

WHERE THE STORY BEGINS ANEW

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Francisco Martínez starts his essay with a quotation by Édouard Glissant. He might just as easily have chosen something from Gaston Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* (1958) or Dick Hebdige’s *Hiding in the Light* (1988) to introduce what lays on the other side. Indeed, when evoking opacity and the suspension of time through concealment, the socially embodied imaginary is never very far away. Neither are the minor key details, as described by Rebecca Solnit in *Orwell’s Roses*: “What exists ‘without any wish to change’ is static; it’s before the story begins, before the fall from grace, or after it is concluded with reunion, rectification, or some other form of repair” (2021: 191).

So there’s a lot of reading between the lines when reflecting on Martínez’ essay. Here, the unsaid could be understood as mirroring the invisible. Moreover, what is renamed, rediscovered and revalued are important factors. As in the case of Eric Blair, who “rechristened” himself George Orwell in 1936, and planted roses in the garden of a small, rented cottage in Wallington. Eighty years later, Solnit travelled to the English countryside and found those rose bushes, establishing a living connection between past and present joys.

Drawing a covert analogy with minor things that might become problematic, we are to assume that holes and basements are disruptive forces – ones which are good to fall into – good to think with. In this sense, they are paradoxical,



Figure 1 – Mini-fridge, Kreuzberg Berlin, 2023. Source: Photo by the author.

ideological and heterographic. To some extent, one might say, they are even dystopic spaces of our human impact on the Earth... of the Anthropocenic in other words (Laviolette and Argounova-Low 2021).

Now, when Martínez writes: “the underground has been a hotbed for myths and stories for millennia”, the imagination of many people will likely revisit their school philosophy classes. In doing so, they will likely recall something of the allegorical teachings of caves, fire, sun, shadows and the surrender of finding hiding places – with a discussion between two philosophers on the experience of prisoners who are forced (or have chosen) to solely gaze upon the opposing wall (Plato 1906).

Again, in terms of the unsaid and the invented, many readers will possibly associate Martínez’s own artistic experimentation with doing nothing in public cafés in Lisbon and Tbilisi with Marina Abramović’s work in 2010 *The Artist Is Present*. In this long-term public performance, Abramović was sat at a table across from an empty chair, waiting for visitors to take turns in sitting opposite her and stare into her eyes. Over the course of a full working day of eight hours, for almost three months, she greeted thousands of strangers, as well as a few familiar faces. This included a profound, if rather “staged”, moment when she was confronted with her ex-partner and collaborator Ulay – Frank Uwe Laysiepen (1943-2020). Brought to tears, she reaches across the table and they grasp each other’s hands. After repeat encounters of this sort, during an extended period of divorce procedures and legal lawsuits over contract disputes, the pair continued to patch up some of the holes from their past, until Ulay’s death in 2020.

Indeed, Martínez draws on Michael Taussig’s notion of secrecy as well as Georg Simmel’s idea of concealment/non-knowledge (*Nichtwissen*) to illustrate how basements are ultimately both relational spaces and spaces of relationships (Martínez in this volume). Yet in considering death explicitly, one could wonder why basements in the context of the liminal are not made analogous to a literal and symbolic rite for burying unwanted things.¹ Perhaps Martínez feels that such a comparison is too simple or obvious to make. Nonetheless, from my point of view, what is maybe most conspicuously absent from his contribution, is a conceptual frame in which to make sense of his project’s acts of subterranean excavation. Here, an “archaeology of the contemporary past” approach is rather taken-for-granted, so that there is little by way of systematic descriptions of what is actually found in these basements (Buchli and Lucas 2001). The examples that are given, dozens of plastic water bottles for instance, do evoke many topical learnings and geo-political concerns – ranging from fear over Russian invasions of former Soviet nations, to rising awareness for global climate change issues.

1 See Danny Boyle, *Shallow Grave*. Glasgow: PolyGram, 1994, 92 mins.

Regardless, I would certainly agree with Martínez's observation that basements are a type of concealed cultural landscape capable of reproducing "a complex entanglement between the private and the public self". There are many comparisons that we could make here, whether cross-cultural, or cross-temporal. Indeed, he makes one of the former types of comparison with some of his own work in Georgia, creating a typology of holes in Tbilisi (Martínez 2019). In such work he argues that holes are both symbolic and structural, an invitation to escape or to reveal something hidden. To peek through, or simply to break on through to the other side, to a place where the story begins anew.

Bringing in my own research of car cultures for a moment, we could easily imagine how the inner landscapes of motor vehicles also blur this dichotomy between public and private, as well as between the individual and the dividual (Laviolette 2020). The similarity exists because both descending the stairs into a building's subterranean storage spaces and stepping (or hopping) into a stranger's car are moments of trust that mostly require an invitation. And one of the differences relates to the visibility factor that Martínez so aptly makes in relation to submerged or underground environments. They are more or less concealed from view, yet lurking not far beneath the surfaces of our past, present and future. It is in this sense, as underworldly spaces, that they are architectural technologies of our consciousnesses, identities and memories.

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