

Alex Pentek

MA/MFA Art in the Contemporary World

26th August 2021.

## Sub-Urban Myths

Infrastructures of rural and urban mutually reliant sites of cultural production.

*“- Meantime Luke began  
To slacken in his duty; and, at length,  
He in the dissolute city gave himself  
To evil courses: ignominy and shame  
Fell on him, so that he was driven at last  
To seek a hiding-place beyond the seas.”*<sup>1</sup>

Written during the height of the industrial revolution, in this romantic pastoral poem Wordsworth describes how Luke, the young son of an honest shepherd is corrupted by the city. Associating the smog and squalor of 19th century city life with ideas of corruption, immorality and “evil courses,” also inspired artists contemporary to Wordsworth such as William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* in 1794. Wordsworth’s dim view of city life is starkly contrasted by many varied descriptions of the mist-covered mountains and the simple, honest lifestyle of Luke’s aged father, Michael, emotively conjuring in the reader what the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan calls “topophilia”,<sup>2</sup> - a love of landscape and place.

In contrast to pastoral romanticism, fast forward to the year 2035 where science fiction writer William Gibson describes the following terrifying urban conurbation known as the ‘BAMA Sprawl’.

*“Home.*

*Home was BAMA, the Sprawl, the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis.*

*Program a map to display frequency of data exchange, every thousand megabytes a single pixel on a very large screen. Manhattan and Atlanta burn solid white. Then they start to pulse, the rate of traffic threatening to overload your simulation. Your map is about to go nova. Cool it down. Up your scale. Each pixel a million megabytes. At a hundred million megabytes per second, you begin to make out certain blocks in midtown*

---

<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth W. Michael. A Pastoral Poem. English Poetry II: From Collins to Fitzgerald. The Harvard Classics. 1909–14.

<sup>2</sup> Albrecht G.A., “The Age of Solastalgia.” August 7, 2012. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/the-age-of-solastalgia-8337>.

*Manhattan, outlines of hundred-year-old industrial parks ringing the old core of Atlanta..."*<sup>3</sup>

In this essay I will briefly look at contemporary ideas of the rural and urban as symbiotic sites of cultural production and consumption, examining the mythically agonistic relationship between these spaces from a modern historical and infrastructural perspective. Urbanist Gary McDonogh writes "myth is a narrative-like cluster, often set in past or distant (disembodied) times, that charters values, institutions, dialogue and conflict in the present."<sup>4</sup> In an ever-changing and often prejudiced narrative of connections through rural and urban infrastructures, dispersed with ideas of interdependence similar to rhizomatic nodes of Actor Network Theory,<sup>5</sup> I aim to identify new criteria for understanding these myths and this relationship, and why it is important today more than ever.

Defining distinctions between rural and urban usually places a boundary of some description between them both physically and in the grammar of our language. The oppositional nature of our use of language leads us towards unavoidable dichotomies that Ludwig Wittgenstein tried singlehandedly to free us from twice in his philosophical career with *Tractatus Logicos Philosophicus*,<sup>6</sup> 1921, and *Philosophical investigations*, published posthumously in 1953.<sup>7</sup> Seeing the paradox in using language to escape language, Wittgenstein likened his grammar to a ladder that must be pushed away once it has been climbed. Not yet ready to completely push away this metaphorical ladder because of other insights that it gives us, for the scope of this essay it is enough to be aware of these oppositional 'language games', and to know that 'rural' and 'urban' are terms with many grey spaces in-between. The post war phenomena of suburban sprawl and 'white flight' from multicultural inner cities being an example. Attributed indirectly to Thomas Jefferson,<sup>8</sup> the social, cultural and political legacy of suburban sprawl and resulting inner city depression is very far reaching, from Hip-Hop to French Ban-lieu films.

---

<sup>3</sup> Gibson, William, 1948-. *Neuromancer*. New York :Ace Science Fiction Books, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> McDonogh, Gary W. "'Bad Spaces?': Interrogating Suburbs, Myth and Spatial Justice". Fol, Sylvie, et al.. *Ségrégation et justice spatiale*. Nanterre: Presses universitaires de Paris Nanterre, 2013. (pp. 185-202) Web. <<http://books.openedition.org/pupo/2144>>

<sup>5</sup> Law J. *Aircraft Stories: Decentering the Object in Technoscience*. Duke University Press. 2002

<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig (2007) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden. New York: Cosimo Classics

<sup>7</sup> McGUINNESS, BRIAN. "BERTRAND RUSSELL AND LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN'S 'NOTES ON LOGIC'." *Revue Internationale De Philosophie* 26, no. 102 (4) (1972): 444-60. Accessed June 26, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23943255>.

<sup>8</sup> Vazquez L. Thomas Jefferson: The Founding Father Of Sprawl? February 20, 2006. (Online).

While the ebb and flow of people between the rural and urban is complex, people are increasingly moving on a global scale. According to the latest International Organisation for Migration (IOM) World Migration Report 2020 there are 272 million people currently affected by emigration internationally. Two thirds of these are seeking labour in search of a better life.<sup>9</sup> While the gap is apparently slowly closing, differences in the distribution of global resources and wealth remain staggering. After centuries of capitalist 'Laissez Faire' policy (still very much with us today through global financial and political infrastructures and institutions), we are left in a situation where half of the entire world's wealth is matched by the number of people it would take to fill a double decker bus, -about 85 people.<sup>10</sup>

While no-one can be faulted for pursuing dreams of a better life, the history of modern wealth, property and ownership owes much to the relationship and creation of interdependent rural and urban spaces. Moving back to between the 15th and 17th centuries in Britain, mapping and enclosing previously open 'common' ground often using hawthorn "as an organic barbed wire, the hedge was increasingly put to work to protect the lands of the powerful."<sup>11</sup> Forcing many already impoverished subsistence farmers to become destitute during this period, forced to move to towns and cities to seek employment, "the history of private property is rather silent on the conditions that produced it."<sup>12</sup> Following the physical infrastructure of property boundaries came the creation of the legal tactical infrastructure of private ownership laws which essentially continue to protect those who 'have' against those who 'have not.' This caused existing social and cultural inequalities to become widened. Ironically, in a climate where there was famine in Britain and constant fear of social unrest and rebellion, during this time there was a period of 50 years that saw a level of increased private building and infrastructural development never seen before.<sup>13</sup>

Increased infrastructural building during a time of instability is a pattern that we can see being repeated today with the Belt and Road project in China, linking it with Russia, the Middle East and Europe. Hailed as the largest infrastructural project in the world today during a time of ecological and biological crisis, infrastructures are being used tactically in

---

<sup>9</sup> International Organisation for Migration (IOM) World Migration Report 2020 (Online)

<sup>10</sup> Graeme Wearden for the Guardian, part of the Guardian Development Network. Oxfam: 85 richest people as wealthy as poorest half of the world 21 Jan 2014

<sup>11</sup> BLOMLEY N. Making Private Property: Enclosure, Common Right and the Work of Hedges. *History* (2007) **18**, 1, 1–21. C 2007 Cambridge University Press

<sup>12</sup> Mitchell, T. 2002. Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, and Modernity (Berkeley). Moore, A.

<sup>13</sup> BLOMLEY N. Making Private Property: Enclosure, Common Right and the Work of Hedges. *History* (2007)

the form of art competitions, new colleges and educational incentives to gaslight the public away from the negative environmental impact that this will have. <sup>14</sup> Against an increasing backdrop of climate change and mass immigration, between 2011 and 2013, China has poured more concrete than the US used in the entire 20th century. <sup>15</sup>

Returning to Britain, much of the architectural legacy of 'the country estate' was largely funded by capitalist New World ventures dependant on the colonialist infrastructure of slavery. As recently as 2015, Britain finished paying a debt to the world bank equivalent to 17 billion pounds, which was borrowed to compensate British slave owners for their losses after the abolition of slavery, in 1833.<sup>16</sup> Curiously, there was no mention of those who were detained as slaves being compensated from this fund. This is a proven example of legal infrastructure protecting those who have against those who have not.

As colonialism and slavery spread across the world through technological advances in navigation, shipping and map-making, by the 18th century, the third American President Thomas Jefferson employed the infrastructures and prejudices of the Enlightenment period under the three tenets of; 'Reason, Science and progress.'

With the land 'claimed' from native landowners under the then accepted racist regime of frontierism, and using cartographers and engineers (including famous black engineer Benjamin Banneker), as Town Clerk, Jefferson chartered the city of Washington DC on a square mile grid formation. As an anecdote, when Banneker, a mathematical and astronomical genius and untypical free-born black African-American shared his astronomical predictions and historically pleaded for racial equality to Jefferson by letter in 1791, he only received a polite but very muted reply.<sup>17</sup> This was after all, a man who owned over 600 black slaves during his lifetime. Later becoming US President, Jefferson's Neo classical home, Monticello, Charlottesville, Virginia, later inspired the design of the American Pavilion in Venice. Representing the US in Venice in 2019, Martin Puryear brought this history almost full circle with a quietly powerful exhibition, including his poignant sculpture *A Column for Sally Hemings*. Taking the form of a fluted marble column with a large rusted shackle brutally embedded into it, and placed centrally in the domed atrium of the American pavilion this work is a tribute to Hemings, an

---

<sup>14</sup> Truscello M. *Infrastructural Brutalism*, a book panel with Michael Truscello March 26 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Swanson A. *Washington Post*. How China used more cement in 3 years than the US did in the entire 20th century. March 24th, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Fact check: United Kingdom finished paying off debts to slave-owning families in 2015 [MATTHEW BROWN USA TODAY](#)

<sup>17</sup> Narrative | Resource Bank | Teacher's Guide Historical Document Jefferson's reply to Banneker PBS 1791

African-American slave 'owned' by Jefferson who bore him five children. How the brutal capitalist infrastructures of slavery mixed American politics and democracy with Enlightenment ideals of reason, science and progress is deeply concerning. Chantal Mouffe believes that we are still in the throws of Jacobean rationalism, universalism and individualism today,<sup>18</sup> which possibly explains why untangling ideas of colonialism, identity and the making visible of infrastructures continues to be important to contemporary artists such as the *Alien Phenomenology* of Ian Bogost, Ben Fry's *Deconstructulator*, the revealed military landscapes of the collective *Demilit* and this year in Venice with the group Annex's installation *Entanglement*, looking at the role of cloud data infrastructures in territorializing the rural Irish landscape. <sup>19</sup>

An example of the sort of entanglement that Mouffe refers to can be found in Jefferson's famous line "all men are created equal." Written in the [U.S. Declaration of Independence](#) in 1776, this normally is simply interpreted to mean 'equal rights.' The seemingly benign difference between these two things is not one of the language games mentioned earlier, but a very real difference with hidden sinister undertones that Stephen Pinker discusses in his book 'The Blank Slate.' Pinker shows that the 'equality' that Jefferson only pays lip service to, leads to the racially prejudiced myth of 'the noble savage', where 'civilised' society reinforces its comparative cultural complexity and superiority over ethnic groups who live simpler lives closer to nature, but in doing so become purer and nobler than having all the corrupt trappings and complexities of modern industrial city life. <sup>20</sup>

It may come as no surprise that Jefferson enjoyed writing out and reading pastoral romantic poetry. <sup>21</sup> While Pinker shows that ideas of the 'blank slate' and 'the noble savage' are complete myths, these ideas never the less framed Jefferson's dim views on cities and race. This is echoed by his opinion that "The mobs of great cities add just so much to support of pure government as sores do to the strength of the human body." Perhaps also fuelled by feelings of solastalgia for a rapidly changing natural landscape,<sup>22</sup> - we can see the power of these myths as they informed Jefferson's influence in the college electoral voting system from a place of

---

<sup>18</sup> "Thinking the World Politically" An interview with Chantal Mouffe Martin Oppelt\*  
Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version Sonstiges / other

<sup>19</sup> <https://entanglement.annex.ie/Pavilion>

<sup>20</sup> Pinker, Steven. *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*. New York: Viking, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Wayland, John W. "The Poetical Tastes of Thomas Jefferson." *The Sewanee Review* 18, no. 3 (1910): 283-99. Accessed August 17, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27532389>.

<sup>22</sup> G.A. Albrecht, "The Age of Solastalgia." August 7, 2012. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/the-age-of-solastalgia-8337>.

distrust and fear of cities. Likely to be also influenced by the then slave-owning hegemony of the time, the college electoral system undemocratically places more voting power proportionally to states with lower, more rural populations, which is not in line with the democratic ideal of 'one person, one vote.' A recent example of this was the 2016 US elections, where we saw Trump losing the popular vote but winning his Presidency through the college electoral system. Then, when Trump lost the 2020 popular and college vote to Biden, he tweeted to a certain country based demographic who hold a mistrust of city-based Democrats, to "Never give up. Never concede. Stop the Steal. We're going to walk them to the capital." During the US riots, five people died and many were injured.<sup>23</sup> The myths and prejudices that Jefferson helped to perpetuate through infrastructures and policies still linger today, but Gary McDonagh writes that "Myths are framing rather than falsifiable; hence, their invisible power in policy and other issues."<sup>24</sup>

Did Jefferson believe city dwellers to be yeoman farmers who had lost their way? Perhaps his belief that each city household should be run like a small farm with enough green space to grow food as well as having recreational value was an attempt to bridge the urban and rural divide, leading to the leafy Acadian suburbia we are familiar with, (if only from countless TV soap operas). Criticised for its "social segregation, cultural complacency, ecological depredation and even issues of physical and mental health,"<sup>25</sup> - Lee Siegeil believes that traditionally, artists and intellectuals avoid the suburbs in favour of cities. Artists like Theaster Gates challenge this particular myth by developing a social arts practice transforming derelict properties into thriving community cultural centres in black marginalised suburban neighbourhoods in Chicago. To view the flow of these property prices in real time on a data map similar to the cyberspace that Gibson describes would be interesting. The carelessness of property and banking prices in the US stand out in the lines "*Discount mortgage on the drop out buses*", -and "*face down in the guarantees*," in Beck's song *Devil's Haircut*, on the album *Odelay*, 1996.

Despite these failings, Siegeil recognises that "*When all else fails, when American life gets too complicated and wacky to get a good satirical hold on, writers repair to the suburbs. The unlovely secrets harbored by the ranch houses, and bi-levels, by the lawns and empty sidewalks of the towns lying just beyond the fervid(?) cities have been to American*

---

<sup>23</sup> Kirk, Michael. Director. *Trump's American Carnage*. PBS 2021. America. WGM Educational Foundation.

<sup>24</sup> McDonagh, Gary W. "'Bad Spaces?': Interrogating Suburbs, Myth and Spatial Justice". *FoI, Sylvie, et al. Ségrégation et justice spatiale*. Nanterre: Presses universitaires de Paris Nanterre, 2013. (pp. 185-202) Web. <<http://books.openedition.org/pupo/2144>>

<sup>25</sup> Leinberger Christopher, "The Next Slum?", in *The Atlantic*, mars 2008, <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200803/subprime>.

*novelists, screenwriters, and television writers what plutocrats were to Daumier. Behind every traveling sprinkler there is a penis longing to wander."*<sup>26</sup>

Suburban myths have become second nature to us all from countless tv dramas that can be seen to play out across our screens at home, (wherever that is), to being watched almost in unison by trading families across the famous nighttime street markets in Bangkok. Roland Barthes sees the politics of these every day myths as "Signes Zodiacaux de l'univers bourgeois: les Essences et les Balances" - as a way to critically understand the ever shifting balances of power between urban, suburban and rural spaces.<sup>27</sup> This is also explored in the genre of the Ban-lieu film, championing the under-represented and marginalised groups of suburban France.

While myths may help us understand the complex relationships between urban and rural sites of cultural production, according to Michael Truscello we live in a time of environmental collapse where global capitalism is investing in infrastructure at an accelerated pace, which he calls '*Necropolitics*'.

To understand both the urban and rural as mutually reliant 'sites' of cultural production and consumption is to also understand how they are constructed and performed. This would seem to require a new set of criteria for the task at hand. But to return to language, in particular the language of Wittgenstein and also the language of capitalism, there is a common thread that perhaps offers an alternative. This is the idea of value, which, according to Anthony Iles and Marina Vishmidt "is the capitalist category par excellence."<sup>28</sup> Going beyond, but also including monetary value, it was through ideas of value that led Wittgenstein to the notion that "*ethics and aesthetics are one*,"<sup>29</sup> as they both represent seemingly very different and even opposing manifestations of core value judgements. We will need to first recognise and then re-assess these values if we are to hopefully move beyond Truscello's necropolitics towards what Glen Albrecht calls the Symbiocene epoch,<sup>30</sup> where urban and rural spaces can enjoy their long standing interdependence.

---

<sup>26</sup> Siegel Lee, "Suburban Blight", in *The New Republic Online*, August 11, 2005 <http://www.nr.com/doc.mhtml?i=w050808&s=siegel081105>.

<sup>27</sup> Barthes *Rolologies*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1957.]nd Myth

<sup>28</sup> Anthony Iles and Marina Vishmidt, 'Make Whichever You Find Work', *Variant*, no. 41 (Spring 2011) from 'In Service: Art, Value, Merit, and the Making of Publics' by writer Andrea Philips; 'Public Servants, art and the crisis of the common good' 2016, (eds.) Johanna Burton, Shannon Jackson and Dominic Willsdon, Cambridge, MA (The MIT Press).

<sup>29</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig (2007) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden. New York: Cosimo Classics

<sup>30</sup> ALBRECHT. GLENN A. Anthropocene and Entering the Symbiocene *MINDING Nature* 9.2

## Bibliography:

- ALBRECHT. GLENN A. Anthropocene and Entering the Symbiocene MINDING Nature 9.2
- G.A. Albrecht, "The Age of Solastalgia." August 7, 2012. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/the-age-of-solastalgia-8337>.
- Barthes Rolaologies, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1957.]nd Myth
- BLOMLEY N. Making Private Property: Enclosure, Common Right and the Work of Hedges. *History* (2007)
- Fact check: United Kingdom finished paying off debts to slave-owning families in 2015 MATTHEW BROWN USA TODAY
- Gibson, William, 1948-. Neuromancer. New York :Ace Science Fiction Books, 1984.
- International Organisation for Migration (IOM) World Migration Report 2020 (Online)
- Narrative | Resource Bank | Teacher's Guide Historical Document Jefferson's reply to Banneker PBS 1791
- Law J. Aircraft Stories: Decentering the Object in Technoscience. Duke University Press. 2002
- Siegeil Lee, "Suburban Blight", in The New Republic Online, August 11, 2005 <http://www.nr.com/doc.mhtml?i=w050808&s=siegel081105>.
- Leinberger Christopher, "The Next Slum?", in The Atlantic, mars 2008, <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200803/subprime>.
- McDonogh, Gary W. "'Bad Spaces?': Interrogating Suburbs, Myth and Spatial Justice". Fol, Sylvie, et al.. *Ségrégation et justice spatiale*. Nanterre: Presses universitaires de Paris Nanterre, 2013.
- McGUINNESS, BRIAN. "BERTRAND RUSSELL AND LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN'S 'NOTES ON LOGIC'." *Revue Internationale De Philosophie* 26, no. 102 (4) (1972): 444-60. Accessed June 26, 2021.
- Mitchell, T. 2002. Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, and Modernity (Berkeley). Moore, A.
- "Thinking the World Politically" An interview with Chantal Mouffe Martin Oppelt\* Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version Sonstiges / other
- Pinker, Steven. The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature. New York: Viking, 2002.
- Swanson A. Washington Post. How China used more cement in 3 years than the US did in the entire 20th century. March 24th, 2015.
- Truscello M. Infrastructural Brutalism, a book panel with Michael Truscello March 26 2021.
- Vazquez L. Thomas Jefferson: The Founding Father Of Sprawl? February 20, 2006. (Online).
- Anthony Iles and Marina Vishmidt, 'Make Whichever You Find Work', Variant, no. 41 (Spring 2011) from 'In Service: Art, Value, Merit, and the Making of Publics' by writer Andrea Philips; 'Public Servants, art and the crisis of the common good' 2016, (eds.) Johanna Burton, Shannon Jackson and Dominic Willsdon, Cambridge, MA (The MIT Press).
- Wayland, John W. "The Poetical Tastes of Thomas Jefferson." *The Sewanee Review* 18, no. 3 (1910): 283-99. Accessed August 17, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27532389>
- Graeme Wearden for the Guardian, part of the Guardian Development Network. Oxfam: 85 richest people as wealthy as poorest half of the world 21 Jan 2014
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig (2007) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden. New York: Cosimo Classics
- Wordsworth W. Michael. A Pastoral Poem. English Poetry II: From Collins to Fitzgerald. The Harvard Classics. 1909–14