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## RUINOUS MODERNITY. ON THE AESTHETICS, CRITIQUE, AND MEDIALITY OF DECAY

### INTRODUCTION

Ruins are architectures in a special state: in material decay, they appear subjected to time, challenging the idea of classical monumentality. Precisely because of this tension—between endurance and transience, permanence and erosion—ruins have long fascinated the cultural imagination, a fascination reflected across media, epochs, and critical discourses. Renewed scholarly attention to ruins has emerged in recent years. This essay argues that this resurgence not only responds to the changing material archive—particularly the growing presence of ‘ruins of modernity’—but also offers a framework for rethinking architectural mediality, temporality, and the cultural conditions under which architecture becomes meaningful.

Building on this premise, the essay traces the evolving significance of ruins from Enlightenment aesthetics to contemporary theory. It explores how ruins function as cultural figures at the intersection of architecture, media, and historical consciousness—how they serve as sites of projection, reflection, and conceptual reframing. While ruins may subtly unsettle classical ideals of monumentality, they are not viewed here as negations of the monumental but rather as invitations to reconsider it in its temporal, symbolic, and medial dimensions.

The approach is grounded primarily in art and cultural history, as well as philosophical and sociological reflection, with selective engagement from media theory. This disciplinary positioning allows for a historically specific and visually attuned account of how ruins have been perceived, framed, and theorized across time.<sup>1</sup> While written from the perspective of an architectural

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<sup>1</sup> Recent approaches from cultural anthropology and cultural geography have significantly expanded the field of ruin studies by emphasizing material agency, ecological entanglements, and multispecies spatialities—especially in the context of the Anthropocene.

and art historian, the essay deliberately refrains from detailed visual analyses of specific artworks or ruin depictions. Instead, it foregrounds overarching aesthetic and theoretical patterns that cut across image types, historical contexts, and disciplinary boundaries.

Particular emphasis is placed on ruins shaped by slow, long-term decay—architectural forms that have eroded over time through neglect and the withdrawal of maintenance. In contrast to ‘sudden ruins’ caused by war, collapse, or catastrophe, as we are unfortunately forced to witness once again, long-term ruins make temporality more tangible and allow for a more nuanced exploration of historicity. Although sudden ruins have developed their own visual cultures, often bound to spectacle and trauma, the slow dissolution of architecture yields interpretive space for ambivalence, reflection, and conceptual experimentation.

Ultimately, this essay approaches ruins not only as static vestiges of the past but as dynamic media of cultural negotiation. They offer a lens through which the built environment may be seen not as a fixed monument, but rather as a layered and unstable constellation of times, materials, and meanings. The epistemological aim, then, is to ask how our understanding of architecture shifts when we consider it not only in its completed or operative state, but also in its ruinous one—when we learn to see architecture through the lens of its own impermanence.

### *RUIN LUST: FASCINATION THROUGH AMBIVALENCE*

The cultural appeal of ruins—outlined in the introduction—has long been shaped by emotional and aesthetic ambivalence. At the latest since the 18th century, ruins have evoked a multitude of ambivalent emotions. Repulsive horror transformed into fascinating attraction, raw deformation was appreciated as a subtle play of forms, and the ugly transitioned into the sublime. The

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These perspectives have opened valuable conceptual horizons and contributed to a broader understanding of ruination as a socio-material and posthuman condition. However, they sometimes operate in analytical registers so broad (e.g., infrastructural ontologies or planetary ecologies) that historically specific aesthetic and symbolic codes—such as the culturally encoded schemata through which ruins have been perceived and theorized in different epochs—can fade from view. This essay, by contrast, foregrounds those historically grounded perceptual and representational logics that continue to shape the cultural significance of architectural ruination. That said, selected insights from these wider literatures will be taken up and discussed in the course of the essay where they intersect with the central line of inquiry.

term *ruin lust*, which in 2014 also served as the title of an exhibition at the Tate Britain covering the period from the 18th century to the present, aptly summarises this passage.<sup>2</sup>

A prerequisite for the aesthetic appreciation of erosion was that Rome, always a *hot spot* of ruin presence as well as its reflective interpretation<sup>3</sup>—was no longer primarily considered a symbol of a timeless salvific order: it was precisely this scheme that was previously anchored primarily in the *locus sanctus* of the religious *caput mundi*.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Rome no longer wished to be seen merely as the ultimate concentration of an idea of empire, which could be amalgamated with Christianity and suggested continuity with antiquity through the concepts of *renovatio* or *restauratio*, mediated by the idea of *translatio imperii*. Another change was necessary to free ruins for aesthetic perception: the impulse of restoration or at least revival of antiquity (*rinascita*, later: Renaissance), which had dominated since the turn of the era, had to fade, too. Only then could a new perspective on *ruinae*—now no longer called *reliquiae*—establish itself. The distance from antiquity, which had already driven the reinventions of the Renaissance, was further intensified by the perception of a temporal gap.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the awareness of the irretrievability of its greatness grew. This became the central impetus of modern ruin thought. Only now could ruins no longer “be lamented for their state, but praised for their beauty”.<sup>6</sup> Denis Diderot was a key figure in this discourse. He reflected on the temporal distance between his own present and the era when the buildings were still intact, heightening this perception to an “eternity” in between, in whose vastness he delighted in contemplating.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, he developed a unique ruin sentiment from the combination of terror and grace, melancholy and poetry, shudder and reverence. This aesthetic sensation links

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<sup>2</sup> B. Dillon, *Ruin Lust: Artists' Fascination with Decay from Turner to the Present Day*, London 2014. On the historical development of the term: S.A. Crane, “‘Take Nothing But Photos, Leave Nothing But Footprints’: How-to Guides for Ruin Photography”, in: *Ruin Porn and the Obsession with Decay*, ed. S. Lyons, Basingstoke 2018, pp. 83–102, here: pp. 84–85.

<sup>3</sup> K. Vöckler, *Die Architektur der Abwesenheit oder die Kunst eine Ruine zu bauen*, Berlin 2009, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> W.S. Heckscher, *Die Romruinen. Die geistigen Voraussetzungen ihrer Wertung im Mittelalter und in der Renaissance*, Würzburg 1936.

<sup>5</sup> G. Lombardi, S. Oberto, P. Strohmaier, “Metamorphosen der Ruine: Zur Einleitung”, in: *Ästhetik und Poetik der Ruinen. Rekonstruktion—Imagination—Gedächtnis*, eds. G. Lombardi, S. Oberto, P. Strohmaier, Berlin–Boston 2022, pp. 1–24.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> D. Diderot, *Salons de 1767* (*Œuvres de Diderot*, vol. II), Paris 1821, p. 371.

the pleasure of viewing decay with the contemplation of a destructively acting temporality—and turns it into a productive aesthetic mode. The decay of monuments was now no longer seen as opposed to their specific beauty but praised as its essential component.

A contemporary ruin lust in research and aesthetic practice, which takes on very different forms of expression, continues this perception. However, several striking shifts can be observed: a review of recent research shows that these have been clearly registered. Changes in the canon of objects are particularly significant: until the end of high modernity, the label of the ruinous was attributed almost exclusively to objects of rank. Primarily, buildings were considered worthy of ruination when they were ennobled by the aura of antiquity—the height of its culture and the monumentality of the elapsed time since then.<sup>8</sup> A corresponding dignity was also guaranteed by the social hierarchy of building types and the closely connected idea of worthy representation.

With the end of high industrialisation, however, this has changed dramatically. Societies are now confronted on a large scale with utilitarian buildings that no longer fulfil their original purpose. External reasons for this include the shift from an industrial to a service society, the exhaustion of supposedly inexhaustible resources, and ever-accelerating social change.<sup>9</sup> Internally, the effect is that since the industrialisation of construction itself, architecture has increasingly been designed a rapidly consumable product.<sup>10</sup> Since then, the planet has been flooded with a massive quantity of such buildings, which, when viewed radically, already appear as junk right at the moment of their creation—before they can even be aesthetically read as ruins.<sup>11</sup> Rem Koolhaas (\*1944), at times himself a designer of such buildings, at times a harsh critic of these products, has categorised this phenomenon in the context contemporary architectural production under the term *Junkspace*.<sup>12</sup> Even digitisation—although in some respects representing a break with the industrial production paradigm—continues to drive this process: the rapid realisation of circulated ideas into material form is now easier than ever, as visions can be printed immediately; their rapid decay is there-

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<sup>8</sup> K. Bücking, *Ruinen-Ästhetik. Über die Spuren der Zeit im Raum der Gegenwart*, Bielefeld 2023.

<sup>9</sup> R.P. Sieferle, "Die industrielle Transformation", in: *Die antiken Stätten von morgen. Ruinen des Industriezeitalters*, ed. M. Hamm, Berlin 2003, pp. 7–17.

<sup>10</sup> D.M. Abramson (*Obsolescence: An Architectural History*, Chicago 2016) as written a critically reflective architectural history of modernism along these lines.

<sup>11</sup> E. Müller, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Modern Architecture and Waste*, Espoo 2022.

<sup>12</sup> R. Koolhaas, "Junkspace", *October* 2002, 100, Spring, pp. 175–190.

by pre-programmed.<sup>13</sup> However, even the crude relics of this Great Transformation, set in motion by industrialisation, can be attractive. On the one hand, they may be considered early, prosaic as well as problematic products of a highly consumerist and increasingly also a throwaway society, but on the other hand, as numerous appropriation practices show,<sup>14</sup> they are ultimately canonised as auratic ruins of the Industrial Age.<sup>15</sup>

The monument preservation approach to the relics of industrialisation, particularly those of the first and second Industrial Revolutions (ca. 1760-1914), began as early as the 1970s.<sup>16</sup> Although the focus was initially on conservation and classification aspects, this literally prepared the ground for a broader engagement. These forms of institutionalised appreciation have always been linked to political identity issues and collective memory. What contours could be preserved for cities or regions as increasingly less prosperous sites of high production? Was the treatment of the heritage of the industrial work era appropriate, and what did it mean for appreciation, not just for value creation? In the search for answers, the concept of the monument itself was modernised, subject as it is to permanent revision in the process of heritagisation or patrimonialisation.<sup>17</sup>

## URBEX, 'RUIN PORN' AND SOCIAL PERCEPTION

It is striking, however, that newer social movements, or rather scenes, turn these restructurings of the canon into something primarily emotional and affective. In doing so, they closely connect to the ruin lust of the 18th century. One example is the Urban Exploration (*Urbex*) movement.<sup>18</sup> It is dedicated to the

<sup>13</sup> Sieferle, "Die industrielle Transformation", p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> T. Edensor (*The Architecture of Ruins: Designs on the Past, Present and Future*, London 2019) has pointed to the many transgressive and experimental forms of appropriation through which former sites of industrial production have been transformed into vibrant urban spaces. The openness of these kinds of ruins—despite originally being tied to rigid economic programs—generates creative, playful, and spontaneous narratives.

<sup>15</sup> On the Industrial Aura: A. Steinecke, *Tourism NOW. Industrie und Tourismus. Zwischen Fabrikrainen, Markenwelten und Kreativquartieren*, Tübingen 2022, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> As a significant testament to the growing interest and engagement, see: B. Bracegirdle, *The Archaeology of the Industrial Revolution*, London 1974.

<sup>17</sup> J.-M. Leniaud, *Les archipels du passé. Le patrimoine et son histoire*, Paris 2002.

<sup>18</sup> J. Tichit, "Les villes américaines face aux changements globaux", *RITA* 2020, 13, available online: <http://revue-rita.com/dossier-13/photographier-les-ruines-recentes-representer-les-symptomes-des-changements-globaux-jonathan-tichit.html> [accessed: February 21, 2025].

private exploration of abandoned places, particularly industrial and infrastructural relics (ill. 1), and combines this with a desire for discovery, exploration, and visualisation. This practice is reminiscent of the thrill that once accompanied the touristic exploration of classical ruins—an activity that, like a stowaway, accompanied the scientific recording of these sites. Moreover, at a time when European expansion, with its exploratory frenzy, is increasingly seen as a morally questionable project, *Urbex* shifts this corresponding explorer's lust onto an internal *terra incognita*—a move that might at first sight seem less problematic.



1. Frank Gemeinhardt, *Der blaue Phönix erhebt sich aus den Müllbergen und versucht dem Elend zu entkommen*, digital photography, 2025, courtesy of the artist

However, in *Urbex* as well, the allure of the (technically) off-limits, the fascination of infiltration, the thrill of risk-taking, and the defiance of taboos are common motivations. At the same time, records, superlatives, and status within the scene are important—something that some regard as an indication of widespread narcissistic subjectivism that, in decay, seeks out the particularly authentic.<sup>19</sup> Yet there are also points of connection between the *Urbex*

<sup>19</sup> For a balanced discussion, see: K. Wells, "Detroit Was Always Made of Wheels: Confronting Ruin Porn in Its Hometown", in: *Ruin Porn and the Obsession with Decay*, ed. S. Lyons, Basingstoke 2018, pp. 13–30.

movement and initiatives for preservation and protection. That means, *Urbex* practices do not dissolve solely into the spectacular visual exploitation of the explored objects but contribute to developing a particular sensitivity for neglected ensembles.<sup>20</sup> Thus, they are able to highlight sites that exist in a visual *off* or below the horizon of perception, often referred to as 'lost places' in German. In doing so, critical attitudes towards the official handling of these complexes are also adopted. Moreover, *Urbex* practices are often linked to transgressive, even subcultural movements. The places are thereby recoded into protected venues where practices can take place that have no space in the hegemonic context. Nevertheless, *Urbex* is frequently discredited as *ruin porn*. This term refers to a shameless, effect-driven staging of what is seen. It aims at a simultaneously latent guilt-laden and lustful, voyeuristic appropriation of the carnal—here, in built forms defined by decay.<sup>21</sup> The accusation is that this occurs without respect for the 'protagonists'—whether the buildings themselves or any remaining users or inhabitants.<sup>22</sup> The result is said to be a fetishisation, a reduction of the depicted subject to a stereotypical symbol of decay and neglect. An external, hegemonic gaze not only fixates the place but primarily the people inhabiting the scene. In doing so, they are stripped of any ambiguity, degraded to voiceless extras, and relegated to a lower social status—placed on the side of the defeated and the dispossessed, who are once again being exploited here, but now more by media-based rather than visibly defunct industrial capitalism.

Such phenomena can likely only be adequately assessed through the analysis of individual works or groups of works. However, one thing becomes clear: the contemporary gaze on ruins constantly moves along ethical boundaries and leads to debates in which ruin lust itself is called into question.

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<sup>20</sup> F. Schmitz, J.O. Habeck, "Ruinen und Lost Places. Konturen eines transdisziplinären Forschungsfelds", in: *Ruinen und vergessene Orte, Materialität im Verfall—Nachnutzungen—Umdeutungen*, eds. F. Schmitz, J.O. Habeck, Bielefeld 2023, pp. 57–74.

<sup>21</sup> Wells, *Detroit...*, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> Urbex photography almost always excludes human protagonists—since, by definition, it focuses primarily on abandoned or vacated places. One criticism is that this perspective is carefully staged and often fails to reflect the actual, more populated nature of the sites it documents. These omissions are seen as stereotypical, even ideological. However, some bodies of work—particularly those by photographers living on site—who still identify with the urbex tradition attempt to counteract this tendency by deliberately including human figures or residents in the frame. For more on this, see E. Grandbois-Bernard, "Portraits de maisons à l'abandon. Ruines, photographie et mémoire des villes délaissées", *Frontières* 2016, 28(1), available online: <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/fr/2016-v28-n-1-fr02922/1038862ar/> [accessed: February 21, 2025].



Underlying this are insights into the lost innocence of the gaze, particularly the mediated gaze. Scopic regimes appear as active producers of realities—of scenes that claim a ‘reality effect’ but are always epistemologically and/or socially framed in a specific, and therefore criticisable, manner.<sup>23</sup> Increased sensitivities to colonial, gender, or class hierarchies play a significant role, particularly when the gaze is directed at relics initially associated with the progressive aspects of modernity. Yet now, this emancipatory dimension attributed to industrial remains, defining part of the metanarrative of modernity, is being questioned for the reasons mentioned above—resource-related, ecological, social, and scopic. What is likely being addressed here is a deep uncertainty regarding the horizons of the future, accompanied by the unsettling feeling of standing at the threshold of an epoch. Since the beginning of modernity, ruins have been the site where such ambivalent feelings were negotiated (see above). Ruins have not only been regarded as indeterminate in degree but always as particularly open structures, in whose voids a breath of the future has always stirred.<sup>24</sup> Not only literally porous but also ideally transparent, they allowed an inkling of times to come.

Diderot is again the key witness here, as he describes how ruination and historical progression are interwoven as a positively open process.<sup>25</sup> Yet in his account, ruins are always accompanied by a subtle shudder (*frisson*), a sensation that is at once pleasant but also potentially distressing, a disquieting and destabilising aura of erosion. The hypothesis is now that precisely this emotional disturbance becomes dominant in the modern and contemporary contemplation of ruins. The supposedly pornographic dimension of contemporary gaze regimes merely conceals this insecurity by engaging in an exaggerated form of acting out, a visually aggressive appropriation.

Perhaps more notably, many of the visual strategies and textual reflections that engage with ruins exhibit or name features of an aesthetics of the uncanny, even the ghostly—a kind of counter-image to the excessively obvious. They form a genre in its own right, an intensified form of the ruinous shudder in Diderot’s sense but enriched with further aspects: the return of the repressed, the suppressed, or the seemingly discarded.

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<sup>23</sup> J. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge 1992.

<sup>24</sup> T. Meier, *Ruins of a post-apocalyptic present*, in: Schmitz, Habeck, *Ruinen...*, pp. 57–74.

<sup>25</sup> R. Mortier, *La Poétique des ruines en France. Ses origines, ses variations, de la Renaissance à Victor Hugo*, Geneva 1974, p. 93.



## RUINS AND THE AESTHETICS OF THE (MODERN) UNCANNY

These aspects culminate in the figure of the ghost (*revenant*) as a returning spectre, which made its entrance onto the stage in the 18th century and experienced a 'golden age' in the subsequent 'historical' century. This figure is linked to the notion of a personified autonomy of architectural space, an uncontrollable agency of the built environment. The Romantic era primarily explored this idea in gothic houses—haunted places and neo-Gothic revival architectures.<sup>26</sup> This category included both authentic, preferably ruinous medieval ensembles and their simulation in the Gothic Revival—a historicism that literally conjured the past. The latter already emphasizes the fictional character of gothic hauntings, which were also cast into novelistic scripts.

These mostly isolated haunted places derived their eerie effect from specific markers: pointed arch windows with a church-like appearance, ornamented façades with stone or wooden embellishments such as tracery, turrets, or battlements, picturesque roofscapes with steeply pitched surfaces, asymmetrical floor plans, and dark, dramatic, and light-penetrated spaces with wooden or stone elements. The typical objects of the *Urbex* gaze—engineering, industrial, or infrastructural structures—function differently. Admittedly, historical connotations are not always completely eluded (some industrial buildings do show, after all, remnants of historical allusion), and the stripping of the structures—removing cladding, interior fittings, or furnishings—can bring them sometimes close to classical or medieval spaces (ill. 2), a quality accentuated in some of the *Urbex* visual stagings. Nevertheless, the majority of these 'lost places' are fundamentally purified, function-driven, at least proto-modern spaces (in Sigfried Giedion's sense).<sup>27</sup> Their relatively prosaic aura lacks the ornamentation or classical furnishing.

Yet even here, the gaze often adopts perspectives that reinforce effects from the repertoire of the uncanny. Impenetrable dark spatial zones meet abruptly illuminated surfaces (ill. 3). Openings such as arches, windows, or doors seem to lead into nothingness, standing as hollow voids that seem to stare blankly into space. Circulation and connection paths—corridors, bridges, or stairwells—suddenly break off or vanish into the shadows. Vegetation winds through the spaces as a *doppelgänger* of infrastructural routes and conduits, seizing control of the tectonics. Compared to organic elements, concrete

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<sup>26</sup> M. Freimuth, *Architekturen des Unheimlichen. Kinetische Labyrinth des Horrors in Film und Literatur*, Bielefeld 2023, pp. 18–22.

<sup>27</sup> S. Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture. The Growth of a New Tradition*, Cambridge 1941.



2. Matthias Süßen, *Derelict ring kiln of a former brickyard in East Friesland, Pilsum, Germany*, 2021 ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pilsumer\\_Ziegelei-2021-2118-.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pilsumer_Ziegelei-2021-2118-.jpg))



3. Pascal Dihé, *Urban Exploring in abandoned bunkers of the Maginot Line*, 2007 ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Urban\\_explorers.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Urban_explorers.jpg))

and metal appear as harsh, even bare materials. It is therefore not difficult to imagine hauntings or ghostly presences in these spaces. Even in ensembles that can only be viewed from the outside, without access to their interiors, such impressions can unfold. This holds true even when they are presented in a consciously taxonomic, strictly uniform order that, at first glance, serves an objective, scientific, and inventory-like logic. Research has shown that façades, in this context, can develop a kind of facial autonomy.<sup>28</sup> Paradoxically, the uniformity of presentation—especially in frontal views—often intensifies the individuality of the buildings. They become emitters of tormented gazes emanating from the half-dead structures.<sup>29</sup>

So, what constitutes the uncanny here, and what does its presence mean? Let us summarize once again: the uncanny always emerges from an interplay of object and environmental factors. Even in *Urbex*, dramaturgical and scenographic perspectives, particularly lighting (ill. 4), play a role. But in contrast to the Victorian (Gothic) uncanny, the sense of unease in industrial-age ruins

<sup>28</sup> Grandbois-Bernard, *Portraits de maisons...*

<sup>29</sup> For the antecedents of this topic, see: *Das Auge der Architektur. Zur Frage der Bildlichkeit in der Baukunst*, eds. J. Grave, A. Beyer, M. Burioni, Munich 2011.





4. Frank Gemeinhardt, *Lichtspiel im entkernten Kesselhaus*, digital photography, 2025, courtesy of the artist

arises mainly from the bare structures themselves and the empty—or rather, emptied—spaces between them (ill. 5). The loss of function has always been a central aspect of perceiving ruins. However, in the case of industrial modernity's buildings, disuse leaves behind spatial shells whose programmatic bareness and austerity now become more visible than ever. Rather than evoking the opulent decay characteristic of the Romantic horror house, this intensifies existing structural and spatial qualities.

Unlike in classical gothic narratives, the modern uncanny is also less explicitly bound to traces of former users.<sup>30</sup> In the gothic context, hauntings were often tied to previous inhabitants, as uncanny imaginings typically revolved around abandoned estates. Of course, in ruins from the era of high industrialization, the contrast between today's stagnation and former prosperity—once embodied by machines running at full capacity—can still evoke feelings of wonder or nostalgia. Sometimes, the latter is deliberately invoked



5. Frank Gemeinhardt, *Fast besenrein geräumt und bereit für eine neue Verwendung – aber ob die jemals eintreten wird?*, digital photography, 2025, courtesy of the artist

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<sup>30</sup> The seminal study on the topic: A. Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, Cambridge 1992.

in a fetishized manner when remnants of industrial society are integrated into contemporary structures and put on display, functioning as modern-day spolia—a unique form of reusing ruinous fragments.<sup>31</sup> However, in modern ruins, the sense that something is no longer right seems to stem directly from the intrinsic architectural or spatial qualities.

This marks a significant shift, though not a radical break. The Victorian uncanny was already an expression of an inarticulate or displaced unease with unbridled modernity. Forces that supposedly served humanity (rationalization, productivity enhancement, or even emancipation) developed their own momentum and ultimately escaped control. Their effects proved to be at least ambivalent on a societal level, capable of generating tensions, conflicts, or even traumas. Ultimately, these forces appeared increasingly uncontrollable rather than governable, unavailable rather than compliant. This very perception was mediated through cultural representations—most notably, uncanny ghostly figures that animated spaces meant to be adapted to human needs, furnished for their inhabitants, and seemingly occupied by them. There seemed to be a kind of perfect match—an idea aptly captured by Walter Benjamin's metaphor of the bourgeois interior as an *étui*.<sup>32</sup> Yet something foreign remained present, something that was not (or no longer) meant to be there: initially, the proper home of ghosts was the decaying edifices of a dethroned aristocracy, displaced by the producing class, the bourgeoisie. Here, the historical significance of these ghosts becomes apparent: they appear as shadows of the past. But from there, they could also infiltrate bourgeois life itself, which symbolically drew from the legacy of the nobility. Because bourgeois culture staged itself historically—through strategies of historicist appropriation—it became infected with the dual notion of decadence and potential, looming economic ruin.

Ghosts are nebulous, elusive beings. As such, they are revenants of an irretrievably obsolete past—and the ungraspable aspects of the present.<sup>33</sup> The historical security that was supposed to provide reassurance to the living—including the architectural apparatus mentioned earlier—proved to be nothing more than a ghostly illusion. The accelerated pace of historical change ultimately threatened to sweep away even its bourgeois beneficiaries,

<sup>31</sup> T. Wilkinson, *Life in Ruins: The Fetishisation of Decay in Contemporary Architecture*, in: Schmitz, Habeck, *Ruinen...*, pp. 91–105.

<sup>32</sup> W. Benjamin, *Paris, die Hauptstadt des 19. Jahrhunderts* (*Gesammelte Schriften* V, 1), ed. R. Tiedemann, Frankfurt am Main 1991, pp. 45–59, here: p. 53.

<sup>33</sup> M. Smolińska, "Gespenster des »preußischen Pompeji«. Zwei ortsspezifische Ausstellungen in den Ruinen der einstigen Festung Küstrin", in: Schmitz, Habeck, *Ruinen...*, pp. 159–174.

driving them into ruin. Nothing was safe anymore from these unleashed forces—not affluence, family structures, the private sphere, or the integrity of the individual as ‘master of the house’, nor even those facets of social life that explicitly belonged to the bourgeois present and underpinned its optimism for the future.

Some of these dynamics also transferred to industrial modernity’s buildings and, indeed, to modern architecture in general, which had taken the industrial paradigm as one of its central guiding principles. What is remarkable, however, is that the ghostly is no longer tied to remnants of eroding historicism. Instead, it manifests in buildings designed to appear perpetually contemporary, unburdened by history—architectures meant to always remain at the cutting edge. When they fall into ruin, a different effect emerges compared to historical structures. Once their functions and installations are stripped away, they immediately appear as ruins. The ruinous quality is already embedded in their morphology and spatiality, even without visible signs of severe decay or fragmentation. In particular, (steel) skeletal constructions—comprising most of modernity’s functional buildings—are assemblies, consisting of fragments, much like ruins.<sup>34</sup> Fundamentally, the *Urbex* gaze on industrial modernity’s buildings reveals that they were already born as ruins, displaying ruinous features the moment they were completed. Seen from a traditional perspective, they appear as half-dead or lifeless bodies, releasing restless, wandering souls. The fact that they no longer suggest an integral corporeality—as traditional architecture long did through its numerous analogies between figures and buildings—can evoke a sense of loss.<sup>35</sup>

Accordingly, critical readings of modernity have emphasized that its buildings always carry a latent melancholy.<sup>36</sup> This suggests that even modernist rationalism or functionalism inherently possesses an emotional and atmospheric undercurrent. What is lost or believed to be lost can no longer be made visible through acts of remembrance, as modernist architectural forms are purely present-oriented. The integral bodily suggestion of tradition-

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<sup>34</sup> M. Dauss, “Ruinen der Moderne. Le Corbusiers Rekonstruktion und Destruktion des antiken Tempels”, *kritische berichte* 2021, 2, pp. 44–54.

<sup>35</sup> Ph. Ursprung, “Phantomschmerzen der Architektur. Verschwindende Körper und Raumprothesen”, in: *kritische berichte* 2006, 2, pp. 117–128.

<sup>36</sup> A. Huyssen, “Authentic Ruins: Products of Modernity”, in: *Ruins of Modernity*, eds. J. Hell, A. Schönle, J. Adams, G. Steinmetz, Durham 2009, pp. 17–28, i.a. p. 27; Mark Wigley’s reflections, too—through his analysis of Jacques Derrida’s engagement with the loss-related aspects of modern spatial concepts—reiterate the core idea of a melancholy inscribed into them: idem, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida’s Haunt*, Cambridge–London 1993.



al architecture is thus no longer accessible.<sup>37</sup> Yet this (seemingly) vanished element can sometimes re-emerge as a revenant, as a ghost, and in extreme cases, manifest as a modern form of the uncanny.

In postmodernism, the lost or believed-to-be-lost tradition was evocatively reintroduced as a form of compensation—though often ironically and never in a non-essentialist manner. This occurs either through artificial ruins, themselves revenants of corresponding 18th-century models,<sup>38</sup> or through quotations that, as decontextualized fragments, disrupt the very work from which they are drawn.<sup>39</sup> This episodic compensation was never intended as a serious remedy for modernist deficiencies, nor did it aim to provide a lasting pacification of modernity's erratic tendencies, with its unsettlingly migrating or repressed elements (soul/corporeality/history).

## THE OPENNESS OF THE RUIN

This is reflected in the conceptual and reflexive development of the contemporary discourse on ruins. Never has it been so open, so lacking in consensus, and thus so difficult to grasp what constitutes a ruin or at what point a structure qualifies as one.<sup>40</sup> (This is, incidentally, a consequence of the artificial multiplication of ruin forms in postmodern aesthetics, which favours free play.) Considering this definitional openness, one might speak of an elusiveness—thus extending the discursive legacy of the modern uncanny, which is characterized by something nebulous and indeterminate, something ghostly. However, with the transformation of this discourse into the reflexive system of theoretical speculation, a positive threshold has been reached.

The uncanny openness of the ruin transitions into a productive analytical insight with far-reaching methodological and conceptual implications. Rather than a simple opposition between ruins and intact buildings, a new perspective emerges: Even structures that do not materially erode appear to be in a constant state of temporary incompleteness.<sup>41</sup> This encompasses their dis-

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<sup>37</sup> R. Sennett, *Verfall und Ende des öffentlichen Lebens. Die Tyrannei der Intimität*, Frankfurt am Main 2004, pp. 27–31.

<sup>38</sup> R. Zimmermann, *Künstliche Ruinen. Studien zu ihrer Form und Bedeutung*, Wiesbaden 1989.

<sup>39</sup> A. Gerber, Ph. Koch, „Architektur muss als Ruine gedacht werden (um politisch zu sein)“, *archithese* 2017, 4, pp. 6–15.

<sup>40</sup> Schmitz, Habeck, *Ruinen und Lost Places*, pp. 11–12.

<sup>41</sup> B. Löffler, „Die Geduld der Steine. Bauliche Fragmente und die Aushandlung von Geschichte“, in: Schmitz, Habeck, *Ruinen...*, pp. 31–44.

use, modification, renovation, optimization, or repurposing—processes that keep them in intermediate states of material and functional transformation. From an empirical perspective, viewed in the context of global architectural history, intactness proves to be the exception. Theoretically, perfection presents itself as an idealized abstraction that obscures the actual performance of architecture over time.

Monumentality, as an embodiment of temporal-morphological perfection and the aspiration for a timeless validity of built structures, thus proves to be a mental construct, even a fiction, one that stands in friction with the ever-changing states of buildings over time.<sup>42</sup> Various architectural interpretations agree on this observation—particularly performance-oriented or cultural-studies approaches that generally understand culture as a dynamic phenomenon, as well as related theories, such as Actor-Network Theory, which conceptualize reality as being constituted through the interconnected interactions of acting agents—including non-human elements.<sup>43</sup> Also worth mentioning are media-theoretical perspectives that emphasize how the impression of perfection is usually generated through an array of images that cluster around built structures, making them appear materially more ideal than their actual physical state suggests. Some canonical masterworks of modern architecture, first and foremost, Le Corbusier's famous 'ideal' villa, the Villa Savoye, were in fact already construction ruins upon completion.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, deeper structural analyses have shown that monuments of moder-

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<sup>42</sup> C. Ruhl, "Mythos Monument. Zwischen Memoria und objektiviertem Diskurs", in: *Mythos Monument. Urbane Strategien in Architektur und Kunst seit 1945*, ed. C. Ruhl, Bielefeld 2014, pp. 9–34.

<sup>43</sup> Examples of the agency of non-human elements, specifically materials, would be coal or steel, which can be seen in close interplay with architectural designs. See D. Pohl, *Building Carbon Europe*, London 2023.

<sup>44</sup> J.-Ph. Delhomme, J.-M. Savoye, *Die sonnigen Tage der Villa Savoye*, Basel 2020, pp. 28–30; K.D. Murphy, "The Villa Savoye and the Modernist Historic Monument", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 2002, 61(1), pp. 68–89. The author highlights the close connection between the actual failure of the residential project and its eventual elevation to a monument of cultural memory. It was precisely the immediate decay of the structure that triggered a process of canonization, ultimately placing the Villa on par with the Gothic cathedrals as a quintessential *monument historique*; on that basis: K.M. Jensen, L. Rellensmann, "Experiential Preservation as Critical Heritage Practice: On Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye in Ruins", in: Schmitz, Habeck, *Ruinen...*, pp. 143–158. The authors critically examine the preservationist handling of patina—understood in the broadest sense, not merely as a material phenomenon—in relation to modernist buildings, using the Villa Savoye as a case in point.

nity themselves can be understood as assembled or collaged, making them less unified or authored by a single hand than commonly assumed.

What is crucial, then, is that from the phenomenal indeterminacy as an integral feature of the ruin—and its inherent uncanniness—we have arrived at an expansion of its narrow definition. Conversely, this has allowed us to view its supposed opposite, the intact monument, as being less uniform, even more porous than previously thought. But if we return from the porosity of the ruin and of the monument ‘infected’ by it to what is unsettling, to the uncanny, and also to its counter-concepts—those configurations that belong to the ambivalent conceptual set surrounding the ruinous—then we must also expand our gaze beyond architecture as an object. The central thesis proposed here is that there is a kind of correspondence between the porosity of architecture—its ruination—and the emergence of entities not bound by fixed spatial boundaries (such as ghosts), or of forces that break through those boundaries, like nature. These two dimensions converge in the form of a nature that has become strangely autonomous—uncannily manipulated by humans, yet now acting on its own terms. For it has always been a defining feature—and a disturbing one—of ruins that they dissolve the fundamental architectural distinction between interior and exterior space.<sup>45</sup> As ‘hollow teeth’, they cannot fulfil the protective function that architecture has been attributed since its earliest theorization. Nature can penetrate the interior space that was originally meant to be enclosed, taking possession of both it and the architectural structure. Ghosts, as bodiless spectral beings, likewise negate spatial distinctions. One of their central attributed ‘abilities’ is to pass through walls. In this sense, they are the ideal inhabitants of ruins—being a fusion of object and agent qualities.

Theories of ruins have always highlighted the struggle between the invading force of nature and the tectonic structure in which nature takes root and which it ultimately bursts apart. These approaches often describe a drama of attack and resistance, a harsh conflict between the unconscious forces of nature and the spirit that shapes matter, between the self-articulation of a dynamic, contingent *natura naturans* and an ordering instance oriented toward control and form. At the same time—and here again an ambivalent configuration emerges—the mitigating influence of the surrounding environment has often been emphasized. The landscape, as a natural setting, seemed to absorb the eroding structure and integrate it into itself, so that it did not mere-

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<sup>45</sup> S. Krasmann, “Die Ruine in der Architektur. Das Schöpferische und das Zerstörerische”, in: Schmitz, Habeck, *Ruinen...*, pp. 107–117.

ly vanish but rather found a way to merge harmoniously.<sup>46</sup> Georg Simmel, for example, saw in this process nature acting as an agent of “higher justice”, reclaiming what had been taken from it by the formative spirit.<sup>47</sup> The balance thus created between nature and architecture even led to a scene of peace. Other thinkers, too, have highlighted this reconciliation between ruin and landscape, which arises from their initial clash. The study of different ruin types or ruins from various cultural epochs reveals a kind of ideal correspondence between the ruinous object and its scenic surroundings. Pictorial representations—above all, the works of classical Baroque painters like Nicolas Poussin—have highlighted such analogies both compositionally and in terms of their narrative content.<sup>48</sup> They depict a harmony of ideal structural principles that connect nature and architecture, landscape and human action.

From the landscape—a space imbued with ideal (divine) ordering principles—there falls a soothing, even transfiguring or consoling light upon the decayed buildings. Even their scattered fragments radiate a healing sense of order onto the surrounding scene. This makes them the ideal setting for narratives centred on emotional restraint or virtuous, exemplary action. In this way, the threat emanating from ruins was domesticated. However, in the age of industrialization, when entire infrastructural landscapes emerged and, for the first time, heavily polluted ecosystems became visible due to resource exploitation and emissions, this concept began to erode. The spirits that had been summoned no longer haunted only enclosed spaces but began to diffuse into their surroundings—into the landscape itself.<sup>49</sup> Once picturesque scenes could transform into ghostly backdrops of ecological dramas.

This development intensified as ecological disasters assumed global proportions. Nuclear disasters leave behind not only irradiated ruins (ill. 6) but also contaminated landscapes.<sup>50</sup> And since climate change has made it clear

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<sup>46</sup> One of the emerging perspectives on urban space reimagined as a landscape no longer dominated solely by humans—a space composed of remnants, gaps, and in-between zones that invite open-ended forms of use: B. Stoetzer, *Ruderal City: Ecologies of Migration, Race, and Urban Nature in Berlin*, Durham 2022.

<sup>47</sup> G. Simmel, “Die Ruine. Ein ästhetischer Versuch”, *Der Tag* 1907, 96(22), February, First Part.

<sup>48</sup> W. Sauerländer, *Die Natur im Stundenglas der Zeit. Poussins Landschaften*, Munich 2024.

<sup>49</sup> K. Barndt, “Memory Traces of an Abandoned Set of Futures: Industrial Ruins in the Postindustrial Landscapes of Germany”, in: *Ruins of Modernity*, eds. J. Hell, A. Schönlé, J. Adams, G. Steinmetz, 2009, pp. 270–293.

<sup>50</sup> In nuclear ruins, the two dimensions of ruination initially distinguished in the introduction converge: the gradual and the sudden. A catastrophic event precipitated the abrupt



6. Timm Suess, *The public swimming pool in the ghost town of Pripyat near Chernobyl*, digital photography, 2009 ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Swimming\\_Pool\\_Hall\\_4\\_Pripyat.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Swimming_Pool_Hall_4_Pripyat.jpg))

that the entire planet, in the era of the Anthropocene,<sup>51</sup> is alarmingly close to becoming a ruin itself—a literal *hot spot* of comprehensive catastrophic developments—the ruinous can hardly rely any longer on a comforting integration into the landscape.<sup>52</sup>

The uncanny presence that inhabits the ruins of the industrial and especially the nuclear age consequently extends to their entire context.<sup>53</sup> Eco-

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abandonment of these structures; although they remained physically intact, radioactive contamination rendered them permanently unusable, setting in motion a slow but inexorable process of neglect and material decay.

<sup>51</sup> For a discussion of this somewhat controversial term, see: S. Lyons, “Introduction: Ruin Porn, Capitalism, and the Anthropocene”, in: *Ruin Porn and the Obsession with Decay*, ed. S. Lyons, pp. 1–10, here: pp. 3–4.

<sup>52</sup> R. Macfarlane, “Generation Anthropocene: How Humans Have Altered the Planet For Ever”, in: *Surveying the Anthropocene: Environment and Photography Now*, ed. P. Macdonald, Edinburgh 2022, pp. 28–40.

<sup>53</sup> On a cultural-historical perspective of the ruins of the atomic age—both contaminated and non-contaminated—that stand as relics of Cold War America: T. Vanderbilt, *Survival City: Adventures Among the Ruins of Atomic America*, New York 2002.

logical wastelands seem eerie because the ghostly breath of the past assumes a transformed form within them—in the shape of contaminated winds or dangerous gases.<sup>54</sup> Part of the paradox lies in the fact that in these scenarios, built structures do not necessarily have to be materially damaged—as nuclear ruins demonstrate. Rather, they become elements of overarching ruinous constellations. In the Anthropocene, it is increasingly difficult to find solace in the idea that everything ultimately dissolves into a cosmic and eternal order. Even this horizon proves to be fatally altered, thrown off balance, and destabilized. Instead, enduring ‘traumascapes’ dominate the scene.

Thus, looking at the contemporary ruinous condition can teach us not only about the current planetary situation but also about its historical roots. The metaphor of the planet as a ruin has its own prehistory, reaching back to the early modern period. Even before 1800, the deformation of the Earth was increasingly discussed in writings on physico-theology and cosmogony—at the intersection of religion and modern natural sciences.<sup>55</sup> What was at issue here was the question of how this insight—the cosmos as an accomplished, though not necessarily absolutely perfect work—could be reconciled with the goodness and beauty of creation as affirmed in the Holy Scriptures.

## THE MEDIALITY OF RUINS: WRITING AND IMAGE

An increasingly difficult—if not impossible—question is how the Earth, whose rugged zones such as mountain ranges and icy landscapes are now being scientifically explored and described in ever greater detail,<sup>56</sup> can still be reconciled with the idea of a ‘calligraphic’ creation by God—based on the analogy between the divine word and the act of creation.<sup>57</sup> This brings us to a final theme: the interconnection of ruins with other media,<sup>58</sup> particularly writing. Since antiquity, ruins have always been dialectically linked to scriptural mediality—the other major storage medium favoured both in Judeo-Christian

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<sup>54</sup> W. Kil, “Halbwertszeit der Erinnerung”, in: *Chernobyl Zone II*, ed. A. Kremenschock, Heidelberg 2011, pp. 73–75.

<sup>55</sup> Zimmermann, *Künstliche Ruinen*, pp. 1–16.

<sup>56</sup> *Die Alpen im Blick. Der Landschaftsmaler Franz Steinfield*, eds. G. Danzer, G. Hölzer-Schuster, Graz 2023.

<sup>57</sup> H. Böhme, “Die Ästhetik der Ruinen”, in: *Der Schein des Schönen*, eds. D. Kamper, Chr. Wulf, Göttingen 1989, pp. 287–304, here: p. 290.

<sup>58</sup> K. Wagner, *Mobile Ruinen. Medienkanäle des Ruinentransports*, in: Schmitz, Haack, *Ruinen...*, pp. 297–316.



thought and in idealist speculation.<sup>59</sup> While the physical presence of ruins contrasts with the apparent immateriality of writing, the materiality of ruinous structures is one of decline and dissolution, a fragmentation of the massive and immobile. This allows them to approximate writing, which is usually understood as a-physical, light, and media-mobile. Both—ruins and writing—bear witness to past states or vanishing events (*res gestae*), inscribing them into the ‘book of memory’ respectively the ‘book of history’.<sup>60</sup> Between material testimonies and textual traditions, there exists a reciprocal relationship of authentication, reinforcement, and validation.

Moreover, the fragmentation of tectonic structures—those that have crumbled into rubble or have been broken apart—does not only align them with the characteristics of writing in general. It also enables a specific reference to their alphabetical coding: writing, too, is based on distinct units that are ‘built’ into meaning-bearing structures and can likewise be decomposed. Giovanni Battista Piranesi had already visualized this connection impressively in some of his visions of Rome’s ruinous landscapes, where surviving fragments resemble letters and vice versa.<sup>61</sup> Beyond this striking juxtaposition, the relationship between ruins—a special form of architectural mediality open to transmedia comparisons—and writing, constructed from code elements, has taken on many historical manifestations. This field ranges from the premodern *historia locorum sanctorum* to the post-historical *lieux de mémoire*.<sup>62</sup> Sometimes ruins serve as a medium of (auto-)biographical self-assurance; at other times, they are understood as metaphors for the psyche, imagined as a mere stratification of ruinous layers. In some instances, they serve as an image for scholarly but fragmented textual commentaries, which focus on a sacrosanct and integral central text, appearing as mere rubble in contrast to it. In others, they signify freely floating annotations that reference one another in a network-like fashion (as a superlative form of intertextuality) or, at the most extreme, mere assemblages of

<sup>59</sup> In reference to this and the following, see: Böhme, *Die Ästhetik...*

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem, p. 287. This refers to metaphors for totalizing systems of inscription in which the entirety of events deemed worthy of remembrance is recorded.

<sup>61</sup> E.g. G.B. Piranesi, *Capital ‘P’*, idem, *Le Antichità Romane*, vol. 1, Rome 1756.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Post-historical’ here does not refer to the ‘end of history’ (a slogan with a built-in bias), but rather to a shift away from lived memory and direct historical experience toward a historical culture increasingly shaped by media fixations, symbolic representations, and acts of substitution. Yet even the *lieux de mémoire* are products of historicization and of the transformation of collective memory into a new form—not the erasure or negation of history itself.



quotations without a central focus. Ruins can serve as a metaphor for early written records, which have often been transmitted in a fragmentary manner—scattered snippets that, despite their fragmented state, remain central testaments of cultural identity. They can also represent the modern “ruins of thought”—relics of a mind that has entirely externalized itself into writing, securing itself in the process but also distancing or alienating itself.<sup>63</sup> In these metaphors of textuality, the ruin becomes a *Denkbild*, an allegory of an already allegorical mode of thinking.<sup>64</sup>

It is striking that more recent paradigms have intensified the old connection between ruination and writing. Philosophical deconstruction and aesthetic postmodernism have repeatedly engaged with both topoi. They have conceived of writing as a trace, as a medium of absence and death, but also as a site of ghostly return, of reading between the lines, even of an ironic, fragile suspension.<sup>65</sup> The connection to the ruin, as an image of temporal and mortal decay, of the absence of function and life, is evident—as is its role as a site for the return of the repressed or lost, an open yet fragile structure.

The decisive transfer here is that the ruinous takes hold of the semiotic process itself.<sup>66</sup> Early critical readings of modernity already saw within it an internal dissolution of traditional sign relations and semantic coherence—a decomposition occurring from within. The crumbling tectonic structures thus become a metaphor for processes of erosion within semiotic systems—most notably the dominant medium of writing. The formerly reciprocal, stabilizing, or compensatory relationship between ruins and scripture (as noted earlier) is thereby dissolved; now, both primarily testify to their own medial instability. The semiotic erosion of modernity manifests only as one facet of an inner disintegration of unity: Modernity itself is characterized by historical discontinuity; ruptures replace traditions, experiences are displaced by mere events. Semiotic, social, and even economic fragmentation occur in parallel and interweave.

Thus, the paradigmatic model of modernity is no longer traditional allegories or scholarly symbols but rather mass-market commodities. These are subject to functional transience—they decay quickly or become aesthetically

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<sup>63</sup> N. Bolz, W. Van Reijen, *Ruinen des Denkens, Denken in Ruinen*, Frankfurt am Main 1996.

<sup>64</sup> K. Kirst, “Walter Benjamin’s ‘Denkbild’: Emblematic Historiography of the Recent Past”, *Monatshefte* 1994, 86(4), pp. 514–524.

<sup>65</sup> J. Derrida, *L’Écriture et la Différence*, Paris 1967; idem, *Mémoires d’aveugle. L’autoportrait et autres ruines*, Paris 1990.

<sup>66</sup> Böhme, *Die Ästhetik...*, pp. 298–299.

obsolete. They lose both their sustainable use-value and their exchange-value. Yet even the fetish character of consumer goods, which momentarily triumphs in a society of accelerating speed, fades faster than ever—and the products themselves become ruins. These are ruins of a new kind: no longer monuments of past epochs, but potential physical and symbolic waste.

Yet even in this process, productive sparks can be struck. Some works of modern aesthetics—among them, as mentioned earlier, Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye—operate precisely at this boundary. Suspended between timelessness and temporal decay, they exude a noble aura of classicism while simultaneously presenting themselves as montages of infrastructural installations, displayed as disconnected fragments. As monuments that have, in a sense, always already been dismantled, they explore the ruinous as an aesthetic category.<sup>67</sup>

Even these works exploring the ruinous aesthetic, however, rely on supplementation—not only through writing but, in the mass-media-oriented modern age, also through images.

The interrelationships between ruins and images have been traditionally established over many centuries.<sup>68</sup> By the early modern period, with the emergence of *veduta* and *capriccio*, a genre had taken shape that incorporated ruins as integral components (ill. 7). These images could imbue cityscapes with a temporal undercurrent or transport them into spaces beyond the empirically visible. The circulation of such images—often produced for tourism or the art market—mirrored the mobility into which prominent ruin fragments themselves were drawn when they were relocated through the antiquities trade and museum-driven archaeology. These images not only influenced the perception of ruins but also led to feedback loops in the built world itself. The entire culture of artificial ruins (see above) owes much to this circulation of images.

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<sup>67</sup> Jonathan Hill has drawn attention to the creative sparks that fly when the concept of the ruinous is rubbed against that of the perfect architectural work (*The Architecture of Ruins: Designs on the Past, Present and Future*, London 2019). Ruinousness becomes a concept through which 'architecture' can open itself up to multiple authorships, narratives, and layers of time. Caitlin DeSilvey (*Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving*, Minneapolis 2017), a cultural geographer, argues along similar lines when, from a post humanist perspective, she suggests that temporal or natural decay should not be seen solely as an adversary, but rather as part of a creative approach to place-making—one that forgoes the idolatry of a conceptually abstracted and always already past ideal state, and instead embraces change as a means of cultivating an open, evolving present.

<sup>68</sup> M. Makarius, *Ruinen: Die gegenwärtige Vergangenheit*, Paris 2004.



7. Gaspar van Wittel, *The Ruins of an Ancient Amphitheater*, c. 1701, pen and brown ink with gray wash over black chalk on cream laid paper, 41.7 x 54.1 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Wolfgang Ratjen Collection, Patrons' Permanent Fund ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gaspar\\_van\\_Wittel,\\_The\\_Ruins\\_of\\_an\\_Ancient\\_Amphitheater,\\_c.\\_1701,\\_NGA\\_139296.jpg?uselang=de](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gaspar_van_Wittel,_The_Ruins_of_an_Ancient_Amphitheater,_c._1701,_NGA_139296.jpg?uselang=de))

## RUINOUS FRAGMENTATION – AND PHOTOGRAPHY

The paradigmatic modern image medium, however, is undoubtedly photography. Its rapid circulation—enabled by its reproductive nature and its progressive detachment from any materially heavy or unwieldy image carrier—makes it the embodiment of a modernity defined by dynamism and mobility.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, photography's documentary function establishes an immediate connection between the medium and those artifacts that are in danger of being swept away by the very dynamism of modernity. It is there-

<sup>69</sup> T.S. Eberle, "Fotografie und Gesellschaft. Thematische Rahmung", in: *Fotografie und Gesellschaft. Phänomenologische und wissenssoziologische Perspektiven*, ed. idem, Bielefeld 2017, pp. 11–70, here: p. 26f.

fore not surprising that there has been a long-standing relationship between apparatus-based image production as an expression of modernity and ruins as symbols of the past.<sup>70</sup> Photography was employed very early for the documentation of ruins or structures threatened by decay.<sup>71</sup> This applied both to 'historical monuments' newly canonized on a national level (ill. 8) (a category of architecture that emerged at the time) and to the remnants of 'great cultures', discovered or appropriated through military or scientific expeditions.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, photography served a compensatory function where urban and architectural renewal processes took their toll or 'history' was endangered.<sup>73</sup>



8. Gustave Le Gray, *The Ramparts of Carcassonne*, photo made for Mission Héliographique, 1851, salted paper print from paper negative, 23.5 x 33.2 cm, Metropolitan Museum, New York ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Le\\_Gray,\\_Mestral,\\_Carcassonne.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Le_Gray,_Mestral,_Carcassonne.jpg))

<sup>70</sup> Although we have already examined numerous examples of ruin photography (particularly in the context of Urbex), its medial properties have yet to be explicitly highlighted.

<sup>71</sup> A. de Mondenard, *La Mission héliographique. Cinq photographes parcourent La France en 1851*, Paris 2002.

<sup>72</sup> A. Yelles, *Aux origines de la photographie archéologique de Rome en Afrique*, Dreuil-Lafage 2020.

<sup>73</sup> I.A. Tranca, *Aesthetics in Ruins: Parisian Writing, Photography and Art, 1851–1892*, Cambridge 2017.

Photography thus became a central medium of documentation but also of symbolic reflection on what was at risk or had been destroyed. Photography made—and continues to make—visible the fact that modernization always also entails ruination, and that forced innovation brings substantial losses. As we have already noted, this maelstrom eventually engulfed the architectural products of modernity themselves.

Beyond these functional or iconographic connections between ruins and photography, deeper theoretical parallels can be drawn. Both are defined by their fragmentary nature—Walter Benjamin identified precisely this as their common foundation.<sup>74</sup> The ruin is the remnant of what was once an intact, now shattered, structure. Photography, in turn, is a medium that operates more than any other through the principle of the hard-edged cut. Ruins are mere remains and traces pointing to once-integral monuments, while photography, as an indexical medium, is programmed to preserve precisely these traces. Furthermore, ruins, like photographs, can be understood as allegorical. Ruins are open to interpretation because they—like allegories—are assemblages of scattered elements that can be related and recombined in different ways depending on how they are read. Photography also isolates individual elements from their original context through framing, shifting them into new ones where they acquire different meanings. Ruins, as remnants, always point to a past life in which they were whole and vital—and thus provoke reflexive thought. Likewise, photography exists under the sign of the irretrievably lost, of temporality and mortality.<sup>75</sup> It preserves a moment from the past without resolving it into a fixed meaning. In this sense, it does not merely provide direct access to the world, as the documentary paradigm might suggest, but also opens a reflective space based on mediation rather than immediacy. Ruins—having fallen out of immediate use, yet visualizing time—have always stimulated reflection, as we have emphasized multiple times. But especially when they intersect with photography, they generate genuine *Denkbilder*—images for thought—whose interpretation will likely never be complete.

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<sup>74</sup> W. Benjamin, *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie* (Gesammelte Schriften, II, 1), ed. R. Tiedemann, p. 376; idem, *Das Passagen-Werk* (Gesammelte Schriften, V, 2), ed. R. Tiedemann, Frankfurt am Main 1991, pp. 825–826, 845–846.

<sup>75</sup> R. Barthes, *Die helle Kammer. Bemerkung zur Photographie*, Frankfurt am Main 1989, p. 88.

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## RUINOUS MODERNITY. ON THE AESTHETICS, CRITIQUE, AND MEDIALITY OF DECAY

### Summary

Ruins are a distinct architectural state, marked by decay and temporal exposure, challenging traditional monumentality. They have long fascinated through their ambivalence—oscillating between dereliction and beauty. Recently, ruins have regained theoretical attention, reflecting both material transformations (ruins of modernity) and shifting perceptions of architecture. The paper links contemporary ruin discourse with historical perspectives, showing how cultural frameworks shape their interpretation. Ruins prove to be a central starting point for exploring the significance of time in architectural perception, while also accounting for the transmedial factors involved.

Since the 18th century, ruins have been valued increasingly aesthetically rather than merely lamented as remnants of loss. The term *ruin lust* captures this shift, exemplified by Denis Diderot's reflections on decay as a poetic force. While classical ruins were dignified by history, modern ruins—especially abandoned industrial sites—lack this aura. Originally simply discarded as quickly consumed utility objects, they have since entered heritage discourse, though their status remains contested.

This engagement is reflected in Urban Exploration (Urbex), which transforms decaying spaces into sites of discovery and visual documentation. However, Urbex is often criticized as ruin porn, a voyeuristic staging of decay that ignores social and historical complexity. This ethical dilemma underscores a broader issue: the ruinous state often involves not only physical structures but also the communities displaced by decline. Beyond their social impact, ruins evoke a profound sense of the uncanny. Unlike Gothic ruins, often associated with aristocratic decline, modern ruins unsettle through emptiness and infrastructural decay. Many modernist buildings appear ruin-

ous from the outset, revealing the latent melancholy of functionalist design. Postmodernism plays with artificial ruins and ironic nostalgia, further complicating the ruin discourse by blurring the line between authenticity and staged decay.

Today, ruination extends beyond architecture to entire ecosystems. Industrial and nuclear wastelands serve as monuments to environmental collapse. Unlike classical ruins, which often harmonized with their surroundings, contemporary ruins resist integration into nature, exposing planetary instability. In this sense, ruination reflects not just the past but an uncertain future. Ruins have always been tied to media, particularly writing and photography, which preserve traces of history. Photography mirrors ruins in its fragmentary nature, capturing both historical monuments and modernity's accelerating decay. The paper shows that ruins are not just remnants but dynamic spaces of interpretation, where destruction, memory, and aesthetics intersect.

Keywords:

ruins, decay, monumentality, intermediality, photography, time