

Frank Auerbach's *Rebuilding the Empire Cinema* 1962

Frank Auerbach's *Rebuilding the Empire Cinema* is an astonishing piece of work. Painted out of the ashes of a blitz-torn London, the picture depicts a theatre conversely forced to rubble by controlled demolition, attended now by various ladders, scaffolds and disorganised cordons. This would not be an easy task to tell if not for knowledge of its context however, as the piece is at a glance near entirely abstract- a pattern of thick strokes, muddled browns, reds, ochres, white. It is violent in its harsh, jagged linework, brief flashes of light and heavy commitment to the impasto technique: one could easily mistake this unorthodox approach for the artist's aggression rather than seemingly simple honesty. Therefore, it is important to consider the briefly aforementioned provenance of this 1962, what I believe to be, modernist masterwork, as well as more deeply inspect its formal qualities, in order to see the full picture.



Figure 1: *Rebuilding the Empire Cinema* (Auerbach, 1962)

In 1952, within less than five years of arriving to London from Kent (following his 1939 evacuation from Berlin as a child of Jewish descent), Auerbach began his first major series of paintings- *London Building Sites*. As the title suggests, the artist looked at construction sites, yet, interestingly, Auerbach looked predominantly at reconstruction sites of destroyed buildings post-Blitz. These works showcase the true beginnings of Auerbach's signature impasto style, birthed from rubble and the psychological effects war had had upon the artist, though not ones of particular anguish- Auerbach felt little pain from the evacuation years and indeed thrived artistically, and personally, throughout them. Bunce Court, the mainly Jewish school Auerbach was sponsored to transfer to on arrival in England, did for example hasten the artist's attraction to the arts through his exposure there to the work of Turner (although, at the time, he found himself more enamoured by acting under the tutelage of theatre man Willhelm Markwald) (Lampert, Auerbach and Clark, 2005, p. 15-21), leaving much of his mind safely diverted from the horrors of the world at large. The artist himself has confessed as much his lack of evident trauma, stating he has chosen from youth to maintain a frank denial toward coming to terms with his parents' deaths since their murders in the 1940s expansion of the Holocaust (Lampert, Auerbach and Clark, 2005, p. 20). Thus, it should be no surprise that while one of the most accomplished paintings of the *London Building Sites* series, Auerbach's *Rebuilding the Empire Cinema*, is such a seemingly brutal mediation of the war's legacy on home turf, it is simultaneously industrious in its tone, perhaps reflecting an inner conflict for the artist whose

personal wartime experience simply was not as negative of one as he was exposed to first in the capital. Rough, thickly layered surfaces contradict firm, decisive lines. Lines representing bars, bars indicating action, action leading to progress. Likewise, these comparatively stable lines exist in a broken, hazy melange of earthy, reddish hues: although likely chosen pragmatically (much of Auerbach's early work used similarly dry palettes for budgetary reasons) (Lampert, Auerbach and Clark, 2005, p. 60), these hues coalesce as violent and dirty, reminiscent of the London not long before. Auerbach's process, though influenced by the chaotic nature of war, however, remains able to convey more positive outlooks like that of the reconstruction of London, acting to brilliantly capture the bittersweet scenario unfolding in 1960s London- while it is true the Empire Cinema itself was rebuilt merely to upgrade its facilities (Sheppard, 1966), many buildings were indeed being replaced at the time out of necessity following shell damage, and this often took over a decade to occur, prolonging the city's post-war recovery mindset. Indeed, over a hundred destroyed buildings from this period remained marked solely by empty spaces as late as 2015, as reminded by photographers Beth and Thom Atkinson in their *Missing Buildings* compilation released said year [capturing such sites] (Atkinson, Atkinson and Chandler, 2015). Perhaps therefore, it seems Auerbach may have painted the scene, though pleased with the city's active growth, left slightly dissatisfied with how long such regeneration was taking, only now beginning to reach out into the future.



Figure 2: From *Missing Buildings* (Atkinson, 2015)

A similar sense of dissatisfaction is inherent in Auerbach's output, where near every painting has been constantly reworked throughout their production- layers are scraped off after a day's work without hesitation and ongoing pieces are often entirely painted over (Hughes, 1990). Impasto, initially only incidental to the artist's method had without question become a conscious effort by 1962. *Rebuilding the Empire Cinema* is heavy, rough and inconsistent- lending it a significant impression of weight as if lunging toward the viewer; as if confronting the viewer. This weight coincides with the weight of the work's subject matter- beyond the surface layer of the piece [being the renovation of a cinema], lays an inadvertent reference to the pain and ruin that was left before it, and London's eventual resurgence amidst its stain. Just as the potential views of Auerbach previously proposed are conflicted, the board was also painted with great inconsistency in temperament. Lenient use of extended, smooth plains of paint, often relatively untampered in pigment, are disrupted by loose, brash slaths and scratches of muddied browns and belligerent reds. It is this complete disregard to traditional painterly convention of consistent technique that places Auerbach's *Rebuilding the Empire Cinema* firmly into the modernist category.

Modernism is a wide term to describe the active shift away from the long-established artistic sensibilities of millennia before- a philosophy that grew exponentially across the art world and beyond through the initial half of the 20th century (Lewis, 2007). It was consequently a highly rebellious movement, and its legacy extends to this day in the contemporary artist's willingness to experiment outside of the direct depiction of reality. With this in mind, another avenue from which to understand the painting in question opens: what is the broader implication of so radically departing from the representational to the more expressive? Although Auerbach's messaging is not overtly political, there is a case to be made such a feat is impossible: by rejecting tradition, the

immanent angle is one against the establishment that facilitated it. The war's impact on Britain, though mostly managed pragmatically through the Post-War Consensus was high. High losses of workers through military enlistment and the effective halt of domestic industry led to an initially strained workforce (Henry, 1985), contributing to the continuation of rationing as far as 1954 ('End of Rationing', 1954), and, worse, the 1956 Suez Crisis highlighted that the increasingly unpopular expansionist mindsets of the 19th century persisted in head office (Owen, 1957). Complimented by the prior 1947 dissolution of the British Empire in turn for a new Commonwealth, Britain was a weakened and divided state. Thus, one can interpret Auerbach's unconventionality as a product of discontent; subconsciously a push for change and order in both a fractured city and, further, on a national stage. This outlook is reinforced by *Rebuilding the Empire Cinema's* appearance at face value. The piece is, as suggested earlier, violent and dirty, but, more precisely, and following Roland Barthes' semiotic theory (Barthes, 1977), what could the work's signs [denotations] signify when considering the specific context of the 1962 British audience? The prominence of umbers may have acted to spark familiar memories in such an audience [comprised in part by veterans and blitz survivors] of the filthy conditions of combat, and the muddy, scorched ruins of public spaces at home. Red, a colour which while in other circumstances may suggest, say, passion, here can be argued to connote violence in the cultural context of a nation so visibly scarred by war, exacerbated by Auerbach's harsh brushstrokes. In conjunction with the piece's lack of true tonal contrast (with no black present) that may speak to the work being faded, perhaps the audience could have drawn a hopelessness from the painting- a sense that such undesirable conditions, conflict and disorganisation remained unavoidable, with or without war. Thus, the viewer may find this unpleasant or perhaps threatening, as perhaps Auerbach intended: a stark reminder of the flawed state of post-war society.

To conclude then, through a formal and semiotic examination of Auerbach's 1962 *Rebuilding the Empire Cinema*, and in light of its context, one can infer various key messages. As proposed in the introduction of this essay, it indeed seems the undeniably violent aesthetic of the painting does not convey the full story of the image: rather, its inconsistencies perhaps more so allude to an internal conflict within the atypical artist, and unwittingly his frustration with post-war Britain's management. Similarly, with more attentive viewing, it becomes evident that the piece is not only one of gloom but one of cautious optimism- Auerbach appears as if he was truly pleased by London's development, in spite of his cynicism regarding its administration. Frank Auerbach's *Rebuilding the Empire Cinema* is consequently a painting of outstanding merit to me, as beyond its powerful initial impression, it offers a unique, nuanced perspective regardless of the artist's conscious intent.

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