

***Flirting with ruin porn: some initial thoughts on ruination as a  
'structure of feeling'***

Over the last 9 months I have read – dipping in and out – of a considerable number of books, essays and articles on ruin and ruination. As many of us here know – and indeed are part of – there is a ***veritable ruins industry***. Writing about ruins as a form of cultural production and the visual documentation (photographs or films) of ruins has matched the ubiquity of ruined spaces which have been transformed into locations and objects of culture, heritage, tourism, commemoration, protest ..... ‘Out there’ there is considerable activity and debate about what to do with ruins and in the ‘industry’ of academia (and an industry is often what it feels like these days in universities). The multiplicity of published work on ruin emerges from so many different disciplines: geography, urban studies, archaeology, performance studies, environmental studies, ecology, sociology, cultural studies, performance studies, visual arts, history and literature. Apart from the sheer quantity of all this it’s also significant how inter- or cross-disciplinary much of this writing is – or aspires to be.

As I’ve been reading, thinking and struggling to find a perspective and frame for the book – beyond its given context – i.e. how ruins perform, how we perform in ruins, how political, social and psychological feelings and thoughts

become performed in and through ruins and – of course – those intentional and deliberate acts of performance – theatre, music, dance and live art – I’ve wrestled with both a more general challenge and a specific one. And in responding to the specific issue I think I’ve found a reasonably agreeable reply to the more general one.

The more general challenge is how, amongst this multiplicity of approaches to ruination, do I carve out an approach which does not simply reiterate what has been said before and how do I identify a methodological framework – or series of lenses – which please me and which are serendipitous and sensitive (and I use this word with deliberation and care) to my subject matter, namely theatre and performance in and through ruins. The more specific issue which I have no choice but to deal with is the issue of ‘ruinenlust’ or its more contemporary equivalent, ‘ruin porn’. It’s not simply that I have to weave my own route through the ‘ruin porn’ debate but it has obliged me to confront the sources and drivers of my own interest in ruins.

At the heart of these ruin porn discourses has been the idea and the critique that much of this visual documentation through the still photograph constitutes a form of *pornography*. A metaphor invoking the focus on a self-centred gaze and seeing urban and industrial ruination in sensational, emotional and instinctive terms. Sharing with sexual pornography a way of

seeing which is voyeuristic and which objectifies and dehumanises the objects in question. Central to this critique is the argument that ruin gazing/looking only really engenders a sense of self-satisfaction and possibly even pleasure. As academics we don't do pleasure! Akin to 'slum tourism' and debates within the documentary traditions of photography. As with other discourses around pornography I sometimes detect a certain kind of finger-wagging sternness about how we should respond to both the imagery and material reality of ruined buildings and locations. There are wrong and right ways to respond. The critique of ruin porn is largely a political one – and one which I therefore have some sympathy for – but which ultimately I find counter-productive. The argument goes something like this:

Ruin porn blinds us to the darker realities of the ruin in question, it fixes the ruin as an aesthetic object to be delighted in, pitied perhaps – the downbeat dying fall of a long drawn out *ooooooooh*, a rather pathetic lament rather than the staccato impatience of '**fucking hell how did this happen**'. A response of passivity rather than on agency. It also deflects us from looking forward beyond the ruin that we see. In their PR essay Carl and Lee quote Petursdottir and Olsen who link ruin porn to disaster porn, climate porn, eco porn and so on. They argue that ruin porn designates 'a superficial and one-eyed portrayal

of urban decay that turns social and material misery to into something seductive and aesthetically pleasing' (2014: 7)

Now I do buy much of this, but I'm still left feeling uneasy about the critique of ruin porn – and I'll tell you why. It's for these kind of reasons:

- It privileges and foregrounds an analytical and cognitive response to the ruin – at worst a deracinated and dry academicism. It privileges certain kinds of intelligence over others, to the detriment of both a more imaginative and holistic response to ruination.
- And the corollary of this is that it downplays and denigrates a sensual and instinctive response either to the visual aesthetics of the ruin or to its tough and delicate materiality.
- It offers an excluding rather than a more inclusive response to ruin – at worst a very unproductive binary. In so doing it runs the risk of downgrading or deflecting an initial sense of identification and almost visceral understanding of the narratives that the ruin image reveals in the instant/moment of watching and seeing. Almost a refusal to indulge in an act of solidarity with the ruin.
- There's a kind of 'honesty' in at least of visually owning up to its/our own desires and feelings – in contrast urban renewal commonly

aspires to efface all material and aesthetic responses to heritage and ruination.

One rejoinder to my points as that I am in turn privileging an anti-intellectual, purely sensual and materialist response to the ruin in question. That I have been seduced by the siren voices of vibrant materialism at the expense of a more overtly rigorous and ideological critical approach to ruins. I don't think so, although I certainly feel that as a heuristic tactic or strategy beginning to understand and sense the materiality of a ruin is a good starting – but almost certainly not a worthy finishing – point.

As in many cases when I'm wrestling with a perspective about matters in the world or – more prosaically and selfishly – about how to identify an approach to writing I turn to the still largely unfashionable (but less so than 20 years ago it is interesting to note) thought of Raymond Williams. I think Williams' proposal that in responding to art objects and indeed almost to any artefact we should consider both its elegance and its weight. And for art object or artefact please read 'ruin'. I propose that our approach to any ruin should operate through this dialectic of 'elegance and weight'. And this is not a binary, of course, but rather a lens that acknowledges and celebrates the complex interaction between the aesthetic and the social in our ways of seeing: Stuart Hall in an article on the life of RW quotes the man himself:

## ELEGANCE AND WEIGHT COMMENT

And finally I want to take further these ideas of elegance and weight and consider briefly the theoretical framework which Williams offers to underpin them, and this, of course, is his framework of 'structures of feeling'. As I have said many times before, I find SoF one of the most persuasive frameworks for trying to understand cultural events and practices. And I think it's immensely helpful in tackling the ruin porn issue.

For RW 'SoF' tackles that separation of the social from the personal which is still such a powerful and directive cultural force field. For RW the apparent toughness of 'structure' and the pliable softness of 'feeling' dissolve into a new productive relationship when they are harnessed together in this way. 'SoF' offers a way of acknowledging and celebrating what he calls the 'specificity of being present, the inalienably physical' with the relative fixity and explicitness of institutions, formations, rules and the structures of our lives.

For RW SoF offers a way of challenging, breaking down, rendering porous the often iron-clad distinctions between – and I quote Williams – 'the subjective as distinct from the objective; experience from belief; feeling from thought; the immediate from the general; the personal from the social.' SoF, I would argue, helps us to deal with what I believe is an inherent unsatisfactoriness with the trope of ruin porn – a way of productively encountering and rendering

generative the frequent tension between received interpretation and practical experience.

In relation to ruins I am, of course, taking liberties with W's notion of SoF by narrowing it down so that it offers I believe a very helpful way of approaching ruins and – as importantly – trying to understand the 'ruins industry' (and I include all of us in this) as a mode of cultural production. In relation to what some or maybe many commentators feel is the distasteful and de-politicised nature of 'ruin porn', an approach embracing the analytical tools of SoF allows us – for a time anyway – to ride with the so-called pornographic or lust-full elements of gazing at ruins, to work with and not against the desires and yearnings so engendered and to reflect curiously and critically on these feelings so as to understand more deeply the current cultural ubiquity of the apparent pleasures of encountering ruins and ruination.

I finish by quoting RW again from his book 'Marxism and Literature' in a chapter entitled 'structures of feeling'

**QUOTE P132.**

## Some questions to ask a ruin:

### The lens' of history, politics and economics

- How did you arrive in this state of ruination?
- What was your function and activity before you fell into ruin?
- What kind of decision-making and economic circumstances propelled you into ruin?
- Who owned you and who made the decision(s) that you should be stripped of your original function?
- What were your connections with the community around you – and with the wider world?
- What are these connections now?
- What were the consequences for others of your transition into ruination?
- Who benefited from your loss of function and slide into ruination?

### Materiality and space

- Where are you spatially in relation to your surrounding environment?
- How much space do you occupy?
- What kind of space do you occupy – for example, urban, suburban, rural, coastal, flat or mountainous?
- How long have you been in this space?
- What is your future in this space?
- What materials were you made of?
- What materials now compose your site?
- What senses does your site most trigger? Colour, touch, smell, sound ...?
- What kind of atmospheres does your site generate?
- How has your decline into ruin effected the spatial networks and connections you once had?

### Strata and layers

- How many layers of history does this ruin possess?
- What are 'layers' in this context: material, social, psychological, political, imaginary?
- What memories does this ruin engender?
- Whose memories are stored in this ruin?
- What collective or communal memories does this ruin provoke?
- How reliable are these memories?
- How do we decide whether these memories are reliable or not?
- Does it matter if they are not reliable?
- Whose bodies are remembered by this ruin?
- Whose bodies are remembering this ruin?

## Ruin ecologies

- What are the past, present and future ecologies in this ruin?
- What kind of life forces are still present in this ruin?
- What new and future life forces might be present in your ruin?
- What does this ruin tell us about relationship between nature/the natural and human constructions and materials?
- How does this ruin problematize notions of the 'natural'?
- How might an approach towards ruination engage with environmental and ecological concerns?

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