

Paradoxical Ruins

An Essay on the Deadlocks of Debris

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A stone idol moves its lips:
it is the city

*Tomas Tranströmer:
November in Former East Germany*

Cogito ergo boom

At the beginning of this century, the literary critic Andreas Huyssen diagnosed a curious phenomenon at odds with the enthusiasm inaugurated by the new millennium. Rather than embracing the promises of a future powered by modernity running amok, from the utopian community designed by technology to the softening of ideological tensions brought about by the professed end of history, Huyssen saw a different picture. Spread throughout the art world, in picture books, films, and exhibitions, since at least the previous decade, he perceived, embedded in these manifestations, a peculiar flirtation with nostalgia. This specific type of longing seemed to be proposing an inquiry about several of the heirlooms bequeathed by the century that had just ended. In Huyssen's words, it was a 'nostalgia for the monuments of an industrial architecture of a past age that was tied to a public culture of industrial labour and its political organization'.¹ Starting from architecture, constitutive elements of life as we had known it were now inviting inspection through the filter of nostalgia. However, instead of a calcified image, a domesticated version of the ghosts of an earlier era, Huyssen identified in this disposition a specific cipher, one capable of making nostalgia more active, more temporally dynamic. In the centre of an 'indissoluble combination of spatial and temporal desires', there was the ruin.

Thus, interpreted as a material and symbolic reminder of the transitory nature of life, as an elegant destabiliser of our firmest certainties, the ruin could function as a sweeping notion able to address many of modernity's crimes and potentials, offering new ways to reimagine the future through the critical

1 Andreas Huyssen: Nostalgia for Ruins. In: Grey Room, 23 (2006), pp. 6–21, here p. 8.

inspection of the past. That is, the ruin was not just employed in the manifestations identified by Huyssen as a cypher by activating a particular form of nostalgia. Instead, it could propose a glimpse into an alternative future through what another literary critic, the late Svetlana Boym, termed ‘reflective nostalgia’. In this sense, ‘the history of nostalgia’, she suggested, ‘might allow us to look back at modern history not solely searching for newness and technological progress but for unrealized possibilities, unpredictable turns and crossroads.’² One way to do this was through the notion of ruin and its literal and metaphorical implications.

For her part, Boym also analysed the momentum behind the new surge of ruins. In 2011, she noticed the phenomenon, qualifying it. In her words, ‘the early 21st century exhibits a strange ruinophilia, a fascination for ruins that goes beyond postmodern quotation marks’,³ meaning that ruins were no longer mentioned, discussed, and configured in the interior of artistic practices as a mere section of repertoire, a plain and ordinary component of the massive array of materials that postmodernists were accustomed to borrowing from time to time; rather, as Boym saw it, ruins were now being used according to their own coordinates, a treatment faithful to the concept propagated by ruins *themselves*.⁴

But what would that entail? What is the language that the ruins utter? Furthermore, what is the reason behind the contemporary interest in ruins, the ‘ruin craze’ that Huyssen diagnosed, the ‘ruinophilia’ that Boym qualified?

A little over a century ago, Georg Simmel intuited something about the dialectical reverberations promulgated by the ruins. In his seminal essay, the philosopher suggested that, at the core of that shattered appearance, within the structure whose texture accuses history, there would be a kind of constructivist content, a tense conjugation that points to another possible, different world, built precisely from debris. The tensions of the past, the present, and the future would be associated, in a dialectical way, in the very essence of those abandoned structures, forging both a mirror and a promise. Paradoxically, according to Simmel, it would be in decadent times that the improbable formalisation of the ruins would prosper in a better way. The intimacy between ruin and the fall would combine more harmoniously with moments inclined to ‘an understanding open to everything’, moments that ‘precisely signify the coming together of all

2 Svetlana Boym: *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books 2001, p. xvi.

3 Svetlana Boym: *Ruinophilia: Appreciation of Ruins: Atlas of Transformation*, <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/r/ruinophilia/ruinophilia-appreciation-of-ruins-svetlana-boym.html> (accessed 22.07.2022).

4 Both Huyssen and Boym refrain from giving concrete examples. Simply to avoid riding in the dark, I think it is appropriate to mention a few names at this point: artists coming from such diverse practices and backgrounds as, for instance, Tacita Dean and W.G. Sebald, both gaining prominence in the 1990s, the decade that the analysts were investigating. Plus, both were part of the ‘northern transatlantic’ addressed by Huyssen. Yet, one could easily find other examples of cultural manifestations involving work with ruins elsewhere, and artists beginning to do so almost at the same time, like the Brazilians Nuno Ramos and Adriana Varejão. The practices of these and many other artists, as well as the interpretations essayed by their critics, at one point or another, stumble upon the notion of ruin.

contrary aspirations.⁵ In the deteriorated appearance of the ruin, in what once had indicated function, concreteness, and purpose, in short, decadence, would be found a more perfect representation, materialised and tensely stabilised. ‘And yet’, in Susan Sontag’s words, as she once considered the question, ‘the equally incontestable result of all this genius is our sense of standing in the ruins of thought and on the verge of the ruins of history and of man himself. (Cogito ergo boom.)’⁶

For sure, our era has also been considered decadent, among other labels. As Ross Douthat pointed out, however, being imprisoned in an eternal loop of repetition and stagnation, both economic and cultural, is not the only horizon available, for ‘a decadent era could give way instead to a recovery of growth and creativity and purpose’, thus echoing Simmel’s prediction and the potential granted by the ruins to promote another future.⁷ Would that be a response to the inflation of ruins in our times? Are these ruins indeed a sign of this claimed decadence and the possibility of continuation afterward?

The editor and curator Brian Dillon attempted a comprehensive panorama in trying to understand this surge of ruins in our historical time:

At the close of the last decade, economic ruin led to a rash of images of architectural and urban-planning disaster – housing developments that would never be inhabited, office blocks that could not be completed – and a renewed awareness of the long decline of major industrial sites and cities of the last century: the plight of Detroit became the prime example. In general, a sense of the waning of the modernity and modernism of the twentieth century was in the air, alongside an awareness of the decaying machinery of colonialism and a vexed nostalgia of the aesthetic forms and iconography of the former Soviet Bloc. At the same time, the prospect of planetary ruination though climate change – a lingering disaster to replace the swift nuclear one imagined half a century ago – did not fail to nourish further ruinous fantasies and apprehensions.⁸

Many artists indeed share a similar reading of the world. To denounce it, eventually, they might sometimes use the ruin, in some sort of mimetic approximation. To confront the issues delineated above, they may try to use some of the

5 Georg Simmel: Die Ruine. In: Georg Simmel: Jenseits der Schönheit: Schriften zur Ästhetik und Kunstphilosophie. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2008, pp. 34–41, here p. 41, translation by the author.

6 Susan Sontag: ‘Thinking Against Oneself’: Reflections on Cioran. In: Susan Sontag: Styles of Radical Will. London: Penguin 2009, pp. 74–95, here p. 75. According to Sontag’s biographer, Benjamin Moser, ‘the notion of philosophy among the ruins (of a culture, of a life) would become central to Sontag’s writing’ after the essay on Cioran. Benjamin Moser: Susan Sontag: Her Life and Work. New York: HarperCollins 2019, p. 139. Moreover, in the same book (p. 381) Moser claimed that Walter Benjamin held a special place in Sontag’s ‘pantheon’ because, among other reasons, they shared some of the same predilections: ‘collecting and books, fragments and ruins.’

7 Ross Douthat: The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success. New York: Avid Reader Press 2020, p. 10.

8 Brian Dillon: A Short History of Decay. In: Brian Dillon: Ruins (Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary art). Cambridge: MIT Press 2011, pp. 10–19, here p. 10.

variations proposed by the ruin, such as the fragment, the decay, debris, and the unfinished. However, it is fair to say that Dillon's evaluation, albeit perceptive, tends to deposit too much on the ruins' capability to make sense of the world. As a metaphor, it assimilates too much, from architectural disaster to the climate catastrophe. Undeniably, the general outline, reading from afar, might look monochromatic. Still, once considered individually, all these phenomena can invite different perceptions so that the notion of ruin can sound as arbitrary as anything else. Consequently, the inflation of meaning built into the notion of ruins as of late has rendered them the opposite of what their contemporary critics perceived and praised them for at the beginning of this century, thus extracting whatever critical power the ruin still had to address the pressing topics of the social, political, environmental, and cultural realms at large.

To test this hypothesis, we will now dislocate the discussion to another place – using a different tone, too, a more concrete one this time – to verify whether the critical charge verified in the ruins in the 'northern transatlantic', as assumed by Huyssen and implied in both Boym's and Dillon's panoramas, can ring true elsewhere. In doing so, I will argue that the ruin as a critical tool perhaps does not find as much critical traction in some parts of the world as it does in others. If the ruins are historically bound, they probably are geographically as well.

A Night in Rio de Janeiro

On the night of 2 September 2018, the National Museum, located in Rio de Janeiro, went up in flames. Almost two hundred years old, the museum, the former residence of the Portuguese royal family and later of the Brazilian imperial family, was dedicated to the natural sciences and anthropology. It was one of the largest institutions of its kind in the Americas, housing around 20 million catalogued items before the fire (caused by a malfunction in the air conditioning system). Of these, 92.5 percent were destroyed: approximately 18.5 million items, including the historic building itself.

The dimensions of the devastation resist comprehension. Among the losses is the most significant portion of the anthropological collections linked to the Amerindian cultures; Luzia, the oldest human fossil ever found in South America, about 13,000 years old, was believed to have perished completely (her skull was later found in a fragmented state). A whole other Brazil and its memory shattered, perhaps forever. One of the rare exceptions to the destruction was the Bendegó meteorite, the largest iron meteorite ever found on Brazilian soil, discovered in 1784 in Bahia. It came out practically unscathed from the fire – a reminder, perhaps, that ruins are always human, all too human.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, a professor at the university affiliated with the National Museum, the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, issued a statement:

With the anger we are all feeling, my will is to leave that ruin as a *memento mori*; as a memory of the dead, of dead things, of dead people, of dead files, destroyed in this fire. I would not build anything in that place. And, above all, I would not try to

hide, delete this event, pretending that nothing happened... I would like it to remain in ash, in ruins, with only the façade standing, so that everyone could see and remember – a memorial.⁹

Full of passion and anger, Viveiros de Castro's declaration (given, ironically, to a Portuguese newspaper) associated the disaster with some of its flagrant causes: carelessness, administrative sloppiness, the infamous lack of attention to the cultural and historical domain by Brazil's politicians as well as a part of its people. Yet, the account struck a chord, touching upon a tendency of more general reverberations that goes beyond Brazil itself and its specific conditions. The emphasis issued by Viveiros de Castro for the collapsed museum to remain as a ruin is based on a grander scheme, tied to the idea that ruins are capable of provoking reflection and denunciation, as we have seen thus far. Likewise, it assumes that the ruins would be able to address and criticise a world that has already been, now solidified in the material wreckage. As such, the ruins could promote a world to come, erected from the remnants of political agendas, from the aesthetic ideas and social contracts that were abandoned with flagrant indifference along the way during Brazil's formation. Thus, an illuminated awareness would come out of the fragments and tell a story, acting as a memorial. The suggestion is noteworthy and consequential, not to mention intellectually timely, demanding deeper consideration and begging the question: Even if the competent authorities were to follow Viveiros de Castro's will, would such a memorial succeed in Brazil? To answer this, we must understand the nature of memorials.

Giulio Carlo Argan, the art historian and a former mayor of Rome, believed there were two types of cities, the real city and the ideal city, and that 'there is always an ideal city in or under the real city'.¹⁰ While the notion of a real city is self-evident, the ideal city requires a little explanation: 'the hypothesis of the ideal city', Argan clarifies, 'implies the concept that the city is representative or visualiser of concepts or values, and that the urban order not only reflects the social order but the metaphysical or divine reason of the urban institution.'¹¹ This order emerged in the Renaissance, and as cities grew, a dialectical negotiation between the real and the ideal unfolded. By its turn, instead of an ideal city to influence the creation of the real city, Brazil was shaped according to what we could call a 'possible city'. Given the harsh geographical conditions of the 'new' terrains to the Europeans, the distance of many cities from the shore, the lack of proper manpower, and above all the idea that Brazil, initially, was to be an extraction colony and not a settler colony, prompted its colonisers to occupy the new land in ways that one could not call 'organised'. Transplanted to a colony on the other side of the Atlantic, the Portuguese were not that concerned with the construction of cities like the ones then seen across Europe, with a distinct design, a cohesive

- 9 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. *Gostaria que o Museu Nacional permanecesse como ruína, memória das coisas mortas*. In: Público, 4 September 2018, translation by the author.
- 10 Giulio Carlo Argan: *Cidade ideal e cidade real*. In: Giulio Carlo Argan: *História da arte como história da cidade*, transl. Pier Luigi Cabra. São Paulo: Martins Fontes 2014, pp. 73–84, here p. 73, translation by the author.
- 11 Argan (see note 10), p. 74.

and fabricated historical narrative. ‘This exploration of the tropics’, the eminent historian Sérgio Buarque de Holanda explains, ‘was not, in fact, carried out by a methodical and rational enterprise, it did not emanate from a constructive and energetic will: it was done with carelessness and a certain abandon.’¹² It follows from there that, if the rationale verified elsewhere cannot be used to interpret Brazil, it may be that the historical ballast expected of its memorials may agonise to achieve their narrative objective. That is, they cannot thrive properly in an urban context whose history, itself, has never had the weight one observes, for instance, in the northern transatlantic. The art historian Alois Riegl wrote in 1903, for instance, that some types of memorials – particularly the ones that encompass the ruins – were vested with what he called an *Alterswert*, that is, a value of antiquity, which was something that could be perceived by everyone, regardless of background.¹³ Such a shared understanding of memorial, it turns out, could never be applied to a postcolonial landscape. Thus, encountered as a blank slate, a utopia where all dreams and desires could be freely pursued, Brazil has undergone centuries of colonisation accordingly. ‘In Brazil,’ someone once said, ‘even the past is unpredictable.’¹⁴ The mixture of ethnicities that formed the country, the religious regime, the distance of the colony from the metropole – there are many reasons for the somewhat deficient formation of a Brazilian history, and of a historical sensitivity itself. Something that generates, in the end, memorials appealing to little-known chapters of national history, and identification deficits with both the so-called national heroes and their tormentors. History is not a given. Perhaps, memorials are better suited for locations elsewhere.

What is the Language of the Stones?

As is well-known, Germany underwent complex considerations regarding the afterlife of the spoils of war. In the architectural realm, the question was what to do with what was still standing and, especially, how to reconstruct a nation without re-invoking the elements that had drawn it to the abyss. Endless discussions occurred in the decades following the conflict on what to make of the physical remnants of the defeated regime and the ruined land: To build it again, like before? Or to declare the land a blank slate and pretend that the future has no ties to the past? The goal, notwithstanding, was simple: the horror should never happen again. Thus, every detail should be observed to avoid commemorating (involuntarily or not) the recent barbarism or inciting similar manifestations that could make the future a repetition of the past.

One good solution was crystallised in the reconstruction of the Reichstag in the 1990s, the building that houses the Bundestag, the lower house of Germany’s parliament. It was argued that the building supposedly managed to conjugate

12 Sérgio Buarque de Holanda. *Raízes do Brasil*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras 2015, p. 49, translation by the author.

13 Alois Riegl: *Der moderne Denkmalkultus: Sein Wesen und Seine Entstehung*. Vienna and Leipzig: W. Braumüller 1903, p. 28.

14 The quote is attributed to the economist and former Finance Minister Pedro Malan.

the various traces of Berlin's history, rendering somewhat a model for how the country should negotiate with its most recent past. Norman Foster, the architect responsible for its reconstructions and recontextualisation, said the following regarding his intentions: 'I came to realize that the Reichstag's fabric bears the imprint of time and events more powerfully than any exhibition could convey. I was convinced that it should not be sanitized. Preserving these scars allows the building to become a living museum of Germany's history.'¹⁵ The building, therefore, was conceived to preserve many of the traces of its history, from the imperial grandeur of its proportions and angles to the graffiti left on its walls by the Red Army when it entered Berlin at the end of the war. Still, such a generous view of the past was not uncontroversial, as the past sometimes has a way of returning uninvited.

The architect Rem Koolhaas, for one, made the following caustic observation on the rebuilding of the Reichstag and adjacent public buildings in Berlin:

To simply put a new head on a building that had an incredibly ambiguous history is innocent, or perverse, whatever you want to call it. [...] Only now are all these civil servants realizing that they actually have to inhabit Nazi buildings as their new ministries, with the anxieties that emanate from that, that demand exorcism – but do glass and steel still drive out evil spirits?¹⁶

The aim of reconstructing prominent buildings, of course, has always been to shape these buildings so that they can serve as a particular kind of symbol of the nation's contemporary intentions. The Reichstag was conceived to serve as a symbol of the new country, that is, open, eco-friendly, tolerant, energy-efficient, modern, progressive, transparent, and democratic. Besides this, it was also supposed to be a structure aware of its past crimes but able to design a different future loaded with those new values. However, as Koolhaas suggested, good intentions and sophisticated architectural and design concepts are not enough to purify the building from its past connotations. The future does not simply unfold out of renovated walls.

Indeed, Koolhaas' criticism may sound somewhat metaphysical, not to mention lacking on empirical evidence. Nonetheless, it is worth paying attention to his language, sustained by terms expelled from the realm of the rational world, such as 'evil spirits' and 'exorcism'. Far from mere metaphors, maybe they indicate the degree of non-accountable, non-rational features that inform our relationship to buildings, as in fact anything else. The renaissance cities described by Argan, his confidence in a unique form of relationship between features and inhabitants, his absolute trust in reason as the ultimate designer of these cities, are simply not able to encompass all the inexpressible dynamics that inform our everyday life. Consequently, the response a memorial utters might vary enormously, since it is not based solely on predication known beforehand. Rather, it can evoke several

15 Norman Foster. *Architecture and History*. In: Norman Foster (ed.): *Rebuilding the Reichstag*. New York: The Overlook Press 2000, p. 77.

16 Rem Koolhaas. Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist. In: Hans Ulrich Obrist – Interviews, vol. 3, ed. by Thomas Boutoux. Milan: Charta 2003, pp. 507–528, here p. 512.

other considerations, unfathomable at first by its creators, something that can lead to exceeding politicisation of the matter, turning a memorial or a building into much more than it should. To avoid such radicalisation, the late historian Tony Judt envisaged how the receptions of memorials should be considered:

Maybe all our museums and memorials and obligatory school trips today are not a sign that we are ready to *remember* but an indication that we feel we have done our penance and can now begin to let go and *forget*, leaving the stones to remember for us. I don't know: the last time I visited Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, bored schoolchildren on an obligatory outing were playing hide-and-seek among the stones. What I *do* know is that if history is to do its proper job, preserving forever the evidence of past crimes and everything else, it is best left alone. When we ransack the past for political profit – selecting the bits that can serve our purposes and recruiting history to teach opportunistic moral lessons – we get bad morality *and* bad history.¹⁷

The suggestion articulated by Judt gains a specific local vigour given that German 'culture', the sociologist Wolf Lepenies reasoned, 'has always been seen as a noble substitute for politics',¹⁸ hence advocating for a different deliberation of structures with explicit political purposes. It is a matter, in other words, of sustaining a moderation principle in the political discussions regarding memorials, monuments, buildings, and the like.¹⁹ Besides, Judt supports his point on the consideration that his generation, in a way, had done its penance – meaning their contribution to the formation of a historical sensibility responsible for situating the holocaust in its rightful place in our shared narrative.

Could the same be said about Brazil? Has the country's history been rightfully told? Can the stones of a burned museum speak for themselves at this time in the country's history?

Of course, one could only metaphorically say that ruins have their language. What they ultimately articulate, however, is bound to what they allow us, the interpreters, to perceive. Since at least Simmel and Riegl, ruins have been understood in terms of their relationship to European history in general, and that doesn't seem to have changed much in the last decades. The framework for their correct understanding, one could say, comes directly from the territory accustomed to their visit. If the ruins speak a language, their accent is European. Despite ruins' presence in other parts of the world, the criteria used to defend their use, be it as a memorial or a source of historical pride or even as an aesthetical object, still lack a broader understanding of what these structures entail. Perhaps, the interpretation of the ruins itself must go through some ruination before attesting its value. Or maybe we simply must learn their new accent.

17 Tony Judt: The 'Problem of Evil' in Postwar Europe. In: Tony Judt: When the Facts Change. New York: Penguin 2015, pp. 129–141, here p. 140, emphasis in the original.

18 Wolf Lepenies: The Seduction of Culture in German History. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006, p. 9.

19 Francis Fukuyama recently defended this principle as a key to the survival of liberalism. In: Francis Fukuyama: Liberalism and its Discontents. London: Profile Books 2022, p. 154.

Abstract

Die paradoxe Ruine

Ein Essay über Barrieren in der Betrachtung von Trümmern

Seit einigen Jahrzehnten werden Ruinen allgegenwärtig als Symbole des derzeitigen Zustands unserer Welt verwendet, da sie vermeintlich einen geeigneten metaphorischen Zugang zu solchen globalen Problemen wie Klimakatastrophe oder Demokratieabbau bieten. In diesem Beitrag wird argumentiert, dass die inflationäre Verwendung der Ruinenmetapher zu einer gewissen Abnutzung und Beliebigkeit geführt hat. Zugleich verhartet das Denken und die »Sprache der Ruinen« in einer weitgehend europäischen Rezeption. Das Beispiel des Brands im brasilianischen Nationalmuseum in Rio de Janeiro und der Debatte über die Nachnutzung des Orts verweisen auf ein anderes Verständnis von Historizität und Erinnerung – im Kontrast zu architektonischen Wiederaneignungen in Teilen Europas, für die beispielsweise das Reichstagsgebäude in Berlin steht. Vielleicht sollten wir die dominierende Form der »Sprache der Ruinen« ablegen, um neue Akzente und Dialekte dieser Sprache erlernen zu können.

