradual meltdown. In extreme cases the syndrome moves beyond hysteria, into psychosis, with the traumatised sufferer falling into a near-complete stupor (e.g. in clinical depression), or withdrawing completely into an inner shell, filled only with elements of his or her own fabulation. Hallucinations and delusions should then allow the sufferer to create and withdraw into his or her own world (e.g. in schizophrenic disorders), far away from the threatening world of other people.

At the other side of the spectrum of hysterical behaviour, Kretschmer goes on, we have the ‘Bewegungssturm’ (or *movement storm*). Again this kind of behaviour has its biological roots: some animals, when threatened, tend to lash out into a flurry of uncoordinated, incoherent movements. A rat that is cornered, for example, is capable of unleashing a true ‘storm’ of uncoordinated movements. Some human beings, suffering from traumas caused by a crisis that they find unbearable, are capable of doing something similar: they lash out, here and there, incoherently, moving and shouting, pleading and screaming, running around, breaking things, panicky, and all that in an incoherent flow of agitated movement. This is where the hysteric’s communicative theatrics are at their most spectacular.

It should now also be noted that not all reactions to crisis and trauma are hysterical theatrics. There is of course also the more or less adjusted reaction whereby the sufferer decides to engage with a number of elements in the crisis in order to make attempts to transform them. In this very process of engaging and transforming those elements the sufferer will also transform him or herself of course. If all goes well, there will be some modicum of adjustment. Out of the old, the new should then emerge. One could call this reaction, or strategy, the Phoenix strategy.

But let us, for the time being, continue with hysteria. It’s not just individual human beings that are capable of communicative hysterics. Groups and communities are too. In fact, wrote Sigmund Freud in 1913, in his *Totem und Tabu* [1], at the very deep anthropological origin of humanity, at the point when human being emerged from its mere biological roots, we find hysterical, communicative theatrics. Not sooner had the band of brothers, long ago in the mists of time, slain the tyrannical (animal) father, founding humanity in the process, than they started the process of mourning the loss, not just of their biological origins in, or the biological law of the animal horde, but also of the father, slain so dramatically, and leaving so much trauma to be processed. The father was once the source of authority and security, and had therefore to be replaced with something else. The replacement, wrote Freud, was the clan totem, i.e. the manifestation of the now *human* law of the clan, the *new* source of authority and security. The totem did more than just make the clan’s law manifest; it also communicated this law to its members in a spectacular way. Like the hysteric, the totem says, silently: ‘Look over here. See what troubles we have gone

through. Do you see the wounds? Do you see what makes us ‘us’? This is what makes ‘us’. This is ‘us’. That there is what we were, and this here is who we now are. This is how we are related to each other and to the world, and that is how we *should* relate to one another and to the world. This is our law. This is how we should behave. This is what others who cross our space under the shadow of our totem should be made aware of. This is what they should take account of.’ It is this point which brings us to monumental works of art, so many of which have sprung up, in so many locations, in the wake of the *permacrisis* and the trauma of decades long, seemingly irreversible post-industrial urban decline. Often there is something hysterical about those artworks, something theatrical. Like the totems of old, the works proclaim, project and communicate their ‘totemic law’ [5] across their territory: ‘This is our trauma. That was us, and this is us now. This is who we are. This is who we would like to be. Take note. And take heed’.

In the remainder of this contribution we shall discuss three such monumental works of art: (1) *Golden* (by Wolfgang Buttress), emplaced at Stoke-on-Trent in the North Staffordshire area; (2) *The Angel of the North* (by Antony Gormley) in Gateshead near Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in the North East of England, and (3) *Another Place* (also by Antony Gormley) in Merseyside, in the North West.

2 Turnover Club Territory

The 24th Roundtables on the Semiotics of Law, which have led to this special issue, were held at Keele University, which is located in the shadow of the city of Stoke-on-Trent. As such the conference, which had as its main theme the place of law in what has become known as the ‘permacrisis’ (or the ‘polycrisis’, as some contributors to the conference made clear), was held at the right place, for the name Stoke-on-Trent has, in the UK, come to stand for near-total post-industrial despair. The city’s recent history (i.e. roughly from the 1970s to the present day) is by no means unique in the country. Its trajectory followed a by now familiar scenario: industrial decline from the 1970s onwards (some mining and metal works, but ceramics—the so-called ‘Potteries’—in particular); successive local governments’ inability to turn the tide, or even slow down the decline; the visible deterioration of the city’s infrastructure; widespread disappointment, to the point of defeatism, in the general population, leading to a willingness to vote for populist parties. And so on. There is little point in dwelling on this well-known scenario here. One thing that can be stressed here though is that Stoke-on-Trent residents (or ‘Stokies’, as they tend to call themselves) have experienced, and continue to experience, the local effects of a five decades long unrelenting permacrisis, albeit that the ‘crisis’ element in this experience has now faded away somewhat. By that is meant here that there is no longer a felt sense of urgency, marked by a need to make or take momentous decisions. That sense of urgency has come and gone a long time ago. The city, many would agree, is now gripped by a very pervasive, palpable mood that could perhaps best be described by a psychiatric term: *melancholia*.

One of the manifestations of this melancholia has quite recently been intricately studied and analysed by a Keele University sociologist, Rebecca Leach, in a series of articles [3, 4] on the local phenomenon of ‘turnover clubs’. Those are instances whereby many Stokies are inclined to check the origin of available tableware (by ‘turning over’ cups and saucers, etc., to view the fabrication stamp). Such occasions are then used to reminisce about the glorious past of Stoke-on-Trent, or about family or other acquaintances who, they recall, were employed by this or that particular company whose stamp is being scrutinised, and so on. It is not possible to

do justice, in this short contribution, to Leach's intricate analysis of the phenomenon, but one point can be made here: it seems clear that those that take part in turnover activities are making attempts to evoke, and perhaps forge, or re-forged, a lost sense of identity and community. There is still some hope in Stoke-on-Trent, but it is backward looking. The promised land, as far as some Stokies at least are concerned, is in the past.

The turnover phenomenon though is not the only manifestation of the area's melancholia. Just over a decade ago the then local council decided to commission a monumental work of art which, it was admitted, would rival *The Angel of the North* (on which more below, in the next section). They ultimately chose a design by Wolfgang Buttress, named *Golden: The Flame that Never Dies*.



Golden

(Wolfgang Buttress, 2016)

Picture by Raintheone, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0..

(Wikimedia commons)

The artwork was emplaced, in 2016, on the site of a former ironworks (i.e. the Goldendale ironworks, hence the name). It is a hollow tube, tapered at both ends, made of steel. It stands at 21 m high, which is exactly the same height as *The Angel of the North*, and that was done on rivalrous purpose. The tube is spiked with 1,500 light bulbs, each of those holding the written ‘wishes’ and ‘hopes’ of one of 1,500 local residents (including schoolchildren, members of local charities,...).

Golden, then, is a beacon. At night, when the lights are on, the beacon beams out its 1,500 ‘wishes and hopes’ into the ether. The explicit message that is beamed out of course is to be read in those written wishes and hopes. Collectively they are saying: ‘This is what we, Stokies, wish for. This is what we hope for’. The implicit message though could very well be something along the following line: ‘Please come and help us’. It is worth noting that when the beacon is doing its work of beaming out hopes and wishes, that is, at night, there is nobody around. The Stokies themselves are at home, in bed, possibly dreaming about the past. The beacon is left to do all the work by itself. Nobody is there. One can read this quite literally: no body is there. No human body is there.

Inside the tube of *Golden* is placed an iron ingot which represents the ‘beating heart of the city’. The beating heart of the city, then, is in the past, or perhaps it is the very past itself. This fascination with the past was, at the time of the commissioning process, noticeable not just in the *Golden* proposal. At some point the commissioners considered a number of alternative proposals, including a design for a giant statue of a wounded, fallen Anglo-Saxon warrior (a few years before a Saxon hoard had been found nearby).... Let us now compare *Golden* to the aforementioned *Angel of the North*.

3 Phoenix

Like *Golden*, this monumental work by Antony Gormley was emplaced on the exact site of a former ironworks. The work actually stands on the foundations of an old steel mill, and the steel which it is made of was largely sourced from there. The work stands in Gateshead, which is near Newcastle-upon-Tyne, another area that had known industrial decline for decades (steelworks and shipbuilding, mostly) when, in 1998, the *Angel* was erected there.

Standing tall at 21 m the *Angel* looks terrifying at first. The solid beams of weathered steel give its body an extremely powerful appearance. This *Angel* is capable of tremendous things, that much is clear. And yet, at the same time, there is something delicate, something feminine, about the giant. The curves around the hips, buttocks and calves, as has often been remarked, suggest tenderness, vulnerability even. There is a certain ambivalence to be noted here. With its wings unfolded the *Angel*, it seems, is welcoming us into its totemic territory, but at the same time there is something very foreboding in this gesture, as if the message, at the same time, also sounds something like this: ‘I’m here to protect this land and its inhabitants. Thou shalt be careful and show respect!’.



The Angel of the North
(Antony Gormley, 1998)

Photograph by Mike Peel (www.mikepeel.net), licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.
(Wikimedia Commons)

This ambivalent *Angel* is anything and everything to anyone and everyone. All that enter its space may find something attractive in its towering figure, something that they recognise themselves in. There may be little coincidence in the fact that, in the quarter century of its life so far, the *Angel* has managed to achieve significant popular acclaim, not just in the North East, but throughout the country. Standing on the firm foundations of the past, the *Angel* transforms those into newness. Out of the ashes of the past arises the new. This *Angel* is a Phoenix. Its gaze is firmly locked onto the future.

4 Between Land and Sea

Another Place is also by Antony Gormley. It consists of 100 life-size iron casts of the sculptor's own body that were placed in 2005, after a few temporary emplacements across Europe, across a 3 km stretch of beach (Crosby beach to be precise) in the Liverpool area, i.e. in Merseyside, a region that had seen a massive decline in its industrial base (port industries mostly, as well as tourism industries) and, consequently, in the quality of its public services and infrastructure also. When it's high tide most of the statues are wholly or partially under water, but that doesn't stop them from gazing into the far distance, firmly, focussed, unperturbed, unfazed, or... perhaps they are wavering? Perhaps they are filled with doubt? Not a lot is going on between the statues, but one thing at least can be said about them: they stubbornly persist in doing whatever it is that they are doing, or not doing, into eternity if necessary, day by day, on the rhythm of the tides. Their time is today. Tomorrow will be another tide, another day, bringing new things (or not, as is mostly the case).

Again there is ambivalence to be noted here. Perhaps the statues are Merseyside residents who are rushing onto the beach following news of help that is on its way. Perhaps they are saying; 'If you come to help us then yes we are prepared to meet you halfway'. Or perhaps they're also adding this: 'But don't you dare fooling us around



Another Place

(Antony Gormley, 2005)

Photograph by Chris Howells, GNU Free Documentation License
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because as you can see we are out here in force!'. Or perhaps something completely different is going on here, on this beach. Maybe the statues are a rescue team. Maybe it is they themselves who are rushing out to help others? Or perhaps it is a defensive force, an army? Like the *Angel*, this artwork is anything and everything to anyone and everyone and is, consequently, much loved, at least by Merseyside residents.

Another Place seems to be imbued with doubt, wavering, and indecisiveness. What are the statues waiting for? What are they thinking? What are they saying to themselves in their many daily inner dialogues? They are standing in an interstitial zone, in the space between land and sea, where things are never clear-cut, and often messy, or hybrid, and so it may not be completely unexpected to see them wavering at every turn of the tide, every day, days and days on end, into eternity.

True ... at some point change may happen, but how, and where, and by whose intervention? Of course, if we wait long enough, change *shall* happen: like the statues that are gradually changing, day by day, by the impact of the water, algae and barnacles, thus becoming hybridized themselves in the process, *Another Place* suggests, so will ultimately Merseyside change, unless of course someone or something arrives to help us, then, on that day, we will all rush out, onto the beach, in droves, frantically if necessary, to meet them halfway.

5 Images of Hysteria

We have here three totemic images of potential reactions to long term crisis, loss and trauma, each one built around their own particular logic, or their own particular totemic law, if you wish. Insofar as the images communicate suffering, there is something theatrically hysterical about them.

It may very well be a number of bridges too far to suggest that, for example, Stoke-on-Trent might, somehow, be stuck in a never-ending 'Totstell reflex'. On the other hand though, such a statement probably makes some sense, however little. If we look at the geographical map then we will quickly see that Stoke-on-Trent as such does

not really exist. It has no body. Quite literally so: the city is a composite of six rather loosely connected small towns, with no recognisable centre to hold them all together. To continue Kretschmer's zoological metaphor: the city consists only of legs (almost a spider!); there is no body. One wonders, then, if it might not be the case that the 'turnover clubs' in Stoke-on-Trent are so many attempts made by Stokies to construct themselves a common body first before they decide to do anything else? But if that is the case, then perhaps the past may not be the place to look for this body, certainly not in a city like Stoke-on-Trent, which is rapidly becoming ever-more super-diverse, almost by the hour.

It may also not be fair to claim that Merseyside is trapped in an uncoordinated, indecisive 'Bewegungssturm', although it could perhaps be agreed that the area has been known to deal with its permacrisis in uncoordinated and, some might say, superficial moves, usually when sudden windfalls in the shape of friendly government grants descend on the city and towns there. The grants will leave the area with more shiny buildings than before but structural intervention and regeneration is much thinner on the ground. The investments following Liverpool's successful bid to become European Capital of Culture in 2008, and the very recent withdrawal by UNESCO of the waterfront's World Heritage status following the city's decision to permit the building there of Everton FC's ultramodern stadium, are two cases in point. In smaller towns in the area similar developments have been noted.

And finally, it may not be the case that in the North East a more Phoenix-type crisis strategy was chosen. That said though it should be acknowledged that the region has seriously invested in the structural conversion towards new industries (e.g. car assemblage).

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