

5.3. Materialities of the new: processes of destruction and construction in the work of Einstürzende Neubauten

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Abstract

My aim is to reflect on the concept of materiality as artistic process based on the theoretical work of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. Concepts such as 'ruin' and 'destruction' (Benjamin) and the concepts 'negativity' and 'new' (Adorno) shall be privileged. As a case study for the possibility of convergent and/or divergent contemporary reading of these authors, I analyze the work of the German band Einstürzende Neubauten. It interests me to anchor my reflection in Neubauten since their heterogeneous production enables an update of the theoretical issues mentioned at several levels: Cultural-historical (The German context of the twentieth century, before and after reunification); aesthetic (the dichotomies between noise and silence; construction and destruction; form and content; performance, language and speech); and technological (DIY musical instruments; processes of composition and recording). The categorization of Neubauten's music is difficult due to the break with prior musical practices and the creation of new sonic experiences, which bring us the concept of 'avantgarde' that occupied both the thinking of Benjamin and Adorno. The critique of such concept enriches and informs the reflection on the materiality of culture.

Keywords: Einstürzende Neubauten; Ruin; Destruction; Negativity; New

Einstürzende Neubauten

In his essay from 1931, "Der Destruktive Charakter" ("The Destructive Character"), Walter Benjamin defines such character as the one who creates space for transformation by ways of destruction:

The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away. (...) The destructive character is young and cheerful. For destroying rejuvenate, because it clears away the traces of our own age; it cheers, because everything cleared away means to the destroyer a complete reduction, indeed a rooting out, out of his own condition. (Benjamin, 2011)

In the 1960's, Theodor Adorno in his posthumous work *Ästhetische Theorie (Aesthetic Theory)* defines the notion of the new as the absolute negativity of the collapse, being that the major artistic utopia:

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A cryptogram of the new is the image of collapse; only by virtue of the absolute negativity of collapse does art enunciate the unspeakable: Utopia. In this image of collapse all the stigmata of the repulsive and loathsome in modern art gather." (Adorno, 2002, pp. 32-33).

In 1981, the band Einstürzende Neubauten, which name means Collapsing New Buildings, launch their first album, *Kollaps*. Some of the songs are "NegativNein" ("NegativNo"), "Draußen ist feindlich" ("Outside is Hostile"); "Vorm Krieg" ("War Front"). These titles manifest a proximity between the band's identity and those seminal concepts presented by Benjamin e Adorno. In the fragments collected in the documentary about the group, *Liebeslieder*, it is even possible see and hear the vocalist Blixa Bargeld, stating that: "My idea of destructivity corresponds with Walter Benjamin's. He wrote an essay titled 'The Destructive character 'in which he said,' the destructive character is cheerful and friendly and knows only one motto: Make Room'" (Maeck & Schenkel, 2005).

Einstürzende Neubauten is formed in 1980, in West Berlin, by Blixa Bargeld (voice) and N.U. Unruh, FM Einheit (percussion), being later joined by Alexander Hacke (guitar) and Mark Chung (bass guitar). Einheit and Chung, leave the group in the middle 1990's. By that time, the drummer Rudolf Moser and the guitar player Jochen Arbeit join the group until today.

They start playing in a very specific cultural and social context. The city is divided by the Berlin Wall, the Cold War is present and the effects of the Second World War are still felt and evident in the ruins and reconstruction projects all over the city. The Neubau (meaning new buildings of the post-war, opposed to the Altbau, the buildings from the pre-war) are a symbol of such conditions with their weak construction, leading to many building collapses, such as the case of the Kongresshalle, Berlin's cultural center and symbol of the relationship between Germany and the United States of America, which collapsed in 1980. An event that underlines the critical discourse envisioned in the group's name.

The architectonic, social and cultural turmoil made way to an increasing squat movement, attracting many foreigner artists to Berlin and feeding heterogeneous subcultural movements, artistic works, and social manifestations, many in the form of riots in protest against emergent capitalist liberal politics and the difficult situations lived in a daily basis. It was in this environment that Einstürzende Neubauten began to produce their sounds, always surrounded by a general disenchantment, by the ruins and the lack of future prospects. Their work expressed such sense of decay and apocalypse, filled with the noise of an impossible, but desired, reconstruction of the city.

Thus, this generation does not share the hopes and convictions of the prior generation of the student movements of 1968. The indignation of the generation of 68 was based on the refusal of an identification with the past and the recent history, as well as a critique of the silence that govern the generation of their parents towards their involvement in National Socialism; they also struggled against academic conservatism; and as opposition to the war in Vietnam; while maintaining the belief in a positive and transformed future. The latter generation later was alienated from this luminous conviction. The uprisings were not against their past nor a future requirement, but vindications to, and in the, present. However, this present time is not ahistorical and the relationship with the past is also established but different from the idealism of the movement of 68. Their aim was no longer to identify and speak to the past, but to summon it in order to exorcise and build a different present.

In this context, Neubauten wants to occupy such wounds, that is the historical, social and cultural ruins. They start to do it by singing in German language (while the majority of bands sang in English, influenced by Anglophone rock, and as a way to conquer foreign audiences),

and by composing completely different soundscapes: corrupting the silence about the recent past with musical discourses filled with noise, produced with street found and D.I.Y. materials and objects (shopping carts, jackhammers, concrete mixers, saws, anvils, steel drums...), accompanied by screams, whispers and vocalized non-syntagmatic sounds. The group's attempt to break with the artistic and contemporary cultural reality while creating a space of difference. They establish an intense relation with material and social spaces, evident in their choice of unconventional recording and concert venues: *Stahlmusik (Music of Steel)*, was recorded on tape in the interior of a pillar of a freeway bridge (being the oxygen measured by a flickering flame of a candle); they performed and recorded in highways, watertowers, and even in the Mojave desert; many of their gigs were marked by the high level of destruction, since Neubauten used to explore building structures as new sonic mediums and devices. They also incorporate sound recordings of everyday life - riots, conversations among acquaintances, sounds of city life and elements of nature such as fire and sand. And even conventional instruments such as the guitar and bass are played in subversive ways:

The thing is, I [Blixa] have always looked at the outside techniques of what is considered "normal" use of an instrument. (...) This is how I play, using this zig-zag strategy to make music that nobody would expect whatsoever. (...) I could still play guitar without actually playing it in any conventional way. I approached singing in the exact same manner. If you don't do the "normal thing", you are free to make discoveries, like finding I could scream while sucking in air to get a much more powerful sound to come out. (Bargeld, 2013)

Einstürzende Neubauten has fourteen studio albums; a series of recordings composed by 8 discs, limited edition by subscription, the *Musterhaus Series*, comprising the more experimental work of the band; and a set of four compilation albums, significantly entitled *Architecture Strategies Against I, II, III and IV*; among soundtracks, singles and maxi-singles, live albums and side projects. Although, they always try to create something different in each work, the year 1993 represents the most striking change in their sound with the release of *Tabula Rasa*. This is the first album released after the fall of the Berlin Wall and points for a seeking for a softness avoided until then, giving way to more melodic environments and for insights about beauty. Beauty will lead to explorations about the possibility of silence in music, with *Silence is Sexy* (2000). Still, when their music seems to follow a less jarring, less subversive way, is in the forms of production that it is more pointedly present. The new forms of production gave rise to albums *SUPPORTERS' ALBUM # 1* (2000) *Alles Wieder Offen* and (2007), the result Supporters Project, and *The Jewels* (2008), a experimental, collaborative work on improvisation.

As we can see, the contradictory flow between construction, destruction, failure, nihilism and transformative capacity experienced in the 1980s in Berlin, enroll consecutively, albeit in different forms, in the course of over 30 years of Einstürzende Neubauten career, always guided by elements of chaos, order, noise, silence, improvisation and method.

Destruction and ruin. Walter Benjamin

The image of the benjaminian destructive character proves to be a productive approach to think about the work of Einstürzende Neubauten. Even more so when related with another seminal figure of Benjamin's critique, that of the angel of history. The joy and aggressiveness of the destructive character invokes, in a way, the angelic face of the melancholic face of Benjamin's allegory of history:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 2007, pp., 262-263)

His constructive destruction is always a process, never crystallized in ideologies, and his interventions are located in a more than present chronotope, the *Jetztzeit* - or the now-time: "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by, the presence of the now [Jetztzeit]" (Benjamin 2007: 261). The angel presents the destruction of the aura of the past, becoming the eye of the collective conscience, building a dialectic and critical relation with its representation: this dissonance of his own image as well as his revolutionary positioning is what permits to regard history in an critical and alternative way, avoiding tragic repetitions. In "Die Genaue Zeit" ("Exact Time"), the last song of *Zeichnungen des Patienten O.T.* ("The Drawings of Patient O.T.") (1983), Eintürzende Neubauten question this continuous, flat and perennial power and its harmonious movement, as observed by the angel of history:

*Power is a non-stop tape
and my ears are wounds.
It's so flat here.
Muzak for morgues and new buildings
pleasantly humming
leaving no traces
chord scars
in my face.
(...)
What time could it be?
It's so flat here.
Between 33 and 45
or in a 2-hour rhythm
It's a question of volume
and they're all the same, the same.*

The song is marked by constant feedback, obtained by the oscillation of a microphone swinging from left to right, creating a sense of anxiety in a vertigo effect. Guided by distortions and the rhythmic voice, this is the sound experience of the sameness. The non-interruption by the now time creates harmful disorientation. Without the awareness of the difference (traces and scars), such critical approach of the angel of history is impossible and impeding to see take consciousness of the "catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet." (Benjamin, 2007, p. 257)

Such disorientation, which is temporal ("What time could it be?") leads to the threat of historical repetition: "Between 33 and 45", the period of Nazism. The same danger to which Benjamin warned concerning political aestheticization: a threat that can only be identified and countered by the unorthodox destructive character. In "Die Genaue Zeit" the microphone, a resource of technological mediation exemplary of the different band techniques employed throughout their work, amplifies the sound in an heterodox way. Its conventional meaning is destroyed and space for a critical perception is created, opening pathways to social inclusion: it impels an interrogative action, an update of the present that must be radically different.

"Hospitalistische Kinder - Engel der Vernichtung" ("Children Hospitalized - Angel of Destruction"), from the same album, is a song that creates an apocalyptic environment

introduced by a children's choir that gives rise to Blixa Bargeld's disconcerting whimper, underlined by the sounds of jackhammers, the percussion of metal objects and debris. The lyrics speak of children who are pushed towards a future contaminated by the winds of the past. These children are awaiting the arrival of a new angel that will release them from their dying condition and that, together, can abolish the deities:

*locked inside dormitory dreams
praying to the new angel
which still my angel remains
like a shadow floating over me
aroused by the sound of weaponry
my angel and I shall abolish the deity
... and I no longer want to wait
until God's infinite scrotum
finally goes up in flames
exterminating angel*

The sound created from a past dominated by mythology (deities) evokes the pile of rubble that the angel of history sees. Also, these children hope for redemption, but that is only possible by extermination, the purification by fire of that powerful and divine totality. Children, young and gay, occupy places of destruction creating new possibilities and different ways, as the destroyer.

The decay and processing death is evident in the allegory of the album *Halber Mensch*, an oppressed person who should enter into decomposition: an half-man opposed to the Nazi appropriation of Nietzsche's "Über Mensch", whose physical ruin accompanies this desire for a twilight of gods and witnesses the humanistic crisis and decadence ("they'll finish you off/ a sight fit for the gods/ the reaper sends kind regards,/ sickle be not!/De-compose"). In the eighth thesis on the Philosophy of History, Walter Benjamin warns of the importance of a state of emergency as a form of resistance and criticism:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. (Benjamin, 2007, p. 257).

The material and bodily ruin, that of the impending catastrophe that crosses *Halber Mensch* with references to diseases, infections and death, but also the dissonance of sounds of instruments and voice, express that urgent emergency. A state of destruction on which reconstruction is possible, as in "ZNS" (Zentralnervensystem), the collapse of the central nervous system ("Say goodbye to the nervous system!"), followed in the order on the album, by the destruction of the soul in "Seele brennt" ("Soul Burning"):

*every day costs me wounds
though I'm now already
wrecked and festooned with blood*

*(...) I will be dead within two years
consuming these amounts
all idols have to die (laughter)*

*...my soul is burning
I go and hide, sit in my hole*

These are sonic, material and lyric symptoms of an urgency for material transformation and harmony corruption. Such internal and external constructions and destructions of their music demolish fixed structures and conventions, making room for new possibilities.

The concept of ruin, as presented by Benjamin (Benjamin, 1984), relates the material condition of the object of destruction with its own dynamics and aesthetic value. Ruin is presented as a process of corruption of the mythic power of the symbol. The ruin allows for an approximation to the historical truth through painful dynamics of reduction, and of dialectics of present and past time. The ruin is the corrosion of romantic universality and operates by ways of the mutation of the object into fragment, which subverts the unity of the structure.

In *Einstürzende Neubauten* it is possible to recognize such disharmony and complex relationship between the subject and the different historical temporalities that relate in the time of a dystopian utopia - the now time of the fragment and the ruin:

On this disc [*Musterhaus 5*, 2006] we have compiled some of these recordings, some in their original form: "Décomposition d'un Placard" is the memorable event of N.U. taking a wardrobe apart in his Paris hotel room in order to support his mattress; the "Eisengrau All-Stars" was recorded in one day in my shop in Berlin, with whoever came and went. [...] "Diverse Lokationen" consists of recording expeditions (Watertower, street objects / inner city railway guerrilla performance / bathtub and so on...) EN did between 1980 and 1983, mixed with other recordings from the EN archive [...]. Around 1984, cassette based answering machines became available in Germany and were greeted happily by some of us, the detritus of those cassettes can be heard here as well. (Bargeld, <http://neubauten.org/musterhaus-5>)

This paradoxical temporality combines a redemptive impulse with the melancholy evident in the appearance of the material thing – the ruin – and its ability to enchant without fascination. It is a relationship of this order that the group develops with the objects with which they work; with the spaces they occupy; and with the historical evidences on which they rely: as the sampling of children's voices, riots, the quotations, to the invocation of places: "Steh auf Berlin" ("Rise Up Berlin"), from the first album, and one of the most disturbing songs of their discography, begins with the sound of the drilling of a wall, a direct inclusion of space in music composition, which moreover happens at different times of their work. Thus *Einstürzende Neubauten* never presents a tragedy but intrinsically and visually dialectic apocalypses in their processes of construction and destruction. As destructive characters they relate directly to the notion of space and complex time in engagement with the material on which are inscribed the dynamic actions. They perform constructive destructions - it is not the quest for meaning but an experience of something that depends on the encounter with the substance. Their performances are always an interruption and mediation of paradoxes (destruction, construction, silence, noise, convention, subversion,...) which leaves no place for harmonious buildings, but establishes itself as working on ruins.

It can be argued that this unfinished process resembles the negative dialectical thought as presented by Theodor Adorno, on the basis of which resides a critique to ideology through the exercise of negative dialectics.

Negativity and new - Theodor Adorno

For Adorno, identity is the first form of ideology, since the identity thinking subdues the entity to prior, fixed and dominant conceptualizations. In this sense, the non-identical dialectical thinking is revealed as the possibility of exceeding the norms of identity. However, Adorno

rejects any binary thinking, he does not propose the opposition of non-identical and identity. Moreover, Adorno does not reject one over the other, which would imply an amputation of the non-totalitarian complex reality that he wants to highlight. To ostracize the identity of non-identical thinking itself, would mean a surrendering to a new ideology. Being such negativity constituted by processes and never by binomials, the focus is on the building mechanisms that invoke a precedence of the material object for the reflection, rescuing materiality in the development of critical exercise. This rescue is not totalitarian, as has been observed, and can only be negative, that is a construction designed as destruction:

Its logic is one of disintegration. [...] From philosophy we can obtain nothing positive that would be identical with its construction. In the process of demythologization, positivity must be denied all the way down to the reason that is the instrument of demythologization. The idea of reconciliation forbids the positive positing of reconciliation as a concept. (Adorno, 1990, p. 145.)

[...] the nonidentical would be the thing's own identity against its identifications. (Adorno, 1990, p. 161.)

What is valued in this ontological rebellion against false identity is the experience that goes beyond objectification and subjectivity, surpassing it through negative dialectics. This methodology allows an approach to the subject which subverts the conceptual and a priori constraints imposed by society, as well as it conveys an attention to the transience to which the entities are subjected, evident in the historical process. That is, negative dialectics promotes the experience of the difference.

In Einstürzende Neubauten's work the presentation of non-identical and negativity has its most obvious representation in songs like "NegativNein" ("NegativNo"), a cry of negativity and disintegration in contradiction.

*Negative No!
life is not colourful amassed we go to ruin [...] what matters:
Negative No!
Negative No!
with a scream it goes to ruin*

The contradiction "negative no" is presented in the musical composition with the integration of liquid and repetitive sounds, like a mantra in contrast to the brutality of noise of the objects and the voice. But also in "Kein Bestandteil Sein" ("To Be No Part of It") in which the black and whispery voice accompanies a continuous melodic dissonance interrupted by guitar and metallic percussion. This song puts in action the tensions of a building in which deconstruction exposes itself over the non-identical and negative thinking. Non submission to categorizations and overtaking binomials is mandatory:

*Want to be no part of it
no part of it
not of that which was, it was nothing
not of that which soon is coming
not of none of that
not of that which is, by all means no, not of that
[...]
no particle in the net
no dust..*

The complexity of the fragmentary and changeable identity of their compositions is presented by the cacophony, the rhythm changes and the inclusion of non-musical objects. Just as in live performances, in which the stage looks like a workshop in which materials dialectically play with their conceptual and material identities (a drill pierces; a microphone amplifies sound, a guitar is played, a hammer hammers) and their non-identity (by carrying out those socially established actions while making music they produce the difference).

Always with the recent past of Nazism on the horizon of memory, Adorno claims the presence of suffering in dialectical thinking, laying bare the dangers of integration and pure identity – the historical and social harmony that prevents the historical approach against the grain defended by Benjamin:

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream (Adorno, 1990, pp. 362-63.)

The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different "Woe speaks: 'Go.'" Hence the convergence of specific materialism with criticism, with social change in practice. (Adorno, 1990, p. 203)

The relationship that Einstürzende Neubauten develop with the historical and sonic materiality embodies that suffering, that updates and transforms the object itself as a form of resistance to totalitarian conformism. The call to "Schmerzen Hören" ("Listen with Pain") of *Kollaps* is an example of the exercise of a physical perception of the difficulty of living, in which the only possibility is suffering and artistic dissonance. That is the unpleasantness of the materiality of sound that communicates with the body and senses of the listener. It is the physical confrontation, not opposed to a mental confrontation but that implies it, which allows an inscription in a social conscience and criticism.

Thus, the defense of autonomous art proposed by Adorno is not a call for an overall "art for art's sake", but a negative autonomy – it rejects what it integrates. These are always relations of negation, of rejection and of fragmentary rupture. So that the social character of art is to be the antithesis of social art:

The identity of the artwork with existing reality is also that of the work's gravitational force, which gathers around itself, its *membra disjecta*, traces of the existing. The artwork is related to the world by the principle that contrasts it with the world. (Adorno, 2002, p. 7)

This darkness must be interpreted, not replaced by the clarity of meaning. (Adorno, 2002, p. 27)

Art constitutes itself as a dark art, which deals with the opacity and the repressed, and which has its more creative action in the performance of implosion than in that of the explosion, as in the case of Einstürzende Neubauten's work. For the band, as for Adorno, art recreates the destruction, it is not a reference as a form of protest, but destruction is embodied as an artistic agency. The annihilation of the real is the assertion of an anti-art, a non-identical, critical and negative form of art:

If i could find that one sentence, we could bring the energy point to a stage high enough to bring it to a state of KOLLAPS, a final implosion to create black holes. That is my SEHNSUCHT, my longing. That's the TANZ DEBIL [Disability Dance] in me." (Bargeld, neubauten.org/kollaps)

By abstraction and autonomy, the artwork becomes constructive, mediating the historical-temporal relations, with a "now time". It is in this clashing temporality that the possibility of

the "new" takes form. But the condition of the "new" is to not survive in time: its constitution can only be incomplete, an always changing fragment, as the embodiment of a desire in process without a final form. As in the words of Adorno, "[t]he new is the longing for the new, not the new itself." (Adorno, 2002, p. 32) – the new in its condition of ruin.

The avant-garde art is thus condemned to a performance of a radical desire for the new. An art which addresses for the future can only truly be a self-destructing anti-art, which creates self-implosion. In their eagerness to make a difference, to create music as anti-music and with a critical relation with the historical space, Einstürzende Neubauten is assumed to produce an art of desire. "Sehnsucht" ("Desire", "Longing") is their only possibility:

Sehnsucht ("Desire"/"Longing")
Desire
desire
comes out of chaos
desire
desire
is the only energy

This energy is never settled, it is a desire that allows the transmutations of path that the band has built on its repulsion and absolute denial of conventions. As a kind of ritual which they follow and deny at the same time, accentuating the non-identical and the urgency of the dark art. With the awareness of the risk that their work can be commodified, Einstürzende Neubauten condemn themselves to a continuous destruction of false consciousness or false aesthetic content: a dystopian utopia that is embodied in the act of composition and decomposition. The avant-garde experience, in this sense, is that of the performance of erasure and innovation as collapse. Because the collapse is the image of a rupture with historical, cultural and artistic models, critically integrating them on their heterogeneous materiality, which is the ruin and the fragment. Never constituted as a totality, the new only survives as an incomplete process of melancholic desire, that "cryptogram of the new as the image of collapse", in the words of Adorno. Einstürzende Neubauten establish a dialogue between autonomous and negative art and socially committed and technically reproducible art exposed by Benjamin. Thus, Einstürzende Neubauten show the importance of avant-garde experience in its ontological, epistemological and historical diversity, enriched by the updated readings of Benjamin and Adorno.

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