Smokestack Nostalgia or Hypermodern Spirituality?
Urban Exploration in Abandoned Factories

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Abstract

Urban exploration is the hobby of those who want to reach the fringes of society and the abandoned and rusting traces of the past. Photography in these forgotten places is as much part of the experience in urban exploration as the actual entering of abandoned buildings. We focus especially on abandoned industrial buildings and how they are represented online. This article attempts to understand the meanings and emotions behind urban exploration and the resulting photography. We argue that urban exploration can be understood as a type of journeying and that such experiences have spiritual and existential aspects. Photography enhances this emotional and spiritual connection with the abandoned sites and is a way of enhancing the experience. Social media enables the sharing of those experiences online.

Keywords

abandonment, Instagram, old factory, spirituality, urban exploration

'Urban exploration' refers to the practice of entering abandoned buildings for leisure, and it has been identified and named as a hobby or specific activity in the twenty-first century. Similar practices have certainly been around for much longer, but it seems that urban exploration (UE) has become a more common and 'formalised' pursuit quite recently, with real and virtual communities linked together by blogs, photographs, and other expressive forms. Trespassing into spaces closed from the public is an important aspect of urban exploration and part of the excitement of the hobby. The abandoned places targeted by urban explorers range from houses to abandoned houses to vast industrial complexes. In this article, we focus specifically on the latter and our purpose is to examine UE in relation to new kinds of spiritualities emerging in urban space in the highly technological era of hypermodernity (see Aupers 2009; Gandy 2005; Obadia 2018).

Anthropological Journal of European Cultures Volume 34, No. 2 (2025): 118-140 © The Author(s)
doi: 10.3167/ajec.2025.340208 ISSN 1755-2923 (Print) 1755-2931 (Online)

Urban exploration has been subject to considerable research. The general view in sociological and ethnographic scholarship, formed through interviews, tends towards the idea that UE hobbyists actualise a type of anarchism against consumerist capitalism by engaging with abandoned spaces (Bingham 2017; Garrett 2014). Heritage researchers have likewise noted through interviews and self-reflection that some kind of resistance is certainly performed when venturing beyond the limits of everyday environment, which may, for instance, be about countering the idea of continuous development and the erasure of the past (Arboleda 2016; Fraser 2012). Moreover, witnessing decay and the passage of time is perhaps something that engages people emotionally as noted by archaeologists and geographers, who put emphasis on the materiality of UE sites (Burström 2011; Edensor 2005). It has also been recognised that there is a 'touristic' dimension to UE (Fraser 2012). Anthropologists Francisco Martínez and Patric Laviolette (2016), meanwhile, used auto-ethnography, and emphasised the liminal character of the sites that attract UE hobbyists looking for 'meaning' in the world, which converges with the view developed in this article: we focus on the experiential and (broadly) spiritual dimension of UE with a particular emphasis on the role that photography plays in the practice.

Accordingly, this article revolves around the study of shared UE photos in social media with which we originally engaged as part of a bigger project that considered perceptions and feelings of abandoned industrial sites in Finland from various different perspectives. In addition to the study of social media materials, interviews were carried out as part of the project, and they are cited, where relevant, in relation to the interpretations of the UE photos examined in this article (Äikäs et al. 2024 details the findings from the interviews). Some of the authors have experience in UE, which also informs our interpretations. The assumption here is that what urban explorers have decided to capture in their photos and share on social media reveals something about their (conscious or not) perceptions of the 'explored' industrial spaces, which we seek to put in a broader sociocultural (and cosmological) context. Photography is evidently an important part of UE, as indicated not only by the photos shared on social media, but also the very slogan of UE practitioners: 'Leave behind nothing but footprints, take nothing but photographs' that features as a hashtag on many of the images. The basic principle expressed in the slogan, moreover, hints at reverential respect towards the visited sites, which we consider in broadly spiritual terms in this article.

For the purposes of this article, we analysed over 600 photographs posted on Instagram under the hashtag #hylättytehdas (Finnish for #abandonedfactory). The hashtag was selected in order to leave out the various other sites visited by urban explorers, such as abandoned farmhouses, schools, and sanatoriums as we were interested specifically in industrial heritage as part of our project, and also to manage the volume of images. We performed both qualitative and quantitative image analysis on these photographs to examine their general themes and styles of framing. We used a combination of content analysis and visual semiotics to analyse and interpret the content of the imagery. These methods are suited for breaking down the content of such a large quantity of images by detailing their different elements, cataloguing them, and counting their appearance in the content. Semiotics on the other hand focuses on the elements of images and identifies their cultural and symbolic significance (for a detailed description of the methods, see Bell 2001; van Leeuwen 2001). Because of the vast volume of images and associated hashtags, we systematically checked one hundred of these to see whether they also included hashtags related to urban exploration and observed that 90 per cent of the postings used related hashtags (e.g., #urbexsuomi, #urbexfinland, #urbex, #urbaanilöytöretkeily). Thus, our data can be seen in the framework of urban exploration even though not all of the people posting under the hashtag #hylättytehdas or even under UE-related hashtags likely consider themselves urban explorers. We take photographs to reflect spots and features in industrial spaces that UE practitioners have found particularly interesting or appealing, as well as a particular way of 'seeing' and connecting with the sites.

This article proposes considering UE and the associated photography as 'journeying' in abandoned industrial sites; movement through sites – which can involve, for instance, going through doorways and taking stairs – contributes, we argue, to the spiritual dimension of experiencing industrial spaces. In more general terms, industrial spaces have affective qualities in which the 'monstrous sublime' of abandoned industrial sites is embedded (see further, e.g., Herva, Moshenska et al. 2024; Juola et al. 2025), and some aspects of this affective power is captured in the UE photographs. Material culture – including abandoned industrial sites as well as photographs – arguably operates, to a substantial degree, on the level of the 'subconscious' (Miller 1991), which means that UE practitioners do not necessarily identify or communicate the meaning of the practice in the same terms as we attempt to do in this article. Our assumption is that photographs

represent important 'waypoints' in journeying through industrial spaces in addition to which photographs allow people to relive and invite others on their journeys through social media engagement. It is from this perspective that we delve into the archives of social media, particularly Instagram where UE photography abounds.[1] So far, this territory has remained largely uncharted. What is the relationship between UE and photography related to it? Ultimately, our aim in this article is to explore the 'meanings' of UE photography in relation to the 'meanings' of abandoned urban space.

UE as Spiritual Engagement

The role of photography in UE activities is much debated, with some scholars arguing that the 'ruin porn' or 'smokestack nostalgia' photography is a superficial consumerism of working-class failures (for discussion, see Apel 2015; Mullins 2012; Strangleman 2013). 'Smokestack nostalgia' as a term has a negative connotation although nostalgia does not necessarily mean a glorification of the past (Cowie and Heathcott 2003; see Smith and Campbell 2017).[2] While we understand the 'ruin porn' critique, our view tends towards a more positive view of the hobby and the associated photography that other scholars have taken. It has been suggested, for example, that the photographic engagement with ruins need not be reduced to the aestheticisation of failure, but it instead represents a form engaging with the life-world of objects (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014). Also, the heritage value of UE photography has been recognised. While performing their journeys in abandoned sites, UE activists are also generating a digital archive that could be valuable from a heritage perspective and so the very existence of these photographs enables reflexive engagement with the sites (Arboleda 2016; McRae 2008). It is apparent from the comment sections in social media that the UE actors express feeling compassion towards the buildings and the past lives they used to house. People frequently comment on how they want to see these places 'untouched' and preserved. Indeed, our material suggests that UE is a way of sympathising with peoples' loss and feeling nostalgic about the past.

Finland provides an interesting setting for exploring the attitudes and feelings about urban exploration in relation to spirituality because 'premodern' worldviews with associated forms of spirituality and magical thinking persisted well into the twentieth century, as reflected in the rich body of folklore. Modernisation and industrialisation took

place in Finland, on a larger scale, only in the twentieth century (and especially after the Second World War), but then the development was very rapid and Finland today is a highly technologised country. The divide between premodern and modern is often described as a historical contrast between the lack of industrialism and industrial development, but it entailed a broader change in the ways of thinking from those defined by family, society, and religion to more heterogeneous worldviews and forms of spirituality. This provides a broader (and deeper) context for exploring UE activities in Finland in terms of spirituality, as Finns are not far removed from their mainly rural and premodern culture and its legacies.

Another level of contextualising the relationship between UE and spirituality is related to the rise of new spiritualities in the Western world in general. One example in that regard that is potentially relevant here is the contemporary fascination with ghosts and haunted places, whether in the form of casual entertainment or a matter of belief (e.g., Cowdell 2014; Hanks 2016; Holloway 2010). Likewise, diverse 'urban legends' continue to blossom and, as with the more specific case of ghost lore, they can contribute – however subconsciously – to uncertainty about the world and its workings, as well as generate a sense of a potentially enchanted world (see, e.g., Herva and Lahelma 2025). Fascination with UE, in Finland or elsewhere, may or may not be connected to traditional or contemporary new spiritualities, but abandoned industrial places can nonetheless be regarded as an 'infrastructure of enchantment' (Holloway 2010) that produce or support feelings and experiences that can be understood in terms of spirituality (Juola et al. 2025) even if UE practitioners do not necessarily make such a connection consciously or explicitly.

The sense of enchantment does not need to be 'supernatural' in character – it can be a subtle and mundane sense of mystery founded on the more or less conscious recognition that there is 'more' to the world that is readily accessible in ordinary everyday life, which in turn can be regarded as one driver of urban exploration as well. Moreover, a closer look at various seemingly rational pursuits – such as economy, extractive industries, and high technology – are rife with magical thinking even though this may not be immediately obvious (e.g., Aupers 2009; Herva, Komu et al. 2022; Moeran and de Waal Malefyt 2018). Modern information and communication technologies are particularly relevant here not only because digital photography and social media are part of the UE scene, but especially because

high technology itself can contribute to the sense of enchantment and spiritual experience (e.g., Aupers 2009). Indeed, the development of photography and telecommunication in the nineteenth century also became entangled with ideas of accessing or communicating with the otherworldly because they could be conceived as a means of connecting to ordinarily hidden dimensions of reality (see Dixon 2007; Harvey 2007). As Stef Aupers (2009: 171) writes, 'technological progress may paradoxically be responsible for the growth and flowering of mystery and magic in the late-modern world' and promoting a sense of mysterious and magical connectedness between things.

While this study focuses on industrial sites, a brief note on abandoned farmhouses is due here for the purposes of contextualisation. Factories and farmhouses are, according to our survey, the two most commonly visited and photographed sites for Finnish urban explorers who have online presence. Abandoned factories and farmhouses both speak of melancholy associated with major transformations in Finnish society during the twentieth century: the rise and decline of smokestack industries on the one hand and the desertion of the countryside and rural ways of life on the other. Hence, abandoned factories and farmhouses can be readily invested with nostalgic feelings for a world that has disappeared. On the other hand, there is an important difference between the two types of sites in that houses are distinctively human and personal or intimate places, whereas factories are, in a sense, more machine-like entities, something bigger-than-human and more-than-human (e.g., Juola et al. 2025). This difference and contrast is perhaps obvious, but worth noting here nonetheless because it provides a basis for the affective and spiritual affordances of abandoned industrial sites.

The affective qualities of derelict factories are at the heart of our analysis in this article. Emotions and affect are overlapping terms that refer to evocative reactions and are an intrinsic part of spirituality (e.g., Emmons 2005). Emotions are often understood as more or less conscious whereas affect is a generic term that can be defined as the embodied state and the initial registering of events in bodies and minds (Wetherell et al. 2018). Affective and embodied dimensions of heritage have also been conceptualised as non- or more-than-representational, turning the focus on experiencing heritage sites and places, their atmosphere, and agentic relationship between object and visitor (Tolia-Kelly et al. 2017). Ruins are powerful sensory environments that trigger affective experiences and provoke unexpected pleasures and imaginings (e.g., Edensor 2005).

Figure 1. A wall writing from an old sawmill that says 'Where have all the good times gone' reflecting similar nostalgia to past work than the sheet mentioned in the text. Photo by Tiina Äikäs.

Nostalgia is evidently one important feeling associated with UE. One photograph included in our analysis of UE photography features a sheet hanging out of a window that says 'ennen oli kaikki paremmin' (everything used to be better). The phrase may of course have been written with an ironic intention but, then again, someone has put a considerable effort in making and hanging the sheet on the window, which might suggest that this message had a deeper meaning to whomever placed it to be photographed (figure 1). But as already noted earlier, we do not regard nostalgia as a negative and superficial mode of engaging with the past and its remains, as it can also involve compassion towards past times.

Spirituality, in turn, can be defined and understood in different ways, but we take it to mean a sense of enchantment – that is, a mode of consciousness that there is 'more' to the world than just meaningless matter. Thus conceived, spirituality is about connecting to realms of existence beyond here and now, a heightened awareness of how people are intertwined with a web of other human and non-human

entities and forces operating in the world. In effect, spirituality – or what could also be termed 'magical consciousness' (Greenwood 2009) – involves manipulation of perception and altered states of consciousness, but such experiences need not be strong or 'religious' in character. Indeed, spirituality can be considered in similar terms as Ariel Glucklich defines magic as 'based on a unique type of consciousness: the awareness of the interrelatedness of all things in the world by means of a simple but refined sense of perception' (Glucklich 1997: 12). Spiritual experiences involve some degree of disorientation and uncertainty of boundaries between things, which in turn affords 'seeing' differently relationships between oneself and one's entanglement with the richness of the surrounding reality. Spirituality has an existentialist dimension to it, yet it is not necessarily about the 'supernatural' in any conventional sense; rather, spirituality is about becoming aware of the world differently from ordinary flow of everyday life. Importantly, too, environments can and do contribute to the sense of mystery, enchantment, and spirituality.

Abandoned Places as Sacred Sites

One benefit of treating the experiences and affordances of abandoned industrial places in terms of journeying is that it brings about the 'narrative' aspect of the practice. Journeying is not only about physical movement but a series (or flow) of human encounters with the surrounding world, which merges immediate perceptions with cultural imaginaries. It is probably not a coincidence that journeying is a prominent mythological theme (think of the Odyssey, for instance). Journeying involves myriad cultural, existential, and metaphysical aspects, as Mary Helms (1988) has famously detailed, and some of these are significant also in the context of UE. UE can be regarded as involving not only journeying in physical spaces but also as journeying in the sense that transcends diverse physical and metaphysical boundaries.

Our interview material shows that exploring industrial sites incites special thrills as they are typically off-limits, and the practitioners know that they are trespassing in those environments (Äikäs et al. 2024). This, in turn, heightens sensorial experiences and makes one acutely aware of one's surroundings and alert to different kinds of impulses around them. The accessibility of abandoned industrial sites in Finland varies substantially, but even if they are easy to access physically, they are effectively outside the ordinary day-to-day

environment where they are physically accessible. Often, according to our own experience, entering abandoned industrial sites also requires climbing or crawling through narrow gaps and boarded entrances. All this can require agility, strength, and/or dedication, which marks a transition to the 'otherworld' inside abandoned spaces. This can be understood, figuratively, as a transition to a different and unfamiliar world – almost like Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole – which tune 'explorers' up to encountering potentially unknown and mysterious things and also prompt their photographic documentation (see below).

As experienced and sensory spaces, abandoned factories have myriad characteristics that make them different from inhabited houses or other everyday places. For instance, the scale of industrial spaces is often very large and thus feel more-than-human places and are therefore comparable in some ways to cathedrals and churches; the large scale can itself provoke a sense of awe. This can be seen in photos where the viewpoint is from below towards structures in the ceiling. The images emphasise the massive scale of the abandoned industrial buildings and make them seem almost cathedral-like (figure 2). This cathedral-like nature of the industrial sites was also highlighted by the interviews even though not in a UE-related context (Juola et al. 2025). Venturing into these sites can be comparable to having a spiritual experience in a church or other sacred place, emphasising the transience, fragility, and smallness of human existence in the face of the time (Piff et al. 2015; Preston and Shin 2017).

Figure 2. A vast industrial hall. Photo by Vesa-Pekka Herva.

Secondly, industrial places can be quite complex, puzzling, and confusing – arrays of strange features and things that may make little sense to outsiders. This is reflected in many photographs that we studied: pictures taken from the inside frequently show jumbles of things that form constellations of shapes, lights and shadows that make it difficult to separate things from each other or identify their purpose (also see Edensor 2005). While factories are human spaces, they are clearly very different from domestic or public places, which makes them extraordinary and such complex technological spaces may even evoke broadly 'otherworldly' feelings.

Technologies, ancient or modern, play a role here. The new technologies and the associated machines afford a sense of complex interconnectedness and entanglements with the worlds beyond 'here and now' and thus a spiritual dimension of reality and a sense of otherworldliness (Aupers 2009). Likewise, in social media we encountered several detailed images of light switches, desks, chairs, and tables can be interpreted in terms of altering perception and consciousness, for instance noticing elements and features of the environment that might otherwise go unnoticed in complex perceptual environments full of exciting and curious stuff, 'zooming' into the strange and rich worlds of abandoned industrial sites, ways of getting 'deeper' into an experientially strange industrial environments that, alien and unfamiliar as they may be, are also at the heart of the modern world. This converges with what Kevin P. Bingham (2017: 238) points out: photographs allow for a certain detail-oriented vision that enhances the experience of UE sites in retrospect; they are a hyperreal engagement with the sites.

Some of the gadgets have graffiti with human figures and animals with human faces perhaps as a way of adding presence to absence. The images also feature pareidolia; in one image specifically, two faces have been graffitied onto an industrial machine, the gauges have been turned into eyes and the levers into noses. Lionel Obadia (2018) likens pareidolia to a sacred experience, as 'hypermodern spirituality' (figure 3). The pareidolia also indicate that adding a lifelike presence to a building can be seen as a way of feeling compassion towards it (Herva and Matila forthcoming). There seems to be a deeper sense of care and sadness about venturing into these sites that is often overlooked in scholarship (but see Arboleda 2016). For instance, hashtags #leavenothingbutfootprints and #takenothingbutphotographs suggest that the UE-enthusiasts generally do not want to see these places demolished. This has also been evident in interviews

about UE (Äikäs et al. 2024). That buildings – houses in particular – are living and sentient entities in some sense has been observed in various cultural contexts, whereas abandoned factories, while technically human spaces, are in many ways more-than-human and alien experiential spaces. For instance, there are allegedly many haunted

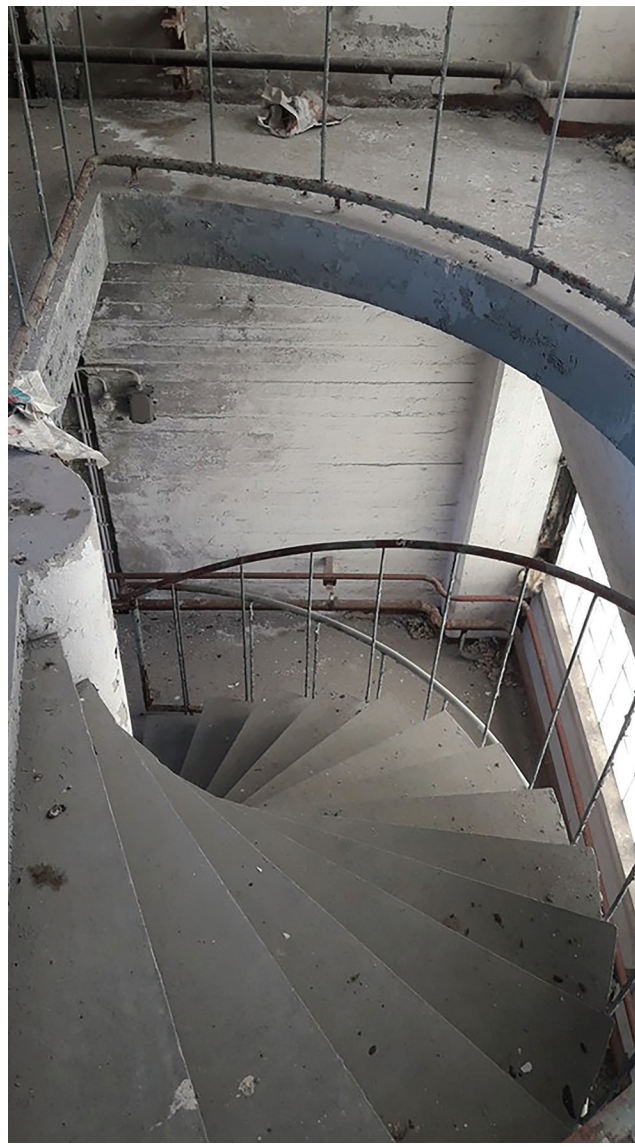

Figure 3. Stairway in an abandoned factory. Photo by Vesa-Pekka Herva.

houses – which for one thing reflects their distinctively 'human' character – whereas stories of haunted factories are far less common (in Finland at least, and as far as we can tell). Derelict factories certainly have haunting and disturbing characteristics (Edensor 2005), as discussed above, but that derives perhaps more from their weirdness rather than humanness.

Although not formally the same thing, it can be useful to compare the experience of moving through abandoned industrial spaces to moving through the labyrinth and the disorienting/spiritual effects that the labyrinth can generate (Artress 1995; Doner 2022). Houses are generally quite simple in their plan, whereas industrial sites can have a rather complex spatial organisation that involves navigating and journeying very differently from houses. While the moves and turns in industrial sites are not similarly determined and orchestrated as in a classical (one-path) labyrinth, abandoned factories may be considered to have similarly confusing and bewildering effects (Doner 2022). Moreover, factories are nowadays quite detached from most people's everyday environments in Finland and venturing into abandoned industrial sites thus represents – or is literally about – entering an unfamiliar world. Conceiving abandoned industrial sites as labyrinths in a broad sense also hints at a particular kind of travelling into other worlds, a potentially transformative 'magical' personal experience that labyrinths can provoke (Herva and Lahelma 2019: 104–107). Moreover, the mythical labyrinth is associated with hybrid beings, Daedalos as a bird-man and the minotaur as bull-man (see below).

One aspect of journeying through abandoned industrial sites, which is clearly reflected in the studied photographs, is the prominence of pictures taken of doorways and stairways (figure 4). These pictures are concrete illustrations of the significance of journeying in factories as transition points between different spaces and may be taken to echo an excitement with a sense of moving into and within strange places, a sense of anticipation of what wonders might be awaiting in new places that can be seen to be there yet are invisible and unknown until one enters them. Doorways and stairways are effectively portals and passing through them reveals new dimensions of a 'layered' environment and, by extension, a layered reality (see also Holloway 2010).

The interest in transition points in UE photography is significant in that it resonates with a much broader and very long-standing cultural tradition, which in turn echoes a complex of themes related to

human perceptions of buildings and boundaries in general. Namely, boundaries and 'openings' have long been invested with cosmological or existential dimensions. In premodern contexts, ritual deposits have been made at, for instance, doorways to magically protect the 'weak' points between inside and outside worlds (see, e.g., Hukantaival 2016). It is intriguing, along the same lines, that ghostly experiences (or feelings of 'presence') among those living in allegedly haunted houses are associated with, for instance, stairways and doorways, which are liminal spaces between the worlds (Lipman 2014: 54). Although the UE practitioners included in our material did not specifically or explicitly express it, stairs are transition points that promise something new to be discovered deeper down (or further up) in the explored spaces – in addition to which stairs are often the most hazardous spaces in any building (Sanath 2016; Scott 2005). The pictures of stairs invite the viewer to wonder what lies on the other side of the staircase and to join the thrill of adventure. Stairs also have a more profound symbolic meaning as symbols of reaching otherworldly places and spaces (Pallasmaa 2000; Sanath 2016), which renders stairs and doorways, in cultural and metaphysical terms, as something more than physical features. There is, evidently, something particularly powerful perceptually and experientially to transition points and openings, which is reflected in the UE photography, too. Importantly, industrial complexes can be rich in such liminal places with otherworldly associations, which potentially contributes to the spiritual experience of such sites, even if our social media material does not really allow examination of how explorers feel about these features.

The images, and posting them in social media, can be understood as a type of 'co-mobility', moving with others via sensory experience in the images (Hughes and Mee 2021). It is a way of presenting these sites online and inviting others to enjoy the sensory realm of abandoned places. Photography and photographs obviously reflect what explorers have found interesting in derelict places, as in the aforementioned case of doorways and stairways, but they are also something that mediates the perception and experience of sites. For instance, and importantly, photographs have often been thought of as capturing unseen worlds unknown to us (Harvey 2007) – that is, photography can be understood as a means of seeing and capturing invisible worlds, literally and figuratively, in a similar manner as the microscope, telescope or other such instruments. Photography is not merely about 'documenting', but it affects what is seen and how it is seen (in this case both by explorers and UE communities).

Figure 4. A light switch with 'a human face'. Photo by Tuuli Matila.

Journeying through the Real and the Fantastic

Journeying also involves travelling into the past and feeling nostalgia or melancholy for the disappeared world that still haunts the future, hence eliciting affects and emotions. Through the photographs shared online, UE activities potentially engage a worldwide community and UE photography spreads a particular aesthetic sensibility across the different corners of the world. These photographs often emphasise

the sadness of these sites and add to the feelings of loss and tragedy. One Finnish UE photograph depicts an abandoned ambulance factory with the caption specifically mentioning that it flirts with 'Pripyat style', that is, it attempts to invoke imaginaries associated with Chernobyl (e.g., Ojala 2022).

Meanwhile, some other images flirt with the concentration camp iconography. In one video shot at an abandoned factory near Helsinki, for instance, the footage features stuffed animals that have been attached to the fence of the factory that is being demolished. The clip has been shot so as to recall the liberation imagery of German camps at the end of the Second World War. Likewise, the former Finlayson textile factory in Ikaalinen, closed in 2008, has been photographed in a manner that creates a connection between the rusting 'Finlayson' sign and that of 'Arbeit macht frei' sign above the entrance gate to Auschwitz. Furthermore, some factories in our material are framed in a way that are reminiscent of the iconic Auschwitz train entrance, including the abandoned match factory in Tampere that features easily recognisable concentration camp aesthetics. These features can obviously be a result of the very appearance of the sites and a way of adding a sense of dread and affect to the pictures, but we feel that this is an important part of the journeying aspect of UE – it allows imaginary links with these international sites and enables pondering the darkest corners of human history in a spiritual way.

Old and abandoned factory buildings readily invite aesthetics that play with death, destruction, and failure. These are also the types of images that foster the most critique. There is no denying that in Detroit, for instance, the 'ruin porn' imagery has produced an aesthetic archive that has little to do with the way the locals would like to be represented or that engages deeply with the reasons for industrial decline and subsequently an entire city (e.g., Ryzewski 2021). Indeed, the lack of people in UE imagery is a general tendency of the 'art'. There is also not that much imagery on the specific machines or other industrial features and only some 100 photos out of the total 600 show clearly recognisable industrial machinery – this imagery would surely not be credited as detailed archaeological documentation. Likewise, people are generally absent in the studied photographs, with only some sixty shots showing people. Deviations from normative constructions of what is usually considered to be attractive for a photograph are themselves frequently aestheticised and imbued with an artistic quality. Photographs that, for instance,

capture industrial decay, poverty and sites/sights of trauma, can slip into the fuzzy realms of 'art', making them at once almost desirable places to visit (Edensor 2005; Robinson and Picard 2009). What we question, however, is whether this is necessarily a negative and wilfully ignorant way of the UE practitioners to turn tragedy into aesthetics, or whether it is actually a way to access spiritual feelings and a connection with the past.

UE and its photographic documentation have different narrative aspects related to journeying in 'weird' places. Abandoned industrial sites provide an evocative setting for connecting with real and imagined lost worlds that are familiar in some ways and alien. Given their peculiar dissonant, liminal, and otherworldly material and experiential characteristics, abandoned industrial sites and their exploration can usefully be considered in terms of 'weirding', an approach that draws from horror stories and other 'weird fiction' and provides one perspective on how people relate with strange places and things (see further, Turnbull et al. 2022). Thomas Ligotti, for instance, provides a disturbing account of a derelict factory in his short story 'The Red Tower' (2008) which, like H. P. Lovecraft's fiction, explores 'deeper and weirder topographies' – not the world as it appears to us as we normally experience it, but the world as it is in its ultimate and deeper dimensions that 'are dedicated to disrupting our normal sense of being at home in the world' (Tabas 2015: 15–16; see also Harman 2012). 'Weirding' the world and indeed experiencing that world beneath its surface – its ordinarily invisible and hidden subsurface structures, dynamics and dimensions – is an aspect of UE.

The alienation from industrial work that is demonstrated by the lack of machinery and people in the studied photos can in some cases lead to seeing these places not as relics of past work but as sets for (horror) stories. This is indicated by comments that describe the photos of old factories as like something from Hogwarts or as homes of trolls. Entering the old factories is a transition to a world of fantasy. Places that anchor fictional universes to reality have been described as 'an intermediary territory, a space between the real world and the fantasy world' (Joliveau 2009: 36). These kinds of places can bring the past closer (Lovell 2019: 462) but here rather creates distance by moving them from real history to an imagined fantasy world. Indeed, Jane Lovell (2019) has used the term 'magi-heritage simulacrum' when describing places that borrow the atmosphere from historic locations while using it to connect to a world of fantasy not related to the

original use of the place. Her examples demonstrate how medieval settings have been used to create Harry Potter and Game of Thrones. She states that 'magical placemaking may augment the spectrum and quality of visitor experiences, by expanding the opportunities to imaginatively authenticate the historic environment' (Lovell 2019: 449). These places enable the 'embodiment of the imagination in the actual world' (Lovell 2019: 449).

To conclude, we draw on a few specific UE actors in social media, whose photography illustrate these points especially clearly. Places where the actual and imaginary coexist have been described as liminal and affective and fantastical elements can be 'woven into existing heritage' (Lee 2012: 60), or in our case into existing industrial ruins. These places are so distant from the visitors' everyday life that they create a story-like feeling and enable people to enter an imagined world where places of industrial work transform to homes of trolls and wizards. This transition is highlighted by the pseudonyms Bunnyurbex and Urbexemilia who always use animal and other masks in their photos, hence creating an atmosphere of otherworldliness, stories, and magic. Horrors and creepiness are often mentioned in their hashtags. Their photographs draw their inspiration from the alienness and mood of the abandoned environments, which evoke feelings of supernatural, spookiness and even threat, fear, and horror (figure 5). In our interview, Bunnyurbex noted that, for her, masking up creates a distancing and otherworldly feeling that in her perception fits well in the abandoned, often rather creepy spaces and creates an intriguing contrast between her as a transformed young female within these old spaces.

Hence, abandoned factories can function as important sites for personal, spiritual pondering and transformation that allow detachment from the mundane, everyday reality. While many scholars may reject such actions as superficial and rather promote a rational and information-based approach to such sites, we would rather not see the allure of UE in such negative terms. While at first these may seem somewhat contradictory – that UE sites can inspire nostalgia for the past and aid people in journeying to fantasy worlds – we argue that this contradiction is one aspect of the positive connotations of UE for personal meaning-making, and as an alternative heritage engagement as Pablo Arboleda (2016) has already pointed out. UE in abandoned factories allows travelling to the past, or the fantastic, the real and hyperreal, the lost and absent, and elicits connections beyond the mundane and profane realm of life.

Figure 5. Masked UE in an industrial setting. Original caption is a poetic description by Bunnyurbex: 'Oh you like what you see, Sure thing but what's in it for me? All these mfs acting thirsty, wipe drool off your chin, I'll hose you down, No tie, it's a win-win.' Photo courtesy of Bunnyurbex.

Conclusions

By looking at UE photography we were able to see more clearly what is at work in UE activities by paying attention, for instance, to the elements that create the atmosphere of the imaginary and extraordinary. Urban exploration takes participants on a journey to the past which is full of emotion from grief to horror and excitement to magic. A key to this experience is travelling through these different emotions and allowing the places to guide perceptions and let the camera work to conjure up things that were hidden in plain sight. We have argued that UE functions as a type of spiritual journeying that connects us to the world past, present, and future, and allows people to feel and experience more deeply the abandoned spaces. Rather than superficially consuming the past, UE activities shed light into our modern condition and the desire to find something deep, engaging, and meaningful. In the process, photography facilitates the accessing of such emotional states. There is, then, much more to UE than meets the eye.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Kone Foundation under Grant (202010612). Special thanks to Bunnyurbex for letting us use one of her wonderful images and to all the other urban explorers who allowed us to interview them.

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Notes

1. Due to copyright reasons, we are not able to use the actual Instagram pictures as illustrations in this article, except figure 5, which we got directly from its copyright holder Urbexbunny. All the other images are our own but mirror the online Instagram imagery.
2. Sociologist Fred Davis (1979: 17–25) divides nostalgia into three different categories: (1) simple nostalgia that is a sentimental feeling, a longing for bygone days, (2) reflexive nostalgia that juxtaposes the past and the present and includes reflection on the course of change, and (3) interpretive nostalgia as reflection on being nostalgic, or an awareness of nostalgic thinking. Folklorist Ray Cashman (2006: 137) has pointed out that material culture can serve as an indicator of reflexive nostalgia, as a resource from which people revise their memory of the past and their identities in the present.

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