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# Cover sheet

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# **Invasive materialities: War bunkers as disturbing nodes of collaboration**

## **Abstract**

This article discusses the qualities and affordances of the remaining World War II bunkers still found along Europe's Western coastline. Drawing on ethnographic and historical material from a Danish section of the line, and on my involvement in establishing an alternative film festival among these ruins, I explore the bunkers as 'invasive' materialities, that is, externally-imposed structures, still conceived in various ways as foreign, intrusive or out of place. The bunkers continue to disturb the status quo, prompting different kinds of responses – of opposition and consternation but also certain kinds of allure and fascination. With the film festival as main case, I trace the bunkers as products of various kinds of collaboration and as natural-cultural amalgams around which questions of protection, ownership, and rights come to matter, socially and materially. I argue that an 'invasive' analytics may further our understanding of the different relationships and agencies involved in these dynamics.

**Key words:** *Bunkers, Atlantic Wall, invasion, war tourism, Denmark*

## **Introduction**

On a spring day in 2018, I was standing in the dunes somewhere along the Danish West Coast with a local landowner; I will call him Erik. We were discussing my research group's possible use of a large World War II bunker lying on his land, a major seaside plot with a 'summer house' (second home) he had inherited from his parents. This two-level underground complex had originally served as an important German command centre, a key node in this section of Hitler's 'Atlantic Wall' constructed in the 1940s to defend occupied Europe from Allied invasion. I was seeking to negotiate access to the bunker for a public film screening to possibly take place inside it as an element of a larger tourism development project I took part in. At one point, our talk turned to the surrounding plant life. Erik told me he quite liked the sea rose (Lat. *Rosa rugosa*). Pointing to a large thicket at the base of the bunker, he explained how it had emerged and spread quickly and how it actually helped keep the sand in place – a major problem in the windswept area. In contrast to several of his neighbours, he was not at all gripped by the general concern over this invasive species, listed by the Danish authorities as a serious threat to coastal landscapes (Danish, 2017). Removing the roses was, he argued, something only newcomers to the area would engage in; those unable to properly understand

the ecosystem and the rough weather conditions here. To him, allowing the aggressive rose to spread was simply letting nature run its natural course.

Importantly, for Erik the invasive plant served also to conceal and protect the entrance to his bunker. This was of great value to him since he did not want tourists or passers-by venturing into it. He cited safety and potential insurance concerns but also stressed that this was private property and that too many people already roamed the area, disrespecting and often damaging the delicate natural surroundings. Erik cared a lot for the land and the wildlife. On the other hand, he did not really get the fuss about the old military bunkers and the historical interest they still seemed to stir. Like most other World War II shelters in the area, the one on his plot was partly overgrown, weathered and invaded by sand, water and plant life; an indeterminate tangle of nature and culture left here to linger.

In this article, I use our film festival endeavours as material for a discussion of what I call the ‘invasive’ properties of the bunkers: the many ways in which they have become loci of *invasions* of different kinds – past, recent as well as possible future ones – as material and social agents. In these dunes, some threats are concrete, militant, and manmade; others are of a less traceable, more abstract or looming kind. While the bunker ruins are obviously the results of an original, military invasion and the violent changes it brought about, I do not restrict my analysis to this conflict or to a conceptualisation of the bunkers as ‘difficult’ or ‘negative’ heritage objects in isolation (Macdonald, 2009; Meskell, 2002). Instead, I view them as elements of wider natural-cultural ecologies in which different dangers are understood to lurk, inspired, among others, by Anna Tsing’s environmentally attuned anthropology and her impulse to ‘look for *disturbance-based ecologies in which many species sometimes live together without either harmony or conquest*’ (2015: 5, original emphasis). The bunkers can certainly be seen as powerful disturbers with whom their hesitant ‘host’ societies in Denmark and elsewhere have had to find ways of coping since 1945.

The dilapidated bunkers can be seen as ‘naturecultures’ in the sense suggested by Donna Haraway (2003), entities ‘collapsing and transgressing the dominant metaphysics that dichotomizes nature and culture’ (Latimer and Miele, 2013: 11). In fact, as I shall discuss, this inbetweenness specifically qualified the bunkers for our film project, as we set out to confuse and override conventional distinctions between ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ tourism (cf. Pálsson, 2013). The sea rose is another unsettling piece of natureculture in this larger ecology, a species spreading aggressively, originally ‘planted as ornamentals around summer cottages’ from the 1950s but now understood as having ‘invaded the surrounding natural habitats’ (Elleriis et al., 2015: 3290; see also Kollman et al., 2009). Importantly, my invasive analytics also allows me to critically reflect upon the process I was myself a key stakeholder in; a research-led attempt at tourism development which we phrased as an ‘intervention’ and as ‘innovation’ but which from certain local viewpoints came to be understood as an outright invasion. I view the bunkers

as concrete nodes in the windswept and shifting coastal landscapes they inhabit, as I seek to analyse the broader sentiments having formed and still forming around them.

### **Heritage, innovation, collaboration**

The idea of utilizing the bunker ruins as settings for a small, alternative film festival grew out of a collective research and development project entitled ‘Rethinking tourism in a coastal city’ running 2016-19 (IFD, 2018: 20). Funded by Innovation Fund Denmark, our team of researchers from Aarhus University and the Aarhus School of Architecture set out to ‘rethink’ tourism in the large coastal municipality of Ringkøbing-Skjern. A key part of our approach was to devise a string of research ‘interventions’ (inspired by Marcus, 2000; Estalella and Criado, 2018) based on an initial fieldwork phase. These interventions were to be developed in collaboration with local stakeholders with whom we aimed to experiment with new modes of exploring, engaging with and contemplating the area’s land- and townscapes. The film festival was one among seven such interventions of different scope and size in the larger project.

This setup meant that we were, from the outset, cast – had cast ourselves – as agents of change (‘innovation’). In our grant application, we had proposed to challenge a number of conventions within Danish coastal tourism, which is based primarily on weekly rentals of summer houses to families arriving by car, especially from Germany (VisitDenmark, 2020: 13). A key project aim was to complicate the taken-for-granted distinction between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ as binary typologies dominating much existing tourism development and discourse (Pálsson, 2013). The bunkers seemed to fit this scope perfectly: neither ‘pure’ culture nor ‘raw’ nature, they are manmade constructs originally imposed on the land by an occupying force but have, over the years, fallen into ruination, collapse, and become partially absorbed into their surroundings. They also appealed to us as research sites since they seemed to be largely ignored, or left to themselves, with a twice-weekly guided walking tour hosted by the local museum during the summer months the only existing tourism offer at hand. In other words, the bunker ruins seemed ideal objects for the kind of ‘rethinking’ we had proposed and been hired to conduct.

Together with our local partners, we were thus actively embroiled in cultural processes of innovation considered appropriate for boosting tourism in the area, including shedding new light on its relatively unheeded World War II heritage. Haidy Geismar has usefully summed up the nature of ‘heritage’ as a key concept and major force of our time, including the commercial promises inherent in ‘it’ (see also Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Dicks 2004; Daugbjerg and Fibiger 2014). Heritage, she suggests, is

a tangle of ideology and expectation; an analytic term and a tool of governance; a category that allows us to understand the power dynamics involved in the selective recognition of identity, often in material form. It is also a foundational category for a political economy, the “heritage industry,” drawing, often exploitatively, on languages of value, resource management, production, consumption, and profitability. (Geismar, 2015: 72)

In our case, the expectations, selections and valuations inherent in the project design certainly came to have consequences, and become disputed, in the implementation phase. Thus, Geismar’s characterisation is relevant to bear in mind, even if the basic question of whether the bunker batteries should be recognised as ‘heritage’ (Danish: *kulturarv*) at all is still open. If by that question we mean whether they should be formally categorised, protected and cared for, they certainly are not. Legally speaking, the listings of protected cultural entities in Denmark (based on measures in the Building Protection Act and the Museum Act) do not include any of the North Sea coast’s bunker facilities, neither as ‘buildings’ nor as ‘monuments’ (*fortidsminder*), the two categories eligible for legal protection according to these regulations. Thus, nobody ‘cares’ for the bunkers in any official sense. Very often, however, their immediate natural surroundings are subject to strict protection as per the regulations of a third law, the Natural Protection Act, especially in the zone closest to the sea. In other words, even if the concrete structures themselves are not formally listed, they are typically enmeshed in a larger context that is.

Heritage debates are invariably infused with questions of endangerment and care, with concerns for elements deemed to be at risk; crumbling, disappearing or otherwise imperilled material or immaterial entities which ‘we’ ought to preserve, nurture or protect for the sake of future humanity (Vidal and Dias, 2016; Harrison, 2017). While from a certain perspective, the bunkers *themselves* constitute endangered historical legacies to be safeguarded, to other eyes they represent violent, invasive disturbances threatening that which ought to be treasured instead; derelict concrete with no right to uphold a presence in the area and without recognized caretakers (or ‘heirs’; see Eriksen, 2014: 142). In the approach I adopt here – informed by work that complicates the sharp boundaries between nature and culture, as discussed above – the very understanding of the bunkers as distinct entities (as something ‘in themselves’) is part of the problem. Indeed, the abovementioned legal framework can be seen itself as a powerful agent in the maintaining and reproduction of the distinction between culture and nature. In Danish law, you can protect a piece of culture – as a ‘monument’ or a ‘building’ – or you can protect a piece of nature, the idea being that these constitute separate, impermeable entities. In such a rationale, there is hardly space for considering half-buried, partly withered concrete ruins inseparably entangled with the surrounding flora and fauna. In fact, the problems we came to face as we sought to intervene in this landscape can be analysed along such a basic clash of understandings: between those insisting on orderly lines, divisions, and pure categories

one the one hand, and those open to ambiguity, entanglement and messy categories on the other. As we shall see, the disputes were not just environmental in character, but also occasionally became enacted along national lines – the bunkers understood as German, not Danish, heritage – but even when they did not, they were infused with specific ideas about order, purity, and the upholding of borders between that which must be kept apart (cf. Douglas, 2002).

An important, related project expectation was our wish and need to *collaborate* with local partners and stakeholders. ‘Collaboration’ is a paramount criterion in the literature on research interventions that we drew upon, in which ‘ethnography occurs through processes of material and social interventions that turn the field into a site for epistemic collaboration’ (Criado and Estalella, 2018: 2). This is linked to ideals of democratic, fair and ethical research designs in which field interlocutors – no longer cast as mere ‘informants’ as in earlier ethnographic traditions – take part in the design and experimentation in the field (see contributions to Ballastero and Winthereik 2021). It is also related to calls for enhanced ‘participation’ in museums and other public institutions in which conventional hierarchies and regimes of expertise are increasingly being questioned (Simon, 2010), and indeed to wider currents of ‘participatory’ research explicitly foregrounding the breaking down of conventional hierarchies (Pain and Kindon 2007; Kelty et al. 2015). In relation to my discussion of order, distinction and categorial clarity, above, it is obvious that calls for collaboration form a fundamental challenge to proponents of purity: at its most basic, collaboration requires a certain openness to non-separation and a willingness to question and traverse categories.

However, considering collaboration in relation to structures and remains from World War II also inevitably provokes questions of a more historical kind. Here, ‘collaboration’ appears as a charged term indicating traitorous or amoral cooperation with the enemy. In the Danish context, while the bunkers were certainly the material offspring of a military invasion, they must also be seen as the results of strongly collaborative efforts between German and Danish actors. In fact, although they are often referred to as the ‘German’ bunkers, these facilities were mainly built by Danes, opportunistic and well-paid local workforces, and without the widespread use of forced labour seen in many other countries. This was the result of an early decision of the Danish government to cooperate as much as possible with the Nazi occupiers in return for maintaining relative autonomy (Christensen et al., 1997: 22; Andersen, 2005). This arrangement, amounting in the eyes of some to a ‘Faustian’ bargain (Lund, 2016), meant that the completion of the Atlantic Wall sections on Denmark remained in the hands of a few major Danish construction companies. They operated, however, under the overall coordination and scrutiny of the *Organisation Todt*, the Wehrmacht auxiliary in charge of the entire Atlantic Wall erected in 1942-44 that would eventually spread across seven countries and stretch from the Pyrenees to Northern Norway (see Tzalmona 2011; 2013). This extreme and accelerated building effort also meant that certain areas along the Danish North Sea coast,

for example around the cities of Esbjerg and Thisted, became hotbeds of economic activity, labour opportunities and Danish-German collaboration during the war years (Knudsen, 2018; Hansen and Lundtofte, 2014).

This article is not the space for a full historical account of these complex webs of cooperation nor of the profound moral and ethical quandaries bound up with them. Instead, I consider this negative conceptualisation of (wartime) collaboration a reflective reminder, or perhaps a shadow, subtexting even the kinds of more benign ‘participatory’ and ‘collaborative’ research we pursued in our project. A reminder, that is, that processes of collaboration, including contemporary ones set up in the name of tourism innovation, are also inevitably shot through with relations of power, prejudice, and suspicion; with memories of earlier alliances and conflicts; and with different agendas, hierarchies and understandings of right and wrong.

In discussing relations of power and agency, I am less interested in the objectives of a single individual, or even of a group of people, and more focused on understanding how lines of influence and paths of action emerge from particular, shifting assemblages of (or collaborations between) actors and entities, human and otherwise. In my analysis, such assemblages must be understood both as momentane, socio-material relations in the here-and-now (say, a particular constellation of weather, sand, concrete and human presence enabling certain actions) and as linkages and layers of a more temporal or historical kind (when, for example, traces of earlier conflicts become carried over or reactivated around the bunkers, as we shall see). In this, I am inspired by a broad range of theory emphasising the role and agency of such assemblages, accumulations, actor-networks, or ecologies (e.g., Latour, 2005; DeLanda, 2006; Tsing, 2015; De Silvey, 2017; for a discussion, see Harrison, 2013: 31-41). Of particular note is Alfred Gell’s (1998) understanding of agency as the ability of a social agent (which may well be a thing) to act upon another person or object, the ‘patient’. Importantly, this ‘patient’ is, according to Gell, ‘*another “potential” agent*’ in the sense that he/she/it is capable of ‘acting as an agent or being a locus of agency’ in another situation towards a new patient (ibid.: 22, original emphasis). This comes close to capturing the flexible distributions of agency and power I seek to describe here, where the bunkers – as composite entities in which traces of earlier engravings, usages and conflicts are bound up and can be partially grasped – partake in and impact upon the lives and activities around them today.

### **Bunker Film Festival: early formations**

The final decision to select the bunkers as sites for one of the project’s ‘interventions’ was taken by the project group in early 2017, following field studies and mappings by teams of students and researchers throughout the previous year. As part of our early reconnaissance, I discussed the histories, peculiarities and possibilities of the bunkers with local experts, interest

groups, tourism caterers and local landowners, among others. Staff from the municipal museum, a core partner in the larger project, were key discussion partners. The project's rhythm – or cycle of innovation, if you will – was convoluted. The bunkers were always likely contenders to become a project hotspot, having been highlighted already in the funding application as a possible example of the kind of cultural-natural setting we were aiming to 'rethink'. Our initial mappings and discussions formed a 'funnel' of sorts in which the idea of activating the slumbering concrete through some kind of event began to take shape. Although we explored different bunker ruins along the municipality's 50-kilometer coastline, a particular battery soon stood out: the former fortifications at Houvig which had housed a major German radar station and the regional headquarters of this section of the line. The rose-surrounded bunker on Erik's land, some 400 meters from the waterline, constituted the very command centre of the station. Other battered structures, including a series of half-buried blocks on the beach itself, had served as observation posts, artillery nests and living quarters for the German soldiers stationed here in the 1940s.

The Houvig bunkers were the most important ones, historically speaking, and also the largest and most imposing ones around. They were all on/under private land plots, either on the very beach or interspersed between the summer houses in the lyme-grass-covered dunes a few hundred metres inland. Any activity involving the entering of installations on private land would need the go-ahead of the landowner. The property and access relations are, however, legally complex. The individual plots extend all the way from the inland dunes, onto the beach itself, and even some way out into the sea. They are not fenced off, though, as summer houses and bunkers lie scattered in the dunes, interspersed by a network of small roads and footpaths, so-called 'private common roads' (*private fællesveje*) maintained by the local landowners' association. This means that beach-goers and passers-by are most often unaware that they are formally on private land. Indeed, several landowners, including Erik, stressed to me that they had no interest in fencing in or policing their plots, and that they generally had little problem with moderate outside traffic in the area. Even if they had wanted to police their plots, however, they could not have obstructed access to the waterfront: all beaches in Denmark are by law open to the public for passing through or for shorter stays (i.e., not for overnight camping).

Another landowner, a neighbour of Erik's whose parcel also had numerous bunkers on it, became a key interlocutor. 'Kurt' (as I shall call him) had himself, over the years, become an expert on the Danish sections of the Atlantic Wall, which he had begun to map and study after procuring his summer house here in 1979. Kurt was not a trained historian but a passionate and industrious storyteller and writer. He had written several popular books on the bunkers over the years and had even created a string of television programs in cooperation with the local TV station, all on the side of his civil career as a (now retired) dentist. The early conversations I had with him came to matter in several ways: He supported our festival ideas and let us use a small bunker on his plot for two 'pilot' events that I shall return to. He helped



us understand the scepticism amongst his neighbours towards anyone planning to touch the bunkers, as I shall also discuss later. And he provided us with an irresistible hook to pursue, stating, in one of his early books, that the largest bunker in the area – the command bunker on Erik’s plot – had in fact already served as a cinema in the immediate post-war years. This claim is reproduced on some of the local tourism websites today (see e.g. <https://sondervig.dk/en/sondervig-history/bunkers/>, visited 14 December 2021). For us, working towards an *in-situ* film event for modern audiences, this piece of information was immediately captivating. If this was true, it would certainly add new layers to our project and promised to potentially turn the festival into a resurrection of sorts.

It turned out to be ultimately impossible to verify the early cinema story. Nobody at the local museum nor at the family-driven cinema in Ringkøbing, which dated back to 1909, could confirm it. There was no context or source cited in Kurt’s 1986 book, and when I asked him about it, he could not pinpoint any after all these years. He did however point me towards an old newspaper article from 1957 which he said backed up the cinema story. It hung, in the form of a yellowed photocopy, on the noticeboard in his summer house. The news piece, from the Copenhagen tabloid *BT*, was intriguingly headlined: ‘Rubbish dump worth ¼ million: Europe’s largest cinema theatre disappeared under sand’ (Nilsson, 1957; all translations from Danish in this article are mine). It indeed alleged that a vast, former film vault was now hidden under the Houvig dunes, although in this version of the story the cinema was operational during the actual war years and not in the aftermath, as in Kurt’s book. Although its claim about ‘Europe’s largest’ cinema, now buried, was hard to believe, the article constitutes a fascinating window into the popular perceptions of the bunkers in the 1950s, at least as seen from a news-hungry Copenhagen. They are described as alien monstrosities, the enemy’s pockmarks on ‘our’ national landscape, concrete scars of no use but to serve as expensive ‘rubbish dumps’ for summer house owners. Also, only twelve years after the war’s end, the bunkers are already crumbling and weathered, according to the *BT* article, as ‘the foundations have been washed away under most of them, and they lie overthrown, as if a terrifying giant hand had played dice along the coast with the eternal surf’ (ibid.).

Underneath the German-bashing junk-heap discourse, one senses something else; a certain allure, an embryonic idea of the former fortifications also as sites of secrecy and adventure. Dangerous and risky, they are depicted as strangely compelling nodes of wonder and (lethal) attraction, almost a premonition of later generations’ interest in ‘urban exploration’ in former industrial settings (Garrett 2010; Edensor 2005). This appeal comes close to what Gell (1992; 1996) saw as an artefact’s ability to captivate or ‘enchant’ the viewer, which to him was bound up with the perceived ‘virtuosity’ of its construction (see the extended discussion in Küchler and Carrol 2021). In the 1957 article, these qualities are bound up with the affordances of the surroundings: the wild land of the bunkers is described as untameable and also partly *unknowable*: the sands are shifting, unstable, full of both disaster and potential.

The fact that half-buried or fully concealed bunkers regularly appear or disappear in the storms that frequent the coast makes this sense of ‘shiftiness’ very palpable. The final paragraph of the old newspaper piece – in which we also, finally, learn of the (rumour of the) hidden cinema – captures this in rather poetic tones:

Up in the dunes, where the sea cannot reach, the drifting sand ensures the erasure of the unpleasant memories. New dunes assemble above the gun towers. The entrances to the subterranean shelters are being buried in sand (*sander til*). It has become more different for those familiar with the localities (*de lokalkendte*) to orient themselves. Thus, this year, an entrance has disappeared which led to a huge assembly hall in which the Germans screened films for several thousand men at a time. On one occasion, wreck-master (*strandfoged*) Fjord Tarbensen visited the Germans in the giant cinema. Today he can only ask that we believe him on his word, for Europe’s largest cinema has disappeared under the sand cover. (ibid.)

The reporter’s proposed connection between sand movement and mental erasures may seem a bit stretched, yet I suggest we read it as a way of expressing a more general sensing of linkages between physical landscape changes and memory work. This should not be seen as a one-way traffic towards increased erasure and disappearance: as I will exemplify below, we sometimes witness an emerging of new narratives and memories tied to movements in the fluid landscape. Also, I would emphasise that such shifts can be facilitated by a number of forces – ‘cultural’ as well as ‘natural’, to use the conventional categories, if only to stress that these are not sufficiently nuanced to capture the actually unfolding processes – and not merely by weather or environmental changes. Indeed, our film festival can be viewed as a set of interventions driven by certain kinds of funding ecologies, agendas and capital; the result of a network of particular collaborative, technological, and human resources assembled here. I will come back to our festival and the forces it set in motion in a short while. But first, I turn to another much bigger news story igniting on those very same shores ten years prior.

### **Shifting sands: the bunker as a vault of treasure**

The claim, in the 1957 *BT* story, that an assembly hall and movie theatre fitting ‘several thousand’ men now lies hidden under the sand, feeds into the aura of mystique, risk and instability clinging to the bunkers. As mentioned, the story has been impossible for me to confirm; it is in many ways un-believable. But then again, so was another remarkable story breaking in Danish and international media half a century later, in the summer of 2008, again with the Houvig bunker battery as its epicentre: Following a storm along the coast, four hitherto hidden structures suddenly emerged from the sands, including a personnel bunker with a

largely intact interior, appearing almost as it had been left by the Germans in 1945. ‘Sensational Nazi find on the West coast’ ran the headline in *Politiken*, *Ekstra Bladet* and several other major Danish news outlets, reporting that ‘archaeologists have embarked on what seems like a Danish Indiana Jones adventure on a beach North-west of Ringkøbing’ (Astrup, 2008; Rohde-Brøndum, 2008). This led to an invasion of the international press. Local history buff Tommy Cassøe, the first person to breach the old bunker, found himself in the news limelight across the globe. The *Irish Examiner* (2008) quoted him stating that ‘it was like entering the heart of a pyramid with mummies all around. What I saw blew me away: it was as if the German soldiers had left only yesterday.’ Cassøe was billed as an unlikely amateur hero; in an AFP report that ran in *Sydney Morning Herald*, among other places, he was said to ‘look like Indiana Jones as he crawls out of a bunker in the sand’ (AFP, 2008). The story of the forgotten bunker and the untouched war relics, revealed by fickle environmental conditions and retrieved by the unassuming local guy, clearly had exceptional news value. Bits of the treasure even disappeared on the first night, assumingly stolen by Nazi militaria collectors, thus adding further layers to the mythology.

A second and arguably even bigger scoop followed a few days later, when the *Dagbladet* succeeded in tracking down one of the re-emerged bunker’s previous occupants, a former German soldier who had been stationed here for three months during the war and had visited the area regularly as a tourist ever since (Petersen, 2008). Gerhard Saalfeld, now an elderly man, had been only 17 during his Danish deployment, and his personal and subjective recollections came to dominate the stories. As noted by Lulu A. Hansen and Mette B. Jensen (2014: 298-300), the Danish media did not portray the former Third Reich soldier with any kind of moral condemnation or guilt but focused on the improbable find of ‘his’ old bunker and his relatively fond memories of his ‘peaceful’ time in Denmark (compared to the horrors of the Eastern front). Instead of the national and moral condemnation of the German occupation dominating earlier decades, his war experiences were now framed as ‘human’ experiences, and he himself portrayed as a once-indoctrinated but basically innocent victim of the horrible war. The bunker’s contents were removed to be exhibited at the nearby museum in Ringkøbing under the exhibition title *What the bunker concealed*. One of the museum’s curators later reflected on the process, stressing the need to focus, today, on nuance and contemporary reconciliation between Denmark and Germany (Ringskou, 2012: 96-98). In a 2013 TV documentary on the bunkers in Denmark Saalfeld was even billed as ‘the good German’ in a remarkable reversal of perceived historical roles (<https://www.tvmidtvest.dk/bunkerne/bunkerne-6-den-gode-tysker>, visited 14 December 2021).

The 2008 find had led to an enormous increase of media attention and a wave of visitors. ‘If you had seen the hype when the storm had laid it bare’, one of the Houvig landowners explained to me in an interview in 2018, ‘when you suddenly had the focus on it. My dear, the

[number of] people. And they were from all over Europe.’ After the exposure of the unknown bunker and its interior, ideas about transforming it into a small on-site museum on the beach itself flourished briefly among local politicians. The local landowner’s association objected strongly. Its chairman told the local newspaper that ‘we should not forget history, but we don’t have to promote it’. He said the association would not accept any municipal plans to transform the area. ‘As children we were always told to keep out of the bunkers. And I still do. They do not interest me. We like to be in [the area] because of wind and weather. And peace and quiet’ (interview in Kryger, 2008). He stressed the wear and tear of the increased streams of tourists and expressed concerns for the dunes and the eroding coastline, comprehending the bunkers as dangerous, polluting elements, in a symbolic but also a strictly material sense. ‘We want to swim ourselves, but as time goes by I begin to doubt whether that makes sense [anymore]. What bunker remains and rebars have not already gone into the sea? Imagine being impaled on a piece of iron in the sea’ (ibid.).

The 2008 disputes constitute an important subtext for our quarrels ten years later. However, they were in fact themselves reignitions of earlier disputes. In fact, the landowners’ association had been formed in 1987 in direct response and explicit opposition to a development proposal put forth by the county board, who had outlined a long-term protection and conservation plan for the Houvig battery and a potential establishment of a visitor’s centre in the area. These plans would have halted the development of holiday homes and caused a gradual disposal or even – so the landowners feared at the time – an expropriation of existing plots. In their protest letter, the association board stressed problems related to traffic and other logistical issues. But they also phrased their resistance along national lines, denying Danish owner- or custodianship of the bunkers and objecting to the plan’s alleged tourism potential out of moral indignation. Their 1987 protest letter to the county board, cited by my interlocutors as a founding document of the association, stated:

The bunker facility is German-Nazi ‘cultural’ history and not Danish. It is an expression of the stupid and cruel cult of violence of German Nazism, and its only relation to the Danish land is to lie here as a monument of shame to the Danish policy of compliance before and during the war. We find it unappealing and distasteful to exhibit and coin money from our country’s total humiliation. And we see no reason, in the Danish landscape, to preserve and protect this ugly and obtrusive Nazi Mausoleum. (<http://nørrehouvig.dk/lidt-historik/>, visited 14 December 2021)

The landowners successfully fended off the development plan and mustered again in 1996, when a new consortium of public actors sought to reignite them, this time led by the Danish Forest and Nature Agency (<http://nørrehouvig.dk/lidt-historik/>, visited 14 December 2021).

The stark national argumentation of the 1987 letter contrasts rather profoundly with the later billing of Saalfeld, who rediscovered his former Danish field station in 2008, as ‘the good

German'. This reflects a general softening of traditional fault lines, in Denmark and elsewhere, where the status and popular perception of the bunkers have evolved since 1945. We thus find a general movement from an entrenched anti-German and utterly hostile outlook in the immediate post-war years to later, less antagonistic framings. Hansen and Jensen (2014) have analysed Danish media discourses relating to the bunkers and sought to identify different post-war phases. They demonstrate how understandings have changed from viewing the bunkers as 'scars' and 'necessary evils' in the early post-war period, over ambivalent debates on their possible didactic potentials, to more recent conceptions of bunkers as heritage or sites of memory and reminiscence (see also Dahl, 2018, 2019). In my previous work at the historic battlefield of Dybbøl in Southern Denmark, I have identified a similar dilution of entrenched Danish-German positions, though often coupled with new interpretations of national identity and significance (Daugbjerg, 2009; 2014; 2019). Likewise, in her studies of bunkers in the British Channel Islands, Gilly Carr (2014: 83-140) has identified four phases in local practices and perceptions towards the former German bunkers – 'erasure', 'amnesia and disguise', 'rehabilitation and restoration' and 'contestation and memorialisation' – and argued that the latter two discourses coexist today.

### **Old wine in new bottles: research as intervention and/or invasion**

The core ambiguity found in the 1957 newspaper article on the hidden cinema, where the bunkers are both conceived as despicable, alien structures and as alluring spaces of adventure, is well-known from previous studies. It was already evident in the 'bunker archaeology' of Paul Virilio (1994) who had walked the French beaches as a young man in 1958-65, determined to 'hunt these gray forms until they would transmit to me a part of their mystery' (ibid.: 11; see also Gane 1999). Virilio approached the bunkers 'as sculptural forms rather than just as monstrous fascist excrescences', allowing 'room for the aesthetic within the realm of the barbarous' (Beck, 2011: 86), as he pondered the connections between these military infrastructures and the emerging architectural modernism of the postwar era. Others have described the bunkers' ambiguities in Freudian terms. For example, Ian Klinke (2018: vii) writes about his childhood memories of a particular West German Cold War shelter:

For me, this concrete survival shell was a forbidden land of plenty and a place of salvation, a place where my fantasies were safe. This secret and sacred space was uncanny – *unheimlich* – in the Freudian sense of something that is both alien and familiar, repulsive and attractive.

In the analysis of John Beck (2011: 82), who also draws on Freud, a bunker is ‘both womb- and tomb-like’, epitomizing not just this particular duality but what he (following Bauman, 1991) sees as a much more wide-ranging ambivalence at the heart of modern life as such.

Whether understood in explicitly Freudian terms or not, our festival plans were certainly fuelled by related kinds of fascination. The project group, including myself, certainly viewed the bunkers as spaces with a distinct aesthetics, hoping to utilise their raw, dank and claustrophobic atmospheres as backdrops to the films. In the autumn of 2017, we staged two ‘pilot’ events in one of the bunkers on Kurt’s plot, spartanly fitted with folding chairs and a small film projector. For the first gathering, we invited sixteen project partners along, with whom we watched 15-minute clips from three war-related films in which the protagonists’ relationship with the surrounding land- or seascape played a key role (Zandvliet, 2015; Metz Pedersen, 2010; Petersen, 1981). Two of them were Danish, one German; two were about World War II, one – a documentary – about the recent War in Afghanistan. We had picked the titles based on our emerging idea of a connecting theme about landscape transformations in war, seeing the bunkers as experiential frames that in themselves exemplified such changes. The images were projected directly upon the interior bunker wall, allowing its basic texture, fissures and colour tones to literally ‘shine through’. A two-hour workshop followed during which we discussed, with our test audience, the qualities and details of the experience and the ‘fit’ of each of the films for the larger event we hoped would take place the following summer. Two months later, we repeated the setup, but this time recruiting participants amongst Danish and German tourists who had been on a bunker walking tour with a local museum guide.

The test screenings left us with a string of useful insights, both about practicalities and logistics and about the perceived interplay and resonance between the film contents and the bunker space. Some participants highlighted the industrial, dirty and slightly uncomfortable framework of the bunker as a plus, contrasting this with normal cinemas which are ‘perhaps too comfortable’, as one pondered. Another said that having the moving images displayed directly on the raw concrete wall was at first a bit confusing but, after a while, served to augment some of the films’ themes and impressions. A third participant found that the dimly visible wall structure behind the moving images provided ‘a physical connection with the past’, while a fourth stressed how to him, it afforded a simultaneous experience of ‘several layers and voices at the same time’ (quotes from interviews with pilot participants). While not everyone found the matches between the selected films and the bunker context obvious, it seemed that the unconventional arena certainly tweaked the cinematic experience and intensified certain filmic elements, forcing viewers to relate to the physicality of their surroundings in various ways.

Encouraged by these impressions, we continued our access and logistics negotiations for the upcoming festival over the 2017/18 winter and early spring. The preparations involved working with Ringkøbing-Skjern municipality to secure the necessary authorisations,

including a dispensation from the Danish Coastal Authority to allow temporary interventions inside the so-called dune protection zone (*klitfredningszonen*) closest to the sea. We also finally secured bunker access from Erik and another key landowner, secured the service of a traveling cinema operator, and finalized the film program together with a Copenhagen consultant. Believing everything to be set, we wrote to the landowners' association in early summer, informing them of our plans and offering free tickets for the three-day event in late August. We had picked films with different kinds of war- and bunker-related themes, still with the overall idea of creating a degree of resonance between the artworks and the unusual experiential frame. Four films were to be screened inside the bunkers (Petersen 1981; Hirschbiegel, 2004; Folman, 2008; Cortés, 2010), while two were planned as open-air evening spectacles on a huge canvas set up on the beach among its bunkers (Coppola, 1979; Nolan, 2017). A seventh film (Zandvliet, 2015) would be on display in the nearby cinema in Ringkøbing.

In our email to the landowners' association, we noted that each of the interior bunker screenings would be capped at 50 participants and estimated that the two open-air films on the beach itself might each attract 500-1000 people in the case of pleasant weather. This message set in motion a flurry of activities and a series of determined protests. A heated general assembly in the association followed, during which the board received the 'unwavering support of members', as its chairperson wrote to me, to do all it could to halt the festival plans. The owners expressed 'great surprise and anger' that such an event had been planned without direct involvement of the association, she wrote, stating also that the association found it 'enigmatic' that the Danish Coastal Authority had provided us with a dispensation, given the amount of funds the same agency otherwise spends on protection of the area (personal correspondence). It was evident that the members considered the association to be the proper negotiation partner, not the individual landowners whose land and bunkers we had already made agreements with. Crucially, his neighbours' responses led Erik to cancel our access agreement three weeks prior to the planned festival. In his withdrawal, he cited inadequate communication on the part of the festival's organisers (i.e., mainly me) and expressed doubts about our grasp of logistics (parking, sanitary facilities, etc.), but he also expressed a feeling that he and his neighbours had intentionally been kept in the dark regarding the actual scope and size of the event.

The detailed argumentation from association members focused especially on the aforementioned 'private common' roads that festivalgoers would have to use to reach the beach from the main road. The ownership and access status of these passageways – like that of the bunkers themselves – is ambiguous, as the association is responsible for their maintenance, but the public is allowed to use them when on foot, bicycle or horseback. Like the unfenced but formally private land I have discussed earlier, the 'privateness' of these roads can be very hard to grasp for passers-by, as no public signage or other instructions about their usage regulations exist. It is thus a privateness that is hidden or unsaid, but which can nevertheless be invoked in

special cases and perceived crises like this one. Although our legal advisors informed us that the association would not be formally entitled to block the roads, our municipal project partners wanted to avoid escalating the conflict. This left us with no choice but to hastily move the entire festival setup and its logistics to a less contentious location.

In hindsight, it was obvious that the festival plans, which we had – somewhat naively, as it turned out – believed might bring locals and visitors together for shared cultural experiences, were received by some as an opening of old wounds. As we have seen, outsiders wanting to transform and ‘innovate’ the area with reference to the former bunkers have never fared well on these shores. Indeed, the association’s very identity is tied closely to its initial objection to bunker protection and ‘development’. Literally born from collective protest, it was explicitly ‘founded with a view to prevent the implementation of Ringkøbing county council’s proposal for conserving the Houvig fortification’, as stipulated in its articles of association (<http://nørrehouvig.dk/vedtaegter/>, visited 14 December 2021). Our festival plans, including vague estimates of up to a thousand festivalgoers visiting/invading the local beach on two August nights, presented the owners with an opportunity to rally around a root cause and to ‘renew their oaths’ to oppose any bunker development, as they had done previously in 2008, 1996 and 1987. As one of its board members explained to me a few months later, those amongst them sufficiently senior to recall the struggle against the county in the 1980s had grown used to these kinds of bunker-related stirrings roughly once per decade, almost like a long-term seasonal cycle, a ritual re-enactment of previous conflicts: ‘Now it is calm’, she said, ‘then it will be ten years. Here [in 2018] it was again. It comes back every ten years or so.’

Although the turf wars were no longer explicitly tied to national-emotional outbursts against the German ‘monuments of shame’ along the Danish coast, they were still fed by – and helped sustain – a strong us/them or insider/outsider logic. This time it was not phrased along national lines but instead according to patterns of private-property ownership and the rights tied to it. Ideals of custodianship, care and conservation were all evoked; not for or with the bunkers, though, which were understood first and foremost as disconcerting out-of-place manmade elements; sources of threat, dangerous vehicles of yet more potential invasions. The landowners rebelled against our project’s promises of ‘new engagements’ with unknown others and our invitations to re-conceptualize the bunkers as unconventional experiential arenas.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have explored a particular section of ruined World War II-bunkers along Denmark’s West coast as an ‘invasive’ tangle of materialities. What, in sum, does such an analytical prism offer? It signals, first, that the entities in question, in this case the bunkers, are embroiled in struggles relating to their agency, power and the forms of belonging or rejection



they help shape and sustain. The bunkers, even as they deteriorate, have been involved in continuous allocations of social, material and territorial positions and hierarchies around them. As soon as something is conceived as an invasion, somebody must be (seen to be) conducting it, while others are (understood as) its victims. Importantly, this is about perceptions or interpretations of intentions rather than the ‘original’ intentions of makers. As KÜchler and Carrol (2021: 136) point out as they sum up Gell’s conception of agency, ‘it matters less what Person A intends to do to Person B than what Person B interprets Person A to have intended’. For example, although my research group arrived with a set of intentions (about frictionless collaboration and innovation), our actions became interpreted as something else (friction-filled activity and invasion) as they were inevitably interweaved with existing traces and memories of previous clashes and alleged intentions of others before us. Thus, an ‘invasive’ optics brings to light camps of perceived perpetrators and victims. Alliances may form. Protection patterns emerge, although what is worthy of protection is not necessarily given from the outset but emerges along the way. Unwanted changes and suppression loom. Invasive materialities thus provoke questions of belonging, fit, and the proper place of things, and not merely in a discursive or symbolic sense but also tangibly, as these issues burst forth in concrete, socio-material constellations. The concerns they give rise to are thus tied to what Vidal and Dias (2016) have called ‘sensibilities of endangerment’; outlooks based on deep-seated feelings of impending loss – of biodiversity, cultures, languages and more – which they argue underpin much social and political action today. Sensibilities of endangerment sustain the calibration of different kinds of responses, including preservation strategies. ‘Yet insofar as it is turned toward a future shaped by a past that the present destroys, and by a present intrinsically under threat, the endangerment sensibility reveals a deep nostalgic undercurrent’ (ibid.: 5-6).

I would also argue that investigating the different ‘invasive’ qualities and claims surrounding material structures such as the bunkers allows for a heightened synchronic attention to the many layers and perspectives criss-crossing around and through them. That is, such a scope affords a nuanced analysis in which different invasions – historical, ongoing, as well as imminent or imagined ones – can be considered from several perspectives in their togetherness, overlaps or mutual co-constitution. Each invasion will come with its own set of concomitant roles, positionings and alliances, inviting fine-grained considerations of how they relate, compete, shift and inform social life in particular settings or periods. In my coastal case material, each invasion I have touched upon – of plant species, armies, politicians, researchers, tourists and so on – casts its protagonists in particular constellations and supports different ideas about who and what ‘victims’ can be. In other words, asking about invasion and protection is a way of exploring relations, bonds of collaboration, and their relative power.

Utilising case material from different moments in time, I have argued that the bunkers, as ruined amalgams of accumulated history, can usefully be conceptualised as these sorts of invasive agents, although I have also stressed that they are precisely not to be considered

isolated actors but parts of wider ecologies (cf. Tsing, 2015; DeSilvey 2017; Bangstad and Pétursdóttir 2021). I have also sought to demonstrate that such a conceptualisation, useful as I believe it to be, does not mean that the bunkers' affordances are limited to militant and confrontational uses and clashes. A never-distant undercurrent of wonder, adventure, secrecy and curiosity still clings to them, a set of qualities discernible in the historical examples I have discussed, and of course in my own research group's struggles to somehow tap into the enchantment of the bunkers. Importantly, this register of phenomenological qualities must be understood as not separate from, but closely tied to, the 'invasive' properties and the violence through which these concrete behemoths were hewn. The fascination cannot be detached from their fatality. The bunkers may indeed be uncomfortable, alien structures still challenging orders and hierarchies, but this is what makes them irresistible as well.

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## **Filmography**

Coppola FF (1979) *Apocalypse Now*

Cortés R (2010) *Buried*

Folman A (2008) *Waltz with Bashir*

Hirschbiegel O (2004) *Der Untergang (Downfall)*

Metz Pedersen J (2010) *Armadillo*

Nolan C (2017) *Dunkirk*

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