



## The First World War of Objects

by Matt Leonard

2012-05-03 09:20:49

Throughout history, conflicts have always been waged with the incorporation of all the modern technology at the belligerents' disposal. But before 1914, industry was not capable of producing the materiel of war in the vast amounts required to turn localised, or continental, wars into global ones.

In August 1914, previous notions of warfare fractured into a multi-levelled and complex palimpsest of theoretical discourses, which in turn ensured that conflict could no longer be viewed in the same context as it had been before. Industrial war now had to be seen in more than just terms of simply its military practicalities, it demanded to be regarded from an archaeological and anthropological perspective, too. For warfare was now not only a battle of weapons and tactics, but also a clash of objects, and one that would forge a new relationship between man and material culture.

The battlefields of 19<sup>th</sup> century conflict, such as those of the Crimea, or the Peninsula Wars, were fairly static places, where fighting would take place over the space of only a few hours, or perhaps days. They were spaces where although artillery and firearms were prevalent, battles were still primarily a clash of men against men. Conflict landscapes of the Great War could not have been more different in character. These battlefields, true modern conflict landscapes, were dynamic and ambiguous regions that were continually changing as the fighting raged over the same space for months and years, not hours or days.

The Western Front, for example, soon dissolved into a Mudscape ' a new type of landscape created through the technologically advanced, human interaction with nature, where political and social ideologies, millions of men and the awesome power of modern, industrial killing weapons, were hurled together along a narrow front, creating a destructive space alive with the dead and one that still has the ability to maim and kill almost 100 years later.

The social life of this new type of landscape is epitomised on the Verdun battlefield, by the Tranche des Baionnettes, near the lost village of Douaumont, where on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> June 1916, two battalions of the 137<sup>th</sup> Regiment were consumed by German artillery fire. After the war, the trench they had occupied was discovered completely filled in, with a line of bayonets protruding at regular intervals out of the ground. Legend has it that the Poilu had resolutely defended their positions, only to be annihilated by artillery and buried where they stood. The site became the by-word for French bravery in the appalling cauldron of Verdun and, thanks to the generosity of an American benefactor, George Rand, the place of the 137<sup>th</sup>'s last stand was immortalised in

concrete.

The chaos of the battle dictates it is impossible to know exactly how the French soldiers died. It is as likely that they were killed by gas or by the concussion from high explosives and then interred by the Germans as they advanced. Either way, the Tranche des Baionnettes highlights the ambiguities of the First World War conflict landscape, itself part of the material culture of modern conflict. The trench had been 'originally' dug into the remnants of earlier fighting, into earth that was already a confused, multi-layered stratum of previous battles and timeless landscape. When the men were buried, it was with the remnants of a socially aware landscape, an object full of objects, that was both pre and post their deaths, ensuring that this massed material culture of the ages would become lost in time, as well as in space. This sacred part of the Verdun battlefield became an object created by modern war, which in time would come full circle and define the culture of its creators.

Landscapes were not the only thing to change their nature due to the emergence of industrial conflict. More recognisable objects, too, took on social lives that had previously been denied to them. The artillery shell is perhaps the defining object of early Twentieth century warfare. Produced in vast quantities, these powerful killing weapons served multiple and complex purposes, murdering in vast numbers, as well as preserving memory and saving lives. Once the shells had been fired, the brass was required to be recycled. But the existential character of the war constantly perverted this purpose. Many were appropriated and turned into works of art that embodied the agency of their creators, or the conflict itself, or the memory of the many lost and missing. These reformed objects often became ubiquitous in living rooms across the towns and cities of Britain, invariably acting as what Dr Nicholas Saunders describes as a 'memory bridge?', allowing the war-widowed women of Britain some relief from the pain of their loss.

But perhaps the social life of these objects can be best seen in their change of use from killing weapons to life saving devices. As the fighting raged, numerous trenches and underground voids along the frontlines would display an empty shell case hung upside down on the wall, now converted into a gas alarm; ready to be sounded when that most insidious weapon of industrialised war silently invaded the hollow security of the front lines.

When the guns finally ceased in 1918 the clash of armies had redrawn the geo-political boundaries of the globe. But, after the First World War of Objects, it was to be the material culture created by the conflict that would define the people that occupied this new world. The new and ambiguous relationship between man and the industrial objects of modern conflict meant that now death had become life, desperation had become hope, and the reflection of man in the objects he created would never look quite the same again.

Licensed as Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA

[Original version](#)