

Edgar James Ælfred Jephcote

Nicolaus Copernicus University

RUINS AND WEEDS:

AN ECOCRITICAL VIEW ON ROMAIN VEILLON'S GREEN URBEX COLLECTION

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*What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish?*

T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

Introduction

In Romain Veillon's photobook *Green Urbex: Le Monde Sans Nous* (2021), an eerie, post-apocalyptic vision of Earth is presented, where the rough greenery of nature has, seemingly, reclaimed formerly-colonised hotspots of human culture, such as castles, theatres, places of religious worship, and even theme parks. In his online article, "What If We Disappeared," Veillon shares his apparent fascination with the themes of abandonment and what could be described as a cessation of human activity. The initial post-apocalyptic framing of his collection is, typically, anthropocentric, but gradually he shifts more towards the natural world and its recolonisation of the urban landscape. While the written passages in the book (printed in French) make the purpose of focusing on nature fairly explicit, it is possible to use Veillon's photographic text as a means for investigating, in an ecocritical fashion, the topic of nature's growth in urban spaces, placing particular interest on the result of the symbiosis of ruins and weeds.

'Green' Urbex and Ruin Porn

In the preface to *Green Urbex*, Sylvain Tesson explains how the arrangement of Veillon's collection methodically composes a chronology for the return of nature (5). The book is divided into three chapters. The first chapter shows the abandonment of beautiful buildings and interiors, the spaces of which are left either clean and empty or slightly dilapidated and derelict. These photographs are picturesque displays of human culture. Meanwhile, the natural world is only to be found in the form of artistic expressions, such as murals, ornate architectural flourishes, or various types of floral patterning. However, it seems that the culture that once populated these spaces is either dying or already dead. There is one photograph captured from inside the room of a French villa that evokes a scene from Ray Bradbury's 1953 dystopian novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, showing a floor completely covered in countless books, intermixed with other miscellaneous junk (Veillon 2021a: 35). The second chapter, titled "Le Pourrissement S'Installe" (the rot sets in), shows more of culture's gradual decline, with further dilapidation on show. The images are full of dust and rubble, peeling wallpaper, as well as collapsing roofs and floors.¹ One striking photograph from this chapter shows a soft chair precariously teetering on the edge of some missing section of floor and wall.² A broken chandelier lies beside the chair, while sundry books are scattered amongst its shattered remains. Also, on the right-hand side, the cracked wall that is allowing for a little daylight to seep through is reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher." It is only in the book's final chapter where nature finally begins to take over, starting with the process of putrefaction. The two adjacent images that begin this final chapter indicate to the reader that nature is coming (Veillon 2021a: 164-65). They show two very similar-looking, spartan rooms, each with a welcoming aperture of sunlight. Even though the rooms remain reasonably untouched, the windows are full of creeping forms of shrubbery. As with the previously described image of the tilting chair, the creepers display movement as well as the passing of time.

The genre of art in Veillon's book currently trends online as either 'ruin porn,' or urbex (urban exploration). Siobahn Lyons opens her introduction to *Ruin Porn and the Obsession with Decay* by declaring ruin porn to be a new incarnation of the seventeenth century sublime (1). She also implies that the depiction of modern ruins is what defines this particular genre, explaining that the images of decay arouse "a fascination of our own death and a tangible image of the precise form it will take" (Lyons 1-2). Even when framed in the light of the climate change crisis and humanity's potential extinction (Lyons 3), the ruin porn genre, as introduced by Lyons, still remains deeply anthropocentric. However, Veillon's latest book diverges slightly from the works of other urbex photographers, such as Marchand Meffre's *The Ruins of Detroit* (2013) or Rebecca Bathory's *Orphans of Time* (2000) by his simple addition of the word 'green.' Veillon's gradual movement towards greener images in the book shows willingness to cross-fertilise the usually separate landscapes of the urban and the rural, thus gradually creating a more ecocritical text in the process, a definitive feature of which is simply not taking "the human cultural sphere as its sole point of reference and context" (Clark 6). Even though Veillon's book is persistently framed in perspective of the human cultural sphere, that sphere ceases to remain the 'sole point of reference' by the book's end.

Shifting Perspectives: Ruins and Weeds

Among the various forms of nature that appear in *Green Urbex*, weeds might provoke the most ambivalent emotional reactions. Culturally, especially in literature, they have long been synonymous with negative emotions surrounding decay and neglect, most memorably in Dickens' *Great Expectations* as well as *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, and even to some degree in Hamlet's first soliloquy.³ However, even Pip had cherished memories of the overgrowth of "tangled weeds" when circumambulating the gardens of Satis House in the esteemed company of Estella (Dickens 54). When viewing Veillon's third chapter, "La Nature Reprend Le Dessus" (nature takes over), the

ambivalence still remains, albeit in a different form. In this instance, the positive feelings one has for the weeds derive from the joy of seeing nature's resurgence and resilience; the weeds signal hope for the planet (even if not for humankind). Perhaps ambivalence about the ruins themselves may also be felt; we may wish to see some structures more 'ruined' than others. In his essay "Ruins and the Embrace of Nature," John Dwyer, on the topic of spontaneous plant growth upon human artefacts, states that what (for humans) is "deprecated from one point of view may be welcomed from another, and deep emotions may be involved either way" (14). In order to grow more appreciative of the weeds, it might be that one simply has to know them better. If the buildings in Veillon's work have been completely abandoned, as the book's subtitle 'the world without us' suggests, then there is no longer any reason for the sprawling plant-life to bear the stigma of an 'unwelcomed pest.' Therefore, a fresh opportunity arises to view these abandoned structures from the weeds' perspective; for example, how they might be useful to the growth of weeds and future successions of plant-life.

In fact, such ruined structures as these often help to give rise to a proliferation of different plant species. Dwyer's essay reveals how the old ruins of the Colosseum in Rome had once been known for its great abundance of weeds (10).⁴ The British charity English Heritage, which chooses to present its ruins as gardens (Dwyer 12), has also noted the significance of this form of plant growth. For example, in the "Landscape Advice Note: Vegetation on Walls," the distinct value of vertical walls (as opposed to leaning ones) is clearly noted, explaining that they create more demanding conditions for plant growth, thus resulting in the appearance of more uncommon, specialised species (Cathersides and Parker 2). Of course, in Veillon's work, there is no evidence of such rare and attractive forms of undergrowth (at least, not yet). However, even the more common species of weed will eventually lead to later successions of more colourful vegetation, which, in turn, results in a more welcoming environment for birds, insects, or molluscs.⁵

The very topic of the resilience of weeds growing in urban spaces and their ability to create a haven for other flora and fauna has recently been shown in spectacular fashion in a new BBC documentary series, *The Green Planet*, narrated by Sir David Attenborough. In the final episode of the series “Human Worlds,” Attenborough explains that the urban path he is standing on – without human intervention – could be completely overrun with pioneer species of plant within the space of just ten years: “the pioneers giving way to shrubs, and the shrubs, in due course, to trees” (00:00:35 – 00:00:51).⁶ Utilising an innovative robotic timelapse camera, aptly named the Triffid,⁷ the BBC series is able to show us the slow growth and regrowth of plants, such as the pioneers in urban areas, all in a matter of seconds. Despite being a very different medium to the *Green Urbex* photobook, the acquired effect of the BBC series is similar to that of *Green Urbex* in that they both remind us how the world of plant-life operates on a time-scale completely different from that of the human world. Part of the challenge of thinking more deeply about non-human life is the difficulty in contemplating the fact that “everything has its own time, its own temporality” (Morton 64). Despite reminding the viewer of these stark differences in time and temporality, the BBC series still presents a “measurement of time” that is “convenient for humans” to consume mentally (Morton 64). While *Green Urbex* maintains its picturesque framing on the abandoned or ruined structures (in contrast to the close-up framing of the plants in the BBC television series), the aspect of time seems to be left more to the reader’s imagination.

Storied Matter

The close focus on this complex ecology based on the slowly increasing symbiosis of weeds and ruins can be enlightening, allowing us to see multiple forms of natural life actively interconnecting and coevolving with the human world. Such a focus seems to be embodied in the new materialist concept of “storied matter,” reframing nature, especially, in its relationship with human

culture, as an agentic and expressive force; as Serpil Oppermann claims, this concept “compels us to think beyond anthropocentricity and about our coexistence and coevolution in the story of the earth itself” (2018b: 412). Going beyond the limits of this photographic text, an alternative yet similar example of storied matter can be found in the work being done to restore the ecosystem of reefs. Between 2007 and 2010, hundreds of old subway carriage chassis were purposefully dumped into the Atlantic Ocean in order to create an artificial coral reef; the process of which, over time, was captured in photographs by Stephen Mallon, whose work was later exhibited at New York University’s Kimmel Galleries (Parke). In this instance, an interesting comparison can be made with Veillon’s overground ruins because both types of ecological environment can emerge and thrive with the help of human-made structures.⁸ Furthermore, both Veillon’s and Mallon’s work can help us to think positively and constructively about the problems of man-made pollution and climate change. According to Oppermann, matter’s expressive capability to bear “material stories about ecological crises interlaced with socio-political struggles and geophysical forces” is part of the key to the concept of matter having a storied dimension (2018a: 10). Both photographic texts show examples of storied matter in that they help us “better understand our fragile ecosystems” and compel us to imagine stories for a better future (Oppermann 2018b: 413). Such examples of ‘ecological crises’ can be found in coral reef degradation as well as the Chernobyl disaster of 1986. Alongside his photograph of the Ferris wheel at the Pripjat amusement park in Chernobyl, Veillon mentions the fact that researchers have noticed the vegetation adapting to the abnormal levels of radioactivity (Veillon 2021a: 208-09). In this third and final chapter, Veillon not only depicts the rise of plant-life but also shows the waste and ruins of a more recent past, such as tanks, buses, gas masks, railway lines or bridges, and even a water park. This slowly decaying waste could also be taken as an example of what Jane Bennett refers to as “vibrant matter”: non-organic forms of life that may help us to draw attention “to an interstitial field of non-personal, ahuman

forces, flows, tendencies, and trajectories” (2010: 61). These “actants” of non-human materiality can be “bona fide participants” in any given narrative (Bennett 2010: 62). The concept of vibrant matter highlights the active agency of the raw waste left behind by humans, which then through its symbiosis with spontaneous vegetation becomes further storied. Matter itself is ‘storied’ by embodying a signifying power.

Viewing Veillon’s collection through the lens of storied matter can help to “think beyond anthropocentricity and about our coexistence and coevolution in the story of the earth itself” (Oppermann 2018b: 412). The images toward the end of the book appear more haunting than those of the eighteenth century interiors at the book’s start because they are a reminder of the brevity of our own modern culture, thus further reinforcing the author’s post-apocalyptic theme. We are also invited to ponder what newer life-forms could emerge from such a landscape. If matter “becomes a *site of narrativity*, a storied matter, embodying its own narratives in the minds of human agents and in the very structure of its own self-constructive forces” (Iovino and Oppermann 2012: 83), then it seems that Veillon’s ‘site of narrativity’ is human artefacts (urbex) plus vegetation (green). The very combination of these two elements, could be the “ongoing configurations of signs and meanings that we interpret as stories” (Oppermann 2018b: 412). In *The Green Planet*, while exploring a long-abandoned ironworks, Attenborough states that “the ability of plants to reclaim the most unlikely sites is truly extraordinary: given time they will attract animals, rebuild complex communities, and even reclaim bricks and mortar for the natural world” (00:01:18 – 00:01:37). The documentary’s onscreen captions also say how the ironworks structure has created a haven for natural life “protected by a fortress of our own making” (00:02:10 – 00:02:17). Not knowing what unique natural structures will develop, it seems that different sites with different materials will create different configurations and stories. The book’s post-apocalyptic setting, serving as a reminder of the brevity of human existence, helps present a speculative narrative on what stories our

modern ruins will leave behind. Using examples such as fossils, volcanoes and tree rings, Oppermann explains that storied matter “represents a new ecology of understanding the ultimate ontology of a meaningfully articulate planet” (2018b: 413). An example from *Green Urbex* could be an abandoned coal mine, which is likely to represent a relatively brief period of industrialised society (Veillon 2021a: 201).

Disenchantment

The collection as a whole can be seen as a true to life representation of a very real, very present, and disenchanted world. In *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Jane Bennett speaks of “the disenchantment of modernity,” describing the “depiction of nature and culture as orders no longer capable of inspiring deep attachment” (2001: 4). Bennett’s surface description of the common mood toward modernity is also present in Veillon’s text. For example, the apparent neglect of churches and chapels could be metaphors for the breakdown of hierarchical structures in society. In addition, certain modern artefacts depicted in the book, such as a passenger plane or a rollercoaster ride,⁹ could be said to be objects of lost enchantment in the twenty-first century. For example, air travel has become a symbol of mass pollution while theme parks may signify capitalist elements of the American Dream. On the topic of disenchantment and human practices, Oppermann writes:

Thinking about storied matter in a disenchanted world means thinking seriously about how our invasive economic practices produce planetary cycles of pollution, how our political decisions and cultural meanings are enmeshed in their production, and how they all enfold into one indissoluble process. (2018b: 413)

In contrast, a more enchanted outlook could be perceived through an ecocritical reading of Veillon’s book. Bennett refers to a “Deleuzean kind of enchantment, where wonders persist in a rhizomatic world without intrinsic purpose or divinity” (2001: 34).¹⁰ She says that for Deleuze, “enchantment resides in the spaces where nature and culture overlap: where becomings happen among humans, animals, and machines” (Bennet 2001: 34). Perhaps for

Bennett, the prospect of symbiosis present in Veillon's images would provoke this sense of enchantment. Veillon's images may not always be pleasing to the eye, but Bennett claims that "[t]o be enchanted is to be both charmed and disturbed: charmed by a fascinating repetition of sounds or images, disturbed to find that, although your sense-perception has become intensified, your background sense of order has flown out the door" (2001: 34). This sense of disturbance is strongly evoked throughout *Green Urbex*.

Natureculture

Ruins themselves are not essentially 'human'; nevertheless, they are human-made. Their apparent fusion with the weeds is also embodied in Donna Haraway's term "natureculture" (Malone & Ovenden 1), the intention of which is to show humans' impact on the natural world as well as to break down the traditional 'man vs nature' dualisms. By focusing on the weedy, less attractive forms of vegetation in these photographs, an imaginative, ecocritical viewer can begin to engage with the "expressive dynamics of nature's constituents," as proposed by the study of 'Material ecocriticism' (Oppermann 2013: 57). As with trees and coral, weeds, particularly in regard to their ontology with the ruins, possess natural-cultural storytelling qualities, which may help "breach the categorical schism between nature and culture" (Oppermann 2013: 60). Thus, John Dwyer's comment that "contemplation of ruins reminds us that weeds have their place in the realm of nature" seems highly relevant to this ecocritical presentation of Veillon's work (14).

Conclusion

Veillon's pictures may not have been framed chiefly in the interest of displaying the basest forms of plant matter;¹¹ however, by looking at the images where weeds and ruins become deeply entangled, the viewer may develop a keener awareness of the weeds' performative powers and presence. The careful arrangement of his photographs shows his ability to tell a story without any

human involvement, and while lacking some of the enchantment of *The Secret Garden* and the sentimentalism of *Great Expectations*, Veillon's photographic text can become part of a newer form of materialist story-telling. An ecocritical and materialist reading of *Green Urbex*, particularly in the light of the concept of storied matter, helps us to go beyond the mere aesthetic buzz of ruin porn and to look at pollution and other ecological crises in a more constructive manner. Displaying an abundance of weeds and mostly unattractive ruins toward the book's end, Veillon presents an honest depiction of the world with a disenchanting and ominous sense of the post-apocalypse, which altogether establishes a suitable framework for this new form of storytelling culture.

Endnotes

1. Walking around structurally compromised buildings is a dangerous aspect of Urbexing as a hobby.
2. This image is listed as photograph "#30" on Veillon's online picture blog ("What If").
3. Hamlet refers to the world as "an unweeded garden" (Ham. 1.2.134-136).
4. Dwyer refers to both Dickens' account in 1846 as well as the botanical study of Richard Deakins, who in 1855, "catalogued and illustrated 420 different species of plants growing spontaneously in the Colosseum" (10).
5. The English Heritage document also mentions specific types of fauna which are likely to appear as a direct result of wall vegetation such as ivy (4).
6. The timestamp refers to a short section of the episode that can be watched via a clip from the BBC Earth YouTube channel.
7. The Triffid timelapse camera has, no doubt, been named after the 1951 post-apocalyptic novel *The Day of the Triffids*, written by British sci-fi novelist John Wyndham. The novel presents a fictional species of plant that attacks and kills people.
8. On January 20th 2022, the Guardian newspaper reported that a huge coral reef had just been discovered in the Pacific Ocean, which was a rare find because of its depth, meaning that it lacks the sunlight upon which the coral depends (Greenfield 2022).
9. The rollercoaster from the abandoned Nara Dreamland theme park in Japan is listed as photograph "#5" from Veillon's picture blog ("What If").
10. Rhizome is a botanical term for creeping rootstalks. Deleuze adapted the concept to be used as a philosophical term to describe theories that are heterogeneous, multiplicitous, non-dualist, and non-hierarchical in their assemblage.
11. The photos are clearly framed in accordance with the shape of the buildings, rooms and other human structures.

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Videos

“When Plants Take Over with Sir David Attenborough.” YouTube, uploaded by BBC Earth, 29 Jan. 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_yJ6Kllyng&t=50s.

Abstract

Urban exploration (urbex for short) has become a popular activity for adventurous photographers, particularly for those looking toward non-human subjects for ways to express their art. Romain Veillon’s latest publication of photographs – *Green Urbex* – invites us to imagine a world without humans, where abandonment leads to the inevitable rot and decay of their artificial structures, eventually giving way to various successions of plant-life. In addition to composing a review of Veillon’s book, the main focus of this paper is essentially to approach the greener aspects of Veillon’s urbex collection from an ecocritical point of view. The photobook slowly shifts our perspective away from mostly picturesque and anthropocentrically framed images of grand interiors to more modern-style conceptions of the post-apocalypse, simultaneously depicting nature’s recolonisation of these seemingly forgotten areas of human culture. In similar fashion, the paper starts with an appreciation of the weeds and ruins phenomenon in aesthetic terms, progressing towards more contemporary theories and reflections of ecocriticism, with particular interest placed on concepts surrounding the interdisciplinary approaches of new materialism, such as “storied matter” and “natureculture.” By using ecocritical thinking to move beyond the scope of Veillon’s text, we can see whether it is possible for weeds and ruins to tell their own story of this human-nature relationship. Also, with Veillon making little attempt to beautify his subject, can the topic of weeds and ruins become more enchanting when viewed from this ecocritical perspective? The very fact that weeds are culturally considered ‘unwanted,’ or are traditionally associated, in metaphor, with themes of decay and neglect, makes them an interesting topic for discussion because they present an opportunity to contemplate life from a distinctly non-typical, unfashionable, and even somewhat alien perspective. These general themes of forgotten worlds and undesirability should make suitable topics for ecocritical discussion, especially considering the attempts by Veillon to facilitate meditations on realistic post-apocalyptic scenarios such as human displacement or ecological crises.