A Cultural Sociology of the Sentimental
The Example of 'Lost Places'

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Introduction: The Special Appeal of 'Lost Places' to Late Modern Societies

In late modern societies, the silent remnants of the past seem to hold a special appeal. So-called 'lost places'—such as abandoned buildings, decaying infrastructures, and forgotten sites, mostly from the recent past—reflect a newly awakened interest in the *aestheticization of the ruinous*. Since the 1990s, the term 'lost places' has been increasingly used as a "topos of the not yet fully ruined" (Schmitz/Habeck 21) and stands alongside other concepts, such as "modern ruins" (Pétursdóttir/Bjørnar), "untimely ruins" (Yablon), and "derelict places" (Mah).

The fascinating allure apparently emanating from those places can, for example, be observed in the social phenomenon of 'urban exploration.' 'Urbex' has developed into a popular and globally networked subculture in which enthusiasts explore and document abandoned buildings and other derelict sites (Bingham; Lesné).[1] In addition, numerous documentaries bring the fascination with lost places to a wider audience. Programs like "Abandoned Places" (2021) and "Lost Places" (2017–) look into the history and current state of forgotten sites around the world, highlighting their often-ambivalent political and social meaning and the stories behind their decay. Countless books, such as "Islands of Abandonment" (Flyn) or "Abandoned Futures" (Lam) delve

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1 As Robin Lesné explains, the 'urban' in 'urban exploration' should not be misunderstood: Urban exploration is not defined as 'urban' in the narrower sense of merely occurring within cityscapes; rather, it is considered 'urban' because the sites explored by practitioners are part of the human-made environment, shaped by both current and/or past human presence (Lesné 425).

into the narratives of these places, combining stunning photography with in-depth research and literary meditations. Furthermore, lost places are often literally transformed into aesthetic spaces in the narrower sense: into places of art. Art installations, music videos, and album covers often feature these evocative settings and draw on the special atmospheric qualities those places have to offer. Last but not least, the tourism industry has also discovered these sites and markets them as unique attractions, sometimes referred to as "dark tourism" (Sharpley/Stone). Locations like the 'ghost town' of Pripyat near Chernobyl or the former pulmonary sanatorium Beelitz Heilstätten near Berlin (which later became the largest Soviet military hospital outside the USSR) draw visitors eager to experience the eerie beauty and historical significance of these sites firsthand. These examples demonstrate how lost places seem to capture the public imagination—albeit differently from varying perspectives and positionalities—and have become a significant part of contemporary culture (cf. Habeck/Schmitz; Bücking for an overview).

This contribution seeks to make sense of the special appeal of lost places to late modern societies, arguing that it stems from their complex spatiotemporal figurations and the affective experiences they afford. In short, I propose understanding lost places as *sentimental spaces*, where the interplay of past, present, and future, the merging of human-made structures with 'intruding' natural elements and the dynamics of decay and repurposing converge to create a space for diverse emotional responses centered around loss and impermanence. Lost places, defined by the contradictions they embody, invite reflection on what once was, what no longer exists, and what might have been, thereby offering a powerful platform for sentimentality that connects individuals to both personal and collective histories, while also exposing the increasingly fractured promises of modern progress.

Theoretically, lost places are used as an instructive case for thinking about the sentimental as a concept for cultural and social analysis. Despite the diversity that has characterized sociological thinking about emotional phenomena for several decades now (cf. Stets/Turner; Diefenbach/Zink for an overview), sociology has so far shown little interest in the sentimental. The overarching aim of this contribution, therefore, is to develop a (cultural) sociological concept of the sentimental and to illustrate it using the example of lost places. To this end, the discussion deliberately moves away from conventional normative notions of sentimentality (cf. Solomon for an overview), focusing instead on establishing the sentimental as an analytical lens for examining empirical phenomena.

Conceptual Considerations on *Space* and the *Sentimental*

The key conceptual step of this contribution is to approach both space and the sentimental at the level of social practices. The practice-theoretical perspective (cf. Schäfer 2016a; Spaargaren et al. for an overview) seems particularly fruitful for thinking about space and the sentimental because of two of its basic assumptions. First, practice theory stands for a materialistic, yet deeply cultural understanding of the social. Practices are thought of as being at the same time materially anchored in both human bodies and non-human entities while also being based on tacit knowledge (Reckwitz 2003, 290). The practice-theoretical perspective thus allows for the systematic consideration of the *cultural-material dimension* that is inescapable for both spatiality and sentimentality. Second, practice theory stands for a relational understanding of the social (Schäfer 2016b, 11–13). The central change of perspective that practice theory takes on action consists, as is well known, in understanding action as distributed. In other words, action is not primarily something that (only) follows social norms or is intentionally carried out by rational human actors but rather something that habitually takes place in networks comprising human actors as well as material structures. Since neither space nor sentimentality are absolute categories but are constituted *relationally* (i.e. both intersubjectively and interobjectively), it seems promising to view them through the framework of practice theory.[2]

Building on these basic conceptual premises, the following sub-sections will first present a sociological perspective on space, followed by a theoretical exploration of the sentimental.

Space (and Place)

In line with practice theory, this contribution adopts a conception of space as "spatialisation through social practices" (Reckwitz 2012, 252). Spaces are created through relationships (both between subjects and material objects), are open to contestation (and therefore political), and are continuously evolving (through ongoing spatial practices).

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2   While I approach the spatial and the sentimental through the lens of social practices, I do not intend to establish a strong opposition between discourse and practice. On the contrary, social practices are always and in many ways connected to discourses, and discourses are in fact themselves the result of—discursive—practices (Reckwitz 2008).

From a practice-theoretical perspective, the constitution of space involves a twofold process that the sociologist Martina Löw describes as "spacing" and "operations of synthesis" (129–95). *Spacing* means the production of a "relational arrangement of living beings and social goods" (135) physically arranged in places. Conceiving of space as a relational arrangement, on the one hand, points to its relationality—to an ensemble of various elements; on the other hand, it points both to the structural arrangement (that is space) and to the act of arranging it (189). Spacing therefore involves practices of assorting and placement of social goods and living beings (which can also include self-placement). It encompasses "erecting, deploying or positioning" (134). To give an example: The practice of reading, which you are currently engaged in, has—like all social practices—a spatial dimension or, in other words, it inescapably 'spatializes.' While you are reading this paper you are part of some sort of relational arrangement that you also actively (re-)produce at the same time, a relational arrangement made up of material entities and yourself (maybe also other people), specifically placed in relation to each other. You may be reading the text on your computer or on paper, may have a pen in your hand, might be sitting on a chair or sofa, indoors or outdoors, in private or in public, etc. Only through what Löw calls "operations of synthesis" (135) can the relational arrangement now be recognized as one element, as one space. *Operations of synthesis* encompass the modes of making-sense of the meaning of specific spaces, which rely on processes of imagination, perception, and memory and are always socially pre-structured (189). To stay with the example: Drawing on your cultural knowledge and experience (and of course, possibilities), you may have intentionally placed yourself in a specific spatial setting to engage with this text—whether that space is pre-existing or one that you have created or adapted. This setting, in turn, influences your experience of reading, be it at home, in your office, or somewhere in public like a park, a library, or on public transport.

Thus, space is constituted through both the act of spacing and synthesizing, arrangement and interpretation. Space is both material and cultural: material through the materiality of the placed goods and bodies and cultural through the established symbolic relations between these elements and the (more or less explicit or tacit) scripts of interpretation (Löw 191; Reckwitz 2012, 152). It shapes action just as much as it is shaped by action—that is why Löw, referring to Anthony Giddens' notion of a "duality of structure," speaks of the "duality of space" (Löw 145). In everyday life, spaces are usually constituted regularly through the constant flow of practices. Once produced, the relational

arrangements and the cultural scripts tied to them form relatively stable "spatial frameworks" (Reckwitz 2012), "spatial structures" (Löw xiv; 141–46), or "spatial figurations" (CRC). Paraphrasing the sociologist Bruno Latour, one might say that space—at least when it is institutionalized—is "society made durable," and one might even specify: society made durable at a specific point in time.

Spaces, however, do not exist in a vacuum; they are not only temporally situated but always located 'somewhere.' As Martin G. Fuller and Martina Löw put it, they require a "where in the world" (Fuller/Löw 476)—a *place*. Returning to our example, the respective relational arrangement (or space) you chose to be part of whilst reading this text—may it be your home, your office, or a public space—can be identified as a specific place on Planet Earth. Place, therefore, means "a location, a position that can be specifically named, generally geographically marked" (Löw 167). By virtue of their own name and location, places possess unique characteristics, which amplifies their symbolic impact. To put it a bit more bluntly: While 'space' is the more abstract concept, 'place' inevitably has a clearly concrete quality. In fact, space only becomes material (and visible) through the material quality of placed objects and bodies at specific places (which again have their own materiality). For example, although Central Park in New York City can easily be recognized as a 'park space' as it can be found in countless numbers elsewhere in the world, it is made unique by its particular location (or placement) in the city of New York and its relationality to other (urban) relational arrangements (as well as cultural narratives, medializations, etc.). Places are thus both the precondition and the result of the constitution of space. Accordingly, the practice of spacing systematically creates places, just as places enable the constitution of space in the first place (Löw 167). There can be—and often are—different spaces in one place. This is also why places do not disappear in the same way that spaces can (cf. Halbwachs 129; Steets 24–7) but remain available to be occupied in different ways.

Finally, the aesthetic dimension of space—central to the focus of this contribution—can be captured through the concept of *atmosphere*. The concept of atmosphere—despite its conceptual heterogeneity (cf. Pfaller/Wiesse for an overview)—has long indicated emotional qualities that extend beyond the individual body and are anchored in material and spatial contexts, even before the affective turn. In very simple terms, atmosphere can be understood as the *perceptible or experiential side of space*. As Löw pointedly puts it: "Space is a figuration laid down in material states of affairs; its noticeable but invisible side is atmosphere" (173). I follow Löw's spatial sociological understanding of at-

mosphere which defines atmospheres as "the external effects of social goods and people in their spatial arrangements as realized in perception" (172). Like perceptual and experiential processes in general, atmospheres have to be actively picked up and are socially pre-structured. While it may appear that atmospheres are 'bound' to specific spaces, they do not emerge automatically, necessarily, or are experienced in the same way by everyone. Nevertheless, as the literary and cultural studies scholar Gertrud Lehnert aptly stated, both elements must come together: "[...] the aura of the spaces and the perceptive faculty of the perceivers" (Lehnert 9, translation S. P.).

The Sentimental

If spatial practices are practices that focus on the production and reproduction of spaces, sentimental practices can be understood as practices that focus on the production and reproduction of *sentimental experiences*. This constitutive experiential dimension situates the sentimental within the realm of affective or emotional practices, as well as within the broader field of aesthetic practices. However, considering sentimental practices as experiential does not imply that they occur solely 'inside' individual bodies and minds. On the contrary, the sentimental—like affective-emotional phenomena as a whole (Burkitt 53)—continually undermines the binary of 'inside' and 'outside,' which, as the historian Monique Scheer puts it, is itself "rather a product of the way we habitually 'do' the experience" (Scheer 198).

Before delving into the specific affective-emotional[3] structure of sentimental practices, I would first like to propose analytically distinguishing between *two fundamental forms*: practices of *making* and practices of *fabricating* sentimental experiences (and respective sentimental 'objectifications'). Thus, on the one hand—and in the narrower sense—, sentimental practices are practices in which sentimental experiences *are made*, that is, all *embodied forms of 'doing sentimentality.'* As such the sentimental is constituted—either as a suddenly occurring, albeit usually socially regulated phenomenon—in the

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3   In this contribution, I do not draw strict distinctions between emotions, feelings, and affects. I use the terms 'emotions' and 'feelings' more or less interchangeably to refer to culturally conceptualized episodes of affective self-world relatedness (although I tend to favor the term 'feeling' when describing the phenomenological or subjective-experiential dimension of these affective relations). Meanwhile, the term 'affect' is used to denote the relational process of affecting and being affected. For detailed discussions on terminology, cf. Slaby/Scheve and Pritz (55–64).

interaction of actors with themselves, with other actors, with artifacts, spaces and places, with aesthetic and cultural products, with sensory impressions and certain bodily movements, with ideas and memories, and so on. Such forms of 'doing sentimentality' can be found, for example, in media practices (e.g. allowing oneself to be moved to tears by a film, novel, or piece of music), in practices of consumption (e.g. buying a Valentine's Day gift, going out for a romantic dinner) or in practices of remembrance (e.g. lighting a candle for a deceased loved one, collective public commemoration), and can be observed particularly impressively in various forms of public ritual (e.g. weddings, funerals, or national celebrations). Following the performance studies scholar Diana Taylor, one could speak here of the "repertoire" of the sentimental, since, although these practices follow cultural scripts or scenarios, they actually exist only in their enactment.[4]

On the other hand, sentimental practices can also be practices that inter-subjectively create 'occasions' for sentimental experiences or, in other words, aim at the *fabrication* of the sentimental. Such practices may themselves have their own sentimental structure of experience and performative quality (e.g. writing a love letter or delivering a eulogy). However, they are particularly significant in the sense that they generate what I propose to call '*sentimental objectifications*'[5], such as sentimentally charged literature, films, musical compositions, speeches, or even spaces—which, in turn, can themselves become

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4   In her influential book *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003), Diana Taylor introduces a distinction between "archive" and "repertoire" to understand the ways in which cultural memory is stored, transmitted, and performed. Whereas the "archive" refers to "supposedly enduring materials" (Taylor 19) that document and preserve cultural memory (i.e., texts, artifacts, photographs, buildings, official documents), the "repertoire" encompasses "embodied practice/knowledge" (ibid.) and ephemeral, live forms of cultural expression and memory (i.e., rituals, storytelling, theater, dance, gestures, bodily movements). However, Taylor highlights that the two are not mutually exclusive but instead function "in a constant state of interaction" (21) and "usually work in tandem" (ibid.). Indeed, Taylor argues that cultural practices in literate societies typically require "both an archival and an embodied dimension" (ibid.). For instance, she illustrates this interplay with the example of weddings, which rely on both the signed marriage certificate (archival) and the reciprocal utterance of "I do" (embodied) (ibid.).

5   I follow the notion of objectification as "more or less enduring indices of the subjective processes of their producers" (49) laid out by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). Through processes of objectification, subjective meanings become social facts and vice versa. For Berger and Luckmann "signification,

objects of embodied practices of doing sentimentality. To put it bluntly, practices of fabricating the sentimental are ultimately about their product: "the fabricated."[6] Again, following Taylor, one could speak here of the sentimental "archive" as the sentimental is preserved in a permanent manner in such objectifications. In this archive, the sentimental can be revisited—as well as of course re-interpreted—as a phenomenon 'cast' in various semiotic or sign systems or, put differently, as a—culturally specific—aesthetic form, for example and most prominently the sentimental novel (e.g. Rivero) or the melodrama (e.g. Paul et al. 2022). Indeed, this aesthetic dimension of the sentimental can hardly be overestimated. One might even argue that the sentimental—at least in its modern European version—emerged as an aesthetic, or more precisely, as a *literary* form in the 18th century (Bell). This literary form, with its specific affective appeal structure, sentimental tropes, and ways of storytelling (cf. Gerund/Paul for an overview), has since continued to spread highly successfully not only in the realm of the arts but has made its way into culture and society at large (Berlant; Paul 2021).

Thus, while the sentimental emerges as a specific *mode of feeling* in (embodied) practices of making sentimental experiences, it is produced as an *aesthetic form* in (archival) practices of the fabrication of sentimental experiences and respective sentimental 'objectifications.' It therefore lies at the interface of the social and cultural sciences, whose distinct knowledge bases and methodological frameworks must be combined to fully grasp the sentimental in its various sociocultural and historical forms and functions. However, the sentimental, as a mode of feeling and an aesthetic form, is closely interlinked as both are always and inevitably *culturally coded*. Simply put, for something to be perceived (i.e. 'decoded') as sentimental, it must first be 'encoded.' The sentimental can only be perceived as such from the wealth of human experience if it is culturally coded or conceptualized (cf. Röttger-Rössler on this process in general). As a cultural code, the sentimental is part of what the sociologist Arlie R. Hochschild has termed the "emotional dictionary" (7), which, according to her, exists in every culture and is complemented by an "emotional bible" in which emotion norms are also laid down. Aesthetic forms now play a key role in the

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that is, the human production of signs" (50) is a special but particularly important form of objectification.

6   The term 'fabrication' of the sentimental implies the possibility of its commercialization. In other words, the sentimental can also be fabricated—and consumed—as an "emodity" (Illouz 2018, 7).

process of cultural coding. Not only do cultural codes circulate through them, they also contribute, as the sociologist Alois Hahn puts it, to a "socialization of sentiments" (Hahn 200, translation S. P.). In order to decode cultural codes 'correctly,' these codes must first be learned and habitualized. Cultural codes thus always rely on and refer to socio-culturally shared knowledge. Understood as a cultural code—a more or less conventionalized *communicative* form—the sentimental operates, as Heike Paul et al. have pointed out, at the most general level as "a relational code of communication that draws on and activates empathic abilities and emotional knowledge" (Paul et al. 2021, 6, translation S. P.).

Like all cultural codes, the sentimental code bears the marks of time and space, is the object of negotiations, and is embedded in power relations. This power dimension is perhaps most strikingly reflected in the shifting valuation of the sentimental, which has been celebrated as a 'moral virtue' while also dismissed as a 'feminine,' 'popular,' or even 'fake' feeling (cf. Solomon; Bedell for an overview and discussion of criticisms of the sentimental). In contrast to these strongly normative or even devaluing stances, this paper adopts a deliberately non-normative approach to sentimentality, suggesting that common judgments of its value—or lack thereof—should be understood within the context of struggles for symbolic classification.

Bearing this in mind, how can we arrive at a more detailed description of the specific affective-emotional structure of sentimental practices? Without claiming to be exhaustive, and against the backdrop of the rich field of social and cultural studies on emotion research, I would like to highlight *three key structural elements* of sentimental practices: Inspired by the historian Monique Scheer and her theoretical understanding of emotion as practice, following the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, sentimental practices can, first, be conceived as a particular form of emotional practice: practices of *mobilizing emotions*. Scheer distinguishes between four kinds of emotional practices, which, in addition to mobilizing emotions, also include naming, communicating, and regulating emotions (209–17). Of course, these can also be a part of sentimental practices, just as different forms of emotional practices are often interrelated and overlap; nevertheless the sentimental seems to be particularly associated with evoking feelings, indulging in them, or publicly displaying, enacting, and performing them. Sentimental practices are—to put it in Scheer's words—practices "that aim at the mobilization of psychophysical capacities in order to achieve aesthetic experiences and embodied forms of meaning" (212). In everyday language, for example, this is reflected in the typical expression 'to

get sentimental'—a phrase that crucially denotes an *increase* in emotionality. As a form of emotional practice, the sentimental involves, simply put, the production of a *surplus*—or sometimes even an *excess*—of feelings, which, of course, is not always uniformly welcomed both individually and socially.

However, the sentimental does not mobilize all emotions equally. Instead, it is typically associated with a *particular spectrum* of emotions (Paul et al. 2021, 7). Most often, the sentimental is linked to so-called "softer emotions" (Bedell 5) or "tender feelings" (Solomon 4), such as compassion, love, and affection, or, more generally, feelings of belonging. To put it somewhat pointedly, one could say that the sentimental reveals our affiliations, as the everyday phrase 'sentimental attachments' suggests—our ties to certain people or groups (ranging from families to entire nations), things or places (of special 'sentimental value'), and even social or political values (such as freedom or justice; cf. Bens). Its often somewhat mixed quality of feeling and its temporal reflexivity, furthermore, connect the sentimental to emotions such as nostalgia (Becker/Trigg; Henneböhl) or melancholy (Lepenies; Flatley). Finally, and particularly highlighted in works from literary and cultural studies, the sentimental code is vividly apparent in narratives of suffering (and overcoming), as traced in sentimental fiction (Gerund/Paul), contemporary pop culture (Illouz 2003), and the political sphere (Wanzo; Paul 2021).

The second key structural feature concerns the phenomenology of the sentimental, with a focus on its distinctive mode of feeling. As noted earlier, sentimental practices are at their core experiential practices. Since their goal is affective or, more broadly, aesthetic experience for its own sake, they can, on a phenomenological level, be described through their *affective self-referentiality*.[7] Sentimental practices therefore always involve some sort of active turning to or even 'enjoyment' of one's own feelings.[8] In everyday language, this dimension is evident in verbs typically associated with the sentimental, such as 'indulging,' 'wallowing,' or 'languishing' in sentimentality. These verbs also express the widespread devaluation of this *self-reflexive* mode of feeling. One of the common accusations in this regard—widespread in both vernacular speech and academic writings—is that the sentimental supposedly

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7   For the sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, the "self-referentiality of sensory perception" is a structural feature of aesthetic practices in general (Reckwitz 2022a, 25, translation S. P.).

8   For this process of 'sentimental enjoyment' in the context of media practices and melodramatic cinema, cf. Kappelhoff.

revolves only around itself, having neither reference nor effect on the 'real world' (Cova/Deonna, 463–65; for a critique of this critique cf. Solomon). Describing the sentimental phenomenologically as a "heightened form of [. . .] affective self-reference" (Paul et al. 2021, 7, translation S. P.) does not, however, imply that this experience occurs solely in isolation. On the contrary, its power unfolds particularly at the collective level—in a way that the sociologist Émile Durkheim famously termed "emotional effervescence" (Durkheim 289; 296–301) to capture the emotional self-transcendence and sense of belonging to a collective that emerge during religious rituals. In social phenomena such as spiritual gatherings, political assemblies, and demonstration marches, or national celebrations, the sentimental can literally move entire masses.

The third key structural feature of sentimental practices is that they are—at least typically—linked to a *moment of unavailability*. The sentimental thus involves the relation to something that—for whatever reason—is not, not immediately, not yet, or no longer attainable. More precisely: The sentimental is, in itself, the—experientially available—relation to that which is more or less unattainable; it can make something affectively present that is, in fact, absent or inherently inaccessible. In other words, the sentimental always has an (affective) *reflexive* relationality. For my understanding of unavailability, I once again draw on the phenomenological tradition in sociological thought, particularly the works of Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann.[9] They use the term transcendence to describe unavailabilities that must be navigated both in 'this world' and 'the hereafter'—and, as one might add, are often addressed within sentimental or sentimentally charged practices. They distinguish between "small," "medium," and "large" transcendences (Schütz/Luckmann 587–672).

In the case of *small* transcendences, the currently unattainable object is out of reach due to spatiotemporal limits, such as yearning for a time past or one's faraway home. Indeed, the sentimental is fundamentally distinguished by its multiple temporalities. Meaningful reference to the *past*—what once 'has been' (and, of course, how this is remembered today)—is often a central part of sentimental practices, revealing the close proximity of the sentimental to nostalgia (cf. Becker/Trigg for an overview on nostalgia studies). The sentimental frequently accompanies experiences of loss or situations in which loss is potentially imminent, along with corresponding feelings such as mourning, sadness, or melancholy as well as rage, fear, resentment, and even feelings of

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9   For a recent sociological discussion of unavailability, albeit with a different theoretical emphasis, cf. Rosa.

heroism or pathos. It can thus be considered a key component of what Andreas Reckwitz has recently termed the 'sociology of loss' (Reckwitz 2022b; 2024). In a similar vein, practices of remembering and identity construction play a particularly significant role in the realm of the sentimental, linking studies of sentimentality to social and cultural memory studies (Erll/Nünning; Berek et al.; cf. also Demmelhuber/Thies). To put it pointedly, one could argue that, on an experiential level, the sentimental—both individually and collectively—unveils the 'historicity' of the present moment by connecting past events and their (emotional) (re)interpretation to the present situation. Just like the past, the *future* is similarly unattainable. The sentimental is therefore by no means limited to the past; it also has a closely intertwined relationship with the future, including its imaginations and attempts at shaping it. As Heike Paul puts it, the contingency-managing function of the sentimental extends centrally to the anticipation of the future (Paul 2024, 32). Practices of sentimentalizing the future can be, for example, wishing and hoping or on the contrary, fearing and worrying that a certain event will occur. The sentimentalization of the future therefore oscillates between an—imagined—potentiality and vulnerability.[10]

Middle transcendences, on the other hand, reflect the inherent boundaries of communication and social interaction: While we can empathize with others—making educated guesses about their emotions and thoughts— we can never fully grasp the entirety of their subjective experience. Sentimental practices come into play as a means of bridging these gaps, invoking, cultivating, and reinforcing a sense of collectivity and social trust among individuals. For instance, during cultural festivities and national holidays such as Christmas, New Year's Eve or political celebrations, people come together to celebrate shared values, history, and aspirations. The communal activities and collective rituals—such as singing Christmas carols, fireworks, or parades—can generate "emotional energy" (Collins), reminding participants of their interconnectedness as a community. These self-affirmations are particularly striking when observed in a football stadium, where fans at the beginning of each game sing their club anthems, wave flags, and raise their fan memorabilia high (Ismer).

Finally, *large* transcendences are what is usually associated with the term 'transcendence' and are situated within the realm of metaphysical or religious practices. With regard to the sentimental, an example of this would be the

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10   For the interplay of potentiality and vulnerability in future imaginaries of sustainability, see Adloff et al.

idea of an immediate experience of divine existence, as is found, among other places, in evangelical traditions (Luhrmann 101–31). The connections between sentimentalism and religion have also been especially emphasized in the realm of politics—with concepts such as "civil religion" (Bellah) or "civil sentimentalism" (Paul 2021).

In summary, the three key structural features of sentimental practices—both of making and fabricating sentimental experiences and respective sentimental 'objectifications'—can be outlined as follows: First, they serve to mobilize (a specific spectrum of) emotions. Second, as experiential practices, they are marked by affective self-referentiality. Third, they frequently involve a (reflexive) relationship with moments of unavailability.

The Sentimentality of Lost Places

Building on the conceptual considerations of space and the sentimental, we can now return to the initial proposition or question: To what extent can lost places be understood as *sentimental spaces*, conceptualized as a specific form of 'objectification' of the sentimental emerging in the co-constitution of spatial and sentimental practices?

The Complex Spatiotemporal Figurations of Lost Places

From the perspective of practice theory, I propose initially conceptualizing lost places as places that have fundamentally *lost their (original) practices*. They are, for instance, congress centers where no one meets anymore, swimming pools where no one goes swimming any longer, or spa hotels where no one takes a cure anymore (for an illustration of these three examples, see figure 1).

Drawing on Martina Löw's spatial sociological vocabulary outlined above, lost places can be described in more detail as follows. The relational arrangement that once made up these spaces is *broken*, *yet still perceptible*, as (some of) the material remnants of the spatial structures remain and the cultural scripts for their interpretation still persist.[11] Additionally, these material remains form *new* relational arrangements—including new atmospheric

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11   The existence of still-functioning cultural scripts for interpreting the broken yet still perceptible spatial framework of lost places may, incidentally, be a key distinction between lost places as ruins from the recent past and older ruins, which are more tem-

qualities—with 'intruding' natural elements such as plants or whole trees, and, of course, with the material changes that occur due to lack of maintenance or weathering. Hence, these new relational arrangements do not emerge due to processes of active spacing; they are not so much the results of actions but rather of *inactions* (such as the neglect of a building), arising from the interplay between human-made structures and natural processes over time. In this context, the sociologist Georg Simmel, at the turn of the 20th century, famously highlighted the "unitary form" (Simmel 129, translation S. P.) peculiar to ruins—a form that is constituted in the struggle of human-made environments with natural forces, making ruins more than mere broken buildings.

Figure 1: From Left to Right: Abandoned Congress Center in Bad Gastein, Austria; Abandoned Swimming Pool in Egloffstein, Germany; Abandoned Spa Hotel in Bad Gastein, Austria

Source: Photographs by Sarah Pritz

Furthermore, new relational arrangements are often constituted through new ways of 'using' these places—essentially, by linking the remnants of

porally distant from the present—although such distance can also be sociocultural in nature.

former spatial structures with *new practices of spatialization*. According to geographers Christian Bauer and Christoph Dolgan, this "re-contextualization through different appropriation processes" (Bauer/Dolgan 102), together with the "loss of functionality of architectural structures" (ibid.), represent the two key elements in defining lost places. From this perspective, lost places are not really 'lost'; rather, they are sites in transition, "built objectifications" (Steets 164) in motion—inhabited by new practices that both draw on and (sometimes radically) transform the spatial figures and meanings associated with these locations, turning them into multi-layered spatiotemporal palimpsests. In this regard, Christian Bauer and Christoph Dolgan particularly emphasize the non-normativity associated with lost places (Bauer/Dolgan 112). This non-normativity may also explain why lost places particularly seem to invite aesthetic and/or transgressive practices.[12]

The relational arrangements of lost places—both broken and newly formed—along with the emerging cultural meanings associated with them, are thus primarily characterized by their *openness*. They exist in a kind of *in-between state*, or, as the cultural studies scholars Aleida Assmann, Monika Gomille, and Gabriele Rippl have put it: a "semantic restlessness" (Assmann et al. 11, translation S. P.) emanates from ruins and lost places. According to the authors, this typical "semantic restlessness [...] continuously inspires new inquiries and self-reflections within the tension between aesthetic experience and historical significance, as well as between forgetting and remembering" (ibid., translation S. P.).[13]

Lost Places as Sentimental Spaces

I would like to argue that it is precisely the outlined *in-betweenness* or *simultaneity of broken and new spatiotemporal figurations*—coexisting and partially converging within lost places—that shapes their distinctive atmospheric qualities,

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12   Apart from aesthetic practices, lost places often—at least temporarily—serve as refuges for socially marginalized groups (see, for instance, Chelcea on the various forms of appropriation practices of former industrial areas in Bucharest). In my argument about the sentimentality of lost places, I focus on aesthetic practices because of their proximity to sentimental practices.

13   The in-betweenness of lost places has also been conceptualized as a specific form of liminality (Bauer/Dolgan 111). Liminality, as famously described by ethnologist Victor Turner with regard to rituals, refers generally to the state of being in between phases or conditions, often characterized by ambiguity, transition, and a lack of clear structure.

ultimately rendering them sentimental spaces. To provide a more precise description of the sentimentality of lost places, the concept of the sentimental as developed above and its three key structural features will now be applied.

First of all, lost places can be understood as sentimental spaces because of the *emotion-mobilizing* potential inherent in their complex spatiotemporal figurations. Lost places have the capacity to stir, evoke, or even activate emotional responses from those who encounter them, and it is often this very capacity that is actively 'sought' in various aesthetic practices engaging with lost places (ranging from urban exploration to artistic, subcultural, gastronomic, and even touristic practices). While the prevailing affective-emotional states experienced when viewing lost places is an empirical question from a sociological perspective (depending on which practices and groups are the focus of research), the notion that sentimentality—alongside elegy, melancholy, and nostalgia—emerges as the dominant mode of feeling when viewing ruins is a recurring theme in the interdisciplinary discussions of ruin aesthetics (Bücking 153). For Simmel, for instance, the feeling of "cosmic tragedy" (Simmel 124, translation S. P.) is potentially evoked when observing a ruin, rooted in the idea that nature is reclaiming an environment once shaped by humans. He refers to this as the "counterplay of two cosmic directions" (Simmel 126, translation S. P.)—the eternal interplay of becoming and decaying, which also reflects our own mortality. Kay Kirchmann describes the "structural affinity of melancholy and ruin" (317, translation S. P.) as a result of a fundamental disruption in the structure of temporal relations: "In the ruin, the melancholic confronts the debris of their temporal order, the dwindling 'flow of their individual becoming.'" (318, translation S. P.).

This characteristic in-betweenness of lost places—not only between the human-made and the natural but also between the past, the present, and the future, between decay and repurposing, etc.—strongly aligns with *affective self-referentiality* as the distinctive sentimental mode of feeling and the self-reflexivity of the sentimental in general. Given the history of sentimentality and the recurrent devaluations it has faced, it is not surprising that this emphasis on affective experience for its own sake is often criticized in aesthetic practices engaging with lost places. The practice of urban exploration, in particular, is often accused of being overly focused on affective self-indulgence. Urban practitioners are criticized for (allegedly) showing less interest in the historicity of these places and prioritizing instead "aesthetic experience, adventure, and emotional encounters" (Zimmermann 311, translation S. P.). The search for (new) aesthetic experiences and "sentimental horrors" (Voogd)—perhaps

best grasped as a sensationalist variety of sentimental practices—is certainly an important and well-studied part of urban exploration practices (Lesné 438), and there are indeed examples of inappropriate hedonistic posing and self-staging in such sites (Röhl/Schneider 271). However, the political aspects of urban exploring are also repeatedly pointed out, such as its challenge to what is commonly considered worthy of remembrance and preservation or the documentation of the socially forgotten (Fulton). As with sentimentality, this sweeping criticism that practices of urban exploration are purely self-centered cannot be sustained.

Last but not least, lost places are at the core of their spatiotemporal figurations deeply marked by *unavailability*. Already by definition, lost places are essentially unavailable, as they are no longer accessible in the way they once were; they are only 'available' in their 'lost' form. This unavailability heightens their sentimental affordance because it underscores the sense of loss, impermanence, and the irretrievability of what once was (or could have been). Lost places therefore exist in a—compelling—contradictory state, characterized by both presence and absence: relics of an often relatively recent past, yet experientially, they can embody "(extra)ordinary presence" (Gottwald et al.). Simultaneously, they hint at a future that never came to be—unfulfilled promises and altered trajectories resulting from social or economic change. As the geographer Tim Edensor has pointedly stated with regard to industrial ruins in particular, they are "symbols through which ideologically loaded versions of progress [. . .] can be critiqued" (Edensor 15). In short, lost places inhabit the threshold between past, present, and (a once-imagined) future, making them objects of (temporal) reflection. They invite social actors to reflect on what has been, what is no longer, and what might have been (and, to some extent, what might still come). As such, and in line with cultural theorist Hartmut Böhme's interpretation of Friedrich Schiller's distinction between "naïve" and "sentimental" poetry, they can be seen as "sentimental objects par excellence" (Böhme 287, translation S. P.).

Negotiating the (Sentimental) Value of Lost Places

However, the sentimentality of lost places cannot be fully grasped without considering their potential to symbolize both collective and individual *identities*—essentially, *the people's feelings.* Given that this important identity dimension of lost places is often the subject of negotiations between different groups, each with varying connections or attributions of *(sentimental) value* to these sites, it frequently becomes a source of political conflict, centered

on the key question of what should become of these places. Should they be remembered or forgotten, rebuilt or preserved as (musealized) ruins, or, on the contrary, 'set free' for new uses? This also fundamentally concerns the sociological question of who engages with (specific) lost places and in what ways, with which connections, interests, or practices. Such engagements are typically socially structured. For instance, a decaying factory building might represent a place of loss for those who, or whose families, once worked there, evoking memories of past economic prosperity. For marginalized groups such as the homeless or artists, the abandoned factory might initially serve as a place of refuge or a space for creative freedom, while urban explorers or event planners may find it offers unique affective experiences. In contrast, real estate developers may view the factory as an outdated site, potentially a 'blight' to be demolished and replaced with something new. Alternatively, such places might be rescued and/or repurposed, often as part of gentrification, displacing original communities in favor of higher-income groups. Thus, conflicts of inequality are always also contested through spaces and their aesthetic and symbolic associations. This makes clear that lost places, as a social phenomenon, extend far beyond being merely an aspect of late modern aestheticization and singularization processes (Reckwitz 2017). Instead, as sentimental spaces, they emerge as profoundly political spaces, sparking negotiations about what should be preserved or remembered and what can be forgotten.

Conclusion: Space for Sentimentality in Late Modern Societies

The aim of this contribution was to develop a (cultural) sociological concept of the sentimental, using lost places as a case study to illustrate this framework. I would like to conclude with an argument on how the new form of aestheticizing the ruinous, as exemplified by lost places and their associated practices, may be connected to broader social and cultural developments in late modern societies, and how this connection could help illuminate the seemingly special appeal of lost places in these societies. In doing so, I will draw on the latest works of Andreas Reckwitz on a sociology of loss (Reckwitz 2022b; 2024). In these writings, Reckwitz diagnoses a "paradox of loss" in modernity (Reckwitz 2022b, 5–6; 11–21, translation S. P.): As a societal formation driven by progress, Western modernity has sought to reduce loss, achieving notable successes in areas such as rising life expectancy, improved medical care, and increased

liberalization. At the same time, however, it has led to an intensification of loss, driven by factors such as accelerated social change, increased societal complexity, the economization of social relations, and violence. While there have always been ways to articulate and address loss, the strong cultural orientation toward progress—reinforced by institutional structures—has largely rendered the losses of modernity invisible and marginalized them within society. In late modernity, however, the dynamics of loss can no longer be overlooked, as the promise of progress has become incrementally uncertain. From climate change to rising social dislocation due to globalization, neoliberalism, and political regressions: The number of losses—both those already experienced and those feared—continues to grow, receiving greater attention in public discourse. According to Reckwitz, this escalation of loss and its growing awareness can also be seen in the realm of aesthetics, particularly in (post-)apocalyptic narratives in film and literature that envision the "future as catastrophe" (Horn).

In light of these observations, the aestheticization of lost places across various practices—ranging from urban exploration to artistic and even touristic endeavors—can be interpreted as forms of a late-modern approach to "doing loss" (Reckwitz 2022b, 9). The simultaneity of fractured yet open spatiotemporal figurations of lost places, as outlined above, provides opportunities for both experiencing and processing loss. From this perspective, lost places are not only sentimental spaces but also places that offer space for sentimentality. Lost places fundamentally represent crises, turning points, and transformations in social, economic, and political development—rendering these shifts tangible and perceptible. While they do not stem from savage violence and military conflict like war ruins, they represent "slow violence," as put forward by Nixon, and the gradual process of ruination as a social phenomenon over time. In this sense, lost places reveal the long-term systemic and structural forces that lead to their abandonment and the people and practices once connected to them. Put simply, the fractures in modernity's progressive narrative are not only visibly embodied but can also be directly experienced in lost places—unveiling the political dynamite of the often underestimated and belittled cultural force of sentimentality.

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