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ARTHUR ROSE

ASBESTOS – THE LAST MODERNIST OBJECT

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In *Fordlandia* (2010), historian Greg Grandin writes the story of a grandiose project run by Henry Ford in the early decades of the twentieth century, to build a large manufacturing community in the middle of the Amazon jungle, a project regarded then as a new stage in the fight between nature and the modern man, to be won by the latter. But this alternative El Dorado soon turned out to be a social and ecological disaster, compelling evidence of how so many of the utopian agendas of modernism eventually showed their true, dystopian face. Arthur Rose, senior research fellow at the University of Exeter, makes a similar demonstration in *Asbestos – The Last Modernist Object*.

The book's cover is a detail from a mural that decorated the entrance to the 1939 New York World's Fair, by Hildreth Meière, depicting a man in an asbestos suit fighting against the flames. Arthur Rose explains he chose this illustration to indicate that „*Asbestos – the Magic Mineral* personified the humble function of fire resistance through a noble figure that appeared to manage and defy the elements. But to think of the mural only in terms of its content fails, I think, to appreciate how Meière's bold combination of flowing lines and modern materials encourages the viewer to imagine the mineral's role in building the 'World of Tomorrow'. Transient as it was, Meiere's work exemplifies a cultural response excited by asbestos's utopian, world-building possibilities, the sense of wonder it evoked, the security it provided, the social responsibility it implied and the possibility of a better world it anticipated.” (2024: 4)

Hailed initially as a magical material with life saving powers, asbestos, a word of Greek origin, meaning „unextinguishable”, was then revealed to be an insidious mineral, extremely hazardous to human health: „a strangely wonderful, terrible material”, in the author's words (2024: 2). While many books and studies have been written in the past two decades on the medical, legal, and industrial aspects of asbestos, Arthur Rose's approach to it, from a combined cultural historical and literary perspective, is highly original and rewarding. Scholars championing for the continued relevance of the humanities in contemporary societies, like Spanish

philosopher Santiago Zabala (2017), claim that arts and literature offer valuable case studies that enable us to deal with crisis and understand the relations between the individual and the world. *Asbestos*, far from being only a very thorough cultural history of this material, provides insight into the numerous contradictions that marked the twentieth century. Through the history of asbestos, Arthur Rose evokes the ambivalent story of modernism, in a broad sense, caught between trust and an idealized view on progress, on the one hand, and a fatal exposure to dystopian scenarios, on the other. Interestingly, the first literary work listed by the researcher is Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. It is not a coincidence, Rose argues convincingly, that the modernist writer, who was also co-owner of an asbestos factory in Prague, wrote in his famous novel that one is sentenced not only in innocence, but also in ignorance. For the Exeter University scholar, this quote can become the very motto of the century-long injustice done to workers and consumers suffering from asbestos poisoning, who were refused compensation because the disease was deemed inexistent. This ignorance didn't imply the absence of knowledge, but a series of wrong assumptions about asbestos and its employment at a global industrial scale.

In this volume, Rose gives a minute account of the narratives surrounding asbestos, from its early days of utopian glory, through its proliferation in the built environment, and then to the proliferation of asbestos-related diseases and the efforts for its elimination. The chapters of the book can be regarded as instantiations of the polysemy of the noun and verb *use*: asbestos was „widely used” in industry because of its miraculous quality of never „being used up”, then it was „misused” when economic agendas continued to support it despite growing awareness of its harmful effects; actions included „the creative use” of data and devices to hide its hazardous potential; the situation culminated with the „controlled use” fiction that most countries have embraced cautiously in recent decades; last but not least, the volume shows how narratives were „used” to tell the controversial story of asbestos. Even when the texts Rose quotes „use asbestos without dwelling on it”, the fact is significant in the sense that it demonstrates the lethal mineral „was meant to be taken for granted” (2004: 7). If not a significant object or event in the selected corpus, asbestos still functions as a metaphor, describing different realities of the relation between the mineral and the human, as well as the two phases of modernism: first, optimism and future orientation, and then, a grim realistic perspective, where the spectre of environmental and other disasters looms large. Through the analysed texts, asbestos is featured at the intersection between three networks: a spatial one, of commercial exchange and of significant sites associated with its exploitation and consumption; an emotional one, bringing to the forefront feelings of hope, anxiety and disillusionment about this material; and a temporal one, following the shifts in the perception and the meaning of asbestos for individuals and communities.

Because the asbestos in literary texts is more important as a metaphor than as a physical object or an actual phenomenon, Arthur Rose draws on Paul Ricoeur's (1990) study on the function of the metaphor and divides this volume into three sections that borrow the French philosopher's categories of mimetic narrativity. In

Prefiguration, which refers to the expectations readers bring into a story, the scholar discusses two literary genres in which asbestos is featured, utopia – as well as its counterpart, dystopia –, and mystery. While the former category is oriented towards the future, showcasing the writers' (and the societies') enthusiasm about the infinite potential of the new material or deploring a reality in which the effects of asbestos are obvious, the latter dwells on a retrospective exercise, in which present troubles are explained in connection to a murky past, related to asbestos use. *Configuration*, which, in structuralist terms, is synonymous with emplotment, and refers to the elements that make up the story itself, is the second part of the volume, where Rose analyses the meaning and mediating role that various narratives gave asbestos. Such examples can include writings about illness or stories about seeking justice and compensation in asbestos-related cases. The third part is *Refiguration*, for Ricoeur, a phase of understanding and transformation, when the story is taken back to the real world. Rose reserves for this part a survey of sites that follow the „life-cycle“ of asbestos, from the mine, the place of its extraction, through the factory, the place of its manufacturing and production, to the built environment, for its distribution and consumption, up to the dump, the place of its disposal. What the author achieves is a genuine cultural geography of asbestos, which maps the evolution of this physical object and metaphorical element, as well as the process of attributing value to it and then of confiscating it.

The corpus analysed in this book is very vast. While it includes only texts from English-speaking cultures, the selection criteria are very convincingly justified, in relation to the literatures of the countries best known as asbestos mining nations and as large manufacturers of asbestos products. British, Canadian, American, Australian and South-African writers are discussed in the eight chapters, as well as in the Introduction and Conclusion. Both highbrow and genre fiction are canvassed, as the selection criteria are based on the principle of cultural relevance, rather than aesthetics. In fact, this aspect is in consonance with the declared purpose of the series to which this volume belongs, the *Edinburgh Critical Studies in Modernist Culture* series, coordinated by Tim Armstrong and Rebecca Beasley, to expand the sense and scope of the canon of modernism, to reflect on modernisms, in the plural, and their numerous cultural, intellectual, and historical contexts. As a result, Arthur Rose walks his readers through an impressive gallery of texts and genres, ranging from prose, drama, poetry, and documentary, and many writers, including Lawrence Durrell, Djuna Barnes, Ross Raisin, Alan Bennett, James Kelman, Marianne Moore, Edwin Rolfe, as well as Richard Kunzmann, Louise Penny, Damien Boyd, or Algernon Blackwood.

A comprehensive and astute inventory of literary texts in which asbestos is embedded culturally and symbolically, as well as a compelling story that documents the success and disaster of the two-faced material, Arthur Rose's book, winner of the 2024 ESSE Book Award, invites readers to reflect not only on asbestos itself, but also on literature's ability to shed light on individuals' and communities' experiences with asbestos in a way no other medium could. What legal and medical discourse, historical accounts, and economic news took decades to achieve, *Asbestos – The Last Modernist Object* succeeds in one stroke.

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