

.This wreckless landscape

- *Eric Laurier.*

'Allegory is in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things' **Walter Benjamin.**

1.

'*Severed* - this usually applies to wiring harnesses trapped or cut through by damaged metalwork'.

from D. Griffiths, *Automobile Assessing.*

On some cheap land leased from a railway company they are stacked up to ten high, headlights plucked out, strands of wiring trailing. Carrion for breakers, brokers and the drivers of bangers. There might be the odd stolen car hidden after dismantling, its undamaged parts re-assembling an insurance write-off for illegal profit, creating a 'ringer'. These are the road's ruins, crumbling faster than buildings, they are the rusting record of metallic modernity, an intimate architecture of vehicle fashions. Some still wearable, others exotic, historical, nostalgic. Modern men's (sic) discarded wardrobe. Mobile machines immobilised. An archaeological record of the just past.

Near the bottom of the dump, in amongst the confusion of metal, paint and rubber are preserved industrial messages - the lost badges of car manufacturers. The spinning 'L' of British Leyland - the badges of failed state intervention in industry. There are the stars of Chrysler cars, which in their later models are silver 'T's for Talbot before the badge disappears altogether in a further 'streamlining' operation by Peugeot, who in turn merged with Citroen. Somewhere down deep there are still lions and chevrons forming a dwindling continuity.

My father, when he was still belted into the stability of middle management in the early 1980s, brought home his company-provided Talbot Alpine to show off to our family. And I knew I was being given privileged treatment as the oldest child, aged 14, when I was taken for a drive, to see 'what the car could do'. To test out the all important car stereo I brought my cheap pop compilation tape, we sped down to the sea-front to cruise along between the suburban coastal houses and the water. The car was a space of patriarchal intimacy, or perhaps the wish of fast fatherhood when children seem so much quicker. More than that, for my dad and me, the car was a vehicle for a proffered pleasure, much as mythical fishing trips and Saturday afternoons at football grounds were for other boys.

Every two years at the end of the summer the car was replaced as the registration letters changed. I can still measure significant periods of my life as much by letters of the car alphabets as by pop songs. My mother meanwhile drove her canary yellow Renault 5 until it collapsed, then a succession of elderly secondhand run-arounds, Citroens with dodgy plumbing, 1970s Nissans spotted and crumbling with poor quality steel.

During some corporation down-sizing my father had to hand back the keys to his office and his company car. In the bourgeois town where we lived it was a conspicuous kind of re-possession; a middle class re-settlement of older men. Unable to find an equivalent job he took to taxi driving which did, after all, still offer a company car. My mother divorced him and not long after bought a nippy silver Fiat with a sunroof.

He never wrote off a car, though he once drove over a policeman's foot.

2.

'*Crushed* - denotes an item directly damaged by impact. It is used to describe fairly severe direct damage to parts such as wings, doors, lamps and panels.'

From D. Griffiths, 'Automobile Assessing'

One summer my then girlfriend's brother, James, was sitting in the passenger seat of his friend's Mini when they collided with a big silver saloon car on their side of a narrow country road. They were struck a glancing blow which pushed them over the edge of an adjacent slope. Their little car rolled, bounced off the top of a low hedge and came to rest upside down in a field. Inside the boys were suspended, dangling and shoulder-twisted by their seat belts. Having a received a blow on his forehead James slipped in and out of consciousness. During one of those half-waking moments he heard cries of pain, saw that his friend was trapped by his foot and tried to start freeing him. In doing so the lack of movement in his upper arm and a steady ache brought to his attention the fact that it was almost certainly broken and definitely useless. He said he laughed a little before drifting back into a haze. Beside him, his friend continued to cry out, having shattered several ribs, broken his leg and had his foot crushed by one of the car control pedals. Or that's how I remember the details as they were told to me by James as we drove back from the hospital several long hours later. His story of the crash was interrupted by his intermittent yelps each time our car went over a bump in the road.

The scene that I was witness to and the one that I am curious about was when we went to see the wreck of the car a couple of days afterwards. James with his broken arm in a sling and me with a camera that he had asked me to bring along. The crumpled Mini had been lifted from the field and taken to a small yard where auto-wrecks were stored behind an ice cream parlour. It was one of those hidden places in the town which I would never

have seen were it not for my being drawn into this post-crash process. Possible write-offs, like scrumpled paper packaging, were left there for insurance companies to inspect them and decide on their futures.

There was a moment of perceptible shock as James spotted the car. He stood still, inhaled sharply, let out a little nervous laugh and then a bigger one. The curve of the car roof was inverted but the real deformation was at the front, where the front wing was folded to one side pushing the wheel into permanent evasion. We walked up to it. James letting out a little whistle, saying 'well what do you make of that!'

It had been reverted to an upright position. Impossibly parked at an even distance from the other wrecks on the gravel, as if owners might still get in these mangled, splayed or flattened vehicles and drive them away. We walked around it a little before taking a look inside. James suggested some of the positions he wanted photographs taken from at a distance. While I was taking the photos, he recalled that there had been a lot of blood dripping from both him and his friend as they hung tangled upside down. And looking inside the car now he noted with disappointment that it had merely left what resembled a mottled brown rust stain on the fabric of the car interior roof. By way of contrast we agreed that the dashboard's position, jutting forward over the front seats, was impressive. In fact we wondered how this could have happened without someone losing, at the very least, a leg.

His friend, the driver, was still in hospital in traction, and with several more pins through his bones than James. They had a mean teasing sense of humour for each other. James had asked me to take photos so that he could bring them to the hospital for his friend's bedside table.

'Oh and there's one other thing I promised him' said James reaching around under the collapsed dashboard. 'I can't get it out, though. Here, you try.'

Just visible under the dashboard was a leather deck-shoe still pinned under the accelerator pedal. Apparently the greatest pain for his friend had been having his pedal-pincer foot pulled from his shoe. To the wonderment of the ambulance crew who eased his foot out of his shoe; though swollen, purple-yellow and sore, none of its multitude of small bones had been broken. With the professional unconcern of emergency teams for items of clothing they left driver's shoe behind. With good reason, I thought, since despite my pulling, twisting and tugging the shoe would not come out from under the pedal. Probably I wasn't the first to try and prise it loose, since there were no other personal effects left in the car. So there it remained: a trace of flesh on steel and plastic bones otherwise picked clean in the few days between the crash and the detainment in this wrecked vehicle pound.

3.

'Lozenged and misaligned - used for chassis frames, door apertures and body shells.'

From D. Griffiths 'Assessing Automobiles'

The Nineteenth Century fascination with ruined buildings and their careful grooming of crumbled churches and castles to make them picturesque, to recapture the threat of decay, by preserving it and perhaps reorganising the passing of time. Between the abandonment of buildings to gravity, wind, rain and vine and their restoration to a copy of what they had once been, the logic of the ruin is neither about the unstoppable loss to the passing of time nor the invisible repair of massive damage. Ruins commemorate as they commiserate, reinstate as they relegate. They don't quite renovate nor do they obliterate. They promise a recovery even as they refuse it.

Car shells delapidate so much faster than stone buildings. They need repaired more often than just about any other object ever manufactured. They are the feeblest of built environments. And yet they now have a central part in human activity that is the match for clothes, ships, houses and places of religious devotion. How might they be preserved as ruins? How might we blend them into a landscape and mark them on maps as historical sites worth visiting?

In farmer's fields in the poorer regions of Britain, and even in the not so poor, you can find abandoned vehicles that might just about qualify as new ruins. There are tractors with footrests which now grow grass to be nibbled by sheep. Black PVC seats half mummy-banded with black repair tape that have acquired a comfortable layer of bright green moss through not being sat upon. In the midst of the rusting ruin, protected by safety glass, immaculate instruments that register just how many miles lead to this final non-passing of the vehicle. Not just tractors lie in the corners of these fields, I've seen small cars, delivery vans and lorries all gradually returning their iron to the earth.

Where once these mobile machines had a clear gap between their carriage and the ground, they have blended with the earth either through its rising up to meet them or their sinking to lie upon it.

There is little sense of them having met a sudden end from their resting places, just that they have indeed been abandoned and forgotten. A driverless crash into the soil occurring slower than the human eye could register.

4.

'*Cracked* - this is used for such items as cylinder heads, blocks and also glassware in appropriate cases'

D. Griffiths 'Assessing Automobiles.'

As part of the West's rites and legal definitions of maturity, a child is accepted into the realms of adulthood through being offered access to the world of driving for the first time. A shared anecdote from Western childhood (more likely boyhood than girlhood) is the first attempt to drive the car, normally at an early age, when it ends up reversed into a tree, lamp-post, gate or neighbour's car. At an older age traversing the gap between father and son is accomplished with greater success when the son takes the car out without his father's supervision. My recollection of childhood and car crashes involved a later and more serious tale of punishment for crossing this road. At the age of fifteen, Donald decided to drive his parent's car while they were on holiday, his father having shown him the basics of driving. His disobedience was made all the more tempting because, like in all the best film plots, his father's car was a treasured Jaguar. The big oak panelled saloon was a mechanical manifestation of his father's successful career, his role as head of the family, his absence from the home, his conservatism and his office. As a father and a serious businessman he drove it calmly and carefully. Donald a rebel without a license went joyriding in it, and he took two of our friends to see his girlfriend who lived further up the loch. On the first night they drove to her house and back without any problem, even though they were fairly drunk. Then they did the trip again the next night. This time on the way home, drunk again, they hit the high kerb on the recently upgraded 'A' road and flipped the car. Lyle, the shyest of the three, sitting in the back seat, was killed as the roof crumpled onto his head. Donald and his front-seat-friend, only slightly bruised, got out of the car and ran away into the night. The oak-panelled saloon was winched upright in the early hours of the morning once the police were finished recording the scene and towed away to be hidden from sight at the back of a local garage. A year and a half later, when he was seventeen, Donald was banned from learning to drive for six months.

This story had a particular moral purpose to it as it was told and retold by my friends and our parents. It was not just an event, it was a lesson, it was a jury decision on the proper accession to our adult lives. For the first time I dealt with the death of a friend and the death of a friend by another's actions, even if not deliberately so. Apparently an accident, it became part of our teenage arguments over alcohol, friendship, cars, fathers, death and guilt. For Donald it meant a ban from such discussions for more than six months.

I wonder where the Jaguar saloon went to, since although being involved in a fatal accident and thus for some time being the property of the law courts, it was a valuable car, not damaged beyond repair. Are the deadly histories of such cars airbrushed away like the group photo faces of Russian ministers who fell foul of Stalin? Except, where automobiles are concerned, it is the careful valeting of interior trim to remove blood and tissue, the meticulous coachwork that puts the car roof back in place, takes the dents out the bumper and the mechanics that true the wheels mis-aligned by impact with the kerb. For its next owner there is barely a trace left of motoring misadventure.

'*Lacerated* - this denotes light cutting of tyres and items of trim'

D. Griffiths, 'Automobile Assessing'

Walking down a red earth road in the middle of West African rainforest I came across a sixties-style Volkswagen camper van. Earlier I had been looking at some brightly coloured and spiny land crab for sale. A village boy had collected them on a stick to sell them from the verge. Not really fancying eating any of the crabs I had paid him to allow me to take a photograph. Further up the road from his selling point there was a bridge built out of thick tropical tree trunks. Cars crossing it would get their wheels stuck between the still-cylindrical trunks and be forced to drive in the rut until they reached the other side. There was something laughable about the way they appeared to buck and struggle with the direction forced upon them by the trunks' tram-lining, like animals straining on a leash.

As I crossed the bridge on the edge set aside with some small wooden rails for pedestrians (of which there were many more than vehicle passengers) I glanced down river. Seemingly frozen mid-leap there was the VW camper van; its nose jutting out into the air and its rear firmly in the grip of vines and branches. Judging by the thick layers of red dust on it, it might well have actually been there since the end of the 60s. I stopped to take some photos of course. While snapping and winding I fantasised about a group of acid-hazed hippies on a magic bus tour around Africa having been so trippy that they couldn't stay on the road. After taking the photos I asked around to find out if anyone knew the story of how the van came to be abandoned there. There were jokes made about the driver having had too much palm wine but no one knew for sure. Most likely it had once been a taxi that eventually had become so beyond repair that it had been rolled toward the river and got stuck halfway on the route to its muddy-watered grave.

How often we see cars, VW vans, articulated lorries and yellow school buses jack-knife and explode into flames in films and TV series, whilst we almost never see sights such as this in the landscape. They are tidied away, their remains having to go through assessor's autopsies. A crashed car cannot be seldom left to rust. Marking the place of the event, we sometimes see a ribbon tied around a tree, bent lamp-post, wall or railing with flowers strewn beneath as a sign that a fatal automobile accident has occurred in *this* place.

6.

'*Buckled* - described rippling of panels, general distortion, also road wheels running out of true'

D. Griffiths, 'Automobile Assessing.'

Robert Hughes, the Australian art critic, in the opening to a series of television programmes about contemporary Australian society, stands staring at the wreck of a car. It is his car and it is part of the record of a crash that almost killed him. In the previous clip he stood on the Great Northern Highway near the spot where two years earlier his Nissan Pulsar collided head on with a Holden Commodore. There is a poetry of coincidence to this scene that is not lost on Hughes since the accident occurred when he was starting the filming for the series - the series which the confrontation with the wreck now provides the prologue to. According to the production notes for the programme, the filming of this scene was carried out as Hughes encountered the wreck for the very first time.¹ As a TV audience we are seeing the learned cultural critic, historian and writer as he sees and is shocked by the Nissan's crush. Quite where his bulky body could have sat inside the collapsed Nissan is an impossible mystery - there is simply no space for it. Instead the shifting metal reshaped his body to fit by snapping and pulverising his bones. A year later, Hughes has made an incredible recovery yet his shattered skeleton will never regain the strength he once had.

In the television scene he rubs his head and stares in amazement, he still has no memory of the collision. What memory might have been reconstructed by the occupants of the other car he collided with has been rendered untrustworthy. Almost a year after the crash Hughes was taken to court and during the case the eye-witnesses were charged with conspiracy to pervert the course of justice. As the judge concluded; the witnesses were untrustworthy, unreliable and willing to give perjured evidence to benefit financially from the trial (they had in fact tried to extort money for their version of how the crash occurred). The only reliable evidence were the remains of the two cars, and all that could be discerned from them was that the cars had met headlight-to-headlight and not quite head-on. Their off-shouldered impact was one of the reasons that Hughes survived.

It was several hours before he was cut out of the car, during a large part of which he was conscious. Petrol was leaking out of the car engine after the crash and aware of this Hughes had asked his friend Danny O'Sullivan to shoot him dead should the car catch fire. Danny is there as they walk around the tortured remains of his Nissan. As they circle the car they repeat the sentences they exchanged whilst Hughes was trapped. Fishing around inside the collapsed passenger compartment Hughes finds a pair of his spectacles. One lens is shattered and its counterpart leg is bent. Looking simultaneously comical and fragile Hughes puts his lost spectacles on. They won't sit right. He doesn't quite stand right either. After a moment he makes a joke about the high cost of these spectacles and how he is going to take them to be repaired. It's hard to say why having the spectacles repaired seems funny. In one sense the joke relies on the presence of the written-off vehicle which Hughes will, by implication, not bother trying to repair. Hughes' almost recovered body stands and moves in juxtaposition to the wreck. Just by standing beside his bust-up car Hughes is aware he is posing a figure of brave recovery and courage when presented with the reminder of his year's suffering. The half-shattered and buckled

¹ Although Hughes had never seen the wreck 'in the flesh' (so to speak) it would seem unlikely that he had not encountered photos of the car smash in the year afterward let alone descriptions from people who had arrived at the crash site.

spectacles, donned by the 'cultural critic', dissolve the distance between Hughes and the wreck, between the spirit of a man as a triumph over his *mere* matter and a mortal man that still thinks about wasting a good pair of glasses.

What was broken can be shown but not what was lost. Except perhaps when the driver and the wreck are re-united - some losses are regained - losses that are mementoes (literally memory-objects) to be repaired or at least gratefully abandoned.

Around the time of the trial stories circulated about the fate of a freshly caught blue fin tuna in Hughes' car boot (trunk). Before the crash he'd been out fishing on the coast and kept one of his catch for making sushi. In set of stories told about Hughes he accused the fire fighters that had saved him of stealing the tuna from his boot. In another, Hughes made a joke about the tuna at least not going to waste if he couldn't have it and offering the tuna to the fire fighters if they wanted it. It may be that the carcass was simply chucked on to the side of the road before it started rotting in Hughes' boot. Clearly the tuna was of some importance to Hughes since he is a keen fisherman and it was part of his recollections of the day spent in blissful beachside ignorance before the crash.

From the newspaper reports given by the rescue team and from the court transcripts, the tuna's disappearance from the scene of the accident was an irrelevance except for the purposes of constructing Hughes' character. And as a media star with a love-hate relationship with Australia the description, on the basis of his tuna handling, of Hughes as either contemptuous of his fellow Australian's or a matey joker was actively pursued. The flesh of the fish was left out of these arguments, and would only have become an important object had Hughes' wished to claim for it on his insurance. In which case an assessor might well have been sent in search of the lost tuna, interviewed witnesses, inspected the boot for material evidence and evaluated its financial worth. Not much is written about the looting, inheriting or gifting of the artefacts left inside car wrecks.

7.

'Missing - used for parts lost at the scene of an accident, such as wheel discs, chrome mouldings, etc, and is also used for items stolen in theft cases.'

D. Griffiths, 'Automobile Assessing.'

If the car crash is the event where we face oblivion, and this might be an erotic oblivion of the kind depicted in J. G. Ballard's 'Crash' or desired oblivion in a suicide attempt or just the sudden un-invited arrival of mortal oblivion. Then the wreck that remains afterwards is the memory of the event. In its crushed, buckled, smashed, shattered, cracked, twisted, torn, bent, bowed, sheared off, creased and lacerated forms we find the possibility of remembrance. Where for Proust's character in the 'Remembrance of Things Past' it is a delicate cake's consumption that triggers the return of lost time, or, rather sets in motion an unmotivated recall, a form of remembering that is distinctive because it makes itself the subject for which our self is the object, it remembers through us; in the case of the car wreck there is a sculptural rendering of some brief moments of near or actual loss of consciousness and perhaps, life.

First to visit the wreck are the professionals in the production of a public record of memory, the fire brigade, ambulance drivers, police, the assessors and lawyers and their assistants. Then sometimes family and friends will go and see what more intimate and private details can be retrieved from the towed away vehicle. Depending on whether the vehicle is to be repaired, kept or dismantled then it will be sent to a garage for repair or auto-salvage experts may move in to break it up into pieces for donation to other cars. Amongst all these people coming and going, the driver and occupants, if they survived, may make an appearance. The profundity of their encounter with the car will depend a great deal on whether the crash was of the near-oblivion kind or not. Most of the times crashes are only prangs, the car escapes its immobilisation as a wreck and its occupants get a little shock and some whiplash. Each year auto-safety is in some small way improved though this has no necessary correlation with the number or severity of car crashes. The good news for car wreck visitor numbers is that they are thus steadily increasing. More and more of us can carry out the shocking and or sentimental journeys described here.

'Details of damage

Such details should be as concise and descriptive as possible. They should assist the assessor to formulate a mental picture of the damaged vehicle long after

the inspection. Notes made at the time should be legible, because it is possible that the assessor may be required by a judge to produce his original notes. Damaged parts should be detailed in a set order progressing from front to rear, side to side, or rear to front as the case may be. Items should be listed under headings, e.g. doors, lamps, bumpers, etc.

The assessor should use a variety of terms to describe damage and he should use these at his discretion. The term 'damaged' is too vague and should not be used.'

D. Griffiths, ' Automobile Assessing'

It's said often enough: we all make mistakes. Don't forget either that each and every car is destined, with or without our errors, inattentiveness or misjudgements, to be left wrecked one day in some way or other.

End.