

# Ruins of a Post-Apocalyptic Present

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This chapter is a bricolage of different perspectives, inspired in part by archaeology, the discipline which has educated me, and in part by discussions with colleagues at Hamburg and Heidelberg Universities, Germany.<sup>1</sup> I will present five perspectives on ruins and add a sixth, which may be considered a concluding reflection or, rather, further thoughts.

My background and my perspective are both Western Continental European; mainly informed by German, but also by French, Dutch, and Scandinavian thought. I am sure that this perspective is not universally applicable on a continental or even global or universal scale, but I hope that it will be worth discussing which of its aspects and considerations can be inspiringly transferred to other cultural backgrounds and settings – or not – and where the limits of this Western perspective on ruins lie.

## I. Ruins

Alain Schnapp, a French classical archaeologist, in his recently published book *Une histoire universelle des ruines* defines that: ‘La ruine suppose l’action du temps ou d’un agent quelconque sur la matière d’un édifice.’<sup>2</sup> Remembering the Parthenon, the Colosseum, or the castles of the Middle Rhine Valley, most

- 1 A preliminary version of this chapter was presented as part of the *Ruinen* lecture series from which this volume resulted (Universität Hamburg, summer term 2021). It was further elaborated for a presentation at the Kaete Hamburger Center for Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Studies at Heidelberg University, Germany on 20 July 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XIHxHXXiWg> (accessed 13.03.2022). I am most thankful to the inspiring and lively discussions following both presentations as well as to the comments of both editors of this volume, from which this chapter greatly benefited; while misunderstandings, shortcomings, and faults remain my own personal intellectual property. My very special thanks go to my colleague Michael Dunn, who made sure that my linguistic inabilities were transformed into good and clear English. This research was funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) under the funding no. 01UK2103. The author is responsible for the content of this publication.
- 2 ‘A ruin implies the action of time or some other agent on the material of a building.’ Alain Schnapp: *Une Histoire Universelle des Ruines: Des Origines aux Lumières*. Paris: Seuil 2020, p. 25. [Translation: T.M.].

people will agree intuitively that ‘ruins are what is left after destruction.’<sup>3</sup> But are the remains of a wooden alpine hut, abandoned some five hundred years ago, a ruin as well? Archaeologists, including Schnapp, agree that the tiny unevenness of the ground can be labelled a ruin as well. But it takes an expert’s eye and knowledge to recognise a few worked stones, a structure, some potsherds as the remains of a hut destroyed by time. However, most people will pass by ignorantly and, even if informed of the significance of the earthen hump, will agree to Louis de Jaucourt’s encyclopaedic definition of a ruin presented more than two and a half centuries ago: ‘Ruines, s. f. pl. (Archit.) ce sont des matériaux confus de bâtimens considérables déperis par succession de tems. [...] Ruine ne se dit que des palais, des tombeaux somptueux ou des monumens publics. On ne diroit point ruine en parlant d’une maison particuliere de paysans ou bourgeois; on diroit alors bâtimens ruinés?’<sup>4</sup> Obviously, it takes more to make a ruin than the destruction of a building and some leftover stones. Jaucourt continues with the example of the Etemenanki, the so-called *Tomb of Belus*, of which little more was left at his time than the tiny remains of our alpine hut: ‘[...] qui ne sont plus qu’un monceau de briques cuites & crues maçonnées avec du bitume, & dont on ne reconnoît que le plan, qui étoit quarré.’<sup>5</sup> So what qualifies vestiges to be considered a ruin is not a question of how many material remains are visible, but it is something else; it is the remains of a destructed building plus something.

It is precisely this additional ‘something’ in which Schnapp is interested. In an earlier, more systematic essay, he states: ‘Construire des monuments gigantesques, les parer avec les matériaux les plus raffinés n’est pas suffisant. Pour plus de sûreté il importe de frapper les imaginations: La pyramide, le ‘palais sans rival’, la ‘grande muraille’ sont chacun dans leur genre des constructions si imposantes qu’elles valent autant par l’ombre qu’elles produisent [...] que par leurs qualités proprement architecturales.’<sup>6</sup> While the pyramids, for example, are perfect monuments that transcend time and inspire fantasy, texts are needed to develop and secure the monuments’ full potential as pieces of memory. Text – and this is the main message of Schnapp’s essay – is a more reliable and sustainable instrument

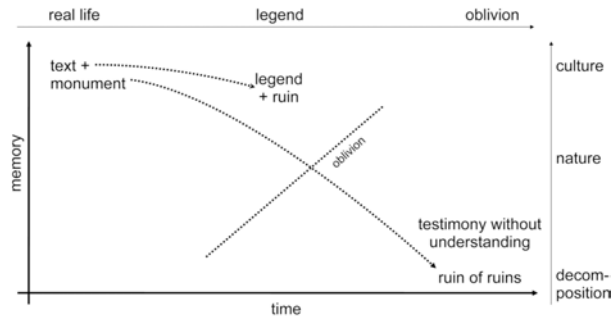
3 Peter Lamarque: The Values of Ruins and Depictions of Ruins. In: Jeanette Bicknell, Jennifer Judkins, Carolyn Korsmeyer (eds): *Philosophical Perspectives on Ruins, Monuments, and Memorials*. New York, London: Routledge 2020, pp. 83–94, here p. 83.

4 ‘Ruins, s. pl. (Archit.) these are the confused materials of considerable buildings wasted by a succession of times. [...] Ruin is said only of palaces, sumptuous tombs, or public monuments. One would not say ruin when speaking of a private house of peasants or burghers; one would then say ruined buildings.’ Louis de Jaucourt: *Ruines*. In: Denis Diderot, Louis de Jaucourt (eds): *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, tome 14. Paris: Faulche 1751 [1765], p. 433.

5 ‘[...] which are now nothing more than a heap of baked & unbaked bricks masoned with bitumen, & of which only the plan, which was quadrangular, is recognisable.’ Jaucourt 1751 [1765] (see note 4), p. 433.

6 ‘It is not enough to build gigantic monuments and to adorn them with the most refined materials. To be more certain, it is important to strike the imagination: the pyramid, the “unrivalled palace”, the “Great Wall” are each in their own way such imposing constructions that they affect as much by the shadow they produce [...] as by their architectural qualities.’ Alain Schnapp: *Ruines: Essai de Perspective Comparée*. Lyon, Paris: Presses universitaires de Lyon 2015, p. 18.

Fig. 1: Visualisation of Alain Schnapp's and Benjamin Péret's concept of monument, text, and ruin along the axis of memory and time. Graphic by Thomas Meier.



of memory than architecture.<sup>7</sup> If the text is lost, the monument turns into a 'ruin of ruins' and it is a testimony in space of past greatness that cannot be understood any longer.<sup>8</sup>

The 'ruin of ruins' was introduced by the surrealist poet and writer Benjamin Péret, who establishes a figure of thought of an immediately preceding real life, which persists as a legendary extension and in turn constitutes a ruin. But if this legendary extension vanishes for some reason – Péret calls it a missing echo in human sensibility – this ruin disintegrates into a ruin of ruins: 'La ruine n'est douée d'un éclat sulfureux que précédée immédiatement d'une vie réelle dont elle est le prolongement légendaire, jusqu'à ce que cette survie disparaisse à son tour faute d'un écho dans la sensibilité humaine.'<sup>9</sup> He elaborates:

Les ruines de l'antiquité, sarcophages sans momies d'une société sans contact émotif avec la nôtre – car sa poussière a été dispersée aux quatre coins du monde – n'offrent que des 'ci-gît' à la méditation des nécrophiles. Trop jeunes pour recéler un mystère humain, trop vieilles pour participer à la vie de la nature, elles ne sont plus guère que des pièces anatomiques conservées dans l'alcool dénaturé des musées, des squelettes reconstitués à partir du nombril ou la mine de charbon qui témoigne de l'existence antérieure d'une forêt.<sup>10</sup>

The ruin of ruins is thus characterised by total oblivion and disruption.

7 See also Hartmut Böhme: *Die Ästhetik der Ruinen*. In: Dieter Kamper, Christoph Wulf (eds): *Der Schein des Schönen*. Göttingen: Steidl 1989, pp. 287–304; for a different view, see Thomas Meier: *Text? An Archaeological Perspective*. In: Cecilia Ljung, Anna Andreasson Sjögren, Ingrid Berg, et al. (eds): *Tidens Landskap: En Vänbok till Anders Andrén*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press 2019, pp. 19–20.

8 Schnapp 2015 (see note 6), p. 19.

9 'The ruin is only endowed with a sulphurous glow if it is immediately preceded by a real life of which it is the legendary extension until this survival in turn disappears for lack of an echo in human sensibility.' Benjamin Péret: *Ruines: Ruine des Ruines*. In: *Minotaure* 12/13 (1939), pp. 57–65, here p. 59.

10 'The ruins of antiquity, sarcophagi without mummies of a society without emotional contact with ours – for its dust has been scattered to the four corners of the world – offer only a "here lies" to the meditation of necrophiles. Too young to harbour a human mystery, too old to participate in the life of nature, they are little more than anatomical pieces preserved in the denatured alcohol of museums, skeletons reconstituted from the navel or the coal mine that testifies to the former existence of a forest.' Péret 1939 (see note 9), p. 59.

The following figure summarises Schnapp's and Péret's concept of ruins in a diagram (see Fig. 1): Time is plotted on the abscissa and memory on the ordinate. Schnapp and Péret start at the top left with text and monument being connected. They contain a high degree of memory that turns into legend and ruin in the course of time. Further in time, there is a threshold or a borderline of oblivion; if monuments transgress this boundary, memory vanishes, and what have been ruins turn into remnants without understanding – that is, ruins of ruins. Consequently, parallel to time, another dimension runs from real life to legend to oblivion, while the dimension of memory likewise runs from culture to nature to decomposition.

## II. Place

Aleida Assmann is one of the few authors interested in the connection between memory, place, and space and material remains. Assmann introduces the category of *Generationenorte* (generational places), which are characterised by a continuous and long-term close relationship between people and a geographical place.<sup>11</sup> The place 'bestimmt die Lebens- und Erfahrungsformen der Menschen' and people impregnate the place 'mit ihrer Tradition und Geschichte'.<sup>12</sup> Fundamental to such generational places is a sense of continuity.

In contrast there are *Erinnerungsorte* (places of memory): ruins, relics, remains that stand out from their surroundings as alien: 'Das Abgebrochene ist in Überresten erstarrt und steht beziehungslos zum örtlichen Leben der Gegenwart, das nicht nur weitergegangen, sondern über diese Reste auch achtlos hinweggegangen ist. [...] Ein Gedenkort ist das, was übrigbleibt von dem, was nicht mehr besteht und gilt.'<sup>13</sup> As with Schnapp, we see the idea of disruption, but in a different constellation. What is still present at such places of memory refers, above all, to absence and passing away. It makes discontinuity tangible: 'Sofern sie [...] kontext- und wissenslos in eine fremd gewordene Welt hineinragen, werden sie zu Monumenten des Vergessens.'<sup>14</sup> While for Schnapp it is memory and monuments that are in the foreground, for Assmann it is oblivion and absence: in her opinion, for such places of memory to exist, a substitute story must be told that replaces the past milieu that is lost. This supplementary narrative is fundamentally different from continuity. It is something other than the past reality that adheres to this place, and if such a supplement does not adhere or is forgotten, the place is gone; it is nothing more than a pile of stones or even less than that.

11 Aleida Assmann: *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*. München: C. H. Beck 1999, p. 308.

12 '[...] determines people's forms of life and experience' – 'with their tradition and history'. Assmann 1999 (see note 11), pp. 308–309.

13 'The "broken off" is frozen in remnants and has no relation to the local life of the present, which has not only moved on, but has also carelessly passed over these remains. [...] A place of memory is what remains of what no longer exists and applies.' Assmann 1999 (see note 11), p. 309.

14 'Insofar as they project [...] without context or consciousness into a world that has become alien, they become monuments of oblivion.' Assmann 1999 (see note 11), p. 315.

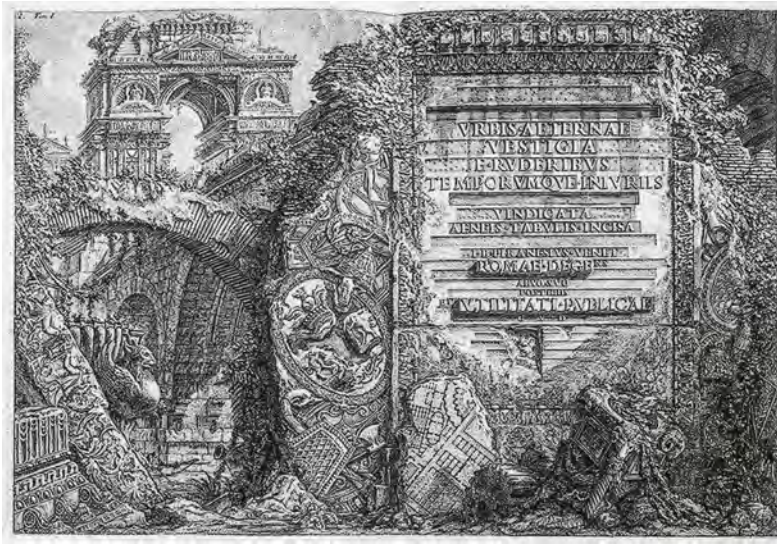


Fig. 2: Frontispiece from the first edition of Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Le Antichità Romane* (1756).

Against this background, Assmann refers to Rome, which is of particular significance in this discourse: ‘Die Ruinen Roms sind Doppelzeichen, sie kodieren sowohl Vergessen als auch Erinnerung.’<sup>15</sup>

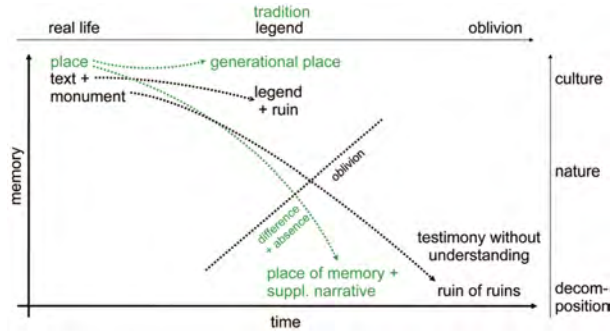
Besides major differences, Assmann and Schnapp have a lot in common: Both argue – without being explicit – under the assumption of an essentialist authenticity of the original; both take the original monument, the original meaning, and/or the original place as the ‘true’ and as their starting point.<sup>16</sup> This perspective of essentialist authenticity is in the tradition of historicism, and as such Assmann refers at length to Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s *Le Antichità Romane* 1756. In its first edition the frontispiece of the book presents an imaginary of Roman ruins, and a Latin inscription presents the motto of the book: ‘Urbis aeterna vestigia e ruderibus temporumque inuriis vindicata’ (see Fig. 2).<sup>17</sup> In Piranesi’s perception, the original remains are violated, desecrated by what has happened to them over time; it is a story of progressive loss and alienation. And it is the origin of the antiquarian gaze that is still so present in many archaeological and heritage perspectives.

15 ‘The ruins of Rome are double signifiers, they encode both oblivion and memory.’ Assmann 1999 (see note 11), p. 312.

16 Achim Saupe: Empirische, materiale, personale und kollektive Authentizitätskonstruktionen und die Historizität des Authentischen. In: Martin Fitzenreiter (ed.): Authentizität: Artefakt und Versprechen in der Archäologie. In: Internet-Beiträge zur Ägyptologie und Sudanarchäologie 15 (2014), pp. 19–26, here p. 22.

17 ‘The eternal remains of the town unleashed from the desecrations and wounds of times’. Giovanni Battista Piranesi: *Le Antichità Romane*. Vol 1. Roma: Rotili 1756, frontispiece.

Fig. 3: Visualisation of Aleida Assmann's concept of ruins (green) compared with Alain Schnapp's concept (black). Graphic by Thomas Meier.



Adding Assmann to Schnapp's diagram (see Fig. 3), she begins with place, which transforms into a generational place that is on the same level as memory.<sup>18</sup> Assmann does not call such memory a legend, but, rather, tradition, which nevertheless fulfils roughly the same function. She adds difference and absence to Schnapp's oblivion; a place that crosses this threshold turns into a place of memory plus a supplementary narrative.

Like Assmann, the French historian Pierre Nora is strongly interested in the interaction between place and memory.<sup>19</sup> Although Nora does not elaborate his theory fully, and one has to extrapolate between the lines, it becomes clear that his concept of *lieu de mémoire* is fundamentally different: Starting from Maurice Halbwachs's idea that collective memory is a fundamental constitutive of any group identity,<sup>20</sup> Nora turns the arrow of time around and starts from the group identity of France in the 1970s, more precisely from the group identity of the French middle class of that time. He follows the bourgeois collective memory back, which refers to those part(s) of French history when the world of this group was in the best order – that is, the 'great times' of the 'nation'.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, Nora's *lieux de mémoire* are conceptualised from the perspective of the present, and he traces the changes and entanglements of narratives and meanings attached to these places.<sup>22</sup> There is no place for discontinuities or for oblivion in his approach, because he neither writes a continuous teleological history, nor is he interested in an original meaning or in places that have dropped out of collective memory. Thus places, things, and meanings that have fallen into

18 Assmann's 'place' is plotted on top of Schnapp's 'monument + text' simply for practical reasons. This position does not indicate a slightly higher degree of memory.

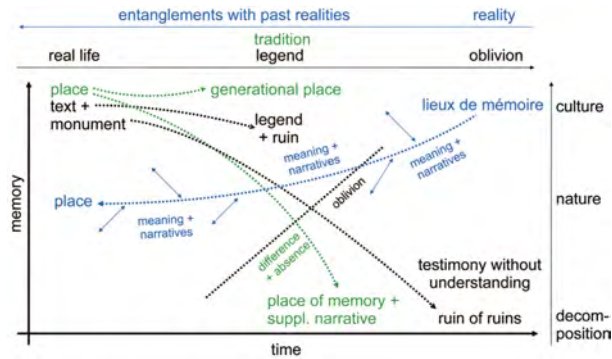
19 Pierre Nora: *Entre Mémoire et Histoire: La Problématique des Lieux*. In: Pierre Nora (ed.): *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, tome 1. La République. Paris: Gallimard 1984, pp. XV–XLII; Pierre Nora: *Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis*. Berlin: Wagenbach 1992.

20 Maurice Halbwachs: *La Mémoire Collective*. Paris: Presses Univ. de France 1950 [critical new edition by Gérard Namer. Paris: Albin Michel 1997].

21 See Ben Mercer: *The Moral Rearmament of France: Pierre Nora, Memory and the Crisis of Republicanism*. In: *French Politics, Culture and Society* 31 (2013), pp. 102–115.

22 Etienne François: *Pierre Nora und die 'Lieux de Mémoire'*. In: Pierre Nora (ed.): *Erinnerungsorte Frankreichs*. München: Beck 2005, pp. 7–14, here p. 9.

Fig. 4: Visualisation of Pierre Nora's concept of ruins (blue) compared with Alain Schnapp's (black) and Aleida Assmann's (green) concepts (for further information see the main text). Graphic by Thomas Meier.



oblivion do not come into his view, and ruins are not considered at all. However, Peter Lamarque, apparently unconsciously, briefly sketches what might be a Noraian theory of ruins by claiming that destroyed buildings may be 'classed as a ruin only if the ruin itself has acquired some significance and the destruction of the building in some sense mattered', regardless of its former grandeur or modest character.<sup>23</sup> Since significance is a value attributed in the present, such an understanding of ruins fully complies with Nora's *lieux de mémoire* and allows ruins to be included into his concept.

To include Nora in the diagram (see Fig. 4) is to start at the other end of the timeline, where a *lieu de mémoire* contains a high degree of present-day memory and culture, but is neutral in an essentialist meaning. To trace this place back in time means to consider all the meanings and narratives it has gained through entanglements with the realities of past societies and identities.

### III. Metanarrative

'Ruin' is not a universal term, but it was invented and its history is the subject of virtually all scholarly contributions on the subject: The people of the middle ages took the antique remains of Rome for granted and perceived them as *mirabilia* (marvels) without any question or care as to how these vestiges had come into being and why they were there, but vesting them into legends to support their own world view.<sup>24</sup> Only the Renaissance mind began to ask such questions, reactivating these *mirabilia* as 'ruins' and perceiving antiquity as the normative foundation of the Renaissance world itself.<sup>25</sup> The material remains constituted a kind of bridge from which it was expected that '[...] ein geheimnisvoller Funke von der Vergangenheit in die Gegenwart hinüberspringen [soll]'.<sup>26</sup> It seems

23 Lamarque 2020 (see note 3), p. 84. Neither Lamarque nor any other author in this miscellany (note 3) engages with the vast non-anglophone discourse on ruins.

24 See, for example, the still masterly study by Peter Burke: *The Renaissance Sense of the Past*. London: Arnold, 1969, p. 2; Gerlinde Huber-Rebenich, Martin Wallraff, Katharina Helden, et al.: 'Mirabilia Urbis Romae': Die Wunderwerke der Stadt Rom. Freiburg: Herder 2014, pp. 19–23.

25 Burke 1969 (see note 24), esp. pp. 21–32; compare Böhme 1989 (see note 7), pp. 291–293.

26 '[...] a mysterious spark would leap from the past to the present'. Assmann 1999 (see note 11), p. 310.

more than a coincidence that it was precisely during this period that the word 'ruin' passed from Middle Latin into French and English and established its double meaning of ruin (decay, decline) and ruin (destroyed building); only in German was the word later, around 1800, split into two words: 'Ruin (m)' and 'Ruine (f)'.<sup>27</sup>

Much more importantly, however, an aesthetic gaze of ruins developed during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Henry Home Lord Kames, an intellectual of the time, distinguishes between two types of ruins: On the one hand, there are 'Grecian ruins', that suggest 'rather the triumph of barbarity over taste; a gloomy and discouraging thought'; on the other hand, there are 'Gothic ruins' that exhibit 'the triumph of time over strength; a melancholy but not unpleasant thought'.<sup>28</sup> More than two centuries later, Aleida Assmann affirms: 'Die malerische romantische Ruine verweist weniger auf Vergangenheit als auf eine überzeitliche Dauer. Im Zustand der der Ruine nähert sich die Kultur der Natur an'.<sup>29</sup> Is romantic melancholia that Kames feels in the face of 'Gothic ruins' the mourning for futures lost, the future of the world the ruin comes from, as well as homologically the future of our own world?

It is this notion of the 'Gothic ruin' and its melancholic tone that has prevailed over the last two and a half centuries, from the genre of artificial ruins in Baroque gardens and the epoch of sentimentalism, to romanticism and the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, all the way to the current art movement of 'ruin-porn' photography.<sup>30</sup> In her review of the recent book of Alain Schnapp, Victorine de Oliveira still remarks: 'Quand la matière passe, la mélancolie demeure'.<sup>31</sup>

In this perspective 'the triumph of time over strength' (see above) is performed and expressed by nature and its forces. As the philosopher Georg Simmel notes, this is a '[...] kosmische Tragik [...] die für unser Empfinden jede Ruine in den Schatten der Wehmut rückt; denn jetzt erscheint der Verfall als die Rache der Natur für die Vergewaltigung, die der Geist ihr durch die Formung nach

27 'Ruin'. In: Wolfgang Pfeifer et al.: Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen (1993), digitalisierte und von Wolfgang Pfeifer überarbeitete Version im Digitalen Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache, <https://www.dwds.de/wb/etymwb/Ruin> (accessed 13.03.2022).

28 Henry Home Lord Kames: *Elements of Criticism in Three Volumes*, vol. III. Edinburgh: A. Kincaid & J. Bell 1762, p. 313. His distinction is cited by Rose Macaulay: *The Pleasure of Ruins*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1953, p. 25 and is received in this way (without the original source) by Assmann 1999 (see note 11), p. 315.

29 'The picturesque romantic ruin refers less to the past than to a supra-temporal perpetuity. In the state of ruin, culture converges nature.' Assmann 1999 (see note 11), p. 316.

30 See Andrea Siegmund: *Die romantische Ruine im Landschaftsgarten. Ein Beitrag zum Verhältnis der Romantik zu Barock und Klassik*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2002; Jürgen Obmann, Derk Wirtz, Philipp Groß: 'Ruiniert euch, um Ruinen zu machen': Antikisierende Ruinenarchitekturen in deutschen Gärten des 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhunderts. Weimar: VDG 2016; Jonathan Jimenez: *Naturalia: Reclaimed by Nature*. [No place]: Carpet Bombing Culture 2018.

31 'When the material passes, melancholy remains.' Victorine de Oliveira: Review of 'Une Histoire Universelle des Ruines', d'Alain Schnapp / 'Ruines', de Josef Koudelka, <https://www.philomag.com/articles/une-histoire-universelle-des-ruines-dalain-schnapp-ruines-de-josef-koudelka> (accessed 13.03.2022).

seinem Bilde angetan hat'.<sup>32</sup> The meaning of the ruin is based on the opposition between human work and the effect of nature, but in the ruin they find a new balance: it is '[...] der Reiz der Ruine, daß hier ein Menschenwerk schließlich wie ein Naturprodukt empfunden wird'.<sup>33</sup>

It would be a misunderstanding, however, to take this romantic notion of culture being transformed back into nature for an early outbreak of ecological consciousness. A letter from 1780 in which the writer, Wilhelm Heinse, reports to his friend, the philosopher and economist Fritz Jacobi, on the experience of an overnight stay in the Alps reveals a rather different attitude towards nature than ecology:

'Triumph, mein Theuerster! Ich bin auf der Höhe des Gotthardt gewesen, und habe da Abend und Morgen und eine Nacht zugebracht; [...]. Was ich da gesehen und gehört und erfahren habe, lässt sich mit keiner Zunge aussprechen und mit keiner Feder beschreiben. Ich habe den Anfang und das Ende der Welt gesehen, und zuerst alle Dinge in ihrem rechten Lichte betrachtet; ich bin mit Entzücken in die innerste, geheimste Harmonie der Wesen eingedrungen, und Herz und Geist und alle Sinne haben sich bey mir in Wonne gebadet. [...] Dieß Anschauen war das Anschauen Gottes, der Natur ohne Hülle, in ihrer jungfräulichen Gestalt; Alles groß und rein, alle die ungeheuern Massen daliegend in unendlicher Majestät!'<sup>34</sup>

Heinse ties nature to the divine in a prototypically romantic way. If culture turns into ruin and then ruin turns into nature, this process of 'naturalisation' equates to, in a romantic perspective, the return of the divine into the former sphere of culture, '[...] daß die Zerstörung der geistigen Form durch die Wirkung der natürlichen Kräfte, jene Umkehr der typischen Ordnung, als eine Rückkehr zu der "guten Mutter" – wie Goethe die Natur nennt – empfunden wird. Daß alles

32 '[...] a cosmic tragedy [...] which, to our sensibilities, places every ruin in the shadow of melancholy; for now, decay appears as nature's revenge for the rape that the spirit has inflicted on it by shaping it in its own image'. Georg Simmel: *Die Ruine*. In: Georg Simmel: *Philosophische KulturSchriften: Gesammelte Essays*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Leipzig: Kröner 2019, pp. 125–133 [first published: *Die Ruine. Ein ästhetischer Versuch*. In: *Der Tag*, no 96 of 22 February 1907, Erster Teil: *Illustrierte Zeitung* (Berlin), p. 126.

33 '[...] the fascination of the ruin, that here a human work is finally felt like a product of nature'. Simmel 1919 [1907] (see note 32), p. 127.

34 'Triumph, my dearest! I have been on the summit of [mount] Gotthard, and have spent evening, morning, and night there [...]. What I have seen and heard and experienced there cannot be expressed with a tongue or described with a pen. I have seen the beginning and the end of the world, and first I have seen all things in their proper light; I have penetrated with delight into the innermost, most secret harmony of beings, and heart and spirit and all the senses have bathed themselves in delight with me. [...] This contemplation was the contemplation of God, of nature without a veil, in its virginal form; everything great and pure, all the immense masses lying there in infinite majesty!' Wilhelm Heinse: *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 10. *Briefe 2. Von der italienischen Reise bis zum Tode*; ed. by Carl Schüddekopf. Leipzig: Insel 1910, p. 39, no. 119 of 10 September 1780. Compare Dieter Groh: *Von den schrecklichen zu den erhabenen Bergen. Zur Entstehung ästhetischer Naturerfahrung*. In: Heinz-Dieter Weber (ed.): *Vom Wandel des neuzeitlichen Naturbegriffs*. Konstanz: Universitätsverlag 1989, pp. 53–95; revised in: Ruth Groh, Dieter Groh: *Weltbild und Naturaneignung: Zur Kulturgeschichte der Natur*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1996, pp. 92–149.

Menschliche “von Erde genommen ist und zu Erde werden soll” erhebt sich hier über seinen tristen Nihilismus.<sup>35</sup> This thinking did not necessarily focus on the Christian God, but could include any kind of spirits that were located in or associated with nature, which ultimately established the ruin as a (potentially) haunted place. The romantic juxtaposition of culture with the divine and the spirits of nature paved the way for the idea of the wrath of nature, which became prominent in 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectual circles. Although it later turned out that the collapse of the railway bridge over the Firth of Tay in 1879 had been caused by botched ignorance and fraud – in other words, solely by cultural factors<sup>36</sup> – the German poet Theodor Fontane, in his poem *Die Brück’ am Tay*, written in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, attributed the catastrophe to the three witches from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.<sup>37</sup> The three witches personify the wrath of nature, which makes humankind realise that all human work is nothing but mere trumpery. In some ecological circles, the idea of a divine nature that takes revenge and humiliates humanity still prevails today.<sup>38</sup>

The divine and/or haunted character inherent in ruins since their romantic reformulation predestines them as places of liminality: ‘Die Magie, die den Erinnerungsorten zugeschrieben wird, erklärt sich aus ihrem Status als Kontaktzone. Heilige Orte, die eine Verbindung zu den Göttern herstellten, gab es in allen Kulturen. Gedenkort kann man als ihre Nachfolge-Institution betrachten, von ihnen erwartet man sich, daß sie einen Kontakt mit den Geistern der Vergangenheit herstellen.’<sup>39</sup> Leaving aside the problems with the concept of the ‘Heiliger Ort’, the important idea is the ruin as a contact zone, a place where contact can be made with the divine and the spirits of the nature and/or the past: Ruins are a contact zone between culture and nature, a contact zone between times, the present, the past, and the future, and a contact zone between

35 ‘[...] that the destruction of spiritual form by the effect of natural forces, this reversal of the typical order, is felt as a return to the “good mother” – as Goethe calls nature. That everything human “is taken from earth and to earth shall return” here rises above its dreary nihilism.’ Simmel 1919 [1907] (see note 32), p. 129.

36 Peter R. Lewis: *Beautiful Railway Bridge of the Silvery Tay: Reinvestigating the Tay Bridge Disaster of 1879*. Stroud: The History Press 2004.

37 Theodor Fontane: *Die Brück’ am Tay*. 28. Dezember 1879. In: Theodor Fontane: *Werke, Schriften und Briefe*. Abt. 1. *Sämtliche Romane. Erzählungen. Gedichte. Nachgelassenes*. Vol. 6, ed. by Walter Keitel, Helmuth Nürnberger. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. München: Hanser 21978, pp. 285–287. First in: *Die Gegenwart* 16.2 (1880), pp. 20–21. – Compare Gilbert Carr: *Entgleisung und Dekonstruktion: Theodor Fontanes ‘Die Brück’ am Tay*. In: Jürgen Barkhoff, Gilbert Carr, Roger Paulin (eds): *Das schwierige neunzehnte Jahrhundert*. Tübingen: Niemeyer 2000, pp. 319–333; Ulrich Kittstein: ‘Wie Splitter brach das Gebälk entzwei’: Das Tay-Unglück von 1879 in der zeitgenössischen deutschen Balladendichtung. In: Fontane Blätter 81 (2006), pp. 34–45.

38 See Reinhard Piechocki, Thomas Potthast: *Naturkatastrophen: Von der ‘Strafe Gottes’ zur ‘Rache der Natur’? Sünde, Schuld und Sühne unter den Bedingungen des Klimawandels*. In: *Natur und Landschaft* 12 (2014), pp. 510–515.

39 ‘The magic attributed to places of memory is explained by their status as a contact zone. Sacred places that established a connection to the gods existed in all cultures. Places of memory can be seen as their successor institutions; they are expected to establish contact with the spirits of the past.’ Assmann 1999 (see note 11), p. 337.

the profane and the divine, the temporal and the eternal. By incorporating the divine, the triumph of nature over culture, the fusion of time and eternity, the ruin gains a level of meaning that points to the end of the world.

When Alain Schnapp speaks about the shadow (*l'ombre*) of the monument<sup>40</sup> he draws on Jorge Borges, who introduces these shadows in his essay *La muralla y los libros*, in which he reflects on the – actually disputed – relation that the Great Wall of China was built by the same emperor Shih Huang Ti who ordered all books to be burnt in order to erase the memory of the past and time in general. Borges ends *La muralla* with the words: ‘La música, los estados de felicidad, la mitología, las caras trabajadas por el tiempo, ciertos crepúsculos y ciertos lugares, quieren decirnos algo, o algo dijeron que no hubiéramos debido perder, o están por decir algo; esta inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce, es quizá, el hecho estético.’<sup>41</sup> The ‘shadow’, it finally turns out, is this ‘imminence of a revelation’ that is inherent in the monuments of the past but never happens, this temporal liminality of past and present.

#### IV. Materiality

A few years ago, the sociologist Anna Henkel has published a fundamentally important and widely ignored paper, in which she argues that materiality is assumed to guarantee stability and the continuity of the world in time<sup>42</sup> – at least in the Global North, that is. Because only in the cultural context of early modern Western Europe did materiality become the basis of an ontological distinction between ‘real’ and ‘non-real’.<sup>43</sup> In particular, materiality is the condition of a specific kind of proof, which we call empirical, and thus forms the fundamental conviction of the scientific approach to the world. Under these conditions of western modernity, the materiality of things serves as a truth-maker that transforms a ‘something’ into a ‘fact’; an ontological truth (see Fig. 5). Other truth-makers include, for example, authority – this is the mode of truth-making favoured in the middle ages, for example, but also widespread in educational systems – or direct evidence, a kind of vulgar empiricism that appeals to ‘the obvious’, ‘the

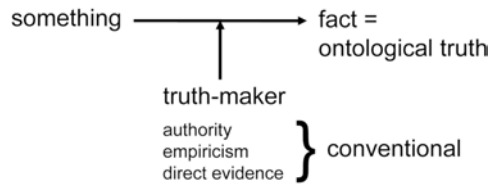
<sup>40</sup> See above, note 6.

<sup>41</sup> ‘Music, state of happiness, mythology, faces shaped by time, certain twilights and certain places, try to tell us something, or they told us something that we should not have lost, or want to tell us something; this imminence of a revelation, which does not happen, is, perhaps, the esthetic act.’ Translation by Gaither Stewart, <https://southernreview.org/54/borges-muralla.htm> (accessed 13.03.2022). Jorge Luis Borges: *La muralla y los libros*. First published in: *La Nación*, 22 October 1950.

<sup>42</sup> Anna Henkel: *Die Materialität der Gesellschaft: Entwicklung einer gesellschaftstheoretischen Perspektive auf Materialität auf Basis der Luhmannschen Systemtheorie*. In: *Soziale Welt* 68 (2017), pp. 279–299. doi: 10.5771/0038-6073-2017-2-3-279. See also Maurice Halbwachs 1950 (see note 20) (I am using the German translation: Maurice Halbwachs: *Das kollektive Gedächtnis*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1985), p. 127 referring to Auguste Comte.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Meier, Friedrich-Emanuel Focken, Michael R. Ott: *Material*. In: Thomas Meier, Michael R. Ott, Rebecca Sauer (eds): *Materiale Textkulturen: Konzepte – Materialien – Praktiken*. Berlin [etc.]: De Gruyter 2015, pp. 19–31, here p. 22, 25.

Fig. 5: The concept of the truth-maker transforming a 'something' into a 'fact'.  
Graphic by Thomas Meier.



natural', and the common sense.<sup>44</sup> Each of these three truth-makers – as well as others – is capable of endowing narratives with truth, of transforming stories into facts. Needless to say, each truth-maker is grounded in cultural conventions about the ontology of the world.

But what kind of truth does materiality make? What does it refer to? The archaeologist Reinhard Bernbeck, who studies the material traces of Nazi-terror, explores this question further and applies it to archaeological remains. He distinguishes three potential modes of reference that material things may take.<sup>45</sup>

First: Evidence. Things can be used as sources of objectified data about past processes and events. This means that objects are measured, drawn, and analysed and subjected to all the scientific procedures that are seen as fancy in some branches of archaeology of today. However, we should be aware that these types of data are not inherent properties of the things themselves, but are the result of cultural techniques and lead to a cultural product. It is our way of treating things, what we invent about said things, and what we put and do not put into them that is reflected in the results of such investigations.

Second: Testimony. In stark contrast to their use of objective evidence, things can be warrantors of what really happened: things can testify that a story is not invented, that it is neither a fake nor a fantasy, but that it really happened because the material remains are themselves a kind of survivor, transforming the story into fact and thus into reality.<sup>46</sup> The need for things that bear witness increases with the death of eyewitnesses. At a time when the last survivors of the Nazi concentration and extinction camps are passing away and the far-right attempts to consign Nazi terror to oblivion or even disavows it, Bernbeck emphasises the growing testimonial value of things, which should be reflected upon

44 See Karl Popper: *Logik der Forschung*. 11<sup>th</sup> edition. Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck) 2005 (first Wien: Springer 1935), p. 23.

45 Reinhard Bernbeck: *Materielle Spuren des nationalsozialistischen Terrors. Zu einer Archäologie der Zeitgeschichte*. Bielefeld: transcript 2017, esp. pp. 8–18, 92–107. Bernbeck extends previous considerations by Paola Filippucci: *Témoins Muets/Mute Witnesses: Ethnography and Archaeology Encounter the Objects of the Great War*. In: TEMUSE 2012, <http://hal.univ-lille3.fr/hal-00836347> (accessed 13.03.2022).

46 See Simmel 1919 [1907] (see note 32), p. 132; Aleida Assmann: *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*. München: C. H. Beck 2006, p. 224; but compare Andrea Rehling, Johannes Paulmann: *Historische Authentizität jenseits von 'Original' und 'Fälschung': Ästhetische Wahrnehmung – gespeicherte Erfahrung – gegenwärtige Performanz*. In: Martin Sabrow, Achim Saupe (eds): *Historische Authentizität*. Göttingen: Wallstein 2016, pp. 91–125.

and promoted much more proactively in the future.<sup>47</sup> This testimonial potential of things, where eyewitnesses are silent, is already widely explored in contemporary archaeology. In this subfield of archaeology, things are researched to make visible persons, groups, and events that are blinded out by the discourses of society, to bring into existence what officially does not exist: homeless people, displaced persons, and other groups that are socially marginalised.<sup>48</sup>

Third: Evocation. Things can potentially evoke a *verstehendes Nacherleben* in the sense of Wilhelm Dilthey,<sup>49</sup> which may lead to emotions like empathy.<sup>50</sup> Bernbeck reports on a concert by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra on 27 January 2015, the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz extinction camp by the Red Army, which was entitled *Violins of Hope* because the orchestra exclusively played instruments whose history was connected to the holocaust, to flight, and to expulsion.<sup>51</sup> Although they are musical instruments, mere things but not people, they have the potential to evoke a *Nacherleben*, when the instruments were once played under the immediately threatening Nazi terror, and empathy will arise with the Jews and all other groups of Europe who were systematically murdered en masse by the Nazis. This evocative potential is neither inherent in things and/or their materiality, nor is it merely ascribed to the instruments by the visitors to the concert, but it resides in the complex assemblage of instruments, their past owners, their current re-use that makes them sound again despite mass executions and extermination using Zyclon B, the connotations of the date, and the wider web of the visitors' historical knowledge. This is probably what Schnapp calls the shadow of a monument and what Bores calls the twilight, the imminent revelation that it desires to unveil to us.

While it is more than appropriate to focus on the evocation of empathy in the face of Nazi terror, this is not the only evocation that resides in ruins in general. It is precisely the materiality of ruins and the potential that is ascribed to this property to guarantee stability and continuity, and ultimately to transcend time,

47 Bernbeck 2017 (see note 45), esp. pp. 109–174.

48 Victor Buchli, Gavin Lucas: *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past*. London: Routledge 2002; Rodney Harrison, John Schofield (eds): *After Modernity: Archaeological Approaches to the Contemporary Past*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010; Cornelius Holtorf, Angela Piccini (eds): *Contemporary Archaeologies: Excavating Now*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Frankfurt am Main [etc.]: Peter Lang 2011; Bjørnar Olsen, Þóra Pétursdóttir (eds): *Ruin Memories: Materiality, Aesthetics and the Archaeology of the Recent Past*. London, New York: Routledge 2014; Alfredo González-Ruibal: *An Archaeology of the Contemporary Era*. London: Routledge 2020.

49 The term *verstehendes Nacherleben* can hardly be translated into English; the neologism 'understanding reliving' may come close to its meaning. Wilhelm Dilthey: *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*.: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7. Leipzig, Berlin: Teubner 1927, pp. 51–55, 213–216; Bernbeck 2017 (note 45), pp. 177–179, 175–208. – Compare also Ralph Buchenhorst: *Ding und Gedenken. Materialität und Authentizität in Erinnerungskulturen*. In: Herbert Kalthoff, Torsten Cress, Tobias Röhl (eds): *Materialität*.: *Herausforderungen für die Sozial- und Kulturwissenschaften*. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink 2016, pp. 153–169.

50 I am very thankful to Irina Feldman, who has discussed the term 'empathy' with me at length, which Bernbeck uses every now and then. Probably 'ehrliche Anteilnahme' ('honest condolence') might be more applicable?

51 Bernbeck 2017 (see note 45), pp. 92–94.

that may also evoke an emotion of consolation. It is the consolation that – without relativising or trivialising the individual and collective catastrophes – not everything ends and perishes with the end of a world, but that something persists time and connects the past with the present and with the future. Through their materiality, it is (also) the message of the ruins – like any other object from the past – that the total end of everything has not happened so far and probably never will. There was and is always something left over from the previous world – any end of a world necessarily leads to a new world that builds on, integrates, and continues the ruins of the old one. Any apocalypse will necessarily lead to a world of post-apocalypse.<sup>52</sup> And it is our choice as to which remnants of the previous world we want to include, or to exclude, for that matter.

## V. Time

In the eyes of historian Reinhart Koselleck, the mentalities of Western Europe changed fundamentally in the decades around 1800, which he calls the *Sattelzeit* of European history. This change also affected the concept of time; in the pre-modern era, the *Erfahrungsraum* (space of experience) generally equalled the *Erwartungshorizont* (horizon of expectation), i.e. what was experienced in the past was expected for the future, a stable world with no or only little changes in time, and the future more or less equalled the past – at least in theory. In the modern era, however, past and future drift apart, the future will potentially be utterly and completely different from the past, which is transformed in the present.<sup>53</sup> Only under these specific mental conditions of modernity does the future become conceptualisable as an – increasingly – *offener Zukunftshorizont* (open horizon of future).<sup>54</sup>

From a constructivist perspective, the now (and the cultural ‘here’) is the only point of reference from which the past is constructed<sup>55</sup> and the future is projected. In post-modernity, both the future and the past are open horizons, narrated according to the rationales and social conditions of today’s societies: the contingency of the past equals the contingency of the future, the act of post-gnosis, of looking back in time, equals the act of prognosis about what the future will be (see Fig. 6).

52 Connor Pitetti: Uses of the End of the World: Apocalypse and Postapocalypse as Narrative Modes. In: *Science Fiction Studies* 44 (2017), 3, pp. 437–454, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5621/sciefictstud.44.3.0437> (accessed 13.03.2022).

53 Reinhart Koselleck: *Vergangene Zukunft*. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1979, pp. 349–375.

54 Lucian Hölscher: *Die Entdeckung der Zukunft*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Göttingen: Wallstein 2016, esp. pp. 38–39, 293. In strong contrast to Koselleck and Hölscher, the continuity of concepts and practices of the future is emphasised by Georges Minois: *Histoire de l'Avenir des Prophètes à la Prospective*. Paris: Fayard 1996.

55 See, for example, David Graeber, David Wengrow: *How to Change the Course of History* (at least, the Part that's already Happened). In: *Eurozine* 2 March 2018, <https://www.eurozine.com/change-course-human-history/> (accessed 13.03.2022).

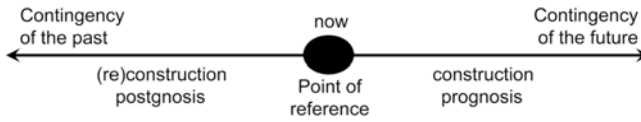


Fig. 6: Post-modernity's open horizons of the future and the past where pro-gnosis equals post-gnosis. Graphic by Thomas Meier.

It is in the present that the truth-maker of materiality gains its conventional power, despite its claim to make true statements about the past and the future. In this way, in the process of truth-making, time collapses in the postmodern now. Thus, the ruins of the past enter the present through their materiality, insofar as this materiality is ascribed to them in the present but claims to be timeless and to form a bridge into the past. It is one of the many metanarratives attached to ruins over time that fictionalises another past essence of the ruin that enables claims to objectivity and historicity. Time collapses in the ruin.

Is it mere temporal coincidence that the idea of the ruin developed at exactly the same time as the modern concept of the future, when the space of past experience and the horizon of future expectations became separated? Is the 'ruin' the material counterpart to the breaking apart of past and future in modernity? On the eve of the *Ancien Régime*, Denis Diderot and his contemporaries developed a sense of the end of the world and began to perceive the ruin as a *memento mori* implying that a past world had ended, that culture had reverted to nature, that there had been a transformation, a change in time:

'Les idées que les ruines réveillent en moi sont grandes. Tout s'anéantit, tout périt, tout passe. Il n'y a que le monde qui reste. Il n'y a que le temps qui dure. Qu'il est vieux ce monde! Je marche entre deux éternités. De quelque part que je jette les yeux, les objets qui m'entourent m'annoncent une fin et me résignent à celle qui m'attend. Qu'est-ce que mon existence éphémère, en comparaison de celle de ce rocher qui s'affaisse, de ce vallon qui se creuse, de cette forêt qui chancelle, de ces masses suspendues au-dessus de ma tête et qui s'ébranlent? Je vois le marbre des tombeaux tomber en poussière; et je ne veux pas mourir!'<sup>56</sup>

The ruin becomes the symbol of 'the end' in general as well as individually, and it warns that such ends of times may be the normal. Consequently, the future

56 'The ideas that the ruins reveal in me are great. Everything is annihilated, everything perishes, everything passes away. It is nothing than the world that remains. There is nothing than time that endures. How old this world is! I walk between two eternities. Wherever I turn my eyes, the objects that surround me announce an end to me and resign me to the one that awaits me. What is my ephemeral existence in comparison to that of this rock which is sinking, this valley which is deepening, this forest which is shaking, these masses suspended above my head and which are shaking? I see the marble of the tombs falling into dust; and I do not want to die!' Denis Diderot: *Œuvres complètes*, édition critique et annotée, ed. by Jean Fabre, Herbert Dieckmann, Jacques Proust et al. Paris: Hermann 1990, p. 338. See also Anne Betty Weinshenker: Diderot's Use of the Ruin-Image. In: *Diderot Studies* 16 (1973), pp. 309–329, here pp. 312–313; Geneviève Cammagre: *Ruines et Retraite, de Diderot à Volney*. In: *Dix-huitième siècle* 48 (2016), 1, pp. 181–195.

must not be expected to be the same as the past already experienced, because the past – as the ruin testifies – has come to an end, and so the present could also turn into ruins and decay. What remains is the open horizon of modernity's future, which implies that the present may give way to a fundamentally different future; the buildings of modernity are the potential ruins of tomorrow: '[...] nous anticipons sur les ravages du temps et notre imagination disperse sur la terre les édifices mêmes que nous habitons. À l'instant la solitude et le silence règnent autour de nous. Nous restons seuls de toute une nation qui n'est plus. Et voilà la première ligne de la poétique des ruines.'<sup>57</sup>

Today, modernity is history, but does the concept of ruin persist into postmodernity? Does a concept of ruin make sense in the face of coinciding past and future contingencies and a collapsing culture|nature divide? In the face of a multiplicity of worlds, ends, and futures? Whose worlds? Which ends? Whose futures? In the face of meanings that reside in the relationality of networks and assemblages – if there is any meaning at all? In an era of individualisation of memory and history and the death of the grand narrative? Is there such a thing as a postmodern ruin?

## VI. In the end

If the ruin is, in many ways, a place between and betwixt, if the ruin is haunted by the shadows of its (imagined?) former life, if in the ruin's specific temporal regime categories of time collapse, if at the same time the ruin signifies the end of a past world, if the ruin testifies the realness of this end through its sheer materiality and simultaneously consoles that something remains beyond the end, is, then, the ruin genuinely post-apocalyptic? The concept of the ruin is per se a gaze looking back from a past future into a vanished present; it vests material remains of 'what is broken off and forgotten' and 'does not apply any more'<sup>58</sup> into new narratives of shadows from the past and calls them legends, supplementary narratives or 'history'. These (hi)stories relate and connect the present, the past, and the future; and the materiality of the ruin endows reality to the transience of these moments in time: they are not just stories imagined, they really happened, they are really happening, and they really will happen.<sup>59</sup>

It has been a common thought since romanticism that the contemplation of ruins is a revelatory act, and postmodernity in its many echoes of romanticism revisits this idea and pushes it further. If the ruin testifies to the end of a

57 '[...] we anticipate the ravages of time and our imagination scatters the very buildings we inhabit across the earth. At a moment solitude and silence reign around us. We are left alone of a whole nation that is no more. And this is the first line of the poetics of ruins.' Diderot 1990 (see note 56), p. 335. See also Cammagre 2016 (see note 56), p. 185.

58 See above, note 13.

59 See Böhme 1989 (see note 7), p. 288. – For archaeology see Thomas Meier: *Der Archäologe als Wissenschaftler und Zeitgenosse*. Darmstadt, Mainz: Philipp von Zabern 2012; Cornelius Holtorf, Anders Högborg: *Archaeology and the Future*. In: Claire Smith (ed.): *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*. Cham: Springer 2018. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-51726-1\\_2792-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-51726-1_2792-1).

world and at same moment testifies that there is a world after the end, it gains a notion of apocalypse as well as post-apocalypse. The ruin tries to reveal – as Borges emphasises – that there was something wrong with the old world and that it was doomed from its very beginning. In this sense the post-apocalypse is a revealed world. ‘Darum wirkt die Ruine so häufig tragisch – aber nicht traurig – weil die Zerstörung hier nichts sinnlos von außen Kommendes ist, sondern die Realisierung einer in der tiefsten Existenzschicht des Zerstörten angelegten Richtung.’<sup>60</sup> Whether a revelation has happened or not, however, can only be judged in retrospect and raises questions such as: When did revelation happen? Who revealed? To whom? And what was revealed (see Fig. 7)?



Fig. 7: The questionable moment of revelation in relation to the apocalyptic event. Graphic by Thomas Meier.

We might expect revelation to have happened right at the moment of the apocalypse and by the power that steered a world to its end. But is it the ruin in its ruined state itself, in its material presence of a failed world of the past, or some mysterious power ‘behind’ this ruin that reveals that this past present carried the seeds of its doom from the very beginning? Or is it we who in the face of the ruin look back to another moment in time that we frame as an apocalyptic event, is it we who bring with our narrative what we then call revelation, namely the conviction that this world was always doomed? And is this revelation really about the past? Or is about the future? Is it about another world that has ended? Or is it about our world that is revealed to be doomed? Is the ruin from the past a revelation of our own future? Is today’s activism or fatalism the correlate of romanticism’s contemplation of the ruin? Journalist Zach Zorich, after visiting an Icelandic abandoned Viking farmstead and its environmentally devastated landscape, ends his reports: ‘As the worldwide climate changes and natural resources are exploited to their limits, Iceland may become an example for other nations that are approaching their own thresholds. Looking out over the farm’s eroded remains, it isn’t exactly clear whether we are seeing the past or the future.’<sup>61</sup> In this sense, is the archaeological and historical view always as post-apocalyptic as it is pre-apocalyptic?

What are the future implications of living with the ruins of post-apocalypse, of living in a revealed world haunted by shadows and facing open futures?

60 ‘That is why the ruin so often seems tragic – and not sad – because the destruction here is not something senselessly coming from outside, but the realisation of a direction laid out in the deepest layer of existence of what has been destroyed.’ Simmel 1919 [1907] see (note 32), p. 129.

61 Zach Zorich: Iceland’s Unwritten Saga. In: *Archaeology* 60 (2007), 2, pp. 46–51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41780224> (accessed 13.03.2022).

## Abstract

### **Ruinen einer postapokalyptischen Gegenwart**

Dieser Beitrag skizziert einige Perspektiven auf Ruinen im Stil einer Bricolage. Ich beginne mit dem Ruinenbegriff Alain Schnapps, der große Überschneidungen mit dem Erinnerungsbegriff Aleida Assmanns aufweist. Beide gehen letztlich von einer ursprünglichen Essenz der Ruine/des Orts aus, die im Laufe der Zeit verwildert. Demgegenüber konzipiert Pierre Nora Erinnerung und Ort von der Gegenwart her, hat aber keinen Platz für Ruinen. Für das heutige Ruinenverständnis ist vor allem die romantische Umwertung wichtig, die Ruinen als hybride Orte zwischen Kultur und Natur deutete und mit einem Schleier der Melancholie umgab. Wenig beachtet bleibt dabei, dass die Materialität der Ruinen zugleich vergangene Realitäten und deren reales Ende bezeugt und dadurch Emotionen wie etwa Empathie wecken kann. In ihnen kollabiert die zeitliche Ordnung aus Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft, sodass offen bleibt, wessen Ende eine Ruine eigentlich anzeigt.