

book review

Ruins of (European) Modernity

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Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (eds)

Ruins of Modernity

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In February 2009, I went for a weekend trip to the mountains north of my then Tokyo home to visit a hot spring town highly popular during the twentieth-century Japanese economic boom. Massive increases in tourists to the town had resulted in large-scale developments that encroached on the town's eponymous river—Kinugawa. Hotels descended down the cliffs on either side to give visitors a closer view of the vibrant blue waters. Restaurants and theme parks proliferated and an express train ran into the town from the capital.

The postwar Japanese boom was not to last and with its end in the 1990s came an inevitable decline in domestic tourism and a corresponding death of much of the town's industry. Now, the town is in decay. Hotels and restaurants are largely abandoned, rusting hulks seemingly at risk of a slow slide into the waters below.

The story is the same in much of rural and regional Japan. Head a couple of hours in any direction from Tokyo and you will see towns like this one.

In the years since the bubble burst, the ruins of Japanese modernity have come to take on a life of their own. While conventional tourists have dried up, a new breed of *haikyo* (ruin) enthusiasts has emerged—artists, photographers and adventurers who explore the decaying remains of the modern Japanese economic ‘miracle’. Glossy books and online photo sharing sites abound. Interest in the aesthetics of ruins and ruins tourism is growing. This has also drawn official attention, with a recent push for World Heritage listing of the so-called modern industrial heritage sites of Kyushu and Yamaguchi in the south.

Ruins also have historic resonances in Japan. Those born in the immediate postwar period have been referred to as the *yakeato* (burnt-out ruins) generation, a reflection of the flattened landscapes of much of urban Japan as a result of Allied bombing. The atomic bomb sites of Hiroshima and Nagasaki feature ruins in their memorial processes, most notably the Hiroshima Peace Dome. Japan’s precarious perch on a range of seismic faultlines also renders the prospect of ruinous catastrophe an ever-present reality for many Japanese, as was seen in the recent earthquake and tsunami tragedy.

This brings me to the book under consideration. It is first worth pointing out that *Ruins of Modernity* does not deal with any of the above. As German and Russian scholars respectively, the editors Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle have an understandable focus on Europe and the (North) Atlantic world. Yet given the above discussion, this absence is an immediately apparent flaw.

Despite its Enlightenment origins, the modernity in the book’s title was not an entirely European project, which the editors hint at in their introduction: ‘This story of imperial legacies, (colonial) empires, and their ruins is familiar, and it seemed to be a story of European ruins. But after 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, it has become an American story, too.’ (3) This slight (and oddly recent) expansion of their category of European modernity to the Americas fails to recognise that, at least from the late nineteenth century, modernity and its attendant systems of imperialism, colonialism and industrial capitalism were not constrained to the European continent or its powers. The United States may have remained largely confined to the Americas due to non-interventionist interpretations of its Monroe doctrine

(although even that is arguable), but mass industrialisation, imperial expansion and many of the other precursors to the modern ruins discussed in this volume occurred in East Asia, with Japan. Of course, these processes were also taking place in European colonies in Asia and the Pacific.

Modern Japanese thinkers have also been interested in the aesthetic, political and philosophical understandings of ruins, particularly after each of the decimations of Japan in the twentieth century (the war, the atomic bombings, the bursting of the economic bubble and multiple natural disasters). Because of the centrality of cycles of destruction in the story of Japanese modernity, these theorists have often had different understandings to what Hell and Schönle describe as the 'potential vacuity of meaning' in the 'semantic instability of the ruin'. (6)

While it is not entirely uncommon to see Japan left out of the history of modernity, an additional absence is in the volume's failure to address in any substantive way one of the core practical and potential causes of modern ruins in the twentieth century—nuclear weapons. With the exception of a passing reference to Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Andreas Huyssen's otherwise excellent opening contribution, a couple of brief mentions in the very interesting chapter by Anthony Vidler on modernist architecture after the destruction of World War II and its presence through absence (except for scale models) in Jonathan Veitch's piece on nuclear test sites in the US state of Nevada, the Bomb does not appear. This may be explained in part by the decline in popular concern about nuclear power over the last few decades, although Veitch's description of the atom as 'passé' strikes a discordant tone in the aftermath of Fukushima. (321)

Regardless, the volume, which emerged out of a long-term project of the authors, covers interesting ground. With twenty-four contributors the scope is large and the editors have chosen to break up the contributions into thematic sections. Part one is structured around themes of catastrophe, utopia and architecture, with Huyssen and Vidler joined by Vladimir Paperny and Svetlana Boym, who write at the intersection of modernism and architecture. The articles in this section are universally strong, with Boym's discussion of Vladimir Talin's proposed but never realised Monument to the Third International particularly interesting. Boym argues that the 'ruinous' design of the monument—spiral, skeletal and open-ended—failed

at its attempts to capture overlapping social and artistic revolutions, instead 'commemorating its opposite: the collapse of the utopian aspiration'. (70)

This connection between form and ideal, destruction and utopia, carries over into the second section, which focuses on political deployments of 'ruins'. Again we begin in Russia, with Tolstoy's adaption of the 1812 Moscow burning in *War and Peace*. Andreas Schönle identifies an emancipatory potential of ruins in Tolstoy's writing, that somehow the ruins help 'ground the emergence of a new sense of community while restoring a multilayered sense of time'. (90) As with several others in the volume, Schönle draws on Walter Benjamin, highlighting an affective difference between his melancholic history—'ruin' as catastrophe—and Tolstoy, who sees history also as ruinous but by way of 'uncontrollable and unfinalizable transformation', not necessarily ceaseless decay. (100) Russell A. Berman picks up a similar thread in arguing that modern ruins always represent the death of an *ancien régime*. For Berman, the ruin of the past is therefore the precondition for democracy—past regimes must be destroyed. The path to any imagined democratic future, regardless of political philosophy, is 'strewn with rubble', (104) whether this future be liberal democracy (born from the French and American revolutions); neo-conservatism (emerging from external imposition, as, for example, in Iraq); or revolutionary leftism (the necessary ruin of the existing order realises the democracy to come). Berman's journey through the connections between liberalism, democracy, violence and ruins is one of the volume's more wide-ranging and interesting contributions.

The connection between past and present infuses the final three contributions to this section. Jonathan Bolton contributes a fascinating discussion of the metaphor of the ruin during the short-lived Czechoslovakian Second Republic (1938–39), a metaphor destructive of the former order while retaining counter-metaphors of construction and cleansing. Past (though defeated) regimes remain present in their ruins. Amir Eshel discusses the historic Zionist silence around the expulsion of Palestinian residents of Haifa alongside contemporary artistic and memorial activities in the sites of their now ruined homes to argue that there is a tension between contemporary ruins as both sites with histories and sites shaped by history. This tension, for Lucia Saks, is revealed in the (South African) city itself,

which functions in a complex relation to capitalism—accordion-like as its borders shift in and out through cycles of expansion and contraction, construction and decay.

The third part of the volume continues the focus on representation, with a particular interest in the ruins of (European) Empire. Julia Hell discusses how the permanent spectre of imperial decline featured in Nazi thought and identifies a particularly Nazi imperial imagination, one that fused imperial creation with 'sublime destruction' to reveal a knowing and profoundly awful awareness of future decline. (188) Todd Samuel Presner re-evaluates the narratives of modernity through a 'contrapuntal' reading of Hegel and W.G. Sebald, after Edward Said. Presner's reading reveals the ruinous literary and political landscape of post-imperial Europe, reinforcing Said's argument that 'Europe is already divided against itself, internally fractured by and comprised of the very forces that it supposedly believes exist only outside'. (195) The place of ruins in imperial storytelling is also a feature of Jon Beasley-Murray's contribution, which centres on a small village in Peru built around a major Inca site. Stories of that site infuse later political projects, from those of the conquistadors through to Maoist guerrillas, and this storytelling, Beasley-Murray contends, reveals that 'ruins inspire and legitimate narratives of power, and sometimes also of counterpower'. (213) The third section concludes with two shorter pieces by Daniel Herwitz on the conflicting desires in South Africa between memorialisation and celebrated ruination when it comes to the apartheid state's founding moment, the Boer War; and by Rahul Mehrotra, on the tension between the static and the kinetic in Indian cities—of concrete permanence versus embodied motion, architecture versus space. Unfortunately these two pieces, Mehrotra's in particular, are quite brief and their brevity reads as a belated nod to a too European focus in the volume as a whole.

The book's fourth section is dubbed Post/Ruinscapes. Helmut Puff and Kirsten Barndt both deal with German ruins, Puff to explore three-dimensional models of urban ruins in German public institutions and Barndt to examine transformations of industrial ruins in postindustrial Germany, similar to those in Japan with which I opened this review. Barndt intriguingly suggests that the 'transformation of the Fordist landscape of production into a post-Fordist landscape of recreation has opened up the historical horizon' to allow for a German reappraisal of the immediate past. (291) Industrial ruins also feature in George Steinmetz'

juxtaposition of 'colonial melancholy' in Namibia and 'Fordist nostalgia' in Detroit, and Veitch's exploration of atomic test sites, mentioned above. The contrast Steinmetz sets up is at first glance unusual, but succeeds in drawing together melancholia and nostalgia through a common dissatisfaction with the present, and in arguing that both sites represent lost white rule, a line that connects his chapter with those of the earlier grouping. It also resonates with the final chapter in the section, a discussion by Gustavo Verdesio of archaeology's connection with colonialism and regimes of visibility.

The final section is also concerned with visibility, taking ruin gazing as a core motif of philosophy and aesthetics. The contributions range from Alexander Rieger's consideration of the role of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake in the development of modern thought and Tatiana Smoliarova's discussion of the ruin in the poetry of Russian literary great Derzhavin, through two chapters on film—Johannes von Moltke on 'ruin cinema' and Eric Rentschler on postwar rubble films—to a final discussion of the everyday snapshots of Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov by Helen Petrovsky.

Overall, the volume is expansive and it is this expansiveness that renders the European dominance of the contributions most disappointing. While the individual chapters are generally strong and in many cases extremely interesting, it is a shortcoming that half of these are based on German and Russian examples. In addition to the absence of Japan, discussed above, later European (particularly French) re-evaluations of ruins such as by Derrida, are also absent. What the book does offer, however, is a substantial collection of writers working within particular modern European philosophical traditions. As such, the volume constitutes a unique and important contribution to the study of European modernity and its attendant aesthetic and political outputs. The book should be read with an awareness of its gaps, but it should be read.

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